

IMAGES OF WOMEN

A Study of American Women in Twentieth Century Literature

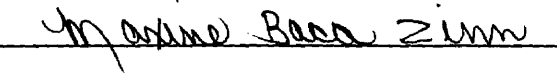
by

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First Reader 

Second Reader 

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
And enters some alien cage in its plight,
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars,
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

- Georgia Douglas Johnson
(Hernton 1987:125)

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INTRODUCTION

If literature can be thought of as an expression of society - and, at times, even a measure of the evolution and revolution of society - then, traditionally our images of women have come to us through the perceptions of men. We know this to be true because in the past, the world was viewed almost exclusively through the eyes of men. However, with twentieth century transformations in women's legal status, more and more women have refused to remain in their traditional place, the private sphere, and have begun to realize that women's history has significant phases of its own. With the increase in female power, many personal and professional options have been opened to women of all ages, classes and races. With the aid of newly granted legal, economic, social, political and educational rights, women have begun to examine their own world.

This examination has yielded a "female culture" which expresses itself in a variety of ways. One of the most effective methods is through women's literature: poems, stories, essays, memoirs, plays, novels and letters by, for and about women. These writings not only emphasize the role of women historically, but they also define numerous traditions and experiences which are uniquely female.

From the beginning, a majority of women accepted their inferior status without complaint. The secondary role of women, both in society and in literature, was a part of life in the Old World long before America. For instance, in 1611 John Donne, in his Anatomy of the World, blamed women for all of the ills of mankind: "God made woman for man's relief...which was the cause of his languishment...For that first marriage was our funeral: One woman at one blow then killed us all" (Abrams 1979:1093).

There were, however, women who took exception to this attitude. Mary Wollstonecraft, the controversial eighteenth century author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1790), once remarked, "I am not born to tread the beaten track." She then proceeded to devote most of her adult life to the then unpopular premise that true freedom necessitates the equality of men and women. It was to a world of double standards and subservience to men that Wollstonecraft addressed her writings, emphasizing her belief that only through adequate education could women achieve personal freedom, self-respect and equality:

The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:139).

There were other early women writers who reached out through their writing and made an indelible impression on the world of literature - Anne Bradstreet, Jane Austin, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Bronte sisters, Emily Dickinson, - but it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that women writers, with few exceptions, began to examine their own history and their unique role in society.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, women had begun to identify themselves as women apart from their relationships with and to men. The agitation by women at the end of the Victorian Age, for more freedom both in their persons and in their property, threatened the social order in America. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, women attempted through reform groups to extend their role as nurturers and moral teachers from the domestic to the public sphere. Not only did the women's movement challenge the power among classes, but there was the threat of a change in the relationship between the sexes, - far beyond the sexual aspect, because it involved legal, political and economic issues (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:1233).

THE MODERN WORLD

The technological and intellectual innovations of the early twentieth century had a striking impact on women of all classes. Though workers continued to suffer from economic exploitation, trade unionism and social welfare programs had started to unite

women. Public education and new systems of mass communication gave women access to a world that had been denied them in the Victorian age. They were able to enter universities and professions, experiencing a new intellectual and sexual freedom never before known to them. Also, after almost a century of struggle, women of all classes at last gained the right to vote. Most importantly, this right acknowledged their full citizenship.

The women's rights movement had its official beginning at the Seneca Falls convention in the summer of 1848 when Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton gathered more than three hundred women (and a few men) to "discuss the social, civil and religious rights of woman." In making a bold claim for full citizenship, part of the resolution resulting from the convention stated: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men and women are created equal" (Evans 1989:95). This claim was for the right to be autonomous individuals, not identified as appendages to their fathers, husbands or children. Perhaps even more important than getting the vote, there was the matter of legal status, which included control of property, of earnings, guardianship, divorce, opportunity for education and employment. One of the greatest problems was how to press for reforms, and for many years the movement struggled with its efforts to succeed.

A major factor in gaining the right to vote was women's contribution to the World War I effort. As young men were sent into battle, their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters at home became powerful in a way never before experienced. Taking jobs

previously held by men in the mines, factories, farms and railroads, women found themselves with an opportunity for both earnings and meaningful work in the public sphere.

There were a number of other important ways in which the social turbulence created by the war seemed to help advance the liberation of women. "War girls" were considered respectable and could stroll the public streets unescorted, go to theaters and dances without chaperones and even travel on their own without being thought of as "fallen" women. Women changed their way of dressing, shortening their skirts, wearing breeches or overalls and eventually, "flapper" clothing - short skirts, brassieres instead of corsets, silk stockings - a drastic change from the heavy, cumbersome clothing of the Victorian Age (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:1235).

Some social changes had already had their beginnings before the end of the nineteenth century: the birth control movement, the free love movement and child care movement. However, all three movements gained prominence in the early 1900s as women began to demand a voice in decisions which affected their lives.

