The Lighthouse Keepers Daughter: The Life and Work of Celia Laighton Thaxter

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The Lighthouse Keeper's Daughter:
*The Life and Work of Celia Thaxter*

“The fair face of every flower salutes me with a silent joy that fills me with infinite content; each gives me its color, its grace, its perfume, and enriches me with the consummation of its beauty. All the cares, perplexities, and griefs of existence, all the burdens of life slip from my shoulders and leave me with the heart of a little child that asks nothing beyond its present moment of innocent bliss”

-Celia Thaxter, Island Garden (1894), Page 113.

Living on the edge of the American empire, Celia Thaxter explored the dimensions of her life in ways that transcended, yet never fully abandoned traditional gender boundaries by cultivating her lifelong relationship with nature through creative expression. The lighthouse keeper's daughter constructed her identity based on the experiences that shaped her on the very edge of civilization. Coming of age on the Isles of Shoals, Celia reveled in flexibility and unrestricted freedom of her natural environment isolated from the cultural spheres on the mainland that reinforced the ideology of domestic femininity. This ideology was dominant in the 19th century in the sense that it was the most subscribed to convention governing the parameters of acceptable womanhood. While it was in fact pervasive, it's imperative to consider that women were not passive recipients of this ideology. Rather, they actively engaged with and negotiated
these cultural norms according to their own circumstances and agency. Celia's life is a fascinating lens through which to explore how individual women navigated these gender dynamics within the broader context of their lives to subvert the ideology of domestic femininity. Celia left her beloved islands at the tender age of sixteen into a marriage with a gentleman from the mainland. Without little formal education and relatively isolated from the dynamics that inform life on the continent, it was difficult for Celia to embrace her new roles as a wife and mother with confidence. The dissonance between personal freedoms she cherished growing up on the islands and constant demands of self-sacrifice fostered a persistent sense of discontent. Celia turned to poetry to express her homesickness for the Shoals, miles away from the expectations and responsibilities that had come to define her existence.

Celia's successful pursuit to establish her own literary voice amid the challenges of managing household affairs is an extraordinary achievement considering the tension between women's domestic responsibilities and creative expression. The relentless cycle of household chores and caregiving often left little time or energy for the sustained dedication and focus that writing often demands. Despite these challenges, Celia was embraced by disguised circles of Boston's intellectual elite. These friendships offered Celia guidance and inspiration to rise above her circumstances in pursuit of artistic expression. When her personal struggles threatened to overwhelm her, these confidants alleviated her doubts and anxieties by encouraging Celia to nurture her creative spirit in the natural environment of the Shoals. Nature writing helped Celia define her identity, removed from the demands of her everyday life, through powerful representations of the islands that shaped her personality. Her creative pursuits were always grounded in her immense emotional bond with the Isles of Shoals, serving not merely as indulgences but as essential lifelines that sustained her spirit amidst the grudge of her daily
responsibilities. By centering her writing on landscape, Celia gained a sense of power through
the language she employed to speak about or on behalf of nature. She found ways to express
herself authentically by striving to be in accord with the natural world.

The success of her literary career gave Celia the status and material conditions to
successfully appropriate the ideological tenets of domestic womanhood to serve her own
purposes. She embraced the popularity of the Aesthetic movement as a socially acceptable means
to reach her creative potential. Celia pursued domestic arts to reconcile the tensions between the
natural and domestic environment in her parlor, where each element harmoniously coexisted to
create a unified aesthetic experience. The distinguished cultural salons that Celia hosted in her
island cottage reconciled her lifelong struggle to manage the limitations of her domestic
environment on her creative expression. She created a domestic space that finally reflected her
inner world by incorporating elements of nature into the design of her parlor. By aligning herself
with the principles of the Aesthetic movement in her elder years, Celia was able to create a
domestic environment that was conducive to artistic expression. This marked a significant
departure from the constraints that had previously inhibited her creative endeavors, allowing
Celia to fully realize her artistic potential. In doing so, she challenged the notion that the home
was solely a place of confinement for 19th century women and instead redefined it as a potential
site of empowerment and self-expression. This reflects a deliberate effort to transcend the
limitations of domestic femininity in pursuit of creative expression without ever fully
abandoning its tenants. Celia actively engaged with and negotiated these cultural norms of
domestic femininity throughout her life according to her own circumstances and agency. In doing
so, Celia was able to nurture her lifelong relationship with nature through creative expression to
explore the dimension of her life in ways that subverted gender norms.
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Life at the Lighthouse

1835-1846

Where the mighty Pisataqua River meets the frigid waters of the Atlantic lay a harbor town nestled amid the rugged coastline and rolling hills of the New Hampshire seacoast. The weather-beaten buildings and cobbled streets of Portsmouth have borne witness to centuries of seafaring tradition. In late September of 1839, the salty tang of the sea yielded to the crisp breath of early autumn as fishing boats and cargo vessels berthed along the bustling docks at the water's edge. Men unloaded cargo from the ships with practiced efficiency, their voices rising and falling like the gentle swell of the tide as they exchanged goods and gossip. The honorable Thomas Laighton was the talk of the town as speculation regarding his unforeseen departure from the mainland left his fellow townsfolk pondering the depths of the young man's heart and the mysteries of his spirit.

Thomas Laighton was an ambitious fellow with the world at his hands, yet he willingly abandoned his prospects for a life of solitude and service when he accepted a post as a lighthouse keeper on the Isle of Shoals. Born on February 2nd, 1805 into one of the oldest and most prominent families in Portsmouth shipping business, Thomas lacked the typical pedigree of a lighthouse keeper¹. While Thomas was denied the privilege of a college education due to a slight limp caused by a severe bout of typhus fever, he remained undeterred in his pursuit of knowledge.

¹ Mandel, Norma H. Beyond the Garden Gate: The Life of Celia Laighton Thaxter. (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2004) pg 7. His father, Mark Laighton, was the patriarch of a family that could trace its ancestry back to Scotland prior to the Norman conquest. The first Laighton to cross the Atlantic settled in Portsmouth in 1645, with the following generations coming of age with the seaport itself as it grew into an international trade center. By the time Thomas was born, his father was engaged at the heart of these proceedings. The Laightons were exporters and importers whose ships cruised Eastern seaboard from Nova Scotia to the West Indies with cargos of lumber, molasses, rum, fish, and general merchandise.
as he cultivated an early life of public service. He was a well-connected man with a commitment
to serving his community, which undoubtedly led to his appointment as assistant postmaster of
Portsmouth under his friend Abner Greenleaf in 1833. A wealthy and beloved public servant,
Thomas had found success in both his public responsibilities and personal endeavors. He married
twenty-four year-old Eliza Rhymes on an early June day in 1831. The couple soon eagerly
awaited the birth of their first child in June 1835, a beautiful daughter whom they called Celia.
Their family grew in the years that followed when the young couple were blessed with the arrival
of two beloved sons, Oscar in 1839 and Cedric a year later. Hereby, Thomas had cultivated a
rich and fulfilling personal life that bolstered his public pursuits. As a family man and fixture of
the Portsmouth community, Thomas was embraced by the local political establishment when he
was elected to the New Hampshire State Senate in 1837. Once a man on the precipice of
opportunity, Thomas Laighton had seemingly turned his back on his prospects to tend a solitary
lighthouse miles away from his life on the mainland.

Suspicious against Thomas mounted when rumors swirled that he was bringing his
pregnant wife and three beloved children away from the mainland to cultivate a life of
domesticity amid the perilous desolation of the Shoals. Lighthouse keepers typically left their
families on shore as the unforgiving landscape in which they resided was seen as an unsuitable
setting to raise a family. The history of the Isles of Shoals reaches back into the mists of time like
the fog that often shrouds their rugged terrain. Long before cartographers etched their outlines

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2 Vallier, Jane E. Poet on Demand: The Life, Letters, and Works of Celia Thaxter. (Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall
Publisher, 1994) pg. 29. He first ventured to organize a reading club for workingmen, and continued his passion for
public education when he was elected to the school board to assess the equipment and requirements of the local high
school. As the son of a Yankee trader, Thomas inherited a certain aptitude for commercial enterprise and partnered
with his friends Samuel Tuckerman, Samuel Cleaves, and Ichabod Goodwin to establish the Portsmouth Whaling
Co. He then served a short period as an editor of the New Hampshire Gazette while serving as assistant postmaster.

3 Mandel, Norma H. Beyond the Garden Gate: The Life of Celia Laiton Thaxter. Lebanon, NH: University Press of

4 Rutledge, Lyman V. The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965) pg 62.
onto parchment, these islands bore witness to the continuous ebb and flow of human existence. Once an industrious seaport that dominated the profitable dried codfish export market during the early colonial period, a forced exodus of fishermen at the onset of the Revolutionary War led to the downfall of the fishing industry that once dominated the international market. By the time the reputable Thomas Laighton was rumored to have accepted a post on White Island, Historian Norma H. Mendel contends that the Shoals were home to a dying community, inhabited by a derelict population scarcely earning a living from the sea. The idea of building a home amidst such desolation seemed like a foolish attempt to defy the natural order of things.

There was a palpable sense of anticipation as residents of Portsmouth eagerly awaited any revelations of the truth behind Thomas's enigmatic plans, but he remained tight-lipped about his true intentions. Only a select few of his closest confidants were privy to his ambitious plans to revitalize the long-stagnant fishing industry at the Shoals by transforming it into an island resort. Thomas assumed that he would be appointed postmaster of Portsmouth when his friend Abner Greenleaf retired in the coming years. Until then, he intended to keep his mind and hands busy with this newest undertaking. While others saw only desolation and hardship at the Shoals, he saw potential. As seaside resorts swept across the country, the natural splendor of the Isles of Shoals seized his entrepreneurial spirit. Rapid industrialization and urbanization in the 19th century prompted city residents to seek respite from the hustle and bustle of city life, driving a

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5 *Ibid*, Pg 9. Innovative fishermen engaged with specific environmental conditions of the Isles of Shoals to develop a superior product called “dunfish.” The region's dry climate supported their distinctive curing process that bolstered the products' stability when transported on shipping vessels to distant trading ports. Mariners were able to extend their trading routes to untapped markets as the dunning process made the fish thinner with relatively little salt, allowing more product to be transported at a lesser cost without sacrificing its durability. This lucrative product catered to the tastes of both the New and Old World, transforming the Shoals into a lively seaport that connected established powers with their ever-expanding colonies across the ocean.


shift in leisure and travel preferences towards serene and natural settings. An increasing number of urbanites traveled to coastal retreats as the advancement of steamship travel and railway networks made these destinations more accessible to a broader swath of American society. Recognizing this shift in leisure and travel patterns, Thomas saw a tangible opportunity waiting to be realized. With meticulous planning and sheer tenacity, he sought to harness the beauty he saw in these harsh surroundings to create a seaside hotel.

The silhouette of the lighthouse eluded an aura of majesty as the Laighton family approached the rugged coastline of White Island, its presence a beacon of reassurance against the relentless force of the crashing waves. For the children, these first moments on the island felt like stepping into a fairy tale, as if the tiny island cast a spell of wonder and magic upon their lively imaginations. Celia reminisced about her family's relocation to White Island with a clear sense of nostalgia and fondness:

“I well remember my first sight of White Island… It was at sunset in autumn that we were set ashore on the loneliest, lovely rock, where the lighthouse looked down upon us like some tall, black-capped giant, and filled me with awe and wonder… Someone began to light the lamps in the tower. Rich red and gold, they swung round in mid-air; everything was strange and fascinating and new. We entered the quaint little old stone cottage that was for six years our home… I do not think a happier triad ever existed than we were, living in that profound isolation.”

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As they settled into their new lifestyle on the Isle of Shoals, the Laighton family embraced the challenges and possibilities that lay before them. Undeterred by scenes of isolation and uncertainty, Eliza Laighton assumed the role of matriarch to create a domestic realm that sat in contrast with the desolation of island life. There are no hints in the surviving historical record of what Eliza thought of her husband's solicitous endeavor. All too often, the wives of great men are not preserved in written history, causing them to be overshadowed by their husband's achievements without any consideration of their role in actualizing them. This oversight is rooted in the historical reality that women in the early 19th century had limited access to formal education, often hindering their ability to read or write proficiently. It appears that this was the case for Eliza as well. Rosamond Thaxter, in her biography of her grandmother, recounted that when Celia was expecting her third child she expressed her longing to converse with her mother through letters:

“Eliza, with great difficulty replied, explaining to her daughter that letter writing was extremely hard for her since she never had the advantage of as much education as her husband.”

Thus, scholars are left to speculate about Eliza's thoughts regarding her husband's plan in the absence of a reliable historical record. Despite any personal reservation she may have harbored, secondary accounts suggest that Eliza assumed the physical energy and moral courage to raise a family at the edge of oblivion with remarkable enthusiasm. She cultivated a sanctuary amidst the tumultuous sea, testifying to her inexhaustible capacity to shoulder the demands of family life on a desolate island.

