

450 QUOTATIONS



Elizabeth Hardwick

(1916-2007)

Elizabeth Hardwick reached the peak of the literary establishment by creating her own peak. In 1963, with her husband the poet Robert Lowell and two friends, she founded *The New York Review of Books*, a more intellectual alternative to *The New York Times Book Review*. In her reviews and essays she became one of the best cultural and literary critics of the 20th century, constructing so to speak a castle of commentaries elegant in architecture and so elevated and well defended that few rival critics have ever ventured an assault. Her perspective is canonical, comparative, and unrestrained by prevailing opinion. Her most helpful essays are incisive overviews and critical biographies of literary writers both major and minor, both male and female, both American and foreign. Collected essays: *American Fictions* (1999) and *The Collected Essays of Elizabeth Hardwick* (2017).

Intimidated by Hardwick's excellence and position, academic critics have avoided analyses of her three distinguished novels--her fiction is over their heads. Her criticism is better than other critics' because unlike them: (1) she is always interesting; (2) her essays are themselves literary compositions in the American tradition of Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, James, and Eliot; (3) her style is clever, discreet, agile, incisive, allusive, witty, and abloom with similes; (4) she has read widely and internationally, whereas academic critics since Feminists took over English departments in the 1980s have been narrow and political; (5) her much larger frame of reference in knowledge of history and literature facilitates illuminating allusions and apt comparisons beyond the reach of Feminists; (6) her subjective responses are based on objective facts, not sexist falsehoods; (7) she is an admirable, modest, humanistic, egalitarian, artful feminist rather than a Feminist at war against men; (8) she has an independent mind rather than conforming to the dogmas and demands of the Politically Correct cultural police state established nationwide by Feminists; (9) her evaluations of literature are fairminded, based upon informed aesthetic values rather than prejudices; (10) she is far more accurate, discerning and helpful in her discussions of women writers than the illiterate Feminist critics, who have no aesthetics nor familiarity with literary history in general.

Hardwick's first novel *The Ghostly Lover* (1945) is a resonant milestone in social history that dramatizes the transition of young American women in the early 20th century from a Victorian to a modern, or feminist, paradigm of relations between the sexes. It was published at the end of World War II, which had

liberated many women from the home while also increasing the postwar desire of most young people to marry and raise children, the impetus to the family-oriented traditional culture that was to prevail in the 1950s. This novel is valuable for dramatizing in balanced complexity the consciousness of a young woman deciding whether to marry for security or to pursue a career in New York, before doctrinaire totalitarian Feminists mandated adherence to their simple "truths" and their tyranny of group think.

The Simple Truth (1955) is a literary crime novel that ends with the reader in the position of a juror who must decide the case. To understand the novel a reader must discern the attitudes and prejudices of the main characters--all observers of the trial, who are analogous to the jurors without the discipline of actually being on the jury. Only when jurors with different views can agree on a "simple truth"--guilty or not--can they go home. A critique of legalistic and reductive political thinking, the murder trial plot has a simple outcome, whereas the main focus of the novel is the true complexity of the case--of *reality* as a whole.

Sleepless Nights (1979) is an experimental Impressionist novel with a brilliantly original style about an admirable feminist succeeding in New York while trying to suppress her grief over being abandoned by her unnamed husband (Robert Lowell). Whereas *The Simple Truth* challenges the mind with an intellectual skepticism that recalls Melville, the semi-autobiographical *Sleepless Nights* appeals especially to the heart. All three of these novels are of canonical quality and display an exceptional artistic range and versatility in their diversity of subjects, techniques, styles and tones.

ORDER OF TOPICS: family, education, personal, America, money, New York, Jewish culture, Robert Lowell, once a radical, the Civil Rights movement, riots and revolution, politicians, reading, art, fiction, technique, literary analysis, major fiction, writers, ideas, moral complexity, memory, writing, her own fiction, Impressionism, characterizations, landscape, sensations, equality, sex, love, marriage, Victorianism, gender, women's liberation, Feminist consciousness, women writers, publishing, critics and reviewers, religion, disbelief, salvation, death:

FAMILY

My family situation is distinguished by only one eccentricity--it is entirely healthy and normal.

The notions I have entertained about my family are fantastic manias... I staggered a bit when I actually came face-to-face with my own mother: she carries no whips, gives no evidence of cannibalism.

The Scotch and the Scotch-Irish, which my mother's family were, mostly migrated to the upper South, especially to North Carolina, where she grew up.

I came from a large family and many of my brothers and sisters were older than I, and I learned from them since they were, most of them, going to college when I was growing up. It was not an intellectual atmosphere, but a stimulating one. Like all writers I know of, the early days were dominated by a love of reading, just reading, like eating, anything around.

So many are children who from the day of their birth are growing up to be their parents. Look at the voting records, inherited like flat feet.

EDUCATION

It was not until I got to the University of Kentucky that the range of books was quite suddenly and very excitingly extended. I had some extraordinary teachers, some of the refugees from Europe, and very smart friends, some clever and "know-it-all" from New York, which appealed to me, and some very bright and lovable from just down home. I was not aware of any intellectual deprivation and there was none in the general sense. But aren't we all self-educated, and of course our self-education never includes all of the things we would like to know or need to know.

In my heart I was weasel-like, hungry, hunting with blazing eyes for innocent contradictions, given to predatory chewings on the difference between theory and practice.

Dear Mama: I love Columbia. Of course I do. The best people here are all Jews.

The young teachers in this position [at Harvard] live in a dazed state of love and hatred, pride and fear; their faces have a look of desperate yearning, for they would rather serve in heaven than reign in hell.

She has a Ph.D., a credential very agreeable and surprising, since her life was all about love and disillusionment, as if she had been a courtesan rather than a scholar.

The trouble is that abstract knowledge does not quite fit the personal case with its galling concreteness and its nasty distance from the universal.

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest. Second, by imitation, which is easiest, and third by experience, which is bitterest.

Experience is not what happens to you it's what you do with what happens to you.

[Philip Rahv] was quite surprised that I had read everything.

PERSONAL

Self-love is an idolatry. Self-hatred is a tragedy.

I do a lot of talking and the "I" is not often absent. In general I'd rather talk about other people. Gossip, or as we gossips like to say, character analysis.

I don't like aggressiveness and I detest anger, a quality some feminists and many psychiatrists think one should cultivate in order to express the self. I was astonished by the number of obituaries of Lillian Hellman that spoke with reverence of her anger. I don't see anger as an emotion to be cultivated and, in any case, it is not in short supply.

Adversity is a great teacher, but this teacher makes us pay dearly for its instruction, and often the profit we derive is not worth the price we paid.

I will do this work of transformed and even distorted memory and lead this life, the one I am leading today.

Due to the fact that I had no respect for him I felt free to speak in the most dogmatic fashion and did so.

Arguments are like the grinding of rusty blades.

AMERICA

I am skeptical of everything in America just now [1971].

To be an American is to try to make a rock out of a waterfall.

Harvard (across the river in Cambridge) and Boston are two ends of one mustache.

All the American regions are breaking up, ground down to a standard American corn meal.

Something pitiless and pathological has seeped into youth's love of itself, its body, its politics.

One thing looms out of the shadows: the reluctance of so many *promising* young people to have children.

The detergent of bourgeois Boston cleans everything, effortlessly, completely. If there were a Bohemia, its members *would* live on Beacon Hill, the most beautiful part of Boston.

In Boston there is an utter absence of that wild electric beauty of New York, of the marvelous excited rush of people in taxicabs at twilight, of the great Avenues and Streets, the restaurants, theaters, bars, hotels, delicatessens, shops.

The true poet, the fiction writer--how will he flee the merciless strength of the American spirit, the cactus that lives without water?

The sheiks of Texas cruise around their desert.

