The Reflecting Mirror: Manifest Domesticity in Contemporary American Fiction by Women and Sources of the Tradition

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And Eve, within, due at her hour, prepared
For dinner savoury fruits, of taste to please
True appetite, and not disrelish thirst
Of nectarous draughts between, from milky stream,
Berry or grape: . . .

—John Milton

The only occupation that may have produced more authors of novels than newspapering is, I believe, that of housewife.

—Ralph Daigh

Milton's treatment of Eve as the first housewife in human history is by no means the earliest manifestation of, to understate the case, a basic obsession with woman's domesticity as an essential component of her nature. The recent Emily Dickinson: Profile of the Poet as Cook shows that the obsession, even in the guise of justification of the poet as woman, is with us still. Description, depiction, or justification of the housewifely role of woman has been but the existential aspect of the situation; in fact, the inescapability of the role became historically determined as its economic necessity increased: the economic bases of society influenced woman's essential role in it. This Laocön-like intertwining of woman, money and society approached its greatest intensity at the time that the novel emerged as a genre in English, and the economically determined role of woman then influenced, indeed molded, the creation of character, sex-roles, family situations, worldly position, goals in life, in short, the very stuff of the novel. In addition, the dramatically increased participation of women in literature through their reading and writing the novel not only contributed to the flowering of the genre, but also made clearer than ever before the relationship between the economics of authorship and the gift of literary creation. Indeed, for women specifically, economic need was often the catalyst for literary expression. England's Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), for example, tells us in her Autobiography of rejoicing when her family lost their entire fortune, leaving Harriet with "precisely one shilling in [her] purse."

"I," she writes jubilantly, "who had been obliged to write before breakfast, or in some private way, had henceforth liberty to do my own work in my own way; for we had lost our gentility." The "loss of gentility," i.e., the situation of bankruptcy or of poverty-level income within a woman's family, did not affect the housewife role she
inherited from Eve, but it was one of the most common liberating factors enabling her to add to it the role of writer. Virginia Woolf's Aunt Mary Beton was only a fantasy fairy-godmother in the usual nineteenth century reality of a daughter's, wife's or mother's writing enabling her family to put bread in their mouths. The never-married Louisa May Alcott was not the only woman writer who 'defined her task in life as the financial and emotional support of her gifted but impecunious family.'

In England, Elizabeth Gaskell represents another thread of the tradition of woman's acceptance of the dual role of both domestic person and fabulator. Comfortably married, mother of four daughters, Mrs. Gaskell began writing at the suggestion of her husband, to console herself for the death of their son at ten months of age. Writing as consolation quickly turned into writing for money and a pattern evolved: Mrs. Gaskell wrote frenetically, often desperately trying to meet the deadlines set by her mentor, Charles Dickens, and often distracted by household chores, child-care, helping her husband's ministry and entertaining endless houseguests, in order to maintain a certain standard of living for herself and her daughters—their educations and vacations were possible only through their mother's literary efforts. But the vacations became a necessity for Mrs. Gaskell, who overworked herself in her multiple roles; and the vacations in turn created new needs for money. Almost at the end of writing what many feel to be her best work, *Wives and Daughters*, Elizabeth Gaskell realized her dream of buying a country house to which she and her husband could retire. Bought with her money, almost half of which was to be paid by future writings, but in her son-in-law's name as married women could not own property at the time, The Lawn was the scene of a happy family reunion in November 1865 during Gaskell's first visit there. But as Elizabeth Gaskell raised a celebratory cup of tea to her lips she keeled over dead of an apparent heart attack—at the age of fifty-five. The extra-domestic feminine experience of writing demanded not only persistence but sacrifice on the part of a woman in the face of adversity; not the persistence so admired in a Whitman, for example, but the no less admirable persistence of a housebound woman writer for whom adversity has so often meant confinement away from the world to child-rearing, housework and the dull throb of domesticity.

Louisa May Alcott was, in November 1865, suffering from the illness she had contracted in her nurturing housewife's role as nurse at the front in the Civil War, an illness that would force her to spend the remaining twenty-five years of her life, until her death at age fifty-six, "in a maze of ill health, drugs, and suffering." The price of extra-domestic feminine experience was a steep one indeed, no less than death, the price extracted not only from Eve for extra-domestic transgression, but from the earliest fictional heroine to leave the domestic sphere in England, Clarissa Harlowe (1747-48), as well as from the earliest such American heroine, Charlotte Temple (1791) and her innumerable nineteenth century sisters culminating with Edna Pontellier (1899) and still from twentieth century heroines like Catherine Barkley (1929) not to mention from women writers themselves. After reading Virginia Woolf's musings about how a woman's writing might be changed by an experience of, say, "a walking tour, a little journey
in France," we need only turn to Alcott's example, in her life and in her heroines, to see what that change often really wrought for women before Erica Jong.

