

The Emigrants:
An American Utopia in Kentucky
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Gilbert Imlay's epistolary novel *The Emigrants* (1793), though little known,¹ has several immediate claims to fame: as one of the first novels in American literature, as one of the earliest American works propagandizing backwoods settlement, and as one of the earliest American novels to reflect the sensibility characteristic of much English and French literature in the eighteenth century but not typical of American literature until the nineteenth century. At a time when thinkers in England, on the Continent, and in America looked to North America² as the place for the establishment of an ideal world of political, economic, and religious freedom, the novel—clearly utopian in nature—describes the beginning of an ideal community of 256 square miles in Kentucky on the Ohio River, “the model of a society” in which good citizenship, honorable relationships, and families thrive (155).

The analytic study of the utopian tradition has tended to be censorious until the twentieth century. Despite the popular view that a utopia is “an ideal or flawless state” offering its inhabitants as much freedom and happiness as possible (Frye 31), many critics have wondered about the “impoverished” literary imaginations that have allowed great “evils” to remain in even the most promising of utopias (Mumford 10). They have emphasized that “the distance between the positive ideal and the negative one was never so great as the advocates or admirers of utopia” believed (Mumford 9). However, by the 1960s literary critics suggested that utopias are invaluable to the social sciences, and it is not surprising that Susan Love Brown's 2002 study of intentional communities is subtitled “An Anthropological Perspective.”

Imlay's *Emigrants* is a valuable work not because it offers an impressive plan for a utopian community, but because it reflects contradictory impulses, thinking, and literary conventions of the 1790s. Readers are often puzzled by directions the narrative takes and agree that the novel justifies Peter Ruppert's comment that utopian fiction cannot be judged by “standards of logic, consistency and coherence” (24). In addition, they recognize that a supposedly liberating text can itself become “oppressive . . . constraining and manipulative” (Ruppert 73). However, published in a period of visionaries, Imlay's 1790s perspective offers the kind of composite that anthropologists welcome as “one more tool for the analysis of culture and society,” (Brown 175) even though, as Susan Brown explains, the “shrewd observation” and “attempt to genuinely solve a perceived problem” in communitarianism “is more an intellectual blueprint than a plan of action” (5).

The Emigrants' blueprint sketches out liberating political views that compare depraved life in England with a free, just, and moral life in Kentucky. It describes in great detail the difficult issue of the relationship between the individual and society, asking what a person should do when he or she believes the laws of society are based in "the opinion of the world" rather than "the principles of morality" and thus are in conflict with the laws of the honorable human heart acting in accordance with "the eternal truths of morality" (126). Who, in other words, determines right thinking? defines institutional strictures? When does individualism become anarchy? It advocates the domestic relationship as the basis of a moral society and approves divorce in abusive marital situations. At the same time, however, there is a pervasive sexism and classism in Imlay's "New World": an upper-class cultural homogeneity of strong, independent men and often helpless, ornamental women that appears to undermine the emphasis upon individualism and education.

The underlying political, economic, social, and gender assumptions of *The Emigrants* are strongly influenced by four often-contradictory forces: (1) the eighteenth-century philosophy of sensibility, with its belief in the natural goodness of human nature and its encouragement of an exquisite sensitivity to beauty and goodness that will inspire moral lives of duty, friendship, and magnanimity; (2) the views of the Pantisocratists Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who favored intuition and approved natural and spontaneous feeling in efforts to establish freedom through reform of government and social institutions; (3) the "radical ideas on love and marriage associated with the [eighteenth-century] feminist movement" (Hare v); and (4) the stylistic conventions of the popular sentimental novel, such as flowery language and stock conventions like the fainting heroine, the damsel in distress, the melodramatic villain, and the gallant savior. The novel suggests that Imlay was very aware of the currents of his age, but either incapable of sorting and directing those currents into a viable utopia or so focused upon the "miseries" and "misfortunes" of women in abusive marriages (Preface v) that he relegated other issues and principles, identified both in his Preface and the novel, to secondary positions.