MONEY

New York--this is no city for poor people.

The rich in their pyramids have a nice time.

Lily explains that people think one can live on the rich, when the fact is that it takes money to live *with* the rich. To be without sufficient money is like diving into the concrete of a drained swimming pool.

NEW YORK

New York, the exile for those with evil thoughts.

This is New York, with its graves next to its banks.

My aim was to be a New York Jewish intellectual.

"I can't believe anything very striking has happened *here*. New York maybe, but not here.

Yes, I'm faithful to New York, one might say. It's ours, our country's, our great metropolis.

I am afraid of the country night and its honest slumbers...the millions in their boroughs--that is truly home.

I like cities, big cities and even medium-size cities. If I were traveling about America, I'd always want to spend the night downtown.

It was New York and even back home I had been reading *Partisan Review* and had already been a communist and an ex-communist, left variety, before I got here.

Every great city is a Lourdes where you hope to throw off your crutches but meanwhile must stumble along on them, hobbling under the protection of the shrine.

Manhattan is not altogether felicitous for fiction. It's not a city of memory, not a family city, not the capital of America so much as the iconic capital of this century.

New York, with its statistical sensationalism, is a shallow vessel for memory since it lives in a continuous present, making it difficult to recall the shape of the loss deplored.

New York: No novelist in his or her volumes has set out to be the social historian of the actual city, this restless monster of possibility and liability.

On the street, he has noticed that people keep turning around suddenly, as if future income taxes were brushing by, grazing coats like a pickpocket.

High heels drown in the splash at the curb and the mean West Side wind from the Hudson blows about as carelessly as crime.

Here in the city the worst thing that can happen to a nation has happened: we are a people afraid of its youth.

Bombay is called the New York of India, and I guess New York is becoming the Bombay of the U.S. What I had in mind was the increasing separation of the classes. The streets filled with Untouchables.

New York City, with its Bosch-like horrors, its hideous deformities, has this rotten density everywhere.

I think I read recently that before many years have passed it is expected that nearly half of the residents of Manhattan will be living on public assistance.

A woman's city, New York. The bag ladies sit in their rags, hugging their load of rubbish so closely it forms a part of their own bodies.

"It's a woman's city, isn't it? The whole thing has been especially created for them. I'm sure--the stores, the streets, the clothing industry, the printing and publishing--it's all for women."

New York once more, to remain forever, resting on its generous accommodation of women. Long dresses, arrogance, more chances to deceive the deceitful, confidants, conspirators, charge cards.

"It's not accident that the Bible speaks of the city as a harlot," he said.... "It creates every possible dye to deepen further the female disguise."

The place was clean and had once been a fine family apartment with a good view of the river, but most of the ladies living there were quite mad and had a way of dividing into warring camps over a foolish issue like the answering of the telephone and sometimes they engaged in the most distressing fights in the hall. I felt rather depressed about all of them because they were lonely and idle and, since I found one as pathetic as the other, I was inclined to be a bit unscrupulous and to try to take both sides in their arguments. This was disastrous; each side repeated what I had said and I sometimes trembled for fear of retribution when I put my key in the door.

This is what it is like in the holy city.

JEWISH CULTURE

Cultural and political attitudes swim along in the same bloodstream.

What I meant [saying that she wanted to become a "Jewish intellectual"] was the enlightenment, a certain deracination which I value, an angular vision, love of learning, cosmopolitanism, a word that practically means Jewish in Soviet lexicography. Right now, I'd say my remark depended upon which Jewish intellectual. I am not sympathetic with the political attitudes of certain members of the New Right who happen to be Jewish intellectuals, and less sympathetic to the Christian Right, most of whom are scarcely to be called intellectuals at all.

ROBERT LOWELL

I love to be known by those I care for.

A burden accepted is both a hump on your back and a star in your crown.

As for having a crazy husband, I came to know well that not all crazy people are alike.

The tyranny of the weak is a burdensome thing and yet it is better to be exploited by the weak than by the strong.

Cal [Lowell] did read my work, of course, and he was very encouraging and nice about it, and all of that, but it wasn't the same as going over each little part.

On the whole, Cal was encouraging. He liked women writers and I don't think he ever had a true interest in a woman who wasn't a writer--an odd turn-on indeed and one I've noticed not greatly shared. Women writers don't tend to be passive vessels or wives, saying, "Oh, that's good, dear."

I was once asked if I had felt overpowered by Lowell's work, meaning, I guess, if it overpowered my own. I said, "Well, I should hope so." I had great regard and admiration for it. Learned from him and from it, got pleasure from it.

Of course I suffered a good deal in the alliance, but I very much feel it was the best thing that ever happened to me. An extraordinarily original and brilliant and amazing presence, quite beyond any other I have known.

I didn't know what I was getting into, but even if I had, I still would have married him. He was not crazy all the time--most of the time he was wonderful.

I have tried for a certain light tone--many of those have to do with events, upheavals, destructions that have caused me to weep like a child.

I feel lucky to have had the time--everything I know I learned from him.

ONCE A RADICAL

It is a great relief to learn that I am thought of only as "radical" and though I know that is not meant to be a compliment it seems quite the happiest way out and so I try to keep that aspect of my past in the public mind on the theory that nice people demand only one transgression and if they find a suitable sin they won't go snooping around for more.

Here are the shards of his youthful liberal cliches, the chopped-off carrot tops of his adversary assumptions, the shriveled balloons of his generation's elated predictions of capitalist catastrophe.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

[James] Baldwin felt the Negro to be approaching a final, revengeful fury.

It's jobs and headstarts and housing and the mother at the head of the family and reading levels and drop-outs.

The value of constantly predicting revolutions, civil war, violent accountings is to give a sense of power to the powerless.

The political genius of Martin Luther King is, by any theory, quite unexpected. The nature of his protest, the quality and extent of his success sprang from the soil of religion and practicality most liberals had thought to be barren. Looking back, it is curious to remember how small a part the Negro's existence played in the earlier left-wing movements. The concentration on industrial labor, white sharecroppers, the Soviet Union and the Nazis left the Negro as only a footnote.

King's language in the pulpit and in his speeches was effective but not remarkably interesting. His style compares well, however, with the speeches of recent presidents and even with those of Adlai Stevenson, most of them bland and flat in print. In many ways, King was not Southern and rural in his address, although he had a melting Georgia accent and his discourse was saturated in the Bible. His was a practical, not a frenzied exhortation, inspiring the Southern Negroes to the sacrifices and dangers of protest and yet reassuring them by its clarity and humanity. His speech was most beautiful in the less oracular cadences, as when he summed up the meaning of the Poor People's March on Washington with "We have come for our checks!"

At the end of his life, King seemed in some transfigured state, even though politically he had become more radical and there were traces of disillusionment--with what? messianic hope perhaps. He had observed that America was sicker, more intransigent than he had realized when he began his work. The last, ringing, "I have been to the mountaintop!" gave voice to a transcendent experience.

The moral justice of the Civil Rights Movement, the responsible program of the leaders, the murderous rage of the white people: this was the occasion at last [the march in Selma, Alabama].

The odd thing is that it should not be beatniks and hipsters and bohemians who are sending out the message, but good, clean, downright folk in glasses and wearing tie clasps.

The assassin's work was completed. Here in Memphis it was not the killer, whoever he might be, who was feared, but the killed one and what his death might bring.

Small-town Christianity, staged in some sense as it was, made King's funeral supremely moving. Its themes were root American, bathed in memory, in forgotten prayers and hymns and dreams. Mule carts, sharecroppers, dusty poverty, sleepy Sunday morning services, and late Wednesday night prayer meetings *after work*.

Perhaps what was celebrated in Atlanta was an end, not a beginning--the waning of the slow, sweet dream of Salvation, through Christ, for the Negro masses.

