

## “The Baby Became Horrible”

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### The Traumatized Adolescent Mother in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' 1870 Reform Novel, *Hedged In*

*In her 1870 novel, Hedged In, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps explores the painful psychological underpinnings that social and historical constraints imposed on unwed adolescent mothers, interrogating the widespread belief that these fallen girls could never recover from their pasts. Through her character of abandoned and pregnant fifteen-year-old Nixy Trent, Phelps shows her middle-class audience the story of a young woman who overcomes her past and becomes an upstanding member of her community, transforming from unwed mother to respected teacher. Yet Nixy's story is not a resounding success: the youthful heroine suffers severe emotional trauma akin to that of contemporary sufferers of PTSD, and this essay argues that her mental illness ultimately kills her, eliminating the collective good that she otherwise could have offered those around her. Thus, Phelps suggests that social standards simply refused to keep pace with the reform she felt the United States as a whole must undergo to aid teen mothers in their emotional healing processes. She further seems to hope that Nixy's story would stir her readers to reconsider their ill treatment of these young women and thereby offer faith in these girls' abilities to change rather than persistently chastising (and, in essence, retraumatizing) them for pasts that could never be erased.*

At the beginning of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *Hedged In* (1870), fifteen-year-old Nixy takes refuge in a poor tenement house that can offer no more than a “mass of rags and straw for her and her baby” (13). While there, she lies in bed, obsessing about a red stain on the wall next to her, a stain left years earlier when another adolescent mother in the same position had committed infanticide. Phelps writes that Nixy “was wondering who the girl was that lay just here, where she was lying, years ago; what she was like; if she had a mother to help her bear what folks said and all that; if she did, why she knocked out the baby's

brains; if it was easy to do,—knocking out a baby’s brains; she felt sorry for the girl; it did not occur for her for some minutes to feel sorry for the baby” (27). Soon after, Nixy daydreams about imitating that same murderous act: “she fell to speculating a little, idly on the ease with which she could squeeze the baby up against the wall; it would not be difficult to squeeze the breath out of it altogether” (28). Though Nixy does not believe killing her child would be a “thoroughly pleasant thing to do . . . the longer she looked at the stained wall, the more familiar the idea seemed to grow on her, as a thing which might be done—as one would take a pill, for instance, to cure a headache. She could have sworn to it, as she looked, that [a] red spider was weaving a red web all about her and about the child . . . as the web narrowed, it seemed to her rather imperative than otherwise to squeeze the baby, just to see how it would feel” (28). Luckily, Nixy is not left alone with her child long enough to fulfill her murderous fantasy, though postbellum nineteenth-century readers would have registered little surprise had she followed through with her dark imaginings.

After all, that young, unwed girls changed irreparably for the worse following a pregnancy was a foregone conclusion and the trauma that childbirth and its aftermath elicited within adolescent mothers was well-documented. Suicide and murder were predictable reactions of teenage mothers, so Nixy’s analogy of murder being akin to a pill to rid her of her “problem” is based on a long line of similar narrative reactions by young American women to the experience of unwed pregnancy. A prolific nineteenth-century writer of over twenty novels and a vast array of short stories and magazine editorials, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps explored the painful psychological underpinnings social and historical constraints seemed to impose on many helpless young women in *Hedged In*, interrogating the widespread belief that fallen girls could never recover from their pasts. However, Phelps finally acquiesces at the end of her novel that social standards simply refused to keep pace with the reform she felt the country itself must undergo to aid in these young women’s healing processes becoming complete and, more importantly, to discontinue the traumatic repercussions pregnancy and childbirth initiated within them in the future. Ultimately, then, this essay argues that *Hedged In* is, at its core, a story of trauma that can never be fully reconciled because of the restrictive historical and cultural forces that already predetermined young Nixy’s fate.

Though Phelps was writing well before contemporary interpretations and discourses about psychological trauma, reading Nixy’s narrative through the lens of trauma—and reading (her) adolescent pregnancy as traumatic—contributes to a fuller understanding of the cultural pressures enacted on postbellum unwed mothers. For instance, Nixy’s feeling “hedged in” by external circumstances, or that no matter what she attempts to do, everything from the point of her pregnancy forward will lead to disaster, can be perceived as a traumatic in much

the same way as if a hurricane had destroyed Nixy’s previous way of life. In either of these traumas, Nixy would have the potential to experience emotional, physical, and social strain as she had never experienced it before and her recovery from either event would be psychologically demanding. In “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,” Laura Brown argues that trauma affecting women across age and time barriers is often ignored simply because it is read as a natural part of human existence—just as Nixy’s descent into depression and morbid preoccupations were accepted as ordinary because of her unwed pregnancy. However, Brown emphasizes that the fact that trauma is often ignored does not make its effects any less palpable to the girl or woman in question. She explains that “The range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class: white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class Christian men. Trauma is thus what disrupts these particular human lives, but no other. . . . Public events, visible to all, rarely themselves harbingers of stigma for their victims, things that can and do happen to men—all of these constitute trauma in the official lexicon. Their victims are rarely blamed in these events” (101-2).

