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BYU Honors Program Thesis Proposal

Fall Semester 2018

Wretched Little Ones: A Novel

STATEMENT OF INTENT

For my thesis, I plan to complete a novel using the skills I have learned while taking Honors Program classes and studying news media, creative writing, and women's studies. In my novel I want to explore the tension between the ideas of female independence and traditional female gender roles and expectations. Being open-minded about these two ideas will help me avoid taking and preaching a certain position in my story.

The novel will follow the story of 19-year-old Samantha Rothwell, a young woman who comes from a wealthy family living in rural 1910s New England. Up to now Samantha has lived a regular life with her parents and younger brother, preparing for marriage and motherhood. Samantha finds love and is engaged to be married to Kearin McCard when disaster strikes for the Rothwell family. The couple's wedding gift (a hefty sum of money) and much of the Rothwell family's money goes missing. Kearin reveals to Samantha that he has become involved in an organization at his men's college that is a cult-like gambling ring, and that it was him who stole the family's money in an attempt to settle his debts with some of the ring's leaders. To save her family's reputation, Samantha goes through with the marriage to Kearin so she can return with him to the gambling ring and try to win back the Rothwell family money and ensure that her family is not left destitute because of Kearin McCard's actions. What Samantha learns from the men (and women) inside the gambling ring is that her family has a long, complicated history

with the ring and its leaders. This challenges her to rethink her identity and eventually leads her to take her fate into her own hands and become an independent person.

The story in my novel, though fictional, has relevance for today's American society. American women have been and continue to be on the move. Following the Women's March on January 21, 2017, *The New York Times* reported that approximately over 500,000 women attended in Washington, D.C. alone (and Washington was only one city of several in the United States that participated in the worldwide event) to protest the 2016 election of President Donald Trump (Hartocolis). In October 2017, the #MeToo and Time's Up movements erupted when actress Ashley Judd came forward accusing Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment (Kantor). Since then, numerous men in positions of power in industries such as politics, news media, and sports (as well as others) have been publicly accused by sexual harassment and assault survivors. Some have been fired or tried in court (Johnson).

These two cultural events are evidence that America's women are speaking up about gender specific issues, such as sexual harassment and political policy that could challenge their freedom. In terms of everyday life, women still have gendered issues to be solved. Pew Research Center found that though women make up 47 percent of the labor force and are now more likely than their male counterparts to have a four-year college degree, the average woman is still paid 83 cents for every dollar a man makes. Additionally, women only make up 20 percent of U.S. Congress and, as of 2017, only 5 percent of CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies. Yet, Pew found, half of Americans say that the U.S. hasn't done enough to give women equal rights to men, and 57 percent of American women in particular say the same thing (Geiger). Though my novel is not set in 2018, it will allow the reader to see how far America has come with women's rights since the first-wave feminism period (which encompasses the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries) and hopefully prompt its readers to reflect on just how far women still have to go to claim their power and equality to men. I would like to note, however, that as a journalism student, I know how important it is to be aware of my own biases and worldviews and work to represent multiple views on an issue. My goal with this novel is to explore the complexities surrounding society's changing expectations for females, including the different viewpoints and opinions that accompany this issue. I don't want to pointedly cheerlead for one side over another.

Once I have completed and polished the draft of my novel, I will work with my faculty advisor, Professor John Bennion, to carefully select a few chapters that best explore the main themes, ideas, and significant plot developments in my novel. I will then critically analyze my novel to identify where it fits in with the history of the women's rights movement of the early twentieth century and how it is relevant today in light of the current women's movement. I will also examine other aspects of my novel like my writing style and themes and compare it to both contemporary and early twentieth century authors I strive to emulate. The selected chapters and written academic analysis will make up the entirety of my thesis submission.

EXTENDED DESCRIPTION

Historical background for the novel. Because my novel is a piece of historical fiction (though the events in the novel will not be based on actual events), I am developing the understanding of history that I need to accurately write about Americans living in the early twentieth century. In nineteenth century Victorian America, women were expected to adhere to what was called the cult of domesticity. This societal idea championed four main virtues--religious piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness--as necessary for a woman who existed in her appropriate sphere, the home. Historian Barbara Welter wrote that men were taught that if they could find a

