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## **Joined Together: American Women's Literature and History in the XXth Century**

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Throughout American's past women of all classes, races, ethnic and religious backgrounds, sexual preferences, and political beliefs have participated in organized activities to improve women's lives. This organizational life has been rich and diverse, including literary societies, antilynching leagues, suffrage associations, the Daughters of the American revolution and others. As in the 1830s the first woman's rights movement emerged from abolitionism, women's liberation came from the civil rights as well as the student movement of the period.

Women's fiction, as a body of work *sui generis*, began to attract serious and sustained critical attention in the wake of the 1960s women's movement. Feminist critics attacked what they saw as the masculinist bias of American literary criticism; the motifs, topics and themes took little account of the contribution of American women to the national literature. Attacks on the male bias of literary scholarship went hand-in-hand with recovery of lost female writers and marginalized traditions (the increased attention to nineteenth century sensational and domestic writing dates from this time in the early 1970s). As an example may be mentioned the work of Nina Baym, who did a substantial study of American women writers and the work of history. The critical drive was towards literary archaeology (recovery of lost texts or authors), towards interpretive strategies focused on groups of writers within more localized schools (for instance, Southern writers, local colorists, or various ethnic grouping). Critics were keen to avoid a universalism which would simply see women's fiction as a set of unchanging, synchronic features, uninflected by the very large differences within women's culture (differences of race, class and sexuality, not to mention the aesthetic differences from one novel to the next). Well-known writers such as Willa Cather or Edith Wharton continued to be read, but their work was increasingly seen as a distinctively female achievement.

At the time of 1960-70s many literary scholars were becoming aware of the narrowness of what was taught as "American Literature". Many

textbooks were limited to a dozen “major writers”. Most women authors, except Emily Dickinson and a couple of others (W. Cather, E. Wharton) were ignored as marginal, yet as one began to read American women writers, “one discovered work of great power and vitality” [1: xxxiii]. Where were the women?

We found the widest sampling of the works of minority and white women writers in “The Heath Anthology of American Literature” Paul Lauter, General Editor, 1998. The selection includes material by 134 women of all races plus special section ‘Developments in Women’s Writing’.

Elaine Showalter points out, why discussion of women writers has been so inaccurate, fragmented, and partisan. First, women’s literary history has suffered from an extreme form of “Great Traditionalism,” which reduced the diversity and extraordinary range of women’s writing to a tiny band of the “great.” Second, it has been difficult for critics to see in women’s writing an eternal opposition of biological and aesthetic creativity [9: 7].

The concept of a female aesthetic logically emerged from female literary history, which describes the developmental stages of women’s writing during the last 250 years, defines the connections throughout history and across national boundaries of the recurring images, plots, themes emerging from women’s social, psychological and aesthetic experience in male dominated cultures. The female aesthetic spoke of a women’s culture (that had been neglected and had to be revived), of a women’s language, and of literary forms that came out of a specific female psychology.

The interest in establishing a more reliable critical vocabulary and more accurate and systematic literary history for women writers is part of a larger interdisciplinary effort by psychologists, sociologists, social historians to reconstruct the political, social, and cultural experience of women.

Speaking on women’s writing from an historical perspective I follow the feminist scholarship of critics such as Annette Kolodny, Elaine Showalter, Guy Reynolds, and Paul Lauter. As Guy Reynolds says, “The emphasis is upon the interpretation of texts within their historical context, and I read these stories or novels as products of a specific matrix of cultural forces, at a specific point in history. I go on to explore the narrative and rhetorical strategies forged by the individual writer. America’s women writers have themselves acted as agents of change in an ongoing process of cultural transformation, often by unsettling old fictional patterns and creating new ones” [8: 5-6].

For Paul Lauter it is important “how a text engages concerns central to the period in which it was written as well as to the overall development of American culture, to reconnect literature and its study with the society and culture of which it is fundamentally a part.” [7: XXXVII]

Within feminist criticism of American women’s writing, the folk arts of quilt-making and weaving, the patching and piecing of material, have come to stand for a womanly aesthetic. As Elaine Showalter summarises: “Both theme and form in women’s writing, piecing and patchwork have also become metaphors for a Female Aesthetic, for sisterhood, and for a politics of feminist survival. In the past two decades especially, they have been celebrated as essentially feminine art forms, modes of expression that emerge naturally from the womanly impulse of nurturance and thrift, and that constitute a women’s language unintelligible to a male audience or readers.” [10: 146]

A literary genealogy is founded on the recognition that all writing is intertextual. “Intertextuality” is the term normally used to suggest the relationships between writers; it also implies affection, kinship or homage across the generations. Feminists replaced literary rivalry with intertextual theories of collective sisterhood. The warmth of Alice Walker’s “Dedication” to the collection of pieces by Zora Neale Hurston which she published in 1979: “We love Zora Neale Hurston for her work, first, and then again ... we love her for herself” [12: 2] is an example.

