



## Article

# “The Mighty Meaning of the Scene” Feminine Landscapes and the Future of America in Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*

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**Abstract:** Like many of her contemporaries, Margaret Fuller had great hopes for the West. The Western lands, open for America’s future, held the promise of what America could become. In *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller sketches what she hopes America will become. Using the landscape aesthetics of her age, such as the work of Andrew Jackson Downing and the Hudson River School of landscape painting, Fuller describes the ideal landscape as one that is more feminine and nurturing, one in which humankind lives in harmony with nature. Fuller’s landscape descriptions both point to a better future for America and critique the values of her contemporaries. Fuller contrasts America’s more male vision of conquest of the land with her feminine ideal of harmony with nature—a cultivated garden—to show what America’s future should be, as it builds westward.

**Keywords:** Antebellum American Literature; Margaret Fuller; Hudson River School; Andrew Jackson Downing; landscape; travel writing

## 1. Introduction

Like their contemporaries, American Transcendentalists viewed the West as a landscape full of possibility, symbolizing America’s destiny as a nation with a glorious future. In her illuminating treatise on the Transcendentalists and their work in the developing West, [McKinsey \(1973\)](#) notes that for many Transcendentalists, the West symbolized not only the freedom they could not find in the stifling environment of Boston, but also prophesied all that America could become. The idea of the West was rife with millennial expectation. While most Americans saw in the West possibility for economic growth and land development, the Transcendentalists envisioned a land where a new, vital religion would develop ([McKinsey 1973](#), p. 16) and social reform would occur. The opening and development of the West symbolized the beginning of a new age. Transcendentalist William Henry Channing, like other Transcendentalists, went West to Cincinnati expecting to find there the fulfillment of his millennial hopes ([McKinsey 1973](#), p. 41). Giving voice to the millennial expectations of many people of his age, Channing wrote in 1840, “We see a progress in the past history of our race; we feel that a mighty power of good is stirring now in our society; we believe in the coming of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup>

As a Transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller also held great hopes for America’s future in the West. Not content with the narrow-mindedness, inequality, social injustice, and materialism she saw in American society, she hoped that the West would offer a better future.<sup>2</sup> The West was fertile ground to

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in [McKinsey \(1973, p. 41\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> A great deal of scholarship exists on Fuller as a reformer. Some useful works include ([Fleischman 2015](#); [Blanchard 1987](#); [Chevigny 1976](#); [Robinson 1982](#); [Capper 1987](#); the essays in [Bailey et al. 2013](#); [Fleischmann 2000](#)).

germinate the seeds of a greater, more just, open-minded, and educated America—an America that would fulfill its destiny as a nation. Yet she was also aware of the materialism that drove America's quest for progress in the West. As Brigitte Georgi-Findlay notes, "Fuller distinguishes between an ideal West, represented as nature, and an actual West, figured as a provincial, anti-intellectual, materialist social space" (Georgi-Findlay 1996, p. 45). While she could see the Edenic possibilities in the West, appreciate the beauty of nature, and dream of a time when humankind would be concerned with the true aims of life, she also realized that for many Americans, Eden was simply another place to turn nature into a commodity, as she noted in a letter to her friend, Mary Rotch, several months after her trip West: "Surely I never had so clear an idea before of the capacity to bless of mere Earth, merely the beautiful Earth, when fresh from the original breath of the creative spirit. To have this impression one must see large tracts of wild country where the traces of man's inventions are too few and slight to break the harmony of the first design.—It will not be so long even where I have been now; in three or four years those vast flowery plains will be broken up for tillage, those shapely groves converted into logs and boards" (Fuller 1983, vol. III, p. 169).<sup>3</sup>

Her work, *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*, details her trip through what is today the upper midwest and her impressions of the landscape and its people. Yet, unlike other travel narratives of her time, Fuller does not write of the inns, the food, and the literal lay of the land, and she does not give guidebook tours of popular places such as Niagara Falls.<sup>4</sup> Fuller's brother, Arthur Fuller, in a Preface to an edition of her works after her death, notes that Fuller is among a class of travelers who truly see more than their contemporaries. These travelers discern "a genius or guardian spirit of each scene, each stream and lake and country, and this spirit is ever speaking, but in a tone which only the attent ear of the noble and gifted can hear. With vision which needs no miracle to make prophetic, they see the destinies which nations are all-unconsciously shaping for themselves, and note the deep meaning of passing events which only make others wonder" (Fuller 1856, pp. iv–v).

Fuller herself writes of the aim of her book as one of impressions rather than facts: "I have not been particularly anxious to give the geography of the scene, inasmuch as it seemed to me no route, nor series of stations, but a garden interspersed with cottages, groves and flowery lawns, through which a stately river ran. I had no guide-book, kept no diary, do not know how many miles we traveled each day; nor how many in all. What I got from the journey was the poetic impression of the country at large; it is all I have aimed to communicate" (Fuller 1991, pp. 41–42). In *Summer on the Lakes*, therefore, Fuller attempts to discern the meaning of the West, "to woo the mighty meaning of the scene," (Fuller 1991, p. 18) offering her readers the "poetic impression" of the place. Fuller weaves together threads of the real and ideal to create for her readers what she envisions to be the true meaning of the West and its potential.

Fuller's view of nature and America's future has been discussed by a number of scholars, most notably Annette Kolodny in her seminal text, *The Land Before Her* (1984), who examines Fuller's depiction of landscape and the plight of women in the developing mid-west. Other scholars, such as Baker (1998, 2010), Malachuk (2014), Newman (2005), Elbert (2016) and Brehm (1999) have discussed Fuller's landscape descriptions as reflecting her ideology and views of American identity. While Baker (1998, 2010) in particular argues for the importance of vision and landscape in *Summer on the Lakes*, none of these scholars has analyzed Fuller's landscape descriptions in relation to the visual arts. Fuller's use of the elements of contemporary landscape painting are essential to conveying her views of what America can become.

