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Breaking the Ties that Bind: Literary Representations of the New Woman in American Society

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The American novel, Leslie Fiedler writes, "is different from its European prototypes, and one of its essential differences arises from its chary treatment of woman and of sex" (31). Indeed, American fiction written in the nineteenth century demonstrates a bias in favor of things male: in favor of hunting expeditions, whaling ships, and exploits in the wilderness. Ahab shaking his fist at the universe, or Huck, rejecting the corruption which the adult world calls civilization, and "lighting out for the territory" simply have no female counterparts. For American fiction, like American history, grows out of an active, pioneering principle, and if the early decades are replete with examples of female courage and indomitability, by the time of the nineteenth century, the ubiquitous forces of Puritanism, particularly in its pernicious Calvinist form, conspired against the establishment of the self-actualized, fully realized female heroes. Women figures were cast into fixed, self-limiting patterns which became, finally, a fictional typology. These women tend to be externally perceived, rigidly stereotyped, mythopoeic, or, even in the psychologically convincing characterization of Henry James, projections of a wished-for ideal. Even the most memorable among them manifest a disturbing insipidity and evince a neurasthenic rather than a vital response to the world.

It was not until American women writers found the uniqueness of their lives a worthy subject, which is to say, not until those lives began sufficiently to change, that the female hero, even in the hands of the most accomplished practitioners, was capable of entering the American imagination with the resonance and permanence of her fictional brothers. The emergence of this new woman began at the turn of the century and continued through the first quarter of the twentieth century. The so-called New Woman fiction, written during the highly transitional period of the turn of the century, not only engages with new ideals of womanhood but it also contains important connections with the literary traditions that precede and follow them. In *The Man-Made World* (1911) and "Coming Changes in Literature" (1915), Charlotte Perkins Gilman called for a "new" kind of fiction about women that would transcend conventional literary paradigms. In *The Man-Made World*, Gilman was calling for a literature that presented women with complexity and in a realistic variety of ways, rather than merely as innocent ingenues, angelic wives and mothers, or shameful fallen women. As she does in "Coming Changes in Literature," Gilman goes on to assert that the "art of fiction is being reborn these days" (123).

Gilman herself, as well as Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton, lived during the fascinating time of transition from the "old type of woman" to the "new." The fiction of all three authors reflects the challenges that this era posed, portraying in diverse ways women who transgress their conventional role and negotiate, with varying success, the ideals of New Womanhood. Other writers contemporary with Chopin, Wharton, and Gilman treated the New Woman in their fiction and presented challenges to the social prescriptions for female behavior. Their fiction was mainly concerned with "the indicators of power--gender, race, class, sexuality--that affect women's lives and [the] privileging of women's consciousness, women's subjectivity and, therefore, women's agency" (Rosenfelt 209). Unlike the old woman, the New Woman female hero leaves behind whatever power she had available to her in the familial community because, while safe, it is on the periphery of life. Her separation from the real workings of society makes her vulnerable to following a marginalized agenda, to a deathlike passivity that comes from being irrelevant.

What, in fact, does happen to the American woman's fiction at the turn of the century is a fictional embracing of the "new woman" philosophy surfacing at the time. As more and more women entered the work place and formed independent communities, and the public discussions of divorce and remarriage raged, women, who were themselves breaking out of the confines of marriage as their only choice and finding independence in work, wanted to see these experiences reflected in fiction. The "New Woman" fiction has come to represent this fiction that demonstrated both the frustration and restrictions placed on middle-class Victorian women, as well as the possibility of escape to a room of one's own, a career, and a man who can appreciate the female for her new found independence. This fiction, with its overt feminist rhetoric, decentered the ideals of True Womanhood as well as the domestic ideology and marriage telos by keeping its focus on the female hero's internal development and independence. As Eve Kornfield and Susan Jackson contend: "The creators of this fiction in America lived extraordinary lives, and, consciously or not, their lives affected their fiction" (74).

