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Amoral Girl and New England Brahmins
: O.W.Holmes’s *Elsie Venner*

Chiho Nakagawa

Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote three novels that he called “medicated novels” — *Elsie Venner* (1861), *The Guardian Angel* (1867), and *Mortal Antipathy* (1885). Holmes’s legacy as a literary man is mostly remembered by his table talk books, such as *The Autocrat at the Breakfast-Table*, but these three novels truly show the integrated products of two different aspects of Holmes’s life—his simultaneous career as a writer and as a physician. In his “medicated” novels, he creates fictional accounts of medical observation and treatment to explore the etiology of human diseases and their possible cures. These novels also serve as the illustrations of one nineteenth century physician’s perspective on psychology before Freud.

In his novels, Holmes deals with one of the important issues of the coming literary movement, naturalism—free will versus determinism, especially in regard to morals. Since Holmes was a physician, as well as the man who coined the term “Boston Brahmin,” one may suspect that his conclusion is that of a simple biological determinism. The three novels, however, show different approaches and different answers to the problem. Through them, we can uncover Holmes’s various theories and debates with himself, which he expressed by having more than one character voice his opinions. In this paper, I will focus on his first novel, *Elsie Venner*, which traces a failure of a young woman’s growth into maturity. Following his exploration into the issue of moral accountability allows us a good look into nineteenth century medical understandings of women’s body and health. I am interested in understanding the relationship between women’s physicality and spirituality and in particular, the view that regards women as sinful, or rather potentially
criminal creatures.

_Elsie Venner_ is a kind of moral case history of an adolescent girl growing up in the small New England town of Rockland. Although she dies from an inexplicable fever, it is her evil nature that hinders her growth and is, ultimately, the cause of her death. The novel offers various medical and not-so medical views and theories on Elsie’s peculiarities, but it fails to offer a solution or a cure. Margaret Hallissy, who reads _Elsie Venner_ as a variation on the folkloric snake-woman story, points out that Elsie’s ambiguity forces the reader “to doubt the applicability of the [Lamia] tradition” (407). The ambiguity of Elsie not only raises questions about the applicability of the snake-woman theory, but all the other theories regarding Elsie’s deviousness. My reading pays attention to multiple theories presented, as well as to inferences and suggestions made in descriptions of Elsie’s peculiarities, in order to understand Holmes’s view of the young girl’s moral defect. The novel’s solution, a supernatural one, reflects Holmes’s conclusion regarding moral accountability: there is no cure for the women who fail to live up to his ideal view of New England womanhood—only true women can survive. As a novelistic structure, _Elsie Venner_ takes the form of a failed romance, since Elsie ultimately fails to love, to be loved, and to attain the heterosexual normativity. The romance plot is intricately connected to the central issue, morals, because growing up to achieve true womanhood means to become a marriageable woman. For Holmes, who advocates the existence of the Brahmin caste in the New World, his “medicated” novels also become a means to test and investigate appropriate New England women that would produce Brahmins. Holmes himself writes in “Currents and Counter-currents” that “medicine, professedly founded on observation, is as sensitive to outside influences, political, religious, philosophical, imaginative, as is the barometer to the changes of atmospheric density” (177), and thus, in _Elsie Venner_, a fictional account of a diseased young girl, one can see that he takes greater liberty than in his medical writings to produce a more political, religious,
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philosophical, and imaginative view of women. As a result, the “medicated” novel turns itself into a supernatural Gothic horror, in which supernatural fears and threats represent mundane fears of everyday life, and purging of those result in justifying the authenticity of the New England Brahmin caste.

Immorality as Sickness or Sin

The defenders of morals in Holmes’s novels are not only clergymen but doctors who play important roles in educating and guiding people. In his novels, Holmes has physicians discuss and argue with clergymen psychological and emotional life of their patients and parishioners. In “The Pulpit and the Pew,” he insists that the “healers of the body” and the “healers of mind” have to be in “intimate and cordial relations,” because they may be able to supplement each other in healing humans physically and psychologically. Sometimes physicians can be “best confessors” rather than clergymen (126). In Elsie Venner, the two professionals, Dr. Honeywood and Dr. Kittredge, in addition to the narrator, who is a professor of medicine, discuss Elsie’s condition with each other, but as Holmes frequently wrote in attacking on the severity of Calvinistic theology in his essays, medical perspectives offered by the physician characters ultimately have the upper hand in understanding her problem.