Like other travel writers in the nineteenth century, Fuller describes the landscapes she sees in vivid images, drawing upon the conventions and ways of seeing of the picturesque traveler.<sup>5</sup> Fuller

<sup>3</sup> Letter dated January 1844.

<sup>4</sup> Many scholars have discussed Fuller as a travel writer in *Summer on the Lakes*. See (Tonkovich 1993; Stowe 2002; Birkle 2003).

<sup>5</sup> For more detailed discussions of the picturesque and picturesque travel, see (Gilpin 1792; Price 1810; Conron 2000; Robertson 1986; Breseson 1968).

employs an iconology of landscape, invoking images of the American landscape popularized in paintings—including those by Hudson River School painters and later by the Luminists—as well as gift books in order to construct her ideals about the lands of the mid-west and America's future. Through her painterly landscape descriptions, Fuller conveys her political and social vision of America, and projects for her readers the kind of place she hopes the West, and America, will become—a kind of new Eden on earth, one that is more feminine in growth and development. In this sense, her landscapes are also a metaphor for the nation as a whole—the land symbolizes America's condition and its potential. At the same time, Fuller uses these descriptions to critique the kind of progress and materialism she sees in the West. However, as Ken Egan Jr notes, she “often critiques the materialism and utilitarianism of the settlers, yet she does not reject wholesale the ideal of establishing a pastoral culture in the then far West” (Egan 2009, p. 56). Fuller sees in the landscape and nature the means by which Americans can create a utopia in the West.

## 2. Nature and America's Future and Past in Nineteenth Century American Landscape Painting

As many scholars have noted, American nature came to symbolize many things to the American imagination. For many Americans, the fruitful and expansive land brought to mind its exploitability, all that it could yield to the industrious, while also symbolizing God's blessings upon the American people. At the same time, unspoiled nature also symbolized America's innocence; the wilderness, seemingly untouched by human hands, was what the world must have looked like, fresh from creation, before humankind corrupted it. In this sense, images of American wilderness led Americans to think of the Garden of Eden and to believe that America was a paradise on earth (Powell 1990, p. 35). The works of many of the Hudson River School painters depict the untamed wilderness as an untouched paradise. Ironically, uncorrupted wilderness evoked thoughts not only of America's—and the earth's—primordial, Edenic past, but also of the future. Paintings of vast wilderness elicited thoughts of future gain, what that land could yield economically and agriculturally. The uncorrupted wilderness, while creating a sense of pride, was also an American possession, a commodity, to be developed to its fullest capacity. While America's uncorrupted wilderness led some Americans to believe it was the Garden of Eden, cultivated, pastoral landscapes did as well. As Marx (1964) has demonstrated in *The Machine in the Garden*, the idea of America as a pastoral paradise and the desire to recreate the Garden on earth were central to the American imagination. In this sense, the controlling image was not untamed wilderness, but the “middle landscape,” a balance between wilderness and civilization, nature and cultivation. The idea of America as a garden was one of lush, rolling meadows interspersed with trees and dotted with flowers, and meandering rivers and quiet lakes. Agriculture also played a role in the idea of the garden, for this was the perfect manifestation of the balance between nature and civilization. Here, wild nature is tamed through the art of agriculture to create a garden. This is a landscape that, unlike that of the wilderness, acknowledges humankind's presence and shows it as beneficial, thus legitimating further cultivation. The idea that America was the new Eden to be recovered on earth was compounded by the millennialist movements during the nineteenth century. As Novak (1980) argues, during the nineteenth century, evangelical religious movements throughout America, including the West, led many to believe that America was the promised land. Many believed that the coming of the millennium prophesied in the Book of Revelation might also be found in American nature (p. 7).

Naturally, paintings celebrating America as a garden were prolific during the nineteenth century. Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire: The Arcadian or Pastoral State* (1833–1836), while depicting an imaginary, not American scene, is an example of the pastoral mode. As part of the *Course of Empire* series, it was also an allegory—Cole's statement on what he believed about America and his fears about

America's future.<sup>6</sup> The painting is also an argument for the balance between nature and civilization and the simplicity of the pastoral (Burns 1989, p. 15). In Cole's painting, the evidence of man's handiwork, in the form of the sundial and temple as well as the carefully placed avenue of trees, reveals that the wilderness has been tamed. The image of the temple, placed between the domesticated landscape and the wilderness in the distant hills, symbolizes the harmony between nature and humankind (Miller 1993, pp. 27–28).

The moral and social tone of the pastoral and the values projected in it are evident in many other paintings during the nineteenth century as well. Asher B. Durand's *The Hudson River Looking Toward the Catskills* (1847) (Figure 1) and Jasper Cropsey's *American Harvesting* (1851) (Figure 2) are a few examples of paintings that represent America as a peaceful, pastoral paradise. In paintings such as these, the landscape has a park-like appearance, in which green meadows are interspersed with groves of trees, suggesting the art of humankind in conjunction with nature. Cows graze in fields or drink at peaceful water, while humankind lives harmoniously in the natural world. Nature itself is non-threatening and inviting. It is domesticated rather than sublime. As Angela Miller notes, nature is "socially and aesthetically accessible to genteel Americans" (Miller 1989, pp. 122–23). Similarly, in Durand's *The Hudson River Looking toward the Catskills* (Figure 1), contented cows and sheep graze nearby while picnickers enjoy nature under the trees (Burns 1989, p. 16). In each of these paintings, there is a perfect balance between the work of humankind and the wildness of nature.

