

FEMINIST CRITICS

ON WOMEN'S FICTION BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

American women fiction writers before the Civil War, unlike their British counterparts, apparently did not try to produce enduring literature. Their priorities were commercial, political, and pious. As the feminist scholar Nina Baym acknowledges in *Women's Fiction: A Guide 1820 to 1870* (1978):

"A reexamination of this fiction may well show it to lack the esthetic, intellectual, and moral complexity and artistry that we demand of great literature. I confess frankly that...I have not unearthed a forgotten Jane Austen or George Eliot, or hit upon even one novel that I would propose to set alongside *The Scarlet Letter*." (14) "Earlier critics castigated this literature for certain allegedly female qualities, as the product of a timid, sentimental, narrow, trivializing sensibility, and some recent feminists, agreeing with this depiction, have seen the authors as hacks and traitors to their sex. Others, however, have claimed a covert feminism for these works, discerning beneath their sugary texture a poisonous brew." (18) "Could these talented women who failed to produce literature of the first rank have done better? If so, why didn't they?...They saw themselves not as 'artists' but as professional writers with work to do and a living to be made." (16)

Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977): "Sentimental 'domestic novels' written largely by women for women dominated the literary market in America from the 1840s through the 1880s... This literature seems today both ludicrous and painful in the evidence it offers of the enormous need of its authors and readers for uncritical confirmation of themselves and instantaneous satisfaction of their appetites" (72-3). The feminist Susan Conrad contends in *Perish the Thought: Intellectual Women in Romantic America 1830-1860* (1976) that women novelists of the period--she calls them "scribblers"--were deliberately anti-intellectual. The feminist Helen Papashvily argues in *All the Happy Endings: A Study of the Domestic Novel in America* (1956) that women's novels before the Civil War were "a witches' broth, a lethal draught brewed by women and used by women to destroy their common enemy, man" (xvii).

Today, many Feminist academics teaching American fiction of this period reject literary, aesthetic and intellectual standards in order to get at least one woman onto their reading lists, usually Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791), one of the best sellers of all time, considered pornographic in the later nineteenth century. A better choice would be Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the most influential novel in American history, but it is a very long sermon, not a great work of art, and affirms the racial stereotype of Uncle Tom. Distinguished women fiction writers began to appear after the Civil War: Rebecca Harding Davis, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, etc.

Among male fiction writers before the Civil War, Brown wrote the first American feminist tract, *Alcuin* (1797)--a dialogue in which he pled for the legal, political, economic, and cultural equality of women; Irving catered to the female audience; Cooper depicted a spectrum of female types; Poe expressed a radical feminism in "Ligeia"; Hawthorne was a domestic Victorian feminist who shared the values of most women in that period; and Melville represented Ishmael as somewhat androgynous in *Moby-Dick*. In his next book, *Pierre*, Melville advocated women's liberation from the constraints of Victorianism.

Helen Papashvily, *All the Happy Endings: A Study of the Domestic Novel in America* (1956): "The ladies at Seneca Falls and their converts...rallied but a small minority to their cause. At its peak the suffrage movement had the active support of less than 10 percent of the women in the United States." (23) "Nevertheless, the quiet women revolted, too, and waged their own devious, subtle, undeclared war against men--their manual of arms, their handbook of strategy was the sentimental domestic novel." (24) "Like many legal conceptions, the control of husband over wife was modified, of course, in actual practice. Individual women by various and traditional methods achieved equality and even domination in the marriage relationship. Henpecked husbands, then as now, served as the butt of jokes. In a really intolerable situation a wife...could rely on the pressure of public opinion to alleviate her lot." (21) "Moreover, as customary in new settlements, a surplus of men (which persisted in some areas until the twentieth century) increased the bargaining power of women." (33) "The conflict no longer arose from the woman's struggle to acquire a husband but rather from her efforts to control him and the marriage." (34) "Equality might have satisfied that vociferous minority agitating far and wide for women's rights but the...sweetly smiling ladies at home sought, though perhaps unconsciously, another goal--complete domination...Domestic novelists, all women [not true]...veiled calculating aims and techniques under misty clouds of pious sentiment, fragile innocence, artless gaiety and heroic martyrdom." (57)

Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977): "Foreign travelers to the United States frequently remarked on the deference which seemed in their eyes to be a trademark of the middle-class American male's relations with the female." (70) "Paternal authority was a waning force in the middle-class American family...The American father, locked into tightening business patterns, was less and less likely to be at home." (87) "It is the women who read. It is the women who are the tribunal of any question aside from politics or business. It is the women who give or withhold a literary reputation. It is the women who regulate the style of living...It is the women who exercise the ultimate control over the Press" [writer Nathaniel Willis]. (122) "The sales of all the works by Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau and Whitman in the 1850s did not equal the sales of one of the more popular domestic novels." (114)

Nina Baym, *Women's Fiction: A Guide 1820 to 1870* (1978): "This fiction was by far the most popular literature of its time, and on the strength of that popularity, authorship in America was established as a woman's profession, and reading as a woman's avocation." (11) "The success of an enormous number of women's books in the 1850s written by many different women suggests a virtually unlimited market open to any woman who could demonstrate drawing power with an audience...The writers who suffered in the 1850s were not the women but the men who were aspiring to classic literary greatness." (179) "While these writers and the critics enlisted in their cause have suffered, hundreds of women authors (I do not exaggerate here) and millions of women readers have enjoyed a mutually profitable relationship." (277) "Although the novelists of this period now considered important are all male, from 1850 until well after the Civil War (some would say until the 1920s) the novel was chiefly a form of literary communication among women.... (32)

The major, repeated, varied story is that of the struggle of good women against the oppressions and cruelties, covert and blatant, of men." (115) "The novels of Southworth, Hentz, Holmes, and Marion Harland all permitted their heroines to triumph in satisfying ways over their enemies, thereby indulging the readers' wish for revenge." (252) "In the fourteen novels from the fifties that form the subject of my analysis, I have found only one thoroughly good man, the father in *The Lost Hieress*. Most are of limited intelligence and overwhelming vanity." (115) "In only two novels of the entire period...do the heroines have doubts of God's existence, but in most of them they have some trouble accepting his decrees." (42) "Turning to God becomes a device for calling on her own resources." (43) "The writers' religious faith coincided with their conviction that God's values were domestic, even if the concept of God himself remained masculine....(44)

The 'cult of domesticity' that pervades this fiction is not equivalent to a later generation's idea of such a cult, as a simple injunction for woman willingly to turn the key on her own prison....Domesticity is set forth as a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the ethos of money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail in American society. The domestic ideal meant not that woman was to be sequestered from the world in her place at home but that everybody was to be placed in the home, and hence home and the world would become one. Then, to the extent that woman dominated the home, the ideology implied an unprecedented historical expansion of her influence." (27) "The modern age is to be woman's age, an age of virtue, family harmony, and love." (58) "The cult opposed the radical demands of the woman's righters." (29) "Class exercises a greater limitation on potential than gender....Upward mobility is the heroine's destiny, but the rise of servants when it occurs is an occasion for satire rather than celebration.... (69)

As Christians and as Victorians [they] were disinclined to acknowledge the body and physical sexuality as elements of self either inherently spiritual or capable of being spiritualized...They had a non-androgynous certainty that men and women were essentially different...They saw this distinction as significant enough to warrant a stratified society based on it, with appropriately different behavior and occupations for the two sexes....(18) Within the marriage relation, women appear historically to have exercised control over sex by inhibiting its expression. Some historians feel that their primary purpose here was to free themselves from the dangers and difficulties of childbearing and child-rearing and thus make their lives safer and more free. But the psychological purpose, expressed in so much women's fiction, of controlling men's attitudes toward women also remains relevant within marriage....The liberated woman was sexually liberated, not in the modern sense but in the sense of being liberated from sex." (254-5)

