

# The Empty Mirror: The Relationship Between Literature and Domesticity in Writings by American Women

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Where lieth woman's sphere?—Not there  
Where strife and fierce contentions are. . . .  
Not in the wide and angry crowd,  
Mid threat'nings high and clamors loud;  
Nor in the halls of rude debate  
And legislation, is *her* seat; . . .

What then *is* woman's sphere? The sweet  
And quiet precincts of her home;  
Home!—where the blest affections meet,  
Where strife and hatred may not come!  
Home!—sweetest word in mother tongue,  
Long since in verse undying sung!

—*Ladies' Repository* 1845 <sup>1</sup>

Nineteenth century ladies' magazine verse may have reflected an abstract and socially stereotyped norm of domesticity, but it was part of the development of the feminine mystique<sup>2</sup> rather than a literary manifestation of an actual reality. Actual reality, social image, and literary expression have never shared a common truth; the distortions in their relationship have nourished human discussion since Aristotle. The economic need to restrict women to an impossible dream of "the sweet and quiet precincts of her home" may have inspired the manipulative verses quoted above, but the truth is that literature in America has never been domestic. The home in American literature has been peculiarly noticeable by its absence; when home appears it is as setting, background for expression of experience independent of it, or as a place that must be left in favor of adventure. Jo, for example, in *Little Women*, that enduring childhood classic of romanticized and repressive home life, finds herself tempted by the boy next door, Laurie, to run away with him. "She wants to do so, longing—as well she might—for 'liberty and fun'; but she observes, 'If I was a boy, we'd run away together, and have a capital time; but as I'm a miserable girl, I must be proper, and stop at home.'"<sup>3</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, when she taught *Little Women*, discovered that all her students "agreed that they had identified with Jo. Not with noble Beth, or domestic Meg, or artistic Amy . . . but with . . . Jo."<sup>4</sup> The popularity of Jo and the sympathy with her temptation to adventure suggest that this American theme, rather than that of

domesticity, predominates.

From early on, American writers imitated their European counterparts in many areas, but interestingly neglected the devotion to domestic detail that has been a part of the European work of art since the Middle Ages. While home and family are often the intrinsic material of European literature, American literature has shunned or apologized for domesticity in favor of the outdoors, of open space, and the struggle for personal independence. Historically, of course, the revolutionary struggle for independence is at the heart of American psychology and literature, and, together with the phenomenon of the frontier and the concomitant emphasis on progress, comprise the central facts activating literary expression in the New World. As Nina Baym comments in her discussion of the feminine novel in nineteenth century America, "Jane's goal in the Bronte novel is dominance while the goal of all the American heroines is independence."<sup>5</sup> But, as the "miserable" Jo so painfully illustrates, independence according to the American ideal, the Huck Finn solution of abandoning "sivilization," has never been a viable one for the American woman.

When George Webber tried to leave "sivilization," paradoxically for refuge rather than adventure, and learned that *You Can't Go Home Again* because the peaceful village life of the country had been trampled by the inroads of urbanization, he echoed the disillusion of Americans of the 1940s. But this attempt to go "home," and the shock of realizing the impossibility of doing so, first appeared in America in the 1820s, in the midst of the violent uprooting of rural life and its transplantation to the industrial, materialistic, nightmarish city. Barbara Berg, in her history subtitled *The Woman and the City 1800-1860*, relates that "during the 1820s and 1830s gift books,<sup>6</sup> periodicals, and novels exhibited a special form of writing, expressive of an attempt to harmonize the agricultural tradition with the urban experience. . . . Nostalgic visions of home, clothed in rural imagery, served a significant function for urban Americans. The 'happy homes of the deep valley . . . the symbols of youth and a happy liberty,' encapsulated the precious qualities of an earlier time. . . . The panegyricizing of childhood homes in poems and stories simultaneously represented an individual's longing for youth and a people's yearning for the glorious days of America's infancy."<sup>7</sup> This romantic vision of "home" still found in ladies' magazines and seen on Hallmark greeting cards, is one of the enduring myths of American life. It was called into existence out of a deep hunger on the part of the alienated city-dweller to find peace, refuge, harmony, and space in the crowded, jungle-like existence of the city. But did it reflect reality?

