

**From Penny Dreadfuls To Dime Novels:
An Exploration Of 19th Century American Popular Culture**

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DECLARATION BY STUDENT

I hereby declare that the data presented in this Dissertation report entitled, “From Penny Dreadfuls To Dime Novels: An Exploration Of 19th Century American Popular Culture” is based on the results of investigations carried out by me in the Discipline of English at Sheno Goembab School of Languages and Literature, Goa University under the Supervision of Dr. Anjali Chaubey and the same has not been submitted elsewhere for the award of a degree or diploma by me. Further, I understand that Goa University or its authorities will not be responsible for the correctness of observations / experimental or other findings given the dissertation.

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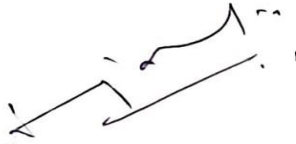
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This is to certify that the dissertation report “**From Penny Dreadfuls To Dime Novels: An Exploration Of 19th Century American Popular Culture**” is a bonafide work carried out by **Ms. Mishel Dias Sapeco** under my supervision in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master in Arts** in the Discipline of English at the Sheno Goembab School of Languages and Literature, Goa University.



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ABSTRACT

Astrid Earll, in her book entitled *Literature as a Medium of Cultural Memory*, asserts that literature serves as a medium of cultural memory, encompassing diverse forms inclusive of lyrical poems, dime novels, historical novels, etc. While every other literary form might sound familiar, the term “dime novel” often remains obscure, despite its substantial influence on popular literature and reading habits in late 19th century America. Analysing six primary texts by male and female authors, this dissertation explores 19th-century dime novels, uncovering their historical, cultural, and financial significance. It compares themes and tropes across genders, revealing nuanced differences. Alternatively, through a feminist lens, it identifies subversive elements in women-authored works. Hence, by synthesizing historical, cultural, and feminist perspectives, the study provides a multifaceted understanding of dime novels situated within the popular literary realm.

Keywords: Dime novels, Popular Literature, Gender, Feminism

CHAPTER ONE

UNRAVELLING THE TAPESTRY: A PROLOGUE TO DIME NOVELS

1.1 Tales of Cheap Fiction

Initially known as “Penny dreadfuls”, the dime novel is a form of American popular literature existing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that was published in a series of inexpensive paperbound editions. The term “dime novel” has been used as catch-all term for a number of distinct but similar genres, including story papers, five and ten-cent weeklies, thick book reprints, and sometimes early pulp magazines. In the contemporary era, the word dime novel has been used to characterise hastily created, lurid potboilers, typically as a pejorative term to denote a sensationalised but superficial literary work.

Typically, dime novels featured the dramatic adventure tales of a single hero or heroine who frequently found himself or herself in the midst of a moral quandary. The morally upright novels promoted virtue and upheld strong moral principles when the protagonist opted for virtue over vice. Dime novelists began writing as part of a greater push for profits and mass production. Due to the cheap price of the dime novels, publishers geared the books toward the uneducated lower class, producing stories with simple, formulaic plots that opened new worlds to their readers.

Therefore, Dime novels emerged as a noteworthy cultural phenomenon in the United States throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Recognized for their low cost, often priced at ten cents, and sensational narratives, they hold considerable significance. It is imperative to conduct a thorough examination encompassing their historical, cultural, and economic aspects to reveal their complex influence on American society and literature during this period.

1.1.1 A Look Back Through the Lens of History: Dime Novels

Dime novels emerged during a transformative period in American history marked by industrialization, urbanization, and social upheaval. The mid-19th century witnessed a surge in literacy rates, fuelled by advancements in public education and increased access to printed materials. As more people gained the ability to read, there arose a demand for affordable and accessible forms of entertainment.

The Industrial Revolution, which brought about technological innovations in printing and papermaking, played a crucial role in the proliferation of dime novels. These advancements made it possible to produce large quantities of printed materials at lower costs, paving the way for the mass production of cheap literature. The dime novel industry flourished alongside the expansion of railroads and the growth of urban centres, where bustling streets were lined with newsstands and bookshops offering an array of inexpensive reading materials. Dime novels catered to the tastes of a diverse readership, providing escapist entertainment to factory workers, immigrants, and rural dwellers alike.

Moreover, the cultural landscape of the 19th century, characterized by westward expansion, the Civil War, and the rapid pace of technological change, provided fertile ground for the themes and narratives explored in dime novels. These publications capitalized on the public's fascination with adventure, romance, crime, and the exotic, offering readers an immersive experience into worlds both real and imagined.

1.1.2 Cultural Chronicles

Dime novels left an indelible mark on American popular culture, shaping literary conventions, influencing artistic expression, and contributing to the construction of national identity. They served as a precursor to modern forms of popular entertainment, laying the groundwork for genres such as pulp fiction, comic books, and serialized television dramas.

One of the most enduring legacies of dime novels is their role in popularizing iconic characters and archetypes, from the rugged cowboy to the intrepid detective. Figures like Buffalo Bill, Nick Carter, and Frank Merriwell became household names, embodying ideals of courage, resourcefulness, and moral rectitude.

Furthermore, dime novels played a significant role in disseminating cultural values and shaping public perceptions of race, gender, and social class. While often simplistic and stereotypical in their portrayals, these publications reflected the prevailing attitudes and anxieties of their time, providing insight into the hopes, fears, and aspirations of 19th-century Americans.

Additionally, dime novels fostered a sense of community among readers, who eagerly awaited each new instalment of their favourite series and engaged in lively discussions about plot twists, character developments and moral dilemmas. The serialized nature of these publications encouraged reader participation and fostered a sense of shared cultural experience among diverse audiences.

1.1.3 The Dime and its Financial Dynamics

From a financial perspective, dime novels represented a lucrative venture for publishers seeking to capitalize on the burgeoning demand for popular literature. By utilizing inexpensive materials and production methods, such as pulp paper and fast printing presses, publishers were able to produce dime novels at a fraction of the cost of traditional hardcover books.

The affordability of dime novels made them accessible to a broad audience, including those with limited disposable income or access to formal education. Priced at just ten cents apiece, these publications offered hours of entertainment for a nominal fee, making them an attractive option for budget-conscious consumers.

Publishers employed various marketing strategies to promote dime novels and maximize sales. Colourful cover art, sensational headlines, and serialized storylines were used to grab the attention of potential readers and entice them to purchase multiple instalments of a series. Additionally, publishers often distributed dime novels through a network of newsstands, bookshops, and subscription services, ensuring widespread availability and visibility.

Despite their modest price tag, the cumulative sales of dime novels generated substantial revenue for publishers, contributing to the growth and consolidation of the publishing industry in the United States. Moreover, the success of dime novels paved the way for the emergence of other forms of popular literature, such as pulp magazines and paperback books, which would continue to shape the cultural landscape well into the 20th century.

Emerging as a multifaceted cultural force during the 19th century in the United States, dime novels were intricately intertwined with the historical, cultural, and financial landscapes of the time, reflecting and shaping societal values while providing accessible entertainment to a wide audience. Despite facing critiques for their sensationalism and perpetuation of stereotypes, dime novels undeniably played a pivotal role in shaping literary traditions and entertainment industry practices that continue to influence contemporary culture. Their enduring legacy serves as a testament to their significance in American history and popular culture.

1.1.4 The Evolution of the Dime

The evolution of the term, dime novel, encapsulates a rich tapestry of literary history, beginning with the modest pamphlets issued by Beadle & Adams in 1860. These pamphlets, often filled with thrilling tales of adventure and heroism, marked the emergence of a new form of popular fiction aimed at a wide audience, particularly young readers hungry for excitement and escapism. As the popularity of dime novels soared, publishers sought to

innovate, leading to the evolution of formats and genres. From the simple pamphlets of the 1860s, dime novels transitioned into more elaborate black and white libraries in the 1870s and 80s, catering to readers' growing appetite for serialized narratives presented in a visually appealing format. The introduction of colour weeklies between 1890 and 1915 further expanded the scope of dime novels, offering readers a vibrant array of stories spanning genres such as romance, detective mysteries, science fiction, and fantasy.

However, despite their initial success and widespread popularity, the dime novel era eventually faced challenges that led to its decline. The advent of film in the early 20th century posed a formidable threat to the printed dime novel, offering audiences a new and immersive form of entertainment for a fraction of the cost. With the ability to watch thrilling adventures unfold on the silver screen for less than ten cents, readers increasingly turned away from printed fiction. Although many dime novel series, beloved characters, and prolific authors found new life in other mediums such as film, radio, pulp magazines, and comic books, the heyday of the printed dime novel came to an end. Nevertheless, the legacy of dime novels endures, leaving an indelible mark on American literary history and popular culture. Through their diverse array of genres, memorable characters, and captivating narratives, dime novels provided readers with an escape into worlds of excitement, adventure, and imagination, shaping the literary landscape for generations to come.

The inception of dime novels around the onset of the American Civil War heralded a literary revolution that captivated readers on both sides of the Atlantic. Known colloquially as penny dreadfuls in England due to their similar affordability and sensational content, dime novels rapidly gained popularity for their thrilling tales of romance and adventure. Distributed in numerical series at newsstands and dry goods stores for a mere dime or nickel, these publications were accessible to a broad audience, particularly appealing to the lower class. Characterized by their cheap paper and vividly illustrated covers, dime novels were

designed to be lightweight and portable, making them easy to carry and share. With their straightforward plots and vivid storytelling, dime novels opened up new worlds to their readers, often employing simple language that evoked vivid imagery and concrete characters. Eschewing complex themes or psychological depth, these novels focused on providing straightforward entertainment to their readers.

As the dime novel phenomenon evolved, its subject matter shifted to reflect changing cultural interests. Initially centred around American Indian tales, the narrative focus gradually transitioned to stories of cowboys in the Wild West, outlaws, bandits, and train robbers. Detective mysteries and narratives featuring working-class heroines emerged later, catering to evolving tastes and interests. In Victorian England, penny dreadfuls often embraced the macabre Gothic tradition, weaving tales of horror and suspense to thrill and terrify readers. With the outbreak of World War I, dime novel publishers found new inspiration in the global conflict, tapping into the rich material provided by wartime experiences for their narratives.

The dime novel phenomenon thus represents not only a literary trend but also a cultural phenomenon, reflecting and shaping the interests and aspirations of its audience. Despite its humble origins and often simplistic storytelling, the dime novel left an indelible mark on popular culture, influencing subsequent literary traditions and continuing to fascinate readers with its tales of adventure, romance, and intrigue.

1.2 Aims & Objectives of the Study

- To conceptualize the phenomenon of dime novels through historical, cultural and financial aspects.
- To scrutinize the role of dime novels in 19th century popular literary landscape.
- To compare and contrast select dime novels written by 19th century men and women authors.

- To analyse select dime novels through a feminist lens and highlight the elements of subversion prevalent in 19th century dime novels authored by women.

1.3 Hypothesis

Dime novels, as a subcurrent in 19th-century American popular culture, represent a multifaceted phenomenon, while their significant contribution to the evolution of women's role in literature and prevalent gender dynamics, illuminates their impact on societal perceptions and gender representation within the paradigm of Popular literature.

1.4 Research Questions

- Understanding the dime novel as a subcurrent in 19th century American popular culture.
- Conceptualizing the phenomenon of dime novels through historical, cultural and financial aspects.
- Prevalence of gender dynamics in dime novels through a comparative analysis of male and female works highlighting respective themes and literary elements.
- Analysing dime novels authored by 19th century women through a feminist lens and understanding their contribution to the evolution of women's roles in Popular literature.

1.5 Scope of the Study

The scope of this research largely encompasses various aspects of literature, culture and gendered nuances. The time period entailing the research topic - dime novels in specific, is the late 19th century, and is geographically focusing on the cultural context bound to The United States of America. Select English dime novels have been chosen, four by male authors and another four written by female authors. These texts qualify under the genre of romance fiction, war, detective and mystery. Important historical events and women suffrage movements, such as The American Civil War (1861-64) and the First Wave of Feminism

(1860's) are looked at as possible underlying influences for the content produced within the pages of these dime novels.

1.6 Delimitations

The delimitations of this study are as follows. This study has been limited to digitalized copies of dime novels due to the lack of availability of hard copies currently. There also occurs a significant scarcity in the material available online, which limits the scope of study pertaining to the selection of primary texts as the surviving dime novels may not represent the entire spectrum of publications from that era. Within the conducted research, interdisciplinary challenges and subjectivity linked with the cultural significance and impact on society are the encountered limitations.

1.7 Literature Review

In an article entitled *The Western Hero In The Dime Novel* by Henry Nash published in 1948, Smith points out the origins of the dime novel by Erastus Beadle in 1858 and its subsequent large-scale production. The article further highlights some of the important traits of the western hero prevalent in 19th century dime novels as well as analyses the characters within texts written by Edward Sylvester, Ann S Stephens and Edward Wheeler. The application and presence of the tradition of “back wood humour” and the persona of “Leatherstocking”, the character, is discussed through a comparative analysis of male heroic characters. Smith largely provides an analysis on Deadwood Dick, a fictional character who appears in a number of dime novels, published between 1877 and 1897 by Edward Lytton Wheeler. A rapid survey of examples from the first decade of the Beadle novels underlines the irregular development of the western hero. Hence, the article provides an analysis of the representation of the western hero in dime novels and their role in shaping the perception of the American West.

Pernicious Stuff: Nineteenth Century Media, The Children Who Loved Them, And The Adults Who Worried About Them, is a scholarly article written by Margaret Cassidy, published in 2011, which explores the concerns and debates surrounding media consumption by children, mass press and certain kinds of inexpensive books in the 19th century, particularly dime novels. These dime novels were termed to be “outrageously disgusting” due to their content. Cassidy examines how dime novels were perceived as harmful and corrupting influences on young minds. She discusses the anxieties of adults who worried about the potential negative effects of these books on children's behaviour and moral development. Being cheap and easily accessible, dime novels were read by most high school children even though some schools banned their usage. Also explored is the cultural and social context in which these concerns arose, shedding light on the negative impact these books had on young minds, especially boys who took to robbery and other minor crimes influenced by these stories. The article thus summarizes the debates surrounding 19th-century media specifically dime novels and its negative impact on children; young male adults.

This article by Rebecca S. Wingo, entitled *The “Forgotten Era” Race and Gender in Ann Stephens’s Dime Novel Frontier*, highlights the significant contribution of dime novels to the genre of Western literature as well as their quick replacement by the clothbound book, which led some scholars to term the dime novel era from 1860 to 1900 the “forgotten era”. Wingo focused upon Ann Stephens and her contribution as essential to the history of dime novels as well as the cultural importance of female authors who used the power of suggestion in their narratives. She emphasized upon the difference between gender portrayals in Stephens’ first novel *Malaeksa* (1836) and last dime novel, *The Indian Queen* (1864). A comparative study of the above-mentioned dime novels written by Ann S. Stephens that reflect and reinforce the shift in race theory from nurture to nature while simultaneously challenging the limitations of Victorian gender roles, is visibly evident

Similarly, in *Cheap Stories: Notes on Popular Fiction and Working-Class Culture in Nineteenth-Century* an essay by Michael Denning, he puts forth the question, “are the products of the culture industry instruments of mass deception and manipulation, signs of cultural degeneration, or are they a genuine people's culture, resisting the dominant elite culture - the basis for cultural renaissance?” In this essay, he seeks to break out of this static and unproductive opposition by considering one of the first of the mass media, one of the earliest culture industries: dime novels, or what Fred Whittaker called 'cheap stories'. It analyses Dime novels as a representation of one of several 'cheap' entertainment forms during an age of Anglo-bourgeois hegemony in American culture - the age from Emerson to Henry Adams. Denning mentions how by and large, dime novels have been overlooked and misrepresented. He also states how these stories raise three discrete problems concerning the interpretation of commercial culture: first, the problem of escape or, what does it mean to say that ‘cheap’ stories were escapist fiction? Second, the problem of genre or, how do we sort out the various themes in the tens of thousands of surviving cheap stories. And third, the problem of reception, who read these stories, and how did they read them? It provides an analysis on genre, reception, escape and tramps. Working-girl novels of Laura Jean Libbey have also been briefly studied, taking into account their “happy endings”.

