Reconciling the Civil War in Winslow Homer's *Undertow*

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Winslow Homer's *Undertow* (1886), rendered primarily in shades of blue and grey, depicts four figures emerging from an ocean (Figure 1). Upon first glance, and as it was perceived by contemporary viewers, *Undertow* might well seem to document superior masculine heroics. Surely the men's verticality alerts us to their chief roles as rescuers of the women they bracket. Erect and strong, they haul their catch to shore while the women, victims in need of saving, lie prostrate and sightless. However accurate this cursory reading may be, it denies *Undertow* the complexity with which Homer infused it. This paper asserts that *Undertow* is far more than the straightforward rescue scene nineteenth-century critics assumed it to be. Rather than a document of "simple heroism," functioning "beyond question or criticism," *Undertow* is symbolically layered, engaging deeply with cultural topics of its time.[1]

The sexed tinge to *Undertow* is explicit.[2] Dressed in form-fitting swimsuits, the women are affixed to a sling-like rescue sled. The mounting of one woman's body upon the other as the painting's central-most vignette forms the basis for its erotic overtones. While the acclivous woman touches her breast, the down-turned female's swimming outfit is tightly glued to her pliable body, a single ripple of white water highlighting her rounded posterior. Far from inactive, the women join forces and work cooperatively to secure their rescue. The upturned woman in particular participates actively in the affair. Hoisted at an upward angle by the leading male, she reaches back with her right hand to grip the rescue sled. With her left arm she tightly grasps her companion, clasping her to her body, her left hand grazing her companion's right which is swung around the lateral side of her frame. Their embrace is insecure; the down-turned woman is in danger of tipping further to her right, her body weight slumped and precariously distributed along the length of the other woman's body. Save for the efforts of her female ally to whom she clings, the down-turned woman appears to have a perilous hold. Her closest male rescuer does little to rectify her unsteadiness, holding only the end of her fabric bathing dress, or possibly the end lip of a rescue-sled covered by her dress. His actions appear strikingly ineffectual either way, especially in light of his tattered clothing and ultra-flexed arm.[3]

A hyper-muscular male figure commands the highest peak of the group's frieze and forcibly pulls the rescue sled toward the left without looking at it. He shields his eyes from the light-source in a gesture that resembles a salute. Standing in the brightest section of the canvas with an upright, stiff torso and flexed physical frame, he assumes leadership and a kind of military authority.[4] His taut, erect body glistening amidst the spume of the crashing wave contributes perhaps the most phallic eroticism of all. In contrast to his assertive posture, the other man hunches over in dark shadow, fixated on the backside of the woman he drags;[5] instead of directing the group, he follows it. In addition to

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1 John R. Tait, "The Academy Exhibition," *The Mail and Express* [New York] 11 April, 1887: 3, "Fine Arts: The Academy Exhibition, I," *The Nation*, 14 April, 1887: 327, both quoted in Margaret C. Conrads, *American Paintings and Sculpture at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute* (New York: Hudson Mills Press, 1990) 80.

2 *Undertow's* sexualized content has been noted by several scholars but has yet to be adequately explored. See Jules D. Prown, "Winslow Homer in His Art," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 1 (Spring 1987): 31-45, who famously analyzes the sexual potency of *The Life Line* and mentions the "sexual implications" of *Undertow*. See Randall C. Griffin, *Homer, Eakins, & Anshutz: The Search for American Identity in the Gilded Age* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2004): 101, who writes, "It is difficult to imagine a picture with more unresolved erotic tension or one more sexually stereotyped than *Undertow*."

3 The "odd and awkward manner" by which the right-hand male attempts to rescue the down-turned female has been noted by Charlene Engel, "'For Those in Peril on the Sea': The Intaglio Prints of Winslow Homer," *Print Review* (1985): 32.

4 The saluting gesture and military implications of the left-hand male figure has been identified by Prown 278, who writes of "the oddly military pose of the almost marching and saluting muscled figure on the left."

5 The focus of his stare is a point of scholarly contention. Elizabeth Johns, *Winslow Homer: The Nature of Observation* (Berkeley and Los

their conflicting actions, the men's distinct clothing—one in simple bathing trunks, the other with a tattered shirt and a fisherman's hat[6]—also indicates two contrary characters with dissimilar social positions.[7] The men appear to be physically disconnected. They look and walk in different directions, the leading figure sharply headed toward the left, the other male directed more frontally. Because of these contradictory movements and lack of coordinated involvement, they appear to be in danger of pulling the women apart from one another, rather than uniting them in a successful rescue.[8] Both men seem self-focused, emotionally detached, rather than devoted to the life-and-death situation at hand. Antithetical to the men's disjointed opposition, the two female protagonists form a connecting force between them, their physical forms intently engaged in the semi-union of this polarized and faltering community.