Nineteenth-century society judged young, unwed mothers harshly for any sign of sexual interest. Pregnant girls’ bodies became visible signs of sin that they could not hide, their bodies themselves sites of trauma that marked them publicly as “ruined” for any chance of future success in life. Unwed mothers received blame through punishment that included social ostracization and financial deprivation (both punishments which were inflicted on Nixy) and which were predictable requirements of any reform-oriented novelistic characterizations of fallen girls. Brown points out that women in particular are often assumed to contribute to their own suffering and thereby to need chastising because they are frequently traumatized interpersonally, that is by their relationships and treatment by others rather than from a catastrophic external circumstance. Because a girl, willingly or not, participated in a sexual act, she was expected as Phelps describes Nixy’s situation “to suffer,” to become “hungry, cold, sick, frightened, tempted” (74). Though Phelps hoped her novel could bring about change in individual girls’ perceptions of their futures, her aims as a reformer resided principally in forcing her middle-class readers to recognize the hypocrisy and ramifications of their treatment toward adolescent mothers.

For Nixy and other late nineteenth-century unwed youth, childbirth was considered an illness, a physical and psychological problem that felt terminal. The tightening “web” Nixy references in that beginning passage set in the tenement house represents a web of social judgment and lack of choices, a web that resulted in an overwhelming sense of helplessness for nineteenth-century adolescent mothers. I submit that in many such cases, adolescent pregnancy and childbirth resulted in symptoms indicative of post-traumatic stress dis-

order (PTSD). For the purposes of this essay, I am borrowing my definition of PTSD from trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth, who says that while there is no “precise” definition of the disorder, “most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors, stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun before or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (4). Nixy obsesses about her pregnancy, considering it the only moment that defines her life trajectory, and she exhibits a broad range of the symptoms cited above, suggesting that although there was no diagnosis of this mental illness when Phelps was writing, the disorder still manifested in analogous ways and begged much the same handling that it does today. Though trauma discourse emerged primarily from Sigmund Freud’s studies of World War II and the Holocaust, analyzing earlier texts through this lens offers valuable perspectives and new readings of earlier United States literature. And though this particular study remains grounded in the nineteenth century, sexual victimization and its psychological impact is in and of itself simultaneously transhistorical as well as culturally specific, making such a reading particularly productive.

That Nixy experiences PTSD because of her helpless feelings as an adolescent mother is evident perhaps most visibly in the moments and days just after she has given birth, during which she disassociates from her surroundings. At this time, her only friend, Lize, states that Nixy seems “crazed” (22), and Nixy’s doctor affirms that “had Nixy been an up-street wife, she might have been allowed the privilege of being ‘depressed’ under such circumstances” (23). As a poor, unwed girl, however, Nixy can only be referred to as having “the dumps” and her acquaintances ascertain that within only a few hours she had “cried long enough” (23). Though Nixy acts desperately in ways that even the doctor sees as abnormal and symptomatic of depression beyond the norm, she is not afforded the luxury of seeking any psychological help. Phelps writes that “Nixy had never had time to think,” but after having her child, “fragments of things” (16) came to her as she lay with her baby on her arm. Nixy hazily recalls a litany of abuses from her past that her current feelings appear to mimic. These disjointed images include an older man who forced her to call him “uncle,” being beaten by a woman whom she was “sold” to after that unnamed man tired of her, living on the streets and then in an asylum, working in a bar that probably doubled as a brothel, and finally facing “the cold horror of the last few months” (17). Nixy’s brain cleaves to these difficult memories from the past to make sense of her current circumstance. She is inundated with “visions,” talks nonsensically, and randomly points at her baby with an “expression, partly of loathing, partly of fear, which always came upon her face at the sight of it” (22),

as if identifying the child as the source of all of her problems. Yet none of her internal or external thoughts are “distinct enough . . . to understand” (22) and Nixy loses track of time, moving back and forth between the present and the past, then finally becoming absorbed in the comings and goings of the small apartment. Phelps says that in the “two weeks” (25) following the birth of her child, Nixy at last turns quiet, fixating on being in a lush, green countryside far beyond Thicket Street.

Psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman suggests that in the initial moments of trauma, many people experience “a state of terror,” in which “attention is narrowed and perceptions are altered. Peripheral detail, context, and time sense fall away . . . people . . . experience profound perceptual distortions, including insensitivity to pain, depersonalization, derealization, time slowing and amnesia. This is the state we call disassociation” (7). As revealed in the passages above, Nixy exhibits many of these symptoms after giving birth. Detaching from her situation, Nixy cannot interact or connect with anyone around her, including her child. Her sense of time widens and narrows disproportionately and she cannot recall past acutely; the past occasions she does remember are painful, yet she flits through them, disentangling from the emotions as they come to the surface. At one point, she even invites physical pain on both herself and her child, staying in the proximity of wet clothes that are flapping in a nearby window that “sometimes . . . struck [her] in the eyes and hurt her. Sometimes they struck the baby, and she wished that they would hurt him; he cried as if they did, and she was glad of it” (14). Nixy is simultaneously ensconced in the moment and also wholly outside of it, exemplifying the crux of the dissociative paradox in which some traumatic details are accentuated (i.e., her “loathing” and “fearful” response to the baby) and others are omitted (i.e., her communication with Lize and her doctor). While Nixy must progress from the moment of her trauma, like most sufferers, she often reverts back to this dialectical thinking, obsessing about her pregnancy and then banishing it from her mind, as if it never happened. Herman reveals that dissociative thoughts and behaviors often activate PTSD and recur throughout a victim’s life and that this link between the two reactions can be traced as far back as the 1890s, when Janet in France first coined the term disassociation. Further, as Herman discloses, “more recently, civilian disaster studies . . . have demonstrated that people who spontaneously disassociate at the time of the traumatic event are the most vulnerable to develop symptoms of PTSD” (7).

