

American Women's Literature in the Twentieth Century: A Survey of Some Feminist Trends

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One might argue that the history of American women's literature in the twentieth century began some time in the 1880s, or even earlier.* The American feminist movement got under way in the decades before the Civil War, and the radical feminists in the United States today are the latest manifestations of a long-standing national tradition of political struggle for the rights of women. In its origins, American feminism was part of a broad current of social reform in which abolitionism was the central cause and which also included movements advocating, for example, prison reform, socialism, temperance and the establishment of public schools. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton became famous American suffragettes during the nineteenth century, and in *The Woman's Bible* (1898) Stanton criticized the dominance of male perspectives in the Judæo-Christian religious tradition. Feminism often leads to criticism of the established religions, then as now. In her recent work, *Beyond Power: On Men, Women and Morals* (1985), Marilyn French proposes that Christianity is a product of a patriarchal social order that the male sex imposed upon humanity several thousand years ago.

In the late nineteenth century Charlotte Perkins Gilman emerged as a prominent American feminist and author. She divorced her husband and gave him and his new wife custody of her daughter in order to obtain the freedom she felt she needed in her life as a writer and agitator for women's rights. Such difficult decisions sometimes had to be made in an age when it was all but impossible for women to combine careers and family life. Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1898) is a feminist classic which demonstrates that the financial dependence of women on men makes it nearly impossible for them to develop the full range of their talents. She also wrote a kind of feminist

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to develop the full range of their talents. She also wrote a kind of feminist Utopian novel called *Herland* (1915). In this work women reproduce by means of virgin birth and live in a harmonious, matriarchal society which is superior to the patriarchal society in every sense.

In her writings Gilman anticipated almost all the arguments of modern feminism, and her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) has recently been restored to its rightful place in American literature besides, for example, the works of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman. Gilman's story is a dramatic account of the growing insanity of a woman who feels that the people around her pay no attention to her desire to put her intellectual and creative faculties to use. She eventually succumbs to a psychotic condition where she envisions herself imprisoned in the wallpaper, a striking symbol of the near enslavement of many women at the time. Both in older and more recent literature by women insanity or suicide occur as consequences of the restrictions that were imposed upon them. It is only in recent decades that women have been given alternatives, as it were, to such tragic outcomes. One might say that divorce and single motherhood have replaced the more drastic options, although the latter alternative often represents a heavy burden for women.

Various women writers exhibit different degrees of feminist awareness. The early literature includes both the worldly skepticism of Edith Wharton and the radical utopianism of Gilman, and similar differences of opinion or emphasis are also found in today's literature, although attitudes have now generally become more radical and uncompromising. It is therefore only natural that earlier writers should sometimes reveal a limited or hesitant approach to the question of women's rights and their place in society. Like everyone else, female authors are influenced by the ideas and values of their times. But however conservative some of them were, there is often a half-hidden or unstated awareness in their works of the problematic situation of women in the world.

In *The House of Mirth* (1905), for example, Edith Wharton seems to vacillate between a direct attack upon society for the way in which it maims women by restricting their options, and an inclination to give Lily Bart, the heroine, considerable blame for her own downfall. Lily, Wharton seems to say, demands too much and goes too far, as a woman, in her insistence on her own integrity. Another approach is found in Freeman's "The Revolt of Mother" (1891). After forty years of marriage and obedience towards her husband, Sarah Penn finally decides that she wants a new house instead of the barn that her husband is putting up. Her rebellion is successful and her wish granted, but Freeman refrains from taking the next step, an obvious one for the modern reader, of questioning further a relationship between the sexes

where power is so unequally distributed. Both in Jewett's and Freeman's stories one can observe how the female characters begin, as it were, to express their own feelings and needs in the face of the patriarchal society they grow up in. It is as if they are groping their way towards a feminist consciousness on the basis of what was possible, or thinkable, during their time.

