



# Fictions of Reform

Dr. Allison Speicher

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## Senior Seminar ENG 461-01

Can fiction change the world? Nineteenth-century Americans certainly believed it could. Because today we think of the nineteenth century as a time defined by a devastating civil war, the oppression of women, the mistreatment of immigrants, the horrors of slavery, and the genocide of Native Americans, it's hard to imagine that the century was also a moment of tremendous optimism. In fact, the inequalities that defined American life helped to foster this optimism by giving rise to a dazzling array of reform movements intended to turn the United States into the utopia settlers had long imagined it could be. Americans rallied behind (or against) such causes as women's suffrage, the abolition of slavery, temperance (banning consumption of alcohol), dress reform (advocating less restrictive clothing for women), moral reform (the "rehabilitation" of prostitutes), common school reform (the creation of the public school system), and dietary reform. Many of these movements achieved monumental results that still impact the lives of Americans today.



In addition to leaving their mark on American history, these movements left their mark on American fiction. Reformers of all stripes embraced fiction as tool of reform. Their texts raise a variety of questions: Why were nineteenth-century Americans so convinced that fiction had the power to effect social change? How does fictional form facilitate or complicate the spread of reform ideologies? How does fiction impact readers—and can this impact change the world?

Over the course of the semester, we'll consider these questions and more, focusing primarily on three major reform causes: abolition, temperance, and common school reform. We'll read literary texts in the context of the reform movements in which they participated, and you'll learn how to access nineteenth-century newspapers and book reviews that will help us figure out how these texts impacted their first readers. You'll use this research along with your skills for critical analysis to produce a seminar paper of 20-25 pages by the end of our second semester. We'll read some famous authors, like Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, as well as forgotten texts like Timothy Shay Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*. As we tackle the work of writers neglected today, we will consider whether the topical nature of their texts—its reform content—keeps them from being seen as literature of enduring merit. By considering such questions of literary quality and the way texts impact readers, this course will challenge you to decide for yourself: what are the purposes of literature?

Tuesdays 4:00-6:45 p.m.