Yet Nixy is not beyond asking for help. She seems to recognize that her personal will is not enough to help her reach beyond her despair; she feels she needs outside support to recover her sanity. Ironically, though, what she cannot control, the judgment and lack of sympathy from the public, is what terrifies her the most. Though she is thinking in “incoherent and coherent snatches”

(15), her pleas for others' assistance, however hesitantly uttered, are crystal: "I s'pose you couldn't tell me what—to do—when I get out?"; she asked of [Lize], by and by, very slowly" (22). Lize, of course, knows as well as Nixy that an adolescent mother has only three choices in prevailing late nineteenth-century discourse: Nixy can murder herself and/or her child, resort to prostitution, or enter a reformatory for pregnant mothers. Understanding this utter lack of alternatives, Lize snaps at her friend's supplications, instructing Nixy: "Hold your tongue!" (22). Instinctively, Lize smarts at Nixy's question because she discerns that whatever she says will be insufficient to salve Nixy's all too understandable anxiety about her future. Herman suggests that restricting women's lives through social and sexual boundaries could very well induce psychological trauma, such as Nixy's, and adds that "We are now beginning to understand that the subordination of women is maintained not only by law and custom, but also by force. We are beginning to understand that rape, battery, and incest are human rights violations: they are political crimes in the same sense that lynching is a political crime, that is they serve to perpetuate the unjust social order through terror" (13). While it is unclear whether Nixy's child is a product of rape or consensual sex, the desire to maintain social order at any cost, even to the point that murder, suicide, and prostitution are deemed viable solutions by the community at large, prompted fear in adolescent mothers to the extent that pregnancy felt much more a trap than a joyous occasion. Even once a baby was born, bonding with the child felt impossible because young mothers were led to believe that any tenderness displayed between the two would only be met with derision by those around them. In her ramblings, Nixy mentions that she has reached the "depths," "the bottom," that she is "lonely—lonely" (22), descriptions denoting the terror that her condition has instigated.

Philadelphia physician John Parry perhaps best encapsulates the authenticity of Nixy's distress about her future after childbirth in an 1871 lecture in which he ruminates on the supposed interdependence of illegitimacy and infant mortality. This lecture, given at the Social Science Foundation of Philadelphia, appeared in a number of contemporary magazines, including the *Friends' Intelligencer*, and describes Parry's vision of the adolescent mother. "Clinging to her child," he observes, "she may struggle on amidst poverty and distress until, to obtain daily bread for both, she yields once more to temptation and plunges for a whole life-time into the dark vortex of sin.... That these mothers should destroy their offspring is not surprising" (n.p.). For Parry, prostitution and murder are expected companions of teenage mothers. Like many other middle-class nineteenth-century reformers, Parry proposed to create an institution to aid these "wayward children." Instead of offering a gleam of hope as another, less fraught option than murder or prostitution, however, Houses of Refuge, Houses of Good Shepherds, and Magdalen Asylums often provoked

just as much fear to downtrodden girls as tolerating a life on the streets for however long a single teenage mother could withstand it there.

Like Dr. Parry, Nixy’s fictional physician, Dr. Dyke Burtis, feels the best advice to alleviate his patient’s despairing mindset is to suggest that he help place her in a local Magdalen Asylum. Rather than feeling relief, however, this counsel triggers a “terrified” (26) reaction from Nixy. Though Nixy never expresses the precise details of why the mere mention of a reformatory activates such terror, she does reveal that she had lived in one prior and was horrified at the treatment therein. “I know all about your ’sylums,” Nixy tells the doctor, “I’ve been there.... I ain’t going from one prison to another so easy” (26-27). Late nineteenth-century reformatories targeted at unwed mothers were very much like prisons, as they dictated when their inmates could sleep, eat, and work. Nixy alludes distastefully to the “bells” and “hours for things” (18) she remembers from her time in the asylum, a place where criminalizing girls rather than empathizing with them was the norm. In such institutions, middle-class women reformers often felt the need to express distaste for lower-class neighborhoods and the young women that they were there to assist because of that long-held supposition that promiscuity could be contaminating. Purity advocates would scold and even turn out girls who did not transform their behaviors to match bourgeois mores, deeming the many who did not reform lost causes. Girls were expected to keep strict curfews and they could only perform work that was judged acceptable, such as needlework and other domestic arts, occupations that did not pay well in urban centers and could force already destitute young women to subsist on even lower standards than they had prior to entering a home. Nixy’s position as a waitress at Jeb’s “*Re*-spectable, *fust*-class dining-saloon for ladies and gentlemen of the cheapest kind” (34) certainly would not have made the list of acceptable vocations, hinting at one reason that “jails and ’sylums” filled Nixy with “dread” (18).