The fictional discussions between religious leaders and medical doctors in Holmes’s novels recreate the debates on free will and biological determinism, resulting in a sort of territorial conflict regarding human morals, between the professionals who administer, heal, or instruct flawed humans. In Elsie Venner, Dr. Kittredge, who sees Elsie as her primary home doctor, has a lengthy discussion with Dr. Honeywood, a Christian minister. Miriam Rossiter and Clarence P. Oberndorf see in Dr. Honeywood Holmes’s father, a minister of the First Congregational Church: both are believers in the strict Calvinist theology but also gentle and kind men. As experienced professionals who have witnessed many cases of human agonies, Dr. Kittredge—a man of
science—and Dr. Honeywood—a man of God—demonstrate different views on human responsibilities. At the same time, they show that they are able to understand each other’s side. For example, even before the conversation, Dr. Honeywood wonders, “supposing that the Creator allows a person to be born with a hereditary or ingrafted organic tendency, and then puts this person into the hands of teachers incompetent or positively bad, is not what is called sin or transgression of the law necessarily involved in the premises?” (248). One can surmise that both Dr. Honeywood and Dr. Kittredge voice Holmes’s ideas. He writes in “Mechanism in Thought and Morals” that “we not rarely find our personality doubled in our dreams, and do battle with ourselves, unconscious that we are our own antagonists” (283). In his analysis of The Autocrat, Peter Gibian discusses the model of self Holmes proposes—coming out of “dialogues between multiple disputing personalities” (197)—and these two doctors’ discussion can serve as an example. The physician and the minister are also Holmes’s alter egos, debating with himself. Similarly, the conversation between them could be Holmes’s imaginary internal dialogue between himself and his father.

The focal point of the debate is whether or not all humans can be held accountable for immoral behavior. Holmes’s stance on morals is clear and simple: he argues in “Mechanism in Thought and Morals” that the “moral universe includes nothing but the exercise of choice: all else is machinery.” And he sees that the “sphere of human responsibility” separated from the “Being who has arranged and controls the order of things” is quite limited (301-302). The two doctors argue variously what elements limit a human’s ability to choose. Dr. Kittredge insists that some humans cannot be responsible for the lack of morals because at psychological level there are “a kind of self-conscious blood-clots with very limited power of self-determination” (323-24). Dr. Honeywood admits that one loses “hold of his moral religious nature,” if “his will is governed by something outside of himself,” but he is also worried that “there is nothing bad men want to believe so much as that
they are governed by necessity” (317). Dr. Kittredge concludes the argument by offering more balanced answers, without denying the other’s position:

“you see, too, our notions of bodily and moral disease, or sin, are apt to go together. We used to be as hard on sickness as you were on sin. We know better now. We don’t look at sickness as we used to, and try to poison it with everything that is offensive, — burnt toads and earthworms and viper-broth, and worse things than these. We know that disease has something back of it which the body isn’t to blame for, at least in most cases, and which very often is trying to get rid of. Just so with sin. (323-24)

He believes that in most cases either disease or sin could be the result of something for which one is not responsible, while insisting that the two professions battling for the mastery over human minds simply use two different words — sickness or sin — to describe the lack of morals. In “The Medical Profession in Massachusetts,” Holmes argues that “medical science, and especially the study of mental disease, is destined” to “react to much greater advantage on the theology of the future than theology has acted on medicine in the past” (366-367), and insists on the superiority of medicine’s influence. Neither medical science nor theology in *Elsie Venner* completely changes the other’s perception of illness or sin, or offers a way to cure her: she is incurable.

**Amoral Girl and Accountability**

The efforts to explain the peculiar girl’s condition are not limited to medical and religious causes, but extended to supernatural and cultural causes, too. While *Elsie Venner* appears to explore whether there can be free will in the face of biological influences, the novel in truth takes extra measures not to make her “evil” nature purely hereditary. Elsie is described as having a snake-like nature — cold, and cruel, possessing a mesmerizing stare. Jaime Osterman Alves points out that earlier critics have “unquestioningly accepted
its most outrageous and unlikely explanation for Elsie’s behavior—that she is part snake, a ‘species of one,’ and thus, a biological fluke,” and insists that Holmes’s intention is to portray her as a regular human with all the inherited tendencies from her ancestors “for which she is not responsible,” but which can be “modified by the influences of culture” (58). While I agree that Holmes originally meant to make Elsie a regular human with inherited problems, I do not see that the novel’s way of portraying Elsie’s peculiarities leaves any space for hope of modification. Elsie is not a “symbol of the difficulties inherent” in forming women into the cultural expectations of wives and mothers when they “resist [their] culture’s dictates of proper femininity” (58), as Alves insists, but a specimen who is born with incurable evil. My conclusion is that Holmes’s novel reveals the prevalent nineteenth-century concept, despite his seeming belief in hereditary influences and in the power of medical and educational interventions, that female biology can cause moral defects in women, and that some women simply cannot overcome their biological destiny.