pious woman to marry, all would be well (Welter 152). Purity was encouraged, though the naturally sensual male gender might attempt to take it away. Women were seen as powerful and lauded for saving men from themselves if they resisted the advances of a sensual male (Welter 154-155). True women at this time who had the virtue of submissiveness were expected to always be passive and accept what life handed them. “A wife who submerged her own talents to work for her husband was extolled as an example of a true woman” (Welter 160). One 1848 publication even encouraged women to put up with abuse from their husbands (Welter 161). In order to abide by the virtue of domesticity, women were expected to create needlework, treasure flowers, and nurse the sick in their homes back to health (Welter 163-165). All of these things were believed at the time to increase a woman’s power and influence, but as Welter writes in the beginning of her article, these so-called “virtues” left a woman as “the hostage in the home” (Welter 151). Because these virtues were so valued in the Victorian era, a young woman coming of age at the turn of the century, as my main character (hereafter referred to as Samantha) does, would have grown up with parents who likely valued and perhaps even perpetuated some of these ideas.

However, as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth century, things began to change. In general terms, it was the Progressive Era in an America that was also going through the Gilded Age. Americans were working to enact social and political reform. Women did not sit idly by at this time; for example, Susan B. Anthony created the Woman’s New York State Temperance Society in the mid-1800s and the Grimke sisters were writing to entreat their fellow women of the south to join them in standing against slavery as active abolitionists (Political 445446).

Out of these movements, women began to fight for their own rights. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, two American women, organized the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, where women (and men) gathered and heard Stanton read the Declaration of Sentiments, which contained the famous line, “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal” (“Declaration...”).

Women’s expectations for themselves were changing as well. Women who embraced the idea of the “New Woman” entered adulthood between 1890 and 1920 and challenged Victorian gender norms like the cult of domesticity (Rabinovitch-Fox). “The image of the New Woman varied according to class, race, age, and ethnic differences. In fact, it represented a variety of feminine types ranging from the Gibson Girl to the bohemian feminist, the suffragist, and the flapper...” (Rabinovitch-Fox). English New Woman novelist Sarah Grand wrote about the New Woman in her 1894 essay “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” listing a plethora of things women had, up to this point, endured at the hands of men. For example, she wrote that men have “deprived us of all proper education, and then jeered at us because we had no knowledge” (*The American Woman* 31). She concludes her list with this: “The truth has all along been in us, but we have cared more for man than for truth, and so the whole human race has suffered” (*The American Woman* 31). With traces of the cult of domesticity lingering and the age of the New Woman dawning in America at this time, a woman like Samantha Rothwell would likely face hard questions about who she was and what her role in society as a woman was, so my writing will reflect this.

It makes good sense that women were ready to turn things around at this time. Early on in American history single women had more rights than married women--they could be part of a jury and vote. But when women married, their rights and belongings—clothes, wages, dowries,

inheritance, sexual freedom—then belonged to their husbands (Frost 1-2). Women began entering the labor force, many working in textile mills, though at this point the working conditions and wages were abysmal (Frost 5-6). As the twentieth century began, progress had certainly been made. In 1900, a little over 58 percent of America's high school students were female and 40,000 women were in college (Frost 267). In many states, women could now own and manage their own wages and property (Frost 267). Women's suffrage, however, wouldn't be made possible until 1920.

Because Samantha's parents are traditional and obviously of the older generation, she would have seen the ongoing struggle for women's rights and freedoms as she observed the interactions between her father and mother and grew up learning about the events of the last hundred or so years. Looking at what was happening in the early 1910s, when the novel will take place, Samantha would have heard about women going on strike for better working conditions (Frost 287). The first women's suffrage parade also took place at this time in New York City in 1910. Samantha would also hear about the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in 1911, in which 146 women died because the doors to the building were locked (to prevent women from leaving during working hours) and the fire safety measures were inadequate (Frost 289). This would have been a disaster that the Rothwell family would have known about and the issue of suffrage would have been a current topic of interest around the dinner table and at social events. Prominent suffragist figures such as Carrie Chapman Catt and Susan B. Anthony, as well as the organizations they were involved in, like the National American Woman Suffrage Association and the International Council of Women, would have been well known and talked about at this time as well. All of these factors, then, from her traditional, older parents to the movement for women's rights, would play a role in how Samantha sees herself as a daughter, a wife, and

ultimately as a woman who has to fend for herself in this novel. One of the biggest moments in the novel where this pull between these influences will be explored is when Samantha marries Kearin McCard. Despite being in love with Kearin and her preparation for the traditional roles of wife and mother, Samantha will have to take a step back and see her husband as the man who stole from her family and turned their world upside down. She will need to decide to either fill her traditional roles or forge a new path, which will cause inner conflict for her.