To fail to behave as moral reformers insisted was to invite treatment as a second-class citizen, to make oneself seem monstrous and unsalvageable. As one Magdalen Society founder declared of his female wards in 1827, “Little was to be gained where the moral sense was so totally depraved in most cases—returning like the dog to his vomit” (qtd. in Gilfoyle 84). A reminder of this type of treatment and a threat that it will happen again in part spurs Nixy’s disassociation when she is in the room with her doctor and newborn. Because she is accosted with “visions” of the time she spent at a reformatory, and “because she was frightened” at the doctor’s advocacy of returning to one, she becomes “sullen” (18), ignoring all that is around her and mentally closing off. Rather than expressing surprise at Nixy’s fear or trying to convince her that it is unwarranted, her doctor accepts her reaction as justifiable, though he has no other advice or relief to offer her. To help calm Nixy down at least

for the moment, Dr. Burtis alters his demeanor and treatment to become more “gentle,” and he makes no further reference to “jails,” nor does he “hint at ‘sylums” (18). Burtis recognizes the charged reaction Nixy displays once such places are brought up and chooses not to disturb her more than he must. Ultimately, Nixy’s pregnancy symbolizes for her all of the inevitable, negative outcomes her life is supposed to take now that she has given birth, and even the well-meaning doctor can predict nothing but tragedy ahead of his patient. His discussion of asylums only underscores the trauma Nixy’s pregnancy has prompted, as she realizes she has come literally to embody all of the evil middle-class reformers felt sullied their cities. After having lived in a reformatory for lost girls, Nixy would have no doubt psychologically imprinted the position middle-class reformers believed having a baby placed her in and her panic would not only be understandable but, more to the point, quite sensible.

The fear that these institutions generated was widespread and did not only apply to the fictional Nixy. Poor girls in urban areas, such as New York and Philadelphia, were often terrified that they could end up in asylums against their wills. Families, police, and even “well-meaning” strangers could decide to “uplift” rebellious or downtrodden youth by taking them to area reformatories. Nixy reveals that she was selling matches on the streets when a missionary “picked her up” and “lodged her” (19) in an asylum without her consent. In *Tramps, Unfit Mothers, and Neglected Children*, Sherri Broder affirms that asylums represented fear much more than hope for young women, explaining that in Philadelphia “Threats to commit a rebellious daughter to an institution scared more than one girl; at least one daughter ran away from home after her mother threatened to send her to the House of Refuge for keeping bad company. The knowledge that other girls in the neighborhood had been sent to reform institutions served as a warning to girls who were never incarcerated” (116). Institutions originally dedicated to helping young women became sites instead that victimized them. Because Magdalen Asylums and similar organizations came to maintain “social order” at any cost, it was all too easy for society to identify them, as Judith Herman notes, with carrying out terrorism that potentially resulted in trauma for the girls they imprisoned. Sympathetic observers acknowledged the distorting of reformers’ mission, perhaps represented in the character of Dr. Burtis in *Hedged In*, who felt the absence of these reformatories’ efficacy but could offer no alternatives for them (demonstrating that social constraints that often overwhelmed individuals’ empathy and perceived capacity to help others). In 1858, *The Monthly Record* of New York’s Five Points House of Industry concluded that the “efforts” of New York’s moral reform societies were “wrong-headed,” further intimating that although such societies were founded “for the laudable purpose of recovering



the wretched daughters of vice ... they carried on with so much more ... zeal than knowledge ... that they could hardly have any other effect than to draw new victims into the same terrible abyss” (qtd. in Gilfoyle 184).

Timothy J. Gilfoyle’s research on inmate population statistics for New York City’s Magdalen Asylums expounds that that girls feared and disliked these institutions and confirms the overall “limited impact of moral reformers.” Gilfoyle found that “At midcentury, in a city of half a million people and approximately six thousand prostitutes, the American Female Guardian Society’s Home of the Friendless had only 89 inmates.... The institution of Mercy in the Fourteenth Ward had a few more with 103 females. And the famed Magdalen Asylum in the Twelfth Ward boasted a mere eleven inmates, ranging from fourteen to twenty years in age” (184). Young women shunned these often hypocritical places of refuge as they felt the treatment there was degrading. In many cases, these young women preferred life on the streets to the discrimination of moral reformers, implying that this seemingly innocuous option for unwed mothers was not a viable alternative at all for girls who desired to retain any sense of self-worth and autonomy over how they and their children led their lives. After all, in the rare instances when young women were allowed to keep their children at an asylum (they were usually separated from them for an indeterminable period), their mothering skills were questioned and overruled by middle-class women who felt that they were more naturally attuned the needs of newborns, once again underscoring the mental abuse perpetrated within reformatory walls.

