



# ***FREE WOMEN***

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*ETHICS AND*

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*AESTHETICS IN*

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*TWENTIETH-CENTURY*

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*WOMEN'S FICTION*

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***KATE FULLBROOK***

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# Free Women

## Ethics and Aesthetics in Twentieth- Century Women's Fiction

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# Introduction

This study of major twentieth-century women writers is based on three governing ideas. The first is that the process of establishing ethical values itself has radically changed, in that the moral imagination is no longer dominated by rigid codes created by formalist theological or philosophical institutions. Ethics has become pragmatic, situational, dispersed, an investigation of sensibilities rather than interpretation of laws. The second is that fiction remains one of the most subtle and complex means of ethical interrogation and utterance. The third is that all the authors treated here are concerned with issues crucial to the feminist reader interested in charting recent changes in the moral imagination with regard to women. What I wish to explore in this book, by considering the work of some of the most skilful writers of the past hundred years, are the ways in which women novelists have been engaged in restructuring the ethical landscape by devising new patterns for assessing moral success or failure. It is my major contention that they have thus helped to change the topography of ethics by shifting the terms in which the good for women is defined.

The ethical inflections in women's fiction, however, cannot be considered without a sense of the connection between feminism and ethics, nor without some further notion of the situation of ethics itself within the modern period.

All varieties of feminism have, at their centre, a core of moral commitment founded on the drive to secure freedom and justice for women. This ethical engagement informs

arguments about women's position in areas as diverse as politics, religion and psychoanalysis. It features, though often in a hidden or inarticulated form, in feminist theory of all kinds. As far as I know, no variety of feminism defines its purpose, or makes its demands for access to justice or power, without an appeal to values. And because women have been treated with condescension, injustice and a general misogynistic shoddiness by the majority of important male philosophers from Aristotle to Sartre who have shaped western ethical traditions,<sup>1</sup> the moral status of women needs to be thought out with care, and, in some senses, thought out anew, in order to effect a radical revision in the way they are situated in relation to moral choice.

There is no doubt that feminism wishes to effect such a change, but the problem feminists confront, along with anyone else interested in significantly altering cultural values, is the deep-seated moral relativism of the modern period. This relativism is, of course, also of great use to feminism as it provides a space in which to challenge traditions of subservience and limitation with regard to women, an ethical heritage whose history threads back to the beginnings of our culture. But the desire to secure the foundations of ethical thought also seems, more than anything, to have precipitated feminist leaps into biological or historical determinism, into mystic, or, at times, even totalitarian thinking in the feminist wave of the last twenty years. The kinds of new ethical foundations feminists have proposed look suspiciously like the old, discriminatory ones that supposedly are under review. The reasons for these backward leaps are understandable. Rage against women's ill-treatment in feminist writers from Shulamith Firestone to Mary Daly gives rise to desires for female supremacy and an ethics of complete female separatism. A wish to claim recognition for traditional feminine virtues has led to the development of a morality based on 'maternal thinking' by writers such as Adrienne Rich, Sara Ruddick and Nel Noddings. The present cycle of interest in psychoanalysis has seen attempts, from the American work of Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein to the revised French

freudianism of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray to posit a separate, 'female' psyche which is alternately described as the source of moral values of care and nurturing, or of fruitfully anarchic and rebellious play. In these diverse but representative examples of recent attempts to rethink ethics for women, women continue, as has been the case throughout the history of moral thought, to be bracketed off from men, defined by their biological capacity for bearing children, or their culturally assigned duties in raising them, or situated in a psychological, if purportedly privileged, ghetto that locks them outside the making of meaning, culture and history. In many ways, much recent feminist thinking appears devoted to reinstating precisely the limited definitions of women's potentialities which feminism came into being to combat.<sup>2</sup>

These confusions strongly mark recent feminist discussions of women and ethics. Rival definitions of feminism place equality against liberty, conscious wishes against unconscious psychological formations, and, at times, choice itself against the uncontrollable drives of women's supposedly innate natures. Feminists are often baffled by the fragmentation and diversity of arguments cancelling each other out, which define the good for women in ways so different as to be totally incompatible.