Despite the challenges of their remote existence, Eliza refused to succumb to the despair of isolation, choosing instead to foster a warm and inviting ambiance within their home that surpassed the difficulties of their island life. As the relentless winter wind rattled their window panes, the Laighton family was confined to their quaint collage for months on end. Despite the inherent solitude of their lifestyle, Eliza inspired her children to find solace and contentment in the simplicity of their remote surroundings. In his memoir, Oscar Laighton, Celia's brother, praised their mother's dedication to creating a nurturing family environment on the desolate island:

“Many people have said, “You must have been very lonely at the Light.” They did not know that where our mother dwelt there was happiness also. I am sure no family was ever more united and contented than the Laightons on White Island.”

Eliza's selfless efforts cultivated a haven where the echoes of laughter drowned out the howling of the wind. With a steady hand and a compassionate heart, she guided her children through the trials of island life, teaching them to find beauty in the simplest of pleasures and strength in the face of adversity. This dynamic may have nurtured a lifelong dependency within the Laighton children for the company of their mother. Critic Perry Westbrook speculates that in her successful efforts to protect her family from all unpleasantness, Eliza inadvertently cultivated a mutual dependency between herself and her children. Cut off from the outside world, they turned inward, seeking comfort and reassurance from one another. Thus, it is likely that the profound sense of longing that Celia and Cedric suffered while living on the mainland was not

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entirely for the Shoals themselves, but rather for the presence of their mother, who remained eternally connected to their cherished island realm. Oscar would never leave. This perpetuated a cycle of interdependence that would shape Celia's life in profound ways, compelling her to put the needs of her family above her own her entire life.

Sheltered from the customs of Victorian femininity while coming of age on the Shoals, Celia was empowered to develop a sense of personhood beyond these conventions. The Laighton's stone cottage in the shadow of the lighthouse functioned as a classroom on dreary, cold winter days when Celia was educated by her father alongside her brothers as an equal. Thomas instructed his children in mathematics, reading, and composition, albeit without any systematic rigor. Thomas's instruction provided Celia with invaluable knowledge and skills, shaping her into a capable and intellectually curious individual. Her father was a model of public life, choosing to teach his daughter skills and wisdom to excel in the realm of public affairs that was traditionally reserved for men. Her brother Oscar recalled Celia's dedication and aptitude for learning were evident, earning her the distinction of being her father's best pupil:

“His knowledge of the best in literature and art made him a rare teacher. Sister was enjoying her lessons and advancing rapidly.”

Thomas immersed Celia in the discussions of literature and art, nurturing an unbridled curiosity and intellect that defied the stifling constraints placed upon most girls receiving schooling on the mainland. Women constantly negotiated their lived experiences with the prevailing social construct of domestic femininity in the 19th century. Historian Barbara Welter

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coined 19th century America’s ideology of femininity as "Cult of True Womanhood" in her watershed 1966 article "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860", in which she argues that lived experiences of upper and middle class white women were influenced by social expectations of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.\(^{15}\) This ideology was dominant in the 19th century in the sense that it was the most subscribed to convention governing the parameters of acceptable womanhood. American culture was permeated with messages that constantly validated and defined these expectations, from women's magazines espousing domestic advice to gendered educational curriculums. While seminaries that educated young girls in the mid-19th century offered certain academic endeavors, they imparted a cumulative and final academic experience rather than serious preparation for more advanced learning opportunities that awaited male students in colleges.\(^{16}\) Regardless of the depth or rigor in their academic offerings, these institutions reinforced the ideology of domestic femininity since their curricula mainly focused on practical skills deemed essential for managing a household. Thus, the intellectual growth of upper and middle class girls receiving education on the mainland was undermined by the perpetuation of societal norms that hindered the full realization of their academic potential.

This constant barrage of messaging from various cultural spheres, especially female seminaries, embedded the ideology of domestic femininity into the core of the American social order in the 19th century. While the Cult of True Womanhood was in fact pervasive, it's imperative to consider that women were not passive recipients of this ideology. Rather, they actively engaged with and interpreted these cultural norms according to their own circumstances and agency. The analytical framework proposed by Welter imposed a static framework on


inherently dynamic interactions, thus failing to adequately convey the relevant complexities of women's lived experiences in the 19th century. Framing these complex experiences within a rigid analytical framework risks overlooking the compelling strategies 19th century women employed to assert their personal agency while navigating their roles in American society. Celia's life is a fascinating lens through which to explore how individual women navigated these gender dynamics within the broader context of their lives. Living on the edge of the American empire, Celia spent her childhood an ocean away from formal educational institutions that often reinforced the ideology of domestic femininity. Free from the stifling expectations of "proper young ladies," her father's unconventional lessons empowered Celia to develop a sense of personhood that transcended the narrow definition of 19th-century femininity. Her unorthodox education facilitated her later creative pursuits by nurturing her artistic spirit, unencumbered by the confines of patriarchal tradition. With each lesson learned and every idea exchanged, Thomas empowered Celia to challenge the norms of her time and pursue her interests and passions with confidence.

Thomas’ informal methodology extended the bounds of education beyond mere academics by encouraging his children to acquaint themselves with nature's ambivalence. For instance, her father compelled her to reconcile the unyielding violence of storms and shipwrecks during her very first winter on the Shoals. In the midst of a nor'easter in 1839, the family bore witness to a shipwreck that later proved fatal, taking the lives of the crew of the Pocahontas as it was homebound to Spain. Celia later recalled this formative childhood memory that had left an indelible mark on her worldview, shaping her perception of the world and her place within it:

“During a storm in 1839, while living at White Island, we were startled by the heaving booming of guns through the roar of the tempest, a sound that drew near and neared, till at last, through a sudden break in the mist and spray, we saw the heavily rolling hull of a large vessel driving by, to her sure destruction, toward the coast. It was as if the wind had torn the vapor apart on purpose to show us this piteous sight; and I well remember the hand on my shoulder which held me firmly, shuddering child that I was, and forced me to look in spite of myself.”

Her father's refusal to allow a young Celia to turn her head from the tragic sight must have taught her a lesson she held close all her life. As she came of age into the demands of Victorian womanhood, Celia faced the inherent dilemmas of the female experience in the 19th century with inexorable fortitude. Her nostalgic recollections of her childhood on the islands nurtured her creative impulses throughout her adult life. She commemorated the men lost in this shipwreck, which she witnessed as a young girl merely four years of age, in an epic poem entitled ‘The Wreck of the Pocahontas', which garnered critical acclaim upon its publication in 1868. The very ruggedness of everyday life on the Shoals prevented her from embracing the popular romantic view of nature's benevolence. Rather, she spoke of its beauty and cruelty in the same breath. She bore witness to the ocean's stunning indifference to the lives of those who traversed its shores. Her childhood at nature's mercy compelled her to defy romantic tradition by representing the duality of the natural world.

As spring breathed life back into the island, the Laightans encouraged their children to interact meaningfully with their surroundings. Celia and her brothers immersed themselves in an

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ever-changing natural environment that stimulated their boundless imaginations. Each year, the children witnessed the resilience of nature in the face of relentless winds and unforgiving weather. As the sole inhabitants on the island, they acquired an acute intimacy with the ecosystem that lay at their fingertips. In her biography of Sarah Orne Jewett, scholar Paula Blancard provided insight into the children's intimate relationship with the Isle of Shoals:

“While the Laighton children probably had some conventional playthings, their world was miniature and highly selective, composed of tiny samplings of a larger environment. Other peoples' common places became their miracles.”

Celia's isolation on the windswept Isles, with only its wildlife and her brothers to play with, cultivated a profound appreciation for nature within her budding consciousness. The paradox of lush vegetative life flourishing amidst inhospitable conditions imbued every moment with a sense of wonder as if witnessing a series of miraculous occurrences. Within the fertile soil of Celia's young mind, a lifelong connection with the natural environment of the Shoals took root. As a young girl, liberated from the rigid structure of conventional schooling, Celia reveled in flexibility and unrestricted freedom of her natural environment. On the Isles of Shoals, she was free to roam the landscape of her mind and explore the depths of her creativity without fear or inhibition. In the absence of formal education, she learned to decipher the subtle cues of the environment, finding her greatest teacher in the ancient wisdom of the earth.

The education that Celia received on the Shoals was guided by curiosity rather than a gendered curriculum. Her childhood exploits within this domain empowered Celia to develop a

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sense of personhood beyond established conventions. Encouraged by her father, Celia formed her identity based on her own experiences and interests rather than societal expectations. Celia's relative freedom from the constraints of the mainland was noticed by renowned American writer Nathanial Hawthorne when he visited Appledore in 1852. His collection of personal journals and notebooks contains the following observations:

“Mrs. Thaxter sitting in a neat little parlor, very simply furnished but in good taste. She is not now, I believe more than eighteen years old, very pretty, and with the manners of a lady- not prim and precise, but with enough freedom and ease.”

Hawthorne remarks that Celia did not conform to the refined models of femininity prevalent on the mainland as a teenager. She roamed the islands with a resolve and independence that set her apart from her peers. In her unique position on the margins of society, Celia's formative experiences demonstrate the compelling ways in which individual women negotiated the complex interplay of gender dynamics within the broader context of their lives to challenge the ideology of domestic femininity. Her childhood on the Shoals enabled Celia to explore the dimensions of their life and construct their identities in terms that defied traditional gender boundaries. Far from the structured confines of traditional education, her childhood explorations of the islands became the solid bedrock upon which her creative pursuits would flourish.

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The Man from the Mainland
1846- 1856

Celia braved the ebb and flow of her adolescence in an era marked by constant flux. Each wave of transition brought trials and tribulations that altered the trajectory of her life, enriching her perspective and shaping her identity in profound ways. After six years, the Laightons cast off from their familiar shores of White Island and set forth on a new adventure. They left the cottage when Thomas was elected to a two-year term in the New Hampshire legislature in 1841.22 Despite his return to politics, Thomas was still determined to construct a resort hotel on the Isles, choosing to move his family to nearby Smuttynose Island to pursue this venture when a new lighthouse keeper took his post. In his periodic absence, Eliza became the entrepreneur of the family by managing the Mid-Ocean House of Entertainment out of the Haley cottage, which the Laightons had assumed as their temporary home.23 Her patrons expressed respect and admiration for the remarkable woman who possessed the rare ability to make everyone feel at home, no matter how far they had traveled:

“Visitors spoke fervently of her cheerful hospitality, radiant spirit, and genial disposition; her wifely devotion and motherly care of the children; her competence, courage and unaffected simplicity; and her wonderful cooking- especially her wonderful cooking.”24

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22 Rutledge, Lyman V. The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 196) Pg. 65.
24 Rutledge, Lyman V. The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965) Pg. 65.
Eliza transformed simple ingredients into culinary treasures that celebrated the bounty of the surrounding waters. Around her table, strangers were bound together in camaraderie by the shared experience of savoring her culinary delights. Eliza's charm and hospitality transformed even the simplest of gatherings into memorable affairs, where laughter flowed as freely as the wine. Here, in Mid-Ocean House of Entertainment, Celia learned the art of hospitality under the watchful eye of her mother. Together, they managed the daily affairs of the inn with charm and efficiency, guaranteeing that every visitor experienced the true essence of island hospitality.

The respite of fresh seaside air and gleeful festivities attracted Harvard graduate Levi Lincoln Thaxter, seeking to recover from a fit of nervous depression amid the pressure to settle on a career that would please the demands of his father. At only twenty-two years old, Levi felt the weight of the world on his meager shoulders. The eldest son of a wealthy banker, real estate broker, and businessman from Watertown, Massachusetts, Levi spent his life brooding in the shadow of his family tree. His family's honorable reputation had afforded him every opportunity, eventually attending Harvard College to pursue a degree in law with his father's encouragement. But as he pored over legal documents and engaged in debates with his peers, Levi's mind wandered to places far beyond the path that had been laid for him. After receiving his degree, Levi sought to foster his passion for the dramatic arts and poetry in defiance of his father's ambitions for him. Leveraging his oratory skills, he convinced his father to fund acting lessons in New York City, promising to utilize these skills in a future law practice. Yet, Levi was a man who struggled to match his ideals with his actions, so his acting career never

25 Mandel, Norma H. *Beyond the Garden Gate: The Life of Celia Laighton Thaxter*. (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2004). Pg 21. His family had nurtured their roots in the elite circles of New England society since 1638, with his forefathers including notable figures such as an aide-de-camp of George Washington, Benjamin Lincoln, and Massachusetts governor Levi Lincoln.

26 Rutledge, Lyman V. *The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend*. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965) Pg. 72.
materialized. After returning to Massachusetts in low spirits, he confided in his old friend and Harvard classmate Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who recommended a trip out to the Shoals to relax in the mid-summer sun. Levi accepted his friend's suggestion to find the strength to mend his broken spirit amidst the rugged beauty of the Shoals. And so, Levi and his friends boarded a fishing vessel bound for the Isles looking for a spark of new life in his weary bones.