When Nixy runs away from Thicket Street with her son, she intuitively lumps her dread of asylums and prostitution together. Phelps writes that Nixy “found herself obliged to rest very often” because of her child, but “between the whiles she walked fast, now thinking she must put distance between herself and the doctor’s ’sylum; now between herself and Moll,” (Moll being a Thicket Street prostitute who tries to convince Nixy to work at her brothel and reminds her that “There’s ways of getting rid o’” her child [11]). Brothels, murder, and asylums conflate in Nixy’s head as pressing possibilities that have arisen from giving birth and as she flees her old neighborhood, she does so not going toward any known or previously conceptualized path. She merely treads forward in hope that in some “lighted, unspotted golden country” beyond her district a different future with “God’s people” somehow lay before her (18). Here, Nixy exhibits “avoidant behavior” common in previously dissociative PTSD victims, defined by “efforts to avert thoughts, feelings, conversations, or activities, associated with the trauma” (Carll 207). Because she cannot find a way to move past the social restrictions having a baby have placed on her, she hopes almost recklessly that a different place will produce a different outcome.

When youth like Nixy run away from the source of their trauma, however,

the journey to circumvent their problems often recreates the traumatic experience in new forms. On the road are constant threats to physical and emotional well-being that merely exacerbate old stressors and feelings of hopelessness and end up accentuating rather than delimiting signs of PTSD. As such, Nixy discovers as she aimlessly walks to somewhere different that the countryside does not offer more opportunities than were available in the city. In fact, one rural woman whom Nixy begs for work seems to channel the reform-minded women in urban centers, doling out advice but refusing to permit Nixy in her home, as she fears the pregnant teen might sully her reputation. Phelps writes that the woman became “anxious in the only way that presented itself to her vivid invention to ‘reform’ the girl;” she barks at Nixy “I suppose you know how wicked you’ve been” (52). While “wondering where she could spend the night,” Nixy dutifully acquiesces to the woman’s estimation of her, assenting that she is wicked. Here, it seems as if Thicket Street’s verdicts and constraints are inescapable, as once again Nixy feels endangered. She has nowhere to stay and her vulnerability to external circumstances once again results from her having given birth out of wedlock. Yet the would-be reformer does not direct her concern toward fostering Nixy’s survival, but rather in stroking her own feelings of piety. “Do you mean to be a better girl?” (52) she asks, waiting for Nixy to say yes. After receiving the answer she wants, she predictably closes her door to the young mother and child, believing she has done her duty by stressing to Nixy the error of her ways, though refusing any practical aid. Nixy, therefore, finds the same closed doors in the countryside that were in Thicket Street and she arrives at the conclusion that she must shirk the most prominent reminder of her past as well. “By degrees,” Phelps writes, “the baby became horrible” (52). Phelps foreshadows in this sentence one of most tragic outcomes of the trauma adolescent pregnancy could invoke in young mothers: without the means to support themselves and their families, unwed mothers could emotionally disengage from their children, beginning to perceive the child as the primary source of their problems.

In recent studies of adolescent runaways who consider the streets their home, having a sense of autonomy is crucial to accessing any inroad toward recovery. Elizabeth Carll, in *Trauma Psychology: Issues in Violence, Disaster, Health and Illness*, observes that pushing “youth to conform to ‘normal’ societal structures and expectation” is counterproductive because it sets up impossible standards wherein poor youth will fail who never had the opportunities to meet bourgeois guidelines (207). Reminding unwed mothers of their lack of morality and then restricting their actions because of their blackened pasts potentially only serves to remind them of the trauma of their pregnancy. Carll relays that rather than “toughening up” youth, recurring sequences of trauma in which control is taken away as a means of punishment, such as what Nixy experiences, “leads

to more severe and chronic posttraumatic stress reactions,” reactions that result in youth becoming “distrustful and guarded to protect themselves from further victimization” (208). Young people, therefore, often begin to have troubled relationships and feel disconnected from those with whom they otherwise might have developed a close bond. For Nixy, this stressed reaction manifests in the way she acts and feels toward her child. As she travels from house to house, her anger toward her child increases, as he serves as a daily reminder of the trauma she has experienced. She grows “very tired of the child” in that he is a living reminder of all that adolescent pregnancy has cost her. “If it wasn’t for the child, there’d be chances,” strangers tell Nixy (55). She finally demurs to others’ judgments, determining that “The baby was the mischief of it!” (55).

Nixy does not resort to murder to assuage her hurt, but instead leaves her child at the doorstep of a middle-class home. There, she believes he will receive adequate care, yet she does not spend ample time anticipating or considering his future well-being. For her, “one place was like another” (57), and she simply wanted to be “rid of the baby” (55). Her emotional detachment is a further symptom of her avoidance in which numbing herself to others allows her to survive in spite of her PTSD. Significantly, Nixy seems to realize that had the world treated her more respectfully, she might have felt more caring toward her child. As she parts with her baby, Nixy “made as though she would have kissed him but the inevitable sudden loathing, or something else, prevented her” (56). Deep down, Nixy wants to exhibit affection toward her child, but she suppresses her maternal instincts to ensure her personal livelihood. After all, without the baby it may be possible for her to obtain a position somewhere, which could enable her to get off the streets and feed and clothe herself. “Loathing” her baby secures her survival, so it is, as Phelps describes, an “inevitable” consequence of Nixy’s situation. Nixy feels she must care for herself first and foremost: “She had done by her own flesh and blood as the world had done by her. It seemed to this poor little mother rather a fair arrangement than otherwise” (58). Whereas most mothers would put their child’s safety and comfort above their own, sufferers of PTSD are often so preoccupied with their own grief that they cannot conceive of adequately caring for anyone else, even a child. In *Treating Psychological Trauma and PTSD*, John Wilson reveals that “unresolved feelings and grief” can lead to “self-absorption” (337). Nixy never considers her baby as a separate human being with needs that could surmount her own. She never names him, feeling he does not deserve his own identity beyond his relationship to her. Nor does she imagine that he should receive different or better treatment than those around her have given her.