This specifically feminist dilemma is part of the same problem faced by anyone engaged in thinking about ethics since the Enlightenment. The debates about women and ethics that run clearly through the work of Kant and Hume, to Rousseau, Paine and Wollstonecraft, through Mill, and, in the twentieth century, through philosophical writing by women from Simone de Beauvoir to Mary Daly, are based not only on increasing attention to the idea of 'natural rights' and the need for justice in honouring those rights, but also on increasing understanding of morality as a product of human history and human choice. Paradoxically, however, the concept of natural rights itself evaporates as the quasi-divine idea of nature that supported it is understood as one more culturally-created ideal, invented to fill the vacuum left by the modern removal of the supernatural from the philosophical arena. In the



process of realising that it can appeal to no moral absolutes, humanity is left both free and bereft. The exhilarating idea of liberty is balanced by the conviction that humanity is in moral free fall, with nothing by which to orient itself except the values it can, itself, construct. Nietzsche, to whom the women writers considered in this study turn with surprising frequency, in view of his misogyny, emphasised this idea in his claim that the sole remaining base from which action can proceed is the individual will to power. Existentialism, which has had the greatest impact on twentieth-century moral perspectives of any attempt to articulate the basis of moral choice, makes a related diagnosis of the fundamental ambiguity of moral systems. The most characteristic ways of thinking about ethics in the modern period are those which stress the proud or abject loneliness of the individual in an irrational moral universe.<sup>3</sup>

As Alasdair MacIntyre, a philosopher whose work can be put to significant use by feminist thinkers, argues in *After Virtue*, there remain no unassailable moral premises on which to build in the modern period. The late twentieth century is left with the shards and splinters of ethical systems which have irrevocably broken down, and which, although the fragments are used as if they made sense, do not fit together in any coherent fashion. As MacIntyre says, we go back incessantly to first principles in ethical arguments and can go no further, having to rely ultimately on individual inclination to guide the selection of which principles to favour.

This philosophical circumstance presents great opportunities for feminist thought as well as great dangers. At worst, claims for justice or equality for women rest on no firmer an ethical base than claims made for any other group. One might, from this position, claim the end of morality and abandon humanity to a valueless future. But since it is unlikely that human beings will turn from the desire to perceive life in an ethical way, one might describe the shift in ethics which has taken place since the Enlightenment, and accelerated in the twentieth century, in a different manner. The erosion of 'official' moralities whose authority was

securely located in the hands of male-controlled institutions like the church, or, indeed, the academic philosophical establishment itself, has given way to a more diverse, pluralistic, egalitarian examination of values. Rather than being a matter of implementing moral codes handed down from authoritative sources, ethical investigation has become more dispersed throughout the population. It has also become more flexible, consisting less of the drawing up of laws and emerging instead as an adjustable response to changing issues, problems and situations. This is a circumstance which women have used to their advantage. And as fiction continues, as it always has done, to contain dimensions which speak directly to the ethical dilemmas of the times in which it is made, the novels of twentieth-century women writers are an important contributory source of the imagining of new values for women.

If feminism is, as it must be, a progressive ethical project aimed at securing justice for women both as individuals and as members of a previously devalued and exploited group, the kinds of ethical revaluations offered by twentieth-century women novelists are of central interest to feminists. The tentativeness and fluidity with which these ethical elements of their fiction must be regarded, assorts well with the suggestions made by women philosophers from Simone Weil to Iris Murdoch, who argue for the need for the development of an ethics based not on adherence to tradition and law, but one based on attention to experience, memory and intense apprehension of the other.<sup>4</sup> Such an ethical impulse avoids the versions of determinism and irrationalism which make moral choice impossible or absurd, avoids the retrogressive pull which affects the feminist imagination at the moment.

But recent feminist thinking is not all misguided. Marxist, socialist and liberal versions of feminism have been profoundly aware of the ways in which women are neither wholly determined nor wholly free. Every facet of life – from language, to clothing, to attitudes toward education and work, to social and cultural paradigms – affects women in ways that are not simply chosen. Naïve individualism was never a

possible stance for feminists. Women are born into social structures which they did not make, but from which they nevertheless benefit or suffer, and which place boundaries around them making it hard to alter who and what they are, what they can say, what it is possible to think and do, or how they perceive ethical decisions. Women, like men, are irretrievably creatures of history.