The Laighton family welcomed the insolent dreamer and failed actor with open arms, inviting him for dinner at their residence. After this first acquaintance, Thomas recorded the events in a journal entry dated July 26, 1846, recalling that:

“The Mr. Howes & Mr. Thaxter dined at my house. Mr. Thaxter came to board with me. Paid Eliza for washing to date.”

His jottings typically cut straight to the point. Thomas rarely made any reference to his personal sentiments in his journals. He was a private man who lacked the inclination to materialize his inner thoughts and desires on paper. Rather, the journals that have been preserved, roughly spanning the years of 1846-1848, consist of sparsely written accounts of day-to-day happenings. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that Levi and Thomas struck up an instant rapport by the affairs that followed their initial meeting. On August 9th, the two men sailed around the islands, eventually making their way across Gosport Harbor out through Malaga Gut into the ocean sea. The two men soon found themselves drawn into an exchange that would forever alter the course of their destinies as they spoke of aspirations as grand as the ocean itself. Perhaps

29 Rutledge, Lyman V. *The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend.* (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965) Pg. 71.
taking into consideration the Levis’ generational wealth, Thomas capitalized on his state of listlessness by confiding to him about his plans to construct a summer resort on the Isles. Staring out into the vast expanse of ocean, Levi’s romantic inclinations were stirred by the vision Thomas had laid before him. Awakening a sense of excitement he had long forgotten, Levi allowed himself to be swept away by the possibilities that lay before him. This conversation became more than just words exchanged between friends when Levi took the first steps to cement their partnership. Always sustained by his family's private fortune, his father sent him $2,500 to purchase half of Hog Island from Thomas. The deal was finalized on September 13th when Levi’s parents sailed out to the Isles, leading to the agreement that the Thaxters shall occupy the North Cottage on Hog Island, whose name they had changed to the more appealing title of Appledore. Together, they envisioned a retreat where the upper echelons of New England society could escape the rigors of daily life in the embrace of nature's splendor. Soon after, the rugged coastline began to undergo a remarkable transformation as the hotel rose from the earth.

As the construction of the hotel ceased to wait out the harsh Shoals winter, Levi found himself with idle hands, yet still reluctant to depart from the island. Thomas must have identified the gentleman's dilemma and proposed a solution that he believed suited their circumstances. In the fall of 1846, Levi was invited to move in with the Laighton family and stay on the Shoals for the coming winter. He relieved Thomas of his teaching duties, giving him the time and energy to devote to their new enterprise. The children were enthusiastic to continue their unconventional education under the guidance of these enigmatic gentlemen from the mainland. Levi’s natural aversion to structure is reflected in his teaching methodology, assuming their studies without any

substantial direction. Despite boasting two prestigious Harvard degrees, Literary scholar Jane Vallier speculates that Levi's aptitude as a tutor left much to be desired:

“Levi Thaxter, trained professionally as both a lawyer and an actor, could proceed to complete the education of Celia Laighton with leisurely strolls along the beach, dramatic storytellings around the family hearth, and occupational investigations into the scientific lore of seaweeds and mosses.”

Levi's mentorship was certainly unmethodical, but he provided Celia with an education far richer than what she might have received at a traditional girls' school. He encouraged her explorations of the natural world and exposed Celia to the latest literary triumphs that would not have been contained in a formal curriculum. Levi spent his glory days at Harvard in the company of an elite gathering of young people who called themselves ‘the Brothers and Sisters’, since this circle was so exclusive that most of its members were related. These blue-bloods of Boston Brahmin society convened at Elizabeth Peabody's Foreign Book Store to attune their refined sensibilities to the nuances of literature and poetry. Their self-image as the champions of refined cultural heritage cultivated through literary salons that featured recitations of their own verses and works by the literary titans of their time. Levi unknowingly contributed to his students' creative evolution into a poet by teaching Celia the methodologies and conventions of leading figures in contemporary literature. Certainly, his insightful readings of Browning's

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dramatic monologues shaped the development of Celia's poetic expression. Her own dramatic monologues such as “In Kittery Churchyard” and “The Spaniards’ Graves” are saturated with a similar dramatic flair. Levi’s mentorship encouraged a profound understanding of the power of literature as a tool for radical self-expression. This empowered her with knowledge of literary traditions to later express herself in ways that she may have not been exposed to on the mainland. Thomas Laightons’ dream finally came to fruition almost a decade after he scandalized the local community by relocating his family to a lot of desolate islands. After a whirlwind of preparations, the Appledore House opened its doors to the public on June 15th, 1848. Every detail had been meticulously curated to replicate the natural serenity of the island with luxurious touches and modern amenities to ensure the comfort and convenience of its visitors. Thomas was intimately familiar with the habits and desires of the elite circles he hoped to attract to his ground-breaking venture, drawing on his experience in politics and publishing to advertise the hotel. The emergence of seaside resorts was not only a response to societal changes, but also a recognition of the health benefits associated with coastal living. Seaside resorts became synonymous with health and rejuvenation, attracting visitors seeking to improve their physical and mental well-being amidst the natural beauty of the coast. Thus, the Appledore Hotel, with its rejuvenating salty air and mineral-rich waters, was advertised as an antidote to the stresses and ailments of modern life. The image of the resort printed on the hotel's stationery was accompanied by the following promotion:

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34 Ibid. Pg. 19.
35 Rutledge, Lyman V. The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965) Pg. 75.
“These islands, situated at a distance of ten miles off the New Hampshire Coast, are blessed with an even temperature, a remarkably pure and invigorating atmosphere, perfect quiet, and entire freedom from dust. The most eminent physicians recommended a sojourn at the Shoals as possessing all the sanitary influences of a sea voyage.”

Promotional material for the Appledore Hotel emphasized the rejuvenating effects of spending time at the Shoals. For visitors seeking respite from the demands of industrialized society, there existed no greater sanctuary than this remote island destination surrounded by the Atlantics' vast waters. Here, members of high society vacationed amidst lush surroundings and luxurious amenities to reconnect with the natural world. The Laighton family had opened their secluded haven to the public as a testament to the healing power of nature to transcend the mundanities of everyday life.

Thomas's bold venture to construct an island resort proved to be an extraordinary success. With the financial support of Levi, he had transformed the once desolate landscape on the Isles of Shoals into a luxurious destination hotel. Their collaboration produced a grand edifice amid the ruins of a bygone era, reshaping both the physical terrain and the historical trajectory of the Isles. Within ten years, Thomas’ success seemed assured; he had added two wings and amenities such as a floating dock, bathing pool, tennis courts, and a bowling alley. Despite the success of Appledore's first season, Thomas and Levi took the preliminary steps to dissolve their partnership at the summer's end. The decision seemed to be amicable, with those close to the two

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38 Appledore Hotel: Correspondence of miscellaneous guests, 1878, 1888, 1893, 1898. Portsmouth Athenaeum, Isles of Shoals Collection.
men attributing the split to irreconcilable differences in temperament and commitments. Celia's granddaughter granddaugther Rosamund Thaxter would later suggest that:

“Levi was far too much of an intellectual dreamer to be very businesslike, and Thomas' quick and stubborn temper may have flared up once too often.”

It seems that Levi’s highbrowed nature did not suit the type of work that running a destination hotel requires. His lack of business skills compelled him to perform the kinds of tasks that the Harvard graduate, and his affluent circle of friends, considered beneath him. This sort of resentment must have led to tensions that provoked Thomas' quick temper. These disagreements seemed to chip away at their partnership, exposing fault lines that eventually ruptured under the strain. Thomas’ journal entries from this period suggest that the former business partners were cordial in the days following their split. Levi continued to live at the Shoals following the end of the season, a decision that hinted at a desire to maintain ties with the family rupture in his professional alliance with Thomas. It seems that the Laighton family did not suspect the revelations that followed.

What transpired thereafter is marked in the sands of collective memory, their true nature obscured by the ceaseless winds of time. Levi remained steadfast in his commitment to the education of the Laighton children. He began to sense a kindred spirit in a young Celia, whose passion for nature and poetry revealed a depth of insight and emotion that belied her tender years. At only thirteen years of age, her sharp wit proved a worthy match for his intellect, and

soon, it seemed she had captured his heart. This saga soon became a legendary tale in the folklore of the Shoals. An article published in the Boston Post after Celia’s passing, though undoubtedly speculative and lacking accuracy, relays the legend of their courtship:

“When he proposed for her hand to her father, the latter fancying his daughter to be a mere child, flew into a rage, the young lawyer was ordered out of the house and off the island. The lover left, but not far, however, for, after expressing a determination to wait until Celia should arrange to make legally her choice, he took up residence on a hut on an adjacent island. The affection of the young girl was increased instead of lessened, and at last the stern father was forced to relent, reluctantly consenting to the union on condition that they wait twelve months. They waited and were married in 1851.”

Fraught with whispers of speculation and the remnants of collective memory, this article shares the riveting tale of their fabled courtship. Yet, in between the embellishments and conjectures, there may be a hint of authenticity in this secondary account. Leading Shoals historian Lyman Rutledge speculates that Levi declared his love for Celia to her father on November 22nd, 1849. He supports this claim by referencing a conscious entry in Thomas’ journal recorded on that day:

“Thaxter handed me what he called a plan of the lot he wished to take- had some unpleasant words with him.”

42 “Poet Dead” *Boston Post*, August 28, 1894
This is the sole instance within his surviving entries where he mentions any tension in his relationship with Levi, even though their partnership with the hotel has since ended. This had led biographers to speculate that this passage refers to the instance when Levi first told him of his intention to marry his beloved daughter. Legend has it that rather than a blessing, he was met with a fury of disapproval from the patriarch of the Laighton family, who banished him from the islands. It is true that Thomas notes in his journal that Levi departed for Watertown two days after this conversation. But, if there was a quarrel, it seemed to have been quickly resolved. Levi returned to the islands on December 9th, and life seamlessly resumed its familiar rhythm, uninterrupted by the brief tumult.⁴⁴ Levi's bid for Celia's hand in marriage, though perhaps met with initial apprehension, was not outright denied. He maintained his standing in the eyes of the Laighton family, evident by his participation in their Christmas festivities that year.⁴⁵ This implies that while Levi's marriage proposal may have initially been met with apprehension, he wasn't rejected outright. Living on a remote island, Celia had a limited pool of potential marriage suitors. Levi, even if not an ideal match, offered a more stable and prosperous future compared to what was otherwise accessible to her under these circumstances.

As they welcomed the new year, both newfound lovers departed from the islands towards different horizons. Levi, finding the harsh winter on the Shoals incompatible with his refined sensibilities, retreated from the bitter cold in his family estate in Watertown, Massachusetts. Celia, on the other hand, set forth on a solo voyage towards an exciting destination she had yet to explore. She was enrolled at Mt Washington Female Seminary in South Boston, where she

⁴⁵ Rutledge, Lyman V. The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965). Pg. 78.
studied for one term in 1849.\textsuperscript{46} It was the first time she had ventured to live beyond familiar shores since she was a child. Legend says that her first, and only endeavor in formal girls' education was meant to sever the ties that bound Celia's heart to her tutor. Yet, while she was in boarding school, she visited Levi’s family and befriended his sister Lucy.\textsuperscript{47} Celia rarely wrote about this period in her life. Without her perspective, scholars are left to rely on a sparse repertoire of documentation to speculate on the nature of their courtship. Her only reference to their engagement from this point in time is contained in an unanswered letter addressed to Jennie Usher of Maine in the spring of 1851:

“Perhaps you do not know who Mr. Thaxter is. He is the gentleman whose wife I shall probably be next fall.”\textsuperscript{48}

While this letter may appear to lack enthusiasm regarding the promise of marriage, Celia's restrained tone and absence of personal reflection in her early letters align with the customs of the era. What may seem emotionally restrained to modern readers might have been considered perfectly expressive within the context of early Victorian culture. It is worth considering that Celia's intimate social circle was limited to her brothers as a child. While attending school on the mainland provided new opportunities to make friends, cultivating meaningful connections to share intimate emotional discussions likely proved more challenging than simply trying to expand her social circle. With this in mind, scholars have drawn on

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\item Rutledge, Lyman V. \textit{The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend}. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965) pg. 78.
\item Vallier, Jane E. \textit{Poet on Demand: The Life, Letters, and Works of Celia Thaxter}. (Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall Publisher, 1994) Pg. 32.
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secondary accounts to inform the period of Celia's engagement with her tutor. According to local historian Lyman Rutledge, Samuel Longfellow visited the Shoals in 1850 and wrote to his mother that:

“He [Levi] is not married, but betrothed to Celia Laighton, the daughter of him who once kept the lighthouse and now keeps the hotel- a simple, frank, pleasing girl of fifteen, who has grown up on the Islands, the flower of the rocks; for the last year planted in Boarding school garden or greenhouse of Mrs. Burill at South Boston”\textsuperscript{49}.