At the turn of the century American society was being reshaped and transformed by two dramatic cultural shifts. First, this was now a mass immigrant culture. During the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth, vast numbers of migrants, mainly from eastern and southern Europe, arrived to transform America, particularly its cities. As over one million new citizens arrived at Ellis Island each year, society became more cosmopolitan, diverse and, in the eyes of some commentators, dangerously plural. For Henry James, returning to his homeland after a long absence, New York now seemed an alien place; but for progressives and radicals, the new society promised exhilarating multiplicity.

Also, old Victorian certainties (of class and marriage, of the role of women) were being dissolved by a rapidly changing economic order.

The twentieth century witnessed a new technological consumerism – a consumerism associated with women who, it seemed, were the main

beneficiaries of the industrial disciplining of masculine work. Advertising, the cinema, the department store, the car, magazines: a leisure society emerged, and it often appeared a *feminized* social order. In *The Great Gatsby* (1925) this feminized consumerism is familiar enough for F. Scott Fitzgerald to deploy a brief, sarcastic caricature of the female shopper, with her magazines and trivial purchases: "At the news-stand she bought a copy of *Town Tattle* and a moving-picture magazine, and in the station drug-store some cold cream and a small flask of perfume." [4: 27]

This dual transformation of society in the early twentieth century radically re-shaped "home" as a notion of national identity. On a macrocosmic level the metaphorical implications of the world "home" had undergone a shift, as new Americans entered the country, bringing with them different ideas of custom and culture, while long-established families (like the James dynasty) no longer recognised their "own" cities. In the wake of the great immigration of the 1890s, the idea of a stable homeland was disrupted: who "we" are, and where "we" come from were questions that would increasingly vex commentators. Simultaneously, consumerism and the development of a leisure class re-fashioned the home. In a very basic sense the home was transformed from a retreat from industrial capitalism into a crucible for changes in the economy. This development is most evident in the emergence of a political writing which addressed the material circumstances of home life, especially the economic structure of marriage. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1898), introduces a new materialism into discussion of the home and marriage: her critique of courtship is grounded in a brutally realistic economic analysis. Marriage is analysed, removed from the world of sentiment and placed solidly in the realm of financial need and dependency.

It is worth quoting an extended passage from *Women and Economics* to see the formation of this analytical discourse, with its decoding of marriage as a form of computerised choice: "The girl who marries the rich old man or the titled profligate is condemned by the popular voice; and the girl who marries the poor young man, and helps him live his best, is still approved by the same great arbiters. And yet why should we blame the woman for pursuing her vocation? Since marriage is her only way to get money, why should she not try to get money in that way? In simpler relations, in the country, wherever women have a person value in economic relation as well

as a feminine value in sex-relation, an early marriage is an advantage. The young farmer gets a profitable servant when he marries. The young business man gets nothing of the kind, – pretty girl, a charming girl, ready for “wifehood and motherhood” – so far as her health hold out, – but having no economic value whatever. She is merely a consumer, and he must wait till he can “afford to marry”. These are instances frequent everywhere, and familiar to us all, of the palpable effects in common life of our sexuo-economic relation.” [6: 93]

Three writers might be thought of as authors responding to these economic and social transformations in the meaning of “home”. For Stein, Wharton, and Antin what home might signify, in both literal and metaphorical senses, becomes the animating dynamic of narratives which encompass diversity of homeland (Mary Antin), the re-making of home by commercialism (Edith Wharton) or the radical re-configuration of domestic space by a modernist aesthetic (Gertrude Stein).

Two other writers attract our attention at the century’s turn: Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935). Each produced works which marked points of translation between the established women’s cultures of the nineteenth century and the disorientation, disestablishment of those cultures at the start of the twentieth. Each worked within a cultural matrix firmly grounded in Victorianism; but in their work we also catch a foretaste of modernism of the twentieth century. Gilman and Jewett established two literary discourses which have recurred, while being repeatedly transformed and revised, throughout the twentieth century.

The heightened, expressionistic, first person voice of *The Yellow Wallpaper* has been enormously influential, leading to a whole genealogy of narratives. Although it is sometimes argued that Gilman herself was indebted to Edgar Allan Poe’s sensational stories, her own tale has become a kind of alternative female point-of-origin for many later writers and critics. Her positioning of first-person voice within a situation of a female crises reverberates in later writers (Plath, Oates); and her re-deployment of Gothic machinery (a bizarre and often enclosed environment, sensational effects, extreme pathologies) serves as a model for the female revision of an extant genre.

