

# WOMEN IN LITERATURE

Life Stages Through Stories, Poems, and Plays





**WOMEN  
IN LITERATURE**

**Life Stages Through  
Stories, Poems, and Plays**

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# PREFACE

Throughout the ages literature by and about women has contributed significantly to the development of the genres of fiction, poetry, and drama. Yet, a student once remarking on my collection of women's literature responded, "So many books . . . and nothing to read." Paradoxically, this anthology responds to that complaint, while it denies its validity: great literature is not dull, especially when it is not presented as simply a list of famous names and titles to be mastered as an academic exercise. Certain archetypal themes and images that transcend all times and all cultures are discernible in the most abstruse as well as the most accessible works of art.

The genesis of this collection is the premise that the desire to read literature is rooted in the desire to know oneself—the crucial parts of oneself strengthened by the central experiences of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, and death. To ignore the full range of these life stages is to forget that women and men are composites of their pasts, presents, and futures.

Thus, a unique feature of this text is its organization according to life stages, a popular topic in both academic and general readership. A related feature is that it deals with childhood and adolescence, areas often ignored by other texts that deal largely with adult experiences. Discussing women's literature from the perspective of aging allows us to say something new about old familiar stories, and to provide a natural way of introducing unfamiliar works by less well-known women authors. An important quality of this anthology is its connectedness; seemingly disparate works are drawn together in a coherent framework less arbitrary than, for example, chronological organization or arrangement by genre or nationality alone.

Class-tested in manuscript form, the book contains 31 short stories, 49 poems, 2 novel excerpts, and 4 plays chronicling each stage of women's lives, with sections on childhood, adolescence, adulthood (work, family, society), old age, and death. There are works from many time periods and cultures, with representative literature from women writing about alternative life styles.

The interrelationships and diversities among the works are discussed in the introductions to each life stage and each section of fiction, poetry, and drama. Additional apparatus includes discussion questions at the end of each section, a selected bibliography at the end of the book, and an index of authors and titles. Further, each individual story is preceded by a brief comment to stimulate interest, and is followed by a series of questions "For Fur-

ther Exploration" (referring to at least one other work on a similar theme). The questions are intended to suggest further connections among the works, and can be used by the instructor for discussion, or by the student for essay topics.

In addition to women-in-literature courses, courses for which this text might be helpful are women's studies, sociology, or psychology, as well as special topics such as adolescence, gerontology, or death studies. Although the text was designed for a college audience, it is also appropriate for use on the high-school level because of the many selections on different levels from which to choose, and the strong apparatus for student help.

My impulse in creating this collection was to stimulate readers and to let them know that literature by and about women exists and is worth reading not only for its literary value, but also for its particular insights into women's lives. During speaking engagements, I have been constantly surprised to learn how few women authors audiences can name, and yet how eager both men and women are to discover literature written by and about women in various life stages.

This anthology asserts that women everywhere have been and will continue writing about subjects of universal importance, deserving both popular and critical attention. The "For Further Exploration" references to extended reading possibilities promote the integral assumption of this book: we are all searching for great works that may be lying on library shelves but appear at first glance to have little to do with our own lives or our previous reading.

The impulse we all hope to engender is similar to Eudora Welty's experience revealed in "A Sweet Devouring," in which she describes weekly childhood trips to the library on her bicycle to find writers with multiple volumes to satisfy her voracious appetite for literature. The great joy when she discovers an author with many volumes and fascinating stories (Mark Twain) is the joy we hope that students will discover in reading Welty's own wide-ranging works, and the numerous works by the over 80 other authors represented here.

In preparing this anthology, I am especially grateful to a few individuals for their many contributions: Carl Van Buskirk, who edited each draft of the manuscript and provided unfailing support, and the following reviewers, who provided excellent assistance in determining selections and focus: Lisa Albrecht, University of Minnesota; Joseph Boles, Northern Arizona University; Gwen Constant, West Valley Community College; Ruth V. Elcan, Holyoke Community College; Joanne H. McCarthy, Tacoma Community College; Nan Nowik, Denison University; Jo Ann Pevoto, College of the Mainland; Susan Squier, State University of New York at Stony Brook; and Barbara F. Waxman, University of North Carolina—Wilmington.