Like a delicate island flower uprooted from its familiar soil, Celia left the comfort of the earth that had cradled her for so long into an engagement with a man from the mainland. Her sanctuary was replaced by the uncertainty of new surroundings. Without a formal education and relatively isolated from the dynamics that inform city life, it must have been extremely difficult for Celia to establish roots in foreign soil. As she stood at the precipice of a brand new life, she had yet to reach full bloom.

To many of Levi's friends, it seemed an unexpected match. He always felt that he could not measure up to the lofty standards set by his family name and the accomplishments of his peers, always falling short in comparison. Perhaps their union was a desperate attempt to appease the expectations of high society rather than a celebration of his own desires. Literary scholar Jane Vallier suspects that by proposing to his young pupil, he fortified himself against failure since Celia was in no position to reject him:

\textsuperscript{49} Rutledge, Lyman V. \textit{The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend}. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965) Pg. 78.
“Afraid of failing in all competition with men of his own social class, Levi retreated to a world of poor fishermen and small children where his inadequacies would not be so conspicuous.”

Unable to surmount his feelings of inadequacy, Levi may have hoped her circumstances would shield him from the sting of rejection. Whatever his motivations behind his pursuits of an adolescent Celia, the prevailing attitudes of Victorian society at large did not consider the significance of power dynamics in the courtship. Any reservations that friends expressed about his marriage seemed to revolve around the disparity in social class rather than the difference in age. In the eyes of their peers, the union between the older gentleman and his youthful bride was perceived through the lens of social hierarchy rather than the years that separated them. In a society where socioeconomic status held meaningful sway, such distinctions often carried more weight than age. Higgison wrote of his best pals new finance with condescending praise in his diary:

“Lucy says she is by no means of a course nature and few girls would have borne as well as her unfavorable position. Levi writes that she ‘has a great deal in her’.”

This gripe suggests that his friends regarded Celia’s humble origins with suspicion, as a gentleman of culture and refinement was expected to seek a match befitting his esteemed standing and cultivated tastes. Yet, he recognized a potential in her that transcended the boundaries of class and station, empowered by the flexibility and unrestricted freedom of her

childhood on the Shoals which later facilitated her creative pursuits. It seems the brilliance of his beloved's mind, which Levi molded to his tastes as her tutor, shone far brighter than the dim flame of his friends' passive-aggressive remarks.

With no elaborate plans or advanced preparations, the couple spontaneously decided to exchange their vows amidst the beauty of their surroundings. Once Celia finished her term at the seminary, the only formal schooling she would ever receive, the couple returned to Appledore Island for the summer. Embracing the serendipity of the moment, the marriage license was attained and the minister was sent for the very day of the ceremony. The couple stood before an intimate gathering of loved ones, hotel guests, and staff and exchanged vows in an impromptu ceremony in the front parlor of the Appledore Hotel on September 30th 1851.52 Celia bound her life together in holy matrimony with Levi, forever altering the trajectory of her life, for better or worse. Celia's granddaughter heard nostalgic recollections of this day growing up, and her description of the wedding undoubtedly captures its heartfelt delights:

“Meanwhile Celia… gathered arms full of scarlet huckleberry leaves, bright rose-haws, wild asters and beach golden god to fill the room where she would be married. For her bouquet, she stripped the garden of its last, fragrant sweet peas. Her mother had finished making a warm, red merino dress for Celia, and this she wore for her wedding gown.

The wedding… took place in the gaily decorated front parlor of Appledore House.. The bride, slender and touchingly young, her brown hair smoothly parted in the middle and drawn back by her silver comb, held her head as always proudly high, as if to catch the sea breeze;

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Levi, with his full auburn beard and deep-set piercing eyes, was a distinguished looking bridegroom\(^5\)3.

Her arms laden with the bounty of the island, Celia transformed the grand parlor of her family's hotel into a garden of enchantments. Surrounded by the beauty of the flowers and the love of her friends and family, the sixteen-year-old bride turned the page to a new chapter in the story of her life. Amidst the serene beauty of Appledore, the newlyweds embarked on their honeymoon in the North Cottage nestled in the island's verdant landscape.\(^5\)4 Among the lush foliage and overlooking the shimmering ocean, the cottage was a fitting setting to begin their married lives. With the changing seasons came a sense of transition. As autumn faded into the cool embrace of winter, the newlyweds bid farewell to the island and set their sights on the mainland once more. As a stranger in unfamiliar land, Celia faced the daunting propset of reconciling her sheltered island upbringing with the demands of her new life.


\(^{54}\) Rutledge, Lyman V. *The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend.* (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965) Pg. 81.
Land-locked

1851-1861

Celia's early years as a wife were a whirlwind of changing landscapes, yet her island roots held firm. Celia and her new husband led a nomadic lifestyle in the early years of their marriage, constantly moving with the coming of the seasons. The couple began to settle into a routine of spending winters on the mainland, finding sanctuary from the harsh cold amidst the delights of refined society, while the warmth of summer drew them back to the Shoals. Levi continued to evade the responsibilities of employment, extending his reliance on his family's financial support well into his married life. His fathers' generosity secured a temporary residence for the newlyweds in Watertown, Massachusetts. 55 This was the first place that they may have called home after exchanging the vows of marriage, but Celia's heart always reserved that title for her cherished islands. Celia returned to the natural splendor of her island sanctuary with her husband in the months leading up to the birth of her first child. The boy, whom the couple named Karl, drew his first breath from the salty Shoals breeze in the summer of 1852. 56 While there are conflicting accounts of his birth, it seems that any indications of his disability remained elusive in infancy. It wasn't until he grew up into childhood that the true extent of his condition became evident. For now, Celia enjoyed tender moments of domestic bliss with her child. With the coming of winter, she bid a heartfelt farewell to the Shoals and began counting down the days until she returned with her new family in the spring. Upon their return, Levi assumed the

56 Rutledge, Lyman V. The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965). Pg. 52.
temporary position of lay minister at the Stone Chapel on Star Island in the spring of 1853. Celia settled into a provisional residence in a cozy parsonage by the meetinghouse. At seventeen years old, a child herself in many ways, Celia took great pleasure in acquainting her infant child with the serene expanse of the island's beauty. Her son's wide-eyed wonder mirrored her own from years ago, and in that moment, their shared experiences in the island's natural environment connected her past to the future she was building with her new family.

When Celia went back to the hustle and bustle of the mainland, she couldn't help but long for the simplicity and tranquility she left behind. The Curzon family in Newburyport graciously extended their hospitality to the newlyweds, urging the couple to make use of their mill house. In the fall of 1854, they relocated to a charming house along the banks of the Artichoke River. Embracing the warmth of their welcome, they settled in for what promised to be a longer stay. Celia's second son John was born in Newburyport in 1855 and welcomed by the crisp November breeze. As they cradled their newborn in their arms, the couple dreamed of the memories they would create together as a family. Yet, just a year later, tragedy would cast a shadow over their once-happy home. With the arrival of summer, Celia led her young family back to the Isles. In the autumn of that season, Oscar and Levi were sailing back to the island from Portsmouth with household supplies when they found themselves ensnared in the clutches of an unforeseen storm. Despite the men's efforts, their boat's fragile frame was no match for the wrath of nature and men were flung from the vessel. Their bodies were washed ashore, somehow managing to weather the onslaught of wind and wave, emerging battered but alive from the ordeal. Ill-suited for the harsh realities of seafaring life, Levi was left traumatized by the shipwreck. He chose to distance

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58 Rutledge, Lyman V. The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965). Pg. 82.
himself from the sea and sold his island property to his father-in-law. His resolve to abandon island life remained steadfast, avoiding any return to the Shoals for nearly two decades after this fateful day. Levi's decision to uproot their lives from the familiar delights of the childhood home that his young wife loved dearly undeniably fractured their marriage. Born from the initial rift, the ache of leaving behind her childhood home became a heavy burden that she bore alone.

As her husband severed his ties to her beloved islands, Celia's farewells lingered in the sea breeze, unsure of when she would return to those shores again. With each gust of wind carrying the echoes of their departure, Celia, Levi, and their two boys returned to the mill house on the river that winter. Her letters from the winter of 1856 are rife with an almost childish delight in the pleasures of the season as a new mother. While Celia immersed herself in the joys of motherhood, her days filled with the laughter and love of her growing family, she could not seem to shake the profound longing she felt for the Shoals in these letters. She composed a letter to her brother Oscar to express her homesickness, one of the few people who could sympathize with her plight:

“The Merrimack is a great deal better than the land, it is like a great flat marble floor and the amount of sleighing down on it is remarkable. I tried to skate the other day but kept falling down and my king Levi laughed so that I gave up in great disgust. I keep faithful to coasting and yesterday coasted way from the top of a high hill, a long coast I can tell you… I wish the winter was gone and we were all back at the dear old island again. I long for you all to see the children.

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I suppose every old lady thinks her own geese, swans, but I certainly do think my two little boys dear and cunning and lovely.”

It seems that while skating on the frozen river, Celia could feel the currents beneath the icy surface of the river pulling her towards the sea, back to her cherished islands. The river, with its crystalline surface shimmering in the pale winter sunlight, was a only painful reminder of the spectacular ocean she had left behind. Despite his young bride's early disconnect, Levi took decisive steps to firmly establish the family's roots on the mainland. In 1856, Levi finally settled his family into their own home in Newtonville, Massachusetts, with his father's money. After years of bouncing from one place to another, their new estate stood proudly on California Street, offering a commanding view of the open field and the majestic Charles River just beyond the fertile soil. The comforts of the grand house did not grant any solace to Celia. The vastness of the estate stood in stark contrast with the cozy familiarity of her island cottage. The daily routines of tending a small living space in harmony with nature were replaced by the continuous duties of managing a sprawling estate in the suburbs of Boston. Each room seemed to echo with the echoes of tasks yet to be completed, a constant reminder of the expectations placed upon her as the mistress of the household owned by a man of leisure. The transition into a life of domesticity, miles away from the island's tranquil pace, exacerbated Celia's deep-seated longing for the familiar rhythm and manageable tasks of her past.

The weight of raising her children and managing the household fell squarely on her shoulders in this mansion. Celia bore these new responsibilities while her husband leisurely

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61 Rutledge, Lyman V. The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965) Pg. 83
strolled through the nearby woods and recited poetry by the hearth. With the birth of her youngest son, Roland, in August 1858 the demands of running the household became even more arduous. As she tended to the needs of their growing family, Celia found herself also expected to play the role of the gracious hostess, entertaining her husband's college friends with hospitality and charm. Celia would come to bitterly refer to this house as the "Bachelor's Hall." As she tirelessly attended to the demands of domestic life, Celia was left to navigate the complexities of motherhood and household management with little assistance. Levi’s perpetual lack of employment certainly presented financial constraints, as the money that his affluent family provided did not cover permanent household staff along with their other expenses. The new housewife confided in her friend Elizabeth Curzon Hoxie in March 1857 that the precariousness of their finances compelled her husband refuse assistance with tending to the household duties at times:

“I do my own washing now, and think of you all the time, and get tired to death and half dead, but unlike you fret and worry when things go wrong, and scold and fuss. How mine takes wing and leaves me forlorn and ugly and horrid! How it seems as if the weary load of things one makes out to do, with such expenditure of strength and nerves and patience, goes for naught, no manner of notice ever taken of all that is accomplished; but if anything if left undone, ah me, the hue and cry that is raised.”

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In this intimate correspondence, the state of mental exhaustion caused by the relentless demands of daily domestic labor is laid bare. While expectations of domesticity certainly empowered women who appropriated these dominant conventions to serve expansive purposes, the relentless toil Celia endured behind closed doors extracted a heavy toll on both her mind and body. The dissonance between personal freedoms she cherished growing up on the islands and constant demands of self-sacrifice fostered a persistent sense of discontent. Isolated from the support and guidance of her immediate family on the Shoals, life on the mainland presented challenges she was ill-equipped to face without support.

This strain was certainly exacerbated by the worsening progression of her son's physical and emotional challenges. The stark reality of his limitations became increasingly apparent with each passing day. Vague anxieties grew as Celia and Levi saw that their eldest could not keep pace with his younger brothers physically or mentally.65 It was a common practice for families in the 19th century with mentally disabled children to send them to specialized facilities. However, Celia found this solution unsuitable for her family's circumstances. Rather, driven by a mother's determination to provide her child with love and support, she assumed the role of full-time caregiver to her disabled son until her death. She disclosed in another letter to Elizabeth Curzon Hoxie in November 1857 about the difficulties she had raising Karl:

“Karly, I think is getting less nervous than he was. I try very hard to let him alone, but he is so mischievous that I can’t help visiting him with small thunder occasionally, also spansks. Poor little spud! He is very loving and sometimes very sweet and gentle.”66

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65 Rutledge, Lyman V. *The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend.* (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965) Pg. 95.
Even when the challenges seemed insurmountable, she always saw the best in her eldest son. She faced the vexations of family life with a remarkable determination, often disregarding her own needs in service of those she loved. The responsibilities she shouldered, borne out of love but ever-present, chipped away at the carefree essence that had defined her youth. Faced with these hardships without a guiding hand, the contentment that had once flowed naturally from her connection to the natural environment of the Shoals eroded. The carefree island girl now sacrificed the freedom she had known as a child on the altar of familial duty.