Jewett, Freeman and Kate Chopin have traditionally been regarded as so-called regional writers from New England and Louisiana, respectively, and this perspective has, until recently, blocked our understanding of their contributions to the realm of women's fiction. For Jewett, the obvious subject for a woman writer was the female experience. She advised the young Willa Cather to stop her "masquerade" of using male narrators and protagonists and to write on the basis of a purely female point of view. A possible explanation of Cather's choice of male heroes at the time is that she may have felt that her work would be taken more seriously if it dealt with men rather than women.

However, Cather was also the writer who maintained that Jewett's short story collection *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) should be ranked alongside *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Scarlet Letter*. In Cather's own mature work, the protagonists are powerful women. The author herself, as well as Jewett, remained unmarried and lived with female companions. Female couples living together was something of a social convention in New England, where they were known as "Boston marriages": Unmarried, artistic, or simply unconventional women, as well as widows, living alone were often accepted socially, and the poet Emily Dickinson is only the most famous example of this phenomenon. Her total withdrawal from society and her spiritual independence may perhaps be seen as an early instance of a feminist awareness and rebellion.

In the stories of Jewett one finds penetrating and memorable descriptions of the frequently lonely lives of both young and old New England women. "The Foreigner" (1900) portrays a young widow who dies from grief after her husband is lost at sea. The story also recreates a special kind of community feeling and mutual support among the women in this environment of sailors and fishermen. Similarly, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* emphasizes the knowledge, authority, and capacity for friendship among women and their creation of a network that functions as an alternative to society, so to speak.

In short story collections such as *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897) Kate Chopin portrayed the lives and manners of the Creoles of New Orleans and the Bayou region of Louisiana. She made them as well known as the New Englanders of Jewett, whose work Chopin knew and admired. But the novel *The Awakening* (1899) was her major work, in which she renders the spiritual and erotic awakening of a married woman from the

numbness of matrimony and social conventions. The novel resembles both Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, but it was the frank descriptions of sexual feelings and dreams, as well as the neutral treatment of the theme of adultery, that created a literary scandal and led to a condemnation of the author that came as a shock to her. These events were probably the main reasons why she refrained from publishing anything more during her lifetime. Looking back, we are in a position to realize how far ahead of her times Chopin was in her attitudes.

Her heroine, Edna Pontellier, falls in love with a young man, leaves her husband and children and tries to live on her own in New Orleans. But when her beloved deserts her she succumbs to despair and commits suicide. Because society restricted women's choices so harshly, they often developed an excessive dependence on men and romantic love and might become enormously vulnerable emotionally. Edna tries to establish an independent existence, but finds herself isolated in the community and receives no real support for this project. She rebels against the role as mother and housekeeper that the husband and society demand that she fulfil and insists on satisfying her own desires and wishes. In short, she demands independence, equality, and freedom in an age with few possibilities of this kind. Divorce was difficult to obtain, and the job market was not regarded as the natural domain of women. Edna paints, but women were not really supposed to be painters either. Her friend, the pianist Mademoiselle Reisz, is a recluse and an eccentric, which suggests to Edna that women have to pay a high price if they insist on being artists of any kind, or even individuals. The consequence of all this is that Edna is left with the fatal conviction that there is no room for a woman like herself in the world. Ultimately, she becomes a victim of the sex role expectations of her place and time.

The Awakening also contains other aspects than the ones mentioned above. Edna's despair is couched in a language that is related to the fin-de-siècle atmosphere of the 1890s, in which spleen and a sense of doom were fashionable. The influence of Whitman and American transcendentalism is also noticeable, and Edna's suicidal yearnings express a wish to be reunited with nature and the infinite. However, the feminist reading is essential to our understanding of the thrust of the novel. The difference between *The Awakening* and the feminist novels of our time is one of degree rather than kind. Chopin did not challenge men and patriarchy in the open and direct way of present-day authors. Instead, she presented, almost instinctively, the tragedy of a young woman trying unsuccessfully to break away from traditional sex roles.

