



MARCH 19, 2018


# HIDDEN BEAUTY: PSEUDONYMS AND UNCOMMON IMAGERY

IN HELEN HUNT JACKSON'S *A CALENDAR OF SONNETS*

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ENGLISH 397

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## Hidden Beauty: Pseudonyms and Uncommon Imagery

### In Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Calendar of Sonnets*

Helen Hunt Jackson (1830-1885) was both a poet and a writer of prose who admired self-reliant women, advocated for Native American rights, and strongly believed in upholding a woman's role as wife and mother (Whitaker 57-59). She wrote numerous novels and books of poetry in her lifetime, some under her full name, some using her initials "H. H.," and some with one of her several pseudonyms (*The Encyclopedia of American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* 234). This paper focuses on a book of sonnets she wrote towards the end of her life titled *A Calendar of Sonnets* which was published in 1886 by the Roberts Brothers after her death (Jackson). This paper also studies Jackson's use of pseudonyms as a female writer in the nineteenth century, comparing and contrasting her use of pennames with other female writers' use of masculine aliases during the same time period. In addition, this paper lends a critical eye to the illustrations printed in *A Calendar of Sonnets*. Each poem in this book has a full-page illustration on the opposite page drawn by Emilé Bayard and two small vignette drawings above and below each sonnet drawn by E. H. Garrett (Jackson).

The large illustrations facing each sonnet help the layout of this book to mirror an actual calendar if turned on its side. Sonnets tend to take on a square shape, which corresponds to the overall square shape and also the smaller squares inside a calendar. The large illustrations on the right side of each page parallel the typical format of a calendar with a large image on the top of the fold and the days of the month laid out below the fold.

The premise of this book is paradoxical—a calendar is repetitive and circular, but each calendar can only be used for one year, and then it is discarded. Without dates or years included in *A Calendar of Sonnets*, Jackson creates a calendar that is reusable, going against the very

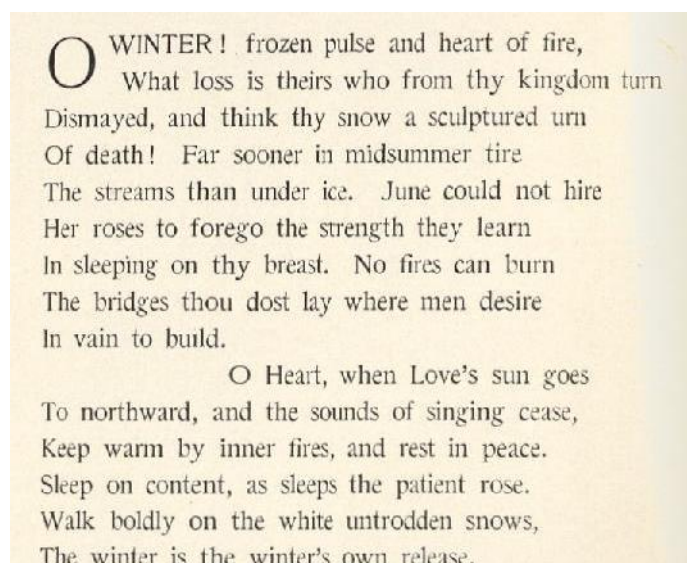
nature of traditional calendars. She plays with structures that have rules which are meant to be consistently followed. A calendar—if used properly—is a tool that cannot be reused, because by the time it is used once, it is irrelevant. At the end of the year, the days that a calendar has marked off are now in the past and will never return. Sonnets typically have strict metrical rules with few variations, but that does not stop Jackson from bending those rules sometimes, while still largely maintaining the customary sonnet structure. “January” has two stanzas, but the meter is uninterrupted. The first line in “March” has an extra unstressed syllable at the end, breaking the almost always consistent iambic pentameter, but the line that rhymes with the first line later in the poem has the same metrical “error.” “July” has only thirteen lines instead of the traditional fourteen, but the rhyme scheme is consistent, and no line is left without a rhyming partner. Jackson finds ways to break the rules, but somehow make the “errors” still feel to the reader like they are purposeful, and therefore not “errors” but intentional choices against the traditional.

Jackson’s purposeful rule-breaking in her structure speaks to a theme in the content of the poems. The poems in *A Calendar of Sonnets* frequently push back against the confines of Romanticism by speaking of nature in harsh, often negative ways. However, there is also a theme throughout the book of the most severe parts of nature being useful or beautiful in some way. Although her aggressive descriptions go against traditional Romanticism, they serve a purpose; the poems suggest that there is beauty in dreadful things or that beautiful things are made more appealing by overcoming struggles.