In fact, four years later when Nixy is nineteen, outwardly reformed, and working as a teacher, her PTSD continues to refuse her the ability to love her child. Soon after Nixy abandons her child, Margaret Purcell, a Christian

benefactress finds the fallen girl outside of her home, takes her in, and resolves to redeem her. While the masses may have been entertained by the details of Nixy's going "to the devil," Phelps wanted them to understand just how trying Nixy's situation really was—that no matter how much Nixy wanted (and did) change, there was no way for her to redeem herself in most outsiders' eyes. Prior to finding Margaret, Nixy expresses that she is "puzzled" by the reactions she receives during her search to better herself: "She did not feel exactly stained. She did not feel like a bad girl. She had wanted to be good. But there [was] nobody to help her, 'no wheres, no folks'" (85). Nixy *can* turn her life around for the better and *wants* to; she simply needs someone like Margaret to take a chance on her. Yet in all of her inquiries for aid, Nixy only receives one proposal to help, as no one else viewed her as worth saving or savable. Margaret's successful rehabilitation of Nixy ran counter to the pervasive bourgeois myth that once a girl was fallen, she was forever relegated to the outskirts of middle-class respectability and that a single event in a young girl's life marked her as unfit to work, socialize, and even live amongst others who saw themselves as model citizens.

Yet even with Margaret's help, Nixy finds changing her attitude toward her child trying. She still "didn't care much" about her son even after "four years of piety and Margaret Purcell" (153), indicating that her feelings about her past and her child are still difficult to face. Nevertheless, she decides she must go "hunt it up," the non-loving referential "it" referencing her abandoned child. When pressed by Margaret, Nixy admits that she has "no maternal longing for it" and "no desire to see it—fondle it" (174). The mere mention of the latter affection toward her child makes Nixy "shr[i]nk all over, in that particular fashion of hers, like [a] sensitive-plant" (174). Following this involuntary reflex, she is assaulted with memories of the days before and after her childbirth, of "the miserable bed, the murder-stain upon the miserable wall, the miserable sights and sounds that had ushered her miserable infant into her miserable life" (174). As Cathy Caruth reminds us, PTSD is most evident when "the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them" (151). Nixy cannot overcome the emotional detachment between herself and her child because the mere existence of her child is so interlinked with her traumatic past.

The obvious question then becomes: why does Nixy feel the incessant, pressing need to go back for her child in the first place? Why could she not simply "forget" (172) it, as Margaret hoped she would when thinking of her adopted daughter's situation? The answer to this question can perhaps be found in the way in which Phelps believed unwed mothers could be properly reformed, namely in the type of ideal woman into which Nixy's transformation is attempting to turn her. In the years following the Civil War, the role

of American women had changed unalterably, as the war transitioned women outside of their homes and into the workforce. The Civil War had pushed women toward occupations, such as nurses, stenographers, receptionists, clerks, educators, postmistresses, and copyists, all of which had been denied them during peacetime. On both the Union and Confederate fronts, women had single-handedly maintained households and farms when their male relatives were undergoing combat, demonstrating that they possessed capacities well beyond domestic duties. There was, accordingly, a heated debate about how women should act and what treatment they should expect in the postwar years. Some upheld traditional values that exalted women’s roles as homemakers, with few ambitions beyond those tied to the household, whereas others wanted to continue making strides into political, intellectual, and social realms that had previously been the almost exclusive domain of men. Postbellum women were, on the one hand, moving toward the New Woman and promises of equity with men on every front, while clinging to the ideal of the True Woman and her time-honored promise of domestic and maternal bliss. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps straddled the middle ground between these contested stances, believing women did not necessarily need to get married and have children to be successful, yet nor did they have to rebel against social structures to the point that they forewent their roles as nurturers and warred against conventional notions of femininity merely to prove a point. In short, she believed women should embrace motherhood if they became pregnant, but they should not do so at the expense of being able to support themselves financially or absent of a husband, if they so desired.