Cropsey's painting especially celebrates the American farmscape in its depiction of a beautiful, harmonious inhabited world. The farm is the center of the natural world, which does not intrude upon man's domesticated acres. The fecundity of the landscape is symbolized by the rich yellow fields and the laden harvest wagon. At the far end are the farmhouse, surrounded by a grove of trees, and a large brown barn. The image of the farm itself carried powerful political and social associations for American audiences and became the icon of American values. Images of neat, cultivated farms were believed to symbolize the virtue of the farmer. Furthermore, country life itself was—and still is, to some extent—believed to be a more simple, innocent existence, especially compared to city life. This belief was articulated by Jefferson (Jefferson 1955) in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* in which he argues that if America would become a nation of farmers, it would attain political and social felicity. For Jefferson (Jefferson 1955), "(t)hose who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue" (p. 165). The American landscape, with its small family farms and peaceful villages, revealed the special virtue of American society, a society of hard working, frugal, and sober inhabitants.

This belief in America's chosen destiny in relation to its landscape helped to serve national and political interests as well. On the one hand, American nature helped to define America against Europe and the "Old World." America's bountiful landscape and its associations with the Garden of Eden was unique to America; it reflected God's approbation of the American people, American progress, and the American way of life. As Angela Miller has argued, "Like other cultural endeavors such as institutionalized religion and education, landscape images worked their power over views, in theory, by formalizing values that unified people of similar social backgrounds across geographic lines" (Miller 1993, p. 101). In other words, as Anne Baker further observes, many Americans imagined "a collective identity emerging through visual encounters with the American landscape" (Baker 1998, p. 68).

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<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Cole's *Course of Empire* series and its relation to Cole's perception of American history, see Miller (1993).





**Figure 1.** Asher Brown Durand, American, 1796–1886. *The Hudson River Looking Towards the Catskills*, 1851. Oil on Canvas. 53 × 69  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches. Fenimore Art Museum. Cooperstown, New York. Gift of Stephen C. Clark. NO391.1955. Photograph by Richard Walker.



**Figure 2.** Jasper Francis Cropsey, American, 1823–1900. *American Harvesting*, 1851. Oil on Canvas. 35  $\frac{1}{2}$  × 52  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches. Gift of Mrs. Nicholas H. Noyes, Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana University, 69.93.

The power of images in articulating national identity and values is defined by W.J.T. Mitchell as Iconology, or a rhetoric of images. It is “the ways in which they seem to speak for themselves by persuading, telling stories, or describing” (Mitchell 1986, pp. 1–2). He further notes that the idea of ideology has its roots in the concept of imagery (Mitchell 1986, p. 4). Ideology, as Raymond Williams defines it, is the expression or world view of a particular class (Williams 1977, pp. 108–9), or, as Althusser states, it is the religious, ethical, legal, political, and aesthetic elements of society (Althusser 1972b, p. 134). The dominant ideology of a society is determined by the economic base of that society. Art resides within the superstructure of society. However, this is not to say that art is ideology. As Louis Althusser (1972a) argues in “A Letter on Art,” art does not give us a “knowledge” in the strict sense, but it does maintain a specific relationship with knowledge. Althusser notes, “what art

makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of ‘seeing,’ ‘perceiving’ and ‘feeling,’ is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes” (Althusser 1972a, p. 222). Landscape, then, both visual and verbal, embodied the ideology of middle and upper-class Americans.<sup>7</sup> It helped to legitimate Westward expansion, articulating the nationalistic beliefs in Manifest Destiny and America’s future. Images of landscape helped to legitimate America’s actions in the conquest of more territory and inspired progress, settlement, and development.

### 3. Margaret Fuller and Nineteenth Century American Art

As a Transcendentalist and an American who grew up in New England, Margaret Fuller could not help being influenced by the currents of thought, the attitudes about nature, and the ways of looking at landscape that circulated around her. In her descriptions of the mid-western landscape, Fuller uses landscape conventions that, as Miller (1993) demonstrated, reflect the values and desires of white, upper middle class Northeastern Americans. As demonstrated in this paper, Fuller both privileged and critiqued those values as she drew upon the artistic images to describe the landscape in *Summer on the Lakes*.

Fuller was well acquainted with the works of various artists, as her art criticism for the Transcendentalist periodical, *The Dial*, and Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* attest<sup>8</sup>. Although not trained as an art critic—a shortcoming she fully acknowledged—her comments about art and sculpture are insightful and reveal her interest in, and sensitivity towards, the visual arts. Among the artists’ works she reviewed are those of the sculptor, Canova, and the painters Washington Allston and J. M. W. Turner. For Fuller, the highest art is the achievement of the transcendental moment, when there is a merging of nature and the soul of the artist (Stein 1967, pp. 29–30). Fuller best articulated her views on art and nature in her review of Allston’s landscapes for *The Dial* in 1840 as she observes that “The soul of the painter is in these landscapes, but not his character. Is not that the highest art? Nature and the soul combined; the former freed from slight crudities or blemishes, the latter from its merely human aspect” (Fuller 1840, p. 82). Fuller’s discussion of Allston’s work portends what she would later say about the true aim of art as she critiqued French painters while in Europe: “Art can only be true Art by presenting an adequate outward symbol of some fact in the interior life. But then it is a symbol that Art seeks to present, and not the fact itself. These French painters seem to have no idea of this; they have not studied the method of Nature. With the true artist, as with Nature herself, the more full the representation, the more profound and enchanting is the sense of mystery. We look and look, as on a flower of which we cannot scrutinize the secret life, yet by looking seem constantly drawn nearer to the soul that causes and governs that life” (Fuller 1856, p. 198). A great artist penetrates and reveals the inner life, the soul of what he or she represents, just as the outward manifestation of nature reveals its inner life.