The significance of the non- or pseudo-scientific theory regarding Elsie’s peculiarities as a snake-woman has to be understood more metaphorically than literally. Hallissy is one of the critics who, Alves insists, takes the premise of Elsie as a snake-woman unquestioningly, but Hallissy does read it in the tradition of snake women stories such as John Keats’s “Lamia” and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” and analyzes the “problem of evil as it manifests itself in human sexuality” (406). Like Hallissy, I take the snake-woman reference as a metaphor. The novel offers an explanation as to why Elsie was born a “snake-woman”: when her mother was bitten by a snake while she was pregnant with Elsie, the snake venom was introduced into her system to make her part snake. This pseudo-scientific explanation of “maternal impressions,” however, does not cancel out the overall implication of the snake-woman: it is one of the classic representations of feminine monstrosity, loaded with fears of female deviousness, especially those of
sexuality, something that cannot be tamed and controlled by men. Her love of the wild, and her constant habit of escaping to stroll in the Mountain render her an outcast to civilization, a misplaced creature taken from the wild. The snake-woman signifies Elsie’s psychological or biological features that make her maladjusted to the world in which she lives.

One more realistic and modern theory is that Elsie is schizophrenic. Oberndorf, a psychiatrist, sees that Elsie’s personality—“isolation, introversion, self-indulgence, apparent lack of affect, bizarre conduct, and negativistic tendencies”—is a perfect match for the “clinical picture of schizophrenia” (23). Yet, as he cautions, “the picture of Elsie Venner is complicated by many elements inconsistent with typical descriptions of either manic-depressive disorders, schizophrenia, or neuroses” (23). What is most clearly dramatized in the novel is Elsie’s disconnection from her environment, especially by the fact that the reader rarely hears her words. Elsie hardly expresses her feelings or inner thoughts to others, and she does not, according to the one and only confession in the novel, as well as the narrator’s observation, love anyone. The narrator pities her for there is no one “to counsel poor Elsie,” except her father, who just lets her be, although he also suggests that she does “not need counsel” for she is “competent to defend herself against any enemy she [is] like to have” (260). Yet it seems that the impossibility of counsel has more to do with the impossibility of communication. In her conversation with Dr. Kittredge at the party, which is a rare occasion in the novel when she utters more than one sentence at a time, Elsie talks about her boredom for not having anyone to “hate,” and asks him all of sudden how to kill a person (101). Elsie exhibits symptoms of a communication disorder, which makes her sort of less than human. The narrator tells us that using words to convey what she thinks or feels is “as much denied to her nature as common articulate speech to the deaf mute” (342).

Beware of the woman who cannot find free utterance for all her stormy inner life either in words or song! So long as a woman can talk, there
is nothing she cannot bear. If she cannot have a companion to listen to her woes, and has no musical utterance, vocal or instrumental,—then, if she is of the real woman sort, and has a few heartfuls of wild blood in her, and you have done her a wrong,—double-bolt the door which she may enter on noiseless slipper at midnight,—look twice before you taste of any cup whose draught the shadow of her hand may have darkened!

But let her talk, and above all, cry, or if she is one of the coarser-grained tribe, give her the run of all the red-hot expletives in the language, and let her blister her lips with them until she is tired, she will sleep like a lamb after it, and you may take a cup of coffee from her without stirring it up to look for its sediment. (341)

The narrator warns against the women who do not express themselves in words or songs, because they may try to kill people, as is suggested of Elsie, who is rumored to have tried to kill her governess by poisoning her, and her suitor, whom she dislikes. It further suggests that Elsie’s means of expression, dance, which she performs in her privacy, as Randall K. Knoper notes, is a lower form of expression or a “kind of reflex spasm of the lower spinal cord, or merely the kind of instinctual nervous response that a snake would experience” (725). A writer and poet, Holmes believes that expression in words is more human and civilized than primitive or automatic bodily expression of dance. Although Elsie’s evil nature never goes beyond rumors and suggestions, one can suspect that she has a certain psychological condition that ultimately affects her in connection with other humans.