The ideal Victorian woman was being shaken in America by many revolutionary movements. Of course, nineteenth-century America was characterized by unprecedented change and tension. On the whole, this tumultuous age embodied diversity and multiplicity of elements and paradoxes. It was a "time of industrialization, knowledge explosion, immigration and vast population growth, urbanization, geographical expansion, changing race relationships, and the greatest armed conflict on American soil" (Howe 507). By the 1840-60 period, the contours of American Victorian culture were dramatically changing and evolving and steadily contributing and adding to the growing pains of a budding, unsettled society. In fact, the sweep of Modernization was forcefully under way at mid-century America, and rapid technological advances were in full swing, bringing about an increasing upward social mobility and restlessness. Also, the fluid and economically expanding American society seethed with intellectual movements and idealistic reforms that absorbed both elite and popular cultures: Bloomerism, Expansionism, Transcendentalism, Feminism (The Women's Rights Movement), domesticity, and the prominent issues of slavery and Abolitionism. Hence, nineteenth-century Americans faced profound changes in virtually all phases of their lives, changes that prompted their burgeoning growth into a continental power.

The emergence of a new capitalist and urbanized nineteenth-century society greatly changed traditional family life and the relationship of the home to economic production.

Industrialization, for instance, gradually separated economic production from the home. According to Rosemary R. Ruether, male work "became increasingly disconnected with the home and was collectivized in a separate sphere. They more and more lost their own productive work, as well as their integration with male work" (196-197). Women were confined to the home sphere and their functions were reduced primarily to that of consumer, child-rearer, and domestic caretaker. Women were determined by their reproductive system, which dictated their physical fragility, emotional passiveness, and homebound maternal role (Smith-Rosenberg 46-47). The Cult of True Womanhood was formulated and this in its own turn transformed the nonproductive women into "angels in the home" and "paragons of virtue." A "true woman" was supposed to possess the four cardinal feminine virtues of "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter 152). She was innocent, modest, and very content with the warmth and security of the home. She was pretty, elegant, and capable of amusing her husband, bringing up her children, and managing the household. Above all, her religious piety and her moral purity enabled her to inspire man to a more spiritual life. In the words of Anne Scott, she was expected to be "a natural teacher, and wise counselor to her husband and children" (5).

Of course, women were traditionally viewed by men as different and inferior creatures. Since Classical Greece, men had insisted that "man represented the mind, woman the body, man the creative principle, woman the reproductive impulse, man the heaven-born aspect of human nature, woman its earth-bound component" (Smith-Rosenberg 258). In his widely read and influential essay "Of Queen's Garden," John Ruskin relates man's qualities as active, speculative, and creative: "He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender" (135). "He is fitted for adventure, for war, and for conquest; whereas, woman is not fitted for this kind of activity. She should be protected from the hazards of the 'open world'" (136). "Her intellect is not for invention and creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision" (135). In his prescription of True Womanhood, Ruskin sums up late nineteenth-century social expectations of woman:

> So far as she rules [in the home], all must be right, or nothing else is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise--wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service—the true changefulness of woman (137).

True Womanhood was in fact a patriarchal ideology that expected woman to be perfect in her virtues but denied her autonomy as a full-fledged human being. It extolled her as an angel but restricted her role narrowly to the domestic sphere as a subservient caretaker. Women, especially middle- and upper-class women, became idle and decorative. They were what Olive Schreiner called a "sex parasite," or what Thorstein Veblen called a "conspicuous consumer" (77; 83). According to Veblen, women were constructed to appear autonomous but really were ornamental and decorative creatures, whose "conspicuous consumption" signifies men's wealth and power (83).