The goal of money-making through writing in the 1840s and 1850s was not restricted to housewives who needed to make money for their families, however; money-making was also an important goal for entrepreneurs who saw women as a new consumer audience and as a source of large profits for magazine or book publishing houses. "Women in America have been considered a specialized audience since at least 1837 when Sarah Josepha Hale started editing Godsey's Lady's Book, . . . the first American magazine published for women, [and] the nation's first popular, mass magazine." The first American best-seller, the book that is said to have initiated the very concept of "best-seller," was The Wide, Wide World by Susan Warner, written for money to keep her household going, under the pseudonym of Elizabeth Wetherell, and published for Christmas 1850.

This invasion of the domestically-based woman writer into the previously all-male enclaves of money-producing publishing as well as literary history, was most notoriously met by Nathaniel Hawthorne's often-quoted letter to his publisher, written from Liverpool in January 1855. Perhaps the most famous outburst we have in American literature before Norman Mailer against the woman writer, Hawthorne's complaint was prompted by an extremely popular, best-selling spin-off of The Wide, Wide World, The Lamplighter, by twenty-seven year old (Hawthorne was then fifty) anonymously published Maria Susanna Cummins. Hawthorne wrote, "America is now wholly given over to a d—d mob of scribbling women. . . ." Women who got no closer to Liverpool than the marketplace of their American hometowns were indeed turning to writing in ever growing numbers: Nina Baym reports that "commercially and numerically [women] have probably dominated American literature since the middle of the nineteenth century." But, as we know from Tillie Olsen's now familiar "One in Twelve" address at the Modern Language Association annual meeting in 1971, women have not been represented in anthologies or histories or textbooks or critical surveys in America. They have been seen as mere "scribbling women," an attitude not limited to Hawthorne as can be seen in Virginia Woolf's calling herself "a mere scribbler," in a talk she gave in 1936 entitled "Am I a Snob?"

In addition to the attacking or ignoring of women writers with anger and/or contempt on the part of men and the indecipherable double message about the non-feminine nature of money-making from money-making women, there was also, as Hawthorne's remarks suggest, the fact that the efforts of a homebound housewife-turned-writer in the nineteenth century were shrouded under much mystery; Hawthorne's nameless "mob" were largely nameless, hidden behind pseudonyms and anon.s (but celebrated today in the contemporary slogan paraphrased from Woolf, "Anonymous was a woman.") This mystery of authorship, often thought to exist out of fear of the male critical establishment's threatened attacks on hapless female scribblers, was just as often because of male embarrassment. That Bronson Alcott's supreme spirituality meant indifference to money and the resulting necessity on the part of his wife and daughters to take in
sewing, go out to service, and scribble books that sold well, is but one example among many of the nineteenth century male’s economic indifference or incompetence, although, to be fair, that incompetence was greatly aided if not sometimes induced by the Panic of 1837 in which more than one husband, father or brother lost his shirt, and after which more than one wife, daughter or sister rescued the family through her writing. The Panic of 1837 and its aftermath was certainly one of the historical episodes leading to the rise and success of the housewife writer and thus to Hawthorne’s frustration in 1855. The mystery of pseudonym and anon. was a shield, not only against the prejudice of the male reviewer, but also against airing the fact of the sex of the breadwinner of the author’s family.

The preservation of Hawthorne's letter is, like the Panic of 1837, an accident of history, and serves as a sort of permanent scout against the group of female outsiders seeking to break into the literary establishment. In addition, of course, it is a succinct comment on the historical cycle of “the rise of the housewife novelist.” Despite the fact that “female scribbler” and “housewife novelist” are equally repugnant terms, we seem, perhaps until the fourth wave, stuck with them. They may even last, for literary history shows that both have been cause as often as effect of literary phenomena. Ian Watt, in his lengthy discussion of the fictional connections to the “patriarchal legal situation of married women,” the fact that “unmarried women were no longer positive economic assets to the household,” and of the thesis that “the novel’s moral values reinforce[d] bourgeois economic reality in which women [were] totally dependent on marriage for economic survival” in eighteenth century England, points out the roots of the dilemma of the nineteenth century housewife writer—the blatant contradiction of novels about women totally dependent on marriage for economic survival making fortunes for the women who wrote them as well as for their publishers, thus making the scribbling female “homebodies” economically, if not socially, independent. This phenomenon has evolved into the “double bind” in our own century which denies women simultaneous “Americanness” and femininity as well as the choice to be a female artist—double bind which helped drive Sylvia Plath to suicide, for death was still the price in 1963 for extra-domestic experience.