Extensive discussions on Elsie’s lack of moral sense continue in the novel mostly in the correspondence from the Professor at a medical school to Elsie’s schoolteacher, Bernard Langdon, who also becomes a potential object of love for Elsie. Langdon observes Elsie in person as a teacher, yet as a doctor in training he has to seek opinions from his teacher in a distant location. To the young schoolteacher who asks about inherited predispositions that could
disrupt the control of the will, the nameless professor answers by referring to the two insanity trial cases in nineteenth-century England: James Hadfield’s attempted assassination of King George III in 1800 and John Bellingham’s assassination of Prime Minister Spencer Perceval in 1812. The Professor criticizes the court’s decision to hang Bellingham, and agrees with the insanity defense of Bellingham, for “a crime [is] not necessarily a sin” (226), and commends Hadfield’s verdict. Hadfield’s councils won acquittal because they argued that he had been under delusion, while Hadfield knew clearly what was right and wrong. Elsie, however, does not seem to present any sign of delusions, although one can never know for sure since Elsie does not share her inner thoughts. Criminal responsibility has been and is still today discussed variously, but during Holmes’s lifetime, the emphasis was placed on the question whether the culprit knew right from wrong, or more broadly on the question whether or not he or she was under delusion. By referring to those cases, the Professor argues for a more liberal interpretation of human responsibility regarding morals.

Although those criminal cases do not seem relevant to Elsie’s case, the nineteenth century physician Holmes sees a clear connection based on a broader definition of criminal insanity. The Professor introduces “that great doctrine of moral insanity,” which, according to him, explains “fixed relations between organization and mind and character” (227). Holmes’s contemporary, James Cowles Prichard, defines “moral insanity” as the condition with “no discoverable illusion or hallucination, or false conviction impressed upon the

1 For an unknown reason, the Professor or the narrator does not refer to a more controversial insanity case, M’Naghten’s case, in which Daniel M’Naghten shot and killed Sir Robert Peel’s private secretary in 1843. The case led to establish the M’Naghten Rules, which included a rule that defined insanity. While both Hadfield and M’Naghten were acquitted, Roger Smith argues that “the criminal law reached different verdicts about insanity” between Hadfield’s case and M’Naghten’s case. He explains that Hadfield’s acquittal was due to the “brilliance of defence counsel,” but M’Naghten was to a “new attitude to medical opinion” (14). M’Naghten rule amounted to the right-wrong test—whether the culprit knew what he was doing, or if he knew, whether he or she knew what he was doing was wrong. Later the famous American counterpart, the New Hampshire Rule—“if the [criminal] act was the offspring of insanity, a criminal intent did not produce it” (1871)—was established.
belief similar to the delusive or erroneous impressions which characterize monomania” (Italics Prichard, 31). Elaine Showalter points out that Prichard’s definition is too broad and ambiguous, and thus, it could be applied to any behavior deemed disruptive to society (29), but it was one of the accepted views. Several prominent psychiatrists in the nineteenth century such as Isaac Ray and Henry Maudsley also defined “moral insanity” or “moral mania,” as conditions without delusions, although their categorizations and understandings are slightly different from each other. In the case of Holmes, he connects the concept of moral insanity to the doctrine of reflex action in considering one’s responsibility. Charles Bowe and Knoper focus on Holmes’s application of Marshall Hall’s theory on nervous action in reading his novels, citing Holmes’s introduction to The Guardian Angel, in which he calls the first two novels “Studies of the Reflex Function in its higher sphere” (vi). In “Crime and Automatism,” Holmes argues, referring to Hall’s study of reflex action, that humans cannot always command feelings or thinking, and that:

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2 In “On the different forms of insanity in relation to jurisprudence: designed for the use of persons concerned in legal questions regarding unsoundness of mind,” James Cowles Prichard defines “moral insanity” as a “disorder of which the symptoms are only displayed in the state of the feelings, affections, temper, and in the habits and conduct of the individual, or in the exercise of those mental faculties which are termed the active and moral powers of the mind” (30-31).

3 Isaac Ray uses the word “mania” instead of “insanity,” but Henry Maudsley explains in “Responsibility in Mental Disease” that the word “mania” is interchangeable in meaning with “insanity” (70).

4 In A Treatise on the Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity, Ray categorizes the mental disorders into two groups, one of developmental problems, and the other of lesion of the faculty of the brain. Moral mania or affective mania belongs to the latter, and thus, he did not see it resulting from heredity. He includes in “partial moral insanity” the cases of women who seemed to have started to exhibit “homicidal insanity,” as a result of changes in the “system produced by parturition, menstruation, and lactation” (154), and describes a case of a young girl who exhibited “hysteric convulsions” (155). And thus, Ray did not believe in hereditary explanation of hysteria. On the other hand, in Responsibility in Mental Disease Maudsley does not intend to explain the causes of various “insanities.” However, he notes that many “moral insanity” cases are often “connected with more or less congenital moral defect or insanity” (179), suggesting he believes in hereditary elements in moral insanity.

