

Religion and Sexuality in American Literature

ANN-JANINE MOREY

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale



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Although sometimes religion and sexuality are treated as an aberrant theme in American literary and religious history, American writers from Nathaniel Hawthorne to John Updike have been fascinated with the connection between religious and sexual experience. Through the voice of American fiction, *Religion and Sexuality in American Literature* examines the relations of body and spirit (religion and sexuality) by asking two basic questions: How have American novelists handled the interaction between religious and sexual experience? Are there instructive similarities and differences in how male and female authors write about religion and sexuality? Using both canonical and noncanonical fiction, Ann-Janine Morey examines novels dealing with the ministry as the medium wherein so many of the tensions of religion and sexuality are dramatized and then moves to contemporary novels that deal with moral and religious issues through metaphor. Based upon a sophisticated and selective application of metaphor theory, deconstruction, and feminist postmodernism, Morey argues that while American fiction has replicated many traditional animosities, there are also some rather surprising resources here for commonality between men and women if we acknowledge and understand the intimate relationship between language and physical life.

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CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE
AND CULTURE

*Religion and Sexuality in
American Literature*

For Robert Detweiler and Todd Hedinger

Language is like shot silk; so much depends
upon the angle at which it is held.

—John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

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Small portions of the book were first tested in different contexts. The comparison between Updike and Frederic (Chapter 2) is adapted from "Embodiment and the American Imagination," *Modern American Cultural Criticism* (NEH: Proceedings of the Conference, March 1983): 39–45; the discussion in Chapter 6 comparing Updike, Percy, and Gass is expanded from "Religion and Sexuality in Walker Percy, William Gass and John Updike: Metaphors of Embodiment in the Androcentric Imagination," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LI/4 (December 1983): 595–609; and the discussion of "in/out" in Chapter 8 is drawn from "The Old In/Out," in *The Daemonic Imagination: Biblical Text and Secular Story*, ed. Robert Detweiler and William Doty (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 169–79. A version of Chapter 5 first appeared as "The Reverend Idol and Other Parsonage Secrets: Women Write Romances about Ministers, 1880–1950," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6 (Spring 1990): 87–103. My thanks for the permissions granted from all these sources. I would also like to thank Joyce Carol Oates and Raymond I. Smith, the owners of "Open Air" by Carolyn Plochmann, for their permission to reproduce the painting on the dust jacket.

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Introduction

While I was writing this book, I was invited to speak to a church women's group. Upon what topic, it was inquired, might I address the gathering?

"My research deals with religion and sexuality in American fiction," I replied.

"Oh!" (punctuated with a noncomedic pause). "We'll have to tone that down a bit," responded the respectable female on the other end of the line. "This is a serious group of people, and the men will want to join the women for the lecture."

I was amused by the idea that in the 1980s putting "religion" and "sexuality" in the same sentence could produce a minor consternation, for my research was clearly indicating that, historically speaking, Americans have long been familiar with the partnership of religion and sexuality, even if it is professed to be a dangerous public topic for an audience of mixed sex.

There is nothing intrinsically antagonistic about religion and sexuality except inasmuch as a particular culture defines the two experiences as conflictual. Hinduism, for example, is structured by the forcefield of sacred sexuality, and many Native American and African religions similarly incorporate the mystery and power of human sexuality as expressions of carefully controlled sacred energy. Cultural realms dominated by monotheism (in this book, the monotheism is Christianity), however, treat religion and sexuality as a binary opposition – a tensive pairing in which "religion" is the dominant term, "sexuality" the lesser term. Twentieth-century wisdom, then, operates upon a reluctant and uneasy acknowledgment of a relationship between religion and sexuality.

The response of twentieth-century writers, readers, and critics to the intersection of religion and sexuality is periodically continuous with nineteenth-century treatment. For all their reputation for repression, nineteenth-century citizens were at least as aware as we are, if not more so, of the fascinating, combustible possibilities of religion and sexuality.

The lore of camp meetings and revivals, after all, was that at events of such prodigal emotionality "more souls were made than saved," and "one old timer remarked that the encampments at Rock Spring in Lincoln County, North Carolina, 'had been mating grounds for that state for fifty years.'"¹ During that period of millennialism, numerous sectarian groups flourished whose goal was to facilitate earthly perfection by realizing purity in community living. Three of these experiments – by the Shakers, the Oneida community, and the Mormons – sought to inaugurate the kingdom by perfecting sexual relations here on earth. That the Shakers are known for their celibacy, the Mormons for polygamy and reproductive abundance, and the Oneidans for free love and eugenics does not indicate their marginality, but rather the fact that each group surfaced something that can be traced right back to the heart of respectable, middle-class culture – the partnership of religious and sexual experience.²

The mutuality of religion and sexuality is not just a novelty of nineteenth-century circumstance. Harold Frederic's comment about his contemporaries' views of sexual appetite can be applied to twentieth-century fastidiousness toward religiosexual connections: "Most people regard it as something so sacred they cannot bring themselves to discuss the conditions attending it – hence our present muddle."³ Certainly, twentieth-century arts and letters suffer from no lack of sexually explicit material, but we have yet to cultivate a responsible public conversation about the intertwining of these two basic human passions.