Just as there were women who unquestionably accepted this socially constructed role and tried hard to live up to the ideals of True Womanhood, there were also women who felt imprisoned by this narrowly defined place and openly defied patriarchal oppression. In the second half of the nineteenth century, women's defiance of patriarchal order and their demands for equal rights became a mass movement in America. Industrialization, as Ruether explains, completed the earlier marginalization of women by confining them strictly in the home, but it also created "a new level of contradiction between women's experience of their capacities and the shrunken and dependent place assigned to them" (9). As a result, women in larger numbers than ever before began to question the traditional ideologies of female subjugation and to challenge the "naturalness" of the separated spheres. Increasingly, women, as Smith-Rosenberg argues, left "the home in droves to purify the world, to elevate themselves, to fight injustice--to create meaningful and fulfilling female roles" (89).

Women, who found their traditionally inferior role intolerable, began to join hands and fight together for equal rights and equal opportunities. At the Seneca Fall Convention in 1848, which officially marked the beginning of the women's rights movement in the United States, Elizabeth Cady Stanton declared that the history of mankind had been "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman" and called for woman's suffrage and her equal participation in various trades, professions, and commerce (70-73). A female rebel, Margaret Fuller, in her influential book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), argued for a widening of woman's sphere, demanding "Let them be Sea-captains if they will." Within the next four decades, numerous national and countless State and city organizations cropped up all over the country. Among them, the National Woman Suffrage Association, the American Woman Suffrage Association, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Council of Women, the National Woman's Trade Union League, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union were the best known and most powerful.

These organizations exerted a considerable influence on the lives of late nineteenth-century American women, especially women writers, and on the social issues concerning them. Organizations, like the Women's Christian Temperance Union, formed in 1874, became what William L. O'Neill has called "safety valves by which frustrated women could find an outlet for talents and ambitions that home life could neither satisfy nor healthily contain" (43). Moreover, as the writer and feminist theoretician Charlotte Perkins Gilman pointed out, these organizations put women into "the broader contact and relationship so essential to social progress" (*The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 257). Repudiating conventional gender distinctions and restrictions, women became a novel social political phenomenon. They were the "New Women" of the late nineteenth- and the early twentieth-century. Young and unmarried, these "New Women" refused to submit themselves to social conventions and sought to live autonomous lives. Education, Smith-Rosenberg argues, was their "first self-conscious demand" (247). Many young women saw in college education "an opportunity for intellectual self-fulfillment and for an autonomous role outside the patriarchal family" (247). Smith-Rosenberg shows that college years prepared young women for roles outside the conventional home--roles that had heretofore been reserved for men (253). New Women came to define themselves through their own political and professional existence rather than through their domesticity, marriage, and motherhood.

In short, the New Women were highly educated, mostly single, and economically autonomous. Resenting indoctrinations that society imposed on women, they began to create an alternative self-image around the issues of female intellectual power, self-fulfillment, and non-domestic roles. They argued that gender distinctions were artificial, man-made constructions, and thus changeable. They asserted that women were as intelligent as men and therefore entitled to a career and to a public voice. They defied traditional properties and pioneered new roles for women. By the early twentieth century, the New Women had firmly established themselves within the professional world that had traditionally been defined as man's sphere (Smith-Rosenberg 176). They were self-conscious feminists who had rejected the idea of True Womanhood and openly challenged patriarchal ideologies of maleness and femaleness (Smith-Rosenberg 245-246). Between the 1890s and 1920s, the New Women, argues Smith-Rosenberg, "amassed greater political power and visibility than any other group of women in American experience" (256).

Women educational reformers, physicians, women writers and artists were the most visible of the New Women. In fact, the term "New Woman" was first used by the British novelist Sarah Grand, the pen name of Frances Elizabeth McFall, in reference to those who were dissatisfied with nineteenth-century prescriptions of femininity. In her essay "The New Aspects of the Woman Question," which appeared in the *North American Review*, Grand wrote that "the new woman" is one who "has been sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with the Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy" (272). However, it was popular novelist Ouida, the pen name of Marie Louise de la Remee, who selected the phrase and capitalized it for her rebuttal in May 1894:

> In the English language there are conspicuous at the present moment two words which designate two unmitigated bores: The Workingman and the Woman. The workingman and the Woman, the New Woman be it remembered, meet us at every page of literature written in the English tongue, and each is convinced that on its own especial W hangs the future of the world (610).