In Iowa a few Southerners even longed for a black face around Woolworth's on a Saturday night.

RIOTS AND REVOLUTION

That old slut, the Revolution!

The Civil Rights Movement is fellowship and Watts is alienation, separation.

The Watts riots were a way to enter history, to create a past, to give form by destruction.

Coarseness enters the mind of the enthusiast as quietly as a faint, hardly noticeable cerebral accident.

The sight of the "Caucasians" and the hot night and the hatred and deprivation burst into a revolutionary ecstasy and before it was over it extended far beyond Watts.

The demands of those days and nights on the streets, the smoke and the flames, are simply not to be taken in. The most radical re-organization of our lives could hardly satisfy them, and there seems to be neither the wish nor the will to make the effort. The words swell as purpose shrinks. Alabama and California are separated by more than miles of painted desert.

The "love"--locked arms, hymns, good feeling--all of that was remembered with feeling. This love, if not always refused, was now seldom forthcoming in relations with new black militants, who were set against dependency upon the checkbooks and cooperation of the guilty, longing, loving whites. Everything separated the old Civil Rights people from the new black militants; it could be said, and for once truly, that they did not speak the same language. A harsh, obscene style, unforgiving stares, posturings, insulting accusations and refusal to make distinctions among those of the white world--this was humbling and perplexing. Many of the white people had created their very self-identity out of issues and distinctions and they felt cast off, ill at ease, with the new street rhetoric of "self-defense" and "self-determination."

Few had realized until Chicago [Democratic Party Convention] how great a ruin Johnson and his war in Vietnam had brought down upon our country.

The present Democratic leadership appears to be divided between bullies and cowards and Humphrey asks us to take our chances on the coward.

Insofar as the safety of the community was concerned, the actions of the police were a dangerous and stupid diversion, alas like Vietnam.

Wave a Viet Cong flag and drive them out of their minds! Take down the stars and stripes and watch them charge, ready for the kill. The more militant demonstrators, resting later in the week, told newsmen they were going into training for battle; they would learn, among other things, how to trip the horses that carried the policemen when they came charging down on them. In Chicago, neither a shooting, nor a stabbing, nor a burning, nor a sabotage has been reported. Guerilla rhetoric, determination to cross the line into the street, rocks and bottles provoked the outstandingly furious, awful reprisal.

What is interesting...is the lack of questioning on the part of the radicals, the survival in them of the grim sectarianism of the Communist International thirty or forty years ago.

[John Reed, early Communist] the brilliant, early master of radical "new journalism"...was a revolutionary, not just a leftist, and certainly not an "infantile leftist" with their accusing utopianism.

Still he [Reed] is not deep enough or reflective enough to be a moral hero and his life at the end shows the damage of a too-eager receptiveness.

This reminds us of the cultist aspect of the American revolutionaries of the sixties, sometimes a small band bound together by their rants, paranoia, and above all the exaggeration of their power and the foolish underestimation of the power of society.

This is perhaps what is truly meant by the phrase, revolutionary suicide--the killing in oneself of the uses of reality by submitting to "the program."

While he was standing there a girl rushed up to the front of the hotel and took off her clothes. She stood there turning like a model, giving her message. The people stared in confusion, in silence. They were seeing it at last--the sixties. Ackerman decided at that moment to vote for Nixon.

POLITICIANS

History starves many, but fattens a few.

A president needs only to be, not to become.

The lie is the only thing we can count on in our image of the president.

The president appears like one of those television commercials run over and over again.

Having successfully attained an elective office seems to freeze the personality in its winning shape.

READING

Reality lives in words.

Reading is a discount ticket to everywhere.

The greatest gift is the passion for reading. It is cheap, it consoles, it distracts, it excites, it gives you knowledge of the world and experience of a wide kind. It is a moral illumination.

Books give not wisdom where none was before. But where some is, there reading makes it more.

ART

Art, of course, lives in history.

Art is a profession, not a shrine.

Art was the religion of the 1920s, and thus there were many women married to the tempestuous gods of the period, women called to share the thunder and lightning.

FICTION

The relativism we now feel undermines the centrality of character.

The story is true, but it cannot be accurate because of the artfulness.

In the sentimental fiction of bygone days there is often a union of poverty with moral purity.

All imaginative creation is partly a revelation of the artist's critical intelligence: the question of an appropriate style, the disposition of the materials at hand, the framing and, in literature, the plot.

In the usual practice of fiction, the style of the lines, the symmetry of the paragraphs, the balance of the elements are likely to give way, almost unconsciously, under the stress of incident, plot, and characterization.

In contemporary fiction...[Postmodernism] the mood of the writer is to admit manipulation and design, to exploit the very act of authorship in the midst of the imagined scene. The broken, the episodic, the ironical are whispers from the wings, reminding us not to be swept away, someone is in charge.

The length of a novel, the abundance of detail have a disturbing and exciting effect on the imagination; in a sense one reads on to find out "what happens" and yet what happens is exactly the most quickly forgotten, the elusive. What seems to remain locked in the memory is a general impression, a selection of detail, a blur of interesting scene, the shape of character, and above all, a sort of remembrance of how one felt when one was first reading the book.

Tracks, not very deep, laid down in the memory prompt us to assert merit and excellence.

With the Russians there is a grandeur and completeness in single works that the contemporary imagination cannot call upon.

Scope, grandeur, largeness, completeness are the grounds of the highest values--and yet smallness, perfection, inspired narrowness and concentration--in Jane Austen, in Kafka--share in the supremacy.

Victorian plots are very perplexing and this is particularly true of the very popular Dickens. The plotting is downright bad and the amazing thing is that so much genuine life managed to connect with the awkward stories.

A novel becomes a fairy tale so that it will not be thought to be a sociological study or a bit of the author's psycho-history, two ideas he may rightly have believed to be running like a low fever among the student body.

Fashion corrupts, but, like artificial respiration, it also gives a second life to the fallen. Structure bores in this generation; freedom repels in the next.

Certain works, as if they were sovereign states, weaken from time to time and whole generations turn their attention away.

To be attacked or to be ignored offer at the least certain surprising possibilities for the future; the work may be dramatically discovered or excitingly defended, reclaimed.

The notion of a large or small masterpiece lying about unnoticed--a Vermeer in the hayloft--has always stirred men's hearts.

It is a painful but honorable destiny to be laughed at, scorned as a madman, slandered as immortal or irresponsible or dangerous. Even refusal, being entirely ignored, has in its own way a certain cold and bony beauty.

Only the genius of Vladimir Nabokov keeps alive the rather disappointing development of a surrealist fiction.

We hardly know which to treasure most: expectation confounded or satisfied.

TECHNIQUE

The decline in the ability to create character comes, in this view, from the modern tendency to try to reach character from the inside. The author has become a sort of ventriloquist; he is not content to describe but must try to impersonate the very soul of someone quite different from himself.

When I open a new work of fiction I like to notice the way it is constructed, to learn something from it. Like Milan Kundera's latest novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The narrator comes in and out and yet the form shifts to stories, to feelings, actions the narrator could not have known.

Too strict a demand for form will often lead to a loss of the rushing, raging sense of life that is the special mystery of certain novelists such as Dostoevsky and Dickens.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

To assert greatness does not give us the key; it is only the lock.

This collection is one long stutter.

The great is seldom a deterrent to the mediocre.

Attacks upon great work have very nearly the same weight as praise.

A genius may indeed go to his grave unread, but he will hardly have gone to it unpraised.

He wrote as an amateur, giving off accounts of himself so vivid and outrageous one would believe them written by an enemy.

In reading certain works, not all works, I do sometimes enter a sort of hallucinatory state and I think I see undercurrents and light in dark places about the imagined emotions and actions. This often stimulates me to write, particularly about novels.