No doubt the greatest conceptual difficulty Imlay faced was the fact that the eighteenth-century worlds of sensibility, of the Pantisocratists, and of the sentimental were, of necessity, elitist and sexist, while the expressed utopian goals of the emigrants who settled at Bellefont, Kentucky, were human rights and virtue. Thus, readers today quickly note that despite the emigrants' harsh indictment of England's system of rank and privilege, there is little suggestion in the novel that the utopian community in Kentucky is one of equality and democracy. Despite the radical view—even for the twenty-first century—that individual conscience and rights are superior to governmental and institutional tyranny, there is little suggestion (except in the area of divorce) that North America is a land where people of different traditions, different classes, or differing values will realize themselves in their own ways. Rather, the upper-class emigrants' tradition of *noblesse oblige* necessitates the care and guidance of the rough and uneducated poor by the educated, cultured, and sensitive. The ultimate goal—if one is good rather than evil or corrupt—is a single, well-defined, and upper-class value system and culture. Further, there are no vital and independent females in Bellefont's male-dominated society with its beautiful and fragile women. Only the occasional disagreements engaged in or described by the letter writers offer dialogic exchanges in the novel; and those exchanges are quickly resolved, either by a discordant writer's realization of her or his error or by a character's decision to return to England and the "old ways" undervalued in the new settlement.

Structure

Through the seventy-three epistolary exchanges of its nine narrators (five male, four female), *The Emigrants* offers a discussion of the economic, political, and especially the social principles necessary to provide humans with the freedom and human rights necessary to assure moral virtue and cultural development. It focuses particularly on the domestic relationship as the basis of human growth and happiness.

The long letters—a short letter usually means a crisis has occurred—narrate the activities of the characters' days but primarily discuss social and political issues that emerge from a concern for the suffering of people, especially women, and from a comparison of values and institutions in England and the nascent United States, where it is hoped the quality of life can improve for all. Some of the letters become strong, passionate ideological debates; and the exchanges are such that I am not sure many friendships or family relationships today would survive the disagreements, especially when one writer is criticizing the values or behavior of another. That these values are not to be mere abstractions is made clear by Caroline's uncle, P. P---- Esq., who explains "that it is not the fine precepts of moralists, or the elegant and patriotic declamation of the statesman, that constitutes the good or virtuous man." Virtue—at least in America—is not "a mere profession of words" (114).

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the main and definitive spokesman on moral and political issues is Caroline's uncle. That he is given this role is very significant since P. P---- Esq. has been ostracized by English society because of his love for a noble woman miserably trapped in an abusive marriage. Clearly, then, the underlying thesis of the novel is that the rights of the moral individual are superior to those of religion or government; that is, institutions should be limited by individual rights. In supporting that view, other letter writers—especially Capt. James Arl----ton and Mr. G. Il----ray, the founders of Bellefont, and Caroline—also define the potentially noble nature of human beings and consider what kind of physical environment and culture offer a supportive context in which men and women can most successfully realize their true natures, that is, their goodness and right thinking.

The utopian vision of the novel is clarified by the letter-writers' discussions of principles of individual and communal behavior necessary for a moral and happy society, such as self-respect, personal integrity, good education, and freedom from long-established but unnatural customs. In addition, the steps that must be taken to put such principles into practice are outlined. The goal of society must be to protect every individual's rights, rights given by God long before the formation of governments. These rights can guarantee freedom of thought, education, morality, financial stability, and domestic accord; and the lives of the novel's main characters, who have either thrived or suffered under decadent European customs and laws, make it clear that these steps must be taken *immediately*.

The central family of *The Emigrants* is that of Mr. T----n, formerly "an eminent merchant" in London (5), whose financial ruin has necessitated his emigration to America. The lives of his four children illustrate the social and political issues discussed in the letters of the novel. One of the most frequent letter writers, his seventeen-year-old daughter Caroline, is courted by Capt. Arl----ton and engages in lengthy dialogues with her uncle, who guides both her moral development and her courtship by Capt. Arl----ton. An infrequent letter writer, his daughter Eliza is unable to leave England until the end of the novel when her cruel husband, whom she has been unable to divorce, commits suicide. His daughter Mary, who does not write letters but is quoted at length by Mr. Il----ray, eventually returns to England, rejoicing to return from "the wilds of a desart [sic]" (7) and "vulgar multitude" to "good breeding" (224), splendor, and

pleasure. His son, George, largely ignores his family's situation and writes no letters: his decadent, spendthrift style of life in London is largely responsible for his father's ruin, but over time he converts to the ideals of the Kentucky settlement.