Frances B. Cogan, in her book *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*, defines this middle-ground women such as Phelps espoused as “real womanhood.” She maintains that:

Survival under the ideal of Real Womanhood demanded that one do so as a woman, not as an androgyne, or “freak”; the advocates of Real Womanhood saw the latter as a degraded and unnatural province of feminism from which they deliberately distinguished themselves. Real Women survived but remained good daughters, good sisters, wives, and mothers because in their own eyes they were important to family and to society; they did not survive merely because they owed it to themselves alone to do so. (5)

For Nixy to avoid her child even after being reformed would be tantamount to confirming that, no matter what opportunities she was given, she still lapsed into that same moral iniquity to which society relegated her the moment she had sexual intercourse outside of wedlock. As Cogan elucidates, it felt imper-

ative for Nixy to portray maternal feelings toward her child, to show herself as properly feminine, to help battle the popular image of her as a sinful woman, yet another type of “freak.” Now that is not to say that Nixy needed to give up her autonomy and embrace her role as a mother at the expense of her survival. On the contrary, her ability to succeed and retain the position she gained as a teacher and upstanding member of her community relies, in part, on her demonstrating to those who question her that she can act in a maternal role to her child. Hence, Nixy feels she must find her child and give him a home, in spite of her inability to care for him, as she believes other mothers do for their children. She explains to Margaret, “I am his mother. Nothing can help that. I should not want to die and be asked, ‘where is the baby?’” (175). Nixy believes that—to borrow Cogan’s language—in order to “survive,” she must indicate to those around her that even though she has previously sexually transgressed and remains unmarried, she can still perform her domestic duties toward her child just as well as young women who were favored by a middle-class birth and upbringing. Nixy constantly compares herself to Margaret’s biological daughter Christina, thinking often that she is really no different than her friend, excluding the past sinful mar that separates them. Hence, Nixy feels she must prove to her community the two’s similarities by embracing her child as she believes they would expect Christina would her own, thereby signifying that her transformation into a “real woman” is complete.

However, even though Nixy has maternal instincts toward other children, the reminder of how her child came into the world prevents her from fully reforming into the type of person she wants to depict herself as to her community. Phelps sets the way Nixy feels toward her own offspring in stark contrast to her attitude toward the children she encounters at school. For instance, when Christina finds out about Nixy’s past for the first time, Nixy turns instinctively toward her students for consolation from Christina’s horrified reaction. One of her students, Little Beb, “kissed her ... and stroked her face. This was a great comfort” (185). Nixy is able to enjoy bonding with other children, whereas merely thinking of exhibiting affection to her own child provokes her to shudder. Further, the townspeople consider Nixy a “respected and valued instructor of youth” (202), indicating that she does not lack maternal instincts but that the memories her child recalls to her prevent her from opening up emotionally to him. Margaret highlights this split in Nixy’s personality when writing to a friend that Nixy’s “influence over her [school]children is a remarkable one. This has surprised me because she has exhibited so little instinctive maternal fondness for her own child. I have sometimes fancied that it was a conscious want of this which has made her so studiously tender of all children” (222).

Nixy realizes that to separate herself from her past in the eyes of others at least and to survive as a financially independent and still feminine “real”

woman, she has no choice but to keep up pretenses that she cares about her child. Otherwise, she risks losing her post and standing in the community. Bringing her child to her and showing outward affection toward him is a means of safeguarding herself against returning to a traumatic situation in which she could once again become homeless, destitute, and judged an aberration because of her past sexual transgression. In finding her child despite her own blasé feelings toward him, Nixy demonstrates yet another symptom of PTSD, hypervigilance (*hyper* = excessive; *vigilance* = alertness, watchfulness). When experiencing this symptom, “the individual is on guard and scans the environment for cues, signs, or situations that signify a threat or potential problem” (Wilson 28). After their first traumatization, PTSD sufferers watch for any sign of retraumatization in the same manner. Even after reaching an environment that may appear safe, they cannot necessarily accept that feeling at face value. Nixy rejoins her child to alleviate her fears that others may find out about him and perhaps threaten her. She feels she must convince her community that she is a caretaker in the way that other bourgeois women are. Though she can never bring herself to name her child, she accepts Margaret’s name, Kent, for him, a name that sounds pleasant but is without deeper meaning for Nixy. Kent’s name is surface-level, much as Nixy’s motherly actions toward him are. Phelps discloses that “In every maternal duty, [Nixy] was faithful to punctilious. . . . [She] never repelled, never neglected him. Yet sometimes when he climbed up into her lap and laid his little face against her cheek, ‘to love momma,’” there would be “an absence of all the little silly, motherly ways and words that happy mothers kiss into a baby’s opening life,” further relating that “sometimes when the child was asleep, [Nixy] used to sit and watch him with a certain brooding, unloving, yet very anxious look” (224). Nixy performs the motions of being a loving mother so others will see her actions, but she does not feel for Kent internally. Her anxiety is present when she is alone with the child in glances and long looks, as if she is considering whether the pain being around him evokes is worth the gain of preventing potential ejection from her position in the community. As a trauma survivor, Nixy’s biological conditioning leads her to believe that she should take any measures deemed necessary to avoid further pain, including feigning maternal affection. As Margaret notes sympathetically in a letter to an unnamed friend, “I did not know which to pity more, the child or the mother” (224).