The double bind of femininity versus individuality and independence, even of mind, can be seen in the pressures brought to bear upon and the images created for an Elizabeth Gaskell. In an 1853 review of one of her novels, the male critic J. M. Ludlow described the ideal woman writer as a housewife-mother:

By this time, [i.e., middle age], with family cares upon their hands, and the moral responsibilities of their now completed life upon their consciences, to write and to print will be no more temptations to their vanity, and it will be for them to judge whether they are really called upon to say something to the world—whether they have that to say which their husbands will gladly hear, which their children will never blush to read; and whether their calling be
to works of fiction or to the severest exercises of thought, we are sure that the little flaxen heads at their knees will add a truth and a charm to matter and style alike. . . .  

But even without the allegedly muse-like presence of a bevy of children about her knees, the unmarried non-mother, Charlotte Bronte, was subjected to even more severe advice on her literary aspirations by no less a male personage than England's poet laureate, Robert Southey, who wrote to her in 1837: "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation." Assurancethat the self-assertion of independence represented by becoming a writer was an insult to true femininity placed a heavy burden on the woman writer whose femininity was nevertheless constantly on call in her daily life: "No woman writer in the nineteenth century dared consider abandoning domestic responsibilities, however tedious, distasteful, and menial, for her art. The poorer ones, like the Brontes, peeled the potatoes; those with servants, like George Eliot, still kept close watch over the linen closets and the silverware."  

That the double bind has not begun to loosen its iron grip even after more than a hundred years of women's struggle against it, can be seen in the contemporary housewife-novel, Fear of Flying. Isadora's thinking about her moral choices, not to mention her lifestyle choices, reflects the painful pull of the double bind as restated by the archetypical mother:

Of course my mother had a rationalization for it all, a patriarchal rationalization, the age-old rationalization of women seething with talent and ambition who keep getting knocked up.

"Women cannot possibly do both," she said, "you've got to choose. Either be an artist or have children."  

Fear of Flying, in carrying the struggle of the earlier Georges even further to meet head-on the dragon-fires of opinion artificated by the Ludlows and the Southeys and the Hawthornes, is the best-known of the contemporary novels of confrontation—novels which serve as reflecting mirrors of the conflicts of the intra-domestic lives of women: authors, heroines, readers. The seeming contradiction of money-making novels about domestically oriented heroines making money for women who wish to be otherwise defined if not oriented, had, by the 1970s, at last begun to dissolve. It began to dissolve in the wake of a veritable explosion of contemporary best-selling books by women dealing exclusively with the domestic scene, the tidal wave of which peaked in 1973 (the same year Fear of Flying was published) with Marabel Morgan's Total Woman.

Ever since the Industrial Revolution, women have been in the limelight as leisureed consumers; women's magazines, women's fiction, and women's education all quickly followed the Industrial Revolution as new and potential money-makers. The race to
woo the "women's market," which was considered until very recently as the "housewives' market," continues unabated today. But in the mid-twentieth century, the economic-literary nexus shifted—money earned from writing in the midst of housewifely duties was no longer the answer to the dire need to feed one's family; it was the modern reward for "work"; money from writing came to be a new necessity for women in the 1960s, women whose unpaid housework could not give them the feelings of self-worth considered essential for the contemporary person. The breakthrough came, again as it had a hundred years earlier, by means of the popular mass market's response to women—this time to their domestic themes. In this case the market response was a liberating force for the woman writer. Denied, as Nina Baym argues, participation in the mainstream of American literature because of their perceived role of "sivilizers," domestic women with their domestic themes have been viewed as entrappers, constrictors. In addition, the popular notion, deriving from Harold Bloom, that the artist writes his novel in order to father both a work and a tradition, has left no room for the housewife-mother to express her truth and her reality.\textsuperscript{20} The breakthrough, then, brought about by best-selling "domestic humor" books, begun by Jean Kerr, mother of six, with her 500,000 copy best-seller, \textit{Please Don't Eat the Daisies} in 1957, and continued by such writers as Peg Bracken (\textit{The I Hate to Cook Book}, 1960) and Erma Bombeck (\textit{I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression}, 1972)—to list only two writers and only one example among many for each—was a breakthrough with far-reaching implications.\textsuperscript{21} While these best-sellers, "laugh-a-line" chronicles of such events as "not flunking the paper towel test" and "the day junior and the dog took a bath in the living room," set in extra-large type for easy reading, were sweeping out the cobwebs of what was "suitable" to be placed between book covers, they were also making other literary history: now, not only could women be published and earn money from their writing, but they could write, be published and earn money even if they chose domestic themes.