Depravity and Natural Virtue

The nature of the economic, political, and social ideals envisioned for the Kentucky settlement at Bellefont grows out of the belief that individuals must use their right reasoning to guide moral conduct and oppose the institutional and cultural norms—especially in England and even more so in France—that have created misery for so many in both financial and personal areas of life. It becomes clear that both institutional reform and cultural change must occur in the Kentucky “model” community in America, “the asylum of all unfortunate people,” according to Caroline (55), “the asylum of the victims of poverty,” according to Miss R---- (57).

Europe offers the “fashionable life” (210), a fashionable life in which “extravagance of . . . desires” overleaps “the bounds of common prudence” (222) and always leads to “depravity” (108) and “dissipation” (35), sometimes to bankruptcy or “beggary” (142). Even for the financially secure, the more their “artificial wants” increase, the more degenerate they become the more “a general commercial spirit” prevails (223). To the utopians, Europe offers a life in which “tumultuous pleasures . . . destroy that lively sensibility which characterizes the rational and innocent heart” (108). But to Caroline's sister Mary, England is “that dear place . . . where every thing is enchantment” (224), where she can be “an ornament to a drawing-room” (20), where her brother George can indolently live a life of “folly and dissipation” in the “first and most fashionable circles” (30), where “virtue [is] a word of mere sound, without meaning” (224).

To the utopians, it is not simply the artificiality, materialism, and licentiousness of England that destroy the character, the moral fiber, of humans. The very institutions of government destroy the individual in two ways. Government creates a world of duplicity: the monarchical form of English government with its system of rank and privilege fosters adulation, servility, and affectation, not to mention venality and loss of self-respect. As men become more successful and “polished,” they become more insincere (223). Mr. Il---ray, Capt. Arl---ton's best friend, argues that “the noble energy of man has degenerated, and the contemptible arts of pleasing by flattery and deception have taken [the] place of . . . open and ingenuous conduct” (221). Thus, he declares, “the tyranny of governments has laid the foundation of European depravity” (221). Further, institutions of government and church discourage—indeed require—humans to stop thinking for themselves. Mr. Il---ray defines the “melancholy truth” that “the priests and courts of Europe, have been in league to subjugate the human mind” through institutional opinion and dogma (221).

Rights of the Individual

The basic and first principle of the utopians, as defined by P. P---- Esq., is the right of the individual to determine the moral guidelines of her or his life, following what has been called natural law in the Early Modern period or the “inner light” by members of the Society of Friends. P. P---- Esq. writes to his seventeen-year-old niece, Caroline,

The first aim of society is to protect every individual in the enjoyment of those absolute rights with which they were invested at the *creation*—which were not only antecedent to the formation of states—which are not only paramount, but which are immutable, and cannot be revoked or abridged by any tribunal [church or state] upon earth . . . (106)

These rights are “the gifts of GOD, of which no human power can deprive us” (106). This principle is defined for Caroline as her uncle explains why his behavior when he supported and fell in love with the married Lady B---- had not been immoral or dishonorable. Lady B---- had been cruelly mistreated by her husband; thus, Caroline’s uncle had used right reasoning, superior to “the prejudices of the world” (104), superior to the guidance and rules of societal institutions, in comforting and helping Lady B----. Caroline must understand, he writes, that there is “material distinction” between “honour . . . founded on the opinion of the world” and honor “derived from self-esteem . . . fixed in the eternal truths of morality.” The honor of “self-esteem” follows the “undeivable obligations that result from the nature of our very existence, and the relation of life, whether to our *Creator*, or to our fellow creatures . . . the only criterion by which we are enabled to estimate the purity and judgment of any human being” (105).

Caroline’s initial reaction on learning of her uncle’s behavior is that he has been imprudent and, even worse, has disregarded the honor and reputation of Lady B---- (95). She writes that his defense of his behavior is “ingenious sophistry” (109) because people give up “part of their liberty” when they enter society. Her position is that people must conform to the laws “the community has thought proper to establish” for the communal good (101). It is only several letters later—after the seventeen-year-old Caroline has learned much more about Lord B----’s cruel treatment of his wife and of Lady B----’s ill treatment by her own parents—that she is convinced by her uncle’s argument. She then apologizes for her “immature age” and inexperience (131) and acknowledges “the fetters that have been so ingeniously contrived to subjugate the human mind.” The exchange of letters between niece and uncle illustrates one of the major points of the novel—the importance of education for the young—and establishes P. P---- Esq. as the primary educator of the novel. A more educated Caroline now “clearly” realizes “the difference between principles, which have for their basis, our unalienable rights, and those which are grounded upon the opinion of the world” (154).