Contrary to the myth of homelife in the wilderness, the reality of life in Colonial and frontier America centered on the problem of survival rather than on a concern with roots. Unlike European reflections of society in literature—a settled society where leisure was possible and home well established—American literature had concerns other than home and family-centered drama. The need to record the conquering and the understanding of the land, to build the new country, to become American, came before considerations of home. That this literary omission was not felt as a lack in America is perhaps because, as Annette Kolodny argues, the American land itself was seen as

feminine and homelike, and American pastoral literature by men celebrated the warmth and receptive softness of this feminine landscape in terms European literature never had. Kolodny sees the "pastoral impulse" in male American literature as a need to capture woman's qualities, not the least of which are those of the woman-land as mother and refuge. She suggests that "America's oldest and most cherished fantasy is a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction."<sup>8</sup> Ellen Moers feels, for her part, that "the female landscape knows no nationality or century."<sup>9</sup> She finds, not without embarrassment she confides, that American women like Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein, to name just two examples, described the American landscape in female erotic terms. More starkly sexual in the women writers' cases than in those of men, metaphors for the American landscape seem to be, at least literarily, inescapably feminine and especially domestic. It is little wonder then, that in the tumult of the shock of urban life in antebellum America, rural America was invoked to create a cult of domesticity in order to recapture the lost and essentially feminine home of nature and the wilderness.

However, before we examine this cult of domesticity and its reflection in writings by women, we should look to literary manifestations of the reality of woman's domestic life in what was, in 1820, the newly romanticized wilderness. As Dawn Lander has pointed out, American women writers, in describing their experience in the wilderness, the farmlands, and the frontier, have passionately demonstrated their love of the outdoors, of the land, their sympathy with the Indian, and their desire to escape domestic stereotypes in order to test their strength in the struggle with the land. Quoting from Caroline Kirkland's *New Home—Who'll Follow?* (1839), Lander shows us "a heroine who believed 'that people, nay, women alone, can live in a wilderness . . .,' a heroine who, in flight, searched for 'her "forest sanctuary;"—Qu. What was she flying from? . . .'"<sup>10</sup> Apparently she, like many of the women on the frontier, was flying from the Emersonian prejudice that "women are . . . the civilizers of mankind," that ". . . there is usually no employment or career which they will not with their own applause and that of society quit for a suitable marriage."<sup>11</sup> A suitable marriage being of course, for Emerson, stopping at home in New England. How different from the findings of Sarah Lippincott in 1837:

The women of Greeley (Colorado) seem to me to have spirit and cheerfulness. Yet I felt . . . they must be discontented, unhappy, rebellious; and I tried to win from them the sorrowful secret. I gave them to understand that I was a friend to the sex, ready at any time, on the shortest notice, to lift up my voice against the wrongs and disabilities of women; that I deeply felt for wives and daughters whom tyrant man had dragged away from choice Gospel and shopping privileges. But the perverse creatures actually declared that they were never so happy and so healthy as they are here,

right on the edge of the great American desert. . . .<sup>12</sup>

Eleven years later, a man, Francis Parkman, looked at women on the Oregon Trail and concluded in favor of the stereotype that "The women were divided between regrets for the homes they had left and fear of the deserts and savages before them."<sup>13</sup> Not only the women interviewed by Lippincott, but others, like Eliza Farnham, writing in 1846, contradict this male stereotype of the uprooted woman mourning her lost domesticity, racist, and terrified of adventure. Farnham described a prairie woman, left alone, "protected, if danger came, only by the dog." When the Indians did come, "she knew they were not enemies, and felt secure in her very helplessness. They had not much lived among the whites, and it requires some teaching to induce the savage to fall on a helpless person who is not his foe."<sup>14</sup> This is civilising woman at her best—not a helpless, fainting, domestic doll, but a woman in tune with her surroundings, the wilderness, the savage, all seen as extensions of, and in harmony with, her homestead.

The true definition of home for the American woman has been always a basically desirable construct, linked irrevocably with the outside world rather than as the separate sphere of stereotype according to men like Emerson, Parkman, or James Fenimore Cooper, who wrote: "It is seldom that [woman's] wishes cross the limits of the domestic circle which to her is earth itself."<sup>15</sup> This is exactly the core of the thinking by which nineteenth century man made woman an historical and social replacement for nature as "the sole repository of goodness and ethicality."<sup>16</sup> In her idealized, fantasy-like, artificially restricted role as domestic earth-mother, the newly installed homebody of the 1820s and 30s served as absolution for the male's guilt at his materialistic, competitive, dog-eat-dog behavior in the frantic city. To create urban America seemed to call for a suspension of civilized virtues and to require restriction of woman to the domestic sphere with the purpose of having her serve as a reminder of the original values of the founding fathers and early settlers on the land. Ignoring both the reality of woman's life in that earlier time and the inherent contradiction in making an hermetic city home substitute for rural American and its values, man attempted to appease his violated conscience.