The New Woman fiction constitutes an important episode in women's literary history. It not only departs significantly from the sentimental novel that flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century, but it also strongly affirms the notion that women were primarily individuals with human needs for substantive work as well as political rights. What distinguishes the New Woman fiction from the sentimental novel is that the female hero's hostility to the patriarchal order is overt and grounded in her desire for self-actualization rather than for eros. She embarks on a quest to find meaningful work in a world ruled and dominated by men, consistently privileging her passion for self-expression or independence over her romantic attachments, important as those are to her. Female heroes in the sentimental novel also value their independence, but they tend to betray it, either by acting against their will or by rationalizing the advent of male power into their autonomous but incomplete lives. While pursuing her own course, the sentimental female hero spends most of the narrative disentangling her conflicted emotions about a man she experiences as more powerful than herself. The New Woman character, though not immune to emotional upset or even self-betrayal, is placed more firmly in a world of her own making and either finds a mate compatible with it or recommits herself to a woman's right to have a life apart from marriage. Even when she was unable to make a good love match, her vocational rewards tended to balance her romantic losses.

Though she may have been christened by a British novelist, the New Woman represents ideals of female agency that have substantial precedent in American history and letters. The first published woman writer in America, Anne Bradstreet, asserted her resistance to "each carping tongue / Who says my hand a needle better fits" in defending her right to be a poet (6-

8). In 1650, she knew that a literary profession to which men had unquestioned entrance would be an uphill battle for a woman and that skeptics might attribute her success as a poet to plagiarism or to mere luck. Her point is confirmed by other literature of the day. In 1645, John Winthrop claimed in his journal the “sad infirmity” of the wife of Governor Hopkins. He was sure that her loss of “understanding and reason” resulted from being allowed to read and write extensively rather than attending to her proper domestic concerns:

> Her husband, being very loving and tender of her, was loathe to grieve her; but he saw his error, when it was too late. For if she had attended to her household affairs, and such things as belong to women, and not gone out of her way and calling to meddle in such things as are proper for men, whose minds are stronger, etc., she had kept her wits, and might have improved them usefully and honorably in place God had set her (45).

The New Woman fiction, which was part and parcel of turn-of-the-century American society, shocked many conservative readers with its description of sexual intimacy, its feminist portraits of independence, psychologically complex women, and its melodramatic assertion that “the eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest best woman” is the “keynote of woman’s strength” (Egerton 29). While such a fiction prompted and sparked hostile debates, it may be seen as significant for its willingness to question both the social assumptions about gender and the literary conventions regarding subject matter. As Ann Ardis has argued, it may be seen as an important antecedent to the development of literary modernism in the 1910s (3). Most importantly, it helped define literary representations of the New Woman in American society, codifying the rights for which this figure came to stand.

As both real women and fictional characters continued to challenge Victorian notions of femininity in the final decades of the nineteenth century, the New Woman, for better or worse, became a pervasive cultural phenomenon in American society. The question of female identity and individuality grew stronger and more urgent and women writers could no longer be reconciled with the ideals of True Womanhood. The widening gap between the ideal of the “true woman” and the social realities of female adolescence necessitated a radical change in the portrayal of women in fiction. The concurrence of the New Woman’s emergence in fiction with the period of literary realism and naturalism is a logical one. In general, the rise of realism contributed to the demystification of the image of woman in fiction. Between the end of the Civil War and the 1910s, many writers strove to represent their world as realistically as possible in literature, and there were corresponding effects on the presentation of women in fiction. More importantly, since America itself had evolved greatly throughout the century because of industrialization and urbanization, writers began portraying setting and characters that reflected these changes. They began to depict women characters in non-domestic contexts, working outside their homes in many of the new occupations that resulted from these influences. Writers also began to overthrow the nineteenth-century ideals of True Womanhood and to characterize the conditions of female upbringing. As the century proceeded, they ventured upon the question of female identity and her attempts at self-realization.