Rights of Women

Establishing the principle that the individual’s sense of right and wrong must transcend the stipulations of the institutions of society is necessary for the letter-writers’ debate on the main social issue of the novel: the oppression of women through the institution of marriage. P. P---- Esq. describes the most anti-feminist position against divorce when he summarizes Lord B----’s argument that “the *tranquillity of society depended upon the tyranny* which should be continually exercised over [women], otherwise a female *empire would destroy every thing that was beautiful, and which the talents of ages had accumulated*” (89). But the novel abounds with statements in which individuals declare their moral beliefs are at odds with the institutional oppression of women.³ Mr. Il----ray notes that “the most lovely women have been neglected by men” (237); “embraces of elegant women have been bartered for” (237); and “no reciprocity [exists] in the laws respecting matrimony” (32). P. P---- Esq. asserts that “the barbarous codes of a savage world, have continued to oppress and restrain the acts of volition on the part of women, when the most licentious bounds on the part of men, have found impunity from the prejudices of the world” (114). Sir T. Mor----ley writes that women are “considered in the light of property, and not as beings to whom we owe everything, and to whom we are indebted for every felicity worth enjoying” (252). This institutional inequity is demonstrated to be especially harmful in the several plots of the novel that emphasize the importance of the domestic relationship and especially the three marriages in which women are treated barbarously—Eliza’s husband even proposing her “prostitution” to “a nobleman in power” (301).

But the novel's utopian concern for women focuses primarily on women in abusive marriages, rather than a careful consideration of women's social, economic, and political condition in the late eighteenth century. Thus some readers consider *The Emigrants* a dystopia rather than a utopia. The novel does stress the importance of education for both men and women, arguing, like William Godwin, that errors in judgment and behavior can be rectified by education. But Caroline's uncle writes at great length about the requirements of education for a young boy and writes nothing about the education of girls. Capt. Arlinton gives as an example of bad education and vanity in the female the assumption of an unattractive woman that she is, in fact, beautiful; in the male, the assumption of an untalented man that he is, in fact, talented. Caroline, praised throughout the novel for her gift of conversation, argues that education for women must change, that they who "have been taught to talk of dress and the things of our day" must "burst bands of prejudice" and study the areas of science and nature. But even she describes these additional areas of knowledge as necessary for the "colloquial charms" of women (78).

The novel also recognizes the sexual nature of women, even declaring that young women should not be forced to marry older men who cannot sexually satisfy them and that widowed or divorced women should be allowed to marry again. It may even suggest—the passage is unclear—that Caroline and Capt. Arlinton live together without a formal ceremony of marriage. (All of the other couples do formally solemnize their relationships.) But *The Emigrants* assumes all women will marry. No letter writer argues that a woman could have an interesting or significant existence outside of, instead of, or in addition to a domestic role. "An amiable woman," Caroline explains, "is formed for the soft endearments of domestic felicity" (132). Women, writes Mr. Ilray, were created by the "*goodness of Providence*," with all that beauty, softness, tenderness, "brilliancy of sentiment, and vivacity of mind which is necessary to polish [men's] manners, and sooth us in the lap of elegance and love, to a forgetfulness of all our mortifications" (31). Such beauty prompts the (male) lover's soul "*to act its noblest part*" and "*wakes Ambition's flame*" (31-32). Clearly, woman's "noblest part" is to inspire men; women are without ambition.

But the novel also offers what Barbara J. Berg calls "the monolithic creed of the woman-belle ideal" (4). It not only suggests an education that fosters social charms rather than aesthetic, economic, or political abilities and defines a future in which happiness equals a tranquil domestic relationship; it also endorses and dramatizes a world where the "true" woman is identified by her goodness and "exquisite sensibility" (88) and where she is too fragile (physically and psychically) to function in society without the assistance of a male protector. The sensibility and delicacy of a woman, several narrators explain, necessitate the male's "protection and utmost care" (32). Frequently the honorable gentlemen rise in pride or anger to protect one or more women—occasionally from the actual physical danger of an Indian attack, most often from the verbal insult of an unthinking man or of an insensitive suitor. Caroline's elderly uncle explains that he is "still strong in the feelings of honour" and if a man has said anything to Caroline incompatible with her "delicacy or sentiments," his "feeble arm shall chastise the wretch" (80). On another occasion, he declares any man a "poltroon" who does not offer his "protection and support" if "the feelings of an unprotected woman have been violated, and she insulted" (88-89). Chastity and modesty are the basis of any woman's reputation. They are equated with honor and once lost—whether in actuality or simply by misleading appearances—cannot be recovered. The honorable man, of course, has as one of his chief duties the protection of every "reputable" woman's reputation. The woman herself must remain passive, waiting for the male to defend or intercede.