Yet, with all of these positive changes in women's lives, there were still monumental problems. Most career women were forced toward "feminine" occupations such as teaching and nursing. By 1925, the feminist movement had seriously deteriorated because, rather than achievement of the vote marking a turning point for women, most female voters failed to register to vote, or if they did register, they voted for candidates recommended by husbands and

fathers. The "women's voting bloc", feared by men, did not materialize. Women, while wanting careers, also wanted to maintain their roles in the private sphere - wife, mother, caretaker of the home. How to reconcile these differences became a dilemma that continues today.

During the period from the Victorian Age to the Modern Age, women writers were experiencing a period of transition, for they were writing in an age when thousands of women were crossing the threshold from the private to the public sphere. Unlike many of their Victorian ancestors, literary women no longer felt constrained to write covertly about their rebellion against women's prescribed roles in society; but rather, they began to write of their protests and of women's place in a free world.

Feminists such as Virginia Woolf and Edith Wharton, with a desire to revise and change history to include "herstory", began to emerge. Women writers began to express a desire for a transformed society (as seen in the character of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's The Awakening), and women historians began to write history which gave a fairer and more realistic view of the past, as this now included women's roles from the vantage point of women, not merely men. For women writers, feminism and modernism became synonymous, and the two blended into the birth of the new woman's literary history. They realized a new strength, a new concern with what is now sometimes called "herstory" and with this new strength came a new realization that women did have a history of cultural achievement. Women writers began to realize

that they did not have to emulate their male counterparts in their writing style; rather, there was a powerful female self for whom earlier female writers had provided patterns (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:1238).

While women writers worked in most of the same modes and genres as their male contemporaries (both in theme and in technique), they frequently wrote about female power, describing their heroines as independent, energetic, and as survivors, with a new awareness of women's experiences and perspectives.

Entering this new world of feminist literature, women no longer were defined only through their relationships with men, but began the exploration and examination of the roles of women in their private and public lives, and perhaps most of all, what it means for women to be full and equal participants in the decisions that shape all of our lives.

British writer, Virginia Woolf, in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", written in 1910, speaking of the change in human character, declared that "all human relations have shifted." This analysis certainly applied to the changing relations between the sexes, for the technological and intellectual changes of the early twentieth century had an extraordinary effect on women of all classes. Woolf was one of the first major writers of feminist criticism in the English language. In "A Room of One's Own" (1929), an essay on women and fiction, Woolf wrote "We think back through our mothers if we are women," stating that early nineteenth century women had "no tradition behind them, or one so short and

partial that it was of little help." She called for a "woman's sentence," a sentence that would be different from the "common sentence...men's sentence." Woolf further points out that for centuries, women writers had tried to express their relationship to culture and society, always with an eye to the female experience, but that women's writing could no longer be considered in isolation from the social, economic and political facts that dictate much of women's condition (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:1238).

THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

A major cultural shift occurred in the years starting around 1940, as the legal status of women rose. In the twentieth century, divorce had become increasingly common and easy to obtain. Nevertheless, there were relatively few changes in the status of women in divorce laws until the 1970s. The introduction of "no fault" divorce laws in the early 1970s perhaps represented the most dramatic symbol of the way in which the Victorian double standard of morality had been reversed. Whereas, in the past a woman could be chastised and divorced for adultery (while, often, a man could not), now either partner could dissolve a marriage for any or no reason whatsoever. Nor could a divorced woman's children be taken from her by their father - as they could in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The landmark Supreme Court decision in the 1973 case of Roe v. Wade gave women an unprecedented control over their own reproductive systems.

Throughout the sixties and seventies, equal pay acts were

passed and equal opportunity commissions were established, seeking to correct traditionally large differentials between male and female wages. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights act of 1964 presented the principle that women should not be paid less money for doing the same work as men and job discrimination was outlawed on the basis of gender as well as race.

The issue of wages for women's work became an increasingly critical one, because, starting with employment opportunities created by World War II, enormous numbers of women were brought into the job market. This situation created monumental problems for women: 1) women workers were clustered in low status, low paying jobs; 2) few married women workers were defined as primary earners even when they were the sole supporters of themselves or their families; and 3) working women had few support systems to help them cope with their traditionally female responsibilities of child care and housework.

All of these shifts in women's legal status had their problems and consequences. The ease of divorce led to unprecedented divorce rates; there was a weakening of alimony and child support payments. A divorcee was frequently impoverished and solely responsible for the welfare of her children. Abortion legislation was continually being challenged by the so-called right to life groups. Today, in the workplace, women still earn only 70 cents for every dollar earned by a man (Rix 1988:346).

More women are seeking higher education than ever before. For instance, the number of women attending college increased by nearly

82 percent between 1970 and 1985, and by 1985, women represented more than half of all college students. Women are making significant movements toward occupational integration in professions such as executive, administrative and managerial occupations. However, the truth of the matter is that most women work in sex segregated jobs, in far fewer occupations than men (Rix 1988:346).