The breakthrough of the 1840s and 1850s had been in ability—women could get their novels accepted by publishers, booksellers and the public; the breakthrough in the 1960s was in acceptability—women could write about their lives, their real lives rather than their fantasy lives. In addition, the "sub-genre," if you will, of the "domestic humor best-sellers" re-created and gave cachet to what we might call "the Stowe syndrome"; the open combination of writing and domesticity evidenced in Harriet Beecher Stowe's letters. Expression of the sheer logistical problems of the housewife writer, instead of being hidden in private, unpublished letters, could, in the 1970s, be openly discussed, as Elaine Fantle Shimberg discusses them at length in her \textit{How to be a Successful Housewife-Writer: By-Lines and Babies Do Mix}. Indeed, a woman could keep house, raise children, write a minimum of eight novels, and then publish an account of the heretofore improbable mixture as Anne Tyler recently did in \textit{The Woman Writer on Her Work}.\textsuperscript{22} A woman no longer had to spend twenty years writing a novel that should have taken only two, as Katherine Anne Porter did with \textit{Ship of Fools} because of "trying to get to that table, to that typewriter, away from my jobs of teaching, and trooping this country, and of keeping house."\textsuperscript{23} A woman no longer had to wait
for publication as in the 1930s and 1940s a Tillie Olsen waited more than twenty years to publish *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, because bearing and raising children and working at a paid job as well precluded having the simplest circumstances for creation exist.

Today, in America, the term “housewife” is out-moded and old-fashioned; the term “homemaker” has long since replaced it; and more recently we hear “household manager” (with “household technician” for a maid). There is only one instance in which the term “housewife” remains in use, and that is in the case of the “housewife writer.” Judith Guest, author of *Ordinary People*, is identified not as a novelist, but as a “housewife writer”; Anne Sexton was called, even in her obituary, a “housewife poet.”

What is a “housewife writer”? Aside from being a term whose total oblivion is devoutly to be wished, it is perhaps a term which might be defined according to three considerations:

1) The easiest definition would be that of “married woman, with or without children, economically dependent on her husband, totally responsible for the ‘non-work,’ that is, work not economically productive, in the home, and whose housekeeping role has priority over all other roles.” But, like all easy definitions, this one is not totally satisfactory, because it does not take into account unmarried domestically defined and economically and socially male-dependent women like Emily Dickinson or Louisa May Alcott.

2) A more satisfactory definition might be made around a woman writer’s struggle with identity, such as the one described by Erica Jong in *Fear of Flying*. A woman asks herself, “If I have no published work, or even if I have some published work, and am somebody’s wife and perhaps somebody’s mother, or am, in society’s eyes, but someone’s daughter, am I a ‘writer’?” “Where is my primary identity?” A housewife writer, in this case, might be a woman who has not been able, or who has not been allowed by society, to identify herself as a “writer.” We think not only of Erica Jong, but of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath.

3) A convenient means for naming “housewife writers” might be by eliminating those women writers who could not be so classified: writers like Anais Nin or Lillian Hellman, women who lived for many years in a more or less stable domestic arrangement, but whose primary and strongest identity was as “writer.” However, here, writers in various conflicts with the housewife-writer designation call our attention: Sylvia Plath, who identified herself as a writer before becoming a housewife, but who tried to excel at an ideal of the two and died a self-judged failure at both. Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman are also difficult to classify—their housewife status was central to their creative motivation as well as to their subject matter, but most of their work was done after their husbands and/or children had left the central stage of their lives. The use of names themselves is often, although not always, helpful in this third category—the housewife writer tends to have taken a husband’s name at some point whereas the non-housewife-writer has never done so.

In addition to these three aspects towards a possible definition, there is another almost infallible mark of the “housewife-writer”—Jane Austen-like, she nearly always
conceals her efforts, from extra-familial eyes, from family members, or from the public eye itself. The non-housewife writer works to publish, as Nin did by going so far as to buy her own printing press, to set the type herself, and to print her books. The housewife writer seems to be heiress to the old bugaboo of the doctrine of the two spheres' assignment of true womanhood to the closed circle of domesticity. Her struggle to emerge from this confining cocoon of stereotyped identity, first by denying her central domesticity in any of her writings, then, by making it the central theme of her writings, is one of the major threads in the tapestry of literary history.

From the early twentieth century, when Margaret Mitchell, a housewife novelist, published Gone with the Wind, through Katherine Anne Porter, Kay Boyle (mother of six), Grace Metalious, Anne Sexton, Pulitzer Prize winning housewife novelist Shirley Ann Grau, Sylvia Plath, Anne Tyler and into the flowering of the openly domestic themes of ten notable housewife writers to be listed here, the dominant note of the so-called housewife writer whose writing reflected women's involvement with home and family has been a feeling of freedom to serve Truth rather than Morality. As Erica Jong's Fanny puts it as she introduces her memoirs, " . . . 'tis Truth we serve here, not Morality, and with howe'er much Regret we affirm it, ne'ertheless we must affirm that Truth and Morality do not always, alas, sleep in the same Bed." By Morality Fanny meant the rules of the patriarchal society of the eighteenth century, rules which continue to bind the contemporary woman writer. The pseudonymous and anonymous women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries remained so, thus, not only for economic and critical reasons, but also for "Morality's" sake; with the mid-twentieth century's dropping of masks in the matter of authors' names as well as in that of subject matter, the service of "Truth" has been greatly advanced.