Disillusionment, a slow but relentless tide, permeated her surroundings and the roles she found herself in. Celia was stricken by a pervasive sense of homesickness for the Shoals, miles away from the expectations and responsibilities that had come to define her existence. It wasn't just the physical distance from the Shoals that tormented her. A deeper longer festered within Celia for the life she once knew, where the cadence of the waves lulled her worries away and the wind's embrace invigorated her spirit. She again penned a letter to her steadfast confidante, Elizabeth Curzon Hoxie to express her discontent, this time from Newtonville in the winter of 1859:

“New baby and his brothers are in bed and sleep and I feel like being in bed and sleepy too, too sleepy to have any ideas left… Somehow ‘crude’ is the word that expresses this place. It seems to be uninteresting, not one beloved, friendly face within reach, no children for ours to play with, but it might be a great deal worse too…

Tell Margie, mother has half promised to come this February and see us, and that we are going to the island in March, for in the summer Levi proposes wandering off to Mount
desert or some preposterous place. They can never be such a charming sea place as the islands; how can anybody want to go further? I do not, most certainly.”

Her exhaustion with the ceaseless demands and responsibilities of daily life in Newtonville is explicit, fomenting a pervasive sense of disconnect with her ‘crude’ and ‘uninteresting’ surroundings. Celia's mind often drifted back to the idyllic days of her youth to cope with these feelings. She recalled the rhythm of life on the island, where time seemed to flow at a gentler pace. With the island's granite bedrock beneath her feet, solid and affirming, she had known a peace that evaded her now. Consumed by a yearning that swelled with the changing of the seasons, Celia penned a heartfelt poem to her brother Cedric in May 1860. In the verses, she revealed the profound homesickness she harbored for the Isles of Shoals, a place that held her heart captive with its memories. As the ink flowed like tears, Celia poured the depths of her homesickness onto the page. Though separated from the Isles of Shoals by miles of distance, she found solace in the act of creation, as if her words had the power to transcend the bounds of distance and time.

It is not surprising that Celia turned to poetry as a means of coping with her emotions during this difficult phase in her life. The constant demands of her domestic responsibilities left Celia feeling drained and unfulfilled. This new stage in her life counterposed the unencumbered freedom and exploration she had been accustomed to as a young girl on the Shoals. As she navigated this transition into 19th-century womanhood, she found a constant source of inspiration and creative energy in her formative connection with this environment. Her

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immersion in the rhythmic cadence of Levi's poetry recitations empowered her impulse for artists' creation, and soon the iambic pentameter of the English romantics seeped into her consciousness.\textsuperscript{69} While she resonated with the cadence and themes of the romantic verse, she was not content to merely replicate the literary titans of a bygone era. Literary scholar Jane Vallier argues that while Celia inherited the romantic forms of an earlier generation, she deftly infused with poetry her own unique literary voice. Celia breathed fresh vitality into the established forms of poetry by weaving it seamlessly with her experiences and insights into her verses.\textsuperscript{70} Thus, Celia's poetry was not just a celebration of the beauty of the external world, but also a reflection of her inner landscape. This gave her poetry a sense of authenticity, each line a reflection of her astute perception and deep understanding of the human condition. Vallier grounds this argument on the principles outlined in T.S. Eliot's seminal work, " Tradition and the Individual Talent."

According to Eliot, every artist must grapple with the interface of cultural tradition and their own creative voice.\textsuperscript{71} She captured the spirit of her time amid a changing literary landscape by grounding romantic ideals in the gritty realities of everyday life on the Shoals. In doing so, Celia Thaxter pushed the boundaries of literary tradition in the 19th century, yet she remained firmly rooted in the timeless themes and motifs that have captivated readers for centuries.

How the poem made its way to the desks of publishers at The Atlantic has long been a subject of conjecture. Her marriage with Levi Thaxter certainly acquainted her with the literary publishing world centered in Boston. The city stood as the epicenter of the early American publishing world in the 19th century, fostering a rich intellectual culture and concentration of literary talent. Established in 1857, the Atlantic Magazine appointed James Russell Lowell as its

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, pg. 114
\textsuperscript{70} Vallier, Jane E. Poet on Demand: The Life, Letters, and Works of Celia Thaxter. (Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall Publisher, 1994) Pg. 64.
inaugural editor, who happened to be Levi's cousin by marriage. This relation is a clear personal link between the editorial team at the Atlantic and the Thaxter family. This has led some experts to speculate that her husband may have facilitated her entry into the literary realm by sending Lowell her work, however, a letter penned by Celia in her later years contradicts this assumption. The letter, sent to Rev. George Bainton dated April 13th, 1889 reveals that Levi did not play a role in forwarding her poems to Lowell or any other literary figure:

“I gave the verses to a friend who in her turn gave them to her mother who was on the staff of the Atlantic at the time, she put them in the hands of James Russell Lowell the Editor, who christened them “Land-Locked” and printed them in the magazine.”

The contents of this letter share a profound truth that shatters the misconception that Levi made any effort to help advance his wife's literary talents into a career. Rather, another person, whose identity is hinted at in this letter, facilitated her launch into Boston's literary realm as an author in her own right, not simply the wife of an affluent gentleman. Celia remained ignorant of the decision to relay the poem to the staff at the Atlantic until she encountered her verses within the pages of the esteemed publication's March 1861 issue. The revelations contained in this letter shed light on the nature of Celia's relationship with her husband which contrasts with previous assumptions. It is apparent that Levi chose to provide financial assistance for Celia's

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72 Rutledge, Lyman V. The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965) Pg. 75.
73 Thaxter, Celia. Correspondence (copy), 1861-1892. Portsmouth Athenaeum, Isles of Shoals Collection. Mary Kelley scholarship determines the peculiar circumstances that enable women's presence in the literary world. She found that the popularity of magazines and literary journals in the 19th century provided a crucial platform for women writers. These publications were more receptive to submissions from female authors than traditional book publishers. For more information, refer to Kelley, Mary. Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America. (New York, Oxford University Press, 1984).
career pursuits only after her career had been firmly established. However, this support was never given without the constant pressure to make ends meet\textsuperscript{75}. Yet, even without her husband's financial or emotional support, Celia's poem received immediate public acclaim upon its release.

Celia's successful pursuit to establish her own literary voice amid the commonly overlooked challenges of managing household affairs is a remarkable feat considering the tension between women's domestic constraints and the creative impulse to write. The conditions of women's lived experiences in the 19th century hindered creative expression. The relentless cycle of household chores and caregiving often left little time or energy for pursuits outside of the home. Virginia Woolf recognized these limitations placed on women's creative potential in her assertion that “women must have money and a room of her own” to produce creative works.\textsuperscript{76} The constant interruptions and emotional labor of domestic life create an environment that stifles the focus and sustained effort necessary for creative endeavors. Woolf’s assertions strongly resonate with the lived experiences of female writers in the 19th century, even authors who earned national recognition and acclaim. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s intimate correspondence with family members illustrates her constant struggle to accommodate the needs of her large family with the success of her literary career. Eleven years before Celia emerged onto the New England literary scene, a frustrated Harriet Beecher Stowe found herself pleading with her husband:

"You must not expect very much writing of me for it drinks up all my strength to care for and provide for all this family—to try to cure the faults of all—harmonize all."\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{77} Harriet Beecher Stowe to Calvin Stowe, 6 November 1850, Acquisitions, S-DF.
Here, the renowned author laments the lack of time and energy to pursue her creative endeavors while raising seven children. Her emphasis on "all this family" underscores the sheer volume of work expected of her as a mother. Thus, the act of writing, a pursuit requiring sustained focus and energy, is sidelined as she prioritizes the care and provision of her children. Stowe could not reconcile the conflicting demands of her literary career and family life since her constant domestic responsibilities hindered her ability to fully dedicate herself to her craft. Her desperate pleas to her husband revealed that the lack of a dedicated space removed from household demands, both literal and metaphorical, served as a barrier that prevented female writers in the 19th century from achieving their full creative potential.

Celia shared this plight with the nationally acclaimed novelist, as both their creative pursuits were in constant tension with the struggles of managing a family. Despite the myriad responsibilities that came with running a household and caring for a family, Celia devoted precious moments of solitude to nurture her artistic passions. In correspondence with her editor James T. Fields in 1862, Celia disclosed that she composed her poetry in the midst of domestic tasks and chores.

“Meanwhile here are some verses which have been evolved among the pots and kettles, to which you’re welcome, if they're good enough for you.”

This correspondence reveals the fragmented nature of her creative process. The imagery of ‘among the pots and kettles’ evokes a sense of chaos and interruption that prevents the dedicated space and focus that Woolf deems essential for creative freedom. Instead, Celia's

writing process was relegated to fleeting moments available in between household chores. This lack of a dedicated space to pursue her creative endeavors impacts the quality of her work, as she implies by offering the verses "if they're good enough for you." Her apologetic tone hints at a diminished sense of confidence, perhaps a consequence of the fragmented and rushed nature of her writing process. Denied the privilege of their male peers to fully devote their time and energy into their work, female writers often doubt their own talents and downplay their achievements.79 Thus, Celia's poetry, which later evolved into prose, encapsulates the challenges that female writers in the 19th century faced as they navigated the conflicting demands of self-expression and Victorian femininity. Yet, even within the confines of her domestic existence, Celia's formative connection to nature empowered her to devote any moments she could to exploring the depths of her own inner world. Her creative pursuits were always grounded in her immense emotional bond with the Isles of Shoals, serving not merely as indulgences but as essential lifelines that sustained her spirit amidst the grudge of her daily responsibilities. By creating space for artistic talents to flourish despite these challenges, Celia asserted her individual autonomy as she processed her lived experiences through creative expression.

New Horizons

1862-1874

With her verses striking chords in the hearts of readers far and wide, Celia rose into the esteemed ranks of Boston's literary culture following the resounding success of her first poem. The city itself was a publishing powerhouse, attracting both established authors and emerging names. This concentration of literary talent gave rise to what can be described as an intellectual high society that cultivated a distinct literary taste that resonated with a national audience. The cultural luminaries of Boston congregated in literary salons, stately homes, and lecture halls to discuss the pressing social and moral issues of the time. As the daughter of a celebrated hostess, Celia thrived in the intellectual fever in Boston's grand estates and cultural gatherings. She was soon embraced by leading cultural thinkers whose spirits resonated with her own. Celia's friendships served as a vital support system, guiding her through the trials of daily life by dispelling feelings of isolation and offering a comforting sense of reassurance. These friendships supported her personal growth by exchanging meaningful conversations and shared experiences. This exchange of ideas and experiences not only enriched her personal life but also encouraged her literary talents. These bonds formed the keystone of her creative life, enabling Celia to pursue her creative passions even in the face of personal challenges. The ability to share creative pursuits, receive feedback, and simply have a network of understanding confidants proved invaluable for the young poet. Celia's experience shows that friendships cultivated by 19th-century women weren't merely social pleasantries, but forces that empowered them to defy limitations and thrive creatively.

81 Ibid. Pg 40.
As Celia navigated the esteemed circles of Boston's intellectual elite, Annie Adams Fields became her most intimate companion. Her husband, James T. Fields had succeeded Levis' cousin as the editor of the Atlantic in 1861, wielding significant influence as both an editor and writer by shaping the magazine's content and steering its editorial direction to the forefront of literary innovation. Fields's successes in publishing not only bolstered his own standing but also laid a solid economic foundation for the burgeoning literary scene in Boston, shaping the trajectory of 19th-century American literary culture. Yet, behind the success of every great man often stands a great woman, and in Fields's case, that woman was Annie. Annie was an equal partner, not a subordinate, in her marriage, often collaborating with her husband in various editorial capacities. Annie's keen eye for literary talent complemented James's editorial vision, and together the couple empowered new perspectives and nurtured emerging literary stars in the pages of the Atlantic. Her tireless work behind the scenes was instrumental in their collective success.

As a devoted wife, Annie firmly believed that it was her domestic responsibility to fashion her household into a literary salon for the authors her husband represented. She saw her role not merely as a supporter of her husband's career, but as an essential contributor to the literary community that flourished within their household in her own right. As a gracious hostess and patron of the arts, Annie cultivated an atmosphere of sophistication and elegance that captured the spirit of an earlier age. Charles Dickens considered the salon at 148 Charles Street as a link to the past, a symbol of refinement and culture. Annie's dedication to preserving the

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traditions of the past while fostering innovation and creativity made her salon a revered institution among Boston's literary elite. As a beacon of intellectual exchange and cultural enrichment in 19th-century Boston, the salon brought together some of the brightest minds of the era to share ideas and engage in lively discourse.\(^85\) Annies invitations to Charles Street welcomed Celia into a stimulating atmosphere where the monotony of daily chores could be momentarily forgotten. As the child of a hotel proprietor, she relied on experiences hosting guests on Appledore and her remarkable gift of empathy to gain the goodwill of this elite circle. Celia thrilled in this atmosphere of intellectual stimulation and artistic fervor, cultivating meaningful connections and exchanging insights with a natural ease. Soon, Celia had earned the staunch affections of James and Annie Fields. The couple became her mentors, guiding her through both personal and professional endeavors for the rest of her life.