You begin to see all sorts of not quite expressed things, to make connections, sometimes to feel you have discovered or felt certain things the author may not have been entirely conscious of. It's a sort of creative or "possessed" reading and that is why I think even the most technical of critics do the same thing, by their means making quite mysterious discoveries. But as I said, the text is always the first thing. It has the real claim on you, of course. [New Criticism]

You wake up one morning and someone's done something a little bit new, something fresh and genuine, a new accent, quality of experience, way of composing and structuring. That's very beautiful to me. I am very happy when I see an interesting, gifted struggle with fictional form.

We are left with only one demand: that a work be interesting.

MAJOR FICTION

The best book on Boston is Henry James's novel *The Bostonians*.

Washington Square [Henry James]: It is a perfect novel of immense refinement.

James was wise to give Catherine the works [*Washington Square*]: her dismaying vital statistics, her dumpiness, and her baffled maneuvering will set her up like one of those dolls at the country fair, ready to be idly knocked down for a prize.

At the party, he goes for Catherine's attention with the watchful concentration of a sportsman waiting for the game to fly in the range of the gun.

Tess [Thomas Hardy] is the most perfectly conceived of the modern betrayed heroines.

Jude the Obscure [Hardy] is about poverty and the crushing of the spirit that goes along with it like a multiplying tumor.

The Mother's Recompense [Wharton]: A mother has abandoned her husband and daughter, and New York society has erased the blot of her existence as if she were a smudge to be washed off a window.

In *The House of Mirth*, her triumph [Wharton], she is not always clear what the moral might be and thereby creates a stunning tragedy in which the best and the richest society of New York reveals an inner coarseness like pimps cruising in Cadillacs.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is a supreme work of the imagination. It has a tonal purity of style, an unwavering accent of lamentation for those caught in a plot of tragic finality.

If there is any culpability on Fitzgerald's part it may lie in his use of Zelda's torment to create the destructive, mad heiress, Nicole, in *Tender Is the Night*.

As a work of its own period, *Nightwood* [Djuna Barnes] is not minor, though it is decadent. The literature of decadence with its ornamental style, artificiality, its relishing horrific incident, is common today in America with Norman Mailer and others [Postmodernism].

Sanctuary was, so far as I know, Faulkner's one effort to make, with deliberation a sow's ear out of a silk purse.... Of course, *Sanctuary* is a book unlike any other, one of the author's six or seven masterpieces.

The Heart of the Matter [Graham Greene] is interesting and serious for its plain, grim understanding of the moral pain of exaggerated sentiment, the tragic heroism of watching over another's life.

[Mary McCarthy]: *The Company She Keeps* and *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* are richer, more beautiful, and aesthetically more satisfying than, say, *A Charmed Life* or *The Groves of Academe*. The condition that made *The Oasis* somewhat stillborn was that it was more biography than autobiography.

In *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, a novel that is very American and yet conservative in both form and matter, [Saul] Bellow needs the voice of one who has not shared the experience of the American [for the] last thirty years [and] Mr. Sammler is a suitable instrument of refusal: he says, I will not accommodate the New Left students or the nihilism of New York.

It is hard to believe anyone in the world could be happier reading *Gravity's Rainbow* [Thomas Pynchon] than reading *Dead Souls*.

Perhaps *Couples* and the cocky antics of *The Witches of Eastwick* [Updike] are best thought of as Restoration comedies, fantasies of cuckolds, loose-girdled ladies, toffs, lecherous squires...

The Sportswriter and *Independence Day* [Richard Ford] are comedies--not farces, but realistic, good-natured adventures, sunny, yes, except when the rain it raineth every day. The new work, *Independence Day*, is the confirmation of a talent as strong and varied as American fiction has to offer.

In *Answered Prayers*, the unfinished nonfiction novel, using the actual names of a transcontinental cast of mostly well-known persons, or if disguised by a fictitious name, carefully designed to be identifiable, Capote made his own shackled step to the social gallows.

WRITERS

Tolstoy, Dickens, Henry James. All the greatly productive geniuses.

Melville? A discovery, not a revival, a correction of a mistake, an omission.

One thing is certain: in American drama O'Neill is preeminent.

Even a schoolgirl must shrink with disgust from that loathsome young man, Boswell, "buttering up" Dr. Johnson, hanging about his coattails like an insurance salesman after a policy.

As a husband Lewes discovered his wife's genius [George Eliot], or rather he "uncovered" it as one may, peeling off the surface inch by inch, uncover a splendid painting beneath.

I am very struck by the revisions of Henry James. They seem to me always interesting, but in the end quite minor--changes in a few words, shiftings. The powers of concentration the great writers show are extraordinarily moving.

Henry [James] certainly struck many observers as snobbish and outlandishly refined, but at the same time there is his literally mysterious energy and grinding ambition, his devilish application like that of an obsessed prospector during the gold rush.

[Henry's brother William] is usually thought to be the most significant thinker America has produced.

A great claim is usually made for Edith Wharton as a social historian, although how that can be confirmed by so intensely hermetic an imagination is a puzzle.

As a social historian, Edith Wharton does not pause to get it just right, on the dot. She proceeds from a very generalized memory and an often commonplace fund of attitudes.

Edith Wharton is bold about sex, even something of a nudging procuress when the plot allows.

Throughout Edith Wharton's work the society is small and its themes repetitive.

A novelist like Sinclair Lewis seems used up, absorbed, like a fertilizer.

We know from Proust that a great French aristocrat can drop his Croix de Guerre on the floor of a male brothel without diminishing his prestige.

Joyce thought the worst thing about World War II was that it distracted the world from reading *Finnegan's Wake*.

If [Frost] had a consistent political theme it was self-reliance.

People could not only listen to Frost and read his verse, they could also write about him as if they somehow felt he was not much better than they themselves were.

He [Frost] was malicious and capricious... He was brilliant, adored, available, and even his resentments were not the sort that stripped a man of his charm.

Perhaps the worst you could say about Frost was that he could not really like his peers.

In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway revealed some of his mean-spirited thoughts about other writers, but he did so with a great deal of beauty and style.

William Faulkner, the grandest fictional talent our country has produced, land-obsessed and with an imagination of staggering fertility and scope, found in Mississippi an epic vision.

[Faulkner's] union of high classical style and vocabulary with the most daring and unaccommodating experiments with form, fractured methods of narration, shifting, shadowy centers of memory and documentation makes an art that was very demanding in his lifetime and not less so now.... Indeed, not one of the novels will reveal even its form, its story, without submersion again and again.

As persons, the Fitzgeralds were not, in my view, especially appealing. Their story has a sort of corruption clinging to it, the quality of a decadent fairy tale, some overgrown lushness and deformation. They seem, most of all, like incestuous brother and sister--brilliant, perverse, selfish--their handsome, self-loving faces melting into a mask.

Very few lives are of a piece in the way the Fitzgeralds' were; with them youth and middle age are linked not so much in the chain of growth as in the noose of cause and effect.

[Hart] Crane somehow never seems to feel he is galloping to destruction. In this he is very different from Fitzgerald, who had in the midst of chaos the rather cross-eyed power of gazing upon his deterioration as if he were not living it but somehow observing his soul and body as one would watch a drop of water slowly drying up in the sun.

As a versifier he [Vachel Lindsay] had no more caution than a hobo hitching a ride, but somehow his voice prevailed for a time, even with some of the respected critics of the day.

"The Congo" is the supreme folly of Lindsay's foolhardy career...[as] the sweating reiterations of the amateur elocutionist might recall Tom Thumb at Queen Victoria's court.

The praise [of "The Congo" by Harriet Monroe] is short but unfortunately ranging in reference, like a kangaroo leaping over rich and spacious plains.

