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## 20 John William De Forest, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion From Secession To Loyalty* (1867)

**Abstract:** This essay identifies John William De Forest's 1867 novel *Miss Ravenel's Conversion From Secession To Loyalty* as key to understanding Reconstruction America as a phase of cultural adaptation. By placing it in the context of an emerging, postbellum literary scene, it highlights the book's unique response to the individual and collective challenges posed by personal loss, national fragmentation, and rapid modernization. The following pages draw on major works of criticism to explain how *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* explores and negotiates the role of fiction in a time of political, social, and cultural consolidation. The essay highlights thematic concerns such as the relationship between cross-sectional romance and realism, the meaning of emotions and affect in the context of state- and nation-building, the intertwining of gender, genre, and democracy, and the novel's view of race and bureaucracy, thereby connecting *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* to very topical cultural and political debates.

**Keywords:** John William De Forest; *Miss Ravenel's Conversion From Secession To Loyalty*; realism; romance; nation-building; affect.

### 1 Context

Leaving more dead and injured than any other armed conflict in U.S. history, the Civil War remains “the most traumatic event the United States has ever experienced, including the attacks of September 11, 2001” (Barrish 2011, 32). Commonly known as Reconstruction, the years following the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse were not only marked by massive political and legal restructuring but also by individual and collective identity crises. William De Forest's *Miss Ravenel's Conversion From Secession to Loyalty* (1867) responds to such crises by representing individual views and collective ideologies, and by addressing questions about national wholeness and geographical uniqueness. Most of all there is a common need among its protagonists to weigh one's opinions against the views of others: having survived the great watershed that irrevocably separates the Jacksonian Era from the Gilded Age, the two main characters in *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* seek to forge new personal identities from cross-regional conversations, disagreements, and mutual attractions.

John William De Forest (1826–1906) was well-suited to stage these North-South negotiations. Seven years younger than Walt Whitman and a free-soiler like him (cf. Aaron 1973, 166), this fairly well-known antebellum writer had lived in both parts of the country before fighting on the side of the Union and holds the exceptional status of “brilliant

first-hand chronicler of the Civil War and its aftermath” (Gargano 1981, 5;cf. Simpson 1965, 36). And yet such praise is relatively recent: from the 1890s to the early 1960s, De Forest was largely forgotten. In the late 1860s, however, he had published some fairly successful antebellum novels and travel reports, and his articles were popular among readers of the *Nation*, the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Galaxy*, *Hearth and Home*, and *Frank Leslie's Chimney Corner* (Gargano 1981, 6; 75 Media and Print Culture). Henry James and William Dean Howells wrote favourable reviews of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion's* lifelike descriptions; in his much-quoted article in the *Atlantic Monthly* Howells celebrated the fidelity of the novel's battle-scenes and its portrayal of “soldiers we actually know” (1867, 54).

De Forest's family connections, and actual living experience, in the South added to his credibility. A native from Seymour (then Humphreysville), Connecticut, he was born into a well-to-do family deeply entangled with the cotton industry in the slavery south: his father owned a cotton-manufacturing firm. This may explain De Forest's ambivalent, shifting views of African Americans. Like many Northerners he was an antislavery man but not a fervent abolitionist. His opinions regarding the freedmen's intelligence and potential moved between Darwinian or environmentalist notions of black inferiority and optimism regarding their future as equal citizens of a proud interracial democracy (Aaron 1973, 166–169).

The father's manufacturing firm had been a typical, patriarchal family business before the economy changed toward a form of speculative capitalism that forced such firms to adapt their business model (Fick 1992, 488). The younger son of the family, John William, was of ill health and therefore inept to take a lead role in this transformation process. He was robust enough to visit his older brother in Beirut, Syria, and spend two years travelling in the region, which sharpened his awareness of what is peculiar about other cultures and also about his own: when De Forest returned to his home state, he discovered the complexity of its populations and wrote his highly acclaimed *History of the Indians of Connecticut* (1851). Only after spending four years in England, France, Germany, and Italy, he wrote an account of his experiences in Syria, *Oriental Acquaintance* (1856), cultivating a sense of detachment that also marks *European Acquaintance* (1858). It can hardly be doubted that his journeys abroad also inspired his quasi-ethnographic gaze on his own people, including a soldier's life among a community of men.

Another strong influence were his family relations, and also fictional characters: the title heroine, Lillie Ravenel, is a mix of De Forest's wife Harriet and the story of Thackeray's Amelia Sedley (Antoni 1986, 58–59). De Forest had married Harriet Silliman Shephard in 1856; she was a Southerner and a highly educated, classical scholar (Bright 1949, 11). The couple spent almost two years with Harriet's family in Charleston, South Carolina. This was where her father, a professor of chemistry, worked for several months every year: Mister Shepard – like his alter ego the wise Dr. Ravenel – held joint positions in both Amherst and Charleston. De Forest's first-hand experience of the South allowed him to recognize the cultural and ideological complexities that divided the nation, at the same time, however, his familiarity with

the South prevented him from cheerfully embracing an optimistic view of postwar sectional reconciliation. As he confided in a February 1869 article, he believed that a great deal of the population in the former Confederacy was too “eccentric” to be reconstructed, and that the best way to “create a true, heart-felt national unity” lay in “sooth[ing]” the “wounded pride” of these people through “[a] little letting alone, a little conciliation, a little flattery even” (1869, 347).

Importantly, De Forest’s restrained response to idealistic fantasies of a happy national union, a “Second Founding” even, had less to do with the political climate of the day than with his earlier experiences in the South. He claims to have compiled *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion* between December 1864 and October 1865, when he was no longer in active service, suffering from malaria and dysentery (1946, xvii). Starting with the northern victory and Lincoln’s assassination in April 1865, this was the beginning of a politically chaotic era. In all likelihood, however, De Forest had already finished half of the book at that time; he had probably started writing it during the early years of the war when he killed time in Louisiana (cf. Antoni 1986, 62–63; Crushore 233).