These new friendships proved transformative for Celia, providing her with guidance and inspiration to rise above her circumstances in pursuit of artistic expression. With the Fields’ loyal support, Celia felt empowered to pursue avenues of literary expression amid her strenuous routine of daily chores. The body of work she completed during this period dealt with the complexities of the female experience, championing narratives long overlooked by 19th-century discourse. Celia embraced the wild beauty and hidden secrets on the Isles of Shoals as a literary subject to explore her innermost thoughts and feelings. In April 1865, “The Spaniards' Graves” an elegiac poem mourning the loss of fourteen Spanish sailors who perished in a shipwreck fifty years prior was published in the Atlantic Monthly. Celia took inspiration from the haunting tale of a legendary shipwreck that crashed at Smuttynose in a harsh winter storm in 1813.\(^86\) In this

\(^85\) Rutledge, Lyman V. *The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend.* (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965). Pg 91.

\(^86\) Vallier, Jane E. *Poet on Demand: The Life, Letters, and Works of Celia Thaxter.* (Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall Publisher, 1994). Pg. 60.
poem, Thaxter subverts conventional narratives prevalent in 19th-century epics by centering the subject on the widows left behind in the wake of the tragedy. The eighth stanza is as follows:

“Spanish women, over the far seas, 
Could I but show you where your dead repose! 
Could I send tidings on this northern breeze 
That strong and steady blows!”

This departure from the typical heroic portrayal of male sailors to foreground the widows' experiences of the shipwreck challenges the prevailing gender norms of her time, where women were relegated to secondary roles in literature and society. Her creative choice to subvert these traditional roles of these heroic tales of survival shifts the perspective to empower the complexity and richness of the female experience. Rather than romanticizing the tragedy or portraying it as a heroic tale, Celia portrays the complex emotions and realities of these widows without excess sentiment. In doing so, she commemorates the resilience and fortitude they display in the face of adversity, defying societal expectations of female passivity and fragility. It was through her own experiences, as well as her encounters with formidable women, that she crafted heroines who undermined the patriarchal conventions of her time. She formed many of her closest friendships with women who could empathize with her experiences. Among Celia's influential female companions were notable figures such as Rose Lamb, an artist and a guest at Appledore, Mary Hemingway, a Boston philanthropist, and later novelist Sarah Orne Jewett. These friendships testify to the power of female solidarity to encourage the meaningful exchange of ideas and

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perspectives to foster creative expression. This support network inspired Celia to write narratives that subverted the very conventions that she and her friends likely grappled with in their everyday lives.

This doesn't imply she lacked male friends, rather, she did not share the level of intimacy in their correspondence as she did with her female friends. Her friendship with John Greenleaf Whittier was the sole exception to her predominantly female social circle. Influenced by his Quaker upbringing, he became an abolitionist and used his writing, characterized by its moral clarity and humanitarian themes, as a platform to advocate for social justice.\(^{89}\) Whittier provided Celia with the steady guidance of a paternal figure. His words carried the weight of a lifetime's worth of experiences, offering wisdom and insight that transcended the generational boundaries that separated them. After having met briefly when she lived at Artichoke Mills with Levi, their acquaintance blossomed into a friendship when the distinguished writer visited Appledore in the summers of 1863 and 1866. Whittier's correspondence provided Celia with a constant source of support and encouragement, filling the profound emptiness left by the passing of her beloved father in 1866. Whittier's guidance proved indispensable to Celia, encouraging her to find the strength to continue writing as she grappled with the profound loss of her father. While some of his letters contain suggestions for improving her poems, most were filled with heartfelt compliments and praise:

“I know of no one who so well describes the sea and sky and wild island scenery. Thy pictures glow with life and color. I am only afraid that I shall be tempered to appropriate them sometime, they so exactly express what I feel but cannot say.”\(^{90}\)


\(^{90}\) *Ibid*, 63
In moments when her personal struggles threatened to overwhelm her, Whitter's guidance encouraged her to channel her experiences into her literary endeavors. His validation of her artistic vision served as a constant source of motivation to pursue her talents amid her family obligations. Encouraged by his wisdom, she continued to translate her experiences into words.

Her familial responsibilities and writing career made it difficult for Celia to find the energy and time to maintain face-to-face interactions with her friends. The demands of her household and family responsibilities took precedence, making it challenging for her to find time to see her friends in person. Thus, her friendship became mostly epistolary. Letter writing was embraced as a means for 19th-century women to maintain relationships and foster connections despite the geographical distance that separated them. Literary scholar Helen Hieneman explores the significance of epistolary friendships for Victorian women:

“Their commitment to a mutual correspondence kept them sensitive to the quality of one another's experiences and made them friends for life, though their futures were widely divergent… These familiar letters unlock the inner lives of women, moving the reader beyond the evidence of statistics or cultural artifacts in tracing the drawing consciousness of the shared female condition.”

Exchanging letters was a crucial way for Victorian women to offer each other connection and support in an era marked by social constraints and limited avenues for female expression. Letters provided women with a platform to express themselves freely, offering a rare opportunity

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for self-expression and intellectual engagement. Serving as a substitute for physical visits, letters effectively bridged the physical distance that separated them from women scattered across vast distances to connect them with a common female experience. These communications must have alleviated feelings of loneliness, providing a sense of companionship and support that empowered Celia to rise above the challenges that lay before her and embrace the fullness of her potential as a writer.

Encumbered by marital strife and domestic turmoil, she turned to the support and encouragement of her trusted friends. By the end of the decade, her marriage with Levi had disintegrated to a point beyond repair. Their friends speculated that their marriage faltered due to contrasting temperaments and personalities. A passage written by Annie Fields in a collection of Celia's letters published posthumously suggests that:

“Their natures were strongly contrasted, but perhaps not too strongly to complement each other, if he had fallen in love with her as a woman, and not as a child. His retiring, scholarly nature and habits drew him away from the world her overflowing, sun-loving being, like a solar system in itself, reached out on every side, rejoicing in all created things.”

Their conflicting temperaments and desires likely clashed, exacerbating tensions that drove a wedge between the couple. This dynamic rendered the couple unable, or perhaps unwilling, to tackle the broader circumstances together and overcome the challenges that plagued their family. A self-proclaimed invalid, Levi grappled with a series of minor illnesses throughout

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his life that steadily increased in frequency with age.\textsuperscript{94} Rheumatism emerged as a particularly formidable adversary, plaguing him with discomfort and pain in the winter of 1868. Concerned for his well-being, a doctor recommended seeking respite from New England's harsh winters by spending time in a warmer climate to alleviate his symptoms.\textsuperscript{95} This set in motion a new dynamic within their family, ultimately leading to separate spheres of duty and existence. Thus began their pattern of separate lives, with Levi taking the younger boys down south each winter, while Celia stayed at Appledore with Karl. Concerns about Levi's faltering health and the instability within their family structure consumed her intimate correspondence. In a letter to Elizabeth Curzon Hoxie, she frets: In a letter addressed to Elizabeth Curzon Hoxie, Celia expresses her anxieties:

“I don't see but we have got to become a kind of human shuttlecocks and battledores, for Levi must go south in the winter and fly north in the summer, from rheumatism in winter and from fever and ague in summer. He has been slowly gaining strength, but is far from well, and this morning began with another threatening of rheumatism which troubles me and makes me feel very anxious to have him off… Levi means to come home in May, or just as soon as it is warm enough. Then heaven knows where he will go or what we shall do, but something will have to be arranged for next winter. Come home I say, there won't be any more home, which makes me feel forlorn.”\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid, Pg. 96
\textsuperscript{96} Thaxter, Celia. Letters of Celia Thaxter. Editeds by Lamb, Rose and Fields, Annie. (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1897) Pg 93. https://lccn.loc.gov/04017199
The physical distance between them worsened the emotional distance that had already existed. The speaker's desperate plea for Levi to come home seems almost futile. The knowledge that "there won't be any more home" implies a profound sense of estrangement within the marriage. From this point onwards, the shortcomings of their marriage became increasingly apparent as they began to spend more time apart. This enforced introspection brought on by their physical separation likely brought to light issues that were previously ignored or brushed aside.

The rift between the couple deepened even further when Celia's mother Eliza fell ill in 1873. Her mother's deteriorating health compelled her daughter to live with her almost continuously on the Shoals to aid Eliza through five years of lingering illness.\textsuperscript{97} Despite the challenges and emotional toll, Celia tended to her mother's needs with unwavering devotion until her last breath. In a letter penned to a friend in the autumn of 1873, Celia maintains that manifestation of prevalent gender roles within her family dynamic required her presence as caregiver in the face of her mother's illness:

“Perhaps you don't know that I am a fixture here for the winter. My mother has been so poorly I could not leave her, and she would not leave my brothers, so I must leave my family to take care of themselves, and stay with her, for our family is so destitute of women it is really forlorn! No sisters, daughters, aunts, cousins, nothing but a howling wilderness of men! So it all comes on my shoulders.”\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{97} Rutledge, Lyman V. \textit{The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend}. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965). Pg 101.
\textsuperscript{98} Thaxter, Celia. \textit{Letters of Celia Thaxter}. Editeds by Lamb, Rose and Fields, Annie. (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1897). Pg 50. \url{https://lccn.loc.gov/04017199}. 
The demands of providing constant care for her mother strained her relationship with Levi, exposing the dual pressures of familial duty and personal sacrifice. Her comments underscore the overwhelming burden placed upon her with no one else to share the responsibility. This imagery of "a howling wilderness of men" captures the speaker's sense of isolation and the sheer immensity of the caregiving task before her. The strain of their circumstances ultimately proved to be too much to bear, driving an irreparable wedge between the couple. As they grappled with the complexities of their situation, the cracks in their bond widened, making it increasingly difficult to bridge the growing divide between them. Uncertain of how to mend the fractures that threatened to tear them apart, the couple retreated into separate corners of their shared existence.

As Celia's domestic responsibilities and concerns mounted, she sought the refuge and solace in nature that she had known as a child. While residing on the Isles with her ailing mother, Celia found her weary spirit rejuvenated by the natural splendor of the islands. She found a constant source of inspiration and creative energy in her connection with this environment. Nature writing helped Celia define her identity, removed from the demands of her everyday life, through powerful representations of the islands that shaped her personality. Published in 1873, Among the Isles of Shoals was Celia's first book of prose in which she evoked the sensory experience of island life to explore the artistic connection between person and place. Celia describes the physical landscape with a level of sensory detail and emotional resonance that captures the emotional and spiritual connections she felt with the natural world. In the 19th century, the nature writer was considered a masculine subject who imposed a hierarchical system.

of power relations between civilization and nature as a feminized other. Thus, women who wrote about nature during the nineteenth century were defined and constrained by the gender hierarchies that were frequently embedded in white male representations of the natural world. This gendered bias meant that Celia and her female literary peers couldn't simply adopt the existing model of 19th century nature writing. Rather, they had to find innovative ways to express their unique perspectives and experiences within the constraints of the genre.

The limitations of the nature writing genre are implicit in Thaxters' own criticism of Thoreau’s *Walking*, which propounds the benefits of walking as a means of strengthening one's bond with the natural world. In a letter penned to a friend from Appledore in 1874, she pokes fun at Thoreau's suggestion that individuals should dedicate at least four hours a day to wandering in the woods to seek nature's infinite wisdom:

“It takes Thoreau and Emerson and their kind to enjoy a walk for a walk's sake, and the wealth they glean with eyes and ears. I cannot enjoy the glimpses Nature gives me as well when I go deliberately seeking them as when they flash on me in some pause of work. It is like the pursuit of happiness: you don't get it when you go after it, but let it alone and it comes to you.”

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She recognized that the constrictions of women's lives made this quest simply unfeasible. With this considered, she subtly proposes a different way of experiencing Nature within the fabric of daily life, rather than a singular subject to be mastered through deliberate exploration. This shift in emphasis disrupts the power dynamic embedded within white male representations of nature. In doing so, Celia demonstrated how a non-hierarchical approach to nature can transform the ways in which humans experience and subsequently interpret nature. She found joy in the fleeting glimpses like a bird flitting by during a work break or the scent of wildflowers carried on the breeze. In contrast with popular literary conventions, Celia regarded Nature as an integrated presence within our lived experiences to advocate for a more inclusive perspective of the human connection with the natural environment.