Physically, too, the women are incredibly delicate. Caroline is admired for her “animation” and “surprising [sic] activity or motion” (173); she inspires awe because, unlike any of the other women in the novel, she regularly takes long walks, accompanied by a female companion. But fainting, even for Caroline, is a familiar occurrence. She faints when she sees two Indians; she faints when she sees the man she loves. (Since modesty requires that the woman’s role in courtship be entirely passive, however, her faint is explained by the fatigue of travel.) Eliza faints when she receives a letter saying that Caroline has been kidnapped by Indians; she explains that she was “electrified by that fluid, which so suddenly rouses the senses of a woman, when a thought strikes her, in which her delicacy is concerned” (161). And this female delicacy affects the very nature of the marital relationship. Even though Eliza defines a good marriage as one in which husband and wife confide in each other, Gen. W----, a man whom the novel portrays as a very good man and a good husband, explains that in some delicate matters he does not confide in his wife. He has developed “a maxim . . . to avoid touching upon opinions that may lead to domestic uneasiness” (153) whenever he judges that such confidences can do no good.

Thus, the novel’s assumption of physical and psychic fragility in women creates a mode of living in which the female is almost totally dependent upon the male. Such an assumption also, of course, limits the world of the text to the cultured and rich, people benefiting from the advantages of being at the top of a class structure. The discussion of the letter writers makes it clear that considerable “substance” is necessary to support the “delicacy and elegance” of the female, this substance depending almost entirely upon the male’s inheritance or his own ability to create a small fortune. P. P---- Esq. is precise in explaining that an amiable woman requires for her domestic bliss certain “social pleasures” (98)—the company of others who are “sensible and intelligent, and possess all the social virtues” (247), witty conversation, frequent dinners, games of picquet, occasional turns in the garden or arbor, and long hours of leisure to write letters or read such writers as Shakespeare and Rousseau.

The influence of the sentimental novel clearly complicated Imlay’s portrayal of women in *The Emigrants*. While describing their right to a tranquil domestic life, Imlay also employed many of the stock literary conventions of the day: the fainting heroine (Caroline faints three times), the damsel in distress (Caroline is kidnapped by natives), the patient and suffering wife (Eliza, Laura, and Lady B---- are abused by their husbands), the wicked sister (Mary actively works to break up Caroline and Capt. Arl----ton), the melodramatic villain (Laura’s husband), and the gallant savior (Capt. Arl----ton, who rescues Caroline). Such a ready-made idiom and form can be amusing for the reader in 2006, but are aberrations in a serious utopian scheme and an account of a rural farming settlement like Bellefont.

Classism

Even readers who argue that *The Emigrants* cannot be dismissed as a dystopia simply because it defines gender views that are considered sexist today are troubled by the elitism or classism of the novel. There is no question that Capt. Arl----ton and Mr. Il----ray intend to welcome and provide opportunities to the disadvantaged: theirs is to be “an ideal or flawless state” (Frye 31) offering the less fortunate land and leisure, freedom and happiness. But the greatest conceptual difficulty Imlay faced in defining a settlement of democracy and equality was the elitism of the principles of sensibility and sentimentality that he also embraced. The individuals creating a utopia at Bellefont are from the privileged classes of England and America. They are men and women of sensibility, the men with the “warm benevolence, and delicate

sense of dignity and honour which is characteristic of a man of principle” (241), the women with “all the graces of person and mind, which nature and the embellishments of education can furnish” (7). They are among the (few) cultured gentlemen and ladies of English society who have not been corrupted by the laws and customs of England and of the Eastern coast of America; are aware of the innate rights of the individual; and intend to devote their lives to principles of behavior (societal and domestic) that safeguard those rights. In addition, they are advocates of a lifetime of reading, studying, and conversation. Their early education and later leisure have been focused upon the cultivation of the kind of deep sensitivity to beauty and goodness that inspires moral lives of duty, friendship, and magnanimity. These are the qualities they bring to the establishment of a “model” society on some 256 parcels of land intended for family men who are to be politically active and also cultivate the right reason, moral virtues, and dignity associated with land ownership and leisure.