### 4. A Garden Utopia: Humanity in Harmony with Nature in the West

In *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller mirrors what she believes to be the highest achievement of an artist in her attempt to convey nature’s truths to her readers. Like Allston, Fuller is an oracle, revealing to her readers what nature’s spirit has said to her. She attempts to depict landscapes in the manner she would later admonish American artists to do—to make “not only copies . . . of our magnificent scenes, but a transfusion of the spirit which is their divinity” (Fuller 1856, p. 369). At her most profound, Fuller seems to merge with nature and discern its design. Thus, she not only invokes landscape representations to persuade her readers to work towards an ideal America, she also shows that it is in merging with nature, living in concert with it, that America can achieve its destiny.

<sup>7</sup> Some illuminating works on landscape include the essays in (Mitchell 1994; Corner 1999; DeLue and Elkins 2010).

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of Fuller’s interest in art, see (Lawrence 2011); (Von Frank 2010); For discussion of Fuller’s art criticism, see (Walker and Holcomb 1981).

This is not to say that Fuller naively believed either in utopia or that the human race was perfect. In a letter to William Henry Channing she wrote: “Utopia it is impossible to build up. At least, my hopes for our race on this planet are more limited than those of most of my friends. I accept the limitations of human nature, and believe a wise acknowledgment of them one of the best conditions of progress. Yet every noble scheme, every poetic manifestation, prophesies to man his eventual destiny. And were not man ever more sanguine than facts at the moment justify, he would remain torpid, or be sunk in sensuality” (Fuller 1983, vol. II, p. 109).<sup>9</sup> In *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller conveys the “poetic manifestation” of America’s destiny in the West, which “prophesies to man” the ideal that America might achieve, if society changes.

Throughout *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller experiences a series of epiphanies as she sits alone, contemplating nature. It is in these epiphanic moments that Fuller discerns the spiritual presence within nature and comes to see truly—in the metaphysical as well as physical sense—nature and its design. At these moments in the book, Fuller describes landscapes that are similar to those painted several decades later by the Luminist painters.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, since the Luminist style did not emerge in full until mid-century, Fuller could not have been aware of their works as she wrote *Summer on the Lakes*. As many scholars have argued in their discussions of Emerson and Thoreau, Transcendentalists held views about nature similar to those suggested in Luminist paintings.<sup>11</sup> Although the sources of Luminism can be found in the work of many artists, John Wilmerding argues that the major forerunner of luminism is Washington Allston (Wilmerding 1989b, p. 103). As discussed earlier, Fuller admired Allston’s work. The unity between soul and nature, the truth of nature that shines through, as well as the “meditative cast” of Allston’s landscapes caused Fuller to state that his highest powers lay in landscape. In her moments of luminist-like reverie in *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller merges with nature and sees into its soul. As will be discussed shortly, Fuller’s ideal physical landscape is one in which humankind and nature almost merge, where there is a sense of communion between them. If the land is a metaphor for the nation, then Fuller reveals that it is through communion and harmony with the natural world, not conquest, that America can recreate Eden on earth. In this sense, then, by merging with nature, Fuller acts as an example of the ideal she hopes her fellow Americans will achieve. For what Fuller argues for is in direct opposition to the ideals of conquest and Manifest Destiny held by much of her culture. This is not to say that Fuller did not advocate America’s expansion West. For as Brigitte Georgi-Findlay (1996) has demonstrated, while women’s travel writing was “generally not given authoritative status or considered a substantial source of knowledge in the context of colonial expansion,” it is still implicated “in the colonialist and expansionist enterprise” (Georgi-Findlay 1996, p. 25). It is clear from *Summer on the Lakes* that Fuller saw American expansion as inevitable and ultimately right, bringing the seeds of future good.<sup>12</sup> However, she clearly did not approve of the manner in which American progress and growth were occurring in the West. Fuller decries the male paradigm of conquest and destruction that leads to “mushroom growth,” with no consideration of aesthetic or social values, that sees the land as nothing but something to be conquered and used, and leads to the degradation and destruction of Native Americans.

In many of her descriptions of the mid-west in *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller depicts the landscape as an uncorrupted, pastoral Eden. Her ideal landscapes are not the untamed wilderness scenes

<sup>9</sup> Letter dated 1840.

<sup>10</sup> Luminism, defined by 20th century art history scholars, occurred during the second quarter of the 19th century and is characterized by the “intimate relation between artist and nature, the artist’s concentrated process of observation” and “interest in atmospheric tonalism” (Wilmerding 1989a, p. 12). Luminist paintings stress the horizontal and radiant light with an absence of brushstrokes. There is also a sense of silence that “in the repose of inaction, represents not a void but a palpable space, in which everything happens while nothing does. We have here a visual analogue of Eckhart’s “central silence” (Novak 1989, p. 28). For a more thorough discussion of Luminism, see Wilmerding (1989a, 1989b) and Novak (1980, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Numerous art historians and literary scholars have noted the similarities between the works of Transcendentalists and Luminists. Some useful works include (Novak 1980; Wilmerding 1989a; St. Armand 1980; Radaker 1987; Conron 1980; Smith 1985).