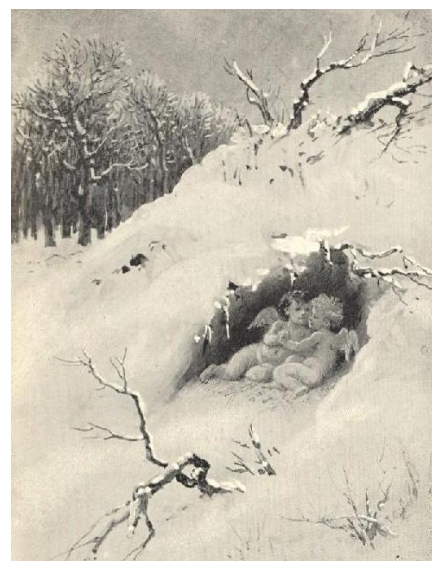
Because there are three illustrations per poem, the drawings in this book make up a large portion of the text, and therefore deserve as close a reading as one might give the poems themselves. The relationship between the poems and their illustrations sometimes furthers ideas

in the sonnets and sometimes creates interesting juxtapositions and discrepancies, bringing into question the illustrator's reading, or misreading, of the poems.

"January" deifies nature, especially cold, snowy weather, addressing winter directly: "O Winter! frozen pulse and heart of fire, / What loss is theirs who from thy kingdom turn / Dismayed, and think thy snow a sculptured urn / Of death!" This poem portrays Winter as a force with great strength, but one that is helpful rather than destructive. The speaker reminds us that "Far sooner in midsummer tire / The streams than under ice." The slowness that the cold brings helps as a respite, a time to hibernate and regain strength. This sonnet is formally unique because it has two stanzas but maintains one line of meter through the last line of the first stanza and the first line of the second stanza. The two stanzas each address a different subject—two mini odes to "Winter" and "Heart." The parallel drawn between winter and the heart further suggest a sense of comfort and warmth in snowy weather. This is mirrored in the illustration on the opposite page. Two cherubs embrace together in a small cave made by snow. Although they are not clothed, they do not appear to be shivering or even huddling for warmth. It seems their shelter is sufficiently warm—a shelter from the snow, ironically made of snow (Jackson).



"January"



"January" Full Page Illustration

In “February,” Jackson describes the landscape as “sheltering snows,” a place where “willow stems grow daily red and bright.” Her use of the word “pregnant” in reference to the season suggests the comfort and safety of a womb. The repetition of the word “still” invokes a calm, quiet atmosphere. In contrast, the illustration shows a woman furrowing her brow and clutching her arms against a cold wind. Her scarf and skirt are blown away from her body, and her dainty boots leave deep marks in the snow behind where she is walking (Jackson).



*"February" Full Page Illustration*

The “March” poem suggests that even small amounts of beauty can overshadow large destructive forces. The poem opens with the explanation that “the warring ancients” called March “the month of war,” but the rest of the poem denies the validity of that claim:

—in thy rough days  
I find no war in Nature, though the wild  
Winds clash and clang, and broken boughs are piled  
At feet of writhing trees. The violets raise  
Their heads without affright, without amaze,  
And sleep through all the din, as sleeps a child.

*"March" lines 4-8*

The presence of simple violets negates all the roughness of March’s weather—their resilience in a harsh environment makes them all the more beautiful, which overpowers the speaker’s attitude

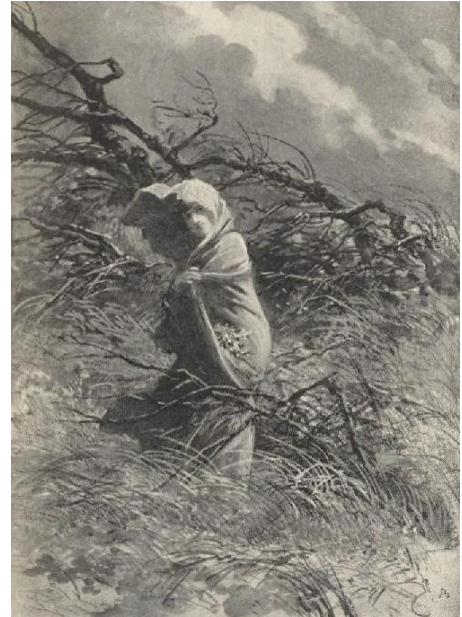
towards the month as a whole. The illustrations associated with this poem, however, focus heavily on depictions of wind.