The regionally based realism – “local colour” – of Sarah Orne Jewett helped to create another discourse which later writers have found endlessly

fertile. Jewett's combination in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) of regional focus, episodic narrative technique and domestic anthropology (folklore, ritual, crafts) served, for writers such as Willa Cather, as a model of what a womanly aesthetic might look like.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's extraordinary career attracts modern scholars for its polymathic energy and political engagement. She was active in reform politics and nascent feminism. Married in the 1880s, she underwent, after birth of a child in 1885, the notorious "rest cure", as pioneered by the very Dr S. W. Mitchell who is mentioned in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. She was advised to give up intellectual work, but instead developed her ideas about her position of women in society, the domestic economy and the organization of work. After her divorce she married George Houghton Gilman in 1900 and produced a series of works adumbrating in impressive diversity many of the concerns of twentieth-century feminism.

Gilman reduces the American woman's fate to its schematic, iconic essentials: woman, man, room. She then pursues the logic of that scenario to its conclusion: a woman committed by her husband and doctor to domestic containment; ensuing madness. The power of *The Yellow Wallpaper* lies in its enmeshment of destructive and creative impulse. Gilman launched a fierce, corrosive attack on Victorian constructions of "home" and "wife"; but she also creates a new female discourse. Gilman created almost surreal first-person prose, establishing a discourse for the exploration of psychological distress and dis-integration.

Told in a series of brief paragraphs of one or two sentences, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is the first-person narrative of a woman, who has been taken by her physician husband to a secluded house in the country – "a colonial mansion, a hereditary estate" – in order to cure a nervous illness – she has developed after the birth of a son. The house is quite alone, standing well back from the road. Confined to her room, she speculates on the yellow wallpaper of the title. By the end of the story, she has become a hyperbolic vision of the female angel in the house beloved of Victorian domestic ideologues – a woman defined in terms of her relations to home and family. She directs her rescuer to the key, is freed and proclaims her freedom: "I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" In this way Gilman expresses rebellion as a symbolic attack on home decoration.

Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) deals with the male and female cultures, contrasts male and female spheres: cosy small

houses and the sea where men adventure and work. Actually, the male sphere, described by Jewett is getting old, many people have already died. Their adventuring days are over, as indeed America's own pioneering had come to a close; the novel was published three years after the official closing of the frontier in the West.

Oral culture, conversation, storytelling, domestic arts, aspects of everyday life, these features became the anthropological model and major form for later writers, informing in particular the work of Zora Neale Hurston.

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) has been a solitary book. Generally recognized now as the first aesthetically successful novel to have been written by an American woman, it marked a significant epoch.

A tale on the "Emma Bovary" theme of bourgeois boredom and extramarital passion, *The Awakening* follows Edna Pontellier, a Yankee Protestant who marries into the exotic Creole, Catholic world of New Orleans. Her impatience with husband and family leads to an "awakening" to her circumstances. *The Awakening* is set in the upper-middle-class demi-monde of New Orleans. Chopin places her heroine, Edna Pontillier, in the Creole culture created by the hybrid aristocracy of colonial French and Spanish America; it is an America within America. Part of Chopin's tactic is to draw on recognised cultural stereotypes of the United States. The Creole world is marked by linguistic pluralism, hybridity and a crude form of multiculturalism (not always, however, as welcome a concept for Chopin's heroine as it might be for modern liberals). There is a broad sense of cultural unease, of not being at home in this "anti-puritan unAmerican mixture of races and nations." Edna was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles, even though she is married to a Creole and lives in New Orleans. Like other women writers of the 1890s, Chopin positions her heroine within an unsettling environment which eventually prompts breakdown and crisis.

The final causes of Edna's suicide – she is last seen walking into the water – are largely those of desperate resistance to the pathways before her. Chopin has cancelled out the more optimistic avenues: romance, art, children. All are found wanting, or compromise the self's integrity. "She had resolved never again to belong to another than herself." [3: 76]

For the question asked by many women novelists, from Chopin to Plath, is this: is the problem "in" the heroine (and of her making), or is it wider

societal forces that have created these dilemmas? Frequently, the novelist cannot resolve the dilemma; a melodramatic ending (death, murder, escape) imposes some sort of order on the messy incongruities of life for these protagonists.

If an anthropologist were to consider late nineteenth-century American society, she would note the central role played by the organisation of space in that culture. It is a cliché, but also a truth, that nineteenth-century American male literary culture associated the open spaces of a new country (frontier, sea, wilderness) with freedom, while female culture was locked within the home. Women themselves, of course, often explored the home as a site of emotional plenitude and a sentimental politics of renewal (as in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). Women's literary modernism of the early twentieth century saw, above all a reconfiguration of these familiar domestic spaces and an opening-up of new environments. The Victorian interior world was radically deconstructed and re-imagined, new, outdoor spaces became the settings for female fictions. In Willa Cather's work the spatial matrix of America was amplified, both geographically and historically: various American pasts (aboriginal, Hispanic, French) exfoliate in her work, even as she sweeps across heterogeneous environments (Mesa land and prairie; Québec and New Mexico; modern cities and ancient dwellings). In Gertrude Stein's experimental texts a familiar domestic setting (parlour, kitchen) is deconstructed and then re-assembled by her kaleidoscopic literary Cubism.