5 Knoper argues that Holmes has a “full-fledged ideas about literary creation of reflex action of the brain” in his paper on realism and neurophysiology (717).
a very large portion of their apparent self-determinations or voluntary actions, such as we consider that we should hold ourselves responsibly for, are in reality nothing more or less than reflex movements, automatic consequence of practically irresistible causes existing in the inherited organization and in preceding conditions. (330)

Eric Caplan points out that Marshall Hall’s reflex action theory “maintained a central precept of Christian morals: free will,” but Holmes can be listed, as Caplain says, among “Hall’s successors [who] challenged his narrow conception of the reflex and sought to apply the reflexion to various mental functions” (91). In Holmes’s understanding, not only delusions, but also many elements could cause the situation in which one cannot be responsible for one’s action. For Holmes, humans’ free will is quite limited, or almost non-existent.

Holmes goes on in “Crime and Automatism” to specify “inherited organization” and “preceding conditions” that affect the control of one’s will, referring to M. Prosper Despine’s *Psychologie Naturelle*. Holmes defends those who exhibit “moral idiocy” because their actions are not governed by their will. They act out their inherited tendencies like a “rattlesnake” acts out his (336). This is another indication that Elsie’s snake feature is a simple metaphorical expression of inherited evil, since the rattlesnake is something “which we hate by instinct, which we extirpate through legislation if necessary, which we take as a type of evil in our theologies” (Crime, 336).

Reading Despine, Holmes lists four elements that cause automatic action: insanity in the family, age, sex, and intoxication, but his emphasis is on inherited traits: “moral idiocy is the greatest calamity a man can inherit, and the subjects of it deserve our deepest piety and greatest care” (344). Holmes advocates moral education, but he does not believe that education alone can create a world without criminals, as he does not make Elsie out to be curable.6

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6 Arnold Goldsmith argues in “Oliver Wendell Holmes: Father and Son” that the physician and the jurist, his son, showed the similar view on moral responsibility.
Holmes’s argument of the root cause of Elsie’s moral defect, combined with other contradicting explanations in the essay and the novel, is complicated and even obscure. In “Crime and Automatism,” Holmes states that the aim of writing *Elsie Venner* is to illustrate “criminal automatism with the irresponsibility it implies, by the supposed mechanical introduction before birth of an ophidian element into the blood of a human being” (358), tying his pseudo-scientific snake-woman theory with automatism. Nevertheless, in the end, he also indicates her evil nature belongs to something fundamentally feminine. In regard to Elsie’s rumored attack on her governess, when she was fifteen years old, the narrator explains that she may have tried to get rid of the governess “by unlawful means, such as young girls have been known to employ in their straits, and to which the sex at all ages has a certain instinctive tendency in preference to more palpable instruments for the righting of its wrongs” (193). The narrator does not attribute Elsie’s “instrument for the righting of its wrongs” to her serpentine element, but to a “certain distinctive tendency” of women. In other words, the narrator declares that women, especially young girls, are more likely to appeal to “unlawful means.” Unlike all those cases that the Professor mentions, the moral issues for the narrator take on gender implications. Holmes insists in “Crime and Automatism,” that “sex shows itself in the extraordinary moral perversions of hysteria” (339) and in the novel, Dr. Kittredge explains to Dr. Honeywood that a certain percentage of girls grow up to be hysterical, and play “all sorts of pranks,” becoming a “good example of total depravity” to ministers (324). The serpentine theory and the hysteria theory are not necessarily inconsistent by implication, since Jean-Martin Charcot first considered hysteria to be a hereditary disease. Holmes, however, lists “sex” as the cause of hysteria, and he also sees it as one cause of automatic action. As Roger Smith explains, in the nineteenth century “hysterical and epileptic automatisms” were considered to be mental disorders that accompanied a lack of mental control (47), or even the “exemplary cases of reflex cerebration and
mediumistic mimicry and reproduction” in Knoper’s words (726). Instead of tying automatism with serpentine venom or heredity, Holmes slips a more universal disorder in the nineteenth century, hysteria, into the automatic action theory, obscuring Elsie’s problem. Elsie’s asocial or alleged homicidal behavior is understood to be a result of potential hysteria, hence of automatic action.