<sup>12</sup> For a different reading of Fuller’s view of Manifest Destiny and her use of the visual arts, see (Steele 1992).



privileged in many paintings, such as many by Thomas Cole, but instead are reminiscent of paintings of pastoral settings she may have observed, or, as Kolodny (1984) argues, the gardens of her childhood in New England. This is not surprising, considering that, as McKinsey (1973) notes, Fuller, like other Transcendentalists, conceived of the wildness of the West as an untrammelled Garden of Eden. Fuller's first acquaintance with nature was in her mother's garden, and she sought to recover in the West the purity and simplicity of her childhood experiences (McKinsey 1973, p. 11). This is evident in her description of the Illinois landscape, where Fuller paints a picture of a beautiful landscape garden. She notes "the velvet lawns, the flower gardens, the stately parks, scattered at graceful intervals by the decorous hand of art, the frequent deer, and the peaceful herd of cattle", which "suggest more of the masterly mind of man than the prodigal, but careless, motherly love of nature" (Fuller 1991, p. 27). Fuller's description of the Rock river countryside is like the paintings of America's pastoral landscape discussed earlier. As in Durand's *The Hudson River Looking Toward the Catskills* (Figure 1), the Illinois landscape Fuller describes is one of parks interspersed with groves of trees and bluffs. Cattle graze peacefully. Humankind and nature live in harmony, and even swallows view Fuller and her companions without fear (Fuller 1991, p. 28). This land is truly a garden paradise. Fuller's description here is very powerful, considering the popular vogue for both pastoral scenes and picturesque settings. For what Fuller describes here is more like the tamed meadows and carefully landscaped gardens of both England and the northeastern United States, not the wilds of the West. Interestingly, while the garden landscape Fuller describes here and elsewhere in *Summer on the Lakes* seems uncontaminated by man, it is not thoroughly wild. It is a middle landscape, where the progress of humankind has not destroyed the natural character of the terrain. Fuller's description is more feminine, where humankind's presence does not intrude upon nature violently, but seems to be naturally a part of the landscape.<sup>13</sup> As Daniel S. Malachuk has noted, "in the antebellum period the quintessential middle landscape of the garden was gendered feminine, whether figured as cultivated settlement shy of the wilder masculine frontier or the delicate picturesque opposite the strenuous sublime" (Malachuk 2014, p. 210). Fuller seems to suggest that the ideal landscape is one that evinces a balance between nature and art, wildness and man.

While Fuller envisions the American West as a Garden of Eden, she also describes it as one of limitless potential. Quoting from a letter, Fuller describes the literal and figurative "prospects" of the West like a carefully composed painting in her descriptions of the limitless Illinois prairie. She notes "There was one of twenty miles in extent not flat, but high and rolling, so that when you arrived at a high part, by gently ascents, the view was beyond measure grand, as far as the eye could reach, nothing but the green rolling plain, and at a vast distance, groves all looking gentle and cultivated . . . Here there is neither enchantment or disappointment, but expectation fully realized" (Fuller 1991, pp. 49–50). The landscape here plays a crucial role in defining Fuller's vision of America. For throughout *Summer on the Lakes*, while privileging garden landscapes, Fuller, enraptured by the Western horizon, also exalts the limitlessness of the West. Earlier in the work she wrote, "Our journey to-day was no less delightful than before, still all new, boundless, limitless. Kinmont says, that limits are sacred; that the Greeks were in the right to worship a god of limits. I say, that what is limitless is alone divine, that there was neither wall nor road in Eden . . . " (Fuller 1991, p. 40). The landscape, in this sense, is analogous to the nation and its prospects. McKinsey (1973) observes that Transcendentalists such as Fuller, Frederic Henry Hedge, James Freeman Clarke, and William Henry Channing saw America's destiny written in American nature itself. She notes that "[i]n their vision, the land and landscape were fused. Nature was translated into the myth of the West" (McKinsey 1973, pp. 9–10).

Furthermore, as Miller (1993) argues, "[t]he peculiar contribution of mid-century landscape was to organize space along an implicit temporal axis" (p. 82). Landscape paintings came to be read spatially and temporally as narratives in which the plot lines moved in progression from foreground to the

<sup>13</sup> For more thorough discussion of Fuller's engendered landscape, see (Kolodny 1984; Georgi-Findlay 1996; Rosowski 1990).



distance and were read as phases in time and history, present and future (Miller 1993, pp. 83–84). The horizon, “[i]n the language of the day,” was “the expression of the future, and the banner of millennial expectations” (Miller 1993, p. 105). Fuller’s landscape descriptions, encompassing foregrounds and limitless horizons, then, can be read as one would read a landscape painting. The endless horizons of the prairies represent not only what she perceives to be the physical limitlessness of the West, but also suggest the limitlessness of America’s future. The actual Western landscape is a metaphor for America itself, its limitless potential, its vast future.

The garden of the West for Fuller is not just uninhabited groves, it is also farms. Yet Fuller makes clear that not all farmscapes are ideal; she distinguishes between those constructed by enlightened people who consult the “spirit of the place” and the settlers who care only for materialistic gain. Fuller’s ideal farm is one of balance and harmony with the natural world:

A wood surrounds the house, through which paths are cut in every direction. It is, for this new country, a large and handsome dwelling; but round it are its barns and farm yard, with cattle and poultry. These, however, in the framework of wood, have a very picturesque and pleasing effect. There is that mixture of culture and rudeness in the aspect of things as gives a feeling of freedom, not confusion . . . This habitation of man seemed like a nest in the grass, so thoroughly were the buildings and all the objects of human care harmonized with what is natural. The tall trees bent and whispered all around, as if to hail with sheltering love the men who had come to dwell among them. (Fuller 1991, p. 24)

Fuller’s description of this farm, like Cropsey’s *American Harvesting* (Figure 2), carries with it powerful associations for her predominately Northeastern American audience. Fuller’s neat, ordered farm represents the idea that thoughtful, careful settlers are the seeds of true American values in the West, values that were disappearing in the Northeast as it became more urban and sophisticated. Furthermore, the balance between “culture and rudeness”—nature and culture—symbolizes the ideal life all Americans should seek, especially in a land of possibility like the West. At the same time, the picturesque elements of the scene reveal that opposites can come together to create a harmonious whole. The hard, man-made structure contrasts with the soft, pliant elements of the natural world, yet out of their opposing forces comes a harmony. There is a sense here that both humankind and nature can live together, to the betterment of both.