And yet, *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion* must be read against the backdrop of the time when it was published. It is here, that its well-wrought negotiations of Northern and Southern belief systems and lifestyles take on their particular meaning. In 1866, the relationship between Congress and the White House had been steadily deteriorating, especially when in March, Radical Reconstructionists pushed for racial integration against the veto of the new president, Andrew Johnson. At the same time, the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups promoted violence against black people and their allies. In the summer of 1866, newspapers from New York to Texas reported on the violent clashes between Union loyalists and former Confederates in New Orleans, and on the suffering of the city’s free(d) black population that was attacked by white mobs (Buinicki 2006, 61). None of this is a topic in *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion*; nowhere does the novel address the emotional turmoil and ambivalence that reverberated within individuals at that time. By 1867, even the undisputed star of national reconciliation, Henry Ward Beecher, had entangled himself in contradictory statements about federal and state responsibilities and the legal status of the freedmen, and was “forced to concede that he could no longer influence the reconstruction policies of the federal government” (Clark 1978, 178; ¶4 Race and Citizenship). Against this backdrop, *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion* proposes a future-oriented idea of a democracy in the making.

Early critics readily acknowledged the book’s decisive role in the postwar “democratic game” that saw “countless Americans fighting over who would be able to play in that game, and on whose terms” (Quigley 2004, ix). Even Henry James, who wrote a less favourable review of *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion*, praised the novel’s humorous descriptions of cross-regional encounters (James 1867, 51) while Howells (strangely ignoring Elizabeth Stoddard’s 1862 novel *The Morgesons*) attached the status of first realist novel to *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion* (cf. 1867, 54; ¶19 Stoddard, *The Morgesons*).

More conservative “representatives of the Gilded Age” were not in favour of such “strong writing,” yet they, too, were enthusiastic about the novel’s unembellished and sobering view of battle, injury, and death (Gargano 1981, 11). Commercially, however, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* was a massive failure – neither its seemingly sentimental plot nor its hopeful vision of sectional reunion attracted a large audience (cf. Scharnhorst 2000, xix–xx). Years later, Howells traced this back to the book’s unflattering portrayals of women that alienated its predominantly female readership (1901, 2, 162). In light of the feminist spirit that had gained ground during the absence of husbands, fathers, and brothers during the war, there is much that supports this explanation. When in 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment granted the vote to African-American men but not to women, the American feminist movement formed new alliances and increased their struggle for equal rights. In this cultural climate, the daring, tomboyish Jo from Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868; 21 Alcott, *Little Women*), or sensationalist novels about female spies became an alternative to De Forest’s fantasy of a dreamy, emotional Lillie Ravenel (or a promiscuous and greedy Mrs. Larue). The author may in fact have missed the point when in a letter to Howells he complained about a “female or a very juvenile public” that longed for titles such as “*Helen's Babies* and *That Husband of Mine*” (qtd. in Wilson 1966, 697).

Another plausible reason for the public’s neglect of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* is the book’s bad timing. While during the war, American publishers had opened up a new market for soldiers’ diaries, letters, and autobiographical reports, the years following the Civil War were a timeout period, a “memory gap” (Hochbruck 2011, 154) marked by trauma, silence, denial, and the displacement of veterans to the psychosocial and geographical margins of society (Blight 2001, 45). *Harper and Brothers* seem to have sensed this turning point when, contrary to their initial plan, they decided against publishing *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* in several instalments in its family magazine since there was too much “butchery that passed for medical treatment,” and too much promiscuous behavior on the side of some protagonists (Gargano 1981, 12). When in May 1867 *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* eventually came out as a book, it was poorly edited – proofs had been sent to De Forest while he was at the South on army duty (Light 1956, 87). Yet for all these setbacks, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* maintains the exceptional status of “one prominent and visible soldier’s narrative” that was not “withheld from contemporary audiences” (Cooper 2011, 47).

Just a few months after the book was published De Forrest wrote “The Great American Novel,” a key text for understanding *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* in connection with the Second Founding. Published anonymously, this literary manifesto lists only European writers (Chaucer, Jane Austen, Balzac, George Sand, Thackeray, Tolstoy, and Trollope) as inspirational, and laments the absence of a truly American literature. It is, essentially, a call for novels that represent the United States in an adequate – by implication realist – manner. What is at stake is a truthful representation of the “ordinary emotions and manners of American existence” (De Forest 1868, 31). De Forest knew that *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* could only be an approximation of that

ideal – after all, “a society which is changing so rapidly” cannot easily “be painted except in the daily newspaper” (De Forest 1868, 37). With its emphasis on the war itself, and partly indebted to the antebellum romance, the novel only to some extent prompted the “American people” to say, “[t]hat is my picture” (De Forest 1868, 31). Reminiscent of the “Orbic Literature” part of Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* (submitted to the *Galaxy* in 1868 but not published until years later), “The Great American Novel” calls for an end to “a nation of provinces” where “each province claims to be the court” (1868, 31), and anticipates an end to discriminatory copyright laws: any truly American novel needed a mass audience to reach its superior goal of creating a national community of readers (1868, 37).

*Miss Ravenel’s Conversion* is inspired by De Forest’s impressions as a recruiter and captain of the 12th Connecticut Regimental Volunteers, and his views on the Louisiana Campaign that he was a part of. Like the author himself, the book’s male hero, Colonel Colburne, is mustered out after three years of fighting (cf. Haight 1955, 107). De Forest relied on letters he wrote to his wife when he describes, almost ethnographically, the endless waiting in camp, the actual fighting (in Louisiana and Virginia), and the brutality of war that impacted on the individual soldier’s psyche. There is also a strong emphasis on subjectivity: as the book’s narrator professes, he is “not trying to show how things really were, but how the Colonel looked at them” (98). At this point, the novel anticipates Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), a book De Forest recognized as “really clever” and in many ways “excellent” – despite its author’s ignorance regarding the real war as De Forest remembers it: “I never saw a battery that could charge at full speed across a meadow” (Oviatt 1898, 42; ↗27 Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*).