Furthering the oppositional essence of this image is the bifurcated space of the sea. The crossing of the females' bent arms forms an X in the center of the canvas; their fused bodies bisect a background wave split into dark and light halves, a division that extends the vertical length of the canvas. Their physical connection articulates the canvas's polarized sections and organizational fissure. The visible disjunction between the two halves is striking. The left side, including the two leftmost figures, is illuminated, bathed in bright light caused by the spray of the breaking wave which has crested and begun crashing. The face of the woman on the left is angled upward; the head of the left male figure is held high. Conversely, the remaining two figures are engulfed in shadows due to the mounting wave behind them whose imminent crash increases the possibility of the sled's capsizing. The inverted woman's face is obscured, and her male counterpart looks and bends downward. These contrasting visual indicators between the two halves of the canvas suggest an underlying rupture.[9] Furthermore, the very title of the work designates opposition.[10] An undertow is quite literally a contrary force. Once a wave has crashed, it sweeps back into the ocean—against the incoming water, creating the dangerous undertow into which these women had presumably been drawn. Moreover, the layered implications of the painting's title point to meanings implicit in the work itself, for an undertow is an undercurrent, suggestive of figurative connotations operating beneath the literal surface. The complexity of the painting is reflected in the status of the women, casualties of the sea's undertow, who find themselves under tow once again by the men dragging them to shore.

When Homer (1836-1910) completed *Undertow* at the age of fifty in December of 1886, he was known as a leading American realist painter, enabling him to operate on multiple artistic and symbolic levels to nearly assured critical acclaim.[11] If *Undertow* depicts a microcosmic community in distress, it is significant that in 1886 Homer himself was part of a community in the process of healing, of learning how to exist as a singular cultural entity following the national trauma of the Civil War. Homer's past as a Civil War correspondent, and the nation's reconciliation present, are embedded in the structure of this painting. The war represented an arena for heroism in the face of American crisis, which constitutes the simple subject of *Undertow*. Building from recent scholars who rightly problematize the posed and frozen figural group, and the unsettling behavior of the so-called heroic rescuers,[12] this paper disputes the passivity of the women,[13] and identifies the bisected light and dark canvas, not simply as a compositional tool, but as a key sig-

Angeles: U of California P, 2002) 118, contends that the rescuers "carrying out their work as a team, avert their glances from the women." Henry Adams, "Mortal Themes: Winslow Homer," *Art in America* 2 (February 1983): 119, explains that the men "avert their eyes from the breasts and buttocks of the women." On the contrary, I agree with Griffin (2004) 158 n. 47 who notes that the male figure on the right blatantly "gazes at the woman's buttocks."

6 Fishermen in works such as *The Herring Net*, 1885; *The Fog Warning*, 1885; and *Eight Bells*, 1886, wear the same type of hat.

7 To my eyes, the colors of the group's clothing—such as the delicate gold details of the down-turned female's blue dress and the shabby grayish costume of the male on the right—joined by the overall blue / grey coloring of the painting, are evocative of Civil War uniforms, especially as Homer painted them. See *The Last Goose at Yorktown*, *c*. 1863; *The Sutler's Tent*, 1863; and *Prisoners from the Front*, 1866.

8 The lack of figural coordination was astutely noted in an important early Homer monograph. See Lloyd Goodrich, *Winslow Homer* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1944) 96, who writes, "The energetic movement displayed in single figures did not link up with any ordered movement throughout the whole design."

9 To my knowledge, the light and dark halves of the divided canvas have never been discussed, not even in strictly formal terms.

10 For a detailed etymology of the word undertow, see the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

11 On Homer's artistic career and persona, see Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1996) 42-43.

12 While there exists no in-depth critical analysis of *Undertow*, scholars have made a good number of suggestive comments about the painting. See Gregory M. Pfitzer, "Women at the Water's Edge: The Body Language of Winslow Homer's Seascape Women," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 8.4 (1994): 266-267, who notes the rescuer's indecent stare and the immovable, static quality of the two men. The most recent provocative reading of *Undertow*, which notes that Victorian gender boundaries are undercut by the staring male figure, unfortunately resides in a footnote. See Griffin 158 n. 47, who writes, "on the one hand, the picture reinforces gender demarcations, while on the other it unmasks the artificiality and arbitrariness of those socially constructed boundaries." While I agree that *Undertow* reveals Homer's rejection of stringent gender boundaries, and, in fact, found them to be harmful to the success of American society, I part ways with Griffin who finds the painting suggestive of Homer's disavowal of heterosexuality, loosely implicating Homer's sexual preferences into his analysis of the painting.