In *Queer Investigations: Foxy Ladies and Dandy Detectives in American Dime Novels*, a journal article by Pamela Bedore explores the representation of queer characters in American dime novels. She examines how these novels, which were popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, featured unconventional and non-normative characters. In this article, she analyses two detective dime novels written by Allan Arnold. Both of these detective texts employ multiple strategies that perform gender critique while leaving the detective genre intact, although she believes that neither detective fits Rich's classification of “Lady Dick”. The two dime novels are: *A Diamond Ear Ring* and *The Broken Blackthorn*, two detective

stories by Allan Arnold. The detective characters studied are Nina, a powerful woman detective and Gay Gus Giles, the lady detective, respectively. Bedore states how both narratives work through the same three subversive strategies. First, both detectives perform gender in intriguing ways that mark them as queer bodies. Second, the reader identification with patriarchal agents and thirdly, although both dime novels participate in the convention of marking the happy ending with a marriage, both distort the marriage plot in ways that undermine dominant norms. She terms Nina Renard, the heroine of *A Diamond Ear Ring*, as a “foxy” lady performs complex gender identification that can be productively considered as “queer”. Similarly, Gay Gus Giles in *The Broken Blackthorn* is looked at as an unexpected detective hero for an 1883 dime novel, marking his as a queer body, since he performs his gender in complex ways compared to what we might expect in a work of popular fiction of the 19th century. This article gives us an insight into select detective dime novels through a queer lens, terming women detectives as “foxy” ladies and men detectives as “dandy”. Bedore argues that these novels provided a space for queer individuals to be represented, albeit in a covert and coded manner. She also discusses the impact of these representations on the broader cultural understanding of queerness during this time period.

Captivating Malaeska: Reading The First Dime Novel As A Captivity Narrative by Elisabeth Ziemba, studies the dime novelist Ann S. Stephens who authored 27 novels tackling social issues. She believed that women could pursue authorship as an honourable profession without compromising their traditional gender roles. An analysis of her novel *The Jockey Cap* as a captivity narrative has been undertaken. These captivity narratives were popular for their ability to combine elements of terror and excitement. However, Ziemba’s central focus was on historicizing *Malaeska*, a 19th century dime novel coinciding with Native Americans and the issue of relocation. Similarly, she has briefly looked at *Malaeska* in contemporary literature. Coming to terms, the author states how Gary Ebersole discusses

the evolution of captivity narratives and how Stephen's novel incorporates captivity narrative tropes and traditions to address modern criticism and anti-Native American sentiment.

1.8 Methodology

A critical exploration of the emergence of 19th-century dime novels as a significant form of literature has been undertaken, aiming to unravel the intricacies of their content, style, themes, and characters. This research delves into six primary texts, authored by both men and women, shedding light on their respective contributions to the genre. Among the works penned by women are Mrs. M V Victor's, *Alice Wilde: The Raftsmen's Daughter* (1873), Mary Andrews Dennison's, *Captain Molly, or, The Fight at Trenton* (1866), and *The Indian Queen* (1864) by Ann S Stephens. Conversely, dime novels authored by men, including Bartley Campbell's, *A Fair Face or Out in the World* (1884), Capt. F Whittaker's, *The Dumb Page or The Doge's Daughter* (1885), and Edward Sylvester's, *Seth Jones or, The Captives of the Frontier* (1885), also undergo scrutiny in this analysis. By applying literary theories such as feminism, this study seeks to discern the gendered perspectives and societal reflections embedded within these narratives, offering a comparative examination of the storytelling techniques employed by male and female authors in the dime novel genre.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROLE OF DIME NOVELS IN POPULAR LITERARY LANDSCAPE

2.1 Defining Popular Literature

"Popular fiction" has been defined in a number of ways (in Western, English-language criticism) over the last half-century (Mayerson 21).

Any literary work that is read by a large audience or is meant to be read by one, is termed as Popular Literature. In its broadest definition, popular literature might include widely read magazines, best-selling nonfiction books, and a specific set of digital texts carrying various genres and forms of written works that are accessible, entertaining, and often have mass appeal. Nevertheless, the phrase is reserved for fictional works that set themselves apart from what is commonly referred to as ¹high literature, creative literature, or just literature, as this type of literature is distinguished from more specialized or niche literature that may target a specific audience or aim to address particular intellectual or artistic concerns.

“The romantic South has been a mainstay of popular fiction in the United States from the beginning of mass-market publishing” (Giest 117). Popular fiction has been categorised as genre fiction since the late 20th century, whereas literary fiction is thought to be its opposite and can be measured by its wide and continued acceptance, which can be seen in sales, frequent imitation, and adaptation to other cultural forms. In the 1960s, American scholars often saw popular fiction as a reflection of broader societal issues such as cultural degeneracy, according to sociologist Tony Bennett. This viewpoint regarded popular fiction both as a symptom and a cause of these concerns. Notably, discussions about popular fiction were predominantly relegated to English departments within academia during this period,

¹ A term for written works that are considered to have artistic and intellectual value.

indicating a limited perception of its significance primarily as a literary pursuit rather than a subject for sociological or cultural analysis. However, scholarly exploration of popular culture, including fiction, has since expanded across various academic disciplines beyond English departments.

“*Popular fiction* as a general object of study has rarely been explored, in part because it is often subsumed under the umbrella of popular culture” (Mayerson 21). However, in today's critical vocabulary, the word "popular literature" refers primarily to contemporary popular works. It is assumed to be low-quality writing that has little to no literary merit. The term "reading public" also conjures up images of a mindless mob devoid of taste or instruction in aesthetics, interested simply in indulging their senses through art. Hence, the assertion made by critics is that our critical assessments of popular literature often stem from a perceived division between two main groups of readers: a minority that establishes aesthetic standards and determines which texts are canonized, and a majority that approaches literature primarily for entertainment, akin to other leisure activities like sports events or social gatherings.

Once dismissed as formulaic, Popular fiction began facing scrutiny with Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869, which established a division between "popular" and "culture". While canonical authors like Milton and Shakespeare were celebrated for their societal impact, Arnold blamed popular literature for social decay in London, setting a precedent for its marginalization. However, contemporary perspectives are challenging this bias, recognizing the cultural value in popular literature.

A common misconception among the general public is that the word “popular” is synonymous with “intellectual”, yet this is untrue. Popular fiction encompasses works that are immensely popular, like Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. This does not, however, imply that

this work lacks intellectual standing. Quite the contrary, throughout time, this book has established itself as a classic and a pioneer in the science fiction genre.

First to write a novel set on a southern plantation, John Pendleton Kennedy, gained early notoriety with *Swallow Barn; or, A Sojourn in the Old Dominion* (1832) and *Horse-Shoe Robinson* (1835). These books, which drew inspiration from Sir Walter Scott, portrayed the romantic plantation life and Virginia nobility that would later become commonplace in popular fiction.

2.1.1 Established Criteria & Characteristics for Popular Literature

Popular literature does not follow rigid categories, and the placement of certain works within a category may evolve over time. Since it depends on a number of variables, such as audience preferences, cultural context, and trends, defining criteria for popular literature can be subjective.

Beginning with wide readership, a broad and diversified readership is a defining characteristic of popular literature. It appeals to a large audience, cutting across different demographics and backgrounds. In terms of accessibility, the language and writing style in popular literature are often accessible and easy to understand. The goal is to engage readers without requiring specialized knowledge or extensive intellectual effort and to promote a pleasurable reading experience. They are largely plot-driven, rather than character-driven, and adhere to conventional narrative structures. As such, they are less intended towards provoking deep reflection or aesthetic appreciation than to be read casually and quickly. As a result, when composing these kinds of works, authors are also impacted by commercial factors, i.e. they must create works that both, meet the needs of the market and are aesthetic in the abstract. Books that are successful at this, especially through their employment of

techniques that stimulate readers' interest and compel them to continue reading, are praised as ²page-turners.

Entertainment is looked at as highly valuable in this genre of literature as it is designed to entertain and captivate readers, featuring engaging plots, relatable characters, and elements that evoke emotions such as joy, suspense, or empathy. Bestseller lists, high sales figures, and widespread availability are indicative of the popularity of a literary work, leading to commercial success which is often a key factor when it comes to genre fiction. While popular literature leans towards escapism, literary fiction frequently draws inspiration from the reality of everyday life. Many popular escapist genres, including romance, mystery, thriller, science fiction and horror, war, detective fiction etc. can be used to classify works. As genres allow for a great deal of flexibility, they are also characterised by reader-recognizable narrative archetypes or tropes. "Genres are essentially contracts between a writer and his readers", noted American literary theorist Fredric Jameson. Basically, they establish and meet the reader's expectations.

In this setting, authors' output takes precedence over the inherent creative merit of their writing. In order to retain and grow a loyal readership, many successful popular fiction writers publish one or more books annually in addition to numerous sequels and series. Popular book adaptations for the big screen, television, and other media, along with the corresponding merchandising and branding opportunities they present, may yield additional commercial value. It is true that popular literature is frequently best understood in the context of popular culture as a whole. This is due to the influence of a work's intertextual relationships such as its adaptations on readers' perceptions and interpretations, in addition to its economic significance.

² An engrossing book or story.

Works that have a significant impact on popular culture, inspiring discussions, references, and adaptations across various media, are also often considered popular literature. Some works of popular literature stand the test of time, remaining relevant and beloved by readers across generations. Longevity can be an indicator of enduring popularity. While popular literature may have crossover appeal, attracting readers from different age groups, backgrounds, and interests, in the contemporary era, a strong presence on social media platforms, positive reviews, and reader discussions can contribute to the perception of a work as popular literature.

2.1.2 Popular Literature Through the Ages: A Historical Perspective

The 19th century is during which the formal publishing category of popular fiction was established. At this time, middle-class and lower-class readers could finally access books due to increased literacy and lower printing costs. However, genre literature dates back to the oldest folk tales and has persisted in manuscripts circulated privately throughout history. "Tarzan" is perceived as a product of the 20th century, a "popular" hero. Nevertheless, stories dating back to our earliest days contain references to the "wild man of the forest".

Writing that might garner a substantial amount of popularity in written form was only feasible with the invention of the printing press. The first European examples date back to the fifteenth century and include broadside ballads, ³jestbooks, almanacks, and romance novels that drew from oral traditions and folklore. But by the late 17th century, printing companies could make a good living by producing a range of inexpensive publications, which were commonly sold as ⁴chapbooks.

³ Collections of jokes and humorous anecdotes in book form.

⁴ Small, inexpensive stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapmen, in western Europe and in North America.

The expansion of elementary education for the middle and lower classes throughout the course of the 18th and 19th centuries led to a wider public reading population. Furthermore, the Industrial Revolution increased the accessibility of published works by developing mass-production technologies. The novel became a popular genre, particularly among readers from the middle class who obtained their books from urban bookstalls and lending libraries. Newspapers and magazines, which had multiplied quickly, also serialised fiction.

Early in the twenty-first century, digital publishing gave writers of popular fiction new platforms because it made it simple to distribute their works outside of conventional distribution channels. Some authors linked to literary fiction find inspiration in genre tropes, since popular fiction continues to shape popular culture in general.

“Fiction was also serialized in newspapers and magazines, which had rapidly proliferated” (Cunnigham). In the late 1800s, young readers from the working class in the United States and Great Britain devoured dime novels and penny dreadfuls, which were thrilling stories of crime and adventure.

2.2 The Dime Novel as a Cultural Artifact

“The nineteenth century was an important and productive period in the United States for popular literature, thanks to the rise of pocket-sized dime novels” (Halley).

Dime novels, emblematic of 19th-century popular literature, epitomize accessibility, excitement, and diverse storytelling. These affordable paperbacks captivated a wide audience with sensational narratives, spanning genres from Westerns to detective tales. The serialized format, coupled with cliffhangers, sustained reader engagement and became a hallmark of popular literature. Rapid production to meet demands and the integration of themes into broader culture marked the influence of dime novels. Perceived as a paradigm of popular

literature, they pioneered democratized reading, commercial success strategies, and a dynamic, ever-evolving industry. As Merle Curti states, the dime novel is the closest thing this nation has ever seen to what is currently the subject of considerable discussion, a truly⁵proletarian work of literature, one that is actually read by and intended for the vast majority of people.

2.2.1 Dime Novel Traits: Echoes of Popular Literature

Dime novels, priced at the cost of mere ten cents, emerged as a distinctive and influential category in the landscape of 19th-century popular literature. The volumes had a plain appearance, a colourful cover illustration, and were inexpensively bound. Being only a hundred pages long, they were small, light, and easy to distribute. Publishers marketed dime novels with simplistic, formulaic tales that introduced readers to "new worlds" because of their low price and target readership of illiterate lower-class people (*American Dime Novels 1860-1915*). The stories were written in a way that made the readers visualise the characters and situations in their minds. The books merely told straightforward stories avoiding any mind tricks or psychoanalytic elements, written primarily for entertainment purpose. This in turn attracted the reading public and gave rise to a broad and diversified readership.

Their hallmark characteristic of affordability and accessibility revolutionized reading habits, ensuring that a diverse audience, including the urban working class and youthful readers, could partake in the joy of literature. This democratization of reading marked a significant departure from the exclusivity of literature, aligning with the broader ethos of popular literature.

The sensational and thrilling content within dime novels became a defining feature, captivating readers with narratives that spanned a vast spectrum of genres. From Wild West

⁵ Belonging to a social class of people who do unskilled work and have little or no property.

adventures to romantic melodramas, crime mysteries, detective fiction and ventures into the realms of science fiction, dime novels showcased an adaptability that reflected their wide readership's varied taste. The serialized format, often concluding each instalment with a tantalizing cliffhanger, not only sustained reader engagement but also fuelled the rapid production of new content. This storytelling approach was not just a narrative technique but a strategic commercial move, enticing readers to eagerly anticipate subsequent issues and contributing to the genre's prolific output.

Beyond their literary impact, dime novels seamlessly integrated into popular culture, leaving an indelible mark on the entertainment landscape. They influenced not only literary trends but also contributed significantly to the early development of other forms of entertainment, including theatre and cinema. The legacy of dime novels lies not just in their stories but in their transformative influence on the democratization of reading and their enduring contribution to the evolution of popular literature.

Numerous characters from the dime novels made their way into popular culture. Many had an impact on the development of popular entertainment, even though the majority are now forgotten. Be it, Boy Wonders, Detectives, Inventors, Outlaws, Western Heroes and Working Girls. Colonel Prentiss Ingraham was one of the genre's most prolific writers, penning over 600 plays, novels, and poetry.

2.2.2 Exploring the Themes & Tropes of Dime Novels

Dime novels, those diminutive treasures of 19th-century popular literature, served as a vibrant tapestry reflecting the eclectic tastes of a diverse readership, unfolding a kaleidoscope of themes that spanned genres and ignited the imaginations of readers across the social spectrum. Adventure and exploration emerged as prominent motifs, with narratives that transported readers to the Wild West, the high seas, and exotic locales. The allure of daring

adventures resonated as protagonists embarked on thrilling journeys, mirroring the zeitgeist of an era marked by a fascination with the unexplored. The western frontier of the United States was widely accepted as the dime novel's iconic theme from the start, even though Beadle's first book, *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter* (1860), by Ann Sophia Stephens (1813–1886), addressed a wide range of topics.

Romance, with its intoxicating blend of love, passion, and emotional drama, found a perennial home in dime novels. These sentimental narratives, often weaving tales of idealized relationships, became a sanctuary for audiences seeking romantic escapism. Whether set against the backdrop of bustling cities or untamed frontiers, these stories captivated readers with their portrayal of love triumphing over adversity, providing a haven for emotional exploration within the confines of affordable literature.

Crime and detection wove a web of intrigue within the pages of dime novels, introducing readers to the captivating realm of mystery. Protagonists, equipped with sharp intellects and unyielding determination, navigated the criminal underworld, solving mysteries and unravelling intricacies that kept readers on the edge of their seats. The detective stories within dime novels became the foundation for a genre that would later flourish in the realms of popular literature. The recurrent protagonists of mystery and detective fiction included Joe Phenix, Old King Brady, Old Sleuth, Old Cap. Collier, and the legendary Nick Carter (*Dime Novels*).

“Modelled on the fiction of James Fenimore Cooper, many of the first dime novels are set on the colonial American frontier, focusing on the interactions of early settlers with Native Americans” (Campbell 26). The Wild West, with its rugged landscapes and tales of cowboys, outlaws, and lawmen, became an iconic setting for these novels. The narratives, unfolding against the untamed frontier backdrop, painted vivid portraits of the struggle

between justice and lawlessness. These tales captured the essence of a bygone era, transporting readers to dusty saloons, high-stakes shootouts, and the vast expanse of unexplored territories.

