

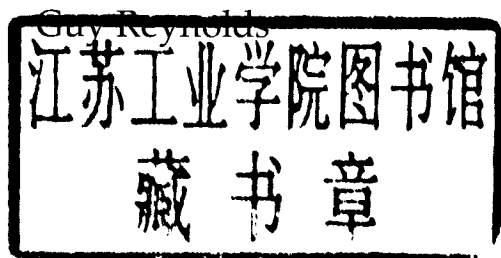
GUY REYNOLDS

Twentieth-Century American Women's Fiction
A Critical Introduction



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For Isabel

Preface

This book sets out to provide readers with a reasonably comprehensive account of a range of novelists, all of whom were women and Americans (whether they have anything in common on account of their gender and nationality is one of the subjects of the book). It is, I hope, a sufficiently wide-ranging account to achieve the authority of a 'critical introduction' or 'survey'. But it is also, I again hope, argumentative enough to take on the flavour of a monograph. That the book is something of a critical hybrid is a testimony to its subject: fictions by American women have often shifted across idioms or conflated genres.

Another form of hybridity might be found in the imagined readerships for this book. Most authors find themselves predicating a reader; in my case, I have had to imagine a number of different, and perhaps competing, readers. Written in the UK, by an Englishman, for a British (and now German-owned) publisher, this is a work rooted in a European context. But it will also be published in New York, and I trust it will find an American audience. What is known to an American reader is not necessarily known to a European, and vice-versa; I found myself moving between the continents in terms of what can be expected to form a general body of received cultural knowledge. Thus, American readers might be slightly surprised at the emphasis on the particulars of their own national life. The book is written by an outsider, and the explication of historical detail is designed to help readers unfamiliar with American history. Equally, non-American readers will have to accept that, in some places, it seemed sensible to preserve US rather than British spellings of key terms: 'local color' fiction remains just that, 'local color'.

GUY REYNOLDS

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In the United States, I have had a regrettably intermittent but none the less important connection with members of the Willa Cather scholarly community, particularly with Susan Rosowski of the University of Nebraska. Becoming part of the wide circle of Cather scholars gave me the confidence to move into other areas of American literary studies. At the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, the librarians of the McFarlin Special Collections helped me enormously, both with primary and secondary materials in the field of women's literature.

The production of the book was handled with characteristic smoothness by staff at Macmillan, notably Margaret Bartley. I must also add my thanks to the anonymous reader of the manuscript, whose perspicacious review helped me to clarify the direction of the final text.

Finally, a phalanx of family members from the Reynolds and Anton-Smith clans provided the reasonably calm conditions in which to write. Above all, Cal Anton-Smith kept the two little wolves from the door.

Every effort has been made to trace all the copyright-holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked, the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

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Introduction: the Genealogy of American Women's Narrative, 1892–1995

After nearly thirty years of canon-busting, critical revisionism and renewal, is it possible to generalise about American women's narratives produced during the past century? For American women's fiction (and associated forms of prose, such as autobiography and the diary), continual recoveries of lost works mean that the 'canon' has hardly come into being. As soon as a canon begins to take shape, the deconstructive turn of modern criticism undermines its foundational principles. Women's fiction, as a body of work *sui generis*, began to attract serious and sustained critical attention in the wake of the 1960s women's movement. Feminist critics attacked what they saw as the 'masculinist' bias of American literary criticism; the motifs, topics and themes celebrated by the masculinist critics were, it was now argued, highly gendered, and took little account of the contribution of American women to the national literature. Attacks on the male bias of literary scholarship went hand-in-hand with recoveries of lost female writers and marginalised traditions (the increased attention to nineteenth-century sensational and domestic writing dates from this phase in the early 1970s). Well-known writers such as Willa Cather or Edith Wharton continued to be read; but their work was increasingly seen as a distinctively *female* achievement. Earlier studies of Cather had tended to 'de-sex' her, but now gender and sexuality came to the fore; critics became fascinated by the lesbianism which informed, in complex and often covert ways, Cather's narrative strategies.¹