The diverse portraits of New Women by American writers at the turn of the century represents fundamental challenges to the Victorian ideal of True Womanhood and replaces that ideal with the ideal of New Womanhood. Fragility, fainting, domesticity, and submissiveness were the signs of the heroine's superiority and fine feelings; she was too pure for this corrupt world with its mercenary rules of commerce and brutal male power. Her realm was the home, the influence of which she hoped to extend to civilization at large. In contrast, the New Woman relished action and strenuous physical activity. She was athletic, healthy, and eager to take on challenges in the non-domestic world. By the 1910s, the woman of action and fortitude had made great headway in replacing the delicate ideal of sentimental fiction and was becoming central to a new fantasy of competence in the roughest circumstances. The woman of action could not stand on a pedestal, immobile, for she was too curious about life beyond home and marriage. She is anxious to flee the circumscribed orbit of parental and societal authority in order to make her way in an urban environment bustling with change and possibility. In doing so, she is rejecting settled, family-oriented life on the margins in favor of an open-ended, individual effort within the heart of modern society. She is released from the roles assigned to women by history and myth. She is now intent on remaking herself into a New Woman in harmony with the dawning new age.

The pitting of old against new ideals of womanhood not only signals the shattering of an old consensus about the nature of women and their progression but also forms the core of New Woman fiction. Women writers began engaging with their new roles, displaying a variety of attitudes toward women's public occupations and economic independence, the idea of marriage as a companionate union entered out of choice, the ending of a sexual double standard, and women's opportunity to be artists. Within this framework, I have chosen four representative women writers with the most continuing appeal to modern readers. Taken together, Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow tend to be the most representative of New Woman fiction. These novelists come to express their dissatisfaction with the confinements of woman's old ideals by creating defiant female heroes who protest more or less frankly against artificial demands of femininity. Their novels *A Country Doctor* (1884), *The Awakening* (1899), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *Barren Ground* (1925), which feature young, middle-class, heterosexual women in adventurous roles, center on the experiences of New Women. In fact, these novels not only come close to a feminist standpoint in demanding that women at least be allowed to choose and to live on their own terms, but they also paint a bright picture of the prospects for self-actualization and personal integrity for women within the confines of a patriarchal, capitalist society.

Several American novels surrounding the turn of the century treat the right of women to pursuits outside the home, including the traditional professions. The predominance of novels in the 1880s and 1890s portraying women as physicians suggests that medicine, in particular, was the focus of much interest. In many of these novels, the protagonist's central conflict exists between her career and her marriage, and the authors resolve it in various ways. For example, Sarah Orne Jewett's *A Country Doctor* has for its female hero a strong, talented, and highly focused woman named Nan Prince. While in medical school, Nan grows to enjoy the affections of a young man, George Gerry, but she soon realizes that her career and marriage are incompatible. However, she remains satisfied with her choice to remain single and fulfill her calling. The actual importance of the book lies in the fact that for the first time a woman writer presented an adolescent female hero who breaks with the tradition of the "true woman" without being punished in the end. Nan Prince does not conform to societal pressures but successfully asserts her individuality defining herself via the profession she has chosen. *A Country Doctor* is indeed the first novel about a woman who resolves the long-known conflict of marriage versus profession in favor of the latter. Thus, it deserves to be called a turning point in the description of the New Woman fiction.

Jewett repeatedly emphasizes in the novel that the woman's choice of profession must be seen as a vocation. Time and again the author expresses her belief that all human beings are created for a special purpose and that each individual should be allowed to make use of his or her God-given talents. Arguing that Nan would be violating her true nature if she let her talent lie idle, Jewett succeeds in invalidating the nineteenth-century concept of "true womanhood." Jewett refuses to condemn Nan's deviation from socially sanctioned norms of female behavior; in doing so, she comes to challenge fundamental assumptions about woman's nature. In contrast to popular nineteenth-century writers such as Alcott who makes her protagonists go through a transformation, Jewett justifies Nan's search for self-definition, placing the female hero's individuality above contemporary social conventions that circumscribed woman's sphere. Significantly, Jewett calls the chapter in which Nan makes her crucial decision to become a doctor "Against the Wind." The author's main concern in *A Country Doctor* is with pointing out that Nan simply wishes to become what nature intends her to be and that she has to fulfill this mission in life if she is to remain true to herself. Nan Prince becomes a forerunner of woman's right to self-fulfillment.