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*Sandra Eagleton*



# CONTENTS

## PREFACE vii

## INTRODUCTION 1

## CHILDHOOD 11

### Fiction About Childhood 14

- Jessamyn West, *A Child's Day* 15  
Colette, *My Goddaughter* 22  
Toni Cade Bambara, *The Lesson* 26  
Helen Rose Hull, *The Fire* 32  
Grace Paley, *The Loudest Voice* 42

### Poetry About Childhood 48

- Constance Carrier, *Lisa* 49  
Anne Sexton, *Young* 50  
Tahereh Saffarzadeh, *Birthplace* 51  
Nikki Giovanni, *Nikki-Rosa* 52  
May Swenson, *The Centaur* 53  
George Eliot, *Brother and Sister* 55

## ADOLESCENCE 63

### Fiction About Adolescence 66

- Carson McCullers, *Wunderkind* 67  
Kristin Hunter, *Debut* 77  
Joyce Carol Oates, *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* 84  
Alice Adams, *By the Sea* 97

### Poetry About Adolescence 106

- Sophia de Mello Breyner, *The Young Girl and the Beach* 107  
Kimiko Hahn, *Dance Instructions for a Young Girl* 108  
Kathleen Fraser, *Poem in Which My Legs Are Accepted* 109

- Colleen J. McElroy, *Defining It for Vanessa* 111  
 Bettie Sellers, *In the Counselor's Waiting Room* 113  
 Pauli Murray, *Ruth* 113  
 Jean Tepperman, *Witch* 114

## **ADULTHOOD, Women and Work 117**

### **Fiction About Women and Work 120**

- Zora Neale Hurston, *Sweat* 121  
 Sarah Orne Jewett, *Tom's Husband* 130  
 Doris Lessing, *One Off the Short List* 140  
 Anzia Yezierska, *America and I* 158

### **Poetry About Women and Work 166**

- Alice Dunbar Nelson, *I Sit and Sew* 167  
 Anne Halley, *Housewife's Letter: To Mary* 168  
 Judy Grahn, *II. Ella, In a Square Apron, Along Highway 80* 170  
 P.K. Page, *Typists* 171  
 Olga Broumas, *Cinderella* 172  
 Carolyn Kizer, *from Pro Femina* 173  
 Marge Piercy, *To Be of Use* 175

### **Drama About Women and Work 177**

- Susan Glaspell, *Trifles* 178

## **ADULTHOOD, Women and Family 191**

### **Fiction About Women and Family 194**

- Alice Walker, *Everyday Use* 195  
 Tillie Olsen, *I Stand Here Ironing* 202  
 Shirley Faessler, *A Basket of Apples* 209  
 Gertrude Stein, *Miss Furr and Miss Skeene* 219  
 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Turned* 224

### **Poetry About Women and Family 232**

- Phyllis McGinley, *The 5:32* 233  
 Dorothy Parker, *Indian Summer* 233  
 Gwendolyn Brooks, *The Mother* 234  
 Sherley Williams, *Say Hello to John* 235  
 Sylvia Plath, *The Applicant* 236  
 Denise Levertov, *About Marriage* 238  
 Adrienne Rich, *Living in Sin* 240  
 Janice Mirikitani, *Breaking Tradition: For My Daughter* 241

### **Drama About Women and Family 243**

- Ursule Molinaro, *Breakfast Past Noon* 244

**ADULTHOOD, Women and Society 257**

**Fiction About Women and Society 260**

- Flannery O'Connor, *Good Country People* 261  
Louise Meriwether, *A Happening in Barbados* 276  
Virginia Woolf, *The New Dress* 283  
Margaret Atwood, *Rape Fantasies* 289  
Dinah Silveira de Queiroz, *Guidance* 296

**Poetry About Women and Society 301**

- Genny Lim, *Wonder Woman* 302  
Marge Piercy, *The Woman in the Ordinary* 304  
Audre Lorde, *The Woman Thing* 305  
Leonora Speyer, *The Ladder* 306  
Lucille Clifton, *The Thirty Eighth Year of My Life* 307  
Maya Angelou, *Woman Me* 309  
Marianne Moore, *Nevertheless* 310