None the less, while critics unpicked the motifs of masculinist canons, there were relatively few overarching 'stories' of American women's writing, few critical pathways through the maze of individual authors. The masculinist canon within

America was posited on powerful grand narratives which placed fiction within a story about the growth of a nation: R. W. B. Lewis's 'American Adam' (fiction as celebration of heroic, youthful individualism); Leo Marx's 'Machine in the Garden' (the primacy of geographical space; the contrast between industrialism and pastoralism); the obsession with the wilderness and the frontier, analysed in Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* and Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Feminist criticism was partly committed to deconstructing these critical paradigms by revealing their masculine partiality and theoretical naivety. Having deconstructed the male biases of literary scholarship, exposing the covert ideologies of criticism, feminist scholars were understandably tentative about replacing one set of constructs with another. Instead, the critical drive was towards literary archaeology (recovery of lost texts or authors), or towards interpretative strategies focused on groups of writers within more localised schools (for instance, Southern writers, local colorists, or various ethnic groupings). Critics were keen to avoid a universalism which would simply see women's fiction as a set of unchanging, synchronic 'features', uninflected by the very large differences within women's culture (differences of race, class and sexuality, not to mention the aesthetic differences from one novel to the next).²

Would it be possible, in the aftermath of all this revisionism and re-discovery, to construct 'post-canonical' critical narratives: networks of continuity, inheritance and influence which tie together disparate texts across a spread of time? 'Post-canonical criticism' can be defined as the qualified recovery of a tradition of so-called minority writing – 'qualified' because the critic is cautious about positing overly synoptic or binding generalisations. Generalised aesthetics have often been subject to critical attack. Thus within feminist criticism of American women's writing, the folk arts of quilt-making and weaving, the patching and piecing of material, have come to stand for a womanly aesthetic. As Elaine Showalter summarises:

Both theme and form in women's writing, piecing and patchwork have also become metaphors for a Female Aesthetic, for sisterhood, and for a politics of feminist survival. In the past two decades especially, they have been celebrated as essentially feminine art forms, modes of expression that emerge

naturally from womanly impulses of nurturance and thrift, and that constitute a women's language unintelligible to male audiences or readers.³

Given our uneven recovery of lost texts, and the hesitation fostered by the deconstruction of established canons, this suggestive model of literary communality seems more persuasive than a tightly argued thesis. But, as Showalter points out, there is also danger in the lack of historical specificity to the aesthetic of the patchwork (surely these domestic arts have changed through time?); and to couple women's writing to the home is to risk essentialism or triviality. The two great theoretical problems facing the identification of a distinctive female literary aesthetic in America are those of history and essentialism.

One solution might be to identify both thematic and formal features which have changed through time, but none the less consistently appear as basic motifs in women's fiction of the past century. Such motifs would suggest a synchronic consistency, but would also mutate diachronically. Some of these features might be shared by both men's and women's writings, even though they would have a very particular cast when they appear in the sisterly genealogy. The word 'genealogy' has a particular centrality in my argument. If the desire, even need, to construct a literary tradition repeatedly conflicts with a sense that 'tradition' is either too static or too monolithic a term, then one solution might be a pragmatic one: to replace tradition with a more flexible and light-footed term, but also to find a word that will carry the very real sense that many women writers have of the interconnections between them. 'Genealogy' carries with it resonant and useful associations; a genealogy suggests familial and dynastic relations, while allowing for evolutionary change through time. A genealogy is both stable, allowing us to identify its key members, and subtly changing as new beings are added to it. And, with every new addition, the established genealogy will look slightly different, as previously unperceived correspondences now reveal themselves. Furthermore, the word 'genealogy' carries with it the tang of a bracing Nietzschean interrogation. Whereas a 'tradition' remains coloured by its associations with T. S. Eliot's model of poetic tradition, a genealogy implies the possibility of irony and subversion – and subversive irony has often been central to women's encounters with their literary forebears.