David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Harvard 1989): "The period between 1800 and 1860 witnessed the emergence of two conflicting popular modes, the Conventional and the Subversive, and a third mode, Romantic Adventure, which occupied a kind of middle ground....(7) Before 1800, Conventional fiction constituted nearly 60 percent of the volumes produced, whereas the figure hovered around 20 percent for the 1820-60 period. The proportionate number of Subversive and

Romantic Adventure volumes, in contrast, rose from about 20 percent before 1800 to more than 55 percent for the 1841-50 decade....The Subversive had roots in eighteenth-century British criminal and Gothic fiction...There developed an intensifying debate between those who wanted to retain what was regarded as the calmness and polish of British prose and those, on the other hand, who called for a distinctly American wildness, roughness, and savagery, even at the expense of all past literary rules.... (8)

Certain authors [such as Hawthorne and Melville] began to manipulate the modes and play them off against each other....(9) The distinguishing quality of the literary text is not radical subversiveness but unique suggestiveness and great reconstructive power...The present book *rejects the notion* of a 'definitive' close reading, recognizing that the literary text is a rich compound of *socioliterary* strands, each of which stems from a tremendous body of submerged writings that have been previously hidden from view....(10) (Italics added.)

I am inclined to split reform literature into two aspects: the Conventional and the Subversive. Both were ostensibly based upon an interest in preserving moral and physical healthiness, a belief in the sanctity of the home, and an identification of religion with moral practice. But the difference between the two groups lies in emphasis and imagery. Conventional reform writings, particularly the highly influential lectures and novels of Boston Unitarians, emphasize the ingredients and rewards of virtue rather than the wages of vice. Typical of the Conventional sensibility are Sarah Savage's domestic novel *The Factory Girl* (1814) the reform sermons by leading liberal preachers like William Ellery Channing and Joseph Tuckerman, Catherine Sedgwick's novels *Home* (1835) and *The Poor Rich Man and the Rich Poor Man* (1836) and the addresses of the abolitionist and education reformer Horace Mann....

The novels of [William] Ware and Sedgwick are Conventional narratives on the power of family togetherness and active morality in the face of social inequities. Eventually, such themes would gain almost mythic status in such Conventional best-sellers as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854). In contrast to Conventional reformers, the Subversive reformers (often called 'ultraists' by their contemporaries) de-emphasized the remedies for vice while probing the grisly, sometimes perverse results of vice, such as shattered homes, sadomasochistic violence, eroticism, nightmare visions, and the disillusioning collapse of romantic ideals....(59)

The sentimental-domestic fiction that is thought to have conquered the popular market actually ran a distant second to more sensational genres. For the whole 1774-1860 period, the proportion of highly wrought, adventurous volumes written by American authors was about 57 percent, while the proportion of sentimental or religious volumes was only 22 percent. Also, the idea that there was a single kind of fiction that can be absolutely designated as 'women's fiction' is inaccurate. Several male authors, such as Timothy Shay Arthur and Charles J. Peterson, were among the most prolific authors of sentimental-domestic fiction, while certain women writers, such as E.D.E.N. Southworth and Mary A. Denison, produced lurid sensational literature....(338) By the end of the 1850s, a profound disillusion with both the piously Conventional and the-politically feminist began to be registered in the so-called literature of misery, an ironic, stylized genre which...set the stage for [Emily] Dickinson's elliptical poems....(387)

There has been neglect of the dazzling diversity of female character types in antebellum literature. Some of these types were indeed conservative, underscoring woman's domestic function, but passivity was rarely praised, and American writers were uniquely bold in fashioning alternative women characters representing a variety of protofeminist or feminist views, ranging from anger against exploitive males to revolutionary assertions of women's rights....(339) American feminists...viewed the typical foreign heroine as too weak....(340) The term I assign to the affirmative, pious heroine of sentimental-domestic fiction is the *moral exemplar*. In some of her manifestations, the American moral exemplar was gentle, but more often she was notably spunky and active, especially when compared with her counterparts in British and Continental fiction. In some works she became so bold as to fight, explore, command, or shoot just like a man, creating an androgynous stereotype I call the *adventure feminist*.