This Truth, in the case of "The Rising Housewife Novelist," began to be seen ten years after the groundbreaking by the "tell-all-the-kitchen-secrets-domestic-humor-best-seller" (Jean Kerr, 1957) with Sue Kaufman's Diary of a Mad Housewife. There then followed many fine novels presenting true reflections of female domesticity. To list the ten most influential:

1—1967 Diary of a Mad Housewife, Sue Kaufman (1926–1977)
   Sequel, Falling Bodies, 1974
2—1970 Up the Sandbox, Anne Roiphe (1935–)
3—1972 The Man Who Loved Cat Dancing, Marilyn Durham (1930–)
4—1973 Fear of Flying, Erica Jong (1942–)
5—1974 Yononnido, Tillie Olsen (1913–)
6—1976 The Women's Room, Marilyn French (1929–)
7—1976 Ordinary People, Judith Guest (1936–) (The first unsolicited manuscript to be accepted by Viking Press since 1949)
8—1977 The Cracker Factory, Joyce Rebeta-Burditt
9—1980 The Woman Who Lived in a Prologue, Nina Schneider (1913–)
10—1980 The Clan of the Cave Bear, Jean Auel
From these ten contemporary novels by and about women's lives in the domestic sphere, there is space to discuss but three here. One of these, Fear of Flying, I have written about elsewhere, but it deserves mention here for its innovative ending. Francine du Plessix Gray noted in a self-interview in 1977 that "Erica Jong's Isadora is the first heroine . . . since Moll Flanders and Hester Prynne who is promiscuous and not only survives, but wins out at the end. Whatever reservations we may have about Fear of Flying, it broke up a whole mythology." As seen in the entire discussion above, the mythology of necessity—"the daily renewal of life, which includes everything from washing the dishes to giving birth and caring for a senile aunt"—winning out over that of freedom—"adult males contracting together to do politics, make policy"—in the case of women in the American novel from the earliest days of Charlotte Temple to the more recent ones of Catherine Barkley has utterly prevailed. One of the salient points, not only about Fear of Flying, but also about all the ten "reflective" novels listed above, is the survival of heroines who dared to question or rebel against the consensus. The second novel we will look at here, of interest especially as anti-Cinderella myth, is The Clan of the Cave Bear. Set 35,000 years ago, it is the story of Ayla, a blond, blue-eyed, tall, orphaned 5-year old who is rescued after an earthquake by the prehistoric Neanderthal-type "clan of the cave bear" who consider her extremely ugly. Iza, the clan medicine woman and her brother Creb, the clan sorcerer, or Mog-ur, become her "foster-parents." They watch uneasily as she comes of age insisting on her individuality, on her personhood, in a male-dominant society. Ayla is seen as ugly and thus a failure as a woman according to the Snow White or Cinderella myths, but she commits a greater sin, the sin against feminine "goodness"—she invades male turf. She secretly teaches herself to hunt, for example; hunting being a feat which, if performed by a woman, is punishable by death. The belief of the primitive clan of the cave bear about men and women was that:

In the physical world, a man was bigger, stronger, far more powerful than a woman, but in the fearful world of unseen forces, the woman was endowed with potentially more power. Men believed that a woman's smaller, weaker physical form that allowed them to dominate her was a compensating balance and that no woman must ever be allowed to realize her full potential, or the balance would be upset. She was kept from full participation in the spiritual life of the clan to keep her ignorant of the strength the life force gave her.

Ayla, put to many gruesome tests by the clan for her recurrent "insubordination," or assertion of her personhood, survived every proof but was finally forced to leave the clan, and her son, for good. Her continued existence, ostracized as it is, is not a defeat, however, for it reveals two important things: 1) women have always been human beings with human natures and abilities shared with men; and 2) Ayla's
race was the race of the future, the race which was adaptive enough to survive the extinction of primitive mankind's more rigidly conservative clans. But whether portraying an Ayla of primitive times or an Isadora of modern ones, the contemporary novel by women in America follows the same thematic thread—woman is a survivor, not a victim.