Suicide, or something close to it, also became the "solution" for Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*. It was apparently typical that death might become the

only way out for women who tried to live according to their own premises during this era. Both Edna and Lily try to obtain respect and acceptance of their own personalities and wishes and discover that this is not possible in the world that they live in. Society insists on fitting them into roles that are not defined by themselves, and the result becomes an intolerable conflict between their own conception of themselves and the way others observe and categorize them. Fundamentally, the issue was society's unwillingness to accept women as autonomous beings who have a right to exist as individuals, and this attitude is essential to patriarchy.

The House of Mirth is a deadly accurate satirical work about the snobbery and money worship of the American upper classes and exposes their egotism, cruelties, and cowardice. Lily Bart is a typical example of the society lady who is unable to survive in the labor market because her talents are primarily in the area of dressing well, playing cards, and keeping the conversation going. She becomes a victim of this narrow role in a way that is parallel to the oppression of lower class women, marked by many childbirths or poorly paid work. Lily briefly joins the ranks of such women when she is forced by circumstances to work as a seamstress at the end of the novel. The tragic aspect of Lily's fate is that her strong personality and intelligence cannot find adequate outlets in an environment where nobody can imagine anything else for her to do than to marry a rich man as quickly as possible.

Refusing to fulfil these expectations, demanding visibility and recognition as an individual, Lily tries to survive by sheer force of personality. But it is not enough. Without a man, which means without a financial basis, and continuing vainly to struggle for acceptance and integration into society on her own terms, Lily is banished from the upper class world. Finally, she sinks into the abyss in the manner of the protagonist of a naturalistic novel. The message of *The Awakening* is repeated: the heroine is destroyed because there is no acceptable place for her in society.

In *The Custom of the Country* (1913) Wharton describes an entirely different kind of female fate and experience. The heroine, Undine Spragg, is a ruthless gold-digger who uses her beauty to get to the top of society. In the process she leaves her husband and their child behind and marries a millionaire who is as wicked as herself. The abandoned husband commits suicide. Undine is a terrifying character, and in this novel Wharton savagely attacks the capitalist greed of the society she knew so well. It is, however, also possible to regard Undine as a sort of twisted feminist heroine. She is a woman who has no illusions about the world and who concludes that she, being female, has to be hard and pitiless in order to get ahead in the system. Even if she becomes a monster, this can also be seen as a result of the unnatural codes women were supposed to abide by. Oppression spawns extreme, sometimes

violent reactions. Undine confronts the problem head on and turns the tables, albeit monstrously so, on a sexist and greedy society.

From around 1910 and throughout the twenties the modernist movement dominated Anglo-American literature, led by authors such as Eliot, Joyce and Pound. But there were also American women writers who were important members of the modernist school. H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), along with Pound, was one of the founders of the imagist movement in poetry. Showing an awareness of the role of her sex, she maintained that she was looking for realities in her work that do not exist, according to men. Amy Lowell was another central member of the imagist movement and eventually became regarded as its chief spokesperson. Marianne Moore developed her own, idiosyncratic poetic style. In her sonnets, Edna St. Vincent Millay celebrated female sexual as well as general liberation in a new and defiant way. Not since Kate Chopin had such frankness and daring been in evidence in writings by a woman, and Millay's poems exercised a considerable influence on women readers of the time.

Another influential writer was Gertrude Stein, a pivotal figure in modernist circles in Paris. Hemingway, among others, sought Stein's advice and was told by her, in a famous line, to "begin over again and concentrate." Stein's own experimental prose, like that of Joyce, is difficult to read, and a piece like "Picasso," written in 1923, seems to be a literary parallel to the abandonment of traditional form and color in the cubism of Picasso and Braque. However, Stein was also experimenting, at a very early stage, with stream of consciousness techniques in *The Making of Americans*, written in 1908. This emphasis of hers on the study of the complex workings of the consciousness of the individual is even more impressively evident in *Three Lives* (1909).