Nixy’s inability to care for Kent because he reminds of her past trauma feels perhaps most tragic because she, too, desires a parental figure throughout her life and resents that her lack of a traditional family structure contributed to her sense of abandonment when pregnant. When she is lying in the tenement house after just giving birth, she laments to Lize that she was “nobody’s child” (16) and that because she was poor she never experienced the “fancy” (16) childhood

supposedly begets. In a discussion of adopted children, Florence Clothier, a Boston psychiatrist, says that growing up without knowing one's biological parents can indeed later aggravate feelings of isolation and abandonment. She reveals that "The child who does not grow up with his own biological parents, who does not even know them or anyone of his own blood, is an individual who has lost the thread of family continuity. A deep identification with our forebears, as experienced originally in the mother-child relationship, gives us our most fundamental security. Every adopted child, at some point in his development has been deprived of his primitive mother. This trauma and the severing of the individual from his racial antecedents lie at the core of what is peculiar to the psychology of the adopted child" (222). Effectually, the experience of giving birth heightens Nixy's feelings of detachment from the world and her child. After all, rather than having her needs met, Nixy is suddenly expected to be able to offer comfort and refuge to another, a near impossible task considering her youth, background, and the shame the public compels on her because of her pregnancy. Her most dire time of need amplifies her sense of isolation and her fears attach themselves to her young child who wants from her what she has never received. When Lize mentions that Nixy should love her child, Nixy replies, "I wish *I* had a mother. To go to now, you know, Lize. To take me in, mebbe, and help bear what folks say and all that. S'pose she'd be ready and willin'? I wonder if she'd kiss me!" (24). Nixy feels that a family, particularly a mother figure, would help her prevail over the depression and the stigmatization (i.e., "what folks say"). Because she is alone and without support, she merely continues a cycle of emotional abuse onto her child, unable to love him because his presence rekindles in her mind all she continues to lack as a fifteen-year-old girl.

Even though Margaret more or less adopts her, no matter long how she lives with the Purcell family, she never finds herself in a place where she feels completely secure. She never is consoled, as Clothier points out, by knowing her genealogical past or being in the proximity of others like her who wanted to protect her from harm. Nevertheless, the death of her child at least alleviates her worries about her traumatic past pregnancy jeopardizing her current situation and consequently erases the one, very public reminder of her transgressive history. Following Kent's death, Nixy is released from her fear of him and the damage he may cause her, able finally to acknowledge a bond between the two. "He looks like me," (229), she states simply, identifying for the first time a connection between them. Soon after making this observation and staring "restlessly" at her dead child, Nixy cries out, "My poor little baby! I might have loved it—might have—" (230). Yet her trauma never allows her to do so. Her painful memories cut more deeply than even maternal affection and Nixy appears to recognize that the two might have been a congealed family



unit had circumstances permitted them to love and be together without it imperiling their livelihoods. Neither Kent nor Nixy ever receive the sanctuary of a bonded family, however, a result of the disgrace Nixy experiences as an unwed teen mother.

Not surprisingly, for many contemporary readers of *Hedged In*, Nixy’s story seemed contrived. One reviewer of Phelps commented that “The people of ‘Thicket Street,’ even the heroine ‘Nixy,’ are too evidently projected from the author’s undue nervous consciousness—evolved, one might say, from an hysterical hallucination, in which the patient imagines herself different people. . . . The author is continually mistaking what *she* would do under certain circumstances, for what would be natural for her *heroine*” (*Overland* 484). Stated simply, Nixy is not an understandable character because it would be impossible for an adolescent mother to walk away on her own accord from a bad situation. Whereas a middle-class woman such as Phelps might be able to reason and desire a better future, *Hedged In*’s reviewers very much doubted that Nixy could desire one for herself or attempt to carve one out without the aid of supposedly more morally upright bourgeois “sisterhoods” (484). Another contemporary reviewer reinforces that Nixy is an aberration to the norm, assessing that “such girls as these are not often in an age born in the terrible haunts of poverty and sin, and such a jewel rarely sparkles before the wandering eye of the patient seeker among the lost for those whom Christ came to save” (*Christian Advocate* 124).

While reviewers may have had to “confess a feeling of disappointment in Miss Phelps” (*Overland* 484), it is doubtful that Phelps herself was surprised at the criticism her book received. Through Nixy’s character, she advocated that adolescent mothers were worthy of reform, that they could outgrow their pasts and move beyond the pain and trauma that their pregnancies incurred both within themselves and within their communities. Without the public’s support, however, these girls would be doomed to repeat the same sad story over and over again, never able to see a way out of their tragic circumstances. Phelps believed that that public stubbornly “hedged in” Nixy and others like her because they did not want to face their own faults. Phelps during the 1870s was a public champion of what she believed were the most pressing women’s rights issues and she published frequently in the in *The Independent*, the leading venue for feminist voices in the late nineteenth century. In fact, a year after *Hedged In*’s release, she made her passion for the cause clear to John Greenleaf Whittier, writing to him that “I am, as perhaps you may suppose, almost *invested* in the Woman’s Cause. It grows in my conscience, and perhaps my enthusiasm, every day” (qtd. in Kelly 12). Phelps hoped that through Nixy’s story, readers might perceive their own sins—that Nixy’s life might stir people’s emotion in such a way that they would reconsider their treatment of fallen young women

and that they would offer faith in these girls' abilities to change and give back to their communities rather than persistently chastising (and, in essence, re-traumatizing) them for pasts that could never be erased.

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