Women, however, thought of home, not as refuge, but as model; as the repository of basic human values which needed to be expanded into society at large in "a reformation of America into a society at last responsive to truly human needs, a fulfillment of the original settlers' dreams."<sup>17</sup> Women did not see themselves in their homes as symbols of harmony and providers of ever-ready comfort; they did not see their help to build the new cities as the cessation of all productive contributions to society, but actively wished to extend their domesticity into the world, humanizing it. In contrast to the ladies' magazine images of woman as "slender, graceful vine," twining itself around the male "rugged lofty pine,"<sup>18</sup> Nina Baym finds that the new "cult of domesticity"<sup>19</sup> pervading the writing of women themselves in the mid-nineteenth century "is not equivalent to a later generation's idea of such a cult, as a simple injunction for woman willingly to turn the key on her own prison. . . . [Instead] it assumes that men as well as women find greatest happiness and fulfillment in domestic relations, by which are meant not

simply spouse and parent, but the whole network of human attachments based on love, support, and mutual responsibility. . . . The domestic ideal meant not that woman was to be sequestered from the world in her place at home but that everybody was to be placed in the home, and hence home and the world would become one."<sup>20</sup> Thus the domestic stereotype, like all stereotypes, is not borne out by reality.

One of the most dramatic examples of how women's concept of domesticity differed radically from male stereotypes of the home is in the plans for utopian communities in the nineteenth century, notably those drawn up by Marie Stevens Howland and Alice Constance Austin. Plans varied, with from four to twenty-four kitchenless houses to be set up around a central kitchen and laundry building which would be used in common. Rational plans for efficient collective domestic work were not meant as any rebellion against the home; rather they were a recognition of the sheer brutality of the individual housewife's job, her isolation, and the waste of energy in individual repetition of tasks that could be shared. In addition, because women saw ideal domesticity as the reciprocity of members of the family, and the family as a unit of humanized social intercourse, the kitchenless house community reinforced and encouraged this ideal. Human perversity being what it is, the mythical stereotype survived and the utopian ideal never became actual reality. My point is that the literature by women until the end of the nineteenth century does not perpetuate the myth but reflects a vacuum left by unrecorded realistic domestic detail and unrealized idealistic domestic dream. These utopian communities illustrate the concept of domesticity which lay at the heart of women's thinking and which is the shadow box background of their writing: "the model community . . . a world in miniature, a concept which at once domesticated political economy and politicized domestic economy."<sup>21</sup>

The concept of the kitchenless house and the extended family type of community in which it would exist is not the only way in which "home" has undergone transformations insofar as myths and stereotypes are concerned while retaining its essential quality—not the quality of pastoral refuge with which many American male writers have endowed it, but the quality of fertility women have always seen in it for the building of an enduring humanity. The campaign for communities of kitchenless houses in the nineteenth century was not a campaign against domesticity, but one emphatically for woman's dream of a domestic world, that is, for a world bound by harmonious ties among men, women, and children. The cult of domesticity was not domestic idyll for antebellum American women but a way of being in the world. However, as Baym points out, "the redemptive possibilities of enlightened domesticity"<sup>22</sup> came to an end along with the Civil War. From the 1870s on, home became "a retreat, a restraint, and a constraint, as it had not appeared to be earlier."<sup>23</sup> The response to this has been the fact that in the twentieth century, escape from the horrors of home has been one of the dominant themes of the canon of American literature. Sinclair Lewis in *Main Street*, Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio*, Philip Wylie in *Generation of Vipers*, and the entire Lost Generation, to give only a few examples, all made it a point to leave, if not to repudiate, home.