While the moral exemplar and the adventure feminist represented affirmations of woman's power, the figure of the *woman victim* (the brutalized drunkard's wife or the seduced and abandoned woman) embodied dark 'women's wrongs' and manifested a variety of emotions, from torpid gloom to rebellious rage. Another character type, the *working woman*, was similarly a victim of male exploitation who was variously depicted as depressed, stoical, or revolutionary. When women's issues were taken up by radical-democrat novelists, two iconoclastic figures, what I term the *feminist criminal* and the *sensual woman*, appeared in a sizable body of pamphlet fiction. In time, the

protofeminist assumptions behind several of these character types became fully politicized, as leading suffragists expanded upon issues that had been debated for years in popular culture. By the 1850s the women's rights movement was producing fiction of its own, adopting all previous character types and adding a new militant figure, the *feminist exemplar*, who openly demanded political rights for women. The numerous character types, reflecting a broad range of aggressions and fantasies within American women, proliferated and diversified to such a degree that by the 1850s there was a great complexity in perceptions of women's roles.... (339-40) (Italics added.)

The power of the female exemplar grew in proportion to the decline of reliable male authority figures....The female moral exemplar takes the place of the male clergyman....In nineteenth-century American fiction there emerged two main types of moral exemplar: what may be called the *angel* (typified by gentle characters such as Eva St. Clare of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Beth March of *Little Women*) and the *practical woman* (such as the increasingly sturdy Gertrude Flint of Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter*)....(342) Phoebe Pyncheon of Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*--fresh, unconventional, active, orderly, efficient--typifies the *practical exemplar*. The *adventure feminist* is an especially tough, active version of the *moral exemplar*....(345) The novelists who were most successful in registering this hardy frontier spirit among women were Catherine Maria Sedgwick, John Neal, James Fenimore Cooper, and William Gilmore Simms....(346) Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827) and *The Linwoods* (1836) stand out as particularly sophisticated treatments of different kinds of exemplars....(347) But [she] decried public agitation for women's rights, avoided outspoken feminist militancy and chose instead to advance progressive ideas indirectly through her fiction....(348)

The literature of women's wrongs emerged between 1832 and 1848 in dark writings connected with key reform movements--antiprostitution, antiseduction, temperance, antislavery....(351) This period witnessed the feminist coloration of two central stereotypical characters: the *working woman* (usually the starving seamstress but also other kinds of workers) and the *woman victim* (either the drunkard's wife, the slave woman, or the fallen woman)....(352) [Melville's] 'The Tartarus of Maids' was a literary culmination of a rich tradition of fiction about women factory workers....(353) By the 1840s...women and children constituted nearly two-thirds of the factory work force...(354) The broadening range of evils depicted in fiction about black women is also evidenced in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), the first novel published by a black person in America....(361) In many sensational novels the *fallen woman* became a fantasy figure of vindictive violence and unrestrained sexuality. The *feminist criminal* was the abandoned woman who avenges wrongs against her sex by waging war against society, especially against men and against proper women....(363)

It should be noted that through the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), male authors were most successful in fashioning heroines that were complicated or iconoclastic (the main exception was Catherine Sedgwick, whose heroines are among the most interesting in pre-1850 fiction). While women reformers were largely responsible for generating such intriguing stereotypes as the *fallen woman* or the *woman victim*, it was the male novelists, especially the sensationalists of the 1840s, who most often translated these reform stereotypes into fictional characters. Hawthorne's stature as the period's earliest fabricator of truly complex heroines owes much to this phenomenon of male authors giving fictional life to cultural stereotypes that were provoking political action in women's reform circles." (366-67)

David S. Reynolds (1989)

Michael Hollister (2015)