Dime novels boldly ventured into speculative fiction and fantasy, pioneering themes that explored futuristic concepts and imaginative worlds. The speculative narratives transcended the boundaries of reality, laying the groundwork for the early development of science fiction and fantasy genres in popular literature. Heroic exploits and vigilantism became recurring motifs, featuring protagonists who undertook daring feats to combat injustice. Whether clad in masks or standing as noble defenders of justice, these characters became symbols of heroism, embodying the enduring triumph of good over evil.

Dime novels, with their exotic and sensational stories often infused with mysticism and the supernatural, aimed to captivate readers by exploring the fascination of the unknown. These narratives didn't overlook social issues or morality; some addressed societal injustices and moral dilemmas, delving into themes of virtue, justice, and societal reform. Through their tales, dime novels provided readers with more than just entertainment, offering nuanced insights into the ethical complexities of the human experience.

Historical dramas, set against the backdrop of different eras, enriched the genre by transporting readers to the olden times. These narratives, blending fact and fiction, offered an immersive experience of historical events and epochs. In addition, stories about the American Civil War, Revolutionary War were included, as well as about slaves such as that found in Metta Victor's book, *Maum Guinea and Her Plantation "Children"* (1861).

2.2.3 Positioning the Enduring Legacy of Dime Novels within American Popular Culture

“But the true place in literature has never really been accorded to these novels” (Shirk 40).

The centrality of dime novels in a wider debate about popular literature is a reflection of the dynamic interaction between changing scholarly viewpoints, cultural relevance, and historical perceptions. Dime novels, sometimes referred to as “penny dreadfuls” or “shilling shockers”, were once written off as “cheap and “sensational” by literary elites (*Dime Novels*). However, a radical re-evaluation has revealed their significant influence on popular literary traditions.

Historically, dime novels were viewed with scepticism, considered vulgar, shallow, due to their mass-produced, inexpensive nature, and often labelled as lacking in literary merit. However, a nuanced assessment reveals the cultural significance of these publications. Dime novels played a pivotal role in shaping 19th-century American reading habits, contributing to a growth in literacy rates and serving as cultural artifacts that provide valuable insights into the happenings of the time. Scholars now acknowledge that their affordability, often sold for a dime, made literature more socially and economically accessible, reaching a wide audience beyond the literary elite.

One key aspect of their reassessment is the recognition of dime novels as pioneers in popularizing specific genres. Genres such as western frontiers, detective stories and romance, once deemed “to be an inferior, vulgar example of literature” are now acknowledged as legitimate and influential forms of popular literature (*Daffy for Dime Novels*). The enduring impact of dime novels on modern genres is evident in the elements of serialized storytelling, diverse genres, and sensational content that continue to shape contemporary Popular Literature. Dime novels are now seen as influential in the development of modern publishing practices. Their serialized format, affordability, and mass appeal contributed to the growth of popular literature and laid the groundwork for modern paperback books and magazines. The vibrant cover illustrations of dime novels, although initially dismissed, are now recognized

for their contribution to visual culture, influencing the aesthetics of book cover designs and visual storytelling.

The fluidity of distinctions between ⁶high and low literature is acknowledged, challenging preconceived notions about literary value. Being described as “miserable stuff” initially, a few researchers now appreciate the complexity and diversity within popular literary traditions, with dime novels being recognized as an integral part of this multifaceted landscape, although it is yet to be studied on a thorough basis (Cassidy 305).

Therefore, within the broader discourse on popular literature, Dime Novels illustrate a journey from initial dismissal to a nuanced recognition of their cultural significance. The evolving perception reflects a deeper understanding of their role in shaping reading habits, pioneering genres, influencing visual culture, and contributing to the rich tapestry of popular literary traditions. This reassessment is bound to position dime novels as valuable contributors to the ongoing dialogue about what constitutes Popular Literature.

2.3 Influence of Dime Novels on Subsequent Popular Literature – Pulp Fiction

Dime novels laid the groundwork for Pulp fiction, that became popular in the early 20th century. Pulp magazines, which featured similar sensational and genre-driven content, continued the legacy of dime novels and influenced subsequent generations of writers

Pulp magazines were the next advancement from dime novels in the 1800s, including heart-stopping romances and high-passion adventure stories. In their fifty-year peak, "the pulps" were immensely popular, either in spite of or perhaps precisely because of their more adult content. Much of what is today regarded as canon in contemporary science fiction, noir, horror, and romance stories was established, thanks to the affordable price and diversity of

⁶ High literature refers to works that are intellectually and artistically complex; low literature encompasses more accessible and commercially driven genres.

stories featured in the most popular journals. “The term “pulp” comes from the fact these stories were originally considered low art” (Arsen). These stories were once regarded as inferior art, which is where the term “pulp” originates. The publications contained graphic depictions of horrific labour violations, political corruption, violent sexism, and repulsive racial caricatures. The paper on which they were produced was made from wood pulp, the leftovers of the printing machine.

Nevertheless, the market for pulp magazines declined significantly following World War II due to the popularity of paperbacks, comic books, and the reallocation of many magazines' budgets to produce higher-quality slicks, or glossy magazines that we are all accustomed to seeing today. However, those authors persisted in penning new works and expanding the pulp fiction's reach into new markets. Examples include, *The Zombie Room* and *The Elephant Tree* by R.D. Ronald, etc.

The pulps featured a wide range of genres, and although the majority catered primarily to men, there were numerous romance novels available for women. Additionally, despite a culture that was far more focused on gender roles, many women also read the other genres. Some genres, such as science fiction, seemed to have faded out with the magazines, while others, like air combat stories, which peaked in popularity during World War I and then declined towards the end of the conflict, were born out of the pulps and were launched in those pages.

2.3.1 The Dime Influence on Popular Literature: Shaping Cultural Narratives

“Dime novels offered some of the earliest entries in major genres like the Western, the detective story and even science fiction; they also influenced the development of major formats like the comic book” (Katz).

A revolutionary force that would change the course of storytelling and readership forever arose in the busy world of 19th-century literature. Dime novels became the literary trailblazers who broke down barriers by putting stories of romance, adventure, and mystery in the hands of a wide range of enthusiastic readers. They served as a catalyst for change that altered both the fundamentals of literary expression and the workings of the publishing industry. The serialized nature of many dime novels contributed to the development of series and franchises, with recurring characters and ongoing storylines.

The sensational content of dime novels had an impact on popular culture in addition to literature. Dime novels' themes, characters, and plots were adapted for the stage and early cinema, among other forms of entertainment. A common cultural experience was shaped in part by the fertilisation of popular culture and literature. Despite having a brief reign as the most popular book format, the dime novel had a big influence on book marketing and production. Dime novels contributed to the development of the contemporary idea of the book as a commodity. These books were particularly well-suited for display because the dime novel industry pioneered many aspects of book production and design, such as the use of coloured pictures and cover illustrations, the variation in size of different series, and the creation of books intended for newsstand sales. These developments were essential to the development of the literary marketplace, which allowed books to enter the rapidly expanding American consumer culture in the late nineteenth century (*History*). Merchandising, not content, was Beadle and Adams's contribution to publishing, as Russel Nye states. In addition to standardising the product and organising production, they also made some astute assumptions about the makeup and size of the market.

Therefore, the dime novel can be understood within the larger framework of the American literary market of the nineteenth century, which saw the emergence of multiple formats for textual presentation, such as differences in binding and illustration, that could be

utilised to target distinct market segments with the same texts. Changes in population patterns, improvements in transportation, and the opening of new retail stores; a dynamic that impacted almost all other consumer goods, made books more widely available to the American public in the years after the Civil War.

With format changes came the dime novel's demise. A subset of the stories found in dime novels were later picked up by specialty magazines, while others evolved into comic books. Certain experts also attribute the origins of contemporary popular best-sellers to dime novels. Even though dime novels still don't receive the credit they deserve, "without them there wouldn't be many forms of genre writing, including detective and crime fiction, pulp fiction, and romance" (Rosenberg). Their inaccurate but powerful tales played a vital role in introducing books to readers who might not have otherwise picked them up.

2.4 Criticism and Controversies

"Literary critics were not so fond of dime novels, but fans loved them for the very features that critics disliked" (Cassidy 306).

Men, women, and children were the target market for dime novels when they were initially published. The first dime novels were frequently reproductions of tales from family magazines and other books. *Malaeska*, the first dime novel, was initially released in the Ladies' Home Companion in 1839. The dime novel's pricing indicates that the intended readership had little discretionary income. To make it more accessible to the general public, a more economical format and publishing style were specifically designed. One could perceive this rising working-class population's literacy as a challenge to society's elites.

As the dime book format evolved, its audience narrowed, predominantly attracting young men and boys from the working class, coinciding with a rise in concerns about crime and juvenile delinquency, leading to the dime book being implicated as the source of

numerous societal issues. Traditional literary criticism has often marginalised popular literature, which is generally seen as unworthy of in-depth examination. Nonetheless, a great deal of literary fiction has achieved commercial success, whereas a great deal of genre fiction has not found a readership. The success of dime novel publishers can be attributed to their use of modern technologies in papermaking, printing, and distribution to provide affordable reading material to a newly literate market.

Initially, editorials mocking dime novels for being so sensationalistic or attributing juvenile delinquency to reading cheap fiction were common criticisms of these books. In one well-known case from 1874, fourteen-year-old Jesse Pomeroy killed two children. The prosecution contended that he may have been inspired to commit his crimes by reading “cheap literature of the dime novel type”, according to Edmund Pearson. However, Pomeroy denied ever having read a dime novel. To these attacks, there were several counterattacks. Several editorials supporting dime novels were published in the *Saturday Journal* and *Banner Weekly* publications by Beadle & Adams.

The dime novel was phased out at the beginning of the twentieth century by a mixture of pulp magazines and movies. Once purchased for a dime, that same amount of money might purchase a movie or additional reading material in a pulp magazine. Readers in the 1920s reminisced over the dime novels of their youth, recalling how these compact books had sparked their imagination, and they amassed archives of their childhood favourites.

In his article for the *Atlantic Monthly*, Charles M. Harvey states, “How those heroes and heroines and their allies, their enemies and their doings, cling to the memory across the gulf of years” (37). Low-art dime novels were seen by many parents as a detrimental influence. Margaret Cassidy, author and researcher, states that these novels, were designed to tuck easily into a child’s pocket during the school day, raised similar concerns that parents of

this day face about smartphones. “She describes nineteenth-century commentary linking pop fiction with juvenile delinquency and crime, citing an 1884 article that warned: *the work of the teacher and preacher is made null and void by the Dime Novel*” (Halley).

The rising popularity of these works did not sit well with the middle class. Known for his contempt, Anthony Comstock, a post office inspector and Secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, Comstock published *Traps for the Young* in 1883, wherein he claimed that the books were literary poison that would corrupt young people through evil reading. The style in which these publications portrayed crimes, employed simple language, and described women to be actively pursuing careers and romantic relationships, posed a significant issue for Comstock and his contemporaries. The standard objections against immaturity and purity ensued, but dime books' appeal persisted. “They were even banned at one point — ‘burnt so freely as literary garbage’” (Rosenberg). The New Republic editorial as well refers to the genre as a “little ill-fitted sister of the American novel” (*The History of Dime Novels and the Cheap Book Boom*).

Quoting Shirk, “They are not immoral, they are not trash. They hold field all their own” (40). As a critic, he believes that, dime novels do not exude any chaos, depravity, or decadence. They avoid imposing any beliefs other than integrity and propriety. Rather, their God is action, strength, and preparedness in a disaster.

2.5 Revisiting Dime Novels: A Crucial Aspect of Popular Literary Heritage

Dime novels, within the realm of popular literature, stand as a crucial and transformative component, shaping the landscape of literary consumption and cultural engagement during the 19th century. Their significance lies in their ability to democratize reading, making literature accessible to a broad audience that extended beyond the confines of socioeconomic status. Sold for a dime, these pocket-sized treasures became a literary

bridge, connecting diverse readers, urban workers, youths, and individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds, with the world of storytelling.

The content of dime novels further reinforces their pivotal role in popular literature. With their sensational and thrilling narratives, spanning genres such as adventure, romance, crime, and science fiction, dime novels catered to a wide array of tastes. The serialized format, with its suspenseful cliffhangers, not only sustained reader interest but also contributed to the rapid production and widespread availability of these narratives. This prolific output mirrored the demands of a voracious readership, demonstrating dime novels' keen understanding of popular literary trends and the need for engaging, accessible storytelling.

The adaptability and diversity of themes within dime novels strengthened their position as a crucial element of popular literature. In essence, dime novels, with their affordability, engaging narratives, and cultural integration, not only reflected the pulse of 19th-century society but also played a proactive role in shaping it. Their legacy endures as a testament to their pivotal position in the evolution of popular literature, leaving an indelible mark on literary trends, reading habits, and cultural expressions of their time. As a crucial component of pop lit, dime novels remain a fascinating and influential chapter in the broader narrative of literature's accessibility and impact on society.

CHAPTER THREE

GENDERED NARRATIVES: CONTRASTING 19th CENTURY DIME NOVELS BY MALE AND FEMALE AUTHORS

3.1 Narrating the Dime: Crafting America's Thrilling Tales

Cheap adventure fiction did not originate with the dime novel of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, from which these stories were drawn. Before the Civil War, paperbound books had been widely consumed by the public for almost thirty years. Irwin Beadle (1826–1889) was the first publisher to regularly release inexpensive paperbound books at a set price, despite the fact that many different kinds of exciting stories had already been published in the early 1800's. There had been occasional appearances and, in certain circumstances, rapid disappearances of other publishers' attempts, with pricing varying from story to story. Beadle's early dime novels were little pamphlets of about a hundred pages.

Many of the well-known and talented writers, who contributed to the initial generation of Beadle's dime novels are unfortunately not among the great nineteenth-century writers whose names have endured. Some had written books other than dime novels and were regular contributors to other journals. The writers were under pressure because dime novels were so widely read. Although there were numerous variants on a theme due to the diversity of writers, formula stories were employed to some extent. Plot similarities were partially caused by insufficient time for revisions. The majority of the writers did, however, write in passable English despite the market's demands for speed. Modern readers may find the speech and tone of the stories romantic and flowery, yet by nineteenth-century standards the writers were wonderfully restrained. The Beadle Company was proud of the high expectations it placed on its writers, although some editorial slackness resulted from the hectic pace of production.

To avoid giving the impression that the stories were produced in a hurry or haphazardly, the dime novel authors cleverly concealed their prodigious output behind clever use of pseudonyms. The dime novel's romantic, thrilling world contrasts with the sombre realities of a nineteenth-century woman's everyday existence. The United States had survived the tumultuous years of its founding and establishment. The status of women was being altered along with the rest of the social order.

Usually, a dime novel features third-person narrative, action, and language. For instance, a horse in a dime novel will never trot or just walk, it always gallops. The dialogue conjures up strong mental images for the reader, which are bolstered by the text's theme and historical context. Many dime novels were published in serialized form, with each instalment ending on a cliffhanger to entice readers to continue following the story. This episodic format created a sense of anticipation and suspense, encouraging reader loyalty and engagement.

3.1.1 The Gendered Lens: Dime Novels through Authorial Perspectives

“The purpose of dime novels, besides helping the publishing industry expand from family run businesses to full-fledged companies, was to uphold the mores of their time” (Pye).

According to many sociolinguists and linguists, men and women speak and write differently because they have had distinct life experiences. While some scholars and readers argue that there may be distinguishable writing styles associated with different genders, the gender of the author can also have an influence on the themes explored in their written work. Female authors, for instance, might be more adept at creating nuanced and complex female characters, providing insight into women's experiences. Male authors might similarly excel in portraying male characters with depth and authenticity. The author's gender can affect how the story explores gender dynamics, according to some, who contend that men and women may create narratives differently. Keeping aside these generalizations, it is important to look

at authors and their writing as unique for their work is shaped by a multitude of factors beyond gender, including personal experiences and cultural influences, societal perceptions of gender and literary expectations.