Stylistically, Stein and Cather have little in common. Stein's avant-garde nursery rhymes are a world away from Cather's careful splicing of the lapidary and the idiomatic. But both writers share a common project, which is both thematic and formalistic: to re-imagine the place where women's writing might be set, and in so doing to re-make the female narrative aesthetic.

In the teens and into the 1920s Willa Cather consistently turned her attention to the past, imagining the lives of the Western United States frontier of which pioneer and eastern European immigrants in books such as *O Pioneers!* (1913), and *My Antonia* (1918). In 1927 her historical novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* sympathetically portrays the establishment of European hegemony in the South West through the lives of two French priests in New Mexico, Cather's last novel, *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* (1990) looks back to pre-civil war Virginia to tell the tale of a young slave woman.

Willa Cather (1873-1947) is the exemplary instance of a female author castigated for disengagement from the contemporary works. Her novels of the 1920s and 1930s (*Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *The Professor's House*, *Shadows on the Rock*) occupied a geographical and temporal space that seemed far from American modernism's great subject, the accelerating futurity of the city. Cather instead wrote of the nineteenth-century Catholic missions in Mexico, of seventeenth-century French Canada, of the ancient civilisations on Mesa tablelands. Cultural transmission is one of Cather's great subjects. The early works traced the migration of central Europeans to the midwestern prairies.

Cather's other great topic is what might be called "ecopoetic": the relationship between (female) self and landscape. Most readers will know Cather as the pioneer novelist; her early famous work, *O Pioneer!* and *My Antonia*, are representations of the settlers who populated the Midwest at the end of the nineteenth century. Each novel positions a heroine at the center of a narrative of settlement; each follows the territorial expansion of the United States into the "empty" Great Plains, appearing to celebrate the heroic virtues of endeavour, steadfastness, and sheer brute determination. Cather is credited with grafting these stereotypical masculine pioneer virtues onto narratives of the female life. But Cather's exploration of the relationship between the land and the female subject is more complex than simple insertion of a heroine into male plots. Her early fiction, in particular, insistently maps the interdependence of humankind and landscape.

Cather was perhaps the first woman to establish a fictional, and therefore public, language of womanly American landscape. Cather's landscape is markedly different from those imagined by earlier, usually male, creators of the written American landscape. Landscape in Cather's fiction, though, reverses this figurative pattern by acting upon the self. Even in the pioneer novels we find alongside a celebration of the transitive actions of the settlers an exploration of the symbiosis of female settler and landscape. In one of Cather's most renowned sentences, the last line of *O Pioneer!*, the protagonist achieves an ecological fusing with the earth itself: "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" [2: 173] The recycling action of the earth, taking in the dead body to provide further nourishment for future generations, here

provides the template for a near-mystical vision of the interpretation of humankind and nature.

For Willa Cather, to read her culture was to read its many spaces. Cather's historical imagination was profoundly geographical. She understood America's past times in terms of the different spaces inhabited and constructed by civilisations such as the Pueblo Indians or the French colonists of Québec. The shaping of her narratives was also governed by dramatic geographical paradigms: contrasts between city and wilderness that greets her pioneers and the settled farmland they bequeath to their children. Cather re-drew and re-mapped her nation, creating odd conjunctions and parallels, new pathways across the disparate space of America.

Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1911) is another experimental revision of the space inhabited by American fiction. Whereas Cather had opened up, cartographically and historically, the areas where American women could write, Stein's early work adapts a familiar interior to create innovative perspectives on a known world. *Tender Buttons* is a prose poem. As in a Cubist still-life, the ordinary world is present in terms of crude subject-matter (Stein's subtitles: "Object", "Food", "Rooms"); but a radical aesthetic fractures, re-shapes and renews known scenarios. Stein here creates syntax to jolt us into strangeness:

#### Eye Glasses

A color in shaving, a saloon is well placed in the centre of an alley.

#### Cold Climate

A season in yellow sold extra strings makes lying places. [11: 112]

The overall shape of *Tender Buttons*, its narrative geometry, is based on a thematic core of homelife and on a series of oppositions between textual and spatial polarities: cleanliness-dirt; curvature-linearity; top-bottom. But the experience of reading closely is more bewildering than these simple categories would suggest. Stein entitles sections of *Tender Buttons* with captions, evoking the titles accompanying a painting.

Stein's sentences are both familiar and strange. Many of her sentences echo the generalising shape of domestic proverbs, but these are not quite proverbs. They present a slanted and surreal domestic wisdom. Thus: "A little called anything shows shudders." Or: "A little lace makes boils. This is not true."