Unlike many of his contemporaries De Forest did not interpret the war as a narrowly religious penance ritual (cf. Ahlstrom 1972, 685) but as a secular yet transformative, “purifying ordeal of suffering through which the characters must pass in order to make the eventual union possible” (Fluck 1999, 64). In line with much of the early Reconstruction literature about the Civil War *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion* searches for meaning by shifting toward fictionalization. Much of the writing from this period has its roots in the confessional mode but takes refuge in poetry and more imaginary forms of prose to imaginatively solve the dilemmas of the present – Louisa May Alcott’s *Hospital Sketches*, Walt Whitman’s “The Dresser,” Henry Ward Beecher’s *Norwood* are popular examples for this tendency. While his singular status as the nation’s first realist author veils De Forest’s membership in that larger club of post-bellum writers, he, too, was yearning for a useable past and shared his generation’s more general struggle for form.

For De Forest, this struggle intensified after the publication of *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion*. He gathered new inspiration while working as District Commander of the Freedmen’s Bureau in Greenville, South Carolina, where he oversaw “all matters concerning the nearly eighty thousand people in his district” (Claybaugh 2010, 203). What he experienced here and in the South in general became the raw material for

several essays and short stories that were printed in major magazines. He continued to write about cross-regional relations in *Kate Beaumont* (1872), a novel that is considered among his best, and that also treats a “union between two conflicting value systems” (Fluck 1999, 64), and *The Bloody Chasm* (1881), another reunion romance that examines notions of consent and citizenship in the reconstructed nation. In line with the general outcry against Gilded Age corruption, an increasingly less hopeful De Forest then switched to political satire in *Honest John Vane* (his most amusing book) and *Playing the Mischief* (both 1875), and returned to Syria as a topic of his literary imagination (*Irene the Missionary*, 1879). In 1886 he tried his hand at a novel about the social conditions in the 1880s; *A Daughter of Toil* deals with the living conditions of a young female worker in America. Unfortunately, the manuscript of that novel has been lost (Fluck 1997, 159; Spiller et al. 1963, 883). In his last novel, *A Lover's Revolt*, he returns to a foundational moment in American history, the Revolution (Wilson 1966, 736).

De Forest wrote several other novels but also many articles, short stories, and some poetry. Among his most important antebellum publications here is *Witching Times* (1856–1857), a story about the Salem witchcraft persecutions that anticipates the realism of its author's later years (Wilson 1966, 679) but did not come out as a book until 1976. After the Civil War he switched toward more recent subject matter. *A Volunteer's Adventures* (1946) supplements the author's wartime letters to his wife by six articles that he published between 1864 and 1868, in *Harper's* and *Galaxy*. The book provides clues about the autobiographical content of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* and essential information about the everyday lives of the soldiers, and the war in Louisiana. *A Union Officer in the Reconstruction* (1948), by contrast, is a compilation of magazine articles that remains one of the most detailed descriptions of the work of the Freedmen's Bureau and the class and racial dynamics of Southern society to this day.

## 2 Close Reading

*Miss Ravenel's Conversion* attaches to history a formative influence on people: there is an emphasis on causation that is crucial for De Forest's understanding of realism. In the novel, the Civil War figures as the watershed moment that marks the end of Hawthornian historical romance (→2 Romance and Gothic) with its “vague consciousness of life” and its overly narrow focus on the “subjective of humanity” (De Forest 1868, 32). All of this ended with the opening shots of the Civil War, and the destruction that followed: “No volcanic eruption rends a mountain without stirring the existence of the mountain's mice” (4). The metaphor describes a Second Founding in its earliest, topsy-turvy state. Yet this world of mouse-like humans, of confused pilgrims on the hill, is capable of communicating with even the most “secluded individuals” mentioned in the same passage. The narrator sets a good example when he receives the

first lines of his novel from an “obscure American author” who shares “one of his rejected articles (3). While sniffing at those who had ignored De Forest’s own antebellum efforts as a fiction writer, the novel emphasizes qualities such as attentive listening and mutual recognition, thereby spotlighting some of the new book’s major concerns – its claim of authenticity, its promise of intimacy, and its emphasis on a collective history that in order to be usable, must be passed on across generations.

Like one of his favourite writers, Honoré de Balzac, De Forest wished to bring to life a realistic, all-embracing moral portrait of his own country, an America in the process of reinventing itself. Such writing involves readers in a communicative act that should become a trademark of American realism in the late nineteenth century. This remains true although “the book is full of Mr. De Forest” as a “constant presence upon the stage as manipulator of the figures,” as Henry James famously complained (1867, 49). And yet *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion* always lets us imagine alternative developments and outcomes. What if the title heroine, Lillie Ravenel, did not have a father who was loyal to the Union but a supporter of the Confederacy? What if this Southern Belle had not fallen in love with the northern hero?

The plot evolves around Lillie, who experiences much suffering before she eventually marries Mr. Right, the decent and self-restrained Captain Colburne. Lillie’s story goes beyond conventional romance – torn between the good and evil that exists in the worlds that she inhabits and actively defines, she is an updated version of the hero in Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress: From This World to that Which Is to Come* (1678). The latter not only resonates in the “ponderous title” of De Forest’s novel but also exhibits many similarities on the level of character types and plot. By alluding to that classic, De Forest prompted nineteenth-century readers to compare the history of one Southern Belle with the famous adventures of Christian’s extensive pilgrimage (Moffit 1962, 353–354).

