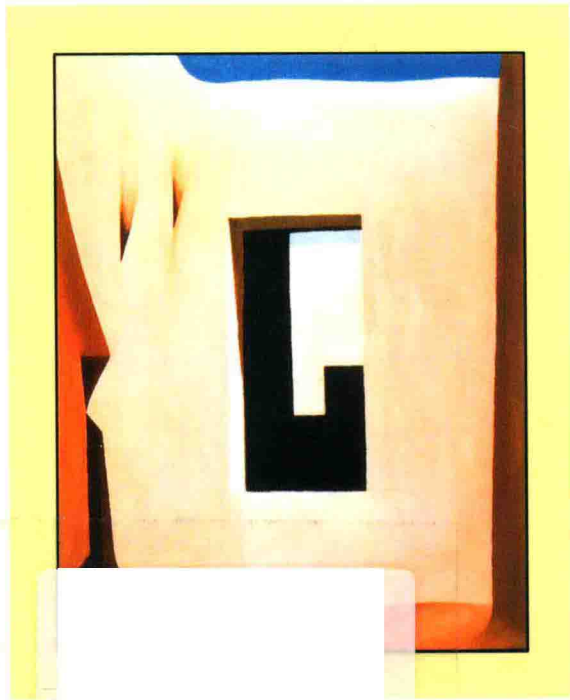


A CRITICAL GUIDE TO
TWENTIETH-
CENTURY
WOMEN
NOVELISTS



KATHLEEN WHEELER



A Critical Guide to Twentieth-century Women Novelists

Kathleen Wheeler

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Preface

This critical guide is an introduction to the rich, varied and astonishingly large body of twentieth-century fiction by women writing in English: an 'introduction' because – as will be clear from a reading both of the four-part chronological introductions to each new period and of the conclusion in part V – many, many additional novelists are mentioned, to direct the reader beyond the one hundred-plus author entries to a further range of fascinating writers. For the field of women novelists is too rich and abundant to be encompassed, even briefly, in one book, a matter which may come as little surprise to readers already familiar with this 'hidden' literature. While each individual author entry can be consulted for biographical, bibliographical and critical information and interpretation about individual writers, the *Guide* primarily functions as a whole to give the reader a clear sense of the development of the novel in English over the last one hundred years. An effort has been made to interrelate many of these writers to their predecessors, contemporaries and successors, in order better to understand the character of the major transformations of the novel form. Concepts such as realism, regionalism, modernism, post-war literature and neo-realism, the literature of exhaustion, the *nouveau roman*, post-modernism and magic realism, as well as terms such as 'experimental' and 'conventional', as applied to narrative practice, are questioned. Rather than suggesting notions of the 'evolution' of the novel form, they are useful, instead, for focusing upon patterns of interaction between innovation and

tradition, which do not so much evolve as recur, or become emphasized, at distinct historical periods. It is evident that the twentieth-century novel by women is so varied in innovation and experimentation, as well as in its use of conventions, that such terms have a strictly limited, albeit useful, role to play in analysis.

In keeping with these two central aims – of introducing the reader to some of the variety of women novelists, and of giving the reader a clear overview of the 'development' of the twentieth-century novel – the entries on individual authors, while giving essential biographical and bibliographical information to fulfil basic reference needs, are mainly devoted to a discussion of the salient narrative forms, stylistic techniques and characteristic writerly practices of these artists. Primarily a critical and interpretative work, then, unlike the existing guides, companions and reference books available, this critical guide seeks, albeit in a very limited space, both to give the reader the flavour of individual writers and to communicate a sense of the marvellous range of nationalities and types of writing in the English language, spread across the whole of the twentieth century. By helping readers to begin to become more aware of and more informed about this vast and colourful landscape of exhilarating literature, the *Guide* may encourage exploration beyond its own all too obvious limits. Moreover, the critical and interpretative approaches of these entries vary widely, and reflect the variety of fictional writings themselves. Yet within this variety of patterns of critical practices, an effort

is made to encounter the texts of these women writers as unique beings, as artifacts with a particularity in need of study. That is, an emphasis is put upon the narrative practices and techniques which these writers have developed or adapted in unique ways. Whether or not we share the views, ideas or beliefs attributed (usually mistakenly) to writers or texts, these entries show that we can still admire the passion, commitment and seriousness of purpose which the texts display.