Besides these avant-garde authors, realistic novelists like Cather and Ellen Glasgow published important works in the first decades of the century. When she was a student, Cather dressed like a man for a while and pretended to be one. Her lesbianism, like that of Stein, may have included elements of protest against and refuge from the pressure of traditional sex roles. Two of Cather's best novels are *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918), both of them describing strong pioneer women from the Midwest. These heroines achieve a heroic and near mythic stature as Cather underlines the inherent strength and self-sufficiency of women as against the commonly held view of them in society. She went one step, or perhaps several, beyond the works of Wharton and Chopin, creating resourceful and independent female characters that might serve as role models for women struggling to break free of conventional expectations. The American settler environment on the prairie also provided greater freedom for women than most other places in the country.

Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!* runs her prairie farm successfully and proves those wrong who claim that women are not fit to be farmers. In *My Antonia*, Antonia Shimerda fulfills a traditional role as a farmer's wife with many children, but because of her strength of character she is greatly respected by her husband and neighbors. She is actually the most important person in her family and achieves self-realization in her role as wife, mother, and equal partner with her husband.

Ellen Glasgow concentrated on her Southern environment in a number of novels and short stories. In her first books she portrays male protagonists, which, as in the case of *Cather*, may have been a result of her insecurity as a female author. But in her later and best works she depicts women's lives in a critical fashion, demonstrating that they were emotionally crippled by the conservative and patriarchal codes of Southern society. *Barren Ground* (1925) is a parallel to *O Pioneers!*, recording the hardships but ultimate triumph of a woman who has to take over her parents' farm, and *Vein of Iron* (1935) deals with a deserted wife, a recurring theme in Glasgow's fiction. The short story "The Difference" (1923) is another excellent treatment of this theme of a husband leaving his wife cruelly. Glasgow's fiction reflects a growing feminist awareness and shows how she rejected the mores of a South in which women were expected to be passive and self-sacrificing. According to her, women were thus conditioned to be taken advantage of.

Katherine Anne Porter is an excellent short story writer, but she is best known for her novel *Ship of Fools* (1962). The story "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" (1930) is a good example of her mastery of the genre and her combination of irony and compassion. She describes the death of an old woman with sympathetic understanding whilst also showing her skepticism towards the Catholic faith of Granny Weatherall. In her youth the old woman had been jilted by her husband-to-be, who failed to show up for the wedding ceremony and thus painfully humiliated her. At the moment of death these events are repeated, as it were. Granny Weatherall now expects to meet Christ, her divine bridegroom, but to her great and final disappointment even he turns out to be absent or nonexistent. In another story, "Old Mortality" (1939), Porter exposes Southern codes and sex roles as Romantic absurdities that result in deformations of the characters and behavior of women. Against all this Porter has set her heroine, Miranda Gay, whom we follow from childhood to young adulthood as she increasingly defies the norms that are applied to her as a girl and decides, first to become a jockey, and later to become an airplane pilot.

Women writers were also represented in the proletarian and radical literature of the thirties. One of the better novels in this genre is Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio*, written at the beginning of the decade but remaining

unpublished until 1974. Parts of it were printed in *Partisan Review* in 1934. In this work the twofold oppression of lower class women is described, firstly by the capitalist system and secondly by the men, who frequently beat and mistreated their wives. Olsen's novel expresses her youthful, idealistic Marxism, but it also reveals her belief that socialism and feminism were two aspects of the same thing. This means that she worked for the revolution in the belief that the introduction of socialism would also abolish the oppression of women. Later in her life Olsen realized that this process was far from automatic and that it takes a change of consciousness and attitudes to bring about a new sex role pattern. The long short story "Tell Me a Riddle" (1964) is a poignant representation of an old woman as she looks back on her life and reaffirms the ideals of her youth, that is, socialism, a belief in reason, and equality between the sexes.