Unlike Christian, De Forest’s female ‘pilgrim’ is always a part of a human constellation. She makes her appearance in a stage-like, theatrical scene told from the perspective of her future husband, Captain Colburne. It is “shortly after the capitulation of loyal Fort Sumter” (3) that he hears a “silvery voice” from the hall of a reading room in New Boston, a thinly veiled stand-in for New Haven (4). For those accustomed with the genre of Southern romance it must have come as a mild surprise that this voice belongs to a woman who much “like the heroine of many a love affair in our own lives is not handsome” but all the more “socially charming” (8). The plain Lillie is De Forest’s realist version of a vivacious, innocent, and politically opinionated Southern Belle: a native of New Orleans she embodies qualities that are dearly needed in a town whose Puritan heritage “is absolutely noxious to social gayeties, amenities and graces” (16). Blessed with the superior intuition and “tropical warmth” of her gender and region (17), Lillie welcomes the opportunity to converse with the gallant Lieutenant-Colonel Carter, a visitor from Virginia who boasts membership in one of that state’s First Families. The young woman, who had just had a pleasant encounter with the level-headed but less magnetic Captain Colburne, is impressed by the West

Pointer's manly appearance and Southern charm, and readily overlooks that Carter "had taken to the wine in a style which showed that he was used to the taste of it" (25). The floor is open for a tragic love triangle and a young woman's demise into an unhappy marriage. However, a more immediate reality interrupts the familiar melodramatic story: after the union army is defeated during the Battle of Bull Run, Carter forms a regiment and Colburne also raises a company. The men meet again during the war, in New Orleans, the Ravenel's home town. They revive their friendship with Lillie and her father, who now organizes black labor and education in that city. They also make the acquaintance of Lillie's aunt, Miss Larue – a young and promiscuous widow. Acting against her unionist father, who frowns at "the bacchanalian New Orleans type of gentility" (26), Lillie marries Carter, who despite his alcoholism has been promoted. When their son Ravvie is born there is hope that Carter will embrace a more decent lifestyle. But the Virginian is less loyal than his uniform suggests and misuses government funds. He also sees "Mrs Larue as often as he wanted, and even much oftener, in a private room, which even his wife did not know of" (358). When Lillie finds this out she leaves "that Sodom of a city" (400) and, together with her baby son, follows Dr. Ravenel North. The remorseful Carter dies in battle, and there is no more obstacle that keeps his widow from fully subscribing to northern values. The "converted secessionist" (439) nurses the sick and mustered-out Colburn, who has become manlier through the "grand lesson" of wartime suffering (438). Her 'conversion' comes full circle when she sheds her Southern views and marries "the man whom she ought always to have loved" (463).

In order to come together, Lillie and Colburne have to go through a series of trials that leaves them transformed and strong enough to face the possible challenges lying ahead. When learning about Carter's *affaire*, Lillie is gripped with a "short fever" from which she recovers on a ship that brings her to New York, and later to New Boston. Her journey to health traces the transition between moral landscapes that both have an indisputable charm. It is by giving an "almost ethnographic account of social life in New England and New Orleans, touching upon Virginia and New York society as well" that a considerable part of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* seeks to "recreate national feeling" (Claybaugh 2010, 210). While the novel acknowledges cultural differences as the outcome of particular socio-historical constellations, it renders the respective scenes in some "rather good satirical description" (James 1867, 51): the New England Puritans must be given "profoundest respect" for the "impetus they have for humanity," and yet they "must have been disagreeable to live with." The religiosity of the South is deep and sincere – but in her prayer, Lillie "may have forgotten the heathen, the Jews, and the negroes" (422–423).

The novel's notion of 'culture' is intrinsically gendered. Lillie's Southern lens makes Northern masculinities appear "dreadfully ladylike" (20); even Captain Colburne, who strikes her as "the only man in New Boston" because he is "powerfully built" (19), falls short of her emotionally driven zest for community, romance, and the good life. Colburne, in turn, is taken aback by the irrationality and aristocratic



heritage of a feminized Southern culture and seeks to inspire the Ravenels with the cool rationalism of the North.

For all its praise of a Southern emotional climate, the novel's sympathies with the former Confederacy are limited. This plainly shows in Lillie Ravenel's eventual, heartfelt embrace of Northern values, opinions – and men. Anticipating Henry James's young and innocent female travellers, she is the “democratic princess” (Wilson 1966, 708), the social subject shaped by old norms and a curiosity that allows her to learn, through comparison and communication, that the truth is not objective. It is by transcending rather than tossing off the burden of tradition that she consents to Northern values: Lillie converts triumphantly because she preserves her identity.

Steering toward the figurative marriage between a masculine North and a feminized South, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* is an example of what today is termed a “romance of reunion” (≈1 Sentimentalism). This postbellum trend materialized in the era's popular culture but also in novels such as Albion Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand* (1879) (cf. Silber 1997, esp. 40, and 111). Contrary to the latter, De Forest fails to create an imaginary world; there is an excess of conversation about society, politics, and moral values. At the same time, however, the book is remarkably uncompromising and formally innovative as it mixes “spare reportage, earthy temptresses, prattling heroines, temperance sermons, and sly narrative asides” (Fick 1992, 473). In some of the battle scenes the omniscient narrator seems to look Colburne over the shoulder, but then the same event is focalized through the hero himself – the Captain's letters convey a more flexible man who recognizes that alcohol can prevent a soldier from fainting. Contrary to the sentimental love plot, the novel's war scenes seem diametrically opposed to generic tradition. Reminiscent of Stendhal and Thackeray these chapters approach battle in a “nonheroic” way (Schaefer 1997, 43); they describe Colburne's days in uniform as a time of waiting, boredom, loneliness, and hardships. Instead of recounting adventures, the Captain's letters list the burdensome trappings of what he admits was an otherwise “glorious” campaign in the Shenendoah – the “privations, marching, and guard-duty,” the half-starvation, the “half-frozen” nights (428). Hard-edged and to the point, the novel anticipates the reduced language and clear imagery of Hemingway, picturing the merciless indifference of life: when there was food, it came as a “small plate of stewed onions, without meat or bread” (323). The fighting is bloody, desperate, and confusing in a manner that may have inspired Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*: “it was impossible to tell whither you were going, or whether you would stumble on friends or enemies; the regiments were split into little squads from which all order had disappeared” (250).