Many American novels from this era also respond to another ideal of the New Woman economic independence. While this belief is connected to the New Woman's desire for a career, the characters in works treating female economic freedom are often not professional New Women, such as physicians. Some of Ellen Glasgow's later novels contain female heroes who come out of a successful living by their own efforts, including the dairy-farmer Dorinda Oakley in *Barren Ground*. In this novel, Dorinda's extraordinary ambition and her pioneer spirit are revealed. Dorinda, who is a strong-willed woman of driving practicality, competes victoriously in a man's job in a male's world. Although she has been seduced, impregnated, and abandoned by her lover, Dorinda overcomes these challenges, comes to own successful enterprises, and witnesses the dissolution of the man who deserted her. Her capacity for survival and her great desire for independence enable her to gain control over her own body and mind, over the earth, and finally over the man who had destroyed her early happiness. The "keynote of her character" is the impulse "to protect, to lift up, rebuild and restore" (350). She realizes, no matter what, she "has got to go straight ahead" (280). Her reward is financial security as well as a respected place, a niche in the community that no other person and certainly no other woman in Pedlar's Mill is granted. *Barren Ground* is undoubtedly an important and optimistic fictional example of a woman who begins with literally nothing but eventually earns her living through meaningful, pleasing work. Truly, Dorinda's public work has become synonymous at this time with not only individual freedom, but with an expanding universe for all women and for their independence from the restricted experience of family duty. A triumph for one, then, is portrayed as a victory for all.

Several authors in this period take on perhaps the most controversial issue associated with the New Woman: her right to sexuality and her claim to sexual self-determination. Coming to her age and her artistic maturity in the era of the New Woman, Kate Chopin studied woman's sexual, social, and economic status in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America and relentlessly criticized society's subjection of women. Chopin was a conscious rebel of the patriarchal social order, a significant "new woman" writer at the turn of the century. In her greatest achievement, *The Awakening,* whose meaningful title testifies to the author's revolutionizing intentions, she, for the first time, openly acknowledged the existence of sexual desire in women. Her liberal treatment of female sexuality, including direct allusions to the female hero's physical enjoyment of sexuality together with an unprecedented criticism of the institution of marriage, along with its sexual double-standards, provoked an outcry of public indignation that destroyed the author's further career. What led to the virulence of these attacks was not simply the admittedly sensitive themes of sex and suicide; it was the fact that here was a novel in which a young woman, who was dissatisfied with her marriage, leaves her husband and children to take a house of her own, falls in love with one man, has an affair with another, and finally, unable to face a future without love or hope, drowns herself--and nowhere in the novel is she condemned.

Unlike the nineteenth-century fictional heroines before her, Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* protests against artificial definitions of femininity and journeys to discover not "life" but "self." When midway through the novel, Edna announces, "I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn't give myself," (48) the American female hero makes a quantum leap into the future. In Chopin's portrayal of Edna, that aspect which brings to American fiction a wholly original conception of the female hero is the gradual revelation of a woman's inner life, an area of consciousness so universally disregarded by earlier writers as to deny the fact of its existence. It is in defining the precise nature of that self and concomitantly, in revealing the rich, inner life of a woman who defies tradition that Chopin's unique and incontestable artistry lies. Indeed, Chopin brings to literature a woman who chooses to sacrifice "life" in the insistence on and celebration of "self." If, in the creation of this woman, Chopin utters a cry of anguish at the plight of being female in a patriarchal world, she expresses as well, in the story of Edna Pontellier, a sign at the terrible loss to all of humanity whenever the attempt to find and to be true to the self is defeated.