By referring to the insanity defense of those well-publicized cases that question the moral culpability of those men who committed very public violent crimes under delusions, Elsie’s psychological problem is somehow connected and slides into the discussion of “feminine” biological destiny; in the end, Holmes’s view of Elsie’s problem merges with a typical nineteenth view of female puberty. Showalter points out that Victorian doctors believed “puberty as one of the most psychologically dangerous periods of the female life-cycle” (56). In the same manner, Alves sees Elsie Venner as dramatizing the dangers of puberty, which is, “by definition, a delicate crisis during which young girls’ minds and bodies are constantly in danger of being overtaken and deformed along the way to adulthood” (54). Yet in Elsie’s case, the concept of adolescence as a critical period has a slightly different significance. Dr. Kittredge insists that it is the period during which some girls develop “hysterical” tendencies, and the time which may mark the turning point for her to bring an “entire change in her physical and mental state” (278). Although Elsie’s peculiarities have been witnessed since her early childhood, her father embraces a faint hope that she will outgrow her abnormality and her youthful problems will correct themselves. I will agree that this view of female puberty underlies Holmes’s dramatization of Elsie’s struggle, but I would like to emphasize the implication of the way in which it becomes apparent in this novel. Since the novel starts as a discussion on hereditary influence on moral dispositions, it reveals a graver problem in the understanding

7 I have to point out that Alves’s argument can be applied perfectly to the second novel, The Guardian Angel, rather than Elsie Venner.
of feminine physiology and psychology—that young girl’s “biological” moral problem is so universal for the nineteenth century physician that a supposed hereditary defect naturally transforms itself into a biological destiny of women. The novel’s explanations of Elsie’s peculiarities go back and forth between her inherited fate—the Professor at one point mentions “special influences which work in the blood like ferments” (italics original, 228)—and her “feminine” hysterical tendency. Bowe also acknowledges that Holmes never commits himself to anything that is scientifically disreputable: “he skates carefully between the unlikely and the improbable, letting the reader choose his own interpretation” (312). Either way, the novel follows the path to show Elsie’s helplessness. All the male authorities observe and ponder on one strange girl, but they do not have the means to understand or help her.

While the novel as a whole seeks to justify and defend the moral unaccountability of the young girl, the argument regarding adolescent girls’ propensity for hysteria virtually determines Elsie’s amorality. Her representation as a snake-woman, although conflicting with the hysteria theory, also confirms the woman’s amoral nature. Elsie is not responsible for her amoral nature, because that disposition may have been engrailed onto her before her birth, or it may be caused by her hereditary influence. Nevertheless, by introducing Elsie as a hysteretic, the novel confirms the view that she is evil because she is a woman. However insistent the Professor and Dr. Kittredge are in advocating the unaccountability of the moral sense of those who are afflicted, Elsie is potentially criminal, if not sinful.

**Foreignness of Immoral Nature**

Despite all the medical and philosophical discussions on Elsie’s amoral nature, the story offers through inferences, not discussions, another element that further confuses a diagnosis of Elsie’s problem. The novel’s inferences of the foreign influences on Elsie finally provide a means to close the novel
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without tainting New England blood or the Brahmin families. Set in New England, Holmes establishes the dangers that the snake-woman poses to proper New England womanhood. An array of foreign influences are presented as if to differentiate Elsie from the ideal New England womanhood, so that it can be protected from evil natures. According to Charles B. Rosenberg, “nineteenth century social hereditarianism provided a framework within which behavior was explicable in terms of will and consequent action” (52). Elsie’s tainted nature cannot “will” to support and produce New England intellectual life. The novel has to eliminate undesirable feminine characteristics from the New England breed.

In *Elsie Venner*, Elsie is surrounded by people with “foreign” blood, and they function as foils for Elsie’s amoral “automatic” nature. Her father and mother are pure New Englanders, but by having those non-New England people as reflections of her evil nature, the novel indicates the incompatibility of Elsie’s foreignness with New England. Elsie’s cousin, Dick Venner, who grew up together with her until her father sent him away, serves as one example of her alien evil character. Though Dick is a son of her father’s brother, his mother is a “lady of Buenos Ayres, of Spanish descent,” who died early, and he and Elsie share similar qualities: “both [are] handsome, wild, impetuous, unmanageable” (150). During the narrative, Dick comes back from Argentina to woo her, so that he could become the master of the Dudley mansion. The narrator explains Dick’s plan to marry Elsie to gain Venner’s property as “his New-England side,” which is “cunning and calculating, always cautious, measuring his distance before he [risks] his stroke as if he were throwing his lasso” and his Argentine side makes him suffer “intercurrent fits of jealousy and rage, such as the light-hued races are hardly incapable of conceiving” (356). There is an unmistakable resemblance between Elsie’s “hysteric” rage and Dick’s “blinding paroxysms of passion,” which connects Elsie’s amoral automatism with his “dark-hued” traits. Being the “wilder of the two” (151) in their childhood, Elsie’s wildness by proxy
is attributed to Spanish and Argentine cultural influences.