In addition, woman is very often a mother. Motherhood as day-to-day interaction with a child, parenthood as a realistic burden, connected with a person's very humanity, is a theme of fiction and non-fiction alike. Charlotte Temple had a daughter she never knew, a daughter who atoned for her mother's transgression. Very different is the daughter of a contemporary mother—the new daughter is an integral part of her mother's life and work. This point is summed up well by Alice Walker, a poet, woman of color and mother of a daughter, Rebecca, the R—of her poem:

Dear Alice,
    Virginia Woolf had madness;
    George Eliot had ostracism,
    somebody else's husband,
    and did not dare to use
    her own name.
    Jane Austen had no privacy
    and no love life.
    The Bronte sisters never went anywhere
    and died young
    and dependent on their father.
    Zora Hurston (ah!) had no money
    and poor health.
    You have R— who is
    much more delightful
    and less distracting
    than any of the calamities
    above.83

Alice Walker notwithstanding, the parent-child relationship, however commonplace in real life, has rarely been at the center of a work of American fiction. It is at the center of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, however, as a mother-daughter relationship seen through the eyes of a male author. In counterpart to Hawthorne's depiction of the troubled, essential and rewarding bonds between mother and daughter is Marilyn Durham's portrait of a father-son relationship, bound, as Hester's and Pearl's is, in sin and expiation. *The Man Who Loved Cat Dancing* is a novel of multi-layered motivation, of characters of depth and individuality as well as universality, and of enduring insights into human emotions, especially male emotions. Set in Wyoming in the 1880s, it features housewife Catherine (not Betty!) Crocker who is running away from her
violent husband as the book opens. She falls hostage to a gang of train robbers who find they must teach her how to make coffee and biscuits. In classic hostage-psychology fashion, she then falls in love with her captor, Jay Grobart, who has stolen the money to try to buy back his half-breed son and daughter from the Native American tribe where they have been living since the murder of their Native American mother, Cat Dancing, and the imprisonment of their white father, Jay Grobart, the man who loved Cat Dancing, and also killed her. The murder was committed because of a father's misunderstanding of his son's garbled story about his mother and "other men," men who peopled not only the son's frightened imagination, but also who peopled the father's suspicious and jealous one. The boy had been scared by stories told "to frighten him into goodness."34 Sent outdoors one day so his mother could nurse his baby sister in peace, the little boy felt angry and hurt. "He crawled into one of his dens, as his father has called them, and daydreamed about the terrible men who would come to his house and get him. He thought they might come and get the girl child, and even frighten his mother. He was pleased with that dream, I think, and thought about it many ways." (pp. 201–202) His mother called him, but she still sounded angry, so he did not respond. Iron Knife, Jay's brother-in-law, continues:

"It was growing dark, and he was frightened, but he blamed her for not finding him. He thought of the men coming to get bad children, and how she would probably welcome them in because she was angry with him. Perhaps she would give him to them gladly, and keep the baby girl. . . . When the father came home, the boy was weeping in the dark, under the spell of his own badness, his fear, and his dream. He rushed to his father's arms and told him some tangled part of it."

(p. 202)

As terrifyingly real as the bogeys of nursery tales, the forces that led Jay Grobart to murder the woman he loved were forces rooted in the very deepest psychology of human beings. In addition, the insights into parent-child relationships in Durham's novel are as startling and revelatory as those shown in The Scarlet Letter.

With sex as the center, and inevitable human separation and death at the outer rim, the circle of paradigms linking these two novels is very wide. A parent emerges from prison as each novel opens, to live for a child who is bound up in the transgression for which both prison and the life outside it are expiation. A parent who has made a "mistake" in the passion of a moment must live with the mistake's being public in both novels: Hester Prynne is often surrounded by a crowd of the curious and always by the early American Puritan community; Jay Grobart is surrounded by his pursuers as well as by the Native American tribe he must face. Motifs of betrayal, of secrecy, of foiled escape, of the secondary importance of adult love to that for children continue the parallels. In addition, the two children themselves play remarkably similar roles: Pearl is seen as a "laughing image of a fiend,"35 as having a "freakish, elvish
cast,” (p. 1033) as participating in “witchcraft.” (p. 1032) Whether or not she is an emissary from the devil, she is other-worldly to say the least. Jay’s son, John Canby Grobart, is also other-worldly: named Dream Speaker by the Shoshone tribe of his maternal relatives, his story is pieced together from his dream revelations, his terrifying “crying dreams.” (p. 201) It is dramatic to realize that Pearl’s and Dream Speaker’s preternatural insistence on knowing the truth about their involvement in their parent’s sin, as well as the intensified burden on the parent when he/she sees the knowledge on the child’s face, are the very wheels on which the human tragedy rolls. The ultimate relief at being finally united with one’s child in knowledge leads to a lightening of the soul which portends redemption, but the double burden itself is never lightened.