If Lindsay had some sort of talents, they were not for poetry. He did not write poetry, he wrote jingles and hymns and scenarios for his public appearances.

[Edgar Lee Masters] has *ideas* as some have freckles.

[Edna St. Vincent Millay] was a woman famous for her fascinating unconventional personality, and for rather conventional poems.

[Ring Lardner's] is a miserable world made tolerable only by a maniacal flow of wisecracks.

[Lardner] wrapped his dreadful events in a comic language, as you would put an insecticide in a bright can.

Because of the habit of lying [in Lardner], it is a world without common sense. The tortured characters are not always victims. They may be ruined and made fun of, but they have the last word. They bite the leg that kicks them.

It would be hard to think of any writer in America more interesting and unusual than Mary McCarthy.... She has popular fame as well as literary distinction.

With Mary McCarthy the purity of style and the liniment of her wit, her gay summoning of the funny facts of everyday life, soften the scandal of the action or the courage of the opinion.

Edmund Wilson...was dismayed by Nabokov's cast-offs, those universally admired works that seemed to be resting in overflowing boxes in the Nabokov vestibule, as if waiting to be picked up by the Salvation Army.

Yet so powerful and beguiling was his image [Dylan Thomas]--the image of a self-destroying, dying young poet of genius--that he aroused the most sacrificial longings in women.

[Graham] Greene has a unique gift for plot and a miraculous way of finding a clever objective correlative for his spiritual perplexities.

His terse novels [Greene], with their clear, firm themes and symbolic situations, are acted out by men with beautifully apt gifts for language... Everything is sharper and more brilliant than the effects of other writers.

Greene, in the dramatic self-slaughter, pushes personal heresy to the limits with a greediness that is convincing neither as fiction nor as religion.... Catholic-convert dramas of sex and renunciation, belief and defiance.

Cheever is a disappointing novelist. The mellifluous style is always at hand, the courtesy and wistfulness of his way with dramatic encounters remain; and yet the novels fly apart, shred and shed as if some wind of inattention had overtaken them.

[John Updike] writes on and on with great success about suburban landscapes or small-town ones efflorescent in observed detail, prodigal in image, and brashly knowing and accomplished in the rhythms of current dialogue and steaming with the orifices and bodily fluids of many fluent copulations.

The greatly pleasurable gifts hang like white, puffy clouds around the humbly repetitive pandemonium of the relentless f.ings [fuckings] that do not advance the plot. [Updike]

With his Christianity and out-of-line distrust of the antiwar movement, [Updike] places himself as an object of aesthetic distance like Johnson in politics, and in religion a lonely swimmer.

There is much that is dismaying and unpleasant and tiresomely perfunctory in [Updike's] violent congress between the pornographic impulse and Christian doctrine.

We are reminded of the bad Philip Roth, creator for laughs of American Jewish life in its underwear.

Sex, anywhere in every manner, a penitential workout on the page with no thought of backaches, chafings, or phallic fatigue. Indeed the novels [of Philip Roth] are prickled like a sea urchin with the spines and fuzz of many indecencies.

The structure of Roth's fiction is based often upon identifying tirades rather than actions and counteractions, tirades of perfervid brilliance, and this is what he can do standing on his head or hanging out the window if need be.

The talent of Philip Roth floats freely in this rampaging novel with a plot as thick as starlings winging to a tree and then flying off again.

[Roth's novel] *Sabbath's Theater* is mud, a slough of obscenity with some lustrous pearls of antic writing embedded in it.

In Roth's novels, the erotic pushes and thrusts where it will.

Joan Didion's novels are a carefully designed frieze of the fracture and splinter in her characters' comprehension of the world.

Joan Didion's novels are not consoling, nor are they notably attuned to the reader's expectations, even though they are fast paced, witty, inventive, and interesting in plot.

[Didion] is a martyr of facticity, and indeed such has its place in the fearless architecture of her fictions. You have a dogged concreteness of detail in an often capricious mode of presentation.... You may accept or allow for the aesthetically doubtful because of the interesting force of the factual in which it is dressed.

The biographer's [Joan Givner] rather smug provincialism distorts the worldly and amusing mishaps of a woman [Katherine Anne Porter] who was not made for marriage and thus married four times.

It is not a useful summarizing sentiment [by Givner] to think of [Porter] as a fiction, just as it has not been altogether wise to think of her fiction as her life.

John Updike found the writing [by Edmund Wilson in *Memoirs of Hecate County*] "leaden and saturnine"; Raymond Chandler said Wilson managed to make "fornication as dull as a railroad timetable."

Capote had [in *Answered Prayers*], like a leper with a bell announcing his presence, horrified those he most treasured, and with many he was marked with the leper's visible deformities, a creature arousing fear of infection.

Reading over these writers [Capote, Carson McCullers, Harper Lee] brings to mind the triumph of their contemporary Flannery O'Connor, painting a similar landscape and filling it not with cute hunchbacks and dwarfs but with predatory swamp rats, literally Godforsaken Bible salesmen intoning their handy lies in magical speech rhythms, all transcending the fictional cliches in the dramaturgy of the generation after Faulkner.

[Boris Pasternak's] beautiful work attracted to him the positive radiance that shines around the poet in Russian society, an effulgence matched by the negative reverence of the state, which displays itself in constant surveillance and oppression such as other countries would think a waste of time.

IDEAS

The world was a dusty old pocket with the zipper stuck.

He has one of those greedy and restless minds that takes in and chews up everything in sight, like a disposal unit attached to the sink.

Life is not a prison. It is an airplane journey and on this journey the self is always disappearing, changing its name, idly landing and departing, spanning the world in hours.

Wasn't it Kant who understood that when we say "in my opinion," we mean instead, "All men able to judge will agree"?

MORAL COMPLEXITY

"It's really unnerving to live in a world where everyone, just anybody, takes as complicated a view as the most clever people! When everyone sees things in all their paralyzing ambiguity--that's not so pleasant and comfortable after all! There's no one to uphold common sense!"

Pigs have to be killed and the robin's dismay is not to the point.

She had thought him innocently guilty.

MEMORY

Middle age is a bill left by youth.

Every moment of the present is rushing into its fate as the past.

She remained outside every event, as if her memory were no longer than a sigh.

Secretive persons tend to generalized memories, discreet editings, and the inevitable seasoning of sugar.

It is time to remember things left unfinished, the heartfelt boyish duplicity of sudden loves, romances lightly erased so that their traces remain on the calendar of promiscuous memory.

The past is not a blur of memory, but a forest in which all of the trees are human beings, rooted, breathing, sustaining the ax, or withering.

The diarist is the most egotistical of beings.

WRITING

Don't you see that revision can enter the heart like a new love?

Making a living is nothing; the great difficulty is making a point, making a difference--with words.

Nothing interferes with my own writing except my often irresolute character and of course the limitations of my talent.

The struggle seems to be to uncover things by language, to find out what you mean and feel by the sheer effort of writing it down. By expression you discover what you wish to express or what can be expressed, by you. Things that are vague in the beginning have to be made concrete. Often, what you thought was the creative idea ahead of you vanishes or becomes something else.

To uncover the mobility of the abstract is a rare gift. The static must move the mind, the invention, in a swirl of significance both intellectual and emotional [in reference to Kafka and to Elizabeth Bishop].

Banalities connect the author with the world around him. They connect the extreme and the whimsical with the common life, with America, with the decade, with the type.

HER OWN FICTION

Some people find it hard to follow my meaning because I don't spell it out, not entirely. My writing is simple but I like to be sort of emphatic and then let it go.

I remember that I started writing *Sleepless Nights* because of a single line. The line was: "Now I will start my novel, but I don't know whether to call myself I or she."

I wrote it in the first person and used my own name, Elizabeth. Not very confessional, however. And not entirely taken from life, rather less than the reader might think.