De Forest believed that another war could not be ruled out, and that it was the power of descriptive realism that could prevent the worst: for him, “reading accounts of previous battles” was “the best way for the prospective soldier to prepare for coming under fire” (Schaefer 1997, 25). He was influenced by military authors, whose knowledge of actual battles fascinated him, and he pays tribute to

one of them when Lillie Ravenel compares Colburne's letters as "equal in precision, brevity, elegance, and every other classical quality of style, to the Commentaries of Julius Ceasar" (199). *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* seeks to capture the very essence of situations in split-second impressions: "One abject hound, a corporal with his disgraced stripes upon his arm [...] gave an idiotic stare with outstretched neck toward the front, then turned with a nervous jerk like that of a scared beast, and rushed rearward" (250). In 1867, such descriptions were the first of their kind in the fiction of the English-speaking world (cf. Wilson 1966, 685). Published shortly after the first war in history that had been documented with the help of a camera, and only one year after Alexander Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War* had come out (cf. Lee 2007, 1), De Forest takes the relatively new medium as both a challenge and an inspiration (cf. Howells 1867, 121) to create an equally close, unsentimental, and precise image of, e.g. "two more artillerists, stark dead, one with his brains bulging from a bullet-hole in his forehead, while a dark claret-colored streak crossed his face" (258). Importantly, the novel's detailed descriptions of colors ("a ghastly yellowish pallor"), smells (the "stifling air," the "pungent odor of chloroform"), and sounds ("groans," "inarticulate jabber") also surpass the technical possibilities of the new medium (260). In several instances the book trumps photography by anticipating an expressionist aesthetics: the invalid Colburne offers a "spectacle" (428) with "eyes underscored with lines of blueish yellow, his face sallow and features sharpened" (427).

Such descriptions also went against the 'feminization' of Civil War literature. Some of the female nurses who had been reluctantly admitted to volunteer in wartime hospitals had published diaries and sentimental short stories about their experiences. De Forest, by contrast, waives linguistic ornament when he confronts readers with the full consequences of human action and interaction:

In the center of this mass of human suffering stood several operating tables, each burdened with a grievously wounded man and surrounded by surgeons and their assistants. Underneath were great pools of clotted blood, amidst which lay amputated fingers, hands, arms, feet and legs, only a little more ghastly in color than the faces of those who waited their turn on the table [...]. "Come up and see them butcher, Captain," said the iron-nerved Van Zandt, striding over prostrate and shrinking forms to the side of one of the tables, and glaring at the process of an amputation with an eager smile of interest much like the grin of a bull-dog who watches the cutting up of a piece of beef. Presently he espied the assistant surgeon of the Tenth, and made an immediate rush at him for whiskey. Bringing the flask which he obtained to Colburne, he gave him a sip, and then swallowed the rest himself. By this time he began to show signs of intoxication; he laughed, told stories, and bellowed humorous comments on the horrid scene. (260–261)

The passage is devoid of metaphor, there is only laws and mechanisms that can be observed and analysed by the reader. Dr. Ravenel expresses the book's anti-metaphysical credo while responding to Colburn's letters from the front: "There is cause and effect and their relations to each other in this narrative" (425). Such

meta-commentary is characteristic for the Doctor's narrative function; whenever he expresses his views, readers may expect a well-balanced analysis. The doctor embodies the book's ideological position: a man from Southern stock but a "Northerner by temperament and sympathy" (Long 2004, 96), he prefers to live among the somewhat frosty population of New Boston than having to deal with his more cordial yet arbitrary Southern brothers and sisters (Fluck 1992, 94). He also makes the Civil War meaningful by defining it as the latest step in the process of civilization:

It is the fifth act in the great drama of human liberty. First the Christian revelation. Second, the Protestant reformation. Third, the war of American Independence. Fourth, the French revolution. Fifth, the struggle for the freedom of all men, without distinction of race and color; this democratic struggle which confirms the masses in an equality with the few. (445)

Importantly, Dr. Ravenel's authority is not invincible. His views are thoroughly subverted by the undisciplinable Colonel Carter, whose drinking, infidelity, and inability to manage money not only turn him into Colburne's biggest adversary in romantic matters, but also challenge the wise old man's political optimism, and foreshadow De Forest's own, increasing frustration with American postwar democracy. Because Carter is so important for the development and philosophy of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* he is particularly well-drawn; Henry James found him to be "daguerrotyped from nature" (James 1867, 49). Carter comes across as tragic rather than negative. When Lillie confronts this guilty but loveable man (comp. Wilson 1966, 797) with the enormity of his moral crime he is gripped by genuine repentance (402). Carter owes his credibility to not knowing absolutes: his love for Lillie is equally deeply-felt as his sexual desire for Mrs. Larue. This side-character is, perhaps, the most interesting figure of all: represented as an octoroon Creole who speaks that language of the most corrupt nation, French, she turns out to be neither entirely bad nor good; her devotion to Lillie's son is as pure and honest as any idealized mother's could be. Mrs. Larue is what her equally contradictory culture has made her: someone without strong moral principles who is not sly (Peper 1966, 75; Haight 155, 110). It is this representation that gave De Forest the name of "first American novelist who dared to let a 'bad woman' go unpunished" (Wilson 1966, 687).

According to the sentimental formula, the charming Belle would convert her unfaithful husband to Christian virtues; Colburne would refuse alcohol even under the daily strain of army life; and Mrs. Larue's "mild and insinuating domination" over Carter would not entail superior, civilizing effects (≈1 Sentimentalism). None of this happens in this novel: by exposing Northern and Southern inadequacies along with a need, and a capacity, to overcome those perceived deficiencies, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* challenges absolutes (cf. Peper 1966, 74). In the ideal case that is sketched out in the novel's sentimental romance, cultural pluralism that is not an option but a "composite of the best from each culture" seems possible indeed (Fick 1992, 485).

