

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

*Structures and Strategies
of Contemporary
Feminist Narrative*

Molly Hite

Cornell University Press

ITHACA AND LONDON

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**THE OTHER SIDE
OF THE STORY**

MOLLY HITE

The Other Side of the Story

AND STRATEGIES OF
FEMINIST NARRATIVES

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*Structures and Strategies of
Contemporary Feminist Narratives*

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"One of the first overviews of contemporary fiction by women, and one which is critically sophisticated, intellectually lucid, and textually nuanced. The work explores the promising question of how to synthesize feminist reading of women writers with post-structuralist theory about overturning dichotomized thinking, especially in light of the fact that, in post-structuralist theories, fictional experimentation is coded as feminine, but women as originators, as authors, are blanked out. A very important topic, contributing to debates in theory and in literary history."

—Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Department of English, Temple University

According to Molly Hite, a number of the most influential women writing contemporary fiction—notably Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing, Alice Walker, and Margaret Atwood—are attempting innovations in narrative form that are more radical in their implications than the dominant modes of fictional experimentation characterized as postmodernist. In *The Other Side of the Story* Hite makes the point that these innovations, which distinguish the genre she calls contemporary feminist narrative, are more radical precisely because their context is the critique of a culture and a literary tradition apprehended as profoundly masculinist.

Implicit in the post-Enlightenment notion of story, Hite says, is the assumption that the coherence of one line of narration rests on the suppression of "other sides," alternative versions that might give the same sequence of events an entirely different set of emphases and values. Noting that fiction by women has historically expressed this "other side," Hite observes that the literary movements of the twentieth century which arose in opposition to realism have strong affinities with a feminist interrogation of the presumptions encoded in realist conventions. But she also perceives important distinctions between the writers of contemporary feminist narrative and postmodernists: the women writers she discusses are equally concerned with the languages of high and low culture, for instance, but are differently implicated in these

(continued on back flap)

MOLLY
HITE

The Other Side of the Story
Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narratives

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**THE OTHER SIDE
OF THE STORY**

For Patricia G. Hite and F. Herbert Hite

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thanks to its Women's Caucus), the Doris Lessing Society, and most of all the Cornell University English Department, whose members encouraged and supported this work from its beginnings.

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MOLLY HITE

Ithaca, New York

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Introduction

This book began with a question I first formulated some years ago in all innocence: Why don't women writers produce postmodernist fiction?

Like so many questions of the "Why don't women . . . ?" variety, this one initially seemed both straightforward and plausible, which is to say, neither particularly ambiguous nor particularly implicated in a network of masculinist assumptions. As far as ambiguity went, the possibility had not occurred to me. I meant by the question something fairly simple: it appeared evident to the point of being a truism that the important male fiction writers of the period after 1960 were characteristically engaged in certain kinds of stylistic and structural innovation and that the important female fiction writers of the period were engaged in no sort of innovation at all. If this assessment of the situation of contemporary writing now strikes me as so naïve that it amounts to purblind complicity, I will add that whenever I brought up my "Why don't women writers . . . ?" question—most often in feminist critical circles—people not only took my meaning in exactly the way that I had intended it, but responded with great interest, "Yes, why don't they?" and immediately began to propose possible answers. I suspect that I would get the same kinds of response today from many people, including many feminists.

Of course, addressing the question forced me to move rapidly from "Why don't they . . . ?" to "What *do* they do?" at which point

a whole other world opened up, the other side of this particular metanarrative about how men and women write. This book contends that a number of the most eminent and influential women writing in the contemporary period are attempting innovations in narrative form that are *more* radical in their implications than the dominant modes of fictional experiment, and more radical precisely inasmuch as the context for innovation is a critique of a culture and a literary tradition apprehended as profoundly masculinist. But I did not end up trying to admit a select group of female—and feminist—writers to the emergent canon of postmodernism. I now believe that one reason Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing, Alice Walker (whom I consider in relation to her literary progenitor Zora Neale Hurston), and Margaret Atwood have not been more widely regarded as innovative narrative strategists is that they seem, as a group, recognizably distinct from the postmodernists: equally concerned with the languages of high and low culture, for instance, but differently implicated in these languages, similarly aware of the material and cultural conditions of their own writing but calling attention to this status in more complicated and more ideologically charged ways.¹ In particular, experimental fictions by women seem to share the decentering and disseminating strategies of postmodernist narratives, but they also seem to arrive at these strategies by an entirely different route, which involves emphasizing conventionally marginal characters and themes, in this way *re-centering* the value structure of the narrative.²

This claim for the highly experimental nature of recent women's

¹Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), offers an intelligent and accessible overview of the conditions and defining features of the postmodernist narrative—and establishes in addition the masculine and maculinitist characteristics of this category of writing. My *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983) aims to situate Pynchon as an exemplary postmodernist and, to this end, discusses implications for narrative of specifically modernist and postmodernist ontological premises. See especially pp. 3–10 and 13–45. Although I am explicitly concerned here with four widely read and widely accepted female writers, my list is in no way intended to be exhaustive. A few of the writers (in English) whose fictions also belong under the rubric of contemporary feminist narrative are Kathy Acker, Christine Brooke-Rose, Angela Carter, Michelle Cliff, Elizabeth Jolley, Toni Morrison, Grace Paley, Joanna Russ, and Fay Weldon.