The implications of the differing views of the masculine stereotype and the feminine expression of the home in nineteenth century American women's writing reflect the unique double bind of the American woman.<sup>24</sup> Maren Lockwood Carden has shown that "the feminine virtues associated with [woman's] traditional role—concern for others, adaptability, dependence, unassertiveness, a capacity to express her feelings, gentleness, supportiveness, and nurturance," are different from "the values of the larger American society... to be active, aggressive, individualistic, independent, unemotional, objective, competitive, and achievement oriented. The sets of traits associated with being 'feminine' and those associated with being 'American' are each internally consistent. But, when a woman tries to combine them, she finds them to be contradictory."<sup>25</sup> This double bind, experienced by the modern American woman as impossible of reconciliation, was expressed in the feminine novel between 1820 and 1870 as soluble because each aspect of the bind was experienced in isolation from the other. Each set of traits involved in the bind being "internally consistent" there was not the soul-tearing conflict of the contemporary fictional heroine. Rather, in the basic plot used by most nineteenth century American woman writers, influenced by the English woman Maria Edgeworth, the heroine, feminine to her fingertips, falls from her fortunate situation through the mismanagement or carelessness of the man she had learned she had, as a woman, to depend upon. Whereupon the intrepid heroine, exerting her Americanness to the fullest, manages, by her own efforts, heroic and untiring, to provide economic support to her family and an unimpeachable example of heroism in adversity to her community. She is rewarded with the acquisition or restoration of an ideal domestic situation, and drops the American aspect of her personality to assume once again the "feminine." This basic pattern of "trials and triumph" is followed whether the young lady is an orphan of no means who rises in the world, or an heiress unexpectedly fallen upon hard times.

Despite the tone of any résumé of these novels by women like E. D. E. N. Southworth, Caroline Lee Hentz, Susan Warner (whose first novel, *The Wide, Wide World*, published in 1851 out of great financial need on the part of the author, is "alleged by some historians to have initiated the very concept of the best seller")<sup>26</sup> or her sister Anna, Maria Cummins, Caroline Chesebro' or the many others of what Hawthorne called that "d—d mob of scribbling women,"<sup>27</sup> the novels themselves are quite respectable pieces of writing. They have long suffered from obscurity because of the choice of their authors to be functional, that is, to help women live their lives, rather than to be what is called artistic—a state requiring isolation and a measure of economic solvency, neither of which the women who wrote these best-selling novels disposed of. They lived as their heroines did, as feminine women exercising the American virtue of self-reliance when circumstances demanded. They overwhelmingly rejected the reigning stereotypes of the eighteenth century literary portrayal of their sex as one of sentimental fools and sexual victims as well as the nineteenth century social view of them as domestic robots. They never lost view of the femininity which they saw as a state of humanistic and pious domesticity based on reciprocity with men, a state to which they unfailingly returned their heroines before the last page.

Nineteenth century women novelists were not by any means the original or exclusive guardians of these feminine ideals. They were, consciously or unconsciously, continuing a feminine tradition of opting for home as a complex network of human relationships freed from its apparent contradiction with home as a mere physical reality—which contradiction had been adroitly resolved by the first American woman poet, Anne Bradstreet (1612?-1672). To see Bradstreet's work represented at the beginning of one of the three 1848 volumes of *The Female Poets of America* (the only one of the three to be edited by a woman, Caroline May), and to compare it with that of the seventy-nine other women poets represented, is to see the literary lie given to the so-called social truth that "emphasis upon woman's essential domesticity completed the transfer of the pastoral legend to the urban environment. The insistence that woman's sphere be limited to the home became a prevailing dogma of nineteenth-century faith."<sup>28</sup> The Bradstreet selection is from her "Contemplations," said to be her most accomplished poem. Its theme is remarkably similar to that of Shelley's "Ozymandias" which was to appear one hundred years later. The poem, like all of Bradstreet's work, is rooted in that basic feminine virtue, piety, and calls upon nature and the uncertain and unsatisfying world to aid her contemplations, which conclude:

O Time! the fatal wrack of mortal things,  
That draws oblivion's curtain over kings,  
Their sumptuous monuments, men know them not,  
Their names without a record are forgot,  
Their parts, their ports, their pomp's all laid i' th' dust,  
Nor wit, nor gold, nor buildings 'scape Time's rust;  
But he whose name is graved in the white stone,  
Shall last and shine, when all of these are gone.<sup>29</sup>

This theme of placing one's hopes in a heavenly home is repeated in "Some Verses Upon the Burning of our House July 10th, 1666." In this poem Bradstreet's feminine eye seems to be seeing the family home for the first time now that it is gone, and she sees those parts which startle housewifely memory most, but quickly leaves any attachment to this earthly home in favor of praising her eternal one. No attachment to domesticity is evident. The other poems by Anne Bradstreet which could be called "domestic" dwell, not on the home itself, but on the social relationships which create the true "home" for woman: poems to a husband celebrating their enduring and close relationship, "To My Dear and Loving Husband"; or to her children upon their leaving home, "In Reference to Her Children," or to a grandchild who has died leaving the family bereft. In addition, she apostrophises her book, spirited to England and published by a kinsman, as a child sent out into the world by its mother.