Whether Pearl and Dream Speaker are linked by their redemptive power to the Christ Child is nowhere made clear in either text, but the fact that each parent, in faithfulness to the child who is a living reminder of the weakness of human emotion and will, builds a solid bridge of trust, love, endurance and dignity between him/herself and the child, a bridge whose influence extends to the larger populace witnessing the painful process, is echo of the inherent domesticity in the relation of the Child Jesus, His Father and His mother, a domesticity which necessarily echoes that of Eve, perpetrator of the sin which necessitated the Child’s coming. Pearl’s obvious attentions to her aging mother, Dream Speaker’s misleading of the pursuing soldiers and then leading of Catherine to his father at the risk of punishment, are symbols of the redemption achieved by each parent. The pagan cycle is echoed, too, as at the end of each novel the parent is dead while the child lives on, marries, continues the redeemed family. Both these novels are concerned, then, to show clearly the process of great sin, with its connection to an innocent child who is bound up in the results of the sin, leading to great humanity, to redemption. The necessary involvement of the sinning parent with his/her child places these stories in the category of the domestic.

The child-who-knows-without-knowing the sin of the parent is a shadow dogging the steps of the parent, a shadow echoed in the darkness of the atmosphere of both books. “Mother,” says little Pearl in The Scarlet Letter, “the sunshine does not love you. It runs away and hides itself. . . .” (p. 1089), as if to account for the “gray or sable tinge, which undoubtedly characterized the mood and manners of the age,” (p. 1118) as well as the mood of the story. In counterpart, after the long and heart-searing revelations of the truth of Jay’s mistake and his sin in The Man Who Loved Cat Dancing, Catherine, sitting at the edge of the Shoshone gathering, “looked around, surprised that the day was still bright. In her thoughts it had been night, but the sun was well above the mountaintops.” (p. 204)

There is a troubling comparison, however, to be made between these two novels: in both the root of sin is woman’s sexuality, and in both the woman’s sin exists primarily in the minds of men. The sin, however, is of an opposite magnitude: Hester’s is the act of love leading to life; Jay’s is the act of hate leading to death. Seen through the eyes of male judges, however, they are disconcertingly equal. The Scarlet Letter’s main narrative opens upon a “throng of bearded men” (p. 1001), after which we are
told of the "magistrates, God-fearing gentlemen," (p. 1004) who have sentenced Hester
Prynne, and of the "solemn presence of men no less dignified than the Governor, and
several of his counsellors, a judge, a general, and the ministers of the town; all of whom
sat or stood in a balcony of the meeting house, looking down upon the platform" (p.
1008) where Hester stands with Pearl in disgrace. In these scenes and in Hester's
dealings with Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth, it is the collective and
overwhelmingly male interpretation of her as sinful which prevails. Likewise, the male
interpretation of the female's sexual sin is the pivot of the drama of Jay Grobart and
Cat Dancing—but the guilt is the man's, the innocence the woman's.

To look at a further aspect of these two novels which is similar, while a counterpart,
we note with some surprise that Hester and Pearl are shown as manly women while
Jay and Dream Speaker are depicted as womanly men. Hester and Pearl are economi-
cally, spiritually, and in character, independent; they stand "in the same circle of
seclusion from human society" (p. 1031) that a male hero in American fiction usually
stands. Jay and Dream Speaker, on the other hand, are shown to be men who are
able not only to accept but to express tenderness, love, pain and other feelings, and to
depend on other human beings in the unified circle of intersubjective relationships—qualities only women are stereotypically said to be endowed with. In addition, paren-
thood is seen in both novels to have humanized a previously rather wild or hysterical
temperament. In the description of Pearl we read that "in the nature of the child
seemed to be perpetrated those unquiet elements that had distracted Hester Prynne
before Pearl's birth, but had since begun to be soothed away by the softening influences
of maternity." (p. 1031) Jay, too, is shown to have softened from the influences of
paternity: "Catherine was surprised by his whole approach to the boy, and she saw
that Iron Knife was too." (p. 192) Catherine and Iron Knife had expected Jay to be
demanding, imperious, perhaps even violent. They had not expected the parental
"soft, reminiscing questions." (p. 192) This androgyeny, and its convincing depiction,
are among the deepest impressions of both works. Whether they are a direct result of
the authors' having the opposite sex from their protagonists is moot and worthy of
pursuit. But the origin of this convincing androgyeny is less important than its effect
on the reader. There is, because of the parent-child involvement in human redemp-
tion and of the male-female involvement in character portrayal, a wholeness in the
thematic fabric of these two novels, a humanly satisfying wholeness which emerges from
the domestic and androgyenuous basis of their major themes.

In conclusion, we can see that domesticity has moved from a rare theme in fiction
to one manifestly more reflective of women's actual lives as, not unmindful of the long
tradition of domesticity extending from Eve, lived incessantly and ever-renewed by wom-
en, but only occasionally reflected in literature before the mid-twentieth century,
American women writers of our time, with the imaginative power released by their
successful scribbling sisters of more than a hundred as well as of only a few years ago,
are adding a new chapter to the history of literature. In a domestic, feminine context,
they are portraying at last the myths underlying the experience of women in the world.
The domestic world of family, of home, of parent and child, of the deepest and most primary relations human beings have, has at last in our time become a world of its own in literature, as women writers continue to enrich, to expand and to infuse with truth the long tradition of humankind’s relation with the word.