An overabundance of religious energy is commonly dismissed as "nothing but" repressed sexuality, but as Chapter 1 demonstrates, this reductive move violates the integrity of religious experience without enhancing the reputation of sexuality. At the same time, the persistent tendency of religious persons to subordinate and control sexual energy under the guise of this or that doctrinal authority works a similar scornful devaluation upon the integrity of sexual experience. Suppose the values were reversed, and we revered sexuality while regarding religious behavior with suspicion and disdain. What if sexual people sought to reg-

1 Bernard A. Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River: The Story of the Great Revivalists and Their Impact upon Religion in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958), 36; Charles A. Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting: Religion's Harvest Time* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955), 209.

2 For two excellent and complementary studies, see Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias – the Shakers, the Mormons and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981). Kern takes a psychological approach to his material, whereas Foster examines these communities in more sociological terms.

3 A Saunterer in the Labyrinth [Harold Frederic], "Musings on the Question of the Hour," *Pall Mall Budget* 33 (August 13, 1885): 12.

ulate the activities of religious people and claimed that religion could occur only in private, but those activities would be subject to public modification and scrutiny regardless of the will of the individuals involved; that certain religious aids and symbols (crosses with dead bodies hanging on them, for example) were prohibited as antithetical to human decency? Religious book vendors would be regularly prosecuted as community menaces, and churches and ministers would periodically be brought to court as dangerous to the healthy expression of physical pleasure, love, and public well-being.

Indeed, several of the outspoken critics of religious institutions writing in the first half of the twentieth century (Chapter 1) championed the ascendancy of healthy sexuality over the morbidity of religious denial, so this is not such an outlandish proposition. In its exaggeration through reversal, however, we recognize that religious institutions have a powerful investment in regulating human sexuality while proclaiming and preserving the distance between the spiritual and carnal portions of human beings. The determined application of so-called higher religious values to issues of public and private sexual morality – especially where the sovereignty of women's bodies is concerned – makes understanding the relation between religious and sexual energy ever more pressing.

In Western Christian theology, the intimate connection between religion and sexual experience has its basis in Incarnation theology – the Word made flesh, the spirit joined with the body – and the promise that humans participate in this divine conjunction. Western theology polarizes this condition, however, seeing the sexual body as an unreliable container for a captive spirit. I refer to this unreconciled relation of body and spirit as “embodiment,” and I am interested in how the doubled resonance of this term (theological, biological) forces one to reflect on the mutuality of body and language in the tradition of American writing.

I am also interested in how such matters of body and spirit are defined in terms of male and female. As we know, in the Western tradition women symbolize carnality and fallen humanity, men symbolize spirituality and redemptive possibility. Presumably the language and thought issuing from the male body is more objective, rational, and literarily creative than that produced by the female, for the culturally authoritative male voice has always assumed the deleterious effect of the female body upon a woman's mind and spirit. No such harmful correspondence is assumed between the male body and mind, however. This sense of superior male mind and body is one reason why the culturally dominant male has presented himself as the linguistic and experiential norm of humanity, when, in fact, the very claim itself is proof that the male mind is no more or less influenced by the physiology of the male body than

is the female mind by the female body. It is intellectually dishonest to argue that we should transcend the specifics of language in order to recognize a universal ground of religious experience (as traditional commentators do quite often) and yet use androcentric metaphors and symbols so consistently that we cannot but be persuaded that the specifics of the language are part of the definition. Male and female sexuality are not symmetrical, exchangeable values in the cultural-theological world. Often they are not even complementary. The androcentrism of the traditional metaphors of embodiment is an essential ingredient in the language of religion and sexuality, and *our* present muddle stems in part from the persistent conflation of language with the thing itself.

Two basic questions, then, have shaped my work. First, how have American novelists handled the interaction between religious and sexual experience? Second, are there instructive similarities and differences in how male and female authors write about embodiment? The originating terms of my study, "religion and sexuality," are shaped by the Western theological tradition as it has been expressed by the white male author writing in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant America. Although this represents a relatively narrow base when considered against the diversity of American culture, white males are the ones responsible for shaping and defining our received sense of literary heritage. That this definition of our literary culture is in need of renovation is without question, but such a reassessment should begin with these originating voices.