There are few other important things to note as background for my story. Samantha's father, Oliver Rothwell, is a prominent figure in their New England community. He owns a textile mill and employs many women. As mentioned above, more and more women had begun seeking employment outside of the home in industries like these, but working conditions were a large concern. Oliver Rothwell would have to deal with the reaction his workers and community would have to women's labor strikes and the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire. How he handles this as a man who has lived through much of the nineteenth century would affect how his family members, especially Samantha, see women's issues.

A large part of my novel will deal with the gambling ring that Samantha's husband will be sucked into. In mathematician Joseph Mazur's book, *What's Luck Got to Do With It*, the history of gambling in America is laid out. Gambling was prohibited in the early U.S., but the pastime of actually made its way up the United States from New Orleans. Riverboat gamblers tested their luck as they sailed up and down the Mississippi (Mazur 46). Many cities called off the gambling prohibition during the Civil War; the activity spread like wildfire across the country. Mazur describes late nineteenth century gambling houses in New York. At one high end gambling house called Morrissey's, visitors were well dressed and wealthy. They "frequented the plush rooms night and day to drop tens of thousands of dollars at a turn" (Mazur 50). They could also

expect free fancy food and wine. Because the McCard and Rothwell families are both wealthy, I can use this information to start building a gambling ring that will reflect the gambling atmosphere for the wealthy in the early twentieth century.

Mazur also deals with the psychology of gambling in his book. Because Kearin McCard's gambling addiction is essential to the conflict in my novel, it is important to understand how he gets so addicted. There are multiple theories about gambling addictions. Mazur writes that the most recent research shows that "PET scans of pathological gamblers show increased levels of dopamine during play and even more substantial increases during high-risk, high-stakes playing" (Mazur 199). Compulsive gamblers are, in this way, similar to drug addicts and alcoholics (Mazur 199). The American Psychiatric Association has this to say about compulsive gamblers: "People with gambling disorder often hide their behavior. They may lie to family members and others to cover up their behavior and may turn to others for help with financial problems. Some gamblers are seeking excitement or action in gambling, others are looking more for escape or numbing" ("What is"). This information will contribute to Kearin's character development and, as I continue to learn more about the psychology behind his gambling addiction, help to set him up to steal the Rothwell family's money.

Literary context and academic analysis of my novel. The second part of my thesis submission will be my academic analysis of my novel. In addition to looking at how my novel fits in with the history of the first-wave feminism period in which it is set and how it is relevant for readers today given our current women's movement, I will also look at how my writing fits in with the themes from some literature of the early twentieth century, how my novel fits in with contemporary literature, and which writers influenced things like my style.

As I envision the full plot of my novel, I foresee the themes of my finished work fitting in with stories from the overlap of both the realist and naturalist periods of American literature. I predict Samantha will be comparable to characters created by Kate Chopin and Theodore Dreiser. While I have not yet read *The Awakening*, I have read “The Story of an Hour” by Chopin. In this short story, Mrs. Mallard is told that her husband has died in an accident. She is distraught until she realizes the freedom that she will now enjoy because she is no longer tied to her husband. Her attitude toward this freedom is apparent in one line: “There would be no one to live for her during those coming years: she would live for herself” (Lawn 57). At the end of the story, however, Mr. Mallard returns home; he hasn’t been killed after all. At this shocking news, Mrs. Mallard dies instantly from heart issues. I think that my characters will fit in with Chopin’s characters because I see a similar sentiment from “The Story of an Hour” echoed in Samantha, who will eventually learn to live for herself and take advantage of her own personal freedom instead of living her life completely hitched to a man (or a society that values man over woman). For this reason, I plan to read *The Awakening* and identify more similarities between my novel and that novel, which showcases the main character’s progressive views about women’s issues. I am also interested in reading *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser, a novel about a young woman who sets out to achieve her own American dream. I want to see how Dreiser’s protagonist compares to Samantha. I am also interested in comparing how Chopin and I write about women to how Dreiser writes about women. I am curious to see what differences there are because of the genders of the authors and the generational difference.

I am also interested in the work of Virginia Woolf. Though Woolf was a modernist, I am interested in reading *A Room of One’s Own* because of its ideas about a space for women. I think it would be interesting to compare early naturalist and realist writers’ portrayals of women with

later texts to see if anything changed for both women in literature and society. I think this would help me better establish the context for my own novel.