At the same time, the idea that humankind’s built environment should harmonize with its natural surroundings reflects popular Romantic landscape aesthetics such as those of the nineteenth century landscape designer, Andrew Jackson Downing. According to Conron (1987), Downing made the house an organic form to be adapted to its enviroing landscape. For Downing, adaptation was a matter of ethics as well as art, for it expressed community between nature and civilization (Conron 1987, p. 19). As Downing noted in his treatise, *Cottage Residences* (Downing 1842), “The relation between a country house and its ‘surroundings,’ have led me to consider under the terms Residences, both the architecture and the gardening designs. To constitute an agreeable whole, these should indeed have a harmonious correspondence, one with the other” (p. iv).<sup>14</sup> Downing argued that not only should a house’s design harmonize with the natural setting, but also its color and where it was situated. Thus, Conron notes, the country house “was designed to appear, from a distance, to dissolve into a sea of natural forms; haze melting it, earth colors blending it with earth, trees atomizing it, the sun transfiguring it into zones of light and shadow. Cottages . . . must be adapted chiefly by strategies of embowerment, situated in ‘recesses’ in the earth, or surrounded with trees” (Conron 1987, p. 19). In Fuller’s description of the Illinois farm, the house, like Downing’s ideal residence, seems to belong naturally to the surrounding environment. Rather than intruding upon the natural environment or destroying it, as many manmade objects would, the farm harmonizes so well with nature as to actually seem like a nest that blends into

<sup>14</sup> For a more thorough discussion of Downing’s aesthetics of landscape design, see (Downing 1841; Schuyler 1996; Wall 2007).

its surroundings. The trees that surround the home seem like loving parents, carefully embowering and protecting the human inhabitants. Humankind here seems to have worked with nature, not as a master or conqueror, but as a loving member of the natural world, as friend and partner with nature. In this sense, then, what Fuller describes is a kind of Eden, where humankind and nature live in perfect concert. Fuller's example of an actual settler who has achieved this kind of balance and harmony with nature serves to encourage her readers that it can be done. If humankind consults the natural world, then the harmony with nature experienced in the Biblical Garden of Eden can be attained on earth, in the West, the land of limitless potential.

Fuller's description of the ideal landscape as one of communion between man and nature is a literal landscape, but also is a metaphor for America as a whole. For what Fuller reveals throughout *Summer on the Lakes* is that the refusal to live in accordance with the surrounding environment and what is natural is destructive, not only to the environment, but to human beings as well. A landscape of harmony reflects a people in harmony with their environment. Yet life for many Americans in the West, especially women, is very difficult because they are not adapted to the land. The work required of women is not what they have been trained for and there is little help. Fuller observes that the women's "city education has imparted neither the strength nor skill now demanded . . . They can dance, but not draw; talk French, but know nothing of the language of flowers . . . Accustomed to the pavement of Broadway, they dare not tread the wildwood paths for fear of rattlesnakes!" (Fuller 1991, p. 39). According to Fuller, the reason women have such difficult lives in the West is because they are not adapted to the environment there. Not educated to a life outdoors or one in which there is little opportunity for dancing and the drawing room, women new to the West have few resources to draw upon and little to which to look forward. A culture based upon "reference to European standards" (Fuller 1991, p. 39) is useless in an environment like Western America.

Although she acknowledges that women who move to the West with a city education cannot change their backgrounds, she does call for a different education for young women living in the West, one more suited to the natural terrain: While many Americans prize an Eastern education, Fuller hopes instead that Westerners will educate women to life on the prairies. Good schools should be built nearby, "planned by persons of sufficient thought to meet the wants of the place and time, instead of copying New York or Boston . . . methods copied from the education of some English Lady Augusta are as ill suited to the daughter of an Illinois farmer as satin shoes to climb the Indian mounds" (Fuller 1991, p. 39). In this passage, Fuller calls for an education of young women that, like the Illinois farm described previously, springs out of the surrounding environment. An education that does not grow out of the needs and natural terrain of an area will be destructive, not only to the young women, but to the future of the West. What Fuller calls for is the development of an education and a race that has a unique Western character, one that is shaped by the natural environment of the place. Like Fuller's ideal landscape that reflects the cooperation of nature and humankind, the Western race of the future must be educated and live in harmony with the natural environment, the spirit of the land.