A familiarity with a truly broad and varied range of fiction, through wide reading, makes possible a more catholic taste, and releases the pleasure of texts which otherwise might be misunderstood without contextual knowledge. Such an enlargement of appreciation, both through an increased grasp of the uniqueness of a text and through a wider experience of the varied traditions in which these art objects exist, is the critical aim of this *Guide*. In parallel, the writings of these novelists can be shown to enlarge our perceptions, enliven our sensibilities and improve our imaginative response, by widening the circumference of our experience, and by drawing our attention to the new ways in which experience can be ordered, processed and valued. New forms of consciousness emerge during these transformations of familiar modes of perception, which constitute new ways of living, writing and reading. For the selecting, forming, ordering, shaping and transforming processes of experience are the aesthetic content of every artifact. That is, works of art are the embodiments of human consciousness through which the mind realizes its protean being, as well as illuminating, and even inventing, the world of culture and nature. No gap, then, between the genuinely aesthetic and the genuinely moral is sustainable in such a critical approach: the magic of both art and criticism is in their power to make us see more imaginatively into the myriad forms of life-experience of other human beings so like, yet so fascinatingly unlike, ourselves. Both the radically experimental novel and the so-called novel of ideas challenge our perceptions of human life, if in different ways, and this challenge has inevitable and undeniable moral as well as aesthetic dimensions. The above considerations raise questions about traditional attitudes to evaluation and 'canonization', and have relevance to Harold

Bloom's and others' recent controversial writings about canon.

The *Guide* is divided into four major chronological parts (a fifth part includes some concluding material of a variety of kinds). This reflects a fairly wide consensus about the 'development' of the twentieth-century novel. Each of the four chronological parts is introduced, first, by a description of some major feature of the period, then, second, by a look at some of the types of writing of the period. The third chapter in each chronological section contains the essays on individual authors.

The explosive influence of psychological writings on the first decades of the century (an influence which has continued to the present day) constitutes chapter 1, while a discussion of 'modernism' (with all the disagreements about what it is) and stream of consciousness introduces the second part. In part III on the post-war period, the gradual rise of international literatures in English by women is examined as it impinged upon issues of identity, ethnicity and colonialism, for example. Part IV is introduced by a discussion of post-structuralist theory, since many of its insights are evident in fiction both overtly and covertly. Each of these chapters concludes with a list of a dozen or so suggestions for further reading in the subject.

In the second chapter of each of the four chronological parts – that is, the chapters devoted to introducing the reader to the writers of the period – an effort is made to familiarize the reader with names of novelists which she or he may not recognize, and to identify some examples of the various forms of fictional practices characteristic of the period. Each of the individual entries that constitute the third chapters of parts I–IV, on the other hand, is introduced, in the main, by relevant if brief biographical information, and information about primary texts. The main portion of each entry is a critical and interpretative discussion of each writer's fiction. Secondary references can be found at the end of the book, in the section of the bibliography devoted to each novelist.

Entries on individual authors in parts I–IV are organized according to the date of birth of the author discussed. However, because some authors began writing late in life, their works tend to fall into the next chronological section.

PREFACE

On the other hand, authors who began publishing very early in life may fall into an earlier section than expected. Authors who had a very long publishing career will span two sections, so that they will be placed in one or another period according to various obvious considerations, such as when they were at the height of their reputation or influence, and so on. Occasionally, the decision will have to be somewhat arbitrary; hence, the chronological divisions should be taken merely as rough guides to a writer's practices.

Part V is made up of a chapter discussing, albeit briefly, some aspects of feminist theory which are touched upon throughout the various entries, but are treated more explicitly here. The next chapter is an effort to indicate further writers who ought to be in this *Guide*, or in a second volume, if that had only been feasible. Even in

that geographically arranged chapter, it will be evident to many readers that names are missing of authors they admire and enjoy. They are missing because of the limits of any author's capacity to cover such a broad area. Finally, a chapter on research resources will, it is hoped, be useful for all readers wishing to explore this subject in greater depth. This chapter has the same geographical basis as chapter 14. The bibliography, then, is additional to and yet dependent upon the final chapter; it is a list of general books and then of anthologies (again organized geographically), followed by an extensive list of secondary criticism on each of the women novelists who have an entry in parts I-IV, and arranged alphabetically by the name of that woman writer.