IMPRESSIONISM

Catherine is as alone as an animal in a field.

Perfume clung to her hair like a fragrant halo.

She dropped her head downward, like a duck slipping its bill into the water.

She hissed her words through teeth that jutted out like an awning over her lower lip.

She was wearing a dress of brown silk--the sort of silk dress worn so long that it seemed to be breathing.

It is a look without seeing, just like two mirrors exactly place on opposite walls.

Her pale eyes did not seem to see anything. They might have been gazing back into the recesses of her own mind and merely pretended to look outward.

Mrs. Gorman never seemed to be actively considering the point at hand; she seemed, rather, to have already thought of everything of importance and to imply that conversation was merely a recollection of a former experience so similar to the present one that she had only to remember what had happened before and to repeat the pattern.

Clicking heels made sounds like the hooves of galloping ponies, and buttocks moved up and down rhythmically as the women filed into the reception room.

The sound of the dogs died away and in the distance she saw a thin, sun-browned arm lifting the week's washing up to the clothesline.

Mr. Brice took the floor now and offered to the jury his impressive brownness, varied by a green tie.

His first utterance [Bartleby] is like the soul escaping from the body, as in medieval drawings.

There was a warmth about her, simple and comfortable as the warmth of a baking oven.

The apartment was rather like a dwarf's dressing room in a film studio.

The days of the visit passed like a spool of slowly unwinding thread.

A rush of heat enters the town like the roar of motorcycles on Sunday.

CHARACTERIZATIONS

She was as free of irony as a doll.

"I don't want no doctor looking up my ass to see if my hat's on straight."

Mrs. Morton was all sap and Clara was all bark.

Clara, too, was fearful to behold in these midnight sessions. There was a menacing rigidity in her features and a certain eloquence in her deep, outraged breathing.

He could no more have refused her intense and flattering concern that a dry root could have refused the rain.

A profound and bullying impudence emanated from Frazier, like steam escaping from a hot valve.

Frazier was not mean-spirited so much as serviceably coarse, like an old army blanket.

This odd harness of habit held him in a vicious embrace.

At college he had been an overbearing and sanctimonious young man who had never distinguished himself in anything except as captain of the debating team, in which capacity he delivered energetic arguments on safe subjects.

He spoke with extreme care and always seemed to be searching his mind for some epigrammatic nonsense that would relieve him of the obligation to pursue any thought beyond two sentences, unless he had engineered the conversational turn himself. His attempts at wit had always been forced and he had now become one of those boring people who tell anecdotes about historical personages.

But just as I stepped upon the back porch I stopped and pretended to be admiring an old fat hen which the neighbors had intended to kill long ago but hadn't found the heart to do so because the hen has a human aspect and keeps looking at them gaily and as an equal.

The sister was transfixed by the spectacle of her incapacities, lifted up to peaks of feeling by every ache and pain, quick to throw the magic of her sufferings into the air like crooked smiles.

Bright, determined scholars, using the minutes, the hours, and the bibliographies, the footnotes falling into line obediently, like little soldiers in the ranks of documentation.

"Please don't be over Dodo's head tonight. It's bad manners." "But it is impossible not to be over Dodo's head. I thought manners was the art of the possible--or is that politics?"

During the meal, Clarence observed Dodo--trained the heavy ammunition of his mind upon her, as if he were a general besieging an undefended shepherdess on her lonely hill.

He had the relaxed gaze of country people, the expressionless patience of men who had sat for generations in front of the country store.

In the way he puffed, he managed to give the idea that smoking a cigar was the most important thing in the world.

She drew on cigarettes as if they were opium, an addition to the opium within her, the narcotic of her boredom.

She began somehow to sink into the mud of maneuver, manipulation, and her own marked self-satisfaction.

She was always behind a closed door--the fate of those addicted to whatever.

She cannot maneuver with any more design than a trapped bat.

The sister, coarse and homely as an old boot.

The halo of invalidism rose over her brow.

LANDSCAPE

Here, in Maine, every stone is a skull and you live close to your own death.

I am looking out on a snowstorm. It fell like an armistice, bringing all simple struggles to an end.

The cold winds blow from the north, from empty space with fir trees like great chandeliers of ice.

One corner would be deserted, as if an entire side street had turned off its lights and closed its eyes.

Empty, dead Main Streets, streets with the ashamed gaze of nude mannequins in a shopwindow at night.

She retained some of the poetic gift and dreaminess of the old pioneers who could see the horizon beyond the mud flats.

Maine lost 25,000 farms between 1880 and 1940. More than half the improved land had reverted to forest over thirty years ago.

In Brazil the presence of a great, green density, come upon like yet another gift to the over-laden, makes the soul yearn to create a gray, smooth highway.

The mobile home, the large box, resting on its plot, asleep, dreaming of the road, dreaming of being pulled along forever, someplace beyond.

Since films and television have staged everything imaginable before it happens, a true event, taking place in the real world, brings to mind the landscape of films.

SENSATIONS

All her senses seemed alerted and she felt in herself that exhilarating but dangerous clarity climbers experience at the top of a mountain.

These questions circled about like a hungry bird, beating the air, hovering, flapping furiously, on and on in a dizzy flight without destination.

The feeling of falling into a well of disgrace.

EQUALITY

Are women "the equal" of men? This is an embarrassing subject. Women are certainly physically inferior to men and if this were not the case the whole history of the world would be different.

Any woman who has ever had her wrist twisted by a man recognizes a fact of nature as humbling as a cyclone to a frail tree branch.

A woman's physical inferiority to a man is a limiting reality every moment of her life.

Women have contributed very little to the art of painting and they are clearly weak in the gift for musical composition.

Literature is the art in which women have had the greatest success.

[Yet] It is only the whimsical, cantankerous, the eccentric critic, or those who refuse the occasion for such distinctions, who would say that any literary work by a woman, marvelous as these may be, is on a level with the very greatest accomplishments of men [see this web site]. Of course the *best* literature by women is superior to *most* of the work done by men and anyone who values literature at all will approach all excellence with equal enthusiasm.

If you remove the physical and sexual experiences many men have made literature out of, you have carved away a great hunk of masterpieces.

Women have much less experience of life than a man, as everyone knows.

In the end, it is in the matter of experience that women's disadvantage is catastrophic.

Albert was staring at her. She felt sorry for him because he was not a woman and had no one to turn to.

His hand was holding Marian's arm tightly. This strong grip somehow dissolved individuality and made them one.

She thought suddenly, He will take care of me! And it occurred to her that she had found the reason for the existence of two sexes.

SEX

Seduction is now a comedy in which both are laughing.

You cannot seduce anyone when innocence is not a value.

In those years I did not care to enjoy sex, only to have it.

Sex and marriage--of the two, marriage is the easiest surrender.

Society must, it seems, inhibit to some extent the sexuality of all human beings.

Seduction may be baneful, even tragic, but the seducer at his work is essentially comic.

In the common man, excessive demand for sex is repulsive. Gentlemen merely run the risk of being ridiculous.

The nature of sexuality is repetition. Phallic compulsiveness is an exaltation of repetition and yet a reduction to routine of the most drastic kind.

There is a staggering amount of evidence that points to the idea that women set a price of one kind or another on sexual intercourse; they are so often not in the mood.

Sex can no longer be the germ, the seed of fiction. Sex is an episode, most properly conveyed in an episodic manner, quickly, often ironically.

The limitations of the human body are nowhere more clear than in the fantasies of Sade. Nearly all of his "imaginative tableaux" involving more than two persons are physically impossible.

Arabella [*Jude the Obscure*] represents the classical entrapment by sex: the entrapment of an "innocent" sensual man by a hard, needy, shackling woman.

He was very handsome and a little depressed by nature, but anxious to please and in this pleasantness somewhat impersonal. For that reason he was doomed to more fornication than he wished.