In 1937 the black writer Zora Neal Hurston published *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In this novel she renders the lives of American blacks from a woman's point of view and touches upon some of the areas that, for example, Alice Walker confronted much later in *The Color Purple* (1982). The heroine of Hurston's novel is given in marriage to a much older man that she does not love, like Celie in *The Color Purple*, but Janie, as she is called, does not resign herself to her fate. She runs away and takes up with another man, and after his death she falls in love with a man twelve years her junior and goes to Florida with him. Throughout all of this Janie refuses to accept the male chauvinism of the black community, and the men respect her strength and the independence of her mind. In other words, as early as 1937 one could find positive, even feminist heroines in black literature. Hurston's novel is also important as an authentic rendering of black American culture and folkways. The author was actually an anthropologist who did field work in the black community of her home town, Eatonville, Florida.

Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) is a novel that can be compared, both in terms of plot and setting, to Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Without declaring any feminist intent openly, but employing the technique of the naturalist novel, Petry tells the story of a young black woman and her doomed efforts to manage on her own in Harlem. As a description of this famous ghetto, emphasizing the poverty, drug use and crime of the area, *The Street* also anticipates the fiction and essays of James Baldwin. But Petry's perspective is clearly female, and Luthie Johnson, the protagonist, is victimized by black men and the women who collaborate with them. She eventually discovers that her boyfriend wants to be her pimp, and in an ensuing fight between them she kills him and runs away from Harlem towards an unknown fate. There are significant similarities between the various forms of female rebellion in the novels of Hurston, Petry and Walker, in which the

heroines begin to fight back against male abuse and to defend their own interests.

During the early years of the period after World War II women writers were relatively invisible, and this is not surprising given the prevailing conservative mood in America during the 1950s and early 60s. Besides Carson McCullers, the most prominent female author at the time was probably Mary McCarthy, whose best known novel is *The Group* (1965). McCarthy is a skilful writer with a keen understanding of human weaknesses and of the special problems experienced by women in society. *The Group* is about the lives of eight women, all of them Vassar graduates, and their tribulations in marriage and the work place. The author also dealt with lesbianism without condemning it, exposed male cruelty in the character of Harald Petersen and criticized the dogmatism of male pediatricians concerning such issues as the feeding schedules and toilet training of babies.

The postwar period also saw the rise of important women writers from the South like Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty. O'Connor's short stories are profoundly religious as well as grotesquely original in their depiction of characters and situations. Feminist perspectives are not immediately evident in these works, but in them O'Connor mainly deals with female characters and what can be called a women's world. As in the case of Faulker, Eudora Welty's subject is the lives and fates of people in the deep South. Her short story "Livvie" (1943), to take an early example, is about a young black woman who is married to an older man who keeps her locked up in his house to prevent other men from seeing her. After a few years of marriage he dies and leaves Livvie with a property and the freedom to start a new life. The implicit feminist message is close to the one found in black women writers.

The poet Sylvia Plath's suicide in 1963 at the age of 30 has become a historic watershed for contemporary American feminists and women writers. As a divorced mother with two children Plath struggled to cope at a time when there was still little understanding of the problems of single women, let alone such as were poets. Plath has become a symbol of the female artist as victim and martyr in a male-dominated society. Her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) is a witty as well as moving account of her life as a young woman and a psychiatric patient. In the celebrated poem "Daddy," published in 1965, Plath, using her deceased father Otto as a model, has created powerful images of everything traumatic and frightening that women may react to in fathers and in men as such. In her poetry, Plath has transformed the extremism and madness of her own life into extraordinarily intense delineations of central female experiences and traumas.

Other important women poets are Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Bishop and Denise Levertov. Rich is a declared lesbian and also a very committed and

articulate feminist. In a poem like "Grandmother" (1981) she eloquently expresses her awareness of the stunted lives of her two grandmothers, women of a generation which had few options other than those of wife and mother and whose opinions and ideas were not often listened to. Marilyn French's latest novel, *Her Mother's Daughter* (1987) is a similar, though vastly greater, journey into the past to recreate the lives of mothers and grandmothers and interpret their fates in the light of modern feminist perspectives.