But history is not a monolith, and individuals, even if constrained, are not totally or necessarily tied to pre-ordained functions or identities. One possible reaction, as MacIntyre rightly says, to an historically defined identity, is to rebel against it. Inherited imaginative traditions contain proposals of alternative worlds, visions of possible futures which leave conscious traces of possibilities yet to be enacted. As MacIntyre argues in a passage that itself contains significant suggestions for the feminist revision of ethical judgement:

We live out our lives, both individually and in our relationships with each other, in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future, a future in which certain possibilities beckon us forward and others repel us, some seem already foreclosed and others perhaps inevitable. There is no present which is not informed by some image of some future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a *telos* – or of a variety of ends and goals, towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present.<sup>5</sup>

From this point of view, what the future might look like depends on the substance and form of the stories or images of the future we make ourselves, and the value judgements we make depend not only on history of prior judgements but also on the total context of what can be imagined. As MacIntyre says, 'I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part"'. . . . there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources.'<sup>6</sup>

What the stories that form the potentially transformatory

stock of a culture address are instances of cultural disjunction, the moments when values conflict. The contents of consciousness are not historically static, and with changes in reports of what we have been conscious of, and in attempts to encode in language precisely those moments of intense attention to experience, pressure is brought to bear upon values to change. Problematic areas in moral judgement reveal themselves as conflicts in the stories cultures tell themselves about their condition. As Karl Popper argues in *Unended Quest*, this recognition of moral conflict is the source of the transformation of values itself: 'values emerge together with problems . . . values could not exist without problems; and neither values nor problems can be derived or otherwise obtained from facts.'<sup>7</sup> There is no fact/value split in ethics. Values are humanly devised, and it is only changing consciousness of the fractures within accepted thought which makes the process of transformation of values possible.

The fiction addressed in this study represents the struggle of women writers to bring to consciousness their intense apprehension of just the kinds of problems which, through their articulation, have pointed to new futures through their transformatory effect upon values as they relate to women. The work in which these writers are engaged reaches beyond the creation of new images of women, and beyond the persuasive force of the confessional novel of individual women's histories – two significant aspects of women's writing to which feminist literary critics have paid close attention. What I propose as the framework within which to read the novels treated in this volume, is the idea that these texts point to alternative futures, invent ethical perspectives which do not yet prevail, but which may be formed in the process of imagining, transcribing and reading them, futures which will certainly not be formed if they are not formulated and discussed. While the women writers considered here certainly do report on the conditions in which they live, they also invent and project new ethical sensibilities. This ethical dimension of women's writing does not try to establish a set of timeless rules or universal moral laws. Rather, it works to create conditions

for alternative ethical judgements within particular historical situations – usually viewed in new ways from new points of view – and thus create new futures through consciousness of the possibility of revision of values. As Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, ‘ethics does not furnish recipes’ for moral action.<sup>8</sup> Rather, these novels build conceptual frameworks within which the fractures in received moral ideas may be identified and alternative values established.

What I am particularly interested in examining here is precisely this revolutionary ethical drive in the fiction of central twentieth-century women novelists. While the details of the issues which the authors address change as the century proceeds, there is a series of ethically inflected problems which continually recur. All the writers selected are engaged, in various ways, in dismantling the dualistic oppositions associated with rigid gender boundaries. These categories are universally attacked as pernicious in any attempt to promote morally acceptable behaviour. From this follows a number of questions about society’s arrangements for women as opposed to men. Most of these issues, such as education, work, the relative economic positions of men and women, marriage, reproduction, and the care of children, bring into question further oppositions between public and private life which are seen to work to the disadvantage of women, and which are therefore identified as problems for society as a whole. Women’s sexuality, control of their fertility, and of interpretation of their psyches are seen as problematic, fractured, ready for revision. Constant appeals are made to radical traditions of both liberty and collective responsibility in attempts to find a workable balance between them that might secure women from isolation, while at the same time guaranteeing them enough autonomy to exist as discrete individuals and not simply as ciphers in a functional female category. Interestingly, none of the writers bracket women off from men. The dismantling of sexual dualism means that traditional notions of masculinity are as much subject to revision and interrogation as those of femininity. The texts tend to dramatise the effects on men of a postulated change in the definition of the good for women as well as the

effects on them if change does not occur. Finally, the emphasis on the specificity of women's experience as a corrective to the tendency to turn 'woman' into an absolute term, leads to questioning of other seemingly fixed categories such as race, nationality and class.