**Drama About Women and Society 312**

- Alice Gerstenberg, *Overtones* 313

**OLD AGE 323**

**Fiction About Old Age 326**

- May Sarton, an excerpt from the novel *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* 327  
Shirley Jackson, *Island* 332  
Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Town Poor* 341  
Katherine Mansfield, *Miss Brill* 350  
Eudora Welty, *A Worn Path* 354

**Poetry About Old Age 361**

- Sandra Hochman, *Postscript* 362  
Ambapali, *Black and glossy as a bee. . .* 363  
Larin Paraske, *A Woman Soon Grows Old* 364  
Marya Fiamengo, *In Praise of Old Women* 365  
Paula Gunn Allen, *Grandmother* 367  
Margaret Walker Alexander, *Lineage* 368  
Sappho, *Here Are Fine Gifts, Children* 369

**Drama About Old Age 371**

- Catherine Hayes, *Act Two of Not Waving* 372

**DEATH 385**

**Fiction About Death 388**

- Mary Wilkins Freeman, *A Village Singer* 389  
Katherine Anne Porter, *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall* 399



Joyce Marshall, *So Many Have Died* 406  
Margaret Laurence, excerpt from *Stone Angel* 421  
Dorothy Richardson, *Death* 436

**Poetry About Death 439**

Shirley Kaufman, *Apples* 440  
Emily Dickinson, *Because I Could Not Stop for Death* 442  
Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Conscientious Objector* 443  
Jane Cooper, *In the House of the Dying* 444  
Honor Moore, from the play *Mourning Pictures* 445  
Ruth Whitman, *Castoff Skin* 446  
Christina Rossetti, from *Monna Innominata* 447

**WORKS CITED 450**

**BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES 452**

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 465**

**INDEXES 470**



# INTRODUCTION

## WOMEN IN LITERATURE

What roles have women played as authors and as characters in literature throughout the ages? What effect has literary criticism had on the reception of women writers in the past and present? Are the subjects or styles of women's writings in any sense different from writing by men?

To begin a study of stories, poems, and plays by and about women, it is necessary to explore these critical issues that arise again and again in discussions of women's literature. In considering these questions and analyzing the works that follow, we should keep in mind that literature is a reflection of life and, historically, literature has been written largely by men; also, literature has been written primarily about men. Perhaps even more important in the long run, literature has been analyzed by men. Literature by women has been less frequently published and less accepted by critics than has work by male writers.

To see the effects of the long history of predominantly male authors, male characters, and male critics, consider the comments made in 1852 by George Henry Lewes about "The Lady Novelists," reprinted in *Women's Liberation and Literature*:

Of all the departments of literature, Fiction is the one to which, by nature and by circumstance, women are best adapted. Exceptional women will of course be found competent to the highest success in other departments; but speaking generally, novels are their forte. The domestic experiences which form the bulk of woman's knowledge finds an appropriate form in novels; while the very nature of fiction calls for the predominance of Sentiment which we have already attributed to the feminine mind.

While Lewes was more generous in acknowledging women authors than were many nineteenth-century critics, his condescending tone and compartmentalizing of "women's themes" is highly offensive to most modern readers. Regrettably, even some recent literary criticism by men and women echoes Lewes' sentiments.

Further, female characters in literature have seldom been main characters, and when women have been central figures, they most often have been viewed in relation to men rather than as themselves. Almost every female character in literature is classified according to her biological, physical, or "female role" before any other: we find out immediately if she is married or

single, a mother or childless, attractive or unappealing. On the other hand, male characters might be stereotyped in restricted sex roles (the “macho” image or “studious type” are two examples), but they are not as often one-dimensional figures. Men are more often portrayed as complex individuals concerned with issues such as politics, professions, religion, ethics, art, or war.

As part of the differences in character descriptions, women frequently are cast into inferior roles revolving around men, and have stereotypical personality traits ascribed to them (emotionality, passivity, etc.) that are considered inferior. Both women characters and women authors are sex stereotyped. In fact, even in male characters, “feminine” qualities are considered inferior: emotion is presented as inferior to logic, passive to active, home to outside world.