As one of several steps toward renovation, I have selected canonical *and* noncanonical novels for study, specifically, those that use the Protestant church and clergy as definitive players, or novels that dramatize theological perplexity about embodied life without any particular reference to churches or clergy. My *general* focus on Protestantism as an institutional and cultural force is both a practical and historically grounded decision. First, I needed to establish some manageable limits to my reading. Second, I take seriously the spirit of H. R. Niebuhr's affirmation that "both history and religious consensus support the statement that Protestantism is America's only national religion and to ignore that fact is to view the country from a false angle."⁴ That said, however, I have entertained no absolute rule in this regard. Catholics and Protestants share many a generalized presupposition about the sexual body and religious experience, and, moreover, I am much less interested in institutional history than I am in the diffused cultural history of Christian

4 H. R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1959), 17.

ideas about religion and sexuality as seen through the literary vision of white male writers.

Paired with these male-authored novels are novels written by nineteenth- and twentieth-century white women, most of which are not recognized as classic documents of American literary history. These woman-authored works set in motion my second question: Are there instructive differences in the ways in which men and women have written about embodiment? Indeed, this second question greatly complicates the first, for by consulting women-authored texts as equal authorities on such matters, the very terms of the question – “religion” and “sexuality” – are jeopardized, along with all the traditional language of embodiment called forth in the male-authored texts. Writing as persons circumscribed and marginalized by the master narrative, women both challenge and confirm traditional language in ways that displace, but do not destroy, the boundaries of androcentric language.

Unfortunately for intellectual orderliness, however, sex-dividing fiction does not produce a tidy arrangement of gender allegiance, a messy reality that forces my second question back upon itself. As I began my writing, it was my intention to use “androcentric” and “gynocentric” to refer to how writers situate gender in fictional worlds without automatically assuming that the sex of the writer would determine the gender-centrism of his or her vision. Theoretically, not all male authors are androcentric; not all female authors are gynocentric. My intentions for this terminology have proved more noble in the abstract than in practice, however, because all the male authors I discuss are androcentric (with the interesting exception of one or two nineteenth-century writers), whereas women writers are far more divided in their point of view. The women writers in Chapter 5, for example, are distinctly male-identified in their outlook whereas the women writing from the context of feminist activism of the late twentieth century are much closer to a gynocentric vision. The variety of gender vision found in women authors is a function of how much women may be divided against themselves as females in a male-dominated culture, a dilemma taken up in Chapter 7.

What I do here, then, is create a temporary order by assuming that biological/cultural identity is sufficiently related and enough of a cultural factor to look for a male- and female-identified language in male and female authors, respectively, while offering part-time acknowledgment of a difference between biological sex and the cultural constructions of gender through a necessarily inconsistent usage of terms like “androcentric” and “gynocentric.” Ironically, in order to challenge the androcentric use of male universality, I have had to rely on another problematic

universal, that of “woman.” Current feminist discussion renders this an equally troublesome structural move on at least two fronts. First, it moves my position uncomfortably close to essentialism, which seems to me to be a useful stage in terms of the continuing discussion of differences between women and men, but is also reductive of women (and men) to an anatomical, albeit mystical, destiny. Second, some women have suggested that the construct “woman” replicates the hegemony of white male in the form of the white, feminist female who, having denounced the male oppressor as a false universalizer, proclaims herself as a universal voice. In the interests of preserving the cultural and racial integrity of their experience, African-American womanists do not want to be classified with white women, for example, and lesbian women have articulated a similar separatist outlook. “Woman,” in other words, may no longer be used uncritically to cover the diversity of female culture any more than “male” may be used to cover the diversity of the culture at large.

One idea I have found helpful in thinking through my problematic use of “woman” comes from Margaret Homans’s discussion of the uniqueness of women’s writing as “(ambiguously) nonhegemonic,” a description of the equivocal position women hold relative to normative androcentrism. When novelists are writing self-consciously as women, “they have more in common with ‘(ambiguously) nonhegemonic’ women of the ruling class and race than with nonhegemonic men, and that, speaking descriptively, complicity with an oppressive male authority is a shared woman’s experience.”⁵ Or, as Carolyn Heilbrun puts it, “the sense of being oppressed and stigmatized by the male world (even if one sleeps with it) is something that unites women”⁶ beyond racial difference or sexual preference. In this study I concentrate on the white female authors who were in most immediate and intimate conversation with their white male peers. I do not take their viewpoint as unilaterally representative for *all* women; I do take their viewpoint as pertinent to women in general. As Susan Bordo comments, “while it is imperative to struggle continually against racism and ethnocentrism in all its forms, it is impossible to be ‘politically correct,’ for all ideas (no matter how ‘liberatory’ in some contexts or for some purposes) are condemned to be haunted by a voice from the margins . . . awakening us to what has

5 Margaret Homans, “‘Her Very Own Howl’: The Ambiguities of Representation in Recent Women’s Fiction,” *Signs* 9 (Winter 1983): 200. Homans borrows this term from Rachel Blau duPlessis and the members of Workshop 9, “For the Etruscans: Sexual Difference and Artistic Production – the Debate over a Female Aesthetic,” in *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 128–56.

6 Carolyn Heilbrun, “A Response to Writing and Sexual Difference,” in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 297.