Anne Bradstreet's feminine concern with members of her family rather than with a socially-conceived domestic ideology is later reflected in the same 1848 anthology of women poets in a whimsical poem of 1845 by Anna Peyre Dinnies called, "To My Husband's First Gray Hair." But, of the other poems in this book of 559 pages, only

seven are what one might call “domestic,” and they are nostalgia poems for the childhood home, the old homestead, or expression of the longing for a brother or a daughter to return home. Only one differs dramatically from the others and concerns itself with a truly domestic theme—it is a remarkable paean to a room of one’s own called “My Closet” by Anna Maria Wells, published in 1831. The worm in the apple, however, is that this is a childhood room, and we hear the poet lament at the end of her poem: “Ah! sad to my young heart the day, /When, lingering still with fond delay, /I wept, and turn’d me thence away, /Alas! for ever.”<sup>30</sup> The poems in this anthology thus contrast sharply with the ladies’ magazine verse as represented in the epigraph to this paper, and with historical assessments of women’s concerns at the time. It is hard, therefore, for the modern reader to determine the true domestic atmosphere of any of these women’s lives or homes, for in women’s poetry as represented in the May anthology, domestic reality is virtually absent, and in the fiction of the period, “in accordance with the needs of plot, home life is presented, overwhelmingly, as unhappy. There are very few intact families in this literature, and those that are intact are unstable or locked into routines of misery.”<sup>31</sup> The mirror of literature remains empty of any reflection of domesticity comparable to the rich reflections we find, for instance, in the English or French novel.

One often overlooked reason for this apparent refusal of women to mirror their domesticity in their writing may be the sheer brutality of housekeeping before the Industrial Revolution and the economic insecurity which followed hard upon it. Women wished fervently to escape to a more humanly bearable physical existence, and, not at all desirous of describing the dubious joys of drawing water from wells, cooking on uncertain stoves for large numbers of people daily, sewing until late at night, or the heavy physical strain of childbearing and caring for the ever-present sick person, they turned to other thoughts and other themes. Indeed, the reflection of women’s domestic lives in literary anecdote and in literature itself is often quite different. Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, was a hardworking, even exhausted, dutiful wife and mother. Suddenly, however, at the end of the first decade of her marriage, during which she had been caring for both children and mother-in-law, her right side became totally paralyzed. She went to one of the many spas for women specializing in these cases, which were myriad, and as a “shattered broken invalid, just able to creep along by great care,” began one year of treatment and a life she enjoyed, she wrote in one letter, as she had not enjoyed life for years. Receiving a number of concessions from her husband, Harriet returned to the family’s new home in Maine, and began working on her masterpiece. There was no recurrence of her affliction, and she lived a healthy and literarily prolific life to the age of eighty-five.<sup>32</sup> Ellen Moers, in *Literary Women*, shows, however, that Mrs. Stowe’s life was not that of the leisured spa convalescent once she returned home. In a letter of 1850, reproduced by Moers, Harriet Beecher Stowe sounds like any harried, exhausted, ever-in-demand housewife and mother of seven. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* appeared within a year of this letter.<sup>33</sup> These two anecdotes together help us perhaps more than anything to understand why there are so few

reflections in their writing of the domesticity in which women were immersed, but never rejected, never blamed, and never escaped. There is no evidence that the women who wrote the volumes of feminine literature of the nineteenth century were anything but devoted and excellent housewives—their letters and diaries show their unrelenting household duties seen to before their “scribbling.” Despite this reality, however, the relationship between the housewifely obligations of women and their literary aspirations were lampooned in such cartoons as that depicting a “reading harness, boon to housewives,” reproduced here.<sup>34</sup> Cartoons or painting depicting a ridiculous housewife neglecting her home and family to read or write abounded in the nineteenth century, and were not, of course, drawn by women. What is remarkable about this multi-faceted picture, is that the women who wrote during this period were fully responsible for the domesticity their age demanded of them, but, while fulfilling it without the least sense of revolt, did not celebrate it in their writing.