Acknowledgements

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To the publishers at Blackwell's, including Andrew McNeillie, Deborah Yuill, Alyn Shipton and Stephan Chambers, I am grateful for the time and trouble they took in the preparation of this large project. Ms Yuill and Mr McNeillie made numerous helpful suggestions in the final stages of the project. St John's College, Cambridge, provided grants and congenial surroundings in the earliest stages of the work, and Darwin College, the Master and Fellows, more recently, must be thanked for the college's wonderful study

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Advice and encouragement, some of it brief and occasional, some of it systematic and some going back over a decade, came from many individuals, including Lucy Adlington, Christina Baker, Suzanne Burgstaller, Cathy Clay, Diane Coleman, Diana Collecott, Sarah Colstello, Peter D'Eath, Anita Desai, Sarah Dillingham, Emma Drew, Karen Ellin, Mariko Enomoto, Netta Goldsmith, Nadine Gordimer, Catherine Hall, Gillian Hanscombe, Jenny Hodgson, Rebecca Hodgson, Jonathan Hope, Mary Ann Hughes, Claudia Johnson, Elizabeth Jones, Pippa Jones, Roseanne Kennedy, Suzanne Keys, Lola Knipe, Doris Lessing, Samantha Lewis, Esther Lightman, Pamela McCallum, Clea McEnery, Anne Malory, Elizabeth Meese, Carol Ann Michael, Ryoko Ota, John Pahl, Paulina Palmer, Suzanne Patrick, Clare Ratliff, Nicola Rehling, Suzanne Reynolds, Sue Roe, Donna Rudolph, Monica Seidl, Laura Severin, Vivian Smyers, Yaeko Sumi, Yvonne Than, Nicola Upson, Andrea Ward, Alison Wooder and Patricia Zampini.

To my mother I owe more than I can say, for her practical and secretarial help, and also for encouragement on a number of occasions during the past decade or so, when it seemed that this gigantic and often unmanageable undertaking might have quite overwhelmed one.

Alphabetical List of Authors

Kathy Acker
Ama Ata Aidoo
Margaret Atwood
Toni Cade Bambara
Marjorie Barnard
Djuna Barnes
Barbara Baynton
Elizabeth Bowen
Jane Bowles
Kay Boyle
Christine Brooke-Rose
Anita Brookner
A.S. Byatt
Hortense Calisher
Dorothy Canfield (Fisher)
Leonora Carrington
Catherine Carswell
Angela Carter
Willa Cather
Kate Chopin
Ivy Compton-Burnett
Eleanor Dark
Anita Desai
Shashi Deshpande
Jean Crook Devanny
Isak Dinesen
H.D.
Margaret Drabble
Alice Dunbar-Nelson
George Egerton
Alice Thomas Ellis
Buchi Emecheta
Louise Erdrich
Jessie Redmon Fauset
Eva Figs
Zelda Fitzgerald
Janet Frame
Miles Franklin
Mary E. Wilkins Freeman
Mavis Gallant
Jane Gardam
Martha Gellhorn
Charlotte Perkins Gilman
Ellen Glasgow
Susan Glaspell
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Patricia Grace
Radclyffe Hall
Elizabeth Hardwick
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Bessie Head
Winifred Holtby
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Rachel Ingalls
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Ruth Praver Jhabvala
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Elizabeth Jolley
Gayl Jones
Anna Kavan
Molly Keane
A.L. Kennedy
Susan Kenney
Jamaica Kincaid
Maxine Hong Kingston
Margaret Laurence
Harper Lee
Vernon Lee
Ursula Le Guin
Rosamond Lehmann
Doris Lessing
Meridel Le Sueur
Alison Lurie

ALPHABETICAL LIST OF AUTHORS

Rose Macaulay
Carson McCullers
Katherine Mansfield
Kamala Markandaya
Paule Marshall
Miriam Masoli (Tlali)
Bobbie Ann Mason
Toni Morrison
Alice Munro
Iris Murdoch
Gloria Naylor
Frances Newman
Anaïs Nin
Edna O'Brien
Kate O'Brien
Flannery O'Connor
Tillie Olsen
Cynthia Ozick
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Dorothy Parker
Julia M. Peterkin
Ann Petry
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Part I

**New Forms of Realism and the Rise of
Early Modernism, 1895–1925**

Chapter 1

The Influence of Psychological Writings on Literature

The influence of developments in psychology and related sciences upon literature in the twentieth century are difficult to assess in detail, though they can hardly be overestimated. The proliferation of articles, reviews and books in the several decades prior to 1900 would probably astonish most students of literature, because of our preoccupation with Freud's writings and the consequences of them. As any history of psychology makes clear, however, the subject is as old as human culture, and people have speculated and written about behaviour and the human mind for thousands of years. However, following Charles Darwin's and other natural scientists' discoveries in the mid-nineteenth century, interest in behaviour and in the similarities and differences between humans and animals increased. Already, by the time of William James's *Principles of Psychology*, serialized in instalments and published in book form in 1890, there was a large body of systematic theory about psychology, which James, in the main, reacted against. Educated as he was in physiology and biology, and later philosophy, he saw the faults of the well-established atomist psychologies, which tended to view instincts as isolated from social and environmental influences. His famous 'stream of consciousness' metaphor, and all that it entailed, was received with great excitement, as was his insistence on the importance of the recent scientific formulation of the 'unconscious', which, he said, he believed to be the single most important step forwards for psychology in the last century. Later developments

