

# AMERICAN VOICES, AMERICAN WOMEN

  
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A COLLECTION OF FICTION EXPLORING LIFE ON THE PRAIRIE,  
IN CITIES, AND NEW ENGLAND VILLAGES—AND THE VARIED,  
INDIVIDUALISTIC WOMEN WHO LIVED IT

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

LEE R. EDWARDS AND ARLYN DIAMOND



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**For Tillie Olsen, who leads the way**





# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 11

*Harriet Prescott Spofford*

THE AMBER GODS 21

*Elizabeth Stuart Phelps*

THE STORY OF AVIS 65

*Mary Wilkins Freeman*

A NEW ENGLAND NUN 151

THE REVOLT OF "MOTHER" 165

ONE GOOD TIME 181

OLD WOMAN MAGOUN 199

*Kate O'Flaherty Chopin*

LILACS 221

THE GODMOTHER 233

*Mary Hunter Austin*

A WOMAN OF GENIUS 257

*Dorothy Canfield Fisher*

A DROP IN THE BUCKET 341

*Susan Keating Glaspell*

A JURY OF HER PEERS 359

*Jessie Redmon Fauset*

PLUM BUN "HOME" 385

PLUM BUN "MARKET" 397

PLUM BUN "PLUM BUN" 423



# INTRODUCTION

This anthology began with our suspicion that there were significant American women writers about whom we had never heard, and, more importantly, that these women had something to say to us. This suspicion gained further encouragement from the women's movement and the series of discoveries and rediscoveries about women's past that the movement has inspired. The American literary tradition has always been subject to change and we are attempting here to broaden it. Just as Afro-Americans had to insist that their experience and literature were an integral part of American culture and then brought to light the documents which legitimized their insistence, so too must women.

We finished reading for this collection with a drastically changed sense of what we mean by the tradition of American literature and the habit of mind, male and female, which produced it. It was disappointing to find that critics who could perceive the greatness of works like *Walden* and *Moby Dick* did not also consider other works potentially as revealing of America's psyche. Why not study works by women whose heroines loved the wilderness as much as Natty Bumppo did, or who themselves longed for the freedom to wander or create? Did these critics ever think to look? Why should we be left with a picture of a literature obsessed with escape from women whose view of the world was bounded by the parlor and the kitchen? Or for that matter, why should we accept the idea that the parlor and the kitchen are unimportant places, respectable, and boring?

As every woman knows and most men now recognize, the maps of our culture have been drawn by men whose vision was focused on their own experience of the world and who confused one landscape with an entire terrain. For the most part the followers of those maps—students, teachers, scholars, critics, editors, publishers—were themselves male. Developments were circular: definition encourages publication; certain authors are kept in print; out

of print works become unavailable, and are unable to exert a countervailing pressure.

At our beginnings, the Puritan leaders defined themselves as something new in the history of the world, and since then Americans have continued to see themselves as different—not inheritors of European tradition but fugitives from it. If post eighteenth-century British fiction was social, domestic, concerned with the relationship between manners and morals, and produced frequently by women acknowledged to be great writers, much of what we traditionally see as American literature is profoundly and self-consciously masculine, anti-social, undomestic, concerned with neither social manners nor social morality, and is, as Hawthorne says, “romantic.” The romancer denies the prophet’s statement that there is nothing new under the sun, endorses the individual out of harmony with social norms and emphasizes not simply the possibility of extraordinary experience but its almost religious nature.

From its beginning, then, America and its literature combined romantic conventions with Puritan consciousness. Flying the City of Destruction, the Puritans brought with them not only a contempt for the petty social concerns of *Vanity Fair*, but also a concept of the proper relations between men and women based on adherence to the most conservative Biblical doctrines. The Christian wife had to atone for the sin of Eve by her submission and self-effacement. Woman’s very existence was a temptation, even if only a temptation to forget ultimate judgment in the comfort of home. If such is the case, then men must be homeless and women abandoned. Hester is the occasion for Dimmesdale’s sin in *The Scarlet Letter*; Thoreau knows that a man can live in the woods only if he lives alone; Ahab would renounce his search for *Moby Dick* if he thought too much about his young wife on shore. Even such seemingly non-Puritan writers as Faulkner, Hemingway, and Mailer are still terrified by the spectre of Eve with an apple in her hand.

Puritanism, moreover, is connected with not only what is romantic but also what is epic in American literature. The myth of the *Mayflower* and that of the frontier meet in a common distrust of woman and what she represents. For the Puritans, woman was evil—menacing and destroying men and goodness. Her only salvation was to be a bloodless saint, an object for veneration rather than an

individual consciousness. For the frontier hero and his creator it is civilization which is corrupt. Since, however, civilization is seen as the realm of females and "feminized" men, a distrust of civilization is equivalent to a distrust of women. The basic assumption behind such a notion is that femininity and wilderness are, as we have been told, implacably opposed. The perception that what strangles men may strangle women too is alien to those writers and critics responsible for the accepted version of the myth of the frontier.

The fascination with Wilderness, Apocalypse, and Escape as defining themes has obscured two realities: First, that women writers and/or characters were just as American as their male counterparts and therefore shared their longings; and second, that there is more to American literature and the American experience than Armageddon and the Santa Fe trail. The selections represented in this collection document these neglected realities. They force us to acknowledge not only these authors' literary and real lives but also the importance of their visions, permitting us to define the American experience in a more varied way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Despite striking differences in style, tone, and overt subject, the writers reprinted here relate to one another in their common sense of conflict. The identities of their female protagonists are formed, of necessity, out of a developing awareness of the difficulties in reconciling their private selves with public expectations of them as women. As a result, these fictions are psychological rather than cosmological in focus. Often isolated in their unhappiness, the women portrayed here are convinced that they are abnormal to sense a tension between social duty and psychological integrity. Male protagonists in American fiction frequently share this sense of isolation, but there is a long historical and literary tradition to justify their alienation. For women, no such tradition was available, and each author and heroine had to recreate her own struggle without the guidance of positive alternative modes of being. The situation persists, but women may now know that the struggle need never have been a solitary one.

In Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Story of Avis* (1877)

and Mary Austin's *A Woman of Genius* (1912), the central figure is torn between her sense of her own large talents and ambitions on the one hand and the demands of love and domesticity on the other. In one of the earlier novel's several turning points, Philip Ostrander, the young professor who has successfully wooed Avis, is pressing for a more immediate wedding than she desires. Unlike Philip, Avis is happy to be merely engaged and mistrusts the condition of marriage. Ostrander appeals to her to recognize that situated as he is—lacking a wife to make a home for him and care for his creature comforts, and to entertain his colleagues—he is unable to “command his best conditions.” Moved by his plea, Avis consents to marry immediately, and Phelps's comment on the consequences of this assent is notable for its pointedness, as well as its restraint:

Long years after, these words came back to Avis Dobell's memory, like the carven stone into which time has wrought meanings that the sculptor's mind or hand was impotent to grasp.

At the book's conclusion Phelps can free Avis only by destroying Philip. But Avis' freedom, as the author well knows, has come too late: “‘It is of no use,’ said Avis wearily, ‘my pictures come back upon my hands . . . My style is gone . . . I work as if I had a rheumatic hand . . . But the stiffness runs deeper than the fingers’ . . .” Beyond the limits of this plot, moreover, Phelps uses her final pages to speculate on the new turnings that new lives might produce:

We have been told that it takes three generations to make a gentleman: we may believe that it will take as much, or more, to make a WOMAN. A being . . . physically educated by mothers of her own fibre and by physicians of her own sex—such a woman alone is fitted to acquire the drilled brain, the calmed imagination, and sustained aim, which constitutes intellectual command . . . such a creature only is competent to the terrible task of adjusting the sacred individuality of her life to her supreme capacity of love and the supreme burdens and perils which it imposes upon her.

A man in whom the sources of feelings are as deep as they are delicate . . . whose affection becomes a burning ambition not to be outvied by hers, whose daily soul is large enough to guard her, even though it were at the cost of sharing it, from the tyranny of small corrosive care which gnaws and gangrenes hers—such a man alone can either comprehend or apprehend the love of such a woman.

The actress heroine of *A Woman of Genius*, Olivia, is fiercer in her devotion to her gift and less determinedly moral than Avis. Phelps and Austin in their works, like Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre*, reveal that the price of conventional marriage is the destruction of one of the partners. Male writers, too, have realized this truth. They, however, attempt either to deny it by assuming that women survive in marriage because they are incapable of being alive in the way that men live or by denouncing the women rather than the pattern for producing this situation.

Near the end of *A Woman of Genius*, Olivia and her friend (soon, we suspect, to be her husband), Jerry, discuss Olivia's autobiography. Their conversation, like Phelps's musings at the end of *Avis*, underlines the need for new forms to produce healthy, non-destructive relationships between men and women:

"Where is the justice in making us so that we can't do without loving and then not be happy in it?"

"I don't believe it is the loving that is wrong; it is the other things that are tied up with it and taken for granted must go with loving, that we can get on with."

"Marriage, you mean?"

"Not exactly . . . living in one place and by a particular pattern . . . thinking that *because* you are married you have to leave off this and take up that which you wouldn't think of doing for any other reason."

"You mean . . . I know," he nodded; "my wife was always wanting me to do this and that, on the ground that it was what married people ought, and I couldn't see where it led or why it was important. But what if it should turn out that the others are wrong and we are right about it?"

"Oh, I think we are *all* wrong. People like us are



after the truth of life, and marriage is the one thing that society won't take the trouble to learn the truth about."

For Harriet Prescott Spofford and Kate Chopin the central conflict is not between talent and the bourgeois marriage of romantic lovers, but between the accepted image of the chaste marble figure of the good woman and the realities of women's emotional lives. Spofford's "The Amber Gods" is an extended monologue by the heroine, Giorgione Willoughby, expressing an intense sensuality which is both compelling and terrifying in its self-absorption. The sequel Spofford wrote to this story is absolutely conventional in its defeat of such egoism by the self-effacing love of Giorgione's proper Victorian sister. Although Spofford finally kills Giorgione she cannot overcome the force of her creation, who says of herself: "I am used to admiration . . . it is my food; without it I should die of inanition; but do you suppose I care any more for those who give it to me than a Chinese idol does for whoever swings incense before it? Are you devoted to your butcher and your milkman?" If Galatea could speak her mind, might she not make the same admission?

In her fiction Spofford keeps returning, fascinated and appalled, to the figure of an imaginative and sexual woman who refuses to deny herself, and in a world which demands only beauty, charm and passivity of women, uses her energy to force the world to satisfy her desires. Chopin does not feel the need to depict her female characters as monsters merely because they are aware of their own needs and powers. Instead, she chooses in "Lilacs" as well as in her increasingly well-known novel, *The Awakening*, to celebrate female sensuality at the same time as she shows the price for it exacted from women by external society and internalized social values. In "The Godmother" she shows that it is just such self-denying and absolute love for another—thought of as women's great gift—which is monstrous. Obsessed with protecting her godson, Tante Elodie condones his murderous actions and thereby destroys him.

The remaining authors—Mary Wilkins Freeman, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Susan Glaspell, and Jessie Redmon Fauset—are concerned with more apparently conventional people, who do not consciously feel the need for