Most of the settlers at Bellefont are former soldiers of the Revolutionary Army and their families. Some one hundred families have already received tracts of land before the founders move to Kentucky. (Capt. Arl---ton has reserved six parcels of land for himself and his friends, but the text is not clear about either the size or location of these parcels.) Every male twenty-one or older is eligible to vote for a house of representatives, the governing body of the colony. Each is also eligible to serve in the house of twenty members who will meet weekly (on Sundays) to consider measures “to promote the encouragements of agriculture and all useful arts, as well as to discuss upon the science of government and jurisprudence” (233). The house will elect a president who can serve for only one year and not be eligible to serve again for seven years. Thus, unequal heritages will be eased; economic and political opportunities will be equal; ongoing social and intellectual development will occur; and rotation of power will be assured. In addition, the settlement will not have slavery; its goal is “equality.” As Mr. Il---ray explains, only with equality can “men . . . regain their pristine sincerity” and thus eliminate the “base arts” of flattery and sycophancy that have caused such inequities and hardships in England (223).

Despite the fact, however, that the former Revolutionary soldiers will each own his own tract of land, there is an insurmountable gap between the founders and the other settlers. The handful of officers who served in the Revolutionary War may, like the emigrants from England, be men of sensibility with gentlemanly refinement; but, as Alexander Hamilton once declared in a letter to John Jay, “Let the officers be men of sense and sentiment . . . the nearer the soldiers approach to machines the better” (17-18). Capt. Arl---ton expands that view when he writes to Mr. Il---ray that one of the reasons communities like Bellefont are necessary is that “the bulk of mankind have been the mere machines of states” (235). The community, then, is only theoretically one of equality. Most of the settlers have yet to be formed according to the principles of sensibility. Capt. Arl---ton hopes that “[s]mall societies” like Bellefont can begin a process “to soften the manners of the vulgar, correct their idle and vicious habits—extend their knowledge—ameliorate their judgment—.” Such a process—if successful—can “afford an opportunity to every genius or man of sense” to become “useful to his country” (235). Before the end of the novel, Caroline’s uncle is already busy at Bellefont, teaching “appropriate knowledge” to the former soldiers, many of whom had served under Capt. Arl---ton. P. P--- Esq. is very pleased that at Bellefont the “benefits of society may be extended equally to every description of men” (247). Caroline herself pays regular visits to the wives of the former soldiers and instructs them in “various and useful employments . . . to promote their comfort” (235). Thus, men and women of privilege—and sensibility—are working to transform more typical “Americans,” those whom Benjamin Franklin referred to as the “masses.”

The letter writers—British emigrants and British-Americans of social status—do not address the gap that exists between them and the other settlers, nor do they appear to realize their assumption of superiority and the condescension that denies equality to the settlers whom they plan to elevate. In Pittsburg, early in the novel, the newly-arrived Caroline had commented about the “Americans” around her: “many of the citizens are amiable, and possess the most exalted virtues.” She admits that Pittsburg does not have the “charms” of London, but it has other kinds of “charms” and “here every thing is new” (53). At Bellefont, when she is trying to persuade her sister Eliza to join them, she writes that the founders have “a great number of neighbours, *independent of our select society* [emphasis mine], who are sensible and intelligent, and possess all the social virtues in an eminent degree.” She tells Eliza with wonder that her husband is busy with farming. In fact, she writes, he “does great part of it with his own hands” (247). She then adds that James returns home at eleven a.m. for refreshment and devotes “the remainder of the day to different employments” (247) without, apparently, any understanding that farming tends to be done with one’s hands and that the other former-soldier-settlers do not work only for a few hours before turning to “different employments.”