A final group of novels published at the turn of the century deals with the New Woman's interest in artistic expression. The artist, whether she be painter, singer, dancer, actress, or writer, is a primary figure of New Woman fiction. Indeed, the artist female hero's desire to engage in such activity alienates her from the traditional woman's world of family and community service and identifies her as a modern person. The concept of the female artist served a variety of important functions in the transition to new conceptions of women. For one thing, she engaged in work that lasted as opposed to the Sisyphian chores of housework. More importantly, though, art bridged the gap between woman's traditional sphere and the new ideal of assimilation into public roles. The artist female hero formed a bridge between private and public realms and was well positioned for the leap from female culture to male. She was a symbol of change, for the artist demonstrated her talents in a public way, calling attention to her achievements and seeking acknowledgement for them.

The Kunstlerromane or "artist-novels," created by women in the late nineteenth century, legitimize women's right to express themselves in an independent, non-gender-defined way. Some female characters in artist-novels of this period who devote their lives to art include operatic singer Thea Kronborg in Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*. On a visit to Panther Canyon, Arizona, where she finds beautiful fragments of Native American pottery, Thea experiences an epiphany that reflects her commitment to art. She acknowledges her calling to the eternal process of cultural production, traditionally a masculine realm in its most legitimized forms, rather than to the realm of biological reproduction:

> The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself,--life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women had held it in their jars. In the sculpture she had seen in the Art Institute, it had been caught in a flash of arrested motion. In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it in one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals (304).

Indeed, Thea vows to use her body literally as a vessel not for the bearing of children, but for the bearing of art. Thea likes waking up every morning with the feeling that "life is your own, and your strength is your own, and your talent is your own; that you're all there, and there's no sag in you" (284-285).

By the late nineteenth century and by the early twentieth century, women writers, especially the representative writers discussed in this paper, rejected the idea of True Womanhood and openly challenged patriarchal attitudes of maleness and femaleness. These women writers departed from the ideology of the hearth and home and began to create new women who are vastly more lively, able, full-blooded and interesting human beings than we have been led to believe. Nan, Dorinda, Edna, and Thea not only battle alone to make their way in a society riddled with prejudice against their sex, but they also come to overcome that prejudice against their gender within a system that is basically open to any person with talent, fortitude, and ambition even if backward beliefs and individuals put women at a disadvantage. Their dedication to work and social progress is ennobling, making it possible for them to improve the modern scene as well as enter it. The New Woman fiction dealt with in this paper endorses and affirms a woman's right to meaningful paid work outside the home, her right to choose what her destiny is regardless of gender, family obligation, tradition, or prejudice. The New Woman fantasy was more than a Cinderella tale with a feminist female hero, then; it was also a tale that posited female individual triumph within a male-dominated system that, nonetheless, made room for the woman of talent and ambition.

In their fiction, Jewett, Glasgow, Chopin, and Cather authentically and poignantly present the new woman's growth, her awakening, and her self-redefinition. They do not attempt to hide their women's spirit and personality behind a tinsel façade of conventional charms. In fact, they are one of the first women writers to debunk most of the Victorian myths and to provide us with a window to new women's lives. Their female heroes are not architects of the cult of domesticity. They actually dare defy convention and brazenly reach and strain for what they desire. The existence of early New Woman fiction with feminist overtones suggests widespread interest in new ways of thinking about women, an openness to female autonomy that can inspire our own visions of change. This fiction, which has kept alive transformative dreams issuing from the long fight to secure equal rights for women which has created an image of competence in non-domestic arenas, can paint a possible world of dreams grasped and limitations transcended that points toward a bright future and away from a frustrating present. Such fiction lives not only because it presents interesting views of new women's changing roles but also because it taps into human experience. In fact, such fiction transforms life into art, and through that creative act it teaches us, arouses us, pleases us, nourishes us--all of us, male and female.

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