Understanding 19th-century literature, social mores, and cultural dynamics requires a gender-based analysis of dime novels. Male and female authors brought about distinct perspectives, experiences, and values, reflecting societal roles. Analysing reader reception unveils audience responses to works by male versus female authors, illuminating societal attitudes towards literature and gender. This exploration identifies patterns and trends in genre evolution shaped by authors of different genders. It allows for an examination of feminist and masculinist themes, revealing whether these works challenged or reinforced traditional gender norms. Exploring authorial intent and creative choices based on gender enhances our understanding of motivations. Importantly, this examination recognizes the often-overlooked contributions of female authors, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of 19th-century American literary history. In essence, this approach helps enrich contemporary literary discussions by unravelling the intricate interplay between gender, societal expectations, and creative expression in dime novels.

Examining 19th-century dime novels reveals distinct differences in themes based on the gender of the authors. Male authors predominantly focused on crafting narratives filled with swashbuckling adventures, frontier life, and detective mysteries, echoing traditional masculine ideals of heroism and action. In contrast, female authors brought unique perspectives, contributing mainly to romantic fiction that explored familial relationships, societal expectations, and the female experience within a male dominated society. Their works delved into the domestic realm, shedding light on women's roles and challenges within societal norms. Analysing these gender-specific themes provides valuable insights into the

prevailing societal expectations and allows for a nuanced understanding of the diverse creative expressions within the dime novel genre.

During the early phase of the dime novel era (1860–70), the readership was predominantly female, a trend attributed to the significant proportion of contributions by female authors who wrote approximately one-fifth of all published dime novels. According to Shelly Streeby, this percentage was even higher, reaching one-third during the years 1860 to 1865, with the Civil War contributing to the decline of male authors. Dime novelists such as Metta V Victor, Frances Fuller Victor, and Mary Denison, among others, emerged during this period. June Johnson Bube, a scholar in the dime novel genre, characterizes this initial decade as a “more varied, complicated gender world”, highlighting the shift from female-centric to male-centric narratives as men resumed writing post-war. Bube emphasizes that women writers introduced diverse ideas to sensational western adventure tales, avoiding a standardized formula for reproduction. Always conscious of their audience, the dime novel authors created women characters of whom their readers would approve (Chu).

3.2 Trailblazers of the Dime: Male and Female Voices in Popular Literature

Edward S. Sylvester (1840–1916) was an American author and educator known for his prolific contributions to literature, particularly in the dime novel era. Born on April 11, 1840, in Geneva, Ohio, Sylvester demonstrated an early passion for writing. Writing under various pseudonyms such as Seelin Robins, Captain J. F. C. Adams, and others, Sylvester maintained a diverse body of work. He initially wrote for Irwin P. Beadle & Co. and its successors, remaining loyal even after Irwin's departure. Sylvester produced works in various genres, including juvenile stories, history, and textbooks. His literary contributions include the creation of one of the most famous and enduring dime novels of the 19th century, *Seth Jones* (1860). The success of *Seth Jones* exemplified Sylvester's ability to captivate readers

with narratives that combined elements of adventure, heroism, and the exploration of the untamed West, reflecting the broader cultural fascination with the frontier during that era. The novel's popularity helped establish Edward S. Sylvester as a prominent figure in the world of dime novels and contributed to the genre's enduring appeal. His influence on dime novels and popular literature during the late 19th century contributed to the development of American literary culture.

Frederick Whittaker, born in London in 1838, led a multifaceted life, working as a soldier, writer, and editor. Despite limited formal education, he showed early literary promise and enlisted in the Civil War, rising to the rank of 2nd Lieutenant in the New York Cavalry. After the war, he worked as a book agent and teacher. Whittaker's literary career gained traction when he wrote for Mayne Reid's magazine *Onward* in 1869, followed by contributions to Frank Leslie's story paper and various journals. Using the pseudonym "Launce Poyntz," Whittaker penned numerous dime and nickel novels, known for their gripping swashbuckling adventures. Whittaker's personal life involved interests in spiritualism, an excitable disposition. However, his accidental death in 1889 occurred when a revolver he carried, discharged. His impactful legacy in the dime novel era remains, leaving behind well-crafted and thrilling stories that entertained readers during the 19th century. These dime novels were known for their thrilling and sensational narratives, typically featuring daring protagonists engaged in exciting exploits. Whittaker's stories often included elements of romantic fiction, exploration, heroism, and encounters with danger, catering to the popular demand for fast-paced and engaging fiction prevalent in the late 19th century.

Bartley T. Campbell (1843–1888), born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was a versatile figure known as a journalist, novelist, poet, dramatist, and theatrical manager. Initially inclined towards law, Campbell turned to journalism, becoming a reporter for the Pittsburgh. However, with the success of his melodrama *Through Fire* in 1871, he shifted his focus

entirely to playwriting. Campbell's theatrical career saw the production of numerous plays, including *Peril; or, Love at Long Branch* (1872), *Fate* (1873), and *The Big Bonanza* (1875). His play, *My Partner*, premiered in New York in 1879, enjoyed long-term success on stage, even being performed in London and Berlin. He died on July 30, 1888. Campbell's burial took place in Pittsburgh. His diverse talents left a lasting impact on the cultural landscape of his time. Known for his diverse literary pursuits, including the writing of dime novels, demonstrated versatility in his storytelling. One of his dime novels, *The Girl Wife, or, The True and the False*, encapsulates elements of romantic fiction and detective-mystery genres. Within the pages of his dime novels, Campbell weaves narratives that incorporate the dramatic and engaging themes characteristic of romantic fiction, while simultaneously infusing the intrigue and suspense found in detective and mystery stories.

Mrs. Metta Victoria Fuller Victor, born in 1831 Pennsylvania, began her writing career at a young age, with early works published in newspapers and journals. Despite initial modest success, her talent grew over the years as she ventured into romance and sensational storytelling. In 1856, she married Orville J. Victor, a fellow editor, and relocated to New York City, where she became a prolific writer for various publications, including those of Beadle. Under various pseudonyms like "Rose Kennedy" and "Seeley Regester," she penned numerous popular novels and stories, earning acclaim and substantial income, notably for her contributions to the *New York Weekly*. Metta Victoria Fuller Victor passed away in 1885, leaving behind a legacy of diverse literary works and a family survived by several children. Metta Victoria Fuller Victor authored several famous dime novels during the mid-19th century, including *Alice Wilde* (1860), *The Backwoods Bride* (1860), *Myrtle, the Child of the Prairie* (1860), and *Maum Guinea* (1861). These works showcased her skilful storytelling and contributed significantly to her reputation as a prolific and successful dime novel author of her time.

Mary Andrews Denison, born May 26, 1826, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, led a diverse and prolific literary career. Married to Rev. Charles Wheeler Denison, she contributed to various publications and wrote novels under the pen name "Clara Vance". Her works appeared in Godey's *Lady's Book*, *Golden Days* and Frank Leslie's *Monthly*, among others. Denison wrote around sixty novels, including popular titles like *That Husband of Mine*. She also penned plays, with *Florel* being adapted into the comedy-drama *Talked About*. Her contributions extended to Beadle, where she authored eight or nine novels. Denison's life included periods of nursing during the Civil War and accompanying her husband to England as an American propagandist. She passed away in 1911, leaving behind a significant literary legacy. The most widely read book she wrote was undoubtedly *That Husband of Mine*. She authored eight or nine books, her first published in 1860, for Beadle.

Ann Sophia Stephens, born in 1813, embarked on a multifaceted literary odyssey, leaving an indelible mark on American letters. From her humble beginnings in Derby, Connecticut, to her editorship at prestigious publications in Portland, Maine, and New York City, Stephens distinguished herself as a versatile and prolific writer. Notably, she authored *The Old Homestead*, celebrated for its theatrical adaptation, and penned *Malaeska*, the pioneering Beadle Dime Novel, which revolutionized popular literature. Beyond her novels, Stephens crafted guides and humorous works, contributing significantly to the cultural landscape of her time. Her influential career spanned various genres, reflecting her remarkable versatility and enduring legacy. Stephens' passing in 1886 marked the end of an era, but her profound impact on the publishing industry and her lasting contributions to American literature continue to resonate with readers and scholars alike, cementing her place as a trailblazer in the literary world.

3.3 A Synopsis of Select Dime Novels

A Fair Face (1884), written by Bartley T Campbell, is a tragic tale set in Ohio, revolving around the ill-fated love affair between Elinor Gregg, who is tempted, impregnated with an illegitimate child and forsaken by Chauncey Watterson due to societal prejudices. Though circumstantially the parted lovers meet, witnessing the birth of their child, questionable prejudice over class and wealth does not permit their reconciliation. Following the rumoured death of his former lover, Watterson subsequently engages in marriage to his new found love interest, Grace Alward. The story progresses amidst a set of twists and turns, with the introduction of subplots and new characters such as the Taggart family, who provide as a foster family to the illegitimate child, now named Romney Taggart. Once 16 years of age, “Romney” is adopted by Grace Alward and her husband, unaware of her true parentage. The revelation through a locket causes Watterson to collapse, while the final pages bring about the reunion of mother and daughter creating an eerie environment throughout. The tragic end is brought about by a tempest that kills Grace Watterson as well as Elinor Gregg whose bodies tightly held get washed away on the shore. However, the protagonist Watterson survives, and the story ends with the notion that God chose that he should live on.

The Doge's Daughter, penned down by Capt. F Whittaker, is a fictional romance between Spanish Noble Don Lorenzo Bellario and the titular “Doge's daughter”, Julia Dandolo. While Bellario's disguised dumb page, Anetta, who later proves to be Julia's half-sister, is another major plot point in the story, it kicks off with the disreputable Noble being held captive by Julia's cousin Countess Estella Milleroni and her betrothed lover Captain Bonetta for attacking the honour of the Dandolo family. Sparking revenge and vengeance, follows a duel held between Don Lorenzo and Capt. Bonetta, slaying the latter. The rumoured news of Capt. Bonetta being termed as a traitor under the Turks and having fled from Venice, reaches the blind old doge of Venice, Dandolo. Following an array of deception and

disguises, Bellario finds Julia in the disguise of his dumb page, Anetta. Their mutual hate for the countess unites them towards seeking revenge and vengeance. Bellario continues manipulating Estella with his fake “love” tactics leaving the countess in a difficult spot. Before the final encounter between Don Bellario and the now returned Capt. Bonetta, Julia deduces and reveals Anetta to be her half-sister, leading to the murder of the innocent sufferer. In the final act of vengeance, Bellario is slaughtered by Capt. Bonetta to whom returns his betrothed love, Estella Milleroni, during the held court hearing. With the revelation of truth, Julia poisons herself, obliged to be buried besides her lover, while Capt. Bonetta and Countess Milleroni reconcile after all their trials.

Set in late eighteenth-century New York, *Seth Jones* tells the story of the eponymous back woodsman hero, later revealed to be a gentleman, who rescues the beautiful and helpless white “damsel in distress”. The novel begins in a forested setting when Alfred Haverland from western New York, is met by Seth Jones who chanced down in his direction. As the two men get along Mr. Haverland introduces his wife, sister (Mary Haverland) and daughter to the new comer, followed by which the Indian Mohawk tribe raids the frontier, capturing the settler's daughter in the process. Seth Jones, the titular character, instantly leads the family on a daring rescue attempt filled with trickery, strategy, and narrow escapes when he is met by a visiting stranger Everard Graham, who as a friend of Alfred Haverland and a supposed lover of Ina Haverland joins in on the rescue mission. Facing a series of difficulties and physical challenges, Haverland finally rescues his daughter with the endearing support of Graham but mainly Jones who skilfully battles the local Mohawk warriors and risks his own life whilst doing so. As this adventure comes to an end, a gist of romance is brought to life with Seth Jones and his melodramatic tale wherein his true name and story is revealed. Eugene Morton’s love for Mary Haverland had brought him to Western New York which now leads

to their marriage alongside the wedding of Graham and Mary Haverland. The novel ends on a happy note.

Set in the western sphere of New York city, *Alice Wilde, The Raftsmen's daughter*, is a unique contribution by Mrs. Metta V. Victor, published in the year 1840. Challenging the conventional norms, the titular Alice Wilde, daughter of sawmill owner, David Wilde, undergoes a series of challenges, beginning with the complete destruction of her house as it is burned down. Taking up the responsibility of the renovation of the house, her strength and courage is portrayed to us as well as furthermore her determination towards books and education is vividly mentioned. The crux of the novel revolves around the theme of love as the protagonist's relationship with two of the leading male characters, takes up the pages of the dime novel. Firstly Ben Perkins, who in the very opening lines of the text is shown to foster an intricate love for Alice Wilde, who also happens to be a hand employed in David Wilde's saw mill. Having no interest in Ben Perkins, she is soon attracted to Phillip Moore, Alice's fathers' companion, a man who had just lost all his family fortune, hailing from New York. While the plot is also inclusive of add on characters such as Virginia, Raymond Moore, Pallas and Saturn, their contribution adds to the twist in the plot. The developing jealousy and hatred of Ben Perkins towards Phillip Moore and his love for Alice Wilde, results in the abduction of Phillip Moore, aiming to kill him and end their budding love story, which Alice doesn't let happen, on her supposed wedding day. However, the story ends on a tragic note with the death of Ben Perkins, who died uttering the name of the woman he loved.

Captain Molly: Or, The Fight at Trenton, 1776 was written by Mary A. Denison, set in the capital city of the U.S. state of New Jersey, Trenton, located along the banks of the Delaware River. The dime novel highlights the theme of war intertwined with romance whilst portraying adventurous female characters, mainly the titular Captain Molly and Elsie Vernon. The ongoing war reflective of the Battle of Trenton, which took place on the morning of

December 1776, during the American Revolutionary War, where the Hessian forces fought against the Continental Army led by General George Washington, is mirrored through the lines of this text. The commander of the Hessian forces, General Rahl, who although despised the Americans, was in love with the beautiful rebel Elsie Vernon, niece of Lady Walsingham. However, the two leading female characters pursue their own respective lovers, of whose Lieutenant Colonel Washburn engaged with Elsie Vernon is accused to be a spy and sentenced to death by General Rahl. Besides, Captain Molly Putnam, is said to be Lady Walsingham's partly maid and partly companion as well as the daughter of a Tory who remained loyal to the British Crown. But the man Molly loves is a rebel, Captain Paul Green of the 10th Volunteers of New Jersey in General Washington's army, which ultimately leads her to discover the welfare of her best friend's lover, imprisoned by British forces, as well as gain the companionship of her own lover. Captain Molly's master plan featuring Elsie Vernon, inclusive of war, deception and disguise. Complications ensue and Molly does find herself in peril, but her efforts help the American cause and General Washington ends up thankful for it. In the end, the plan is a success resulting in a happy ending with two weddings, one wherein Molly marries her handsome Captain Green after having been cast off by her father and second, the marriage between Elsie Vernon and Colonel Washburn.

The Indian Queen, beautifully written by Ann S Stephens, was published in the year 1864, and vividly paints a picture about Native American tribes in the Northeast during the colonial period and war, focusing on women, and interracial sex. Mahaska, the protagonist of *The Indian Queen*, is a mixed-blood woman of notable beauty who also has a cunning, crafty dark side. The unacknowledged relationship of a Seneca woman and a French-Canadian ruler gave birth to Katharine Frontenac, who later took the title of Mahaska, their mixed-blood daughter. However, following the death of her mother, her father treats her rather poorly. The Senecas implore Mahaska to return to her people as their leader. Not everyone thought highly

of the queen, as there definitely were those characters such as the Fox, who displayed hatred towards her actions. Once her people construct her a castle and pamper her like the European royalty, Mahaska develops a power-hungry personality. Despite her mistreatment and dislike of him, she marries Gi-en-gwa-tah, an influential chief who adores her. The different sides of Mahaska's personality are brought about through the lines in the text, portraying her as a "tigress" hungry for revenge as well as an affectionate mother and ambitious wife who overthrows all as she is more concerned with getting revenge on her father and the current French governor, Gaston de Laguy, who she once loved, highlighting her hatred towards the French. In order to undermine the Seneca's alliance with the French, Mahaska betrays them by collaborating with the British. After a while, Gi-en-gwa-tah comes to understand her betrayal and is compelled to banish Mahaska and retake leadership of his tribe. The novel ends on a tragic note with the death of Mahaska, the Indian queen.