*"March" Vignette Above Text*



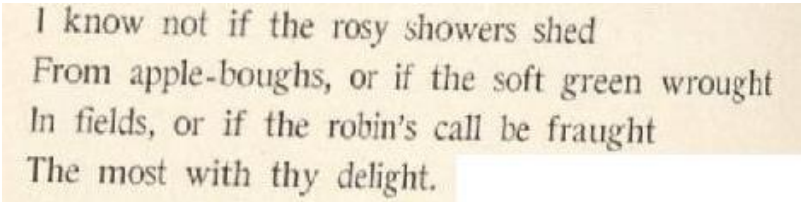
*"March" Vignette Below Text*



*"March" Full Page Illustration*

Bayard drew a hint of something floral in the folds of the woman's wrap in the image on the right, but otherwise, the overbearing theme of these illustrations is a strong wind forcing branches and grasses to bend. Garrett's inclusion of a singular violet branch below the text addresses the presence of violets in the poem, but fails to include the context, which is crucial. A blooming violet is much more significant within a harsh environment than it is alone on a blank background. The poem argues that the violets' beauty outweighs the violence of the windy weather when the speaker says "I find no war in Nature" although there are detailed descriptions of aggressive conditions. The violets' ability to overcome these elements is what makes them so beautiful and powerful. Garrett's drawing of decontextualized violets hovering on the page ignores all of this, missing the point of the violets' inclusion in the poem (Jackson).

“May” is dedicated to love and marriage, which is reflected in the full-page illustration of a couple embracing in a lush background of flowers; two white doves kiss on a branch above their heads. There is a darker undertone in this poem, however. The final few lines speak of lovely memories that the elderly think about while lying in the May sunshine one last time before they pass away. The words “wrought” and “fraught,” while not referring to industrial mechanisms in this context, still carry laborious and stressed connotations. This is highlighted by the fact that these words are used to give action to fragile parts of nature: “soft green” and “the robin’s call.”



I know not if the rosy showers shed  
 From apple-boughs, or if the soft green wrought  
 In fields, or if the robin's call be fraught  
 The most with thy delight.

*"May" lines 5-8*

Images of gentle nature lie alongside terms that frequently carry negative connotations. This juxtaposition suggests that the two can coexist: nature can be both soft and harsh simultaneously (Jackson).

Words such as “pale,” “white,” and “fair” are used in “July” to speak about both positive and negative attributes. Fair skin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was considered ideal for women especially. Jackson personifies the lily in this poem as a “queenly” being, strong and thriving in spite of the harsh rays of the mid-summer sun. The lily “keeps fair,” not coloring or wilting in the heat. Jackson also uses similar words to describe the effects of the sun—“the white heat pales the skies from side to side.” These terms being used in contradictory ways is another example of this book suggesting that nature can be beautiful and severe at the same time (Jackson).



“September” thinks about the yellow-heavy harvest—wheat, corn, gourds, and finally the contrasting-colored purple grape. The grape cannot ripen without frost, which makes the harsh weather useful to some parts of nature. This is a prime example of something or someone’s beauty not being possible without overcoming a hardship. Jackson writes:

To highest boughs have leaped  
The purple grape,—last thing to ripen, late  
By very reason of its precious cost.  
O Heart, remember, vintages are lost  
If grapes do not for freezing night-dews wait.  
Think, while thou sunnest thyself in Joy’s estate,  
Mayhap thou canst not ripen without frost!

*“September” lines 8-14*

The irregular meter in the second to last line—especially beginning with a stressed monosyllabic word—forces the reader to pause longer on the line. The first word, “Think,” is unexpectedly stressed, jarring the reader out of the comfort of a perfectly constructed meter thus far. The reader therefore must follow the direction of the first word in the line: stop and think (Jackson).