Fuller's description of the harmonious Illinois farm also symbolizes the importance for all humankind of a balance between the works of man and nature, the animal and the spiritual. As Adams (1987) observes, Fuller offers "glimpses of harmony and junction" (p. 257). Fuller's story of the Seeress of Prevorst bears out this point, for the Seeress is an example of one whose spiritual faculties so outweigh her earthly nature that she cannot exist in this world. This story, which seems, at first glance, to have little to do with the West or America, actually serves to strengthen Fuller's argument for the importance of balance and harmony, both to society and the individual.<sup>15</sup> The functions of spirit and nature "should be in equipoise, and when they are not, when we see excess either on the natural (so called as distinguished from the spiritual,) or the spiritual side, we feel that the law is transgressed" (Fuller 1991, pp. 98–99). Similarly, Fuller shows that Euro-American society is out

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<sup>15</sup> Adams (1987, p. 259) makes this point also.

of balance because it has too much intellect and does not harmonize with nature. Fuller observes that “the civilized man is a larger mind, but a more imperfect nature than the savage” (Fuller 1991, p. 136). She reveals that it is detrimental to any people not to have a balance of opposites—nature and spirit, nature and intellect. An ideal, healthy society can come of a race able to acknowledge and integrate these opposing forces in themselves and the community as a whole.

Ultimately, what Fuller calls for is a more feminine approach to the development of the West. The kind of Western development, which Fuller decries, is that of fast-paced progress, utilitarianism, and conquest that she sees on the frontier—all elements of the male paradigm of expansionism. Fuller’s ideal for the West is one of cooperation and nurturing, where “nature still wore her motherly smile and seemed to promise room not only for those favored or cursed with the qualities best adapting for the strifes of competition, but the delicate, the thoughtful, even the indolent and the eccentric” (Fuller 1991, p. 38). What Fuller describes here is a society built upon cooperation and relationships, between both people and nature. Nature itself is described as motherly, loving, nurturing. If Fuller admonishes her readers to look to nature to find the ideal blueprint for creating an Edenic society in the West, then what she is advocating is a female rather than male paradigm. Fuller’s landscape descriptions themselves reflect a feminine principle, in their harmony of opposites, cooperation with—rather than conquest of—nature, emphasis on relationships, and nurturing and caring by both nature and man.

What Fuller makes clear through much of *Summer on the Lakes*, however, is that most settlers in the West do not achieve this kind of harmony with nature. As discussed earlier, Fuller’s ideal Western home is neat and tidy, seeming to grow out of its surroundings. Fuller contrasts this ideal by depicting the reality of most Western settlers’ lands, noting that “Sometimes they looked attractive, the little brown houses, the natural architecture of the country, in the edge of the timber. But almost always when you came near, the slovenliness of the dwelling and the rude way in which objects around it were treated, when so little care would have presented a charming whole, were very repulsive” (Fuller 1991, p. 29). Fuller further observes that progress for most people moving West is “Gothic, not Roman, and their mode of cultivation will, in the course of twenty, perhaps ten, years, obliterate the natural expression of the country” (Fuller 1991, p. 29). Fuller depicts the ideal landscape as an Edenic garden reminiscent of the pastoral paintings discussed earlier. She contrasts the ideal she believes all settlers should achieve with the real landscapes constructed by most settlers in order to critique the values of Americans moving West. The West cannot become a garden where man lives in harmony with nature because most settlers are too consumed with their material wants to see nature’s beauty and live in concert with it. Their concern is not the improvement of quality of life, such as would occur with the care and beautification of the landscape as well as with education and fellowship. Fuller heightens this contrast by evoking an ideal scene and describing the settlers’ homes from a distance as being attractive, then undercutting that image with the slovenliness of the actual homes. This contrast demonstrates that the reality of the West does not often live up to the ideal, what one would project from a distance or idealize for the future. Americans’ progress in the West is rough, harsh, “Gothic”—in other words, uncivilized—in contrast to a civilized, Roman development, a progress of slow, cultivated, considerate growth, one that consults the genius of the place and attempts to maintain its beauty.

Throughout *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller demonstrates that the reason why Americans have not yet been able to create the Garden on earth is because they cannot truly see nature. Fuller rejects the materialism and kind of progress she sees in the West, both of which inhibit Americans from looking beyond the gratification of the moment or their physical wants. People move to the West, not to improve society spiritually or socially, but only to acquire property and wealth: Fuller laments that “immigrants who were to be the fathers of a new race, all, from the old man down to the little girl” spoke “not of what they should do, but of what they should get in the new scene. It was to them a prospect, not of unfolding nobler energies, but of more ease, and larger accumulation (Fuller 1991, p. 12). Fuller echoed these sentiments in a letter, written from Chicago while on her

journey, to Ralph Waldo Emerson: “The dissipation of thought and feeling is less painful than in the Eastern cities in this that it is at least for material realities. The men are all at work for money and to develop the resources of the soil, the women belong to the men. It did not please to think that the nation was to be built up from such materials . . . ” (Fuller 1983, vol. III, pp. 129–30)<sup>16</sup> Greater freedom of thought, the building of schools, or intellectual acquirements are not important to the majority of the settlers Fuller sees while in the West. She notes that the immigrants still speak of religion “in the poor, narrow doctrinal way” (Fuller 1991, p. 12), and that with lives so consumed with the acquisition of material goods, “[t]hey will need the spirit of religion more than ever to guide them, but will find less time than before for its doctrine” (Fuller 1991, p. 12). At the same time, consumed by material progress, the majority of Western settlers have no consideration for aesthetics, for “[t]he traces of a man’s hand in a new country are rarely productive of beauty. It is a cutting down of forest trees to make zigzag fences” (Fuller 1991, p. 50). As Fuller states in the same letter to Emerson, she has higher hopes for the future of the West: “I want to see some emigrant with worthy aims using all his gifts and knowledge to some purpose honorable to the land; instead of lowering themselves to the requisitions of the moment as so many of them do” (Fuller 1983, vol. III, p. 130).

The materialism of many Americans, their inability to see nature and acknowledge the importance of beauty or higher attainments, is best epitomized in Fuller’s experiences at Niagara Falls. As McKinsey (1985) has argued in her illuminating work, *Niagara Falls*, Niagara Falls had become a national icon by the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> From America’s discovery by Europeans, the Falls took on special meaning. For some, the Falls’ awesome sublimity represented the American wilderness, while others saw in it America’s future or the power and presence of God. Others, especially Europeans, saw the Falls as a symbol for America itself. Considering the iconic import of the Falls in the American psyche, Fuller’s discussion of Niagara is especially pertinent, as it portends the attitude toward nature and life she saw in the West. As Fuller sits experiencing the sublimity of the Falls, a man “walked close up to the fall, and after looking at it a moment, with an air as if thinking how he could best appropriate it to his own use, he spat into it” (Fuller 1991, p. 5). Fuller sketches the grandeur of the Falls for her readers, knowing that they are familiar with its lineaments and also aware of its meaning to the American psyche. If Niagara is an icon of America, its future, and its wilderness—American nature—then Fuller’s description is fraught with meaning for America and the West. Clearly, Fuller is critiquing the materialism of her contemporaries. At the same time, she reveals that because of their materialism, most Americans cannot see the Falls except as a commodity, something that has a use. The aesthetic beauty of the Falls, their sublimity, and the power of God they revealed to some Americans, are lost on the majority of Americans who look only for what they can gain from the natural world. By extension, if the Falls represent American nature and the wilderness, then the man’s actions toward the Falls is the attitude of many Americans towards nature itself, including the West. Thus, the “mushroom growth” and get ahead, grasping behavior Fuller sees in the West is another manifestation of the same action. It is also another example of Americans’ inability to live in harmony with nature; instead, nature is an object of conquest and a commodity to many.

Fuller drives home her point further in her powerful description of the chained eagle at the Falls who was “captive, and addressed by the vulgar with the language they seem to find most appropriate to such occasions—that of thrusts and blows. Silently, his head averted, he ignored their existence . . . Probably, he listened to the voice of the cataract, and felt that congenial powers flowed free, and was consoled, though his own wing was broken” (Fuller 1991, pp. 6–7). The story of the chained eagle is also the story of American nature. Not only is the eagle a national symbol, and so represents America, but his soul as Fuller depicts it is clearly in the wild. As a symbol of wild nature, the eagle is, like the wilderness, the victim of a society that celebrates wildness while attempting to control it

<sup>16</sup> Letter dated 1840.

<sup>17</sup> For a thorough discussion of the history of Niagara Falls and its meaning in America, see McKinsey (1985).



(Steele 1992, p. xxiv). Furthermore, as noted earlier, the eagle, along with Niagara and other American natural wonders, came to represent America and American nature. The people at the Falls who taunt the bird cannot see the beauty and grandeur of the bird's soul; instead, the eagle is something to be conquered and rendered useful—this time for human consumption as entertainment. If the eagle is a symbol of American nature, then Fuller describes its treatment in order to reveal the lack of respect, understanding, and vision of nature's soul that she sees in her contemporaries' treatment of nature, in the East and West. Nature is important only as it is exploitable. Once again, humankind has not learned to live cooperatively with nature, but only as master to it.

While Americans' materialistic and utilitarian values make the creation of the Garden in America difficult, so too does the kind of progress Fuller sees in the West. As discussed earlier, Fuller calls American progress in the West "Gothic," rather than "Roman." She argues for a slower, more natural progress, one that is not so destructive. She laments that American progress is "that of a warlike invasion" and looks to in other countries" where "the house of the son grew from that of the father, as naturally as new joints on a bough. And the cathedral crowned the whole as naturally as the leafy summit the tree (Fuller 1991, p. 18). In this passage, Fuller once again argues for Americans to live with nature, not in disharmony with it. This is evidenced not only by the destruction of the landscape that comes from growth without thought or consideration of aesthetics, but in her use of nature imagery. Like the farmscape she described that privileged the farm cradled in nature, Fuller wants a kind of progress that grows out of nature with slow deliberation, in harmony with the natural world. Human growth should be like the growth of a tree, "slow and knotty growth" (Fuller 1991, p. 50), building upon existing life. Fuller reinforces her argument by describing the cathedral crowning the slow process of growth—God approves of what is most natural. The West can achieve its destiny only by obeying the higher laws evinced in nature.

The slow growth that Fuller advocates is one that, like the garden landscape and the farm that is harmonized with its surroundings, finds a balance between nature and culture. This ideal is evidenced in her description of Mackinaw, "an old French town, mellow in its coloring and with the harmonious effect of a slow growth, which assimilates naturally, with objects round it" (Fuller 1991, p. 107). Fuller emphasizes the fact that because the town has a slower pace than most American settlements, it is more attractive, aesthetically pleasing. Mackinaw is assimilated into the natural landscape, seems to belong there, because it grew up more naturally, mirroring the growth process found in nature—slow, deliberate, building upon the past. The citizens there have more time to live fully because the pace is slower, and people are not consumed with business.

Throughout *Summer on the Lakes*, then, Fuller evokes the image of America as a Garden in order to show her readers what the West can become. Although idealistic, she was also practical—she realized that Americans' materialism and utilitarianism would make the fruition of her dreams very difficult. Fuller's landscape descriptions both point to a better future for America and critique the values of her contemporaries. Fuller urges her readers to see the great design of the spirit in nature and bring it forth, writing, "The Spirit, no doubt, leads in every movement of my time: if I seek the How, I shall find it as well as if I busied myself more with the Why. Whatever is, is right, if only men are steadily bent to make it so by comprehending and fulfilling its design" (Fuller 1991, p. 82). It was this design that Fuller sought to comprehend in the Western landscape and communicate to America in *Summer on the Lakes*.

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