House and Woman

In a modern cartoon by James Thurber, also reproduced here,<sup>35</sup> one sees perhaps, with the hindsight wrought by psychology's illumination of our most intimate relationships, the clue to both the nineteenth century male attack on and the female non-celebration of the home-woman nexus. Anne Sexton offered the same clue in a 1961 poem entitled “Housewife”:

Some women marry houses.  
It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,  
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements,  
The walls are permanent and pink.  
See how she sits on her knees all day,  
faithfully washing herself down.  
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah  
into their fleshy mothers.  
A woman *is* her mother,  
That's the main thing.<sup>36</sup>

Although their subject is identical, Sexton's feminine viewpoint differs sharply from Thurber's masculine attitude. This double-image view of the woman-house identification, seen by Sexton as a situation in which "men enter by force drawn back like Jonah into their fleshy mothers," is dramatized by Thurber, not as entry "by force," but as the hesitation of a Milquetoast; but both make woman-house identity a physically or psychologically violent one. The feminine heritage and inner understanding of the human, organic chain of being spin the web which becomes the walls of a home—cocoon-like for the woman but of devouring threat for the man. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the background and implications of this dual reaction for the silence about domesticity in women's literature in America, and the misunderstanding or attack on it in men's, but that the empty mirror may be of psychological rather than social or even literary origin is a distinct possibility.

The dual problem in the question of woman-home identity is perhaps unresolvable. First, there is the implication of Thurber's cartoon for human relationships; that is, that for all human beings, mother, being the first connection with the world for the helpless, pre-verbal infant, retains forever the omnipotent threat of loss of security and gratification that comes to be the threatening aspect of "woman-home" for the adult.<sup>37</sup> Second, there is the double bind of the woman who acts as housewife-gratifier, server-nurturer, and then is vilified for "devouring" her family when she plays her role to perfection. Thurber and Sexton use the cutting edge of non-verbal terror to depict this dual threat of woman-house identity. The women poetry and fiction writers before the twentieth century did not express this cutting edge. They expressed instead their passionate desire for life in the midst of an existence which was restricted at every turn by the vicissitudes of social mores, housewifely burdens, unreliable men, and the walls of their houses themselves.<sup>38</sup> In the turmoil of the materialistic society they unwillingly found themselves in, they created an ideal of a civilized, domestic world in which woman would act in the world at large as she did in her home sphere, that is, as a positive, struggling, pious, and ultimately successful human being. She had to overcome trials of every sort, but she triumphed on her own with the help of God, and in the long run achieved and won more than the worldly and tyrannical non-domestic people in her life. But the fact remains that she does not reflect in her literature the image of home that we have come to regard as the American dream. The home she reflects is nothing more than a working hypothesis, one which no woman would ever freeze into immortality.

Women's writing, then, concentrates on the adventures, the activities, the trials and the triumphs of women trying to be worthy women within a subliminally perceived context of home. The reality of the home for women is in the relationships occurring within its walls; for men, it seems that the woman-matriarch-home identification dehumanizes the home and makes of it a sort of eerie stage in which the very walls have the power to threaten or comfort, unrelated to the people within those walls. In E. D. E. N. Southworth's novel, *The Curse of Clifton*, for example, there is a typical plot embroilment in which the devoted wife is accused by her husband, on the basis of a

forged letter, of infidelity. Unbelieving despite Catherine's unimpeachable character, behavior, and vehement protestations of innocence, Archer Clifton leaves the family home, not to return until the last page. Catherine's wild grief at his abandonment of her at first manifests itself in a like desire to run away forever.

But simultaneously with this suggestion, arose the instinct of the wife, and the inspiration of the Christian, teaching her that scorned and outraged as she had been, her only post of duty as of *hope*, was her husband's home. Yes, amid all the gloom and terror, she caught this one glimpse of Heaven. Amid all the clash and clang of passion and despair, she heard this voice of God.<sup>39</sup>

Catherine's piety and sense of duty seemingly urge her to remain faithful to her new role of an abandoned wife who, ironically, manages the home and estate successfully on her own; yet Southworth reminds us that Catherine does not forget that this is her husband's house, not her own. Not only does this reminder indicate the actual economic state of a homeless wife (there is no doubt that Catherine is held at White Cliffs not only by duty but by economic necessity), but it also indicates the final realization that all women must accept: that the home which they create and symbolize is not, in fact, theirs. This realization and its acceptance dovetail with the piety on which these women based their entire world-view: from Anne Bradstreet through Catherine Clifton, the non-personal home, the realization that not the earthly home but the "house on high erect/Fram'd by that mighty Architect,/with glory richly furnished,/Stands permanent tho' this bee fled,"<sup>40</sup> is the mainstay of their domestic lives. Although told that home equals her identity, woman knows home is not hers. Far from making this the grounds for a rejection of home, woman has used it to see home as an operation of human beings rather than as an institution, as ephemeral and paradoxically satisfying in its very ephemerality.