The novel further complicates Elsie’s peculiarities by associating her with another non-New England location. When Old Sophy, Elsie’s nurse, whom she acknowledges as the only person who loves her, scolded Dick in their childhood, the face he made in reaction reminded her of a wood-carved figure of an African deity, which she “burned when she became a Christian” (151). Dick’s non-New England heritage, Spanish or Argentine, somehow is connected to some African deity, while his heritage cannot give any foundation to be anything but Christian. Elsie also favors a dance that a Spanish woman teaches, “one of those wild Moorish fandangos, such as matador hot from the Plaza de Toros of Seville or Madrid might love to lie and gaze at” (147), confirming a vague but repeated impression of Elsie’s Spanish and African associations, making her “foreign” to the environment she is in. In other words, the novel implies that Elsie’s amoral or even criminal nature is so foreign that it could not come from people in New England. Old Sophy has virtually raised her from the time she was a baby as a sole woman in Elsie’s life who gives her unconditional love and devotion. The African woman, the only person who stands by Elsie, does not of course possess the New England traits, with “animal-looking” eyes (151), frequently associated with primitiveness or animals. Old Sophy dies with Elsie, as if her fate were inseparable from Elsie’s fate. Elsie’s affinity with non-New England people and cultures reminds us of many horror stories at that time, making the story an Imperial Gothic, so to speak.

Those foreign influences associated with Elsie, unlike hereditary or biological elements, are easy to eliminate altogether, enabling the novel to have a solution. Ultimately, the novel ends as a Gothic supernatural horror story, which aims to justify the dominant class of New England, while indicating various threats to the New England Brahmins in the form of invading forces from the outside. Elsie Venner’s first chapter is dedicated to the discussion of the Boston Brahmins, but the novel does not end as a
realistic social drama; it ends with a supernatural overtone. The novel kills off Elsie after a period of delirium, and then the rattlesnakes that infest the Mountain, when the ledge crumbles after her death, so that there will be no more Elsie or anyone like her in Rockland. While the cause of Elsie’s nature is discussed variously in the novel, in the end the only solution that could bring peace to the New England town is to make her an extraordinary oddity.

Elsie’s elimination illuminates the ideal New England womanhood by negation. In the beginning of Elsie Venner, Holmes defines the idea of Boston Brahmins, in effect proposing the ideal type of New England manhood. The new “aristocracy” is not about money or land, but rather what is of “congenital and hereditary” (4), sharing a “distinct organization and physiognomy” (3). Those who belong to the Brahmin caste of New England are scholars, who have a tendency to have “exchanged a certain portion of animal vigor” for intellectual capacity, although Holmes does not limit them to a “few chosen families” but include nameless people who “refine themselves into intellectual aptitude” (5). While the narrator introduces Bernard Langdon, who takes leave from a medical school to teach at the girl’s school at which Elsie learns, as a specimen of the Brahmin caste, the chapter gives us almost no information on the women who belong to that class, or whether women can belong to that class at all. Naturally, Bernard has to choose the true New England woman.

I have focused on the form of femininity presented in Elsie Venner, but in a complemental way, Bryce Traister reads Elsie Venner as a “script for masculine self-creation inscribed on the suffering female body” (222). He reads Bernard’s rejection of Elsie’s demand of love—Elsie asks Bernard to love her—as his insistence on “sibling trust and compassion rhetorically [establishing] a connection between the sufferer and the viewer central to sentimentalism’s promise of identification through shared feeling” (219). I

8 Holmes’s idea of the Boston Brahmins, contrary to what it came to mean, does not intend to establish a fixed aristocratic group in Boston. He believes some people can join the intellectual elites without elite family backgrounds, because of “Nature’s republicanism” (5).
will argue, however, that Bernard’s rejection signifies his efforts to eliminate the elements that threaten his masculinity. Before this incident, Bernard’s New England masculinity is vindicated when he succeeds to fend off the foreign threat, Dick Venner, who, as I have mentioned earlier, is described as a dark-hued villain, aims to eliminate a rival in his quest, Elsie Venner. Bernard shows off his marksmanship by disabling the horse which Dick is riding, thereby thwarting the Argentine’s attempt to lasso him and stage a disguised suicide. His New England masculinity is proved and secure, when he can tackle and eliminate the exotic and unreasonable threat in a more peaceful way.