“November” questions a theme Jackson has built throughout this book: the idea that in order for something to be beautiful, it must first suffer, or that by first suffering, something is made even more beautiful after overcoming a struggle. The poem begins with hope—“the violet returns” and “the pale down-trodden aster lifts / Her head and blooms again.” There is imagery of revival and reinvigoration brought into autumn by the “summer’s voice,” but it is quickly squashed when nightfall comes with “an icy shroud.” The speaker questions at the end, “What joy sufficient hath November felt? / What profit from the violet’s day of pain?” This pushes back against ideas in much of this book, because now the speaker is questioning whether the pain and



suffering is worth it. Instead of finding ways to make troubling things seem positive—even attributing beauty to it—the speaker wonders what the point is. What did November gain from killing the violets? The speaker cannot find a way to put a positive spin on this death and destruction (Jackson).

This poem speaks to Helen Hunt Jackson's personal woes. Jackson's first husband, Captain Edward B. Hunt, and their two children all died by the time Jackson was 33 years old (Hubbard). Her first son died in infancy, her husband died in the fall of 1863, and her second son passed away just a year and a half later (*The Encyclopedia of American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* 234). A year and a half is enough time to begin to put one's life back together after the death of a loved one—enough time for a violet to start to bloom. Too quickly, Jackson's world is once again surrounded in “an icy shroud” with the death of her second son: her last living immediate family member, as her parents both also died in the 1840s (*The Encyclopedia* 234). During this time, “her mind filled with thoughts of ‘danger’ and the instability of human life,” which is shown in the themes of the “November” poem (*The Encyclopedia* 234). However, she did move past this dark time. She did not begin her literary profession until after these tragic deaths, and she did end up remarrying in 1875 to William S. Jackson (Hubbard). Perhaps her successful career and new husband are the November profit of her early life's destruction of violets.

Rosemary Whitaker observes that Jackson favors self-reliant women as characters in her stories and emulates the women she admires in her own life. Whitaker explains, “With little action and superficial characterization, the stories and novels rely on their readers' interest in a heroine's long and ultimately triumphant struggle, the triumph being a good marriage and settlement in a community of admiring neighbors” (Whitaker 57). The accomplishments of

attaining a good husband and running a stable home are more significant if a character had to overcome obstacles to get there. Although she admired autonomous women, Jackson openly opposed the feminist movement for women's rights, calling it "an evil fashion of speech which says it is narrowing and [a] narrow life that a woman leads who cares only for her husband and children; that a higher, more imperative thing is that she herself be developed to her utmost" (*The Encyclopedia of American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* 234). Until she became an advocate for Native American rights, Jackson "had never been interested in social causes" and was "critical of women lecturers and had no sympathy for women's suffrage," in spite of "her independent, assertive personality" (Whitaker 58). Jackson utilized her self-reliant personality to overcome the life-changing hardship of losing one's husband and children in order to re-join wifehood with her new husband, William Sharpless Jackson (*The Encyclopedia* 234).

### Pseudonyms

Helen Hunt Jackson wrote under several pseudonyms throughout her life—Marah, Rip Van Winkle, and Saxe Holm—but the most common was the simple "H. H.," which is arguably not a pseudonym but still has the potential to function in a similar way (*The Encyclopedia of American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* 234). She also wrote a novel for a "No Name" series: a sequence of writings where each text is written by a different author, but they are all published with no names attached to any of the works. Her publishers, the Roberts Brothers, hoped this project they created would excite readers' curiosity about "the great unknowns" and increase sales (Whitaker 57). Although it was known that "H. H." was, in fact, Helen Hunt Jackson, the simplification of her name reduces her identity. The use of a pseudonym is in some ways a denial of authorship and in others it is a tool to control authorship. She persistently denied being the

author behind the alias “Saxe Holm,” and her submission to her publisher’s “No Name” series was also a straight denial of authorship (Hubbard, Whitaker 57).

There was speculation as to whether or not she was the author of “Saxe Holm’s” stories, some even suggested that she co-wrote them with another author. Susan Coolidge published a short article in *The Literary World; a Monthly Review of Current Literature* denying suspicions that she was Jackson’s co-author. She wrote with the assumption that “H. H.” was at the very least a main contributor for “Saxe Holm” writings, but also thought it was very unlikely that “some copartnership existed which made it possible for her when questioned, honestly to deny the full responsibility for them” (Coolidge). Another person wrote a letter to the editor of *The Phrenological Journal and Science of Health* saying that “H. H.” was not the person responsible for “Saxe Holm,” citing another anonymous woman “who is the daughter of a prominent clergyman, and the wife of a New York merchant” as the real person behind the alias (M. A. L.). Critic for *The Dial; a Semi-monthly Journal of Literary Criticism, Discussion, and Information*, Sara A. Hubbard proclaims that “until it be proved that another may claim the ‘Saxe Holm’ stories they must be ascribed to Helen Hunt” (Hubbard). Although even Jackson’s close friends were influenced by her “persistent refusal to be identified with ‘Saxe Holm,’” the writings attributed to Saxe Holm resemble Jackson’s writing style so closely that critics believed it highly improbable that anyone else could have written them (Hubbard).