In 1963, the year when *The Bell Jar* appeared, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, probably the single most important book about the oppressive situation of American women during the post-war years. Soon after, the American women's movement emerged as part of the general protest movement of the 1960s. The rebellion of students and blacks gradually subsided, but the women's movement is still active, if in a more restrained way. This seems to indicate not only that its goals have not been fully achieved, but also that it is of basic importance to society and its development. In the context of this movement, a wave of women's literature arose throughout the 1970s and 80s which is rich and manifold enough to constitute one of the most important currents in American literary history of this century.

Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1974) was one of the first modern bestselling novels in America that dealt explicitly with women's issues. Jong tells the story of the vicissitudes of her protagonist Isadora Wing, who wants to create a life for herself as an individual and artist. Like earlier literary heroines, she resists the demands that society makes upon women, and she also singles out psychoanalysis for attack because of its support of the traditional female sex role. In its frank acknowledgement of female sexual desire, *Fear of Flying* goes much further than earlier women's literature and contradicts most vigorously the stereotype of an essentially passive female sexuality.

The most consistently feminist novelist of today is very probably Marilyn French, whose novel *The Women's Room* (1978) is a feminist tract that presents a passionate indictment of the patriarchal society and the crimes and injustices it perpetrates upon women. Like *The Feminine Mystique*, this work was very influential in shaping public opinion and has a status in relation to the women's movement that can, to some extent, be compared to the influence *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had upon society's attitude to slavery. *The Women's Room* focusses our attention on the subjugation of women in the American middle class of the 1950s and 60s, when they were largely regarded as second class citizens in the social and economic sense and were supposed to devote themselves entirely to the home and the family. French attacks men directly and provides the reader with a long list of male offences and shortcomings. Her male characters are egotistical, ruthless, and violent, and

the only solution for women is to get away from them in one way or another. Mira Ward, the main character, becomes divorced, and at the end of the novel she lives alone, having given up on men and feeling that the differences between the sexes are simply too great for them to be able to live together.

French may be charged with oneness and pessimism, but she is quite consistent and carries what may be called the logic of feminism to the point where drastic measures such as lesbianism and segregation are seriously considered. But the solution French ultimately seems to be working for is the nonviolent abolition of patriarchy and the establishment of a wholly new type of society in which no forms of sexism exist. Most modern feminist writers share such a motivating concept of a new, androgynous social order in which there is not only complete equality between the sexes, but also greater joy and harmony in general.

During the 1970s and 80s women writers have in fact assumed a central, if not dominant position in American literature, a situation which has no historical parallel. A host of greatly talented authors have emerged, such as Joan Didion, Marge Piercy, Bobbie Ann Mason, Mary Gordon, Anne Tyler, Joyce Carol Oates and numerous others. Piercy's *Small Changes* (1973) is a seminal novel that deals with the dissatisfactions engendered by the standard sex roles. Gordon's *Final Payments* (1978) depicts and criticizes the patriarchal and religious traditions of an Irish-American milieu in powerfully executed fiction. Enormously prolific, Oates has created a vast chronicle of modern, and sometimes older, American lives, manners and environments.

Some of the most outstanding women authors of today are black and carry on the tradition from Hurston, and, for example, Lorraine Hansberry and her play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). The themes of this work are the racism and economic hardship experienced by black Americans in general. But in her essays Hansberry also touched upon feminist aspects and stressed, as early as 1957, the importance of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison represent the latest flowering of this tradition of black female writing, and Maya Angelou and her autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) should also be mentioned.

One of the notable differences between male and female black literature is that the latter often concentrates on the black family and is less concerned with the white society that surrounds it. Male writers more often tend to focus on various kinds of confrontations between blacks and whites. The theme is usually the struggle of the black hero to survive in society at large. This difference may reflect the existing sex role pattern in society. The black women have stayed at home or have had jobs as maids or nannies in white homes. The black men have more often tried to maintain their own identity

and integrity vis-a-vis white society and have been more directly exposed to racial discrimination.