included the rise of the influence of behaviourism, of which Pavlov, in the first decade of the 1900s, was the most famous expounder. Here, the influence of Darwin was also evident, if one-sided, for the shift from early theories of introspection to the observation of behaviour in concrete situations involved the study of animals in the main, and of the cognitive process of learning, though the results were sometimes tantalizingly generalizable to humans. Behaviourism forbade reference to the mind, or to reports of thoughts, feelings or intentions, because they were not publicly observable, and sought to fuse Darwinian biologism with observationalist traditions of scientific method. (Later, B.F. Skinner refined and extended these early experiments and findings.) Opposed to, or at least sceptical of, behaviourism were the purposive psychologists and the *Gestalt* psychologists. While purposive ideas, propounded by McDougall, for example, in the first decade of the 1900s, were certainly taken up by Freud later, this movement was subsumed by the powerful and long-lasting *Gestalt* theories of Wertheim and others. Again, like William James, they rejected as wholly inadequate the atomistic notions at the basis of much psychological theory, and insisted upon reconceiving human mental experience as a 'field' of sensations, rather than as a mass of elemental, atomistic units somehow put together by mysterious interaction with supernatural laws of mind. As an alternative to James's 'stream of consciousness' metaphor, the 'field' metaphor was used to explain important mental activities such

as learning. Learning, it was argued, occurs not so much by means of routine, rote or repetition, or by trial and error, as the behaviourists and others had suggested; rather, *Gestalt* theorists wrote of the capacity for an individual to have insight into a learning problem by looking at the whole, at the field and the numerous inter-relationships within it – and then seeing a solution. These *Gestalt* theories had an effect upon both philosophies of education and practical school arrangements, as well as stimulating the creative artist. Moreover, for the *Gestalt* psychologist, the individual was to be understood as a part of an entire ‘life-space’, a social and environmental context, not observed in isolation as had been done by many psychologists. Later, R.D. Laing and Richard Reich took these insights to their logical conclusions, but already they influenced Freud in his early studies of hysteria, for example.

Freud’s writings, then, were not the beginning of a tradition of sophisticated psychological systematization of theory so much as embedded in an already rich and flourishing world of active reflection, well developed theoretically by the time he learned techniques of hypnosis, for example, from Charcot, or free associative techniques of therapy from Breuer. Moreover, many of his contemporaries and closest associates were alive enough to the depth of the already-existing tradition to see Freud’s contributions as only a part of the developments in recent psychologizing, albeit often central and path-breaking. Associates such as Adler and Jung, amongst others, eventually parted with Freud over issues about the nature of the unconscious, the extent of sexual influences, especially on the early development of the child’s mental health, the role of the person or ego in behaviour, and so on. Other theorists, such as Melanie Klein and Piaget, took Freud’s insights and developed them into vigorous and seminal studies of child psychology, while Karen Horner, Helen Deutsch and, much later, Juliet Mitchell explored the implications of Freudian and other theories for women and for feminism. Reich, on the other hand, applied Freudian insights to an understanding of social and mass psychology, while Laing worked to reveal the *Gestalt* effects of the (often illness-producing) family upon the mental health of individuals. Lacan, publishing and writing in the middle of

the century, has probably been the single most important influence on literary theorists in his ‘return to Freud’, and in his emphasis upon Freud’s preoccupation with language and interpretation, with dreams and the unconscious as coded texts, while most recently Julia Kristeva has once again examined Freud – and Lacan’s reinterpretation – for both therapy and for feminism. Contemporaneously, Michel Foucault has subjected Freudian metapsychology, and especially the theories of sexuality, to reanalysis, criticism and questioning.