These assertions about women’s roles throughout literature leave us with a discouragingly bleak view. No doubt one could argue that times have changed, that now more women are writing, are being published, are writing about women, are being criticized by female critics, and are being accepted into the mainstream of “good literature.” While some of these changes have occurred, almost all of the same issues about women’s acceptance in literature still exist, albeit to a lesser degree. The study of women in literature remains largely a separate field from the study of “mainstream” literature, with only a small number of “token” women authors known to general readers. This situation keeps the spotlight on a few literary “stars” while casting a shadow over less known women writers.

Recognizing the historically sexist bias in how women’s literature has been received, we must find ways to rise above and beyond these limitations. In studying works by women or men about women, we may tend to fall into the trap characterized by antifeminists as scholarly attention only to the “ravages of patriarchy” in literature. In truth, there is much more to say about women characters and authors than whether the portrayal or criticism of them is sexist. As Adrienne Rich aptly noted in her introduction to *Working It Out*, a study of creative achieving women, women’s commonality is not based solely on the fact of having been oppressed as a group. Instead, we must recognize other sources of commonality.

## LIFE STAGES

One common world women share is the life cycle itself. At each stage there are many dimensions of woman’s selfhood to consider, with both positive and negative ramifications to explore from childhood through adolescence, adulthood, old age, and death.

Literature by and about women reveals the differences between men and women’s life stage development and shows the similarities among women as described in literature throughout the ages. Just as there are recurrent issues related to the discussion of women’s literature, there are also a number of issues in life stage research that are directly related to the same subject. For example, what effect do childhood experiences and the impact of society have on a woman’s development from childhood to adulthood, and are there differences between men and women’s development? What qualities are women expected to have in each life stage? Are affiliation and caretaking primary characteristics or stereotypes of being a woman, and to what

extent are expectations for women based on their physical attributes and bodily changes throughout the life cycle? Do women develop autonomy as individuals, and do they transcend to new levels of enlightenment upon reaching maturity and old age? How do women deal with physical, mental, and emotional change, and with the ultimate transformation, death?

These and other issues will be discussed in connection with stories, poems, and plays about each life stage; however, it is helpful first to review the psychosocial underpinnings of the topic of life stages.

*Life stages, life cycle, life span, and life course* are terms often used synonymously. To describe stages within the life cycle, researchers use analogies such as "seasons," "passages," and life "maps." Life cycle psychologists began mainly with studies of men's lives, or with research that supposedly did not differentiate between the sexes—an approach challenged by later researchers. More recently, studies have been designed and conducted specifically about women.

Freud's studies of the psychological effects of childhood on later life, and Jung's extension of Freud's theories to include the impact of society on adult development paved the way for Erik Erikson's contribution of an eight-stage paradigm from infancy to old age. Daniel Levinson's *Seasons of a Man's Life* incorporates some of Erikson's model, and delineates four eras of about twenty years each: childhood and adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood.

In *Passages*, Gail Sheehy includes many of the same topics as Levinson, and both use case studies to answer the basic question "Is there life after youth?" But Sheehy challenges Erikson's idea of midlife "generativity" (other-directed energy) as a stage of life; she points out that for women, the altruistic, caretaking role occurs throughout life, rather than being reserved for late adulthood. Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* also asserts women's important role of affiliation, in contrast to men's individuation.

Penelope Washbourn's *Becoming Woman* builds on the concept of life crises that need to be negotiated in order to reach a higher stage. She bases her discussion of women's life crises on physical changes of a woman, such as menstruation, sex, pregnancy, and menopause. Like Gilligan, Washbourn emphasizes what makes women different from men, although Washbourn starts with the premise of biological identity.

The question of whether anatomy is destiny relates to Madonna Kolbenschlag's claim in *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Goodbye* that male models are inappropriate to describe women's lives. Applying life stage study to the realm of literature, Kolbenschlag argues that unlike men, women in literature do not move to a new level of insight. More often, in myths and other fiction, women remain static, go mad, or die.