In closing, we should look at one of the most interesting footnotes to an examination of domesticity in the literature of the nineteenth century—the ubiquitous etiquette books. One of the best known was *Miss Leslie's Behavior Book*, published in Philadelphia in 1859. Eliza Leslie only wrote one novel, but is remembered for her highly successful cookbooks and her etiquette book. That etiquette books were not only popular but a vital necessity for women indicates of course the pre-eminent role of behavior and human relations in the structure of their world. But Miss Leslie offers even more; in two chapters entitled, "Conduct to Literary Women," and "Suggestions to Inexperienced Authors," she allows us a glimpse into the relations between home and literature in women's lives. "Rejoice," she urges, "when a little girl shows a fondness for reading, and by all means encourage it." And when the little girl grows into a woman and writes novels, "Trust her, and believe that she *has* painted from life." And then, "when in company with literary women, make no allusions to 'learned ladies,' or 'blue stockings,' or express surprise that they should have any knowledge of housewifery, or needle-work, or dress; or that they are able to talk on 'common things.' It is rude and

foolish, and shows that you really know nothing about them, either as a class or as individuals. . . . A large number of literary females are excellent needle-women, and good housewives; and there is no reason why they should not be."<sup>41</sup> As Eliza Leslie so astutely realized, women were, and still are, basically housewives, no matter what else they may be. This is a fact to them, and it has nothing to do with a particular place (a home); they do not find it necessary to either defend or celebrate such a fact. Nature, one's relations with God and with other people, and the cultivation of one's mind and perfecting of one's heart are all of greater importance. One must all too often forget the domestic setting in order to write, as Harriet Beecher Stowe tells us in one of her letters: "I have taught an hour a day in our school, and I have read two hours each evening to the children. . . . yet I am constantly pursued and haunted by the idea that I don't do anything. Since I began this note I have been called off at least a dozen times; once for the fish-man, to buy a cod-fish; once to see a man who had brought me some barrels of apples; once to see a book-man; then to Mrs. Upham, to see about a drawing I promised to make for her; then to nurse the baby; then into the kitchen to make a chowder for dinner; and now I am at it again, for nothing but deadly determination enables me ever to write; it is rowing against wind and tide. . . ."<sup>42</sup>

The indolent Marjorie Daw, product of male imagination, pampered and languishing in a hammock reading a novel, reflects nothing of the domestic reality of the women who wrote novels or poetry. And the novels and poetry they wrote do not reflect their domestic reality either, for it was not until more than a hundred years after what Fred Lewis Pattee called "the feminine fifties"<sup>43</sup> that the reality of women's domestic home life emerged in fiction or poetry. Ironically, it was only when women were no longer exclusively tied to the home that they began to write about it honestly, unsentimentally, and freely. Perhaps in an age when domesticity was the entire circumference of a woman's life there was no felt need to record it; now, as this domesticity threatens to disappear, women are recording it with the enthusiasm and exactitude of a Margaret Mead faced with a disappearing tribal lifestyle. The mirror of literary reflection of domesticity, empty for so long, only today rewards the persistent Alice with a world unsung by the passionate women writers "scribbling" by the light of nineteenth century embers.

## NOTES

1. Quoted in Barbara Berg, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism: The Woman and the City, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 60.
2. Betty Friedan painstakingly traces the modern counterpart to this portrayal of women at home by women's magazines in the second chapter of *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1963), entitled "The Happy Housewife Heroine." The image of the serene, content, frivolous, untroubled, romanticized housewife of the 1950s is not different from that reflected in the women's magazine image of the 1850s. Both were a long way from reality.
3. Quoted in Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), p. 126.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

5. Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 30.
6. A somewhat later example of these gift books is *Golden Thoughts on Mother, Home, and Heaven from Poetic and Prose Literature of all ages and all lands*, with an introduction by Rev. Theo. L. Cuyler, D.D. (New York: E.B. Treat, 1878-1882). A hefty tome of 454 pages of entries taken almost exclusively from writings by men, it reflects an abstract and sentimentalized image of the three subjects.
7. Berg, pp. 65-66.
8. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 4.
9. Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), p. 255.
10. Quoted in Dawn Lander, "Women and the Wilderness: Tabus in American Literature," *University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies*, II, iii, 62-83.
11. Quoted in Lander, p. 67.
12. Ibid., p. 64.
13. Ibid., p. 65.
14. Ibid., p. 76.
15. Berg, p. 68.
16. Ibid.
17. Baym, pp. 48-49.
18. From *The Ladies' Garland of 1837*, quoted in Berg, p. 71.
19. For the explanation of the role of this idea in the overall view of woman at the time, I am grateful to Jean Tucker for an outline of Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," *American Quarterly*, Summer, 1966.
20. Baym, p. 27.
21. Dolores Hayden, "Two Utopian Feminists and Their Campaigns for Kitchenless Houses," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* IV, ii (Winter 1978), 275.
22. Baym, p. 50.
23. Ibid.
24. R.D. Laing, in *Self and Others* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1961), has defined double bind as a situation in which "the 'victim' is caught in a tangle of paradoxical injunctions, or of attributions having the force of injunctions, in which he cannot do the right thing." (p. 144) Suzanne Juhasz, in *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), devotes an entire chapter to "The Double Bind of the Woman Poet."
25. Maren Lockwood Carden, *The New Feminist Movement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1974), p. 23.
26. Baym, p. 140. Opinions differ on just which book was the first American best-seller. Wendy Martin, in "Seduced and Abandoned in the New World: The Image of Woman in American Fiction," in *Woman in Sexist Society* edited by Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: New American Library, 1971), claims Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794) was the first.
27. Quoted by Fred Lewis Pattee in *The Feminine Fifties* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1940), p. 110.
28. Berg, p. 67.
29. Caroline May, ed., *The American Female Poets (with Biographical and Critical Notices)*. (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1859), p. 21.
30. Ibid., p. 102.
31. Baym, p. 27.
32. Berg, pp. 118-119.

33. Moers, pp. 3-4.
34. From Van Wyck Brooks and Otto Bettman, *Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America* (New York: Paddington Press Ltd., 1956), p. 174.
35. From James Thurber, *The Thurber Carnival* (New York: The Modern Library, 1957), p. 348.
36. From Florence Howe and Ellen Bass, eds., *No More Masks!* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday Anchor Books, 1973), p. 188.
37. For a full discussion of this see Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).
38. For the first chilling protest against these walls themselves, see Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," first published in 1892 and reprinted by The Feminist Press, Old Westbury, New York.
39. Mrs. Emma D.E.N. Southworth, *The Curse of Clifton* (Reprinted from the edition of 1886, Philadelphia, by AMS Press, Inc., 1970), p. 396.
40. Anne Bradstreet, "Upon the burning of our house, July 10th, 1666," in *Poems of Anne Bradstreet* ed. Robert Hutchinson (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), pp. 54-56.
41. Miss Leslie, *Miss Leslie's Behaviour Book: A Guide and Manual for Ladies* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson and Brothers, 1859), pp. 257, 259, 262, 294.
42. Quoted by Moers, pp. 3-4.
43. Pattee as noted above.

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## THE EMPTY MIRROR : THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LITERATURE AND DOMESTICITY IN WRITINGS BY AMERICAN WOMEN

Catherine Broderick

Stereotyped images of the American women as domestic were perpetuated in the nineteenth century by ladies' magazine fiction, sentimental gift books, and popular novels. The social and economic needs of the period after 1820 restricted women to a very narrow life at home, but the reality of this life was nowhere reflected in literature. The "cult of domesticity," closely linked with the "cult of true womanhood," were idealized, fantasy-like, artificial sets of ideas far from the rather difficult lives most women lived, whether in the wilderness or the city, and yet, the true definition of the home for the American woman has always been a basically desirable construct linked irrevocably with the outside world rather than as the separate sphere of stereotype. Women found the home to be neither heaven nor hell, but something in between, a real world of human beings. The domesticity which they lived, however, was not that which they recounted in their writings; rather, in their literature there is a central moral choice made, always in favor of the home, by a heroine faced with complex difficulties not of her own making. Women's writing in America before the twentieth century concentrates on the adventures, the activities, the trials, and the triumphs of women trying to be worthy women within a subliminally, not overtly, perceived context of home. This is perhaps partly because the human relationships within it defined home for many women, and they concentrated on these; or perhaps because the burden of household duties was so great that women did not wish to continue them in writing; or perhaps because of the violent conflict inherent in the psychological origin of the identification of woman with house; or perhaps because women found domesticity so bound up with their total identity that there was no need to reinforce it by reflecting it in literature. The etiquette books of the time, for example, show that the literary women themselves were also accomplished housekeepers, but that there was no essential relation between the two areas of activity. Women tended to treat their writing much as men treated their work, as something outside the (in women's case, psychological) confines of home. Women did not refuse or rebel against the home in America; they simply found no reason to either excoriate it or celebrate it in literature. The mirror of literature in America has remained empty of reflections of domesticity until well into the twentieth century.