

ANALYSIS

A Woman of Means (1950)

Peter Taylor

(1917-1994)

"No description of the mere materials or events of *A Woman of Means* can indicate the particular kind of excitement it possesses. The kind of excitement is the excitement of being constantly on the verge of deep perceptions and deep interpretations. Mr. Taylor follows closely the contour and texture of event, and sometimes for a considerable space the reader feels that he is engaged with an ordinary realistic, objective narrative. However, Mr. Taylor's method is to intersperse tantalizing flashes, to break the ordinary texture of things and then quickly close the rent before the eye has caught the full significance of what lies beyond the curtain."

Robert Penn Warren
New York Times Book Section
(11 June 1950) 8

"*A Woman of Means* (1950) is also Jamesian in its method and conception. It is a short novel, skillfully told from the point of view of a young boy and carefully controlled everywhere in its disciplined and delicately written pages. It is not specifically a southern novel--its setting is St. Louis--but its theme is very close to Taylor's principal concern in his short stories. He seems to be saying here that any value system that rests upon money, that derives its sense of order and stability from the possession of money, will destroy those who live by it. No explicit contrast to the traditional southern way of life is made in this novel, nor is one even hinted, but one still feels the unspoken presence of some alternative to the corruption induced by wealth and the sense of failure induced by the lack of it.

The young boy who tells this story is in search of a stable existence and in flight from a life where it has been denied him in every way. Motherless, moving from city to city with his father, he has lacked a sense of place and a sense of belonging. He needs psychological, familial, and economic security, and when his father marries a wealthy woman, he seems to have found it in the loving home of his stepmother. And yet he is still haunted by a feeling of insecurity and the dread that his new life is ephemeral. His nightmares materialize. Money is responsible for the corruption of his stepsisters and destroys their love for the boy's father. The father's money failure leads to the break-up of the marriage. Divorce, in fact, is made easier because the stepmother possesses money. Money creates tensions in human relations at every point of contact. The problems of the novel are framed in an economic and moral context that is peculiarly modern, revolving around business success and divorce. They are modern, particularly, in contrast to the values of another, departed order in which human relationships were conducted in obedience to established moral ideas of responsibility and authority. This implicit contrast makes Taylor here, as in his first volume, an elegist, a critic of the pointless or destructive new way and a mourner for the old that has not survived."

Chester E. Eisinger
Fiction of the Forties
(U Chicago 1963) 197-98

"The only full-length work [on Taylor] is Albert J. Griffin's *Peter Taylor*, an exceptionally fine volume His analysis of Taylor's novella, *A Woman of Means* [1950] is typical. Quint, the narrator, 'no Holden Caulfield, no subjective adolescent' but more like Melville's Redburn, reflects as a mature adult on his adolescent maturation that occurred during his widowed father's courtship and initially idyllic two-year marriage to Anna Lauterbach, an exceedingly charming and very rich St. Louis divorcee with two college-age daughters. The questions of whether she 'is more attracted to the prospective son she envisions in Quint' than to her bourgeois businessman husband from rural Tennessee, whose economic rise and fall she witnesses, is never resolved, nor is the question of whether Gerald married her for her money, What is clear is the thoroughly nurturing effect of 'a mother's love and solicitude lavished on [Quint] by his beautiful

stepmother: 'I thought of the firmness with which I was established in her heart. Suddenly I had become the carefree hero of a wonderful adventure.'

But as Quint's 'burgeoning desire for adult independence asserts itself' as he rejects her 'silent demand' to turn his middle school achievement award over to her, 'she turns to fantasy and imagines herself to be carrying in her womb the son who will love her for herself'--a delusion that leads to her hospitalization and ultimately breaks up the marriage. Griffith aptly observes, 'The characters do not fall into neat moral categories: there are no heroes or villains in this novel. Not a single character is completely unsympathetic and not a single character is without flaws.' Nor are the characters merely symbols; 'they are in this novel, as elsewhere, of primary importance as people truthfully re-created,' 'known and defined precisely by their interactions with other characters and with their environment'."

Lynn Z. Bloom

Fifty Southern Writers after 1900: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook
(Greenwood 1987) 475-76

"*A Woman of Means* was finally published on May 4, 1950, in an edition of 2,5000, a thousand more than the printing of *A Long Fourth*. It was not, however, as enthusiastically received as the short story volume. The critic of the *Saturday Review* judged it 'as slight in effect, in content, and in quality as it is slight in form.' She found it lacking 'the impact of Peter Taylor's fine stories.' The *New Yorker* reviewer called it 'a rueful little first novel, faultlessly written,' but registered disappointment with the work because Taylor had here 'attempted too little rather than too much.'

Even Coleman Rosenberger of the *Herald Tribune* qualified his praise. He argued that the slightness of the novel was deceptive, that it was a 'work of very solid merit.' But he added: 'It is not, however, the fully realized novel for which a reader of Mr. Taylor's excellent short stories could wish. One suspects that it stands halfway between those short stories and a novel which he will write.' A majority of the reviewers found the work's major flaw to be the descent into madness of the title character. They considered it 'too feebly foreshadowed,' 'a glaring weakness,' 'awkward and superimposed,' 'ambiguous.'

In the midst of such criticism, two reviews stood out as particularly positive and particularly sensitive to Peter Taylor's method. Both came from sources close to Peter Taylor. Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Robert Penn Warren praised the novel for its 'vividness of characterization' and its 'sense of the depth and complication of event.' He pointed out the author's skillful involvement of the reader: 'He wants, it seems, to make the reader make his own interpretation, or at least to give the reader the illusion of that freedom and that responsibility.'

Thomas Wilcox, in the *Sewanee Review*, went a step further than Warren, pursuing the issue of the author's irony. 'None of these people knows why all this has happened,' he wrote, 'though none of them is so imperceptive that he cannot find an explanation plausible to him.' Then Wilcox offered an insight that illuminates many works both that Peter Taylor had written and that he would write: 'What may at first look like simple dramatic irony becomes something different when you begin to explore the tissue of paradoxes Mr. Taylor has contrived. When you try to construe the few events his novel describes you find that no single interpretation will account for everything you have learned and that finally you must credit all the explanations--some of them seemingly contradictory--the characters separately entertain.' Even though the reviews were more mixed than Peter would have wanted, he was happy that the book was out, and *A Woman of Means* was receiving wider notice than his first volume."

Hubert H. McAlexander
Peter Taylor: A Writer's Life
(Louisiana State 2001) 113-14

Michael Hollister (2021)