3.4 Literary Themes and Tropes: An Analysis of Male Authored Dime Novels

Dime novels, popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, written by men, thrilled readers with tales of adventure, heroism, and justice set in the American frontier. These stories featured rugged protagonists battling outlaws, seeking vengeance, and upholding moral values. While offering escapism, dime novels also reflected cultural attitudes, sometimes perpetuating ethnic stereotypes. Nevertheless, they captivated audiences with their exciting narratives and larger-than-life characters, providing a glimpse into the untamed wilderness of the West.

3.4.1 Inheritance, Nobility and Class: Colonial America

In the United States, the former colony of Britain, Queen Victoria left a lasting impression. Victorian America sought to imitate Victorian ideas and styles, and the word is typically used to apply to both the densely populated Northeast and the Deep South. The

Women's Suffrage Movement and the Second Industrial Revolution both occurred during this time. As business and industry became more prosperous, a "gilded" upper class emerged, anxious to imitate the manners, morality, and aesthetics of the old mother nation. For a large portion of the 19th century, American social life was dominated by Victorian principles. It was general knowledge that men and women had different domains of existence. While raising children, domestic chores fell under the feminine domain while wage work and politics fell under the masculine domain.

The concept of nobility did not officially exist in America, given its foundation on democratic principles and the absence of a hereditary aristocracy. However, in colonial American dime novels, a literary genre that often-romanticized historical settings, depictions of nobility were prevalent. These novels, while not reflective of the social reality in America, frequently incorporated European-style aristocratic characters, settings, and themes.

European literary traditions had a great influence on the concept of aristocracy/nobility in dime novels, especially those that took place in colonial America. Nobility, aristocracy, and chivalry were frequently the subjects of stories in European literature, particularly in the historical and romantic genres. This impact permeated American dime novels, influencing the stories and characters in these widely read works. Dime novel authors in America drew inspiration from these European narratives, adapting and incorporating elements of nobility to cater to the tastes of their readership.

While in *A Fair Face*, the story takes place in a US based state of Ohio, the setting of *The Dumb Page* is largely European with the action being located in Venice, Italy. We see prominent elements in this text showcasing the influence of the European culture, such as the "duels" fought between Don Lorenzo Bellario and Captain Bonetta on the "island of San Antonio (Whittaker 8). The presence of the blind old "Doge of Venice" Dandolo, in his ducal

palace and the addition of the crafty Venetian republic institution, “The Lion’s Mouth”, dealing with treason and the intervention on the Court featuring The Council of Ten and The Council of Three, together touches upon the aristocratic and political makeup of Europe. Recurring references to ⁷the clock of St. Mark and the iconic ⁸gondolas, present in these texts, are distinctive features associated with the city of Venice, Italy. These references contribute to creating a specific atmosphere, adding a touch of exoticism and romantic allure to the dime novel's storyline especially since luxurious gondolas were often used for leisurely rides and social events by the wealthier individuals, as Don Lorenzo Bellario proves to be.

Referring to the aforementioned male authored dime novels, the male protagonists, in both of the romantic fiction texts, *The Dumb Page* and *A Fair Face* belong to the wealthy upper class or nobility. “Why, that is Don Lorenzo Bellario, the rich Spanish noble...” (Whittaker 2). Similarly, Mr. Chauncey Watterson is portrayed to be another wealthy man living in a “long rambling structure, with many windows and gables, and two battlemented turrets”, along with his mother, Mrs Watterson, who is said to be rich and proud, bearing no pity towards the young distressed lady, Elinor Gregg (Campbell 3).

Class based prejudice typically capturing the rich vs poor segment is prevalent in *A Fair Face* authored by Campbell, as the titular character Elinor Gregg is abandoned by the rich Mr. Watterson who finds it “impossible ... to marry a poor farmers daughter” (9). While Lucy Watterson believes she is an “accomplished girl”, her brother clearly disapproves of keeping any romantic connection with an unworthy, poor, beggar (13). The struggle between wealth and love is also visible through the portrayal of the Taggart family when Van Taggart says, “I would buy you good clothes too, if I only had the money”, as he gets affected by the fine treatment of Grace Alward towards his foster sister, Romney Taggart (26). Belonging to

⁷ St Mark's Clock is housed in the Clock Tower on the Piazza San Marco in Venice, Italy, adjoining the Procuratie Vecchie.

⁸ A traditional, flat-bottomed Venetian rowing boat used on the canals of Venice.

the lower class, two ragged boys, Van Taggert and his late brother would set up musical stations upon the sidewalk, playing sad sweet music on a pair of dirty looking violins. The essence of poverty in 19th century American society is captured and put forth through these characters. *The Dumb Page* also features one such character of the dumb page Anetta, who is looked at as “the poor girl” who in duty to Don Lorenzo Bellario has been treated as a “slave” in the disguise of a boy (19).

The common element of a grand “Ball” being held, marks the beginning of both these texts. One being the ball at the Foscari Palace, which is attended by Don Lorenzo Bellario and the Countess Milleroni, amidst a setting summative of cavaliers and gondolas marking the European influence on 19th century America. “There had been a great ball” in Ohio attended by “the beauty of Cincinnati, set in precious gems and sheeny fabrics...” (Campbell 2). Departing in a carriage, Mr Watterson and Miss Grace Alward resident of the Alward Mansion, are an intricate depiction of the wealthy upper class. In Colonial America, particularly from the early 18th century onward, formal dances known as balls were a prominent social event. The affluent individuals who attended these gatherings adhered to a rigorous set of social norms and expectations. Towards the end of the novel, Watterson’s advice to his daughter also promotes his wealthy noble nature where he mentions, “You are rich- very rich; the heiress of Bolton Palace, and you should be very careful that you are not led into an alliance beneath you” (29).

3.4.2 Masculinity and Manhood

“During the colonial era, a man was valued for his role in the community and as head of a household” (Adams 15).

Men were frequently perceived as being more moral and logical than women. Following the revolutionary era in politics and business, individualism gained prominence

and ⁹communal manhood gave way to ¹⁰self-made manhood. Men were seen as competitors in a free market. Work was done more for one's own achievement and sense of self than for the benefit of the public and were viewed as aggressive and passionate. In an effort to help men control their impulses and prosper in the business, women took up the role as defenders of family values. This was a role that men accepted for women, but it was insignificant to many who had married for the opportunity of sexual intercourse. Traditional gender roles often dictated specific tasks and responsibilities based on gender. Men were typically associated with tasks requiring physical strength or skills deemed masculine, while women were associated with domestic chores, caregiving, and nurturing roles.

Typical of male physical description, the male characters are subject to a vivid description of their rather handsome features, being “large, well formed” men. Using the term “boyish” to distinguish between the behaviour of a male and a female paints a stereotypical image, contributing to the stigmatization of behaviours or interests perceived as “unmanly” or associated with femininity.

The male characters of *Seth Jones* are looked at as strong, sturdy and adventurous, each having a different description cumulative of a “muscular frame” having “formidable strength”. Be it Alfred Haverland, titular character Seth Jones or Everard Graham, who was rather prepossessing in appearance. The three male characters prove to be made all set for the race of life and death. Jones’ serio comical manner gripped with nonchalance, arrested and amused his captors. The phrase “manifestly nothing but to die like a man” suggests a profound reflection on the inevitability of facing death with courage and dignity (Sylvester 90). As a male protagonist, the character of Seth Jones is weaved to promote the traditional characteristics linked with manhood, as he dives into rescuing poor Ina Haverland by

⁹ Captures the essence of masculinity centred on community values, responsibilities, and relationships.

¹⁰ The concept of achieving manhood or masculinity through individual effort, perseverance, and self-reliance.

strategically fighting and defending the Mohawks. While the described rescue mission and its execution continues through the pages of the dime novel, it puts forth an adventurous element set in the forests, amidst the mountains and wild plants. To say that Seth Jones cared nothing for these inflicted agonies would be absurd but it is true for he had been schooled to Indian indignities and bore them unflinchingly. "...Our hero made a bound down the embankment, alighting at the bottom, and struck directly across the plain...".

Playing the role of the protagonist, Bellario can be looked at as a villainous character who ultimately meets his tragic end and yet is looked at as a model figure for his physical appearances and elements of toxic masculinity that were admired by women and normalized by the male dominated society. "Don Lorenzo Bellario is a bad model to follow... but he is so devilish handsome..." (Whittaker 6). Referring to protagonist Chauncey Watterson in *A Fair Face*, who also happens to play the role of a villain, is described as a very stylish and handsome man. The depiction of his outfit, silken hair and blue eyes lures the audience towards accepting his negative role in favour of the plot.

Traditional notions of toxic masculinity intend to glorify aggression, dominance, and the need to assert control. This can manifest in the form of aggressive behaviour, bullying and an emphasis on physical strength as a measure of manhood. Be it the "man of intense pride", Don Lorenzo Bellario or his captivator Captain Bonetta, whose "form was full of tough sinewy strength". These noble men indulge in duels and other adventurous activities portraying their strength and undying zeal to attain revenge and vengeance, "that is Don Lorenzo Bellario...who has fought more duels... than any other man". Men adhering to toxic masculine norms may belittle, dismiss, or invalidate women's feelings, contributing to a cycle of emotional harm. The characters of Chauncey Watterson and Don Lorenzo Bellario hold the title of being a womanizer respectively, keeping in mind their multiple love interests and failed love relationships. In the case of Don Lorenzo Bellario, he "has broken more hearts...

than any other men in Venice” yet the women “all go crazy for him” (2). Bellario’s cruel treatment of his disguised dumb page Anetta who knelt at his feet, is evident through his actions and words as he proclaims, “dumb thou art and dumb thou must remain, till I tell thee to speak”. His failed relationship with Julia Dandolo, highlighting his motive of abduction, followed by his fake love act in order to trap Countess Estella Milleroni and gain revenge bring to light his selfish, toxic nature, “the countess shall be queen till I am tired of her” (9).

Chauncey Watterson while already engaged in a love affair with his lady love Grace Alward is shown to have interest in other women simultaneously as his carriage driver Michael Rand after the grand Ball, suggests, “I thought maybe you wanted to see Nellie or the other girl before you’d sleep” (Campbell 3). Strongly holding onto his class-based prejudices, Watterson abandons his prior lover Elinor Gregg with their illegitimate child in her womb. Although being the dark cloud in her life, towards the end “God chose that he should live on, that he might repent for the evil he had worked”, promoting male dominance and favourism towards men that has existed in society since the very beginning (31).

3.4.3 Portrayal and Perception: Depiction of Women

The “damsels in distress” trope, deeply rooted in traditional literature and folklore, portrays female characters as passive, helpless, and in need of rescue by a male hero. Often associated with beauty, innocence, and vulnerability, this trope perpetuates traditional gender roles and has faced criticism for reinforcing stereotypes about women's dependence on male protection. Critics argue that it diminishes the agency of female characters and contributes to harmful social perceptions. Characters fitting this archetype are typically characterized by their beauty, innocence, and vulnerability. Their primary role in the narrative is to serve as a motivation or catalyst for the hero's actions.

“She shrunk beneath his sheltering form, believing that his strong arm was capable of protecting her against any foe...” (Ellis 93). Ina Haverland is a typical example of a damsel in distress, held captive by the Indian Mohawk Tribe, who is altogether rescued by the three leading men, led by the titular Seth Jones. Her strength as a woman is questioned and doubted on finding a broken stick as one of the rescuers believe that she would never be able to break a stick and it would have taken her a lot of time, ultimately choosing to avoid doing so. Held captive, helpless Ina Haverland is attacked with brutal menaces and is left in a dreadful position to the mercy of the Indian Mohawks.

Often perceived as “weak and feminine” the three highlighted male authored novels describe the lead female character as one who is either frail, weak, frightened, often threatened and not to forget unjustified. For absolutely no fault of hers, Elinor Gregg is abandoned and left to suffer all alone. As she struggles to receive help, she is helped and rescued by hero Chauncey Watterson, as her love for life was still strong within her youthful breast. “The devouring wolf is ever ready to rend the tender lamb” (Campbell 15). Easily manipulated by Watterson’s advances, Elinor Gregg chooses to be the “forgiving loving woman” as is believed every woman should be. Painting a false image about Elinor Gregg, calling her “unworthy” and cruelly treating her and her new born child all show the negative outlook of the celebrated protagonist. Only because “the girls a beggar” her former lover holds no respect and rather subdues his love for her, moving on with another woman. While in a relationship with Grace Alward, he shows half-hearted love, still holding love for Elinor Gregg deep within his heart.

Similarly, the characters of Julia Dandolo and Anetta, the dumb page are thoroughly controlled and manipulated by the villainous protagonist, Don Lorenzo Bellario. In an attempt to abduct Julia Dandolo, he visited her at her palace window singing luring songs to gain her love. In relation to his treatment of his disguised dumb page, she is merely a slave to

him dancing on his tunes. In the following lines, the cruel, harsh nature of Bellario towards women is made clear; “I put her in a sack and threw her in a river” (Whittaker 31). Yet his behaviour is glorified in the name of love by his love interest as she forgives him the insolence proclaiming, “I am a fool for the love of your beautiful eyes” (20). He fakes his love for Countess Milleroni and traps her just to make her fall in love with him and torture her heart for the sake of revenge. Treating women as commodities and objects of desire to fulfil their own desires is a noticed toxic trait.

The stereotypes associated with women bearing children out of wedlock is emphasised upon through the character of Mrs. Watterson, the rich and proud mother of Watterson. She looks at Elinor Gregg as a bad person and believes that for her “sin”, “there is no room in the world for creatures like her” (Campbell 4). On explaining that she was tempted to do the same, there is no attempt to understand, rather Mrs. Watterson replies with “young ladies should have better sense than to believe everything told to them” (4). Here, the name or title of the supposed father is not even considered to be known. Even on revealing his cruel heartless act to his wife Grace Alward, though shocked she knelt down by his side and whispered her forgiveness, truly undeserving.

“She was dreaming and thinking as girls will dream and think...” or “the two girls greeted each other... just as girls would do”, while full of such generalized statements, the use of the term “buxom” and “girlish” are placed within lines referring to women characters. For instance, Ina Haverland is described as a “bouncing buxom girl” and a “purty flower”, a mere objectification of women is made evident (Ellis 11). When Chauncey Watterson suffers from an acute Epilepsy attack, he is compared to a trembling “school girl”. Women are not given a fair chance at occupation as Van Taggart says about Romney, “it ain’t no place for a little girl...”. Little baby girls are very tender, “a great deal more than boys” (Campbell 18). The clear distinction between a good and bad woman is made wherein good is associated

with timid, forgiving nature as opposed to bad who is seen as sinful and troublesome. Watterson's manipulative comparison of Elinor Gregg and Grace Alward in order to win her confidence, portrays women as essentially innocent and easily manipulated. "After I saw you, this bad woman had no charms for me" (22).

Women against women, a very unsupportive environment is setup in two of the above novels. Mrs. Watterson is totally against poor Elinor Gregg while Grace Alward shows no concern towards her. Julia Dandolo hates her own cousin Countess Milleroni, and ends up killing her half-sister Anetta, the dumb page. The only characters gaining something good from this are the respective protagonists, who women ardently obey choosing to "repay (your) their confidence" for absolutely no logical reason apart from love.

However, storytelling has evolved, with contemporary narratives seeking to subvert or deconstruct this trope by featuring strong, independent female characters who actively shape their own destinies. The push for diversity in storytelling emphasizes the importance of showcasing a range of female characters with agency, strength, and complexity, challenging traditional archetypes and promoting more inclusive narratives. Efforts to move beyond the damsel in distress trope contribute to a broader cultural shift towards portraying women in literature and popular culture as active participants in their own stories.

3.4.4 The Intricate Web of Deception, Disguise and Revenge

"This is a world of deceit and wickedness..." (Campbell 19).

Dime novels, prevalent in the 19th and early 20th centuries, frequently employed the theme of deception to weave sensational and melodramatic narratives. Central to these stories were characters with masked identities, secret betrayals, and dramatic twists, creating an air of mystery and suspense. Impersonation and disguises were common, introducing unexpected moral dilemmas and complex relationships within the plots. Deceptive actions often fuelled

vengeful schemes, romantic entanglements, and criminal plots, showcasing the versatility of this theme. Mistaken identities added to the intrigue, leading to dramatic misunderstandings that added to the overall narrative. Importantly, the theme of deception in dime novels served not only as a plot device but also as a vehicle for exploring themes of redemption and revelation, as characters faced the consequences of their deceitful choices. Overall, deception was a key element that contributed to the popularity and captivating nature of dime novels, engaging readers with its moral complexity and unexpected twists in the plot.