A literary genealogy is founded on the recognition that all writing is intertextual. 'Intertextuality' is the term normally used to suggest the relationships between writers; authors are imagined as borrowing from, revisiting and revising earlier writers. Intertextuality, when used of women writers, also implies affection, kinship or homage across the generations. Many feminist critics have wanted to replace Harold Bloom's poetics of male rivalry with their own model of intertextuality as a process of communality. Bloom argued that male writers were caught up in an Oedipal struggle, an epic creative struggle as literary sons attempted to supplant their fathers. Feminists have wanted to replace the Bloomian 'agon' of literary rivalry with intertextual theories of collective sisterhood, thereby creating what Annette Kolodny calls a 'map for rereading'.⁴ Thus the warmth of Alice Walker's 'Dedication' to the collection of pieces by Zora Neale Hurston which she published in 1979: 'We love Zora Neale Hurston for her work, first, and then again . . . we love her for herself.'⁵

However, for many women writers the relationship with a predecessor has been one of co-mingled rivalry and communality, an intertwined knot of allegiance and rivalry. Genealogy posits this relationship, with its broad sense of connectedness and its dynamic torque. Just as in a family the genealogical tie might encompass envy, rivalry, indifference, even hatred, so a writerly genealogy allows for a range of responses between writers. In place of rivalry (the Bloomian masculine model) or community (the feminist response) genealogy presents a dialogue between writers which is sometimes comradely and sometimes critical. The term allows for a more textured and nuanced sense of intertextuality than either of its predecessors. The very term 'genealogy' carries with it the notion of a multiplicity or diversity within a single entity; typically, we talk of a 'genealogical tree', imagining successive generations as proliferating branches off a single trunk.

Susan Sontag's play *Alice in Bed* (1993) can be read within a genealogical matrix. Her comic Beckettian piece focuses on Alice James, sister of Henry and William; it sketches Alice's brief life as invalid and writer *manquée* (my first chapter contains an account of her *Diary*, a major work recovered from the margins of the literary canon). The play pits the male relatives, with their imprecations about getting better and feeling better, against the relentlessly morbid and mordant Alice, a woman who sums up the female fate

as 'sickbed deathbed birthbed'. Sontag certainly draws on Alice's status as one of the iconic lost women of American letters, but balances hagiography with a tougher tone of iconoclasm. Sontag rebukes Alice James for her retreat from broader social and political engagement. In one scene she has Alice encounter a working-class Cockney burglar, 'a representative of the world that does not have the bourgeois luxury of psychological invalidism'.⁶ Elsewhere, a phantasmagoric tea party, based on the Madhatters' tea party in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, sees Emily Dickinson speaking a language of mystic solipsism (most of the things she says are simply incomprehensible to her literary sisters). This is both a funnier and more sarcastic view of female intertextuality than we are accustomed to; it plays literary sisterhood off against the demands of political engagement. And in the jokes at the expense of Dickinson's sequestered speech, we see a sly dig at notions of 'female speech' – Dickinson's hermetically sealed discourse has, in Sontag's play, led only to isolation. Sontag both admires and chides her nineteenth-century predecessors, praising their imaginative achievements but chastising them for failure to reach beyond the 'victories of the imagination':

A play, then, about the grief and anger of women; and, finally, a play about the imagination.

The reality of the mental prison. The triumphs of the imagination. But the victories of the imagination are not enough.⁷

The writer who engages with a genealogy of fiction – a genealogy to which she is added, and which she adds to in a process both intransitive and transitive – becomes enmeshed in a complex negotiation with forebears and with as-yet-unknown literary descendants. Whereas earlier models of feminist criticism proffered interpretative strategies of resistance, the genealogical model is predicated on resistance and affiliation, indebtedness and inauguration. Genealogy offers a map of interconnection where the writer is seen as involved in a complex inflection of earlier literary discourses; to interpret genealogically is to recognise writing as a *negotiation*.⁸