In the novels and stories [of Mary McCarthy], the "shocking" frankness of the sexual scenes is very different from the hot prose of male writers. These love scenes are profoundly feminine, even though other women writers do not seem to want to take advantage of this same possibility.

In *Dance the Eagle to Sleep*, the girls are constantly available and practical--I'm afraid rather like a jar of peanut butter waiting for a thumb.

The libertinism of the detestable sixties brought in the newfangledness of typewriter fucking.

Novels that are profoundly about illicit fornication have a way of ending on accidents, illness, or death.

LOVE

A few people, couples, looking into each other's eyes, as if they were safe.

They often look deeply at each other, but it is a look without seeing, just like two mirrors exactly placed on opposite walls.

Love! The emotion the deepest persons believed to be nonexistent except by the side of a certain measure of hatred.

The messiah had seemed, even upon first meeting, a little tattered; the hope of salvation was still problematic.

In his love life, he is something like a telephone, always engaged, and even then with several on hold.

J. suffered in his loves from seizures of optimism, a blighting frenzy quite unknown to me.

He expressed anxiety over impulses to take his own life and also to assault murderously the girl he was going with. He was alarmed. He said he was in love.

How mad I was about you, how perversely aware of my sinful enjoyment of your affection for me.... I worshipped your indulgence of me. Nothing so easily unbalances the sense of proportion in a woman of artistic ambitions as the dazed love and respect of an ordinary man. I was nearly deranged.

She could feel the happiness that radiated from Leo; he was warm in the excitement of being engrossed in something outside himself.

"As someone said, every love affair is an unique experience. You never make any progress. You've always got to start back at the beginning."

Through black women the primeval dark waters of love were supposed to flow uninhibited.

He looked like some Neanderthal ruler, superb and forceful in a savage way, and quite eternal. My ghastly darling.

Gentlemen do not appeal to all women.

Boredom with love is as powerful as love itself.

Even the moon was sinister.

MARRIAGE

Monogamy drifted about him--the scent of a hot iron on a shirt collar.

Husband-wife: not a new move to be discovered in that strong classical tradition.

To use Marianne Moore's phrase, that "interesting impossibility," marriage and ideal love.

He supported his tiny little wife who could not stand alone. She dangled on his arm like a black shopping bag.

Marriage was like one's birth: you do not ask for it, you do not make the circumstance with free will. You merely accepted it as an inevitable condition of adult life.

The wives--completely stunned by the marvelous possession of these blithe, busy husbands. They sigh tenderly under the delightful burdens of propitious marriages and smile at the less fortunate with queenly compassion.

In the long run wives are to be paid in a peculiar coin--consideration for their feelings. As it usually turns out this is an enormous, unthinkable inflation few men will remit, or if they will, only with a sense of being overcharged.

"I'm not so sure [marriage] would be the right thing to do. We make each other very, very dull. Anyone can see that." I was careful to give these insulting answers in a very affectionate tone, for after all the situation between us required a really exhausting amount of quick thinking on my part. I often felt I had done an honest day's work after an evening with Edgar.

Suppose, great heavens, that I had married him. This idea completely unnerved me because I had wanted to marry him and would have done so if he had not violated one of those rigid, adolescent, feminine laws. I finally broke with him only because he went away for three days and didn't write to me on each of them. His infidelity crushed me and with real anguish I forced myself to say, "My heart is utterly broken. If you don't care enough about me to keep your promises...." The thought of the risk I had taken chilled me to the bone." [fiction]

She thought quite simply that she must get married.... She was so much absorbed by the idea and the obscure liberation it offered that she wished immediate fulfillment.

The paradox of the woman who reaches her true spinsterhood only after she is at last married and settled. She takes command and reaches a state of dominating dependency to which only she has the clue.

VICTORIANISM

[Her mother] would have been satisfied in Victorian England, in a society where women had duties rather than rights.

She had profound convictions about a woman's right to be spoiled.

She can take a cold, icy bullet into her flesh, pull it out with a wince, sugar it and offer it to the world, to herself mostly, as a marshmallow.

An unmarried girl of thirty would appear very neurotic, a lesbian or something.

GENDER

Biology is destiny only for girls.

Nothing is the same for men and women.

He was standing opposite her and intently watching the wrong exit.

It seemed clear that this boy and girl both liked and disliked each other. What was the need of pretending an absolute?

Store clerks and waitresses are the heroines of my memories, those ladies cast off with children to raise.

I have always, all of my life, been looking for help from a man.

Many men see women as a threat to their very being, as a force trying to destroy them.

His coercive neatness inflamed me at times, as if his habits were not his right, but instead a dangerous poison to life, like the slow seepage of gas from the hotel stove.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION

Rights represent the challenge of the most gifted.

Women's liberation suits society much more than society itself is prepared to admit. The wife economy is as obsolete as the slave economy.

Hawthorne created two women [Hester and Zenobia] with fanatical stamina, with an independence of mind and action that went beyond anything the world could rightly have asked of them in their time--or later.

Zelda Fitzgerald's sad, wasted life seemed to have been buried beneath the ground, covered over by the desperate violets of Scott Fitzgerald's memories.

I see how much has changed since the 1950s, especially in the manner of life for women. You are still weaker than men in muscular force, but can sleep in the streets if you like, even, alas, if that is the only place you have to sleep, and go to Arabia in your jeans and knapsack...and much, much more.

It's a wonderful, remarkable book [*The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir]. Nothing that has come since on the matter of women compares to it. When I wrote my [negative] comments I was thinking of existentialism and the idea that one can choose and not be dominated by the given...something like that.

There is hardly a thing I would want to say contrary to her thesis that Simone de Beauvoir has not said herself.

The Second Sex is so briskly Utopian it fills one with a kind of shame and sadness, like coming upon old manifestoes and committee programs in the attic.

Many books strongly presenting feminine claims begin...as if under a compulsion to veil the whole idea of sexual differentiation with a buzzing, watery mist of insect habits and unicellular forms of life.

He imagined he heard her saying that a career was the only thing she wanted.

"Women must do something just like men."

She will have an apartment, a lover, will take a few drugs, will listen to the phonograph, buy clothes, and something will happen.

The two women do not know what they look like, do not see their lives, and so they wander about in their dreadful freedom like old oxen left behind, totally unprovided for.

Have mercy on them, someone.

FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

The fat bird moved around the pit, vain and patriarchal.

Dear Joanna has a mind fixed like a footprint in cement. The ACLU, the Sierra Club...Planned Parenthood.

She had knowledge of an almost frightening degree about the hidden violence of unions between the sexes.

Arthur was an awkward piece of furniture, which could be neither overlooked nor easily renovated, although Clara had often tried the latter.

There was something of the dizziness of a see-saw when the two figures were seen in juxtaposition, as though the ground beneath lay patiently waiting for the loud, defeated thump of one or the other.

He turned on his side now and looked at her. She could see in his eyes that the time has come for the final and complete examination of every feature, like weighing of every fault, like turning a naked body on a slave block. He seemed to say, This is what it means for me to be male and you female.... She felt that whatever he had seen in her in that one glance was the beginning and end of all he would ever see.

"The female always accepts the male with a pious revulsion. She finds no particular joy in destroying him. In fact, she finds no joy in him at all and God knows what reason she has for giving in to him."

They are "new women," and their husbands represent to them an intolerable boredom they do not see themselves destined to endure.

There was a sickening, witch-burning pedantry that meant to punish the boy for what in the profoundest truth was not his responsibility.

She had lived with him for the whole period of her adult life and she knew that she herself was more a man than he.

Her consciousness of self was greatly heightened and that consciousness brought with it an immense unfulfillment.