While the above writers and theorists had a tremendous influence upon art and literature in the early part of the twentieth century – certainly influencing the development of surrealism and modernism, as well as other avant-garde movements – Freud’s influence has continued to predominate in literary theory, whether as reinterpreted by Klein, Lacan, Mitchell and Kristeva, for example, or as influential in more accessible interpretations. Freud argued, polemically, that everything he knew was learnt from poets, writers and artists; this mutual influence explains the ease with which many of Freud’s insights, emphases and metaphors are referred to literature preceding his own writings. The use of dream analysis for therapy and the splitting of the human mind into conscious/unconscious, with further splits of preconscious and subconscious, affected characterization pre-eminently in literature. The later postulation of the id/ego/superego trichotomy led to a considerable transformation of the literary representation of both individuals and their relationships with each other. Earlier literary motifs such as the ‘double’ had already established the fragmentation of the self in some individuals, but Freud established it as characteristic of the human psyche. Moreover, while artists had always used the dream, fantasy and other extraordinary states of consciousness as a means of representing the complexity of human experience, Freud articulated these complexities in a new language. These new emphases and new metaphors, along with a more systematically theoretical and generalized application, led artists to further explorations, based on these new understandings of the ‘ordinariness’ and normality of things which had previously been the preserve of the ill, the mad, the bad or the eccentric. Indeed, one way

of describing the increasing conflict between late realist modes of writing and early modernist ones, which had been surfacing already in the pre-Freudian writings of Henry James, amongst others, was the gradual elimination of the rationality of representational social realism in favour of psychological realism, which included the irrational as part of everyday life. That is, an increased use in literary writings of the inner world as a whole, to represent reality, directly contrasted with realist descriptions of and emphases upon order, logic and externality.

The marked interest of writers in the use of the dream, fantasy, reverie, memory, interior monologue and madness, and the reporting of sensations and perceptions, thoughts and feelings, in fragmented and disorderly modes, led to the rejection of the unitary character of realism for characterization as a site of split, conflicting selves, roles and relations within the psyche as well as without. Plot and familiar, sequential time presentation were also jettisoned; interior experience took precedence over external happenings and observable events, objects, settings and so on. The Freudian idea of the timelessness of the unconscious was contrasted with the pseudo-objectivity of clock-time, thus affecting a novel's structure as well. Writers seemed to feel freer to use flashbacks and other time-disrupting techniques, including frameworks, alternative points of view, stories within stories and so on; all familiar devices, no doubt, but now made the main narrative techniques instead of a deviation from the norm of sequential, discursive, developmental unity.

Another change in literature involved experimentation with language, leading to a rejection of familiar, 'ordinary' language, that is, language used primarily to communicate some content or message, in favour of language toyed with to discover its latent resources. These resources, it was argued, are present in ordinary language and affect our communication, but are repressed or de-emphasized. The result was often a less accessible language of disrupted, fragmented syntax, swirlings of semantics, ambiguities compounded by deliberate punnings, connotations, innuendos, repetitions – but with suggestive variations – sexual insinuations, sinister hints, jokes and other devices to draw attention to the materiality of language and its self-referentiality.

Freudian insistences upon the multivalent nature of utterances encouraged artists to represent language as multilayered, through extensive use of extended metaphors, elaborate symbols and images structuring the narrative, minute particulars made intensely significant, and so on. Freud's published dream-interpretative work encouraged these techniques, and reinforced the idea that social realist and other realist literature had been concerned only with the surface of the mind; however much it had delved into the depravity of society, poverty and illness, it had always encouraged the repression of the insight that *within* the mind of every individual is the lurking power of irrationality, quiescent but wakeable.

It is probable that the impact of Freud's and others' psychological writings were strengthened by World War I. Psychoanalysis had opened up a view of the human being and of reality which was not compatible with either humanist or enlightenment emphases on a unitary subject. This subject was conceived by humanist, enlightenment thinkers as predominantly rational, capable of self-knowledge and self-control, and living in a society constantly progressing towards a better, more just human community. Freud's conception, by contrast, was of a human being only partly conscious of her or his being, only partly capable of control or knowledge, and very vulnerable to powerful, unconscious drives and forces within. The somewhat determinist element of Freudian theory, that what happens in childhood has decisive and irrevocable consequences for future possibilities of development, also added to the sinister aspects of recent theorizing. This 'new' human, profoundly sexual, violently aggressive, innately selfish, inhabited by a death instinct as strong as any life force, split into warring 'selves' and full of ambivalent impulses, and potentially irrational to an unpredictable degree, may not have been true to the complexity of Freud's theories, but became a popular view of his results. With art and science described as in part, at least, sexual fantasies or sublimations, and ethics and religion as the internalization of parental or social taboos about, usually, sex, humans were shown to contain within themselves that very 'Other' which, for thousands of years, they had been trying to destroy as if it were outside themselves. With the horrors of World War I seemingly confirming