My discussion takes its cue from the historicised feminist scholarship of critics such as Annette Kolodny and Elaine Showalter (rather than the psychoanalytical school represented by, say, Judith Butler). The emphasis is upon the interpretation of texts

within their historical context, and I read these stories or novels as products of a specific matrix of cultural forces, at a specific point in history. Placing texts within a particularised cultural 'moment', I go on to explore the narrative and rhetorical strategies forged by the individual writer. America's women writers have themselves acted as agents of change in an ongoing process of cultural transformation, often by unsettling old fictional patterns and creating new ones. Culture, as Sontag once remarked, is a way of thinking: through revision and inauguration within their literary culture American women have established new ways of thinking about themselves and their society. Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* fashioned a folkloric, anthropological discourse about domesticity; Nella Larsen's two novels created a fabular, hallucinatory framework for stories of black selfhood; Sylvia Plath created a surreal discourse to represent the medicalisation of the female body. All these fictional languages anticipated shifts in the wider culture, adumbrating new structures of feeling.

No single, monolithic key is offered in this book to the totality of fiction by American women. I have presented a capacious survey and emphasised the quiddity of the specific novel or the individual career. Nonetheless, within each chapter I do advance more embracing arguments which encompass groups of writers from a specific literary-historical phase. Thus, my third chapter looks at modernists such as Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein, examining how their fiction configures space (and re-orders the familiar territory of the Victorian novel). Moreover, within the overall female genealogy several thematic and formalistic features do recur across a swathe of texts, and these provide leitmotifs throughout my study: folkloric modernism (manifested in an anthropological interest in folk culture and quotidian ritual); a fascination with the construction of national identities or what Gertrude Stein termed the 'making of Americans'; political engagement (women's narratives are more urgently bound up with cultural and political dispute than many commentators recognise); and a generic or formalistic latitude.

Folkloric Modernism

In works such as Cather's *My Ántonia* or Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* folkloric modernism became a means to construct

radical fictional shapes which were informed by an anthropologist's sense that trivial or superficial features of everyday life (gossip, cookery, family anecdotes) contained the deep structures of a culture. Folkloric modernism has been one of the most significant well-springs for the woman writer; it has watered, in the past two decades, the heightened awareness to oral culture underpinning African-American and Asian-American fiction (notably, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*).

Construction of National Identities

The question of what an American woman *is* has inspired a great array of novels and short stories. One of the quirkiest works I deal with, Alice James's *Diary*, is important for just this reason: the record of an invalid life in England, it is also an expatriate testimony, an account of being an American abroad. Expatriate writings are a key constituency in this literary culture, since they enfold explorations of both gendered and national identity (a womanly representation of sexuality and nation in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, or throughout Gertrude Stein's career). Alongside expatriate narratives are two other major forms: the immigrant narrative, describing the arrival and assimilation of the European woman into American society (Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, Willa Cather's early fiction); and what might be called the crisis narrative of ethnic identity. The latter constitutes a massive body of work in its own right, almost a distinct genre. For instance, in fabular fictions of the isolated self, a writer such as Nella Larsen explored the existential crisis of the mulatto heroine. Larsen's 1929 work *Passing* looks back to earlier studies of miscegenation, notably Frances Harper's 1892 text *Iola Leroy*; but the writer's construction of the miscegenation narrative is very different in each case. Whereas Larsen's text is a declensionist narrative of tragic conflict within the ethnically split self, Harper posits a progressive story of black 'uplift', as ethnic self-awareness and solidarity transcend division.