December 7, 1981

NOTES


9. E. Barbara Phillips, “Magazine’s Heroines: Is Ms. Just Another Member of the Family Circle?” in Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media, ed. Gaye Ruchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels and James Benet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 116–117. Nancy Cott, in The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), on p. 68, tells us that “no writer more consistently emphasized the anti-pecuniary bias of the domestic rhetoric than Sarah Josepha Hale. . . . ‘Our men are sufficiently money-making,’ Hale said. ‘Let us keep our women and children from the contagion as long as possible. To do good and to communicate, should be the motto of Christians and republicans.’” This double message is repeated in our time by Marabel Morgan, author of the best-selling Total Woman (1973) and head of a countrywide lucrative franchise of Total Woman Seminars which teach that a woman is to devote her entire energy to making her husband happy and caring for her house and children. Nowhere in the book or the seminar course does Mrs. Morgan explain how she herself keeps her husband happy while simultaneously managing a multi-million dollar business empire.


11. Fred Lewis Pattee, The Feminines Fifties (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1940), p. 110. Henry James shared the general feeling when he wrote, on receipt of a novel by Willa Cather: “. . . I find it the hardest thing in the world to read almost any new novel. Any is hard enough, but the hardest from the hands of young females, young American females perhaps above all. This is a subject . . . on which I could be more eloquent,
but I haven’t time and will be more vivid and complete some other day.” Quoted in Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1978), p. 138. Willa Cather herself did find time to be eloquent on the subject: “I have not much faith in women in fiction. They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable. . . . Women are so horribly subjective and they have such scorn for the healthy commonplace. When a woman writes a story of adventure, a stout sea tale, a manly battle yarn, anything without wine, women and love, then I will begin to hope for something great from them, not before.” *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather’s Articles and Reviews*, 1893–1902, sel. and ed. with a commentary by William M. Curtin (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1970), pp. 276–277.

12. Nina Baym, “Melodramas of Beet Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors,” *American Quarterly* 33, No. 2 (Summer 1981), 124. To oversimplify, Baym’s thesis is that from the earliest formation of theories of American literature there has been a standard of Americanness rather than a standard of excellence at work. Women are excluded from the canon because they cannot contain the essence of American culture. Baym’s article is detailed, replete with examples, and offers a new approach to “the woman problem.”


25. The most thorough discussion of the doctrine of the two spheres, its history and effects, that I have seen, is to be found in Chapter II of Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).


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eds. Ronald Gottesman, Laurence B. Holland, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979) p. 1033. Further references are to this edition and will be cited by page number in the text.

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Summary

The Reflecting Mirror: Manifest Domesticity in Contemporary American Fiction by Women and Sources of the Tradition

Catherine Broderick

Domesticity, the woman's sphere, has been the setting in which women have been depicted as contented or rebellious in American fiction by male rather than female authors until the mid-twentieth century. The economic influences on women's domestic role, literary depiction, and authorial production have been largely ignored. In particular, historically important economic situations which created openings for women to enter the market as well as the canon of American literature have not been seen in their true importance. That women could write literature does not seem to have presented the problem that the fact that women could make money by writing has presented—Hawthorne's diatribe against "scribbling women" comes to mind. In fact, money, women writing and domesticity in literature have been linked in an explosive way twice in the last two hundred years: after 1830, that is, after the Panic of 1837, in which so many men lost family fortunes, women wrote out of financial necessity and succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. The floodgates of "housewives," that is, women based in the home, writing and earning money were unleashed. Women were able to write openly, but did not write about their actual domestic lives. In the 1960s, with the enormous popular success of the subgenre of "domestic humor" books by housewives, the floodgates opened anew—this time to domestic themes in writing the legitimate novel. Women could write and thereby earn money by the late nineteenth century; by the late twentieth they could write about home, family, housewifery—the experiences, in short, central to nearly everyone: family life, intimate home relationships and problems could finally be valid material for fiction by women in America. One of these recent works, Marilyn Durham's The Man Who Loved Cat Dancing, can be compared with Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter in their treatment of parent-child relationships as central motivation for the characters' decisions upon which the novels turn. The mother-daughter relationship seen in the male writer's novel and the father-son relationship in the female writer's book offer a compelling argument for the centrality of the domestic. But whereas the former was an isolated case in nineteenth century literature, the latter is but one among numbers of domestically centered contemporary novels by women. Domesticity, or the truth of women's lives, is manifest at last in American fiction.