*Tender Buttons* is also full of sentences with the syntax and interrogative diction of questions; but there is not a single question mark in the entire text.

The deliberately coded femininity of *Tender Buttons* is also confirmed by its use of the language of children. In its repetitiveness, absurdity and jokiness, *Tender Buttons* reminds the reader of nursery rhymes. By becoming a child in her writing, Stein could invoke one of the central Victorian paradigms of womanhood: woman as child, as infant. In fact, a form of empowered infantilism has energised several of America's most avant-garde female writers. Emily Dickinson, Alice James, Gertrude Stein: all three writers become, at points in their writing, big babies who exploit the association between women and the nursery to create a radically experimental literary discourse.

The representative of Native-American literature of the period is *Mourning Dove, also Humishuma* (1882-1936) author of *Cogewea, the Half Blood* (1927, reprinted 1981). Her novel explores the difficulty of being a half-blood woman on the Flathead Reservation at the turn of the century. Central themes of the novel include genocide and the pressure to assimilate (as the tragic oral tales of the grandmother reveal) as the choices of the books three half-breed sisters impact. One sister marries a white man and lives only minimally in connection with an Indian identity. Another sister—chooses the ways of her traditional grandmother and tries to the change. The third, Cogewea, wants to live in both worlds but is not comfortable nor fully accepted in either. This dilemma continued to bother Native Americans throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The radical creative works of the interwar era were marked by a code of social realism and social protest, often coupled to representations of “proletarian” life and a fascination with vernacular speech. The Female literary histories of this time are now familiar to us: Tillie Olsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen. The white leftists and the black modernists shared a commitment to a form of social problem novel.

For African American writers the identification and articulation of their specific cultural identify became a central project. Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset created a fiction whose discourse is closer to cultural anthropology than to the political pamphlet; the tracking of local rituals and customs forms a fictionalised investigation of ethnic identify. Hurston and Larsen placed cultural and existential dilemmas at the centre of

their novels. For the heroine of Larsen's work the dilemma is one of identity, both personally and collectively: who am I and to what culture do I belong?

The woman writer of the early twentieth century was therefore in a unique position of inaugural creativity: her American, female English was doubly innovative, since it marked out a terrain new both for her gender and for her nation. Meanwhile, ethnic or minority writers brought into being their own community's voices (another language with little written grounding until this point). A sense of inauguration is everywhere in woman's literature of the early twentieth century; but these various newnesses could create conflict, division and instability within a text. It is one thing to be granted a language stamped with freshness, but another thing altogether to be granted two or even three new idioms. For one of the central writers of this period, Zora Neale Hurston, the double- or triple-voicedness of her writing creates ceaseless tension; cross-hatched languages jostle and wrestle with one another, as she writes out of and towards overlapping communities (black America, female America, the white establishment where she was educated).

Nella Larsen produced two books at the end of the 1920s, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929); she is one of the great rediscoveries of feminist scholarship after falling into obscurity for much of her lifetime. She has now become one of the central novelists within the African-American canon. *Quicksand* was recognised at the time as a major achievement; she was praised by W. E. B. Du Bois and awarded a Harmon Foundation medal for achievement amongst African-Americans. Then she infamously retreated from the literary stage after *Passing*; one of her short stories led to an accusation of plagiarism, and the ensuing scandal drove her into silence. It is hard, though, to imagine where she could have gone in her writing after these two novels. Each seems to represent a full-stop, an abrupt closure, as if Larsen had thought an argument and presented her own unanswerable reply.

Three motifs recur across these two books: racial identity (Larsen deals extensively with the hybrid figure off the mulatto); sexuality – Larsen brought black female sexuality explicitly into fiction for the first time; and a trenchant scepticism about the patterns of fulfilment offered to black women. The prevailing tone in both works is sardonic, caustic and mordantly disillusioned.

The critics and readers have not agreed with Flannery O'Connor's joke "There are so many horrible examples of regional writers, and the South is loaded." For them, rather than "horrible examples" the South has supplied some of the best of modern American writing. They emphasize the centrality of history to the Southern writer. Southern literature seems to possess sufficient coherence as a corpus of work to sustain generalisations such as the comment that these writers 'have tended to depict man's nature as being religious, to view the individual very much as a creature of time and history, to assume the individual's commitment to society and his determining role within it. These account responded to the obvious: Southern writing *was*, to a great degree, home to many fine women writers – Caroline Gordon, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor.

The Southern woman writer creates fiction, essays, polemics; her role as letter-writer or journalist is also important. This multi-vocalism and discursive range is not unique to the South, of course (think of Edith Wharton, equally fluent in short and long fiction, and a prolific travel writer too); but it does provide a unifying model for this region. Southern writers have been misunderstood, but they are not silent.