13 Early Homer biographer William Howe Downes, "Marine Pieces with Figures: 1885-1889," *The Life and Works of Winslow Homer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1911) 143 writes, "one of the two has lost

nifier of community fracture. In confronting the gendered politics and tensions of the postwar United States, *Undertow* stresses a polarized and endangered society, condemns the instigating forces behind male heroic action, and by featuring women as reconciliatory agents, advocates their centrality in cultural unification.[14]

Contemporary critical responses to *Undertow* were overwhelmingly positive.[15] Amidst an artistic climate of overt femininity and European influence, critics embraced Homer and his paintings in strikingly masculine, native terms.[16] One critic called *Undertow* "penetrating."[17] Kenyon Cox wrote in 1910, "[Homer] strikes one as a natural *force* rather than a trained artist…His handling is forthright and almost *brutal*…[His paintings] give the world *assurance of a man*."(author's italics)[18] The truth is that his brushstrokes were as delicate as they were rugged, and women were protagonists of his imagined communities, perhaps more so than men.[19] Fisherwomen from Cullercoats, England, for instance, captivated him as subjects in the early 1880s (Figure 2). His series depicts courageous, physically and psychologically strong women who seem to blur the line between masculine and feminine in their bodies and actions. Frequently, Homer turned his attention to characters who fell outside of society's prescriptive gender boundaries, honoring women as independent human beings rather than members of a subservient sex.

That critics espoused Homer's paintings as wholly masculine was partly due to his perpetual bachelor status during a time when family values and domesticity were prized. Critics understood *Undertow* in the same terms they had come to understand Homer. This was a masculine painting by an unadulterated masculine painter. Homer also contributed to his self-image, vocally criticizing fashionable French art as un-genuine.[20] He is quoted as saying, "I wouldn't go across the street to see a Bouguereau. His pictures look false; he does not get the truth of what he wishes to represent; his light is not out-door light; his works are waxy and artificial. They are extremely near being frauds."[21] (Figure 3) The women in *Undertow* are meant to be everything those in Bouguereau's works could not be: real, believable women who emerge from the water in their tight fitting, wet bathing clothes in a narrative of unsettled catastrophe.

Despite critics' claims of rugged, untrained artistry, Homer worked carefully, well within the boundaries of the studio tradition. While his women emerging sensuously from the waves make obvious reference to a long tradition of Venus sea imagery, his women are not mythological; they confront the possibility of death. Homer's alignment of figures and their sculptural mass is reminiscent of the *Parthenon's* sculptural program. Like many travelers, Homer visited the British Museum where the *Parthenon* marbles were prominently displayed (Figure 4).[22] *Undertow's* monolithic figures prompted critics to make connections: it possessed "that harmony and dignity which we call Greek," and a "sculpturesque effect which endows [the figures] with the quality of the antique."[23] *Undertow* was received in strictly aesthetic terms and it was understood as a straightforward depiction of male heroic rescue.

consciousness, and both are apparently helpless and exhausted." Griffin (2004) 101, explains that the women are "utterly passive" and "no longer *perceive* the world around them." Henry Adams, "Mortal Themes: Winslow Homer," *Art in America* 2 (February 1983): 119, observes, "we see two female swimmers, either unconscious or dead." On the contrary, the most compelling explanation of the women's predicament comes from Conrads 80 who writes, "The women still seem alive—how else could they hold on?—but their ultimate fate is uncertain."

14 My essay joins a growing group of studies which closely interrogate the symbolic and cultural significance of Homer's paintings, attributing to Homer a culturally cognizant voice. See David Park Curry, *Winslow Homer: The Croquet Game*, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1984), Saul E. Zalesch, "Against the Current: Anti-Modern Images in the Work of Winslow Homer," *American Art Review* 5 (Autumn 1993): 120-125, and Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., "A Harvest of Death: the Veteran in a New Field," *Winslow Homer Paintings of the Civil War*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1989): 82-101.