### 3 Theoretical Perspectives

*Miss Ravenel's Conversion* refuses to give easy answers to complex political and philosophical problems. This has been identified as the book's greatest failure and its greatest strength. Starting in the mid-1960s, scholars have recognized *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* as a critical examination and negotiation of antebellum values and norms, and as an exploration of democratic form and debate. Critics agree that the book is in no way "naïve regarding the prospects of reconciliation" (Buinicki 2006, 49): as Mrs. Larue exemplifies, most of those who have identified with the Confederacy will not cease to do so in the future.

Such skepticism sets the book apart from the literature of mourning, consolation, and humorous compensation that includes Walt Whitman's "The Dresser" (1865), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Gates Ajar* (1868), and Alonzo Hill's *John Smith's Funny Adventures on a Crutch* (1869) – works that seek to "bind up the nation's wounds," as Abraham Lincoln had put it in his second inauguration speech. De Forest, too, wished to contribute to the nation's healing, and it was in this context that he praised *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an ideal combination of "national breadth" and a "truthful outlining of character, natural speaking, and plenty of strong feeling" (1868, 33; ↗15 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). Interestingly, however, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* departs from Stowe's sentimental agenda and warns against that all-absorbing climate of willful denial that marked postbellum society. While seeking to bridge the gap between the country's recent past and its undefined present, there is – in spite of Lillie Ravenel's individual "conversion" – possible doom and future conflict in this novel.

Much of the scholarship from the 1990s onward takes this tension as its starting point and interprets *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* as an assessment of the nation's potential to renew itself. According to such readings, America's core dilemma is the result of over-identification with collective fictions: shaped by the norms and rules of their society, the protagonists appear limited in their self-realization. The "romantic pretensions" of the antebellum Southern myth of the heroic cavalier and the fair lady are one such fiction that is exposed through the narrative's skeptical Northern gaze (cf. Fick 1992, 475 and 482). Lillie is eventually punished for her naïve belief in passion and romance. At the same time, however, Colburne's almost scientific form of detachment keeps him from experiencing domestic happiness (cf. Fluck 1992, 102). It is only by juxtaposing the couple's respective fictions, and their deficits, that the curious and open-minded Lillie can liberate those doggedly suppressed, softer aspects of Colburne's personality (cf. Long 2004, 97). *Miss Ravenel's Conversion*, in other words, suggests that individual change and, potentially, collective development might be possible.

Critics have long lamented the novel's wavering between realism and romance. This only changed during the 1990s, when this apparent weakness was perceived as being key to the novel's cultural work. Created as a strategic "war of genres" (Fick 1992, 474), this "wavering" abolishes Southern claims to cultural superiority by demolishing the historical romance and its hero, the cavalier gentleman. It uses realism as

a means to this end, rather than an end in itself. From this point of view, the most significant sections of the novel are not De Forest's realistic descriptions of battle, but the pervasive confrontation between the conservative Southern historical romance in service of a slaveholding society and a fledgling Northern realism with ties to a progressive free-labor ideology (cf. Fick 1992, 474). On a more general plane, the book's strange indecision between romance and realism discloses an unresolvable cultural dilemma that was particular to that era of national redefinition. It turns *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* into a key text about America's search for ways of adequately and truthfully representing itself as one nation with the potential of further developing its superior 'civilization' (Fluck 1992, 96). Such a reading broadens our understanding of what realism actually meant for the nineteenth-century American fiction writer. The prevailing, content-oriented understanding of realism that laments the novel's use of romance omits why De Forest decided to write fiction in the first place. He could, after all, have penned an ethnographic report – a genre that he was well acquainted with. Yet unlike factual modes of expression, fiction invites playful experimentation, especially with unresolved, real-life conflicts. In *Miss Ravenel's Conversion*, this quasi-therapeutic, nation-building task is staged as an ongoing negotiation between two cultural, geographic modes that are not only gendered but also driven by moral concerns. What emerges over the course of the novel is a highly dynamic "semantic field of relationships and binary oppositions" (Fluck 1992, 93). The core aim is an almost arithmetic, national balance where each part of the country contributes its strengths and advantages to build an advanced, U.S. civilization (cf. Fluck 1999, 93). It requires an openness toward others, a willingness to converse about conflicting issues that lets the protagonists grow as individuals and citizens of this democratic, capitalist nation. Lillie's wit and quick grasp of cultural quirks do not leave Colburne unimpressed, and contribute to his own metamorphosis: when she marries the Captain, he has gained in sexual energy (that unlike Carter he knows to control), is spiritually enriched, and maintains the "Northern virtues of restraint and industry," minus the negative connotations of the Northern capitalist (Fick 1992, 485).

It is only through repeated encounters and long conversations that both cultural leanings arrive at a happy synthesis of two essentially incomplete civilizations (Fluck 1999, 97). The book's seemingly conventional romantic plot entails a rather philosophical "*declaration of (mutual) dependence*" that challenges the ideal of individual and national independence (Fluck 1999, 98). Through its negotiations of cultural values, it inspires an alternative understanding of national union that no longer relies on endless compromise to preserve respective privileges and interests but promotes a new understanding of democracy as communication, negotiation, and constant change. This includes a different understanding of the individual: *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* asks how a person can preserve his or her individuality if it is not autonomous. Lillie and Colburne, the novel's happy couple, fulfill that ideal through their position within the society they belong to, and not in opposition to it. They are curious and open-minded enough to change while moving in social groups

and geographies that are not identical with their own. Lillie's "conversion" is not the result of Colburne's superior arguments nor does it emerge from that "delirious" "enthusiasm of the moment" that once made her accept Carter's proposal (178–179): by embracing the new, the matured heroine replaces her earlier secessionist impulses (cf. Buinicki 2006, 51), and appropriates the North's sense of individual responsibility and self-control to her own – less rigidly 'puritan' – agenda.