For feminists in the 1960s to address reality was to engage in revolutionary and revisionist acts of storytelling and recovery of undocumented reality. This period is associated first and foremost with the name of Betty Friedan (born 1921) – feminist nonfiction writer, journalist, activist, and social psychologist. She studied at Smith College, worked at Berkeley, became a reporter in New York, was fired from her newspaper position after requesting a second maternity leave. She began free-lancing for women's magazines, but became disillusioned, when she noticed that her articles were edited to exclude any reference to women's careers. These personal experiences, along with material gleaned from interviews with Rocesewives, mostly Smith graduates, became the core of her classic *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). *The Feminine Mystique* argues that middle-class American white women had been duped (by education, advertising, the media, sociology) into accepting the motion that marriage and motherhood were the sole means of happiness for women. Friedan pinpointed "the problem that has no name", the suffering by women who, supposedly, have everything – home, husband, children – but who feel dissatisfied with their lives.

The book has been credited with marking the beginning of the most recent wave of United State feminism. The book originated in a questionnaire

Friedan sent to her fellow graduates in 1957 about education and women's role in society. The finished volume was structured around the freed voices of women, speaking out from the margins to place their angst at the centre of the culture. *The Feminine Mystique* achieved its vital impetus in moments of confession and collective recognition:

“But on an April morning in 1959, I heard a mother of four, having coffee with four other mothers in a suburban development fifteen miles from New York, say in a tone of quiet desperation, “the problem.” And the others knew, without words, that she was not talking about a problem with her husband, or her children, or her home. Suddenly they realized they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name. They began, hesitantly, to talk about it. Later, after they had picked up their children at nursery school and taken them home to nap, two of the women cried, in sheer relief, just to know they were not alone.” [5: 15].

The form of *The Feminine Mystique* is a collection rather than a conventional academic argument (with its linear argumentation and appeal to objective facts). For feminists, storytelling about oneself acted to foster community. Storytelling forged a collectivism where before there had been isolated, silent individuals. Friedan's intertwining of the narrative impulse with a sense of community reminds us of earlier moments in American women's culture (for instance, Zora Neale Hurston's creation of community by folktale and vernacular energy in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*).

The 1960s are synonymous with literary radicalism and experimentalism, and especially with a revolt against narrowly prescriptive realism. Realism, the telling of stories from “real life”, was felt to be necessary because the actualities of women's lives had been overlooked. Feminists saw one of their tasks as the voicing of narratives produced by what has become known as the “domestic ideology” of the 1940s, 1950s and the early 1960s. This was a period of idealization of the family; of marriage at an early age; of women's return to the home after the working years during wartime; of the staggering baby boom which stretched through to the mid-1960s. Meanwhile, men moved out into a surging economy characterised by modern corporations, technology and suburbia. A vast cultural apparatus – of movies, magazines, advertisements – emphasised the centrality of the home, and the centrality of women within the home.

Betty Friedan presented the feminist as a storyteller who would give voice to the unknown narratives of this apparently satisfied world. In the

major female fiction of the era we see an analogous project: to re-present and re-create female realities and, as a corollary, to re-structure the codes of realism as a genre. The experimentalism of Sontag, Plath or Oates is not “anti-realist”. Plath, Oates and Sontag all wrote fictions engaged with the “domestic ideology” of the 1950s and early 1960s; all placed the typecast motifs of that ideology (idealised marriage, suburban conformity, the junior executive male) into dizzying, shifting fictions. Oates’s *How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began Life Over Again*, Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Sontag’s *Death Kit* – in all three works we see the normalities of the 1950s home and its steady routines subject to satirical, surreal and vertiginous representation. The 1960s female avant-garde sought, through stylistic and formal experiment, to extend Friedan’s methodology by alerting the reader not only to the reality of the feminine mystique but also to the *construction* of that reality.

Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963) was published under a pseudonym shortly before her suicide; it is nearly impossible not to read the book as a *roman à clé* reflecting the experiences behind that tragedy. Esther Greenwood, a bright student from an elite women’s college, has won a journalism contest; the prize, a trip to New York, takes her into the world of blandly consumerist women’s magazines. Poised between studenthood and adult life, Esther is frightened by the divisive paths offered her; intellectual gifts lead only towards a traditional career as housewife and mother. The reader realizes that Esther’s heightened, ultrasensitive responses are as much a signal of encroaching illness as of precocity. Hospitalized, she descends downwards into electro-convulsive therapy, ludicrous sessions of analysis and, in conclusion, fragile renewal.