In all the writers selected for this study there is a recognition of how intricate human motivation and desire, social customs and the need for change always are. The adaptability of fiction for a presentation of complex factors is part of these writers' strength as delineators of moral issues. But this complexity has had other effects closely related to the kinds of aesthetic formations that women writers of this century have devised in the construction of their fiction. The redefinition of ethical concerns has been accompanied by related and necessary changes in modes of writing. One of my purposes in this study has been to chart the ways in which women have directed the aesthetic course of the novel in the twentieth century and the ways in which these changes are related to the ethical debates regarding women which their fiction so urgently addresses.

The writers examined here form a substantial part of the alternative women's canon of twentieth-century novelists which feminist literary critics have been identifying over the last twenty years. If, as Virginia Woolf claims, we do indeed think back through our mothers, these are all maternal voices which will repay attention. By carefully examining both the statements these writers have made about the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of their fiction, and the texts themselves, I hope to indicate the extraordinary range of the ethical revisions they propose, and the new ethical sensibilities the texts enact. Finally, I have hoped, in this study, to catch something of the great sweep of women's ethical and aesthetic literary achievement in this century through close attention to the texts of key authors. By looking at how women's fiction has served as a means for ethical debate and disclosure in the modern period, I hope to add to the pressure on the fissures which women have identified in the ethical ideology of our time.



# 1

## Edith Wharton: Sexuality, Money and Moral Choice

Modern considerations of the good for women consistently return to the issue of freedom. And the basic outlines of what the twentieth-century debate about freedom for women might entail are fully in place at the turn of the century in Edith Wharton's fiction. Wharton wrote steadily from the 1890s until the 1930s with all the resources of the realist tradition firmly under her control. Her work both reflects the state of the novel at the end of the nineteenth century and anticipates this century's developments in writing by and about women. The fiction, superficially so decorous and genteel, addresses an historical moment of collision of values. She summarises the issues surrounding the 'New Woman' of the late Victorian era – the woman ready to take control of her education, economic survival, and sexuality – and anticipates the wide-ranging changes for women that this access to greater freedom would bring. Wharton's fiction is well known for its dissection of corruption in the American and European ruling classes. But it is important to emphasise that she saw that particular social dominance as based on the artificial constriction of women. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out, Wharton's work runs parallel to Thorstein Veblen's critique of the American plutocracy in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. She analyses what it means to make the highest cultural goal for women the delegated conspicuous consumption of male wealth.<sup>1</sup> The list of abuses that follow from this ideological goal, to which the fiction repeatedly returns, forms a programmatic outline for feminism in the twentieth century.



Wharton sees women's sexuality as stifled or perverted or prostituted, and she examines the collaboration of men and women in this perverse social project. She is interested in the education of women and condemns the tradition of teaching privileged women to be strictly ornamental beings, willing to be passive objects of consumption by men. Wharton stresses the helplessness of women who are forced into predesigned roles with material destitution and exclusion from the clan as the prices for failure to conform to rules of feminine success. Further, she is highly aware of the ways in which this configuration of gender-linked abuses victimises the large sections of society which are needed to support a patriarchal controlling class. Wharton weaves into her deeply pessimistic series of nineteen novels and nearly one hundred novellas and short stories published between 1899 and 1938, an insistence that the foundations of social corruption of her time were built on the exploitation of women of both the ruling and the working classes, and on the deformed relationships which prevailed between individual members of the sexes. The central problem that her fiction addresses is that of how things might be made otherwise, how the passions and intellects of women might be freed in ways that would provide them with enough material resources to encourage development of their moral autonomy, and in this way, transform society as a whole.

Wharton's concentration on the changes in the milieu she knew best – that of fashionable, late nineteenth-century New York at a time when an older, leisured ruling class was being displaced by a new, cut-throat capitalist order – tends to obscure her analysis of the continuities of power. Her fiction is full of Darwinian metaphors: what goes on as the niceties of old New York are blown away in a revelatory rush of modernity, is a logical evolution rather than a revolution. Possibilities for change always take place for Wharton on the margins of an ever vicious power struggle for social control. The characters who concern her most deeply are those capable of moral 'mutation', those willing to entertain the possibility of acting outside of the herd. Wharton's own belief in the liberating influence of Nietzsche's idea of the exceptional