Don Lorenzo Bellario and Chauncey Watterson, both of these villainous protagonists, mirror the theme of deception through their troubled love relationships. While Elinor Gregg is deceived by Watterson in so many aspects, beginning from her abandonment to the proposed plan of hiding her in Covington to ultimately manipulating her and getting away with marriage, Grace Alward, Lucy Watterson and Mrs. Watterson are no exception. Weaving false narratives and painting a fake image of the innocent Elinor Gregg, Watterson deceives his family members as well as his fiancée, Miss Alward who falls in his trap. Until the very end of the dime novel, he conceals the truth from his wife. With absolutely no concern about the new born child, as a self-centred character he carries on the plot through a set of wicked lies and baseless strategies to save his reputation, supported by other minor male characters.

Bellario casts his net of deceit onto several characters mainly women, beginning with his disguised dumb page Anetta who can be looked at as his slave, tortured and troubled. Following his plan of abduction of Julia Dandolo and professing his questionable love for her, comes his manipulative love tactic of trapping Countess Milleroni “You will never know what it is to love hopelessly as I have done so long” (Whittaker 23). Towards the end of the novel, Bellario’s act of deceit against the Doge of Venice, Dandolo, is also revealed as poor Captain Bonetta was falsely accused while the real criminal sat pretending to be innocent.

From Anetta, the dumb page, to Father Ambrose and Julia Dandolo further on into the plot, these three characters can be looked at as victims of disguise in order to enhance the mysterious element of the novel. Anetta, is disguised to take on the role of a boy with “clustering curls of gold” (Whittaker 3). Don Lorenzo Bellario, pretends to be Father Ambrose just so he could set up a meeting with Julia Dandolo, in the bargain concealing his true identity from the Dandolo family. Gaining influence, Julia Dandolo disguises herself into the noble’s dumb page in order to execute the proposed plan only to realise Anetta is her half-sister. Similarly, the strategy of deception and disguise is well implemented in Seth Jones be it by the captors or the rescuers. Seth Jones deceives the Indian Mohawks when he is captured by them, carefully navigating his way out with the application of humour and intelligence. A clear instance of deception executed by the Mohawks was when they purposely lodged a piece of Ina’s dress, upon a bush, in the rear of the larger party. However, the biggest plot twist is the disguise of the protagonist Seth Jones himself, who conceals his actual name and identity and who’s reason for visit is nothing but a long-lost love affair with Mary Haverland. Towards the end of the texts, his revelation follows, “My real name is Eugene Morton. Ten years Mary Haverland and I pledged our love to each other” (Ellis 117).

“This is only the beginning of my vengeance” (Whittaker 9). These novels are formulated on the basis of revenge, be it Elinor Gregg seeking revenge and justice from Chauncey Watterson or, Don Lorenzo Bellario seeking revenge from Countess Estella Milleroni. However, the narrative presents another vengeful character Captain Bonetta, who trains to be an athlete “with his strength redoubled by the keen desire of vengeance” (18). Eventually Captain Bonetta is victorious alongside his lady love Countess Milleroni while Don Lorenzo Bellario ends up dead. Elinor Gregg revisits the narrative in the end scene “with a terrible vengeance” as she had envisioned, only to end up meeting her end alongside Grace Alward, a totally absurd ending.

3.4.5 Frontier Fables: Adventure & War

One of the myths that has influenced American society is the frontier myth, sometimes known as the myth of the West. The idea of a region in the periphery of a civilization, especially during a time of expansion, is known as the frontier. The American frontier was a period of colonisation and expansion by European Americans throughout North America from the 17th to the 20th century. In literature and art, this age was idealised and romanticised, giving rise to a myth. The myth of the frontier is described by eminent expert on the topic Richard Slotkin as "America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top".

Frontier literature, with its roots deeply embedded in the pioneer spirit of exploration, captures the essence of untamed landscapes and the clash of cultures on the outskirts of civilization. Stories within this theme often unfold against the backdrop of courageous journeys and the discovery of new lands, showcasing characters grappling with the challenges posed by the rugged wilderness; dense forests, towering mountains, and unpredictable weather. A central motif involves the clash of cultures, as encounters between different groups, settlers and indigenous peoples unfold, giving rise to tensions, negotiations, and conflicts. The concept of ¹¹Manifest Destiny permeates these narratives, exploring the ideological underpinnings of westward expansion. Individuals on the frontier embody traits of individualism and self-reliance, where survival hinges on adaptability and the ability to navigate challenges independently. The quest for freedom is a prevailing theme, as characters seek liberation from societal constraints or the promise of an independent life on the frontier. Lawlessness, justice, and the establishment of order in the absence of legal systems are explored, reflecting the moral dilemmas faced by those navigating the wild frontier. As

¹¹ Concept of American exceptionalism the belief that America holds a unique and superior position among nations.

settlements and civilizations emerge, marking the end of the untamed wilderness, frontier literature also delves into economic opportunities such as gold rushes and fur trading. Ultimately, the survival of the fittest in the harsh frontier environment forms a compelling narrative thread, weaving a rich tapestry of stories that illuminate the challenges and triumphs of those who ventured to carve out a life on the fringes of known civilization.

Orville Victor, editor of Beadle & Adams, called *Seth Jones; or, The Captives of the Frontier* (1860), a startlingly violent and action-packed frontier adventure narrative, the “perfect dime novel”. It is useful, however, to think of the frontier and Western stories as fantasy spaces, rather than realistic or accurate historical accounts. Dime novels mass marketed the idea of Americans as rugged individualists making their own way in the world. At the core of this fantasy lies an imagined shared identity: the bonds of white brotherhood strengthened by “scenes of gory violence” focused at Native Americans and other non-whites (Streeby 592). Professor Hubbell states the significance of the frontier factor: “The frontier gave to American literature . . . two very important things” (Paine 3). It provided writers with an abundance of untapped literary material, fresh settings, novel character archetypes, and romantic incident fodder. It also provided them with a fresh perspective. The primary nationalising impact in a literary genre that is all too frequently dismissed as a little subset of English literature came from the border.

The character of woodman Haverland and his whereabouts paints a typical example of “nature’s noblemen” (Ellis 1). “In a pleasant valley, stood the humble house of Alfred Haverland”, alongside his wife, sister Mary Haverland and the beautiful daughter, Ina Haverland (10). The introduction of the new comer, Seth Jones, a “Yankee” from New Hampshire is described as one whose “feet were encased in well-fitting shoes, while the rest of his dress was such as was in vogue on the frontiers...” (6). Looking at the setting and background in which this story is placed, American Alfred Haverland had moved to this

isolated area of western New York many years prior to the more developed eastern provinces. Having raised a modest home in the middle of nowhere, he had established the groundwork for a settlement with his sister and his devoted companion. Even though this "settlement" was still little, Haverland could see that the flood of emigration was going west quickly and steadily. Before long, the untamed forest would give way to towns and cities, and the Indians would be forced to travel further in the direction of the sinking sun.

In addition to the challenges posed by geographical and cultural frontiers, the concept of captivity was a significant aspect of the frontier experience. As settlers and explorers ventured into unknown territories, encounters with indigenous peoples, rival settlers, or other groups sometimes resulted in captivity. Individuals could find themselves taken captive for various reasons, leading to complex interactions and cultural exchanges. Captivity narratives, often recounting the experiences of those who were captured, provide insights into the tensions and struggles on the frontier. These narratives explore issues of cultural misunderstandings, negotiation, and the resilience required for survival during periods of conflict. The theme of captivity adds a human dimension to the frontier, highlighting the vulnerabilities and risks faced by individuals as they navigated the uncharted territories on the outskirts of established civilizations.

"...we are both actuated by a desire to rescue an unfortunate one from the horrors of Indian captivity" (Ellis 25). Held captive by the Indian Mohawk tribe, Ina Haverland, the supposed love interest of Everard Graham, is rescued by Seth Jones alongside the aid of her father and lover, taking on the role of a "frontier hero" also referred to as "our hero" by the author, during the rescue mission.

3.5 Embracing Romanticism: A Shared Theme

As the Romantic movement in Europe came to an end, American Romanticism emerged. It began about 1830 and continued until the conclusion of the Civil War, at which point the era of realism, another movement began. characterised by an emphasis on individuals, emotion, nature, and creativity. A few other elements, including nature and the great unknown, were also included in American Romanticism and were expressed via stories about the frontier, an area that was yet unexplored but had promise for growth, colonisation, and freedom. A resurgence of optimism and the widely held American conviction that everyone can achieve anything they set their mind to resulted from taking a chance on the unknown.

Dime novel literature often reverently captures the sublime beauty of nature, employing vivid and evocative language to portray landscapes, flora, and fauna. This recurring theme transcends mere description, delving into the awe-inspiring qualities of the natural world. Beyond its visual appeal, nature serves as a compelling backdrop for exploring the profound connection between humans and their environment. Writers frequently delve into the restorative and spiritually enriching aspects of nature, highlighting its capacity to foster a sense of peace and well-being. Furthermore, the symbolic use of nature in in these texts adds layers of meaning to narratives, with elements like trees, rivers, or animals representing growth, renewal, or freedom. While nature is often depicted as idyllic, literature also recognizes its potential for conflict and danger. Storms, natural disasters, and untamed landscapes symbolize the unpredictability of life. This nuanced portrayal captures both the serene beauty and the dynamic, sometimes perilous, aspects of the natural world, making nature a versatile and enduring theme across genres and eras.

The beauty of nature is expressed through its vivid description in these three texts. Each of these texts begin with a vivid description of nature, set during the night time amidst a dark, mysterious, eerie setting. “The waning moon” opens the text by Whittaker, while in *A Fair Face*, “it was an ugly night ...the trees dripping...” (1).

In relation to the theme of nature, personification is often used to anthropomorphize natural elements, giving them human-like characteristics and behaviours. This literary technique allows writers to create a more vivid and relatable depiction of nature, “The trees were weeping tears of blood upon the... grass” (Campbell 19). Throughout the lines within these texts, a major element of personification is visible, for instance, “the bell rung its farewell note” (24) or “the tall cypresses waved in the evening breeze” (Whittaker 17). Set amidst wild forests and woodmen, *Seth Jones* as a frontier dime novel is an epitome of nature and it’s personified description for Alfred Haverland’s “residence stood at some distance from the forest, which rolled away for miles” (Ellis 10). Applying the element of foreshadowing, the “bright moon” and a “smouldering fire” as a symbol of hope, “shining in unclouded splendour upon the forest”, lightened the way for the continual of the flight, as well as the appearance of a “rattle snake” as a deadly warning just as the “heavy clouds growing darker” predicted the coming of a storm, a couple of times during the story.

In the women authored texts as well, the central defining characteristic is the theme of romanticism, precisely nature. The vast descriptions depicting the setting and the foreshadowing of the plot and circumstances is present of each of these romantic fiction dime novels.

The story of *Alice Wilde: The Raftsman’s Daughter*, is set amidst “the rush of waters and the murmur of the pine forest” where she and her family live in a “little one-story log house, so completely covered with clambering vines that it looked like a green mound”

(Victor 2). The lives of these characters are ingrained within the realms of nature for Alice who is as “gay as a hummingbird”, takes over the responsibility of building a new house after the woods catch fire, burning it all down. Ben Perkins designs a pretty rustic cottage, something in the gothic style and a porch in front. Be it the sudden disappearance of Phillip Moore or the abduction of Alice Wilde, both executed by Ben Perkins vanishing in the forest with the weapon on his shoulder, the evergreen forest was the outright location. “Happy is the bride the sun shines on” but soon the wedding takes a dark turn as the “air was black – night fell upon everything” (26).

Captain Molly, a more adventurous and war themed dime novel through its picturesque setting consisting of frozen grass and beautifully disposed chestnut trees “whose bare branches were strongly defined against the red of the evening sky” (Denison 9). The wind howled with ever-increasing severity down the dark banks of the Delaware, and whistled along the Delaware. Before ten o'clock on Christmas Eve, Walsingham House was a glorious sight. Glittering streaks of fire glistened from every crack and aperture, illuminating the lifeless, white snow far below. Set on the banks of the Seneca lake, with the radiance of the setting sun and the heavy clouds of smoke over the Iroquois village built on a picturesque curve of the shore, *The Indian Queen* is a blend of romanticism, adventure and war. Mahaska possesses supernatural powers as she is being linked to the great spirit, highlighting another important element of romanticism; “she was going out upon the lake to receive the last instructions of the spirits who made her wise with their counsels” (Stephens 38). The very common imagery of the full moon with “the air singularly pleasant and soft, and the whole scene so full of tranquil beauty, in spite of its wildness”, here signifies the nature of the upcoming plot, adding an element of foreshadowing.

3.6 Feminine Narratives: Themes and Tropes in Women's Dime Novels

In the realm of women's dime novels, narratives are often centred around themes deeply intertwined with the female experience, catering to the tastes and expectations of a predominantly female readership. Within these narratives, romance reigns supreme, weaving intricate tales of love, courtship, and emotional fulfilment. The heroines, often depicted as virtuous and resilient, navigate through a myriad of challenges, both internal and external, in their pursuit of happiness and fulfilment. Domestic life serves as a backdrop against which these narratives unfold, showcasing the complexities and nuances of familial relationships, friendships, and societal expectations.

Tropes such as the virtuous heroine, the forbidden romance, and the triumph of love over adversity are recurrent motifs, captivating readers with their timeless appeal. Moreover, moral dilemmas and ethical quandaries add depth to the narratives, prompting readers to contemplate issues of morality, duty, and personal integrity. Through these themes and tropes, women's dime novels not only entertain but also provide a mirror to the hopes, aspirations, and struggles of their readers, offering a glimpse into the complexities of womanhood in the cultural landscape of their time.

3.6.1 Captivating Tales of Love and Romance

A recurring theme in the dime novel romance written by male authors precisely is marriages gone wrong, fake unions, unions with bigamists, unions with “false” officials, unions with unloved men out of obligation, unions with the right man but for the wrong reasons, and unions between lovers who split up right away. Although the theme of love and romance is dominant in the three female authored novels, it serves a unique perception which is rather different from the viewpoint of the male authors and their portrayal of love. *Alice Wilde*, *Captain Molly* and *The Indian Queen*, showcase romantic relationships between the

protagonists and their respective love interests. For instance, the relationship between Alice Wilde and Phillip Moore, Captain Molly and Captain Paul Green, and Mahaska and Giengwatah, respectively.

“Phillip Moore thought he had never beheld so lovely an apparition” (Victor 2). This young gentleman’s “love at first sight”, captivates the beautiful Alice Wilde, who for the sake of his love resorts to marriage although showing a considerable lack of interest initially. Being a barrier between this typical love story is Ben Perkins who introduces the concept of romantic rivalry through his undying love for Alice Wilde and rigid hate towards Phillip Moore, while Alice does not return his love, “I worshipped her shadow” (23). Another romantic relationship is between Virginia and Phillip Moore, which fails due to Virginia’s prejudice.

In *Captain Molly*, the two prominent relationships turn the women into warriors, Elsie Vernon and Colonel Washburn as well as that of Captain Molly and her lover Captain Paul. In order to save Colonel Washburn from death and cancelling out his accusation of an assumed spy, Elsie Vernon and Captain Molly together execute a plan, eventually succeeding at it. Captain Molly herself goes against her father’s beliefs by choosing a rebel lover over her family virtues and ideals. These happy unions end up in joyous marriages of the four lovers. Mahaska and Giengwatah in *The Indian Queen*, although married and share a relationship, somewhere fail to hold on to that romantic bond which is made clear through Mahaska’s treatment of her husband showing disrespect and lack of love. This could be looked at as an unhealthy relationship often dominated by the wife herself with no room for understanding and support.

3.6.2 Adventurous Hearts: Women Embracing Risk and Discovery

Women featuring in adventurous positions taking on roles of fighters, queens and raftsmen. Living a frontier, pioneer life, the depiction of Alice Wilde and her physical strength residing in a cabin home as the daughter of a raftsman and indulging in similar activities almost effortlessly, portrays her adventurous spirit. The very opening lines of the text describe the scenic setting with “a tiny skiff turning the bend of the river” and logs that bob around like the olde sea-sarprint” (Victor 2).