The same controversy emerges in death stage research such as Robert Jay Lifton's comments on death encounters and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's important work on stages of death. While Kübler-Ross's stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—are reflected to a certain extent in literary accounts of women dying, the final stage (acceptance) is often not reached by women in fiction and drama. There is the same lack of transcendence into a new self noted in women's versus men's literature.

At the heart of the many controversies about female versus male life stages is the whole notion of change. Maurice Shroder in "The Novel as a Genre" indicates that a change in the main character is so often the major subject of fiction that it in fact can serve as the definition of a novel. But how many women are truly transformed in literature?

In literature, many examples about death show that women are seldom transformed to reach the final stage of acceptance—creating inner peace. Even in studies of real life, we have already noted Sheehy's claim that women do not have a separate stage that represents a change to nurturing and caretaking. Perhaps, as Jung suggested, the progress of the individual psyche parallels the development of a society; thus, women might not be reaching peace and acceptance individually because women as a group have not been able to do so in society. In contrast, we can hope with Penelope Washbourn that women can slough off old selves to make way for transformations.

## LITERATURE AND LIFE

In this anthology, literary works are brought together to represent each stage of a woman's life, from childhood to death. Instead of drawing conclusions about what happens in each life stage by recording real-life behavior, this study presents a creative record of women's behavior as it appears in stories, poems, and plays.

For simplicity and accessibility, the stories, poems, and plays are organized into five major stages—childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, and death. Because only literature intended to be read by adults is included, "children's literature" and "adolescent literature" are not represented here. Within the adulthood stage there are three sections—work, family, and society—which are thematic rather than sequential (that is, there is no implication that a woman first works, then has a family, then becomes a part of society).

In identifying the life stages and subcategories, there is a deliberate attempt to avoid defining a woman's life in terms of her physical and biological roles. While some researchers have been able to focus successfully on the crises in a woman's life directly related to her physical changes (menstruation, pregnancy, motherhood, etc.), there is more to a woman's life than being a biological "other," and too often the categorizing of women by what makes them different from men results in stereotyping.

We are our genes, but we are not only our genes. Women in literature and in life are not only married or single, childbearing or childless, menopausal or premenopausal (although topics such as these appear and are discussed throughout the life cycle literature); women are involved in politics, work, religion, art, and ethics, just as are multidimensional men in life and in literature.

### Childhood

Female children in literature are described as confronting a wide world of natural and material objects, people, and ideas. Common themes one might expect to see, such as dealing with parents and siblings, learning the often restrictive mores of society, and expanding communication with others do indeed appear. In addition, several motifs emerge in childhood which might at first seem surprising, such as the notions of coming to terms with death, having an adult woman friend, and enjoying a private place in nature.

Typical childhood topics having to do with living in a family group include learning to give and to share, developing a feeling of security, experiencing the exchange of love and the extreme domination of parents. However, much of the unconscious concern in childhood has to do with a child learning a sex role—the process of socialization that teaches girls to be more docile, less aggressive, than boys. Female children develop a desire to acquiesce and to please that stays with them much of their lives, culminating in the modern adult phenomenon of women trying to learn to express their anger, while men are trying to repress their aggression.

Young girls do not restrain potential aggression only because “boys are bigger,” but also because they learn to seek male approval in all areas. With less emphasis on competitive games and team sports for girls, women later find themselves more likely to compete with members of the same sex (for male attention in areas such as jobs, husbands, recognition) than to see women as members of the same team. In addition, from infancy, codes of proper behavior—such as not being unruly, boisterous—are reinforced by the wearing of restrictive clothing meant to be kept neat, clean, and pretty. This pristine image of the “ideal” girl in life is evident in much of the literature about women’s childhood stage, and is subtly satirized by several of the authors.

## Adolescence

Of course a girl does not wake up suddenly at thirteen as an adolescent; nor is the onset of menstruation always a sudden turning point in women’s lives. As a transition period between childhood and adulthood, adolescence is gradual and could be divided into many substages, according to each individual’s development.

In almost every work of literature or research about adolescence, several common characteristics of the female adolescent emerge. In addition to the extreme passivity noted in many studies of adolescents—the young woman waiting for some other person to give her an identity—there is an enormous preoccupation with physical appearance. Linked to the desire to please and attract young men, the desire for glamorous good looks is a predominant attribute of teenage girls. Often unfortunate victims of peer scorn are those young women who either do not like men or have an unconventional interest in intellectual pursuits or “nonfemale” hobbies.