Celia's focus on the landscape became a means to explore her personal identity. She transcends the limitations placed on women of her time by defining her own sense of self within the context of the island environment. Celia's symbiotic relationship with her island homeland challenges the subjectivity and biases inherent in hetero-normative nature writing. Her skillfully crafted prose demonstrates the ways humans are immersed in a complex, ever-shifting relationship with the ecological spaces that they inhabit. This perspective transforms landscapes into non-hierarchical sites that defy conventional power dynamics and resist the enforcement of subservience. In this book, Celia evoked a sense of care and reverence for the natural world by regarding nature as an empowering lifeforce:

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“the manifold aspects of Nature held me and swayed all my thoughts until it was impossible to be silent any longer, and I was fain to mingle my voice with her myriad voices, only aspiring to be in accord with the Infinite harmony, however feeble and broken the notes might be.”

By centering her writing on landscape, Celia gained a sense of power through the language she employed to speak about or on behalf of nature. By striving to be in accord with nature, she finds a way to express herself authentically. Encouraged by her friends, this endeavor in regional nature-writing empowered her to develop a sense of personhood beyond established conventions of 19th-century womanhood. She chose to empower the dimensions of the life she wished to define in the context of her landscape to embrace the true essence of her being.

Like a ship caught in a sudden squall, Celia found herself battered by waves of personal crises in the latter years of the 1870s. Her mother, her constant anchor of her support, lay frail and fading in her bed at Appledore, her presence diminishing with each passing day. The uncertainty of what the future held only served to deepen her sense of despair as the woman who had always been her main source of strength now reduced to a mere shadow of her former self. By the early autumn of 1877, both Eliza's health and Celia's emotional well-being had declined significantly. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, the family decided to move Eliza to Portsmouth to ensure she could receive medical attention. Celia's heart ached with dread, knowing she was about to lose the guiding light of her life. Winter's imminent arrival casted a frosty veil over the landscape as Eliza spirit faded into the quiet stillness of death on November 14th, 1877. She informs Annie Fields of her passing in a letter written that very day:

“Dearest Annie, this morning, at half past seven, the sweetest mother in the world went, God alone knows where, away from us! There is no comfort for us anywhere except by the gradual hand of time. The consolations of religion I cannot bear. I can bear my anguish better than their emptiness, though I am crushed breathless by my sorrow. It seems as if I could never fill my lungs with air again, as if I never wished to look upon the light of day.”

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Celia struggled to make sense of the profound absence left in her life after her mother's passing. Her sense of self had been so deeply entwined with her mother's that it was difficult for Celia to envision a life without her constant guidance and support. The passage of days brought a gradual easing of the raw pain, yet also served as a relentless reminder of the permanence of her mother's departure. Since her mother no longer required her care, she had no reason to remain on the island through the year. Thus, Celia was left with no choice but to confront the harsh realities of her life that awaited her on the mainland.

Celia released a new poetry collection upon her return to Newtonville. Driftweeds contained fifty-eight poems, half of which appeared in magazines the previous two years. The poems in this collection demonstrate Celia's frustration and loneliness as she endeavored to piece together the fragments of her disintegrating family life. Yet, despite the cathartic release that writing had always yielded, Celia was emotionally, spiritually, and artistically drained. In consequence, Celia's poetry exhibits little indication of artistic progression throughout the years. This poetry collection was a repetition of familiar motifs that failed to push the boundaries of her creativity. Literary scholar Jane Vallier suspects that Celia's reliance on the Fields in both her professional and personal endeavors led to stagnation in her creative process:

"Having neither the education nor the aesthetic confidences to go very far beyond the Field's literary horizons, Celia became dependent and thus limited by them."

She certainly internalized their literary standards and opinions, as evident in her inclination toward didacticism even as the style began to fade into obscurity. As the literary

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landscape shifted towards more nuanced and experimental forms of expression, Celia clung to the familiar methods of her trusted mentors. With that said, it is imperative to consider how the precariousness of her financial situation at this time informed her stagnation as a poet. Her income from her creative pursuits far exceeded that of her husband, whose lack of traditional employment meant Celia's earnings supported not only herself but their family as well. Literary historian Mary Kelley's landmark study on how twelve of the century's most successful women writers reconciled their dual functions both within and beyond the sphere of literary domesticity found that this was typical of female writers at the time. The majority of these women pursued writing to provide their families with supplementary income in response to financial pressures since no man in their families was adequately fulfilling that responsibility. At this point in his life, Levi’s health struggles made it difficult for him to pursue a typical career path. This created a financial burden that Celia was increasingly forced to address. These circumstances mirror that of writers Caroline Lee Hentz and Harriet Beecher Stowe as the ill health of their husbands were determining factors in expanding and altering their careers. Writing became a viable option for these women, allowing them to contribute financially to the welfare of their families. Since their writing careers supported their families rather than personal interests, these women reconciled the income they received from creative pursuits as an extension of their domestic responsibilities instead of an act of defiance against the ideology of domestic femininity. Thus, the success of literary career allowed Celia to explore the dimensions of her life to construct her identity in ways that transcended, yet never fully abandoned traditional gender boundaries.

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Caught in the relentless cycle of financial precarity, she was forced to prioritize earning a living rather than cultivating her artistic skills. The pressure to earn a living for her family took precedence over the time and resources needed to hone her craft. In her famed assertion that “woman must have money and a room of her own”, Virginia Woolf recognized limitations financial insecurity places on women's creative potential. Though fame offered a semblance of financial stability, it came at the cost of sacrificing her creative freedom. She was compelled to write greeting cards, sell watercolors, and endorse commercial products. Her likeness appears on advertisements selling products as diverse as typewriters and cigars. Shouldering the burden of supporting both herself and her family, Celia diverted her focus away from the cultivation of her artistic talents and towards the relentless pursuit of financial stability. The time and energy that her male peers were able to devote to honing their craft was likely consumed by the immediate need to generate income. The need to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads left little room for the luxury of artistic exploration or development. Thus, Celia was compelled to focus her creative efforts towards fulfilling pragmatic concerns of day-to-day survival to the detriment of her artistic development.

The constant pressure to generate income while tending to household chores led to a sense of insecurity in her creative abilities that permeated her self-perception. It seems that every word Celia managed to write was distorted by incessant self-doubt. In calling her latest poetry collection *Driftweeds*, Celia subtly alludes to her skepticism regarding her own creative talents at this point in her career. In a letter that Celia sent to her editor, publisher, and dear friend James Fields, she explains her thought process in choosing this title:

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“And these little verses are seeds that sprang out of the rock and never knew cultivation. Don't you know I never went to school? I can fancy you smiling and saying to yourself that there is little need of telling you that.”

The imagery evoked by the title hints at Celia's internal struggles as an artist. Just as drift weeds are at the mercy of the wind and waves, she lacked control over her creative process. The focused introspection and experimentation necessary to refine their craft was impossible to achieve while tending to her familial responsibilities. This lack of dedicated time and the financial pressure to produce commercially viable work likely contributed to a cycle of self-doubt, leading Celia to downplay their achievements and question their own talent. She calls the poetry in this collection "seeds that sprang out of the rock and never knew cultivation," implying that this lack of agency over her creative process left Celia feeling adrift, unsure of her ability to harness her talents and channel them into meaningful expression. Celia's self-deprecating remark mentioning her lack of formal education reveals a deeper insecurity that the value of her work diminishes without the formal training her peers in the Boston literary world had received. This internalized gaze reflects the broader societal devaluation of women's creative pursuits. Without the validation and financial support often afforded to male writers, Celia incessantly doubted her own talents by questioning the legitimacy of her artistic voice. This self-doubt creates a vicious cycle, where the pressure to succeed commercially reinforces

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her insecurities, leading her to downplay her achievements and further restrict her creative exploration.

The decay of her family life undoubtedly added to Celia's despair. Celia's family dynamic crumbled each season she forsook the mainland to take care of her mother, leaving behind fractured relationships and unspoken tensions. It seems that Roland harbored the most resentment towards Celia's absence from her family while she cared for her mother and pursued her career. According to Celia's granddaughter Rosamund Thaxter, although he was twenty at the time, Roland begged his mother to come home after Eiza death, pleading:

“Everyone has had more of you than I, who feel as if I had never had a mother.”

The candid words from Roland expose the tensions that had formed over time. Resentment and unmet expectations had corroded the bonds that had once held them together over long distances. Celia's lifelong struggle to reconcile her desire for creative expression and her duty to fulfill societal expectations of domesticity suggests that 19th century female writers could only achieve success at the expense of a fulfilling family life. Despite her efforts, it seems that Celia and Levi reached a mutual decision to live apart for the rest of their lives after her return to the mainland. In the winter of 1879, Levi purchased a 186 acre farm on Cutts Island in Kittery Point, Maine and sold the house in Newtonville that following spring. A beach at the edge of the property, beyond the farm pastures and pines, beheld a view of Appledore Island on clear days. While the couple had separate living arrangements, they continued to share family

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responsibilities and remained in communication. Thus, Celia ultimately found herself unable to reconcile the conflicting demands of her literary career and her marriage to Levi. Her decision to live apart from her husband may have been a painful acknowledgment of this reality, a bittersweet recognition that true fulfillment in one aspect of her life necessitated sacrifices in another. Celia's ability to defy societal norms stemmed, at least in part, from her financial independence and social standing. Without these advantages, the path she carved for herself would have been far more difficult, if not impossible. The freedom to pursue her own happiness, separate from her husband, was a luxury not afforded to most women of the time.

Recognizing the privilege, their choice to maintain separate residences ultimately enriched both their personal and professional lives. Perhaps spurred by their separation, Levi finally settled on a career reciting Browning's poetry at public lectures in Boston.\textsuperscript{117} Levis transformed Browning's poems into captivating performances by combining scholarly insight with a thespian's flair. His lifelong passion for the poet's work not only imbued his renditions with authenticity but also helped introduce Browning's poetry to an American audience. Sadly, Levi's burgeoning career was cut short just as it began when he fell ill in December 1883. Just as swiftly as his star had risen, it was extinguished when he passed away on May 31st of the subsequent year.\textsuperscript{118} Levi Lincoln Thaxter was laid to eternal rest at Kittery Point with his memory enshrined in the hallowed earth. Robert Browning thoughtfully composed an epitaph for his tombstone:

\textsuperscript{117} Vallier, Jane E. Poet on Demand: The Life, Letters, and Works of Celia Thaxter. (Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall Publisher, 1994). Pg. 44.
\textsuperscript{118} Rutledge, Lyman V. The Isles of Shoals in Lore and Legend. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishers, 1965). Pg. 118.
“Thou, whom these eyes saw never, say friends true/ who say my soul, helped onward by my song/ Though all unwittingly, has helped thee too?”

Levi Thaxter was a man of leisure with a restless spirit. When his own words faltered and fell short, Browning's poetry offered the self-proclaimed invalid a language to articulate his innermost thoughts and feelings. When Levi bestowed the gift of literature onto his young wife, he did not anticipate that Celia possessed a command of language that rivaled his accomplishments. Levi must have grappled with the bittersweet reality of his own limitations, knowing that while he had nurtured his wife's creative spirit, it was destined to carry her far beyond his reach.

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The Twilight Years
1884-1894

After a lifetime of catering to the demands of self-sacrifice as a woman, Celia gained more freedom to nurture her creative impulses as she matured into her elder years. With her younger sons grown into adulthood and her husband and parents gone, Celia had more time and energy to dedicate to creative pursuits, as she no longer had as many dependents to care for. She embraced the popularity of the Aesthetic movement as a socially acceptable means to reach her creative potential. Arising from sentiments held among Britain's artistic elite, this art movement embraced the power of beauty to give pleasure to the beholder. Their motto, “art for art's sake” championed the idea that art's purpose was to be beautiful rather than serve any moral or didactic aim\textsuperscript{120}. The belief in art to elevate the soul encouraged the cultivation of beauty within the home to enrich the daily experience. Homes became curated expressions of personal taste, filled with beautiful objects chosen not just for function but for their ability to evoke feelings and inspire the senses. The Aesthetic Movement gained popularity in America when Oscar Wilde, an Irish playwright and champion of the Aesthetic Movement, captivated audiences with his wit and flamboyant personality. Hoping to capitalize on his celebrity abroad, the American lecture circuit invited Wilde to deliver a series of talks on aesthetics across the country in 1882.\textsuperscript{121} His lectures advocated for the transformative power of beauty in everyday life. In doing so, Wilde challenged the prevailing Victorian notion of the home as a purely functional space. Rather, he saw homemaking as a deliberate creation of an aesthetic environment that uplifts the spirit and enriches daily experiences rather than mere decoration. His lectures encouraged American

\textsuperscript{121} Mandel, Norma H. Beyond the Garden Gate: The Life of Celia Laighton Thaxter. (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2004). Pg. 129.
women to embrace their creativity and express their personalities through their homes with handcrafted objects with artistic merit. The creation of beautiful living spaces enriched the lived experience of 19th-century women through the power of art.