The threat to Bernard’s masculinity that Elsie poses is of a different nature. The moment Elsie demands love from Bernard clarifies the critical problem for Bernard and for Elsie; her irregular femininity tips the balance off to deny Bernard’s masculinity. When Elsie pleads him to love her, he reacts as if “he [were] a woman listening to her lover’s declaration” (423). Before this critical confession, Elsie also exerts the same influence on him, when she saves him from a dreadful rattlesnake attack on the Mountain. He goes out to the Mountain to examine the “Rattlesnake Ledge,” where rattlesnakes nest, telling himself that he does so “out of scientific curiosity” (188), and then he tries to peek into the cavern, in which he believes that Elsie visits often. He cannot move when a rattlesnake welcomes him there, and Elsie saves him from it by distracting it with her own snake-like stare. He looks back and wonders why he has needed help, since he is an “active, muscular, courageous adventurous young fellow” (203). At that moment, Elsie provides the help he desperately needs. He cannot fight it fairly and squarely like he does the foreign villain. In the open of the steep mountain, in the face of a rattlesnake, Elsie emasculates him, turning him into a “man in distress” saved by the young girl who moves comfortably around there as if it were her own home. A Brahmin who is destined to be an intellectual leader cannot show his true worth in the middle of the wild, fighting against rattlesnakes. His
place is in civilization with fellow Brahmins. Bernard has no choice but to
decline Elsie’s demand for love, for she makes him a failure.

Instead, Elsie Venner allocates the true womanhood to her schoolteacher,
Helen Darley, who sits beside her as a nurse during Elsie’s final moments.
Helen dedicates her time and care for her work at school, exhausted and
making herself sick. She represents a frail New England womanhood, which
Holmes started advocating in his various writings and Silas Weir Mitchell
developed and argued in Doctor and Patients. Mitchell points out that the
woman’s “weakness,” “unstable emotionality,” and “tendency to morally
warp” (11) would be caused by long nervous suffering. Helen exhibits another
popular disorder at around the turn of the twentieth century, neurasthenia,
which is considered to be a nerve disease but, in fact, a psychological one.
Her neurasthenia is a result of her overwork but she does not resort to
“morally warping.” Unlike the hysterical Elsie, as Traister points out, she
superbly “performs the appropriately subordinated nurse function Mitchell
would later advocate” (221). Since as Barbara Sicherman argues that
“neurasthenia was then the diagnosis of choice for men and women whose
diffuse symptoms might otherwise have been dismissed as hypochondria or
hysteria” (42), Helen is a specimen of the sickly and frail, yet sympathetic
and subordinated woman: in other words, she is the model of true womanhood.
Helen’s dedication to Elsie before her death as a nurse shows her “true
womanly nature” (432). The neurasthenic Helen does seem to be a perfect
companion to a Boston Brahmin, whose “vital force” sometimes is exchanged
with his intellect. Although Holmes does not choose Helen for Bernard’s
companion, he puts her in the position to start another and proper Venner
family by marrying her off to Dudley Venner, now a childless widower, so
that the influential family in Rockland can continue with a woman without
snake influence.

Elsie Venner examines various elements in the teenage girl’s life—hereditary,
cultural, biological, and environmental influences—to see what makes her fail to grow up to be a proper New England woman. Holmes’s inclusions of various discussions demonstrate his contemporary theories and debates on the issue, from the perspective of a well-respected physician of the day, as well as an educator who was concerned with the successful education of doctors and of youth in general. Holmes’s exploration into the source of the amoral nature of women does not give us a clear-cut answer. Elsie is a puppet of the mysterious element with which she was born. Her innate “evil” nature controls her to the point which one can hardly hear from her. The narrator does not let the reader hear her inner voice, or even her speaking voice because her supernatural but possibly genetic (or more generally biological) element does not allow her to own a truly human self that the reader can relate to. Elsie is almost under the autopilot control of her “criminal” body, which itself is not sinful, for she does not have her own free will to govern it.

Yet her criminal body is undeniably female. The snake venom in her body that supposedly causes her to act less human and the biological quirk that causes her to act hysterically both connote women’s or young girls’ propensity for evil—the deceptive and sometimes homicidal inclinations that make them immoral. Through all the discussions on the automatic action that could vacate moral accountability of humans, Holmes aims to defend her and illustrate how Elsie the evil snake-woman is not responsible for her harmful behavior, but also that she cannot help being evil, simply because she is a woman. Holmes denies that women are innately sinful creatures, but still he admits that women are criminally dangerous.

The solution to Holmes’s long explorations into the sinfulness of women is found in a simple supernatural ending, probably because he cannot allow that innately evil women might exist in New England. In the end, Oliver Wendell Holmes, who wants to argue for the intellectual aristocracy of the United States of America, depends upon the Gothic narrative, so that the
threats to healthy New England women and, in extension, men can be removed. The Brahmin breed can prosper in New England in his story. The supernatural ending, however, betrays his anxieties over biological destinies, or his negative view of women, who would never be able to overcome their “defects.”

Works Cited
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