“It is the rules of war – a spy is hung almost without judge or jury” (Denison 51). Captain Molly’s zeal and love for her country and lover is well put through her actions and motives. The rebellious Elsie Vernon supports her in her endeavours possessing the art of deception and disguise by drugging the sentinels with wine and taking on the appearance of a Hessian officer. Thinking like a true warrior, bravely executing the plan at the fight at Trenton, for Elsie exclaims, “Molly, you ought to be a general yourself!” (Denison 106).

3.6.3 Depiction of Women: Breaking the Norms

The unconventional notions under which women are depicted is what largely sets the stage of comparison between male and female authored works. The portrayal and character projection of the three female protagonists, Alice Wilde, Captain Molly and Mahaska is quite different from the usual “traditional” norms and conventions forced upon women by society.

Quite a physically strong and mighty girl as Ben Perkins himself states “you’re mighty pert with the oars, for a gal, I never see’d no woman could row a boat like you, Miss Alice” (Victor 2). Highlighting her ambitious side, visible is her love for boating even amidst the harsh waters of the river with no assistance for she believes “nobody ever touches this (oars) but myself”, showing her adventurous spirit typically uncommon among women of the 19th century. Breaking the stereotype linked with marriage, Alice “had never thought of

marriage, except as a Paradise in some far land...which she had fashioned from books” (7). She rejects the proposal of Ben Perkins instead stays put on her determination to study and for books, also thrusting aside the usual womanly desire of jewellery and other pretty trifles. With her father having taught her to “read write and cipher”, the theme of education is well marked throughout the text just as her multitalented nature of studying as well as sewing (19). Similarly noteworthy is the very money minded personality of Virginia wherein she says “I am not willing to make this sacrifice” and settle for less just for the love of Phillip Moore, even though they both love each other (4).

A literal competition between two men to get their hands on the resilient Alice Wilde, is evident through the hatred Ben Perkins holds towards Phillip Moore who leaves no chance in attacking him and duping their relationship by abducting Alice on her supposed Wedding Day. For his love for Alice was so wild that he even “worshipped her shadow” and sought to kill Phillip Moore. While its usually the women who craze themselves towards receiving the love and affection of their male counterparts, in these texts it is rather opposite. Phillip Moore immediately falls in love with the personality and beauty of Alice as he thought he had never beheld so lovely an apparition.

“This American girl”, assertive, bold and rather superior to most of the other young American women, Elsie Vernon paints another unconventional image in relation to 19th century women. An excellent German scholar, that language being her specialty based on her ambition to master all its intricacies. “She was not beautiful, this Molly Putnam” working partly as lady’s maid and partly companion, she found herself too educated to work in a menial capacity (Denison 13). Throughout the text, she is said to indulge in knitting and her books, simultaneously. The description of Molly showcases her as a bitter and uncompromising patriot, said to be having a rebel lover and who rightly speaks and acts like

an inspired creature, capable of leading an army herself if she might be accepted. Quite a patriotic when she claims to have left her ex-lover because he was a traitor to his country.

A strategist as Elsie indicates, the seventeen-year-old Molly devises a plan to rescue the lover of Elsie, Colonel Washburn from the clutches of being faced with a death warrant. Brushing aside the belief of sacrifice and death, she persuades Elsie to believe in her and her plan as the plan won't fail, for she feels "as strong as a thousand Hessians" (106). Although towards the end her father cast her off for her rebellious nature surrounding love and her lover, she did not become a widow, rather the sobriquet of captain always clung to her, she herself accompanying her husband bravely further on in the future. The bond shared between these two women is noteworthy for the support and concern they extend towards each other. For Molly Putnam worshipped Elsie in her heart and thought her like the king who could do no wrong.

3.7 Shakespearean Influence on Dime Narratives

English playwright William Shakespeare's works were adopted by Americans across the country, and the stories in his plays are now seen as a part of the country's cultural legacy. Americans learned to refer to Shakespeare using the possessive word "our" during the nineteenth century, something they did not do with other foreign authors. William Shakespeare is perhaps "the great author of America", as James Fenimore Cooper once said. Shakespeare dominated American theatre, and many patriotic Americans made it a point to study the various American adaptations of his plays. Shakespeare's name appeared on bar signs, patent medications, almanacks, and documents. He was a popular subject in American art, poems, literature, paintings and dime novels.

The classic writers of the American Renaissance era in the years preceding the Civil War are often the focus of an examination of mid-nineteenth-century American literature.

American writers, especially Shakespeare, drew inspiration from the Elizabethans throughout this time. This view is reinforced by Lawrence Levine's assertion that "Shakespeare was popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America".

Shakespeare, armed with the sceptre of cultivation, followed the dusty path of the pioneers, preserving aspects of British culture in the hearts of distant people who were yet fundamentally English in race. Even while the culture was unavoidably shallow in certain areas, just like it was in the frontier life, it nonetheless maintained its inherent virtue, like gold polished to a thin layer, and it contributed to the homogeneity of American civilization across oceans. Fittingly dubbed ¹²Shakespeare idolatry, the growth of this phenomenon in the first half of the nineteenth century was one of the most astounding manifestations of our intellectual life at this time. Admiration for the poet among the middle and upper classes developed into a passionate adoration that in its extravagance and universality, has never been found in England or any other nation.

Shakespeare's profound influence on 19th-century dime novels is multifaceted and pervasive. These inexpensive publications frequently mirrored Shakespearean themes and plots, incorporating elements such as love, betrayal, revenge, and power struggles. Character archetypes reminiscent of Shakespeare's creations populated dime novel narratives, with heroes, villains, and mentors mirroring those found in his plays. While dime novels were not known for their literary quality, they often employed vivid and dramatic language similar to that of Shakespeare's works, captivating readers with excitement and tension. Though direct references to Shakespeare were rare, authors and readers of dime novels were steeped in the cultural milieu of Shakespeare's time, leading to indirect influences through adaptations, performances, and shared cultural knowledge. Overall, Shakespeare's imprint on dime novels

¹² Reverence for the unmatched legacy of William Shakespeare.

of the 19th century is undeniable, permeating the themes, characters, language, and style of these popular publications.

Particularly, in dime novels written by male authors, there exist direct references to Shakespeare's dramatic well-known characters. For instance, in *Seth Jones*, there is a reference to Macbeth which describes the scene with Haldige and the hunters spell to be similar "like the knocking at the gate in Macbeth, which dispels the dark, awful world of gloom in which the murderers have been moving and living..." (91). The use of verse that was commonly found in Shakespeare's plays is implemented in *The Dumb Page* by Capt. F Whittaker and is expressed through the character of Don Lorenzo Bellario who uses these verses to manipulate and enchant women such as Julia Dandolo, his lover and Countess Estella Milleroni, as well as by Capt. Bonetta after his defeat, as he sings out of misery, "All over the sparkling sea! Music and love are roaming free" (Whittaker 10). Another quote from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, "The sins of the father are to be laid upon the children" is rephrased in the dime novel as "The sins of the father are visited on the children" as is spoken by the judge Dandolo in the final scene.

3.8 Wrapping up the Differences in Dimes

Women's dime novels of the late 19th and early 20th centuries defied conventional norms by presenting narratives that challenged traditional gender roles. These novels, while still embracing themes of romance and domesticity, featured heroines who exhibited agency and independence, breaking free from societal constraints.

In contrast, men's dime novels of the same era tended to adhere to familiar tropes of adventure and heroism, portraying male protagonists in more conventional roles of bravery and strength. These narratives reinforced societal expectations of masculinity, offering readers tales of daring exploits and heroic deeds within traditional frameworks.

CHAPTER FOUR

UNEARTHING SUBVERSION: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF 19TH-CENTURY

WOMEN DIME NOVELS

4.1 Empowering Equality: Understanding Feminism

Feminism is a social, political, and cultural movement that advocates for the equality of all genders and seeks to address and dismantle gender-based inequalities and discrimination. At its core, feminism promotes the idea that women should have the same rights, opportunities, and privileges as men, and it challenges patriarchal systems and structures that perpetuate gender oppression. Feminism encompasses a wide range of perspectives and approaches, but some common goals and principles include:

Gender Equality: Feminism advocates for the equal treatment of all genders in all aspects of society, including legal rights, political representation, economic opportunities, and social norms.

Challenging Patriarchy: Feminism critiques patriarchal systems, which prioritize men's power and control over women, and works to dismantle these structures to create a more equitable society.

Intersectionality: Intersectional feminism recognizes that individuals experience oppression differently based on various intersecting identities, such as race, class, sexuality, disability, and more. It emphasizes the importance of addressing multiple forms of discrimination and oppression simultaneously.

Empowerment: Feminism seeks to empower individuals to challenge gender norms and stereotypes, assert their rights, and advocate for social change.

Diversity and Inclusion: Feminism acknowledges and values the diverse experiences and perspectives of women and marginalized genders, striving for inclusivity within the movement and in broader society.

Feminism has evolved over time and encompasses various strands and schools of thought, including liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, ecofeminism, and postcolonial feminism, among others. These different perspectives offer nuanced analyses of gender inequality and propose diverse strategies for achieving gender justice and liberation. Overall, feminism is a multifaceted movement that seeks to create a more just and equitable world for people of all genders by challenging and transforming systems of oppression and inequality.

4.1.1 The Feminist Movement: First Wave of Feminism

The feminist movement is a diverse and multifaceted social, political, and cultural movement that advocates for gender equality and the dismantling of patriarchal systems and structures that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and oppression. Spanning several centuries, the feminist movement has evolved through different waves, each marked by significant achievements, challenges, and shifts in focus.

The first wave of feminism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily in Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. This wave focused on securing legal rights and political equality for women, particularly in areas such as suffrage (the right to vote) and property ownership. Key milestones of the first wave include the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, where the Declaration of Sentiments was drafted, calling for women's suffrage and equal rights. The suffrage movements in various countries, such as the passage of the 19th Amendment in the United States in 1920 and the

Representation of the People Act in the United Kingdom in 1918, were significant victories of the first wave.

4.1.2 Feminist Literature and Dime Novels

Fiction, nonfiction, drama, or poetry that advances the feminist objectives of defining, creating, and protecting women's equal civil, political, economic, and social rights is known as feminist literature. It typically depicts the effects on women, men, families, communities, and civilizations as unpleasant and frequently labels women's positions as inferior to those of males, especially in terms of rank, privilege, and power.

Dime novels of the 19th century were not explicitly feminist in the modern sense, as they often adhered to conventional gender norms and were primarily aimed at entertaining a mass audience. However, they did contain underlying feminist themes and elements that reflected the evolving status of women and the influence of early feminist ideals within American society. Female authors, despite the constraints of their time, used dime novels as a platform to subtly challenge gender norms, advocate for women's rights, and portray strong, independent female characters. While dime novels may not have been overtly feminist, they did contribute to a broader cultural conversation about women's roles and aspirations in 19th-century America.

In the 19th century, dime novels authored by women offered a unique platform for the exploration of feminist themes and the portrayal of strong, independent female characters. Despite the constraints of societal expectations and limited opportunities for women writers, several notable authors emerged, who used dime novels as a vehicle for feminist expression. Firstly, dime novels of the era occasionally featured strong, independent female protagonists who defied conventional gender norms. While these characters were often portrayed within the confines of traditional gender roles, their agency and resilience served as subtle

expressions of early feminist ideals. Secondly, the proliferation of dime novels coincided with the first wave of feminism in America, providing a platform for feminist voices to reach a mass audience. Women writers, such as Ann S Stephens, Augusta Evans Wilson, Laura Jean Libbey and more, contributed to dime novel literature, infusing their works with themes of female empowerment and social critique. Their stories often challenged gender stereotypes and explored issues such as women's education.

Thirdly, dime novels played a role in shaping public perceptions of feminism and gender equality during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While some narratives perpetuated traditional gender roles and romanticized notions of femininity, others offered more nuanced portrayals of women's experiences and aspirations. Through dime novels, readers encountered diverse representations of femininity and were exposed to ideas that questioned the status quo, laying the groundwork for future feminist discourse. Stories featuring assertive female characters and themes of women's rights became more prevalent, mirroring broader shifts towards greater gender equality in American society.

Through their storytelling, these women authors challenged prevailing notions of gender and power, championed women's rights and autonomy, and paved the way for future generations of feminist writers and activists.

4.2 Writing the Dime Women

“Women writers brought different ideas to the sensational western adventure tale and did not settle on one working formula that could be easily reproduced” (Wingo 125).

19th century witnessed a cadre of talented female authors, leaving an indelible mark on popular literature. Among them were Bertha M. Clay, Caroline Hart, Charlotte Brame, Clara Trask, Effie Adelaide Rowlands, Emma Garrison Jones, Georgie Sheldon, Grace Shirley, Ida Reade Allen, Laura Jean Libbey, Lillian R. Drayton, Mary Dennison, Mary

Grace Halpine, and Mary Reed Crowell. These women, alongside their male counterparts like Charles Garvice, E. Burke Collins, and John Coryell, penned down captivating tales that enthralled readers across America. From gripping adventures to heart-wrenching romances, their works entertained audiences and shaped the cultural landscape of the time. Each author brought their unique voice and perspective to the dime novel genre, enriching it with stories of courage, love, and resilience. Their contributions remain a testament to their creativity, skill, and enduring legacy in the annals of literary history.

In the early years of dime novel publishing, authors like Metta Victor, Frances Fuller Victor, and Mary Denison joined the ranks alongside male writers, contributing to a diverse and evolving genre. However, the genre gradually shifted towards male-centric narratives as men returned to writing after the Civil War. Despite criticisms of the formulaic nature of dime novels, esteemed authors like Stephens helped legitimize the genre. Stephens, known for her social reform efforts, addressed issues such as wealth disparities in her non-dime novels, but her approach tended to be conservative. This contradiction between her conservative views and social reform efforts may have been influenced by her desire to please her readership.

Female dime novelists often incorporated strict moral codes into their stories to counter fears that cheap literature might promote undesirable behaviour among the lower class. These women authors wrote dime novels for various reasons, including financial necessity, desire for creative expression, and opportunities for publication in a male-dominated industry. Dime novels provided a platform for women to share their stories and ideas with a wide audience, often tackling themes such as romance, adventure, and social issues. Additionally, writing dime novels allowed women to challenge societal norms and stereotypes, as well as to explore their own imaginations and aspirations. Regardless of the approach, dime novels offered women writers a means of sharing their stories, ideas, and

perspectives with a diverse readership, contributing to their visibility and influence in the literary landscape.

The majority of the time, these works included prominent female characters. A lot of the books were labelled as “romances”, with a protagonist and heroine battling against all the obstacles. Even in historical fiction and adventure novels set during the American Revolution or Colonial era, dime novel heroines had prominent roles. These ladies may be mistresses, daughters, spouses, prisoners, or even proficient shooters. By 1872, women had published almost 75% of novels, thanks in large part to the huge popularity of notable female authors. That is a striking climb from the nearly non-existent number of women writers at the turn of the century, a shift mostly due to the popularity of the dime novel and the growth of female readers.

4.3 Unveiling Women's Voices: A Look at Feminist Themes

“She dazzled, she captivated, she conquered, at once and entirely” (Stephens 58).

Carving out a space to explore feminist themes and tropes vis-à-vis challenging the prevailing norms and stereotypes of their time, these women dime novelists set a benchmark in 19th century literature. Through protagonists like Captain Molly, Alice Wilde, and Mahaska, these dime novels explored themes of female agency, empowerment, and resistance against oppression. In the male-dominated environments they navigated, these characters asserted their leadership, independence, and resourcefulness, defying traditional gender roles and stereotypes. They portrayed strong and capable women who commanded respect and admiration, offering nuanced portrayals of womanhood that challenged prevailing norms. Through their stories, women-authored dime novels provided a platform for celebrating the strength, resilience, and courage of women, highlighting their ability to confront adversity and shape their own destinies in a rapidly changing world. These narratives served as

powerful reflections of the evolving aspirations and experiences of women in the 19th century, contributing to broader discussions about gender equality and empowerment.

Female authors in dime novel publishing faced both criticism and support for their inclusion of strong female characters. While some readers and critics applauded the portrayal of empowered women in these stories, others criticized it as unrealistic or inappropriate for the time period. However, these authors persisted in their depiction of strong female characters, challenging traditional gender norms and contributing to the evolution of women's roles in literature.

4.3.1 Breaking Barriers: Women Empowerment Through Education

“... you do not know how eager I am to learn – how hard I should study!” (Victor 7).