Given the significance of this process of rapprochement, the novel seems all but "ill named, from a circumstance that is in itself trifling, and which is in no way of the least importance to the story" (James 1867, 50). Yet it took almost a century until the cultural significance of these 'trifles' and the prominent role of the young lady therein were recognized for the first time (Cecil 1962). Suffering degradation and hardship before reaching the status of a loyal U.S. citizen, Lillie transfers the Southern soldiers' humiliation and eventual salvation to an individual civilian plane. Her conversion is not a sudden 'touch' by the spirit of Northern rationality but a gradual "mental adaptation" process (Butler 2006, 173) that is, at least with regard to Colburne, theoretically open ended. Yet the Southern Belle's ensuing victory over the fictions that had led her to disaster lends new meaning to the past as well: in line with the "most religious war in American history" (McPherson 1998, 63), hers is a "holy war" that in the end is purifying for both sides involved.

By making this transition, she undermines the laws and conventions of the romance as a genre – not without them but through them. Lillie Ravenel is not the stereotypical heroine of Southern romance but a young mother who recognizes her sham first marriage and leaves her husband. Subscribing to Northern values makes her an adult version of her former, emotionally driven self – and Colburne proves equally flexible when he sheds some of his reserve and follows his romantic impulse. The cross-regional boy-meets-girl plot, in other words, seeks to reconcile romance with lived reality.

By intertwining two different approaches to this lived reality (one that relies on analytical powers; and one, on feelings), *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* acknowledges the push and pull of tradition while suggesting a process of approximation between romance and realism. The former is not inferior to the latter but a part of the American civilization project: Colburne's 'American education' starts with his masculinization through his experience and realistic view of the Civil War and continues through his many conflicts on the battlefield of love (cf. Fluck 1992, 94–96). Lillie has her own sobering experience when Carter becomes "her Gettysburg, her Cedar Creek, her Wilderness" (Cecil 1962, 356). The emotional and ideological ups and downs, impasses and detours that are encountered during the couple's mutual development are more important than the protagonists' eventual marriage. Given the postbellum conflicts in Congress and the massive corruption there was not much to support this vision of a happy ending. The novel's notion of progress was limited to the lives of exceptional individuals – in the end, the couple's union remains predominantly private, despite the applauding crowd (see Fluck 1992, 108 and Buinicki 2006, 53).

While the novel stages the cross-sectional couple's gradual rapprochement with subtlety and detail, its representation of the nation's latest citizens relies on coarse stereotypes – the book is sprinkled with god-praising freedmen (108), jolly pickaninnies (227), and other stock characters of antebellum nostalgia. There is reason to believe that De Forest would not deny that such imagery was flawed – after all, Dr. Ravenel demands a more realistic view of black lives when he states that “Uncle Tom is a pure fiction” since “there never was such a slave, and never will be” (239). A more realistic representation of the former slaves' postbellum lives, however, would potentially be distracting from the novel's main topic, white reunion. Therefore, conversations about the future of the freedmen focus almost entirely on the “sentimental illusions” of feminized, Northern “nigger worshippers” (Shi 1996, 62–63). *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* mainly refers to African Americans in the context of carving out a Northern, postbellum concept of white hegemonic masculinity that frowns upon the presumed naiveté of radical abolitionism and its supporters. It is by keeping the freedmen childlike and dependent that the novel displays Colburne's newly acquired brand of manliness, one that claims membership in the more ‘advanced’ circles of the antislavery movement (see Sumner 1864; Rose 1998, 75; Massey 1966, 123).

In the late 1990s, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* was first criticized for its problematic usage of racial allegory. The novel calls Carter a “white dissolute” for acting like a stereotypical black man when he sacrifices his honor and good reputation to his sexual appetites for his octoroon acquaintance: “there was a great deal of body” to Carter's “volcanic” nature (159) (cf. Hedges 1997, 229). In another instance, the “West Point Brahmin” voices a thinly disguised, racialized notion of self-hatred when he links the emergence of black regiments to his own decline: “I despise the low brute. [...]. If you take a command of niggers, you will find yourself put into Fort Pike or some such place, among the mosquitoes and fever and ague, where white men can't live” (167). By metonymically blackening white Southern aristocracy, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* marks the moral – and by extension ideological – superiority of the North as white character traits (Scharnhorst 2000, xiv).

Racist condescension and the marginalization of African Americans in this Reconstruction novel makes De Forest part of that postwar trend toward national reconciliation that refused to acknowledge the self-sacrificial feats of black regiments and the freedmen's right to equality in order to celebrate the newly emerging, white nation (cf. Blight, 2001; 74 *Race and Citizenship*). This negligence appears strategic: in 1867, De Forest not only finished writing *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* but witnessed the beginning of Congressional Reconstruction, an era of radical lawmaking that reached its first climax in the controversy surrounding the 14th Amendment. Around this time the Republican Party was declining because members worried that black male suffrage (which was what the 14th Amendment was about) would cost them white votes not only in Southern states but also in Northern ones. To counteract their party's decline, other Republicans supported the introduction of the black vote throughout the North. In line with the prevailing skepticism among the white

northern population, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* pays lip-service to the rights of free blacks, while assuring readers that the future of the U.S. lay elsewhere for it “must make room for something more consonant with the railroad, electric-telegraph, printing-press, inductive philosophy, and practical Christianity” (Scharnhorst xiii).

Since the year 2000, there is a marked shift toward analyzing the concepts underlying the novel's discussions of American democracy. Continuing on the path that Fick and Fluck have taken, scholars have investigated the emotional component that seems indispensable for the novel's imaginary nation building process. Instead of supporting a concept of consensual citizenry whose primary aim was the prevention of violence through the citizen's submission to a set of predefined limitations, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* explores under what circumstances notions of love, sympathy, and the struggle for mutual understanding are crucial to a successful social contract. What is at stake are questions of personal – and, by extension, collective – loyalty in a democratic setting. The novel negotiates through Lillie's consecutive marriages two concurring models of the spousal – and by extension national – relationship: the contractual model (“until death do us part”), and the right of the individual to leave an abusive relationship.