It was not uncommon for female authors to use masculine pseudonyms in the Nineteenth Century. Charlotte Brontë wrote under the pseudonym “Currer Bell” for the entirety of her career, but now that she has died, publishers use her given name on republications (Jung 765, 769). Mary Ann Evans’s books are still published under her pen name “George Eliot” (766). The adoption of an alias for a female writer functioned to “promote her social and moral authority in

the public sphere” (765). What makes each writer’s story unique in their use of pseudonyms is how critics and the public reacted to the reveal. After Charlotte Brontë’s real name, and subsequently her own life story, became known to readers, reviewers completely changed how they interacted with her work. They began to pay “more attention to Brontë’s quality as a woman than as an author” (769). It is one thing to simply separate a writer’s personal life from her professional life, but the result of this separation was that people focused much more on Brontë’s personal story than the stories she put on the page. Publications such as *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, the *Eclectic Review*, and the *National Magazine* in one way or another emphasize the importance and interest of herself over her work. They willingly admit the genius of her writing, but they stop there. No longer do they critically analyze her novels or even approach them from a scholarly stance. They refuse to engage with her work in the ways that they did before knowing her identity for fear of upsetting her. A reviewer in the *National Magazine* writes, “[W]hat a new idea is given of the masculine-minded reckless writer of *Jane Eyre*, when we hear of her quietly shedding tears of grieved feeling over a harsh criticism in the *Times* newspaper!” (769). These reviewers now see Brontë as “a mere girl who would be heartbroken to hear her works criticized by other people,” which overwhelms the previous standard of reviewing *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* (769).

Sara A. Hubbard writes in *The Dial* just a month after Jackson died in 1885 that “Her genius was a secondary power.” She continues,

Her femininity surpassed it in overwhelming charm. Had her purely intellectual qualities, strong and brilliant though they were, been encased in a man’s brain and shaped and toned by masculine moods and feelings, they would never have secured the distinction they gave her. It was her sweet and gracious womanhood,

her capacity for love and friendship, her deep sympathy and her immense tenderness, which made her a captivating figure everywhere.

Like with Charlotte Brontë, critics get distracted in talking about Jackson's life and character rather than her writing, especially after their death. Critics never fail to praise both women's writing, but the discussion stops at a blanket statement of admiration. In articles written on Helen Hunt Jackson soon after her death, critics tend to focus on her life and disposition rather than the work she accomplished. *Friends Review; a Religious, Literary and Miscellaneous Journal* wrote, "As an author, Helen Hunt Jackson obtained a place of distinction; but a greater measure of influence belonged to her personal character" (For Friends' ReviewH). Now, Jackson's character surely deserves lauding. She dedicated much of her life and work to improving conditions for and raising awareness of Native American struggles during her time (Dobie 94). However, the articles written after her death focus on neither her literary accomplishments nor her advocacy for Native American people. Many of them hardly even mention the work she did towards bettering Native American communities and conditions, only dedicating a sentence or very short paragraph to it in a multi-column piece. Jackson's life as a wife, mother, and daughter consume the majority of the page space in nearly every single article. The loss she experienced with the death of her first husband and two children at a young age tugged at the heartstrings of readers and critics alike. Her literary career did not start until age 38, seven years after Captain Hunt died in an explosion and five years after her last son had passed away (Hubbard).