The very figure of P. P---- Esq. is a statement of the impassable gap between the yeomen and the gentlemen. When the novel opens, P. P---- Esq. has been separated from his sister and her family for years. While in Pittsburg, Capt. Arl----ton and Caroline encounter “an old man” who Caroline says has “something” about him that bespeaks “the manners of a gentleman” (27), even though “his garb and employment” are “that of a yeoman” (56). Some months later, of course, the T----n family discovers the old man is Mrs. T----n’s lost brother. It is clear that the yeoman’s “garb and employment” cannot possibly hide a true man of sensibility who has had the advantages of education and upper class living in England; yet the utopians do not seem to realize that, from the opposite perspective, the yeomen of Bellefont cannot, in Robert Southey’s words, discuss metaphysics while cutting down a tree, critique poetry while chasing buffalo, or “write sonnets whilst following the plough” (72).

Imlay’s Bellefont encounters one of the major problems that led to the break between Southey and Coleridge in planning their pantisocracy. The settlement includes the shared property and representative government that Southey and Coleridge advocated, but the nature and backgrounds of the people as well as the issue of labor become a problem. Ideally, in the Pantisocracy the men would work about three hours a day, with the remainder of the time spent in philosophical study and debate and appreciation of art and beauty. Southey, however, believed that the community would need slaves, or at least laborers. He tried to rationalize the issue of equality (since equality was one of their ideals) by writing, “Let them dine with us and be treated with as much equality as they would wish—but perform that part of labor for which their education has fitted them” (114). Coleridge believed that having servants was incompatible with the egalitarian ideals of the Pantisocracy. He declared, “To be employed in the toil of the field while we are pursuing philosophical studies—can earldoms or emperorships boast so huge an inequality? Is there a human being of so torpid a nature as that placed in our society he would not feel it?—a willing slave is the worst of slaves—his soul is a slave” (qtd. in Malachuk).

But clearly Imlay’s visionaries ignore the problems Southey and Coleridge debated. Although Bellefont does not have slaves, it is unlikely that Caroline, Eliza, or Mrs. W---- plan to give up their maids. The former Revolutionary soldiers farm all day, even though they may relax among their neighbors in the evenings, and their education is limited by its appropriateness. Over time P. P---- Esq. could become

quite offensive in his certitude about his own right thinking and his belief that others should “imitate the examples” he sets as he works to transform them (156). Tom Poole, one of Coleridge’s friends who admired the idea of a pantisocracy but thought it impossible, defines the problem for, perhaps, all utopians: if they could realize their vision, “they would, indeed, realize the age of reason; but however perfectible human nature may be, I fear it is not yet perfect enough to exist long under the regulations of such a system, particularly when the Executors of the plan are taken from a society in a high degree civilized and corrupted . . .” (“Coleridge”). Part of the corruption of the Bellefont founders, I’m afraid, is a lack of awareness that they have established a two-tier system similar to the system they have criticized in England. The utopians have a sense of intellectual and cultural superiority, even though they are willing, even anxious, to share their values and beliefs with all; and the settlers, receiving their land and their “appropriate” education from advantaged gentlemen and ladies, will naturally experience some degree of loss of respect. Bellefont creates the very structure of “dependants” and “superiors, or men in power” that Mr. Il--ray had argued led to degeneracy in England, given “a general venality” in humans and the “adulation” and “servility” natural to “subordinate orders of men” (223).

Further, the utopians do not appear to realize that their own personal needs are not being met and the very underpinnings of their own values and accomplishments may be endangered. The education P. P---- Esq. and Caroline offer the settlers is “appropriate” (235) and “useful” to the settlers’ “comfort.” The emphasis appears to be upon the practical and material, with no suggestion of general cultural or spiritual development. When Caroline writes that she and her husband often partake of “the gaiety and festivity” of their neighbors, who dance “to the rude music of the country” and “seem to have forgotten all their troubles” (247), she acknowledges the gap between the operas and concerts of Europe and the “rude” music of “America” and also approves an escapism at the end of a day of manual labor. The goal may be a kind of panacea in America, the “asylum for the unfortunate,” but missing are the reading, thinking, and conversation of *individuals* who are *searching* to define and establish a virtuous society of freedom, equality, goodness, and beauty. The idea of individual conscience and rights also appears lost in a colony that does not encourage, or even allow, different traditions, classes, or values. It is true that P. P---- Esq. plans to build an assembly house, large enough for all of the settlers, in order that “the people will be edified by hearing what passes,” but it is also clear that speakers will be censored. Capt. Arl----ton, for example, writes that itinerant preachers whose religious ideas disturb “domestic felicity,” spread “ignorance,” and darken the intellect and reason will not be allowed (234). And there is no question that P. P---- Esq. will have equally strong views on who should or should not be heard. Thus, the utopian scheme has itself become oppressive. Utopias tend to build in “safeguards against radical alterations” of their structure (Frye 31).