15 The *New York Herald* reported that *Undertow* was "the star painting of the [National Academy] exhibition…a masterpiece which is quite classic in its rugged strength and vigorous simplicity of treatment." "The National Academy of Design," *New York Herald* 8 April 1887, quoted in Conrads 80. The *New York Evening Post* stated, "[*Undertow* has] a force about it, an air of truth …by its virility, its truth, its sincerity of intention, [it] outranks every picture in the Academy exhibition." "The Academy Exhibition. First Notice," *New York Evening Post* 14 April 1887, quoted in Conrads 80.

16 On Homer's relationship to realism, and realism's relationship to American art in the late nineteenth century, see Bruce Robertson, *Reckoning with Winslow Homer: His Late Paintings and their Influence*, exh. cat. (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1990).

17 "Art Notes. American Pictures at Doll & Richards," *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* 21 January 1887. While the sexual innuendo was likely accidental, it unwittingly speaks to *Undertow's* obvious sexual potency.

18 Kenyon Cox, "Winslow Homer," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 5, no. 11 (November 1910): 254-256.

19 See, for instance, *Scene at Houghton Farm*, 1878; *Eastern Point Light*, 1880; *The Berry Pickers*, 1873; *A Summer Night*, 1890.

20 His persona was one whose creation he contributed to over the years, helping to craft a virile American identity for himself and his work. See Burns 42-43.

21 Burns 42-43, quoted from George William Sheldon, *Hours with Art and Artists* (New York: Appleton, 1882) 137.

22 According to Conrads 79, he visited the British Museum during his 1881-1882 travels through London.

23 "The Fine Arts: Good Work at the Academy," *The Critic* 7 (9 April, 1870): 4, quoted in Conrads 80. Mrs. Schuyler van Rensselaer, *Six Portraits* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1894).

The irony of Homer's condemnation of Bouguereau is that *Undertow* is just as synthetic in its own right. Not only did Homer alter a rescue scene he may have seen, posing models to decide upon bodily posturing,[24] he rendered the bodies, in the words of one contemporary critic, "discordant, hard, [and] lifeless."[25] Other than that single critical response, the immobility of the figures and their placement, as if upon a theatre stage, went surprisingly unnoticed. Indeed, Homer arranged his figures in a way that seems purposefully directed and intentionally unnatural. The frozen gesture of the saluting male, the unproductive positioning of the right male figure, the blatant contrast between hard, erect male bodies and supple, prostrate female ones are details that appear as engineered elements of a theatrical drama.[26] While they did not fault the posed nature of the tableau-scene, contemporary reviewers did consistently critique *Undertow's* unusual coloration, as too harsh or dissonant, but it was never considered an intentional artistic move.[27] Homer was certainly capable of capturing movement in his figural compositions and creating less jarring color palettes.[28] Yet here the blues and whites are bold and harsh. As a result, the water appears sharp and cool. The light shining upon the left side of the canvas is without warmth.[29] There is a choreographed awkwardness unusual in Homer's work. The peculiar coloristic effects, accompanied by the staged configuration of figures, encourage recognition of the scene's pretense and the unnatural, forced character relationships Homer captured so realistically.[30]

While Homer's stylistic debt to Greek friezes has been suggested, the larger meanings behind his elongated compositions have been somewhat overlooked. Homer painted at least three of his major works as classically inspired friezes, or banded compositions. *Undertow*, *Prisoners from the Front* (1866), and *Snap the Whip* (1872) employ the same compositional structure: a linear group of contiguous figures inhabiting the same picture plane (Figures 5 and 6). Historically, the frieze was intended to form connections, linking figures or foliage together in an unbroken line to create a sense of continuity or forward movement.[31] Homer has reversed this trend, using the frieze instead to signify disjointed communities and divergent directions. *Prisoners from the Front*, his only large scale Civil War painting, depicts the most blatantly divided community of the nineteenth century, as three aligned Confederate prisoners face a commanding Union officer. In this visual stand-off, the opposing men represent the larger combative country. Similarly, despite the group activity and collaborative game-playing depicted in *Snap the Whip*, the game results in the collapse of community ties, when all figures, save the anchors, have lost physical contact with one other. The two boys who have broken off from the group are falling toward two young girls with a waving family farther behind them.[32] Symbolically, they leave behind their community of boy friendships to forge new relationships, those involving domesticity and union with the opposite sex.[33] The broken communities evidenced in these three

[24] According to Downes 120-121, Homer conceived of *Undertow* three years before he finished it; in Atlantic City he witnessed a drowning rescue. He worked on the painting and its preparatory drawings in New York by drenching female models with water on the roof of his studio, and he completed the painting in his recently renovated studio in Prout's Neck, Maine. For a detailed review of Homer's preliminary drawings and group figural experiments, see Nicolai Cikovsky Jr. and Franklin Kelly, *Winslow Homer*, exh cat. (Washington: National Gallery of Art; New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1995) 231-235. See also Alexandra R. Murphy, *Winslow Homer in the Clark Collection*, exh.cat. (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1986) 52-53, who mentions the various drawings and the likely Atlantic City rescue spawning them. According to Murphy 52, Homer visited Atlantic City specifically to monitor the techniques of the Atlantic City Rescue Guard.