Parks had no doubt Doris was cherishing some operatic protest in her bosom; in her silences he heard screams of accusation.

Doris was sincerely moved to pity for the other women in the house, young, amiable Iowa wives with children.

Doris was fully awake now. "You're too fat, Joseph. If you'd get a move on and help me with the housework, you'd trim down a bit."

She did not feel sorry for her husband and was therefore able to criticize him in a comfortable way.

She could not, with her mother, master that female, tender way of speech.

To be single and busy--nothing bad in that. Such people do much good.

WOMEN WRITERS

Woman writer? A bit of a crunch trying to get those two words together... I guess I would say no special difficulty, just the usual difficulties of the arts.

Just as many atrocious women writers are laughing all the way to the bank as men. But I do feel there is an inclination to punish women of what you might call presumption of one kind or another.

There were many enlightened and cultivated women about, but she [Margaret Fuller] was the only seriously learned one in her circle, perhaps in the country.

She herself [Fuller], in the wide sweep of her being, is the best American woman the nineteenth century had to offer.

As a critic, she [Fuller] does not have the mind for the details of a work but rather for its general effect, and so there is a sameness in the language and a tendency, strong, to moral description of literature.

Only her writing [Fuller] still suffered from orphic diffusion, from a sentimental femininity of accent.

Madame de Stael, vexing and far-out as she was, needed her rather embarrassing love affairs to smooth over, like a cosmetic cream, the shrewd image.

[Gertrude Stein] is as sturdy as a turnip.

In her life [Stein], confidence and its not-too-gradual ascent into egotism combined with a certain laziness and indolence.

To her name [Djuna Barnes] there is always to be attached the splendor of *Nightwood*, a lasting achievement of her great gifts and eccentricities--her passionate prose and, in this case, a genuineness of human passions.

In Sylvia Plath's work and in her life the elements of pathology are so deeply rooted and so little resisted that one is disinclined to hope for general principles, sure origins, applications, or lessons. Her fate and her themes are hardly separate and both are singularly terrible. Her work is brutal, like the smash of a fist; and sometimes it is also mean in feeling.

With Sylvia Plath... Always, behind every mood, there is rage--for what reason we do not know.

Sylvia Plath always seems to be describing her self-destruction as an exhilarating act of contempt.

If there were any real ancestor among American women for Mary McCarthy it might be Margaret Fuller.

Very few women writers can resist the temptation of feminine sensibility; it is there to be used, as a crutch, and the reliance upon it is expected and generally admired.

In autobiography, self-exposure and self-justification are the same thing. It is this contradiction that gives the form its dramatic tension.

In many women writers on the current scene, the union of license and literary conventionality is quite noticeable. More and more they suffer from what Colette called the great defect in male voluptuaries: a passion for statistics.

Taste is also used as the surest indication of character.

PUBLISHING

Publicity, the bed sore of the fame-sick, inflicts its pains.

publicity--so easy to swallow, so difficult to remember a moment later.

I don't think publishing changes much. It's still sort of a running faucet and words and pages pour out. I doubt that many worthwhile books don't make it to the printing presses.

I like sometimes to think otherwise....that something brilliant and unacceptable, something too quirky and original is being created. In general I guess I feel that what we have is what is there.

CRITICS AND REVIEWERS

He shuffled about in the text like a melancholy sheep in a pen.

The madness of the infatuated is...just an exaggeration of the reasonable assent of the discriminating.

I notice that many of them [reviewers] in very important places haven't written anything except their reviews, their quick, short reviews, composed with an air of easy authority. For the most part, I think the authority should be in some way earned.

The condition of popular reviewing has become so listless, the effect of its agreeable judgments so enervating to the general reading public that the sly publishers of *Lolita* have tried to stimulate sales by quoting bad reviews along with, to be sure, the usual, repetitive good ones.

The flat praise and the faint dissension, the minimal style and the light little article, the absence of involvement, passion, character, eccentricity--the lack, at last, of the literary tone itself--have made *The New York Times* into a provincial literary journal, longer and thicker, but not much different in the end from all those small-town Sunday "Book Pages." (*The New Yorker*, *Harper's The Atlantic*, the news and opinion weeklies, the literary magazines...)

Fifty-one percent of the reviews summarized in *Book Review Digest* in 1956 were favorable. A much more interesting figure is that 44.8 percent were *non-committal!*.... The unfavorable reviews number 4.7 reviews.

For some recurrent best sellers...the readers would no more ask for a good review before giving their approval and their money than a parent would insist upon public acceptance before giving his new baby a kiss.

What is truly dismaying about the *Times* and *Tribune* is the quality of the editing.

When a real writer discusses literature and culture you will notice a difference in style, in carefulness, and you will actually find ideas, illuminations, oddities and not merely yes-or-no opinions.

Critics are often wrong, but writers are hardly ever wrong, hide and deny it as they will, in knowing whose opinion really counts.

It is the mind of the critic, somehow, the establishment of his own thought and values, that counts; and that establishment is the authority of the voice, whether it comes from creative work in the arts or creative work in criticism.

Edmund Wilson, one of our country's supreme men of letters, is sometimes remembered as being autocratic and intimidating. My own memory, not the most intimate, is of a cheerful, corpulent, chuckling gentleman, well-dressed in brown suits and double martinis.

Mary McCarthy has written in her memoirs of her detestation of Wilson's body and soul, information provided by her decision to become his wife. She has disguised him in satirical portraits in her fiction, a disguise on the order of sunglasses.

It is not a question of right or wrong specific opinions, but of the quality of the mind.

RELIGION

It may sound glib but I suppose for me religion is a vast, valuable museum.

Over the mantel the black, leather Bible with its curled edges lay unopened and dusty, for there was no crazed, naked, God-fear or God-love here.

Of course, even though I'm a nonbeliever, I was brought up a Presbyterian. I still feel an attachment to the Presbyterian Church where I know all the hymns and where I first felt the beauty and resonance of the scriptures.

We left the delineation of the vivid results of enmity with God to the crude Baptists.

Many Americans will naturally want a strong America, but I don't know that God is in agreement. I hadn't thought of Him as being a patriot... I hadn't thought of Him as in a state of desire except against idolaters, and as we know from the Old Testament it is very easy to sink into idolatry, which a good deal of the flag-waving is just now. As for the evangelizing Christians, their vulgarization of the scriptures surpasses belief, their incredible assumption of Jesus as a pal in the cheering stand.

DISBELIEF

The denial of God is certainly no more terrifying than the denial of one's flesh and blood.

"By the way, you aren't becoming religious, are you?" Joseph repeated. "It's so fashionable nowadays you might take it into your head to jump on the bandwagon." He shook his finger playfully at her. "God, no!" Doris answered fervently.

So, life after death is to fall in love once more, to set up a little business, to learn to drive a car, take airplane trips, go to the sun for vacations.

We can be upright and morally acceptable if we want to make the effort... But this verdict gives me the idea that perhaps this isn't believed any longer.

Through support, flattery, and the wonderful plasticity of self-analysis, paranoia enters the wrongdoer's soul and convinces him of his own innocence as if it had been confirmed by the accounting of St. Peter at the gates of Heaven.

SALVATION

The devil was surely just that incapacity for thinking of the proper sacrifice, the useful, courageous action.

Dear spotted atheism, the homely, wrinkled queen of heaven for the Big Bang, mother of the depressing claims of the prehistoric upright ape and the joke of the Piltdown Man.

For beautiful eyes, look for the good in others; for beautiful lips, speak only words of kindness; and for poise, walk with the knowledge that you are never alone.

Yes, I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Savior.

DEATH

While you are living, part of you has slipped away to the cemetery.

Oh, the dear grave. I like what Gottfried Benn wrote, something like, "May I die in the spring when the ground is soft and easy to plough."

Michael Hollister (2021)