Providing a voice to the authors opinions and beliefs, these dime novels authored by 19th century American women express their urge and interest towards learning and the right to education through their well portrayed female protagonists, be it Alice Wilde, Captain Molly or Mahaska the Indian queen. Ambitious Alice Wilde holds a connection with books as they are described as “precious” and the only possible source of knowledge. Unlike jewellery and such pretty trifles as other girls seek after, she was different and rather placed her interest in possession of books and other useful material. Emphasizing upon her strong will to get an education by going to school, she puts forth her request to her father who initially believes it isn't really the best thing for a woman. However, she is given the permission to attend school for her father finally exclaims, “we must all live and learn for ourselves” (Victor 16).

Hence, “Alice Wilde had been taught by her father to read, write and cipher” (Victor 19). Even though some of the young ladies were disposed to ridicule her extreme ignorance on some matters, they were finally content to let her assert her own individuality and be what

she was, “a charming puzzle” (19). Not just the protagonist but the character of Virginia as well shows signs of ambition when she asks Phillip Moore to find her a rural school in order to earn her “bread and butter in peace” as a teacher, one that is good and “commanding” (25). Giving major importance to books and education, Alice Wilde chose to save her books from the approaching fire that would set her house and belongings on fire, by “putting her precious books in packages...” (7).

Similarly, the lead protagonist Captain Molly, although the daughter of one of the neighbouring farmers, is said to be too well educated to work in menial capacity, however it was her father who consented that she should fill the place she did. Once again, Molly was all about books as was known to the members of Lady Walsingham’s house. Occupying herself with her book, Molly Putnam “stole quietly into her usual seat and her knitting alternatively” (Denison 16). Despite Lady Walsingham’s despise towards Molly’s habit of reading books, who constantly asks her to “throw down that book”, she continues doing what her heart desires. However, on making her appearance in the kitchen she is considered a general favourite.

Besides, Elsie Vernon, said to be an obstinate girl, is an ambitious one. Her interests surrounded reading and further on in the novel her determination to learn the game of chess is clearly mentioned alongside her excellence as a German scholar. In order to save her lover, Lieutenant Colonel Washburn, she mentions how she is willing to do anything that can be done by “mortal women” to save him.

4.3.2 Redefining Women Protagonists in Modern Narratives

“In their midst stood a woman in the fairest bloom of youth, with her crimson robes falling so royally about her...” (Stephens 5). The strong, determined and fierce protagonist, Mahaska, taking on the role of the Indian white queen or “avenger” as she would like to call

herself, puts forth a vivid yet terrific character sketched by Mrs. Ann S Stephens. Her continuous passion and desire for revenge over sweeps all bounds as upon the very entrance to her career she is checked by the crafty Fox who seeks to undermine her power. Katherine Frontenac by birth, the back story of the protagonist shows us how she threw aside her civilized life to take on the title of Mahaska, the Avenger, when her love for a French Cavalier was spurned by him when he wedded another, her rival sister.

“As long as her fadder libs, she’ll never marry, not if it war a king” (Victor 3). Once again, a fearless woman protagonist, Alice Wilde resembles her name “wilde” as she rejects Ben Perkins’ claim of being too “mighty” with the oars for a “gal”, as she suggests she can take care of herself while also taking on the role of a hostess, rowing a boat like no other (Victor 9). With marriage not being considered a priority during a time when it was the only focus for women, Alice Wilde had never thought of marriage except as a Paradise in some far, “Arcadian land” of dreams which she had fashioned precisely from books and the “instincts of her young heart” (7). Even during the state of emergency when the woods were on fire, she singlehandedly with a brave heart and calm mind, prepared for the destruction that was approaching as she “would think of nothing now but of being equal to the emergency” (7). And even when she watched her house burn down to ashes, the hopefulness of youth within her led her to seek a new spot to consecrate a second home, making an excellent captain as proclaimed by Ben Perkins. Unlike keeping up to beauty standards and focusing on physical appearance, Alice Wilde’s beauty was of a kind to defy criticism. Wearing sackcloth, flannel and thick boots or a Turkish dress or even a queen’s robe would have made but a small difference for her loveliness was overmastering and her charming and lovely personality radiated energy that exalted “peasant women to thrones” (14).

Protagonist Molly Putnam, was “partly lady’s maid, partly companion” and although she is “not beautiful”, she was a right cheery, pink blossom-cheeked damsel, a farmer’s

bonny daughter. Educated, intelligent and brave, the title “Captain Molly” rightly suits the protagonist who executes a wonderful plan to rescue Elsie Vernon’s lover as well as to protect her own love interest, Paul Green and to stand for the fair and just, bravely. Molly exclaims, “I will devise a way to rescue him. It only needs a brave heart and a determined will”, and that is how the plan progresses to succeed (Denison 62). Firm and assertive, she does not entertain any irrelevant questions related to herself or her family, stating “you have no right to question me” as she dodges every obstacle put in her way by the enemies, leading a feminine conspiracy alongside Elsie Vernon who calls her a better “strategist” than herself (27, 33). Her ultimate bravery led to the victory of the American army, and the succession of her plan leaving behind the “story of Captain Molly” on Christmas night (120).

4.3.3 Subverting Expectations: Challenging Conventions

In 19th century America, women were bound by rigid societal norms that confined them primarily to domestic roles as wives and mothers, relegating them to subordinate positions with limited legal rights and educational opportunities. Legal and social restrictions constrained their mobility and participation in public life, while dress codes and social expectations enforced conformity to feminine ideals. Despite facing pervasive gender discrimination and exclusion from political processes, women who challenged these norms, such as suffragists and feminists, encountered social stigma and resistance. The gendered division of labour perpetuated economic inequality, as women's unpaid domestic work was undervalued compared to men's paid labour, exacerbating disparities between the genders. It wasn't until the late 19th and early 20th centuries that concerted efforts in the women's rights movement began to dismantle these oppressive structures, leading to legal reforms and greater recognition of women's rights and equality in American society.

In the vibrant world of dime novels authored by women, female characters emerged as dynamic forces challenging the status quo. These novels were more than mere entertainment, they were revolutionary platforms where women authors boldly defied conventional norms, crafting narratives that celebrated the strength, resilience, and independence of their female protagonists. Through gripping storylines filled with adventure, intrigue, and daring escapades, these characters shattered stereotypes, fearlessly navigating worlds beyond the confines of traditional gender roles. From intrepid explorers to astute detectives, these women embodied agency and determination, inspiring readers to reimagine the possibilities of womanhood. In portraying women as architects of their own destinies, these dime novels authored by women not only entertained but also sparked conversations about gender equality and empowerment, leaving an indelible mark on literature and society alike. The common notion that “Marriage is the primary, and often only, goal of their female protagonists and wedding someone with wealth is a young lady’s highest achievement”, is challenged and conventionally erased from the supposed stereotypes (Pye).

The very title “Alice Wilde, The Raftsman daughter”, indicates the wild and adventurous raftsman spirit ingrained within the female titular character Alice Wilde, which would be considered quite a rare sight during that time. Rowing the boat with her mighty oars, the fearless protagonist defies any claims against a woman’s physical strength, showing how women can be strong and courageous too. Breaking free from the stereotype surrounding marriage, “she had never thought of marriage” and rather urges to gain an education by studying and pleading to be sent to school much different from the typical Victorian women and their conventional ideals (7). Her diminished interest in jewellery and other womanly trifles, as well as the fact that she “lacked experience as a nurse” is what the author has dared to portray in her work (11). Although the novel ends with the marriage of Alice Wilde and her lover Phillip Moore, it is definitely not one of those typical love stories highlighting a

damsel in distress. Another character from the same dime novel is Virginia, who's character is initially painted to be rebellious and later on ambitious as she stands her grounds unwilling to make any sacrifices for the sake of love rather considering her family pride and her personal traits linked with beauty, fashion, pride etc. She proudly calls herself selfish and stands by her decisions believing they are for the best.

In *Captain Molly*, the author introduces two powerful women characters, Captain Molly and Elsie Vernon. A woman rejecting a man, in this case, General Rahl, commander of all the Hessian forces, with only her beauty and style to recommend her, is particularly what the character of Elsie Vernon rebelliously highlights. Choosing to break off her relationship with her former lover only because he was a traitor to his country, similarly showcases her as a bitter and uncompromising patriot, who also dares to ridicule the nobility and the Court, gaining great applaud from Molly Putnam. Bold Captain Molly, and her plan induced with disguise and deceit is what sets her apart from the usual helpless portrayal of women. "Sacrifice and death – nonsense", exclaims the protagonist as she strives to prove how there lies no danger in her plan which is well set (88). Far from entertaining any interference or questions related to her love life, Molly boldly mentions to Lady Walsingham that as a seventeen-year-old girl, she could undoubtedly have a lover. Together, these women bring out an empowering environment believing in themselves as Molly confidently exclaims, "We shall not fail. I feel as strong as a thousand Hessians" (106).

Similarly, a dime novel based on an Indian Queen during an era resonated by men, is what sets apart this distinct narrative from those authored by men. Amidst the leading chiefs of the Six Nations' Tribes, stood a woman, fierce and ambitious. Mahaska's ambition and desire to wage war against the Delawares as a woman truly ignites the flame of feminism in 19th century America. Considered a "coward" and a babe, by the Fox and a few other men, the Seneca as well are met with hate as the Fox exclaims, "The Seneca's are dogs to be led by

a woman” (Stephens 13). Situating women within the realm of war, Mahaska breaks barriers and challenges the stereotype that women are physically weak and incapable of participating in activities related to war and attaining vengeance, usually attributed to men.

On being insisted to share her sovereignty with her husband Giengwatah, her “bosom heaved in its rage”. Afterall, she was queen but he was chief and husband, as was being said by many, implying that she was not supreme. Husband or not, Mahaska’s ambition could see no other man rise above her, which led to a sense of intense dislike even towards her own ambition. She had loved Giengwatah dearly, but him standing in her path, had led her to scorn and hate him. Underlining Mahaska’s rights as a queen and to live as a sovereign, the author draws a comparison to ¹³Cleopatra, as her wild ambition and restless spirit yearned for new triumphs. Having exhausted the ordinary successes of her life, she resolved to attain new glory by actively participating in wars and conflicts. This comparison emphasizes the protagonist's determination to pursue greatness and assert her authority, much like the legendary Cleopatra.

It is her thirst for revenge and power and her love for wealth that makes her character distinct and unique, set apart from the pious women of those days, as she rightly proclaims “Queen Mahaska loves danger” (Stephens 90). This female character in question diverges from Victorian expectations by prioritizing revenge against her father and the French governor, Gaston de Laguy, instead of focusing on her family as societal norms dictate. This departure from traditional roles highlights her agency and independence, challenging conventional notions of femininity prevalent during the Victorian era.

¹³ Last ruler of Egypt, famed for intelligence, politics, and romances with Caesar and Antony

4.4 Reader Reception & Impact: Influence on Women

The late 1800s saw the rise of a new demographic of book buyers: young women migrating from rural areas to urban centres, earning the moniker "New Women". These industrious individuals toiled in factories, sweatshops, and offices, often enduring hazardous working conditions. Despite the challenges they faced, they found solace and escape in dime novels, where they encountered tales of young women confronting fantastical challenges akin to their own struggles. These novels provided a much-needed respite from their harsh realities, offering entertainment, diversion, and a sense of hope.

During the early period of the dime novel from 1860 to 1870, the readership was predominantly female, partly due to the significant contribution of female authors. Women authored approximately one-fifth of all dime novels during this time. Shelly Streeby suggests that from 1860 to 1865, this percentage was even higher, with women penning one-third of the novels. The decline in male authors during this period, attributed to the Civil War, contributed to the increased prominence of female-authored dime novels. The rise of fiction book sales, particularly fuelled by women readers, has been significant in recent years, with romance novels leading the surge. This trend mirrors a historical precedent set by 19th-century ladies' dime novels, which played a crucial role in shaping the publishing industry. During this period, women authors began to dominate the marketplace, with books by and for women becoming increasingly popular. These dime novels, characterized by sensational romances and morality tales, catered to a predominantly working-class female readership seeking escapism and entertainment. Despite criticism from moralists, dime novels provided solace and companionship to many young women, contributing to the expansion of literacy and the evolution of the publishing industry into what it is today.

4.5 Beyond the Archetypes

In the realm of late 19th and early 20th-century women's dime novels, female protagonists emerged as trailblazers, shattering entrenched stereotypes with their portrayals of strength, resilience, and agency. These narratives often centred around themes of romance and domesticity, while the heroines transcended traditional gender roles, presenting readers with bold and independent characters who navigated through life's challenges on their own terms. Through their actions and decisions, these protagonists defied societal expectations, breaking free from the confines of conventional femininity to forge paths of empowerment and self-determination. Their stories not only entertained but also served as powerful vehicles for challenging cultural norms and inspiring readers to reconsider the possibilities of womanhood. In the vibrant world of women's dime novels, these characters stood as beacons of progress, symbolizing the transformative potential of fiction to reshape perceptions and redefine boundaries.

CHAPTER FIVE

WRAPPING UP THE DIME: A CULTURAL RETROSPECTIVE IN CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this dissertation has explored the multifaceted nature of dime novels within 19th-century American popular culture. Through a thorough examination of their historical, cultural, and financial dimensions, a deeper understanding of the significance of dime novels as a paradigm of popular literature shaping the literary landscape of the time has been gained.

We delved into the roots of dime novels, tracing their origins and evolution within the broader context of Popular Literature. By contextualizing dime novels within the socio-economic realities of the era, their role as both a reflection of and a reaction to the societal norms and values of 19th-century America, has been unearthed. Providing a conceptual framework for understanding dime novels, their appeal to diverse audiences and their unique place within the publishing industry is elucidated. By examining the intricate interplay between supply, demand, and cultural trends, we gained insight into the factors driving the proliferation and popularity of dime novels during this period. Dime novels faced criticism from literary elites for their sensationalism, yet they found immense popularity among fans for the very features that critics disparaged. Despite being deemed lowbrow, they democratized reading, making literature accessible to a broad audience. Through affordable pricing and captivating narratives, dime novels empowered readers across social strata, fostering a culture of literacy and imagination. As a result, they left an indelible mark on American popular culture, shaping diverse literary genres and captivating audiences for generations.

Exploring the gender dynamics prevalent in dime novels, a comparative analysis of works authored by both men and women enabled a thorough dissection of themes, characters,

and literary elements employed by male and female authors, as well as the distinct perspectives and contributions each gender brought to the genre. Throughout the exploration of dime novels, it was made evident that male-authored works frequently employed themes of deception and disguise, crafting sensational narratives filled with characters harbouring masked identities, secret betrayals, and dramatic twists that added layers of mystery and suspense to the plots. In contrast, dime novels authored by women often centred around female protagonists depicted as virtuous and resilient individuals navigating challenges in pursuit of happiness and fulfilment. Moreover, late 19th and early 20th-century women's dime novels broke gender norms with independent heroines, showcasing women who defied societal expectations and pursued their goals with agency and determination.

Conversely, men's dime novels of the era reinforced traditional masculinity through brave, strong protagonists who exemplified traits of courage, honour, and stoicism. By examining the distinct narrative approaches taken by male and female authors within the genre, this dissertation has underscored the diverse storytelling techniques employed to captivate audiences and reflect the evolving societal norms and values of 19th-century America. Finally, delving into the often-overlooked realm of dime novels authored by women, a feminist lens has been employed to uncover their role in reshaping representations of gender and challenging traditional narratives. Through a nuanced examination of female authored dime novels, we underscored the significance of these works in advancing the portrayal of women and their evolving roles in popular literature.

In essence, this dissertation has illuminated the rich tapestry of dime novels, shedding light on their significance as a cultural phenomenon and their enduring legacy in American literature. By delving into their historical, cultural, and gender dimensions, we have not only deepened our understanding of dime novels but also gained valuable insights into the broader socio-cultural landscape of 19th-century America. As we conclude this exploration, it is

evident that dime novels remain a vital and vibrant area of scholarly inquiry, offering a range of opportunities for future research and discovery. Despite being historically overlooked, dime novels hold significant importance in understanding evolution of popular literature. They offer valuable insights into cultural, social, and economic dynamics of the time. Therefore, dime novels deserve greater scholarly attention and should be integrated into academic research in American literature and cultural studies.

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