²I deal more explicitly with one instance of an “entirely different route” in “(En)Gendering Metafiction: Doris Lessing’s Rehearsals for *The Golden Notebook*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 34, no. 3 (1988), 481–500.

writing may strike many readers as unusual—perhaps even outrageous—given the various institutional contexts within which we read, describe, debate, evaluate, categorize and analyze contemporary fiction. But these contexts are no more innocent of masculinist presuppositions than my original question, and they condition critical practices that lead us to read innovative fiction by women back into a tradition that presumes women's writing is inherently conservative or flawed or both. Such contexts serve to mute female difference, effectively intervening in women writers' attempts to articulate what I call here the other side of the story.

I take it as a premise that it is possible to read other-wise, in ways that acknowledge female-created violations of convention or tradition as deliberate experiments rather than inadvertent shortcomings.³ The silencing of female attempts to articulate an "other side" to the dominant stories of a given culture is never complete, in that this "side" is not in any absolute sense unimaginable or inconceivable (or outside the Symbolic order, in Lacanian terms).⁴ My readings imply a somewhat different account—at once less drastic and more political—not only of the relation of women to language but also of the relation of the feminist writer to a narrative tradition that works to inscribe her within its own ideological codes. I return briefly to this issue at the conclusion of the book, at a point where I hope it will be more evident that the key question for feminist narrative is not "Can there be discursive practices that to some extent evade or undermine masculinist presuppositions?" but "Given such discursive practices, under what conditions and using what strategies are we most likely to discern them?"

Quite early in my reading, I found that I was appropriating the

³Important precedents for this contention and for my own methodology are Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); and Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

⁴See Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), especially pp. 1–39, for a feminist treatment of an alternative, "maternal" mode of expression, which manages to appropriate the Lacanian account of cognitive and linguistic development while avoiding the implication of silencing inherent in the Kristevan premise of a semiotic order.

metaphor of an "other side" to a story purporting to be "the" story and that this figure was singularly fruitful for my own consideration of contemporary feminist narrative. Cliches tend to have unanticipated potency in relevant contexts, and certainly the notion of telling the other side of the story in many ways describes the enterprise of feminist criticism, perhaps even of feminist theorizing generally. Much of the power of the metaphor here derives from the fact that it makes visible the association of alterity—otherness—with woman as a social, cultural, and linguistic construction: Other *as* woman, or in Luce Irigaray's provocative conflation, the Other Woman. But the other side of the story is also, if implicitly, another story. The notion that stories inevitably both obscure and encode other stories has been axiomatic to our understanding of narrative since at least the eighteenth century; when construed as repressed or suppressed stories of *the Other*, these other stories become the enabling conditions for the writing and reading of feminist narrative.

I

Stories in the modern sense are always *somebody's* stories: even when they have a conventionally omniscient narrator they entail a point of view, take sides.⁵ Such a perspectival notion of story implies that the coherence of one line of narration rests on the suppression of any number of "other sides," alternative versions that might give the same sequence of events an entirely different set of emphases and values. One immediate consequence is that even though conventions governing the selection of narrator, protagonist, and especially plot restrict the kinds of literary production that count as stories in a given society and historical period, changes in emphasis and value can articulate the "other side" of a culturally mandated story, exposing the limits it inscribes in the process of affirming a dominant ideology.

⁵Ian Watt observes that the rise of realism in the late eighteenth century denoted "a belief in the individual apprehension of reality through the senses"; because stories in these terms are ultimately grounded in individual apprehension, they entail a point or points of view even when they employ omniscient narrators. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), p. 14.

For example, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both male and female authors produced what Nancy Miller has termed "heroine's texts," novels with sexually vulnerable female protagonists whose entire futures turn on the possibility of being integrated into the surrounding society through a successful marriage.⁶ As a number of feminist critics have recently demonstrated, many of the female writers during that period made it at least part of their project to articulate the "other side" of this story, stressing the constrictions of the romance plot and thus how this plot enforces the prevailing cultural construction of female identity and destiny.⁷ Jane Austen foregrounded the economic necessity motivating marriage and, through the exemplary situations of her peripheral female characters, showed how likely it was that marriage would prove a painful necessity, psychologically damaging if not spiritually annihilating. Charlotte Brontë modified or withheld a narrative closure that her novels revealed inevitably to be an enclosure, ultimately entrapping the heroine. George Eliot made a central theme of the female martyrdom inherent in both the "dysphoric" and the "euphoric" endings of the romance plot—that is, not only in those endings that resolved the situation created by the sexual susceptibility of the protagonist by terminating her life but in those endings that resolved the same situation by absorbing her into a conventionally happy marriage.⁸ Indeed, one reason that "heroine's texts" written by women remained vital for so long and can still engage reader expectations may well be that in revealing the "other side" of an apparently simple and familiar story, female novelists imbedded a cultural critique that introduced complication and novelty.

⁶Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text: Reading in the French and English Novel, 1722-1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

⁷Some of these readings now constitute cornerstones of the Anglo-American feminist tradition. Among the most important are Mary Jacobus, "The Buried Letter: *Villette*," and "Men of Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*," both reprinted in her *Reading Women: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 41-61 and pp. 62-79; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); and Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

⁸Miller, *The Heroine's Text*, p. xi.