When she died, many literary publications wrote articles about her life and work. *The Critic: A Literary Weekly, Critical and Eclectic* wrote that she was "best known as 'H. H.'" ("Helen Jackson"). Sara A. Hubbard for *The Dial* wrote that "it will always seem most natural to call her [Helen Hunt]." Her first husband's name became an integral part of her authorial

presence, even though she did not start writing until several years after he died. The fact that Helen Hunt Jackson kept both her married names but omitted her maiden name speaks to how much marriage and her role as a wife were important to her identity. It is also interesting that she chose to continue writing under pseudonyms and/or continue to deny authorship of stories written by “Saxe Holm” even after she had a successful career with her own name. Female writers who wrote with pseudonyms in the nineteenth century like Charlotte Brontë chose to do so hoping that they would have greater success with a masculine-sounding name (Jung 765). Hubbard speculates that the person behind the pseudonym “Saxe Holm” must be a woman and must also already have a certain level of success with writing published under her own name. She asks, “But what woman—it was surely a woman—solicitous for fame as all children of genius are, would forego the distinction due the author of the ‘Saxe Holm’ stories, if she had not already a surfeit of homage from other sources?” (Hubbard). As plausible as that argument is, one must also ask, given Jackson’s professional achievements with her own name, what is the need for an alias? She had already proven herself as a successful female author, why did she feel like she needed a masculine front? Furthermore, some critics even seem to argue that it was advantageous in the nineteenth century for a writer to be a woman, for “she can, without loss of dignity, write her own heart into her lines and she invites more confidences in return” (“Helen Jackson”).

However, there are a few definite advantages to using an alias. It carries with it added intrigue of the unknown, inciting readers’ curiosity and interest, and potentially increasing sales, just like The Roberts Brothers Publishers hoped with their “No Name” series. Jackson’s use of “Saxe Holm” as a pseudonym interests the public enough that one reader, E. L. Bickel, writes to *Current Literature* asking if one of their correspondents would be able to inform him who “Saxe

Holm” was. They preface the query with “*Saxe Holm again,*” insinuating that the question had arisen before. Writing under a penname can also attempt to force critics to study the work alone. Without a known person behind a text, a critic can only speculate about the character and personal history of the author, and speculation can only fill a page so much before the critic is forced to focus on the text itself. As we can see with Charlotte Brontë and Helen Hunt Jackson, literary analysts tend to place undue focus on the *woman* and her traditionally womanly roles as an emotionally fragile creature and a nurturing mother or wife. Currer Bell’s novels were not reviewed with the author’s feelings and personal story in mind—they were judged for their literary qualities (Jung 769). After Brontë’s identity was revealed, and her “strange, sad story” released to the public, the *Eclectic Review* wrote, “we have no heart for mere literary criticism; we must lay aside her books, and leave their brilliant excellences uneulogized, and their scarcely less brilliant faults uncensured: others may criticize her writings—we are unable to think of anything but her life” (Jung 769). Although the critic willingly admits that the novels are both brilliant and flawed, he refuses to analyze them because his attention is entirely used up by the author’s newly-revealed backstory.

Jackson’s *A Calendar of Sonnets* was published with her full name, not an alias. So, why is a portion of this paper focused on pseudonyms? *A Calendar of Sonnets* was published after Jackson’s death—her name is forever stamped on this book, likely without her explicit consent to the publisher. This may not be as significant of an issue for other authors who always write under their given name, but with Jackson, the situation becomes more nuanced because she chooses to use several pseudonyms throughout her career. She makes conscious decisions about when and how to assert or deny her authorship over texts. Not only do the Roberts Brothers make the decision about the listed author of *A Calendar of Sonnets* after Jackson is no longer



alive to make that decision, but after her death, there is no more discussion over who the author behind the “Saxe Holm” alias is. It is widely accepted that Jackson is “Saxe Holm,” even though she always denied it while she was alive. This forced authorship runs directly counter to Jackson’s practice of carefully, intentionally making decisions about how she is portrayed as an author.

Helen Hunt Jackson lived a rather short life, dying at only 55 years old. She had an affinity for finding things and people more beautiful after they had gone through some sort of struggle. This is apparent in her book *A Calendar of Sonnets* (1886)—the sonnets in this book again and again glorify nature that has undergone hardships. Jackson tends to write characters, particularly female ones, who fit the same characteristics—characteristics that she appears to emulate in her own life as well. Jackson’s resistance against traditional structures of calendars and sonnets mirror her denial of established features of Romantic poetry. Her use of pseudonyms and initials to sign her books is an interesting move for her time, as women often wrote under masculine names in order to more easily enter the literary world. She, however, was already successful as an author under her own name, but by using an alias, critics had no way of focusing on her personal life and were forced to write literary analyses about the way the books functioned by themselves without getting distracted by her womanly characteristics. In this way, she was able to see that her literary accomplishments were, in fact, well-received on their own. As a woman who lauded self-reliance in herself and others, this would have been important to her.

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