Utopian Southern Novel

The Emigrants is clearly an exemplary utopia—with its inconsistencies and contradictions and its commitment to important social, political, and economic ideals but neglect of equally significant ideals. It is exemplary for its successes and failures, juxtaposing a “new way of life with the old one that is the object of the critique” (Brown 174) while at the same time creating a way of life that includes limiting, oppressive, even “evil” (Mumford 155) characteristics. Ruppert notes the irony of every utopia: “it unmasks existing ideology as contradictory but then masks the significance of this recognition” with its own ideology “that pretends to be the end of ideology” (73).

Such texts will always be valuable to those interested in analyzing culture and society because they offer a blueprint for “mechanisms through which large state societies change” (Brown 175); and even if the carefully sketched text fails to conceptualize an ideal or perfect world, it does visualize possibilities (Frye 31).

The Emigrants is more than a utopia, however. It is also a neglected early Southern novel whose characteristics support the assertion that many nineteenth-century and modern Southern novels have strong utopian tendencies. Set in Kentucky, *The Emigrants* anticipates many of the characteristics now identified with the Southern novel. Place is important as a love of the natural (even “wild”) world in which the artificiality and decadence of society do not impede virtuous development of the human mind. Bellefont is a farming community, with an agrarian life committed to “the quality of individual life” and “the more spiritual side [definitely not the material side] of a good, full and happy life” (Rubin xiv). Emphasis is upon the family as the center of society and upon communal living, with work and play enveloped in “a leisure” that permits “the activity of intelligence” (Ransom 12). In this world, the “amenities of life . . . consist in such practices as manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family life, romantic love—in the social exchanges which reveal and develop sensibility in human affairs” (Rubin xliii).

Capt. Arl--ton, Mr. Il--ray, and the older P.--Esq. are exemplars of the Southern gentleman, men of honor and integrity, with a deep sense of *noblesse oblige*. This tradition includes an assumption of inequality and privileged orders and necessitates the care and guidance of the rough and uneducated poor by the educated, cultured, and sensitive, with the ultimate goal being a single (stratified) value system and culture. It also identifies Southern gentlemen as guardians and protectors of the exemplars of white Southern womanhood—Caroline, Eliza, and Laura—with their pleasing natures, elegant manners, and “divinity of soul” (21).

In 1860 an article by A. Clarkson appeared in *DeBow's Review* asserting that “the Southern States were settled almost entirely from the better and more enlightened classes of Great Britain and France” (10). The “gallant, high-spirited, chivalrous, and generous race of the pure Anglo-Saxon blood” (9), these Southern Cavaliers, this planter aristocracy, represented a culture superior to that of the morally deformed, materialistic, and ruthlessly competitive Yankee. Further, the “intellectual development” of these Cavaliers “was then not surpassed in Europe, and their moral culture was at least equal to that of their age” (9), with “the only true, civil, or religious freedom that now lives in the world” to be found in the South (11). This culture included “chivalrous devotion to the weak and helpless female” and “generous and manly protection of her” because of woman’s “moral and social mission,” a “sphere assigned her by God”: “she is the great moral agent that lifts [men] above the brute creation” (13). Except for the inclusion of slavery, Clarkson’s 1860 description of the superiority of Southern communities in the United States could have been written by Imlay’s 1790s utopians.

Endnotes

1. In 1964 Robert R. Hare argued that Mary Wollstonecraft is the author of *The Emigrants* in his Introduction to the University of Florida Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints edition. In 1975 Emily W. Sunstein mentioned Hare’s claim in her Wollstonecraft biography and stated that Wollstonecraft clearly “had a hand in sections of the book” (238). Janet M. Todd found merit in Hare’s argument in her 1976 bibliography of Mary Wollstonecraft. Davidson supported the idea of Wollstonecraft’s assistance in 1986. In 1971 P.M. Penigault-Duhet argued in an article in *Etudes Anglaises* that Helen Maria Williams, a close friend of Mary Wollstonecraft and perhaps a lover of Imlay, collaborated with Imlay.