The warring philosophies within this romance emerge in the context of an American tradition of male-versus-female sentimentalism. As critics of male sentimentality (Bruce Bugett, Russ Castronovo, Mary Chapman, Glenn Hendler, Dana Nelson) have pointed out, male nineteenth-century writers seem to rely on the “affective strategies of romance” to voice their “political critique of Reconstruction” (Jackson 2003, 279). For contradicting critics who have read Lillie's return to the North as “a pressure to conform to genre” (Cooper 2011, 48), this type of sentimentality harbors a “practical consciousness” that enables De Forest to “revise the very meaning and practice of citizenship” (Jackson 2003, 279). Unlike the religiously inflected discourse of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the novel's male sentimentality inflects “an intellectual immersion in the writings of Hobbes and Locke, which had infused American political culture since the constitution debates of the 1780s and which returned to the political fore in the congressional debates of 1860 and after” (Jackson 2003, 288). By leaving Carter, Lillie goes against the conservative consent-without-conviction stance and privileges the Lockean model of free will as the ultimate, more stable option. Importantly, however, the novel precludes a feminist, radical stance: Carter's death spares Lillie the scandal of a divorce. Since her change of locale implies a political statement in favor of the North, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* encourages a rethinking of the ideal of patriotic duty in situations that cease to be mutually advantageous. By challenging, rather than merely projecting, notions of loyalty and love, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* enables an understanding of the Southern states' earlier secession, and rejects an easy answer to the postbellum dilemma of national consensus. At the same time, it promotes trans-regional negotiations together with “constant concern for the cultivation of proper national affect necessary to transcend perilously narrow or local affiliations” (Duquette 2010, 68).



Recent studies of affect, combined with earlier ones about the economical dimensions of Lillie's "conversion" have helped grasp the fundamental meaning and exceptionality of the heroine's change of heart and mind. By linking affect to the nation, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* undermines the established, feminized notion of sentiment. As a child of the latter, Lillie undergoes a long phase of suffering and humiliation before she can develop that love of national union that motivates the Northern hero. Representing a milder version of a 'sequester' lady rebel, she belongs to a category that allows the novel to dismiss "(l)ingering regional antagonism" "as a violent fit of feminine pique" (Duquette 2010, 77). Therefore, the "terribly illogical" and "warm-hearted" Miss Ravenel (138) depends on the emotional depth of a "conversion" to change her mind. This southern quality helps re-inventing a new and revitalized masculinity that lives up to the challenges of the United States' increasingly industrialized, postwar economy. The 'aristocratic,' Southern model, however, is hopelessly outdated, as is revealed in the unhealthy relationship between Mrs. Larue and Colonel Carter. According to the novel, the proud and honorable Southern aristocracy has been taken over by morally and spiritually deprived women such as Mrs. Larue, who "gets both money and pleasure and ends the novel richer and happier than she began it" (Fick 1992, 485). This cautionary sexual-financial constellation gives the Northerner, Colburne, "an impressive sexual energy" and lets him prove his "honor" by successfully keeping it in check. The idea that "the cavalier gets poor by spending his sexual force" while "the Yankee gets rich by restraining his sexuality" is certainly not new, a narrative that emphasizes an immediate link between the two certainly is: in the end, Lillie prefers Colburne to Carter. With *Miss Ravenel's Conversion*, the potent Southrons have reached the end point of their risqué lifestyle that emerged from an economy that had driven them "half mad in their desire for cotton. Cotton was a contagion, an influenza, a delirium" (372). The winner in this game of "geographical morality" is Colburne – a man who spent his youth in that "stable world of property and patriarchy" that had started to crumble due to "the risky one of capital investment" during the antebellum era (Fick 1992, 488). And so together with his wartime experience, which led to him hardening against the horrors of the battlefield, the newly-wed "soldier citizen" (468) is prepared to compete in an increasingly aggressive business world (Fick 1992, 489). The hero can now secure the cultural and economic hegemony of that endangered patrician elite into which he (and De Forest) had been born (Fick 1992, 487–490):

The chivalrous sentiment which would not let him beg for promotion will show forth in a resolute self-reliance and an incorruptible honor, which in the long run will be to his outward advantage. His responsibilities will take all dreaminess out of him, and make him practical, industrious, able to arrive at results. [...]. He has the patience of a soldier, and a soldier's fortitude under discouragement. (468)

Colburne's identification as a soldier results in an even greater incommensurability with postbellum U.S. culture: during his years in the army, he comes to appreciate

what most civilians regard as a nuisance – institutional bureaucracy. As a soldier, Colburne learns that such paperwork is a prerequisite to becoming a part of the new, democratic nation: it is only after signing his men's muster-out rolls, and writing their reports, that this hero feels ready to wear what he calls "a citizen's suit" (429). According to recent scholarship, this emphasis on administrative work makes *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* a key text about nineteenth-century bureaucracy, associated in the first half of the century with the governing elite (cf. Claybaugh 2010, 204). In the novel, a different type of bureaucracy emerges that for the first time finds the consent of the so-called common man: ordinary soldiers find "something admirable" in the rules and paragraphs that structure their daily lives because "regulations encode precisely the knowledge that is needed in battle" (Claybaugh 2010, 212). Importantly, however, soldiers must first learn to appreciate this counter-intuitive knowledge: as the novel consistently reveals, much of the paperwork involved is not only cruel but also ineffective. This makes it all the more difficult for regular citizens like Lillie and Dr. Ravenel (430) to understand veterans' new admiration for bureaucratic action. The novel thus anticipated a conflict between veterans' claims to cultural hegemony and societal visions of a newly emergent, forward-looking elite and ultimately calls for a different bureaucracy, one that emphasizes states of transformation – and is carried forward by individuals worthy of and desiring to bring about change.

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