In that same vein, I would like to compare the ideas in my book to the ideas in F. Scott Fitzgerald's stories. He was obviously a writer in the Jazz Age and a member of the "Lost Generation." However, I think the way that he portrays women and marriage in his work is fascinating. Specifically, in his 1922 novel *The Beautiful and Damned*, Fitzgerald walks his readers through the lives and marriage of New York socialites Anthony and Gloria Patch. The story actually begins in the 1910s and follows the couples on through World War I and into the Roaring Twenties. Gloria Patch, the female protagonist in the novel, is described as "darn nice--not a brain in her head" (Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful* 29). Later Anthony Patch remarks that because Gloria doesn't have a brain, "she must be pretty good" (Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful* 41). When he finally meets her, the following description is given: "She was dazzling--alight; it was agony to comprehend her beauty in a glance" (Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful* 48). For the entirety of the novel, beauty is Gloria's most important characteristic. Even she recognizes this: "In the end, her beauty was all that never failed her. She had never seen beauty like her own" (Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful* 339). Between alcoholism, extreme materialism and financial issues, and this view of Gloria, the marriage between the two characters becomes toxic. Toward the end of the book there is a scene where Gloria tells Anthony she loves him. He tells her to leave the room and she responds with "Hit me!...Oh, hit me, and I'll kiss the hand you hit me with!" (Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful* 385). This is a shocking, anti-feminist scene that only adds to the rest of the misogynistic views of Gloria throughout the novel. I think it would be interesting to analyze how Fitzgerald's work, which came after the naturalist and realist periods, fits in with earlier writers'

work (like *The Awakening*) and also identify how my experience as a woman in the twenty-first century makes my writing of women different than someone like Fitzgerald.

Though I am interested in examining literature from the time period in which my own novel is set, I am a contemporary writer creating contemporary historical fiction. Because of this, I will compare my work to contemporary novels. Some of my favorites are *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, and *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* by Mary Ann Schaffer and Annie Barrows. Each of these novels have a female protagonist and are set in a different time period (and *Guernsey* and *The Book Thief* are set in Europe), but I think examining how my novel fits in with these books will help in my critical analysis of my own story.

Another thing I want to examine at the end of my thesis process is who I write like. I truly admire the writing of F. Scott Fitzgerald. I love the beauty and musicality of Fitzgerald's language. When you read his work, you can feel how meticulous Fitzgerald was in picking out each word. Consider these sentences from *The Great Gatsby*: "He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God..." (Fitzgerald, *The Great* 110-111). Another writer I admire and would like to emulate is Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*. I look to Shelley's debut novel as an example of a story that is vivid and shocking and memorable. Writer Fiona Sampson wrote that Mary Shelley "changed the face of fiction...she forced open the space for herself in which to write..." (Sampson 249). I strive to be like Shelley and defy the norms of fiction and what is expected of women writers. I also admire Agatha Christie for her ability to create explosive plot twists. I want to learn the art of surprise and incorporate it into my own story. As I complete the *Wretched Little Ones* manuscript, my hope is that I can include beautiful language,

carve out a space for myself as a forward-thinking female writer, and surprise my reader with my plot and characters.

TIMELINE

-I plan to meet with Professor Bennion for every 50 pages completed of my novel. -I will finish my complete novel draft by November 30th to give myself time to work on revisions.

-I will have my novel and academic analysis ready to submit by February 1st, to allow for ample time to schedule my thesis defense, have my committee read my submission, and revise as needed.

-I will schedule my thesis defense prior to the February 22 deadline.

-I will defend and submit my thesis before March 1st.

Preliminary Works Cited

Note: All annotated sources are documents I plan to research. Citations without annotations have been used in this proposal.

Aldrich, Nelson W. *Old Money: The Mythology of Wealth in America*. Allworth Press, 2005.

One gap in my knowledge is an understanding of how wealth and inheritance functioned within families in the early twentieth century, especially for women. I plan to use this book to become more familiar with the functioning of wealth in early twentieth century America and get an idea for what wealth will look like for the Rothwell family in my book. After all, it is because they are wealthy that Kearin McCard steals from them.

Baym, Nina. *Feminism and American Literary History: Essays*. Rutgers University Press, 1992.

This is a collection of essays dealing with feminism in American literature. One essay is about how theories of American fiction exclude women. Another is about feminism and teaching literature. I think this collection will inform my academic analysis of my novel and give me more of an understanding about how women and feminist ideals are represented in our country's literature.

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

As I mention in my proposal, I plan to compare my novel to Kate Chopin's work. Because *The Awakening* is about a woman who has unorthodox views about a woman's place in the world, I am interested to read it and compare Chopin's plot to my own. I'm

curious to see how Edna Pontellier (Chopin's protagonist) and her attitudes compare to Samantha Rothwell.

"Declaration of Sentiments." *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, 26 Feb. 2015, www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/declaration-of-sentiments.htm.

Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.

In Dreiser's novel, Caroline Weeber sets out for the big city and the fulfillment of her American dream. She later becomes a successful actress. I plan to read this book and compare it to my own. I am particularly interested to look at how a man writes about women differently than a woman would.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Beautiful and Damned*. Vintage Classics, 2010.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner, 2004.

Frost, Elizabeth, and Kathryn Cullen-DuPont. *Women's Suffrage in America: An Eyewitness History*. Facts on File, 1992.

Geiger, Abigail, and Kim Parker. "A Look at Gender Gains and Gaps in the U.S." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 15 Mar. 2018, www.pewresearch.org/facttank/2018/03/15/for-womens-history-month-a-look-at-gender-gains-and-gaps-in-the-u-s/.

Gorham, Deborah. *The Victorian Girl and The Feminine Ideal*. Routledge, 2014.

As I continue to create Samantha Rothwell as a character who is surrounded by both old and new ideas about femininity and women's rights, I need a stronger understanding of what her mother, Abigail Rothwell, was expected to be as a woman as she came of age. Learning more about the Victorian expectations for women will help me illustrate the strength of Oliver and Abigail's older views and how they influence their daughter.

Hartocollis, Anemona, and Yamiche Alcindor. "Women's March Highlights as Huge Crowds Protest Trump: 'We're Not Going Away'." *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 21 Jan. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/01/21/us/womens-march.html.

Johnson, Christen A., and KT Hawbaker. "#MeToo: A Timeline of Events." *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago Tribune, 19 Sept. 2018, www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-me-too-timeline20171208-htmlstory.html.

Kantor, Jodi, and Megan Twohey. "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades." *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, 5 Oct. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassmentallegations.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=storyheading&module=a-lede-package-region@ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news.

Lawn, Beverly, editor. *40 Short Stories: A Portable Anthology*. 5th ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017.

Longstreet, Stephen. *Win or Lose: A Social History of Gambling in America*. Bobbs-Merrill, 1977. This book is geared specifically toward American gambling. Though it fascinates me, I am not very familiar with gambling. This book focuses primarily on the average amateur gambler and describes different ways Americans have tried their luck over the years. By reading this, I can come to better understand what the gambling world was like in the early twentieth century and what sort of games and stakes would have been involved in a gambling ring like the one Kearin McCard participates in.

Mazur, Joseph. *What's Luck Got to Do With It? The History, Mathematics, and Psychology of the Gambler's Illusion*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

Munting, Roger. *An Economic and Social History of Gambling in Britain and the USA*.

Manchester University Press, 1996. This is another book that will help me to get a grasp on what gambling has been like through history. This is important for me to know because, as I mention above, Samantha will discover in the novel that the Rothwell family has deep (and dark) roots in the gambling ring Kearin McCard is involved with.

Political and Historical Encyclopedia of Women, edited by Christine Fauré, et al., Routledge, 2004. *ProQuest Ebook Central*,

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/byu/detail.action?docID=183243>.

Rabinovitch-Fox, Einav. "[RE]FASHIONING THE NEW WOMAN: Women's Dress, the

Oriental Style, and the Construction of American Feminist Imagery in the 1910s."

Journal of Women's History, vol. 27, no. 2, 2015, pp. 14-36,194. ProQuest,

<https://searchproquest-com.erl.lib.byu.edu/docview/1689848825?accountid=4488>.

Sampson, Fiona. *In Search of Mary Shelley: The Girl Who Wrote Frankenstein*. Pegasus Books, 2018.

The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930, edited by Martha H. Patterson,

Rutgers University Press, 2008. *ProQuest Ebook Central*,

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/byu/detail.action?docID=358313>.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly*, vol. 18, no.

2, 1966, pp. 151–174. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2711179.

Whalan, Mark. *American Culture in The 1910s*. Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

I need to understand what it was like to live in the 1910s if I am going to write about it.

From this book I plan to get a better idea of what clothing, music, food, pastimes, and

homes were like at this point in American history.

"What Is Gambling Disorder?" *American Psychiatric Association*, American Psychiatric

Association, 2018, [www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gambling-disorder/what-](http://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gambling-disorder/what-is-gambling-disorder)

[isgambling-disorder](http://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gambling-disorder/what-is-gambling-disorder).

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Macmillan Collector's Library, 2017.

This is another book I want to use to inform my academic analysis. Though Virginia Woolf is a modernist and her work is not quite within the scope of realism and naturalism that I am looking at in the 1910s, I think her ideas about women's roles will be helpful as I compare my book to other literature around this same time.