Political Engagement

Texts by American women debate, though sometimes indirectly or covertly, salient political questions of American life; they are, in

the broadest sense, *engagée*. I argued in an earlier book, *Willa Cather in Context*, that the apparently escapist writer could be seen as profoundly involved in the war of political ideas, if we only looked to the right series of contexts for her fiction: progressivism, multiculturalism, 'Americanisation' in Cather's case. In this book, with its larger sweep of writers, it is harder to maintain that a central clutch of topics recurs across many works. Nevertheless, it remains the case that contextualised readings reveal the extent to which social history and cultural politics frame women's narratives. Women have often embodied in their fictions oblique, latent or allusive commentaries on what H. L. Mencken called the 'public psychology' of the day; political engagement is not necessarily synonymous with didacticism. Southern writers such as Flannery O'Connor or Eudora Welty have deployed symbolism and elliptical narratology to fashion stories which reveal themselves, on close reading, to be 'inside narratives' about their culture's political history. Other writers have addressed subjects which only reveal themselves as 'political' by reference to the contexts in which they were produced. Thus, I read Susan Sontag's *Death Kit* (1967) as a satire on the corporate male (a figure who had featured in a plethora of pop sociological accounts of suburban America); the novel also ironically meditates on the idealisation of romance and marriage which featured so widely in the domestic ideology of the 1950s and early 1960s. Indeed, several important 1960s texts can be read as a fictional counterpoint to the polemics then being published by feminists such as Betty Friedan: Sontag, Sylvia Plath and Joyce Carol Oates married formalistic experimentation to wry and often horrified meditations on what Friedan had famously termed 'the feminine mystique' in 1963.

Generic or Formalistic Latitude

Gillian Beer notes of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*: 'Each of the books Woolf wrote around the time strained across genre, attempted to break through – or disturb – the limits of the essay, the novel, the biography, to touch realities denied by accepted forms. In all her work there was an astute awareness that apparently literary questions – of genre, language, plot – are questions that touch the pith of how society constitutes and contains itself.'⁹

I discuss works which show a similar willingness to disturb generic conventions and the constraints of 'accepted forms'; the revisionist canon is a new formation, not least for its acceptance of diverse and hybrid forms. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is ostensibly a fictional narrative; but it contains well-documented biographical reference, and is often read as a quasi-political polemic. Women's fiction has often trespassed across the boundary between 'life' and 'art', taking on the shapes of writing close to biography: the memoir, the journal. For this reason I have included works of outright biographical origin (Alice James's *Diary*, Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*), and included accounts of fictions which are heavily autobiographical (Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* or Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights*). For this reason, too, I like to use the word 'narrative' in place of 'novel': it frees us from prescriptive and proscriptive notions of form.

'Narrative' also has a pedigree as a term used by women to defend their work against accusations of formalistic incoherence. Willa Cather was attacked because *Death Comes for the Archbishop* seemed to possess little conventional coherence. She replied:

I am amused that so many of the reviews of this book begin with the statement: 'This book is hard to classify'. Then why bother? Many more assert vehemently that it is not a novel. Myself, I prefer to call it a narrative. In this case I think that term more appropriate.¹⁰

Cather's nonchalance ('Then why bother?') is an index of the ease with which many women have transgressed the boundaries of genre. Cather had opened up her novel to include anecdotes and characters drawn directly from the history of the Spanish Southwest; her fiction appeared to many critics too close to history or biography. But this response predicates an ideal of fiction as flexible, narratologically relaxed, open to mixture, impatient with rigid classifications. Many of the key works of the past century are hybrid texts of indeterminate genre; the female writer has often worked as an amalgamator of disparate registers and forms. Cather blended history with fictional reconstruction; Flannery O'Connor wedded dense theological symbolism with the twists-and-turns of the magazine short story; Susan Sontag and Joyce Carol Oates have repeatedly fused genres to create a new fictional typology.

Even Cather would have to accept one form of classification: the marking of temporal boundaries, of beginnings and endings. This study encompasses a period from the 1890s to the 1990s; it charts a genealogy from the breaking-up of Victorian fictional models in the *fin-de-siècle* through to the formulation of a radical communitarian fiction by Toni Morrison at the next century's end. The image of the writerly genealogy or tree is an organic one, and implies an ongoing process of growth and succession (and, therefore, of growing interconnections). Books may themselves be made of trees, but cannot mimic this exfoliation. My study thus draws to a conclusion with writers born just before the Second World War (Oates, Sontag, Ozick, Morrison).