[25] Anonymous reviewer, quoted in Philip C. Beam, "Winslow Homer before 1890," *Winslow Homer in the 1890s: Prout's Neck Observed*, exh. cat. (New York: Hudson Mills Press in association with the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, 1990) 24.

[26] Adams 119 states that the figures appear to be made of "porcelain rather than flesh and blood," attesting to their unnatural, contrived appearance. Griffin 101 also notes, "[*Undertow's*] classicized figures appear frozen in a tableau vivant. For an artist known for Naturalism, this overt artifice was unusual."

[27] See Conrads 81 n. 22, who states, "The coloration of *Undertow* is the only aspect of the painting that provoked a less-than-favorable response on the part of the reviewers. Nearly everyone, and some more vehemently than others, found Homer's colors too bold or discordant."

[28] Homer's Cullercoats series of women by the sea demonstrate his clear proficiency depicting figural groups and movement. See, for instance, *Fishwives*, 1883. Other paintings that, like *Undertow*, depict figures against the backdrop of the sea, also illustrate Homer's ability to capture motion in paint. See *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)*, 1873-76, and *The Life Line*, 1884. Homer was also a brilliant colorist, producing stunning watercolors and oil paintings. Among those that predate *Undertow* are *Sunset Fires*, 1880; *Promenade on the Beach*, 1880; *Autumn*, 1877, and *Hark! The Lark!*, 1882. These examples further indicate the intentionality behind Homer's color and compositional choices.

[29] See Conrads 80, who writes that "Homer worked with a limited palette based in cool colors appropriate to the iciness of the setting." To her, the iciness of the setting reflects the literal life and death situation on view.

[30] Engel 32 identifies a contrived quality to *Undertow*, writing, "It is only upon close examination that the unnaturalness of the situation becomes apparent." She neglects, however, to explore the reasoning behind Homer's artistic and thematic choices.

[31] Among a host of others, see the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, 13-9 BCE, and the *Parthenon* friezes, 438-432 BCE.

[32] Homer painted two versions of *Snap the Whip* in 1872. The larger of the two, shown and discussed here, includes the two small girls and waving family standing before a mountainous backdrop. In the other version, housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the background figures are indeterminate, smaller and much less prominent, and they stand against a flat landscape.

[33] Other than this now-standard reading alerting us to a form of communal opposition in *Snap the Whip*, Zalesch 120-125 also notes the contrast between smaller, weaker town boys—Homer indicated as

paintings are thus comprised of individuals struggling to find their rightful places within new societal arrangements. The banded compositional device Homer used alerts viewers to a telling symbolic correlation among these works.

As seen in *Snap the Whip* and other works, conceptions of gender in the late nineteenth century were in the process of transformation. With the radical number of deaths and casualties to men during the Civil War, gender roles became confused and unclear as women assumed new familial and societal responsibilities.[34] Homer's version of postwar gender dynamics foregrounded not simply the charged nature of male / female relationships at the time, but society's nascent movements toward political equality for women. As David Park Curry has demonstrated, Homer's croquet series from the mid-1860s accentuated the dismantling of male domination and the sexual role reversal that took place in croquet games whereby women assumed more active, participatory roles denied to men.[35] In *Croquet Scene* (1866), it is the women who stand erect as the main players and the man who bends to assist them (Figure 7). As in *Snap the Whip*, the game of croquet that Homer was interested in had much to do with the social dynamics that transpired, given the reversed convention of male sportsmen and sidelined females.

Opposition to female empowerment at the end of the nineteenth century was widespread. Croquet itself soon fell out of favor, in part because of its emphasis on the equality of the sexes. Despite societal attempts to assert what many considered to be an obvious male hegemony over the female sex, women strove for new political authority within their communities and claimed what territory they could.[36] Women's reforms demanded a role, for instance, in reconciling Northern and Southern animosity, and they advocated their unique female power to do so. The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), founded in 1890, maintained that "women's healing capacities might do more than male posturing in restoring sectional harmony," and that women were "active contributors to the patriotic consensus of the present."[37] As evidenced in *Undertow*, Homer appears to have agreed that women were active agents in community bonding, whereas the 'posturing' of men became an inflated feature of his work.