Even in families expecting academic achievement for their female children, it is rare when it is not assumed that the young woman will also marry and have children. Further, in late childhood and early adolescence women begin to develop a dislike or fear of male-dominated areas such as science and math, pursuing instead “female” subjects that will eventually lead most of them to “women’s work” in adulthood—childrearing, domestic and clerical work, or teaching. The enculturation process teaches young women to be helpmates in the home or at work, or at best executive assistants or middle managers, but not top decision makers in life.

As some poems and stories about adolescence show, ideally this period could be the start of a woman’s best time of life. If young women could maintain the exuberance and questioning mentality of childhood, without succumbing to parental and societal pressures, they could perhaps achieve the personal autonomy most authors advocate. Some of the teenagers in litera-

ture show real promise, leading readers to wonder what external and internal forces have in store for each young woman as adulthood approaches.

## Adulthood

**Women and Work** The topic of women and work is discussed first in the adulthood stage, not because it is a woman's most important role, but because work considerations have had such a powerful influence on women's family lives and places in society. Issues of child care, division of labor in the home, self-image and status in society, even infidelity and divorce are influenced by the work situations in which women find themselves.

Many people have noted that an unfortunate byproduct of the women's movement is that the old unrealistic dream of all women finding total happiness in the home has been replaced with a new unrealistic dream of all women finding total fulfillment at work. At the same time that women are expected to be high achievers in paid positions, studies such as Matina Horner's on fear of success show that the feelings of inferiority women develop in childhood and adolescence are not easily cast off in adulthood.

Statistics on women working show that women do feel the pressure to succeed in a career, but that the majority of working women are also expected to perform a second job in the home. According to *The Sociology of Housework*, "housewives" spend about seventy-seven hours per week doing housework, with a working woman spending forty-five hours at the same tasks. Other research shows that modern men agree that they should do housework, but spend few hours a week at domestic chores. As hard as writers have struggled to kill the image of women working slavishly at home and work, and as much as each woman fights against it in her mind, the image of the Superwoman has not died, and the image of the Superman has yet to change character.

However, times have changed in terms of the number of women in the work force, and the impact is evident in every aspect of women's adult lives. Women now hold almost half of the jobs in the United States. Most, though, are engaged in "women's work," and a third of the women working have clerical jobs with steadily decreasing pay. And women continue to earn less money for the same jobs held by men. The "bottom line" is that women are paid less to do more, both at home and at work.

Fiction and poetry about women working supports the notion that hard work—at home and/or an outside place of employment—is the lot of women. As typists, waitresses, or business managers, women in the stories and poems do not find an easy road to success. Further, while women are working so hard and long, few are reaching top positions, a fact reflected in the paucity of high quality stories, poems, and plays about women executives. At the decision-making level, the number of women in management positions is increasing, but there are few women at the very top of major corporations.

The "old boy network" continues to act as a pernicious barrier for women, called the "glass ceiling" by the *Wall Street Journal*, and described in this collection by the "Cinderella" poem about women's token status in the workplace. Poems about women and work often show the frustration unappreciated women experience in paid and unpaid jobs. Narratives and

plays, on the other hand, more often show that women's work need not be considered inferior or trivial, as it often is in life.

**Women and Family** As Cinderella is the fairy tale model for women at work, Goldilocks is the model for women at home. With "affiliation" as her primary characteristic, Goldilocks is forever looking for the perfect family. However, the definition of "family" has changed so radically that if Goldilocks wandered into a household today she would have only an eleven percent chance of finding papa bear, mama bear, and two baby bears.

Although ninety percent of American youth expect to marry and want it to last, the Census Bureau predicts that almost half of today's marriages will end in divorce. The fairy tale of the "normal" family is challenged also by the two million unmarried couples living together, and the rapidly increasing number of homosexual family units.

As a result of these changes, there is a wide diversity of descriptions of family life in literature. Stories, poems, and plays show not only women living with husbands and children, but also single mothers, women living with women, alone, with men, or with parents. Stories and plays about mother-daughter relationships are of great interest and frequency—a virtually unexplored subject for literature until recently.