For black women the main problem has often been black men, and the suffering caused by their irresponsibility is a major theme in the literature created by these women. They have focussed on black family life and provided a unique and colorful picture of how blacks live and function in twentieth-century America. In the feminist atmosphere of today it has also become possible for them to tell the truth about the way black men may treat women, and the result has been shocking for members of both races. Some black male readers have reacted negatively against this writing and have accused the authors of betrayal of the black community and of providing white racists with ammunition with which to slander blacks in general. But this criticism cannot obliterate the realization that abuse and neglect on the part of black men have been incontrovertible facts in many black families.

Both Walker and Morrison describe violence, incest, and rape of black women and girls in powerful prose narratives that are often painful to read. In novels like *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *The Color Purple* the pathos is made almost unbearable by the fact that the abuse befalls sacrificial lambs, so to speak, in the shape of defenseless and innocent girls like Pecola Breedlove and Celie. The male sexism of the black community has apparently been more systematic and archaic than the one found in white society. Women seem to have been regarded as a kind of cattle that could be bought and sold and that existed in order to be exploited as much as possible. In *The Color Purple* a comparison is made between the male chauvinism of black Americans and that of the Africans which suggests that the evils in question may also have certain tribal or African roots. An additional factor is the oppression of black men by white men which has created a compensatory need to subjugate black women. An oppressive situation has created a low self-image in the men and thus made them capable of oppressing their women. Racist abuse thus leads to self-denigration and violence. At the bottom of this hierarchy one finds the black women, whose self-image is even more endangered.

Walker's Celie feels that she is everybody's scapegoat and victim and finds herself in a state of emotional paralysis or even death. It is therefore all the more urgently important for her that Shug Avery, the lover of Celie's abominable husband, becomes fond of her and helps her regain her self-respect. Parts of the novel contain truly horrific descriptions of the barbaric conditions which often have existed in black communities. But *The Color Purple* is still fundamentally optimistic about the prospects for black people, men as well as women. There is no doubt about Walker's commitment to the cause of improving the situation for black women, but she also seems to regard black men as victims of an ancient patriarchal tradition which has flourished among

black Americans in a particularly virulent form because of the ignorance and isolation of many of their communities. Celie's husband Albert acts not only out of cruelty, but also because he does not know any better. When Celie and the other women in the novel stand up to their men and insist on fair and equal treatment, the men turn out to be capable of remorse and change. The story ends happily, some might say sentimentally, and shows Walker's belief in the moral and spiritual power of women and women's values.

The concept of women's literature is a new one, and most literary history has traditionally been written by men. This means that the canon in American literature has been dominated by male authors. It is unlikely that this canon is going to be radically altered, but the women writers that are already known should be given greater attention and read in a way which employs the insights of modern feminist literary criticism. These insights should also be brought to bear upon the works of male authors and their presentation of female characters. Twentieth century American literature has for too long been regarded as consisting of a select group of male writers in which names like Faulkner and Hemingway have overshadowed others. An author like Ellen Glasgow, for example, has been relegated to a very marginal position in the consciousness of the academic public. Women writers have concentrated on female experiences and perspectives which have been largely ignored by male critics and literary historians. The basic cause of the relative invisibility and subordination of women writers originates in a patriarchal value system where the literature of women has been regarded as being less important than that of men.

Until recently, literary criticism and history have not distinguished between the male and female experience and have tended to regard the former as being universally valid and representative. There has been little awareness that the female experience has a significance of its own and constitutes an essential part of the human consciousness as such. These assumptions and shortcomings have now been challenged and addressed most vigorously by feminist scholars, and the process of changing them is well under way. These changes are of monumental importance for literary history, criticism, and creative writing and probably represent the most significant literary reorientation that has occurred in the post-war era. Women writers are likely to be read and emphasized even more in the future, and with a new understanding of what they have been trying to say about the conditions of women in various regions, classes, and epochs.