The war caused the country profound loss and mourning; it also presented women with new public responsibilities. *Our Watering Places—The Empty Sleeve at Newport* (1865), documents a female driver who exemplifies the postwar generation of self-sufficient women (Figure 8). Yet, as this image also makes clear, the war altered male roles. This man has lost a limb, requiring his wife to take the reigns of the carriage. Homer presented the ex-soldier not as a war hero, but as a man struggling to accept the reality of his newfound physical limitation and social situation. Battle has scarred him—socially emasculating him rather than shaping a courageous hero; he appears apathetic and malnourished. With this image, Homer mocked the glorification of war, emphasizing instead its psychologically devastating and physically disfiguring effects. Incapacitated and forced to ride as a passenger in his own car, this man might well have doubted his claim to masculinity.

This type of situation helped to instigate what historians have termed a societal crisis of manhood.[38] Masculinity at the turn of the century was a complicated concept. Whether or not white men should be controlling the country by themselves, how seriously women's reforms ought to be taken—these subjects were inevitable, conspicuous components of the postwar United States. Middle-class men at the turn of the century were pointedly interested in—even infatuated with—manhood, as evidenced in fictional accounts like Henry James' postwar novel *The Bostonians*.[39] Victorian ideals of gender demarcation were no longer as relevant or even possible, because of the war's destabilizing effects upon traditional gender roles, and because of an upsurge of women and men interested in female rights.[40] There was even a contemporary theory that sexual inter-

much by outfitting them in shoes—and the stronger group of farm boys from whom they fall. See Zalesh for an intriguing account of Homer's anti-industrialist sentiments, and his use of the shoe as a symbol of urban modernity.

34 On postwar conceptions of gender and specifically manhood, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995).

35 For an analysis of Homer's croquet paintings (*Croquet Player*, 1865; *Croquet Players*, 1865; *A Game of Croquet*, 1866; *Croquet Scene*, 1866; *The Croquet Match*, 1867-69) and an overview of the gendered dynamics affecting the sport's postwar rise and fall, see David Park Curry, "Winslow Homer and Croquet," *The Magazine Antiques* 174 (July 1984): 154-162, and Curry, *Winslow Homer: The Croquet Game* (1984).

36 On female involvement in postwar cultural unification, see Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1993) 168.

37 As quoted in Silber 164.

38 See Bederman 10-11. On the shifting meanings of masculinity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, also see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

39 *The Bostonians*, published the same year Homer completed *Undertow*, confronts the male society's gender dilemma through Basil Ransom, the novel's protagonist. Stringently determined not to let female reformers strip him of his rightful masculinity, Ransom defends the "masculine character" of the world that he fears is fading. See Henry James, *The Bostonians* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003): 325-326.

40 On how the Civil War challenged traditional conceptions of gender, see Joan E. Cashin, ed. *The War Was You and Me: Civilians in the American Civil War* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2002) 3, who writes, "The war unsettled, undermined, and sometimes destroyed traditional gender roles, in all regions, forcing people to reconsider their assumptions about appropriate behavior for men and women

course undermined male integrity, sapping men of their vital energy, one more element in the era's sexual tension.[41] *Undertow* highlights male preoccupation with proper gender relationships, and with it Homer articulated the complex masculine identity crisis of his time. The peeping male rescuer undermines Victorian sexual restraint, and the leading male figure, whose self-control restricts him from looking at the women, exaggerates it.[42] Representative of contradictory models of masculinity—one male working to uphold the Victorian moral model, the other breaking it and losing his concentration—the men embody the country's disjunction. By awkwardly avoiding contact with the women—they are careful not to actually touch their bodies, which would be a much more effective way of saving them[43]—the men's rescue skills themselves, ironically their most masculine characteristics, are called into question.[44] Disconnected from their environment, the men's attempts to adhere to an ideal, chaste masculinity endanger the survival of the very community they wish to save.