*The Bell Jar* was one of the most important women’s novels of the 1960s, and deserves its iconic status for three reasons. First, it can be read as an intertextual work which radically updates the narrative of confinement and hysteria inaugurated by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Yellow Wallpaper*; Plath’s novel is one of the “hysterical” tales that have featured so strongly in US women’s narrative. But it also foreshadows a very particular fascination, nurtured in the counterculture of the late 1950s and 1960s, with marginality, madness and the paradoxical lucidity of those condemned as insane. Second, Plath establishes a funny, slangy first-person voice, appropriating the heightened first person voice of American fiction from

*Huckleberry Finn* through to Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Esther is a sister to Holden: brilliant, witty, disintegrating. Third, and most significantly, Plath's novel crystallised a cultural moment in the early 1960s: the revelation of the 1950s domestic ideology as a false consciousness that oppressed women psychologically even as it proffered a cornucopia of consumer goodies within the shrine of suburban homelife. *The Bell Jar* was published in the same year as *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan's polemic witheringly lambasted the entrapment and nullity of suburban domestic life. Her vignettes of bourgeois desperation, emotional desolation and affluent anxiety are hauntingly congruent with Esther Greenwood's world. Friedan summed up the nightmare as *Progressive Dehumanisation: The Comfortable Concentration Camp*.

What must it have been like to read Friedan's work alongside its echoing fictional counterpart? Unfortunately, Plath's book was only published in Britain in 1963, and the American edition had to wait for eight years (the near-biographical reference to people still alive had raised legal difficulties). British readers of Friedan and Plath might have recognised a common terrain in both works.

The fiction of the past thirty years has seen a rebirth of the fascination with community which has been a leitmotif in American women's narratives. This period (1970-2000) can be described as a phase of radical communitarians. For writers such as Cynthia Ozick, Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston the novelist remains a storyteller (all three are indebted to the folkloric modernism). For the communitarians, storytelling is complicated by the interplay of the imagined communities addressed by the writer. The communitarian writes for a readership of women, for her own ethnic or cultural village (in Morrison's term); but these authors also claim a national significance for their stories, addressing fundamental national subjects (migration, race, cultural pluralism).

The communitarians have continued and deepened the interest shown by earlier writers in the vernacular. The forging of a new language, rather than an ironic re-capitulation of earlier modes, is seen in the communitarian's desire to weave oral textures into prose. The communitarian tries to catch the elusive discourses of a culture, the spoken language that normally lies beyond writing since it is too fleeting or too trivial to catch the writer's ear. Maxine Hong Kingston adopts the Chinese term, "talk-story", to denote a

storytelling technique which blends narrative, family anecdote and gossip within a loose, episodic fictional structure. And Toni Morrison brings fiction close to oral traditions by incorporating the rhythms and recursive patterns of spoken language into her prose. At the same time the communitarian writer has begun to sense that the vernacular mode is not always a guaranteed route for the writer to represent a culture. For Cynthia Ozick, what she calls “aural culture” is inevitably tainted by the degradations of modern media (particularly, television); she looks wistfully back to a golden age when writing rather than speech remained the cultural standard. In Toni Morrison’s prose, one hears the rhythms of the “speaker text” while noting the intensely worked, crafted, attentive inscription of her novels as *written* artefacts. This exchange between the written and the spoken has become a major dynamic in works such as Morrison’s *Beloved* and Ozick’s *The Messiah of Stockholm*.

Morrison’s use and revision of motifs from Zora Neale Hurston’s work deserve attention.

*Beloved* deploys an image central to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: the tree. Hurston had used the image of the tree to embody in vernacular symbolism Janie’s sense of self. “Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom were in the branches.”

For Hurston the tree is imbued with an organic sensuality; but in *Beloved*, where the tree is equally central to the heroine, it takes on other significances. For Hurston the tree is the tree of life; for Morrison the tree is part of the iconography of black suffering – the lynching tree. Sethe has a bizarre pattern of wounds on her back in the shape of a tree, marks of a whipping that precipitated her flight from slavery. The scar is that of a “chokecherry tree”. Trunk, branches and even leaves. When Paul D first put his arms around her, she knew, but could not feel, that his cheek was pressing into the branches of her chokecherry tree.

Hurston had transformed the lynching tree into an erotic emblem. Morrison’s description looks back to the moment in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* where Janie’s sexuality burst into flower; here, too, there is an acute sensory detail. But Morrison recovers the buried significance of tree, allowing it to fiction as symbol of pain and eroticism, as an emblem of what America does to its blacks and what in fleeting moments can be