The major factor in changing the nature of family (and consequently, literature about women and family) has been women working. The fact that there is a high correlation between women's achievement at work and the divorce rate, however, is inaccurately attributed to the stereotype that "bad mothers go to work and break up the family"; instead, divorce rates have been affected by the new financial independence women have experienced as workers. Economic power enables women to escape from what otherwise might have been a permanent trap, and the realization of the equation "money equals power" in turn prods women to pursue careers with tenacity.

Numerous contemporary stories deal with divorced women or single women looking for life partners, bearing out the statistic that more than one-fifth of the heads of American households are single or divorced women. Some of these women would prefer to live in a conventional marriage, and some deliberately have chosen a solitary lifestyle. A controversial study indicating that a woman's chance of marrying after forty is smaller than her chance of being killed by a terrorist, while insulting in its implication that all women are looking for men to marry, is all too true for some women and many modern literary characters searching in vain for a permanent male partner.

Many women also feel victimized by the "biological clock" that forces them to decide about childbearing before they are forty. It is true, as is pointed out in *Sooner or Later: The Timing of Parenthood in Adult Lives*, that with the lengthening of the human life cycle has come the shortening of the time required for child raising. However, it is also true that women often have to decide between career advancement and having children, a choice men do not have to make. Poems and stories about motherhood or the decision not to be a mother raise issues about women juggling the many roles they now play in society.

**Women and Society** Women's roles in society incorporate many issues already mentioned, such as politics, religion, etc. But the primary questions to which most researchers return are "What is women's status in the social or-



der?" and "What is seen as a woman's purpose, or mission, or reason for being in society?"

About the question of status, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* answers that there are two kinds of inequality: temporary inequality (social rankings, such as bosses and workers, parents and children), and permanent inequality (by birth, such as minorities and women). "Superiors" or "dominants" give tasks to "inferiors" or "subordinates." In the power structure, helping others is the lesser task given to women. It is their contribution to society—their mission. Inspirational and satirical literature throughout the ages supports this concept; for example, in the nineteenth century Catharine Esther Beecher told the Christian Women of America that women's mission was to train ignorant people to obey the word of God, and Maria Weston Chapman exhorted women to end slavery by telling men that slavery is wrong (uncomfortably similar to women's current crusades for peace). The power structure here is clear; women embrace their secondary status even while denouncing slavery or war, by attempting to influence the real decision makers—men.

The controversy about women as helpers, the altruists of society, comes up many times in research and literature. Paradoxically, woman's best quality is also her worst quality, for kindness and caretaking often give way to passive acquiescence to the status quo. For example, it is still more likely for a woman to be active in religion (although still not in the number-one position) than to be active in politics. Unfortunately, in much of the literature about women, politics and other societal realms of interest often considered "male," such as sports and war, do indeed get short shrift. This continuation of the sex role messages of childhood and adolescence is evident in the popular phenomenon of cadres of women working for peace or against drunk driving. Only in these limited spheres are women's voices expected to rise above a whisper or a prayer.

## Old Age

In old age one would expect to see women "coming into their own," especially since they usually outlive men, and often are not confronted with men's shock of having to create a home life after retirement. For some women, old age is a peaceful, secure time, or a time for personal growth after years of giving to others. A large determinant of happiness or dissatisfaction in old age is the woman's life circumstance—physical health, financial security, living arrangement, degree of independence, and so forth.

Declining physical health is difficult for any woman or man to deal with at any age, but added to the burden is the societally enforced dictate that a woman should try not to lose her physical attractiveness as she ages. Journalist Ellen Goodman has written a clever diatribe against the "cult of mid-life beauty" that extends into a woman's old age: if we did not look like Raquel Welch or Jane Fonda at twenty, says Goodman, we cannot expect to look like them at forty or fifty. Yet women fight the onset of wrinkling and graying to a greater extent than do men growing old.

A further burden for older women is that they are the most economically disadvantaged segment of the population, which accounts for the dominant theme of money, or lack of it, in the stories and plays about aging women. "Genteel poverty" is the badge of elderly women, a phrase seldom