Homer was a Civil War correspondent, not a fighter. Even if he wanted to, he could never lay claim to male heroic status the way a war veteran could. Yet, he was politically active, mindful of the psychological ramifications of war, and intensely aware of the war-hero phenomenon. Far from celebrating heroism, Homer avoided clear-cut heroic subject matter throughout his career.[45] Instead, he reminded his viewers of the great toll war takes upon humanity. His Civil War images address the human costs of war: soldiers visiting cemeteries, soldiers in camp reading letters from home, women mourning for men.[46] A near contemporary of Homer's also acutely tuned to a cultural fixation on manhood and its link to heroic fervor was William James. Like Homer, James was vocally critical of war and its unnecessary violence. While prizing masculinity as a positive virtue, his essay entitled *The Moral Equivalent of War*, 1906, mocks war apologists, reproving their romanticized views about heroic death and their exaggerated military patriotism.[47]

Also grappling with the potential artifice and conceit of heroic action, Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* (1895), likewise debunks the pure nobility of war.[48] The Naturalistic novel's title is instructive—the protagonist seeks a *badge* of courage, an outward showing of it rather than the quality itself. Crane documented what appeared a rather obvious tension between the quest for manhood and true heroism; the soldier's ego endangers his ability to find his internalized, moral core.[49] Concern for heroism was a significant characteristic of the postwar American consciousness. According to many men, the Civil War still represented the apex of manliness.[50] Yet, the postwar generation of American men had experienced no war battles and no brave moments of military command; instead, they knew them only through "romanticized legacy."[51] Surely they felt a pressure to continue the ancestral masculine tradition established by their fathers and grandfathers. In this light, the male figures in *Undertow* appear to be copying a manly tradition of heroic action. The leading male emulates the soldierly tradition passed down to him with a saluting gesture of his own. Homer depicted men struggling to achieve their own acceptable versions of

of both races." Also see Will Kaufman, "The Regendered Civil War," in *The Civil War in American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006): 92-109.

41 On the construction of manhood and the mid-late nineteenth century conception that sexual intercourse compromised a man's strength, see G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Routledge, 2000). He discusses the belief that proper male behavior depended upon the utmost control of sexual urges. For according to period health experts, male ejaculatory release enervated and debilitated men. According to this mentality, by carefully regulating copulation, a man could preserve his energy and ensure his capability to function in society.

42 See Griffin (2004), 158 n. 47.

43 Exemplifying a more effectual rescue strategy, see "*Wreck of the Huron*," from *Harper's New Monthly*, February 1882, an eponymous image which depicts the aftermath of the catastrophe. A male rescuer carries a woman out of the water in his arms. His right arm is extended underneath her bent knees, and he holds onto her outer thigh. His left arm supports her upper back and turns her slightly inward toward his body for protection. Her arm is draped around his neck for added support.

44 Pfitzer 266 labels both men "utterly immoral" because their rigid stances and refusal to make human contact suggest a lack of moral integrity. Yet to say simply that they are immoral neglects to account for the gendered tensions involved in the rescue, and the complicated, shifting nature of masculinity at the turn of the century.

45 On Homer and the heroic, see Cikovsky 95, who writes, "So much did Homer avoid the glorification of heroic personality, it seems, that he more than once depicted its complete opposite." While Homer avoided concentrating on male heroic personalities, he did ennoble individual fisherwomen from his Cullercoats series to heroic proportions. More typical of Homer's heroic subject matter, though, is a work like *Wreck of the Iron Crown*, 1881, in which heroic activity takes place but is secondary to the deeper themes of man's vulnerability to nature, and life versus death, that captivated Homer throughout his career.

46 The paintings I am referring to are: *Trooper Meditating Beside a Grave*, 1865; *Home, Sweet Home*, *c*.1863; *The Initials*, 1864. For an anthology of essays on Homer's paintings associated with the Civil War, see Marc Simpson, *Winslow Homer: Paintings of the Civil War*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 1988).

47 William James, *The Moral Equivalent of War* (New York: American Association for International Conciliation, 1910).

48 Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998).

49 Similar stories of misguided heroism can be found in Civil War veteran Ambrose Bierce's short stories. See Ambrose Bierce, *Civil War Stories* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994).

50 See Silber 169.

51 Silber 169.

manhood in order to insure the prosperity of their community—which was, no doubt, of grave national concern.

Undertow is the result of a deeply reflective, culturally conscientious individual who understood sexuality as a profoundly important part of human nature, holding very real repercussions for the community at large. If we are to understand this work within its postwar context, this broken community is in need of reconciliation and the women are the central, mediating entities who provide the link. Certain biographical experiences may have contributed to Homer's attunement to and recognition of society's gendered system: his close relationship with his independent-minded mother and her recent death in 1883, for instance.[52] Other potential influences are solely speculative, such as Homer's sexual preferences. Whatever the motivating factors, Homer's presentation of women as resolute cultural agents contributed to the salient national issue of female equality.[53] The women are focally-placed starring actors here, insisting on community connectedness despite conflicting male leadership in a time of crisis. In *Undertow*, Homer advocated for female centrality in societal resolution and warned of society's dangerous emphasis on masculine gender ideals that threatened communal survival during an ongoing, unresolved trauma.