recovered by the African-Americans for her own fulfilment. The chokecherry tree, then, is imagined in a profoundly genealogical way; its significances reveal themselves slowly, as we look back to how an earlier writer used the tree in her own fiction of the black female subject. Fittingly, too, this image is itself a *form* of genealogy: a tree that suggests continuities and further creativity.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior – Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) extends and deepens the project undertaken by earlier women writers such as Willa Cather: the fictional representation of a bilingual, bicultural community in all its shifting, exhilarating complexity. As we saw earlier, Cather's *My Antonia* created an open, episodic form to accommodate the new stories of the recent immigrants; the novel then becomes a tapestry of tales, a mosaic of anecdotes, memories and folk stories. This, Cather implies, is one of the ways the migrant experience has transformed American culture: the American story is diversified into *stories*, and the evolving trans-national America becomes a palimpsest of overlapping languages and conversations. Kingston extends Cather's technique. *The Woman Warrior* is woven together from many examples of "talk-story" – a sort of conversation that is also a form of reminiscence and storytelling. The text, a hybrid of gossip, fable and autobiographical memoir, brings together material from the Old World of China and the New World of California. Kingston's narrative, for instance in the section entitled "White Tigers", cut abruptly from fiction (the account of a mythological swordswoman) to fact (life as a Chinese-American girl). The technique of rapid-crossing and juxtaposition creates a collage of voices; the mythic and literal, Chinese and American intermingle and weave together.

Kingston's book bears witness to Elaine Showalter's recent account of the hybridity which often marks women's writing: such writing is always double-voiced, what Henry Louis Gates, speaking of Afro-American literature, calls "two-toned", or Ramón Saldivar, speaking of Chicano literature calls "the dialectics of difference", or Naomi Schor, speaking of women's literature, calls "bitextual" [10: 7]. This is an autobiography; but discussions of the book occur largely in accounts of American fiction. Kingston stretches autobiographical discourse to the breaking point. The development of the writer from girlhood to adulthood provides the loosest plots; the reader often searches in vain for concrete details of chronology and

place. It is the memories and tales of the Chinese homeland which are frequently foregrounded in place of the expected curve of a life-story: the book has its roots in that real life, but the overall effect is to show how ordinary lives are endlessly created out of stories.

Kingston interprets migrant experience as a journey across linguistic boundaries as much as the literal crossing of geographical space. She has said of her Chinese heritage that “The culture was handed down orally. It wasn’t necessary to be literate.” The entry into America is thus seen as an initiation into a new way of talking.

The startling premise of *The Woman Warrior* is that for the Chinese community America is a land of “ghosts” – their word for the Westerners. The Chinese homeland remains substantial, while experiences in the United States are bizarre, dreamlike or surreal. Kingston’s account of migration and Americanization is usually powerful for not tracing the complete assimilation of the Chinese new, mysterious, strange. Family members insistently tell each other stories and narratives of their lives as if they were characters in a novel.

Within the overall female texts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century several thematic and formalistic features do recur across the texts, they are:

- Folkloric modernism, expressed in an anthropological interest in folk culture;
- Construction of national identities the so called “making of Americans”;
- Political engagement, that is women’s narratives are bound up with historical and political context;
- Generic or formalistic latitude, willingness to disturb generic conventions of the accepted forms, women’s fiction often takes on the shapes of writing close to biography, memoir, journal.

These features speak for the close connection of women’s literature and history in the twentieth century.

## NOTES

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History and Writing. Categories of literary works by American Women: captivity narratives; slave narratives; “underground railroad”; temperance novels; the literary of abolition and suffrage; working-class literature; early and contemporary feminist literature; literature of socialist, utopian, and leftist radical movements; literature of the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights movement; literature of self-determination (African-American, Chicano, Native-American and so on); antiwar protest literature; literature of the labor movement; literature of feminism and lesbianism; holocaust writing; ethnic and immigrant literature; literature concerning women's involvement in international politics.

#### I. Writing at the Turn of the XX Century.

- Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1869-1935);
- Sarah Orne Jewett (1849 –1909);
- Kate Chopin (1850-1904);
- Edith Wharton (1862-1937).

#### II. Modernist Geographies: Space and Identities in Women Fiction.

- Mary Antin (1881-1949);
- Mourning Dove;
- Willa Cather (1873-1947);
- Mary Austin (1868-1934);
- Gertrude Stein (1874-1946).

## III. The Interwar Social Problem Writing.

- Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960);
- Tillie Olsen (b. 1913);
- Nella Larsen (1891-1964).

## IV. “There are So Many Horrible Examples of Regional Writers, and the South is Loaded” (Flannery O’Connor)

- Eudora Welty (b.1909);
- Caroline Gordon (1895-1981);
- Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980);
- Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964).

## V. “The Feminine Mystique”.

- Betty Friedan (b.1921);
- Sylvia Plath (1932-1963);
- Susan Sontag (b. 1933);
- Joyce Carol Oates (b.1938).

## VI. Fiction for the Village.

- Cynthia Ozick (b.1928);
- Toni Morrison (b.1931);
- Maxine Hong Kingston (b.1940);
- Leslie Marmon Silko (b. 1948);
- Louise Erdrich (b. 1954);
- Alice Walker (b. 1944);
- Amy Tan (b. 1952).

## Themes and Formalistic Features:

- folkloric modernism;
- construction of national identities;
- political engagement;
- formalistic changes.