Women were not just passive consumers of aesthetics; they were also producers. The Aesthetic Movement provided women with means to express their taste and creativity through the pursuit of beauty within the domestic sphere. China painting became a way for 19th century women to bring the movement's ideals into their everyday lives.122 The very act of choosing and designing everyday objects became an artistic pursuit, as beauty took center stage in every aspect of life. Driven by financial constraints, Celia directed her artistic efforts toward china painting to capitalize on the growing demand for aesthetically pleasing objects to furnish the Aesthetic home. This pursuit was far more lucrative than her previous literary efforts, as collectible items painted and signed by well-known figures became sought-after commodities.123 Regardless of the artistic medium she chose, Celia always drew creative inspiration from the island's natural surroundings. She embellished practical, everyday items such as plates, bowls, and vases, with compositions inspired by the natural wonders of her island home. With meticulous care, Celia translated intricate sea moss patterns, the graceful curves of seashells, and vibrant flower petals on porcelain. China painting was more than just a pastime for Celia, it was a profound source of personal joy and fulfillment. In a correspondence exchanged with Annie Fields, Celia expressed the sense of reward she felt in her new craft:

123 Stephan, Sharon Paiva. One Woman’s Work: The Visual Art of Celia Laighton Thaxter. (Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall Publisher , 2001). Pg. 136
“I live in these little landscapes I fashion; I love the flowers, living things, and quaint Japanese I work among, with a perfect passion. It is all my entertainment, all the amusement I have, you know.”

The focus that china painting entailed demanded her full presence, offering a welcomed escape from the demands of everyday life. Celia was empowered by the control she wielded over the colors and the meticulous placement of each detail. Sharon Stephan, curator of One Woman’s Work: The Visual Art of Celia Laighton Thaxter, suggested that it was her work in visual arts, rather than her writing, that became her creative source of pleasure and fulfillment. When the words refused to come, she reclaimed her creative voice by painting china. With each stroke of the brush, she discovered a sense of empowerment that allowed her to embrace her creativity and express herself authentically.

Celia depicted natural elements with a refreshing simplicity and precision in her artistic endeavors. With a keen eye and steady hand, she rendered the delicate veins of a leaf and intricate patterns of a seashell without any embellishments. She captured the essence of the world around her with straightforward honesty, rejecting the fragmented brushstrokes that were characteristic of the popular Impressionist movement favored by her contemporaries. Rather, Celia found inherent beauty in the subtle nuances and unadorned simplicity of the natural world. Her technical prowess rivaled that of esteemed botanists as she meticulously crafted her paintings with a precision that bordered on scientific mastery. Celia's intimate relationship with the natural world allowed her to recreate its wonders with astonishing accuracy, even in the

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125 Stephan, Sharon Paiva. One Woman’s Work: The Visual Art of Celia Laighton Thaxter. (Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall Publisher , 2001). Pg. 100
126 Ibid Pg. 102
absence of references before her.\footnote{Fields, Annie. \textit{Letters of Celia Thaxter:} Edited by Lamb, Rose and Fields, Annie. (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1897). Pg 4. \url{https://lccn.loc.gov/04017199}.} Despite the talent and dedication that this required, Celia's artistic skills were trivialized since china painting is associated with women's pursuits. Victorian women like Celia focused their efforts on domestic art forms because it was one of the few socially acceptable ways for them to express their creativity. Artistic pursuits such as china painting further entrenched women within the confines of the domestic sphere, as this trend was perceived as a hobby to beautify the home rather than a serious pursuit of artistic merit. This confinement to domestic arts had a stifling effect on Celia's creative potential. The very act of creating beauty within the home, while seemingly empowering, ultimately reinforced the societal constraints placed upon her.

Celia's sought to reconcile these tensions seamlessly integrated the natural and the domestic environment, where each element harmoniously coexisted to create a unified aesthetic experience. Her actions weren't just about aesthetics. Celia's innovative efforts to bring nature indoors cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the stark material constraints in the 19th century that limited women's experiences in the natural world. In her criticisms of Throuaeu, Celia acknowledged that raising children and managing the household while pursuing a writing career left her little to no free time for leisurely pursuits in the natural world.\footnote{Thaxter, Celia. \textit{Letters of Celia Thaxter:} Editeds by Lamb, Rose and Fields, Annie. (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1897). Pg 142. \url{https://lccn.loc.gov/04017199}.} Thus, her parlor served to reclaim her connection with nature within the context of her domestic life. By incorporating elements of nature, a life source of inspiration and personal freedom, she created a domestic space that finally reflected her inner world. The parlor serves as a seamless extension of the vibrant garden just beyond its doors. Her small, cutting garden design rejected the extravagantly contrived gardening style popular in the Victorian era to replicate the natural
beauty and organic flow she found in the landscapes surrounding her island cottage. Inside, the parlor walls are adorned with a light green hue, reminiscent of the verdant foliage that surrounds the property. Nestled to one side, a grand piano stands as a centerpiece, its polished wood gleaming in the natural light. The parlor was filled with meticulously crafted floral arrangements sourced directly from her lush garden. She devoted meticulous attention to the method in which she constructs the floral arrangements, intentionally arranging each bloom in a linear progression of color. The untamed beauty of her floral arrangements was barely contained by the vase, bringing a touch of untamed wilderness indoors. By bringing these wildflowers indoors, Celia created a bridge between the wild spirit of the island and the ordered space Celia, as a woman, was expected to inhabit. In doing so, Celia managed to reconcile the tension between the domestic and natural realms by manipulating the ideology of domestic femininity to serve her own needs. Surrounded by the enchantments of her beloved islands, Celia achieved a self-actualization constructing her identity beyond, but never fully separated from, her prescribed roles as mother and wife through cultivating her lifelong relationship with nature.

Celia's summer cottage on Appledore island captured the imagination of all who crossed its threshold. Throughout the summer months, Appledore Island buzzed with the energy of Borton's literary and artistic circles. Celia welcomed famed creatives like Childe Hassam, Ole Bull, J. Appleton Brown, and Sarah Orne Jewett into a secluded environment where the anxieties of everyday life faded into renewed connection to a wellspring of creativity. Nature's intricate patterns and dynamic elements provided an inexhaustible source of inspiration for artists across

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130 Ibid Pg. 81
131 Thaxter, Celia. An Island Garden. (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1894) Pg. 58.
various disciplines. The isolation and serenity of the Isles fostered an inspiring creative atmosphere free from the distractions of modern life. Celia fostered a sense of community among her guests by seamlessly integrating artistic expression into the natural flow of the day. Concerts were held before lunch and after dinner, with poetry readings in between, while afternoons were reserved for composing, sketching, and painting.\textsuperscript{133} Guests were free to indulge in the pleasures of artistic expression in a setting of unparalleled beauty, leaving guests with cherished memories that would endure long after they had departed from the island's shores. In a collection of unpublished writings released posthumously by her brother Oscar, friends and contemporaries like Maud Appleton McDowell recollected the joyous times she spent in Celia's parlor:

“What concerts we had and how like boys they all were! Just enjoying their holidays and “making music” when they wished and playing what they wanted. And in such an atmosphere of beauty! Something to appeal to your eye and ear and even sense of smell, with the scent of honeysuckle coming through many windows. Then in the evenings we had reading aloud or recitations by her or some of the literary guests… Those were turley the golden days for me and I have cherished their memory ever since”\textsuperscript{134}

Her fond reminiscences of her time in Celia's parlor conveys the immersive nature of the experience in a space where beauty resonates through every sense. In this quintessential aesthetic parlor, with each element meticulously curated to evoke a sense of wonder and enchantment, Celia invited her guests to immerse themselves in the atmosphere of creativity and refinement.


Women like Celia strategically navigated the creative limitations of their gendered experiences by aligning themselves with the principles of the Aesthetic movement as a socially acceptable means to reach their creative potential. At this point in her life, Celia had acquired the status and material conditions to successfully appropriate the ideological tenets of domestic womanhood in the 19th century to serve her own purposes. By leveraging her island cottage as a setting for cultural gatherings, Celia was able to reconcile her lifelong struggle to manage the limitations of her domestic environment on her creative expression. This shift marked a significant departure from the constraints that had previously inhibited her creative endeavors, allowing Celia to fully realize her artistic potential. In doing so, she challenged the notion that the home was solely a place of confinement for 19th century women and instead redefined it as a potential site of empowerment and self-expression. This reflects a deliberate effort to transcend the limitations of domestic femininity in pursuit of creative expression without ever fully abandoning its tenants. The distinguished cultural salons that Celia hosted in her island cottage finally reconciled her artistic aspirations with the realities of her domestic life.

Every summer at Appledore, a powerful synergy of artistic minds emerged in the shared pursuit of creative expression. This annual influx of creative energy inspired Celia to write her final book of prose with the encouragement of her friends. In her elder years, the toll exacted by years of fulfilling her household duties and relentless dedication to her craft manifested in physical ailments and exhaustion. Despite the mounting challenges posed by declining health, their lifelong encouragement remained a constant source of strength in moments of doubt and fatigue. Sarah Orne Jewett, a rising literary talent famous for capturing the essence of life in New England, found inspiration in Thaxter's island cottage on Appledore. The authors were bonded

by their shared affinity for the rugged beauty of the coast and a passion for capturing its essence in their writing, evolving into a collaboration that would significantly influence both their literary careers. Recognizing Celia’s waning energy but unbridled passion for the natural world, Jewett actively encouraged her to write a book about her beloved island garden. Her encouragement and editorial guidance culminated in "An Island Garden," in which vivid descriptions and stunning illustrations by Childe Hassam describe how Celia cultivated life from barren rock. The ability to share their work with Sarah as trusted confidante, someone who understood the particular challenges of nature writing as a female author, undeniably helped Celia refine her craft. Their letters, filled with lively observations and witty banter, reveal a genuine interest and comprehensive insight on each other's lives and artistic endeavors. In a letter from the Shoals in the autumn of 1893, Celia wrote to her new confidante about her struggles of crafting her final book in her condition:

“I am pegging away hard on the book and I want to ask you a lot of things. I have got a little plan of the garden, as you suggested, with places of everything marked, – a sort of little map[. I have got the whole thing about done, the writing, but there is much copying and arranging of parts to make proper unity. I have been so ill since the house closed, just about dead with stress and bother of things and people, and feared to slip back to the hateful state of three years ago.”

With Sarah's guidance and support, Celia found the inspiration to translate her
experiences into a stunning reflection of life on Appledore Island. Throughout the entirety of her literary career, Celia's friends empowered her to cultivate her relationship with nature to transcend circumstance in pursuit of creative expression. The intimate exchange of ideas and experiences provided Celia with respite from the challenges of her physical condition and a renewed sense of interest in her creative pursuits. Even in the last years of her life, Celia always found solace and inspiration in the natural environment of the Isles of Shoals. Through nature writing, she explored the depths of her identity by writing powerful descriptions of the islands to articulate the essence of her being. Removed from the demands of everyday life, Celia found a sense of freedom in her creative pursuits to express herself through her deep emotional connection to the Shoals.

Celia, with a heart heavy with unspoken premonition, had invited her dearest friends to Appledore once more in the summer of 1894. This year, her invitations weren't just for lively soirees and laughter-filled evenings. This year, it was a pilgrimage to cherished haunts, a silent farewell tour to the soul-stirring beauty that had shaped her life. The setting sun seemed to linger longer, casting golden hues on faces etched with love and unspoken goodbyes. In the waning light of the late summer sun, Celia surrendered to the eternal slumber that awaited her. On the morning of August 26th, 1894, the island awoke to the solemn task of bidding farewell to its beloved poet. Along the winding pathways that threaded through Appledore, her dear friends gathered, their footsteps hushed in reverence as they made their pilgrimage to the family burial ground. In her introduction to a posthumously published collection of Celia's letters, her dear friend Annie Fields tenderly her funeral:

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“It was indeed a poets burial, but it was far more than that: it was a poets burial, but it was far more than that: it was the celebration of the passing of a large and beneficent soul.”

Celia’s earthly vessel was laid to rest on Appledore Island, cradled by the embrace of the land she had loved so dearly. Each blade of grass, each petal of a wildflower, bowed in reverence to the poet who had captured the essence of their beauty in verse. And though Celia’s voice may have fallen silent, her words continue to echo on the island breeze. Celia’s life is a fascinating perspective through which to explore how individual women navigated gender dynamics in the 19th century within the broader context of their lives. When her personal struggles threatened to suffocate her creative spirit, her friends alleviated her doubts and anxieties by encouraging Celia to nurture her lifelong relationship in the natural environment of the Shoals. Her creative endeavors helped Celia define her identity, removed from the demands of her everyday life, through powerful representations of the islands that shaped her personality. The success of her literary career gave Celia the status and material conditions to successfully appropriate the ideological tenets of domestic womanhood to serve her own purposes. In doing so, Celia gained the power to explore the dimensions of her life in ways that transcended, yet never fully abandoned traditional gender boundaries.

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