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[52] According to Johns 112-115, Homer's mother was an independent woman, while Homer's father was impetuous, dependent upon others, and self-absorbed. Griffin 12-13, refers to Homer's father as "selfish, irascible, egomaniacal and impractical," discussing Homer's closeness to his mother.

[53] On Homer and equality, see Cikovsky 95.

Figure 1. Winslow Homer, *Undertow*, 1886, oil on canvas, 29 13/16 x 47 5/8 inches (75.7 x 121 cm.). Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, © 1996 Clark Art Institute.

Figure 2. Winslow Homer, *Fishwives*, 1883, watercolor on paper, 18 x 29 1/2 inches (45.72 x 74.93 cm.). Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire, Museum Purchase, 1938.1.

[*above left*] Figure 3. William Adolphe Bouguereau, *Biblis*, 1884, oil on canvas. Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, India.

[*above right*] Figure 4. Phidias (*c*.490-430 BCE), *Three goddesses* (Hestia, Dione and Aphrodite?), frieze from the east pediment of the Parthenon, Acropolis, Athens, Greece, *c*. 438-432 BCE, marble. British Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

[*left*] Figure 5. Winslow Homer, *Prisoners from the Front*, 1866, oil on canvas, 24 x 38 inches (61 x 96.5 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Frank B. Porter, 1922 (22.207). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 6. Winslow Homer, *Snap the Whip*, 1872, oil on canvas, 22 x 36 inches. Collection of The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio.

Figure 7. Winslow Homer, American, 1836-1910, *Croquet Scene,* 1866, oil on canvas, 15 7/8 x 26 1/16 inches (40.3 x 66.2 cm). Friends of American Art Collection; Goodman Fund, 1942.35, The Art Institute of Chicago, © The Art Institute of Chicago.

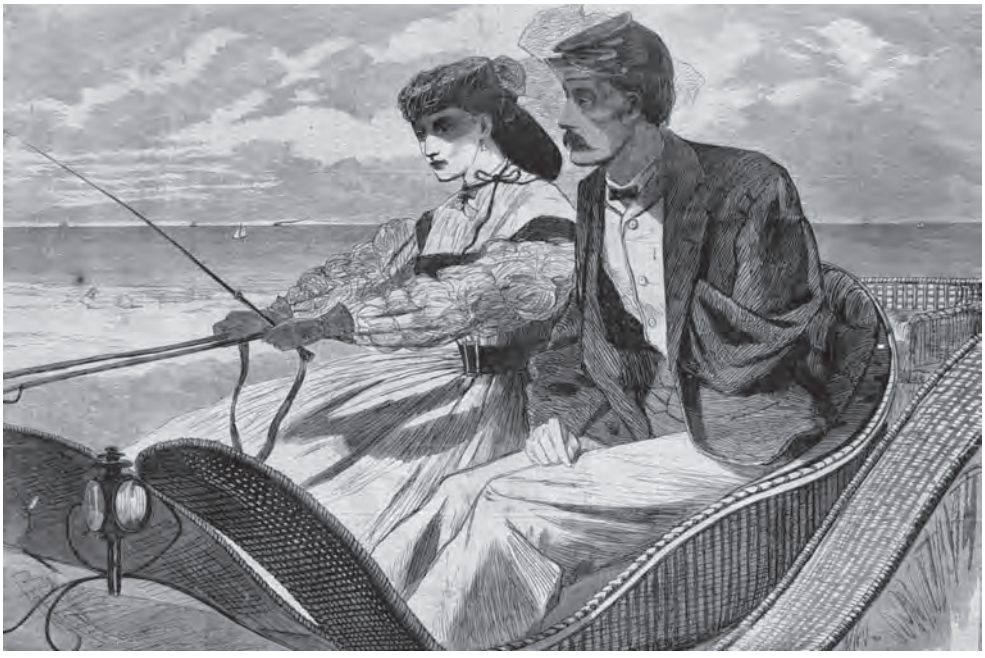

Figure 8. "*Our Watering Places: The Empty Sleeve at Newport*," After Winslow Homer, 1865, wood engraving on paper, sheet size 16.38 x 11.10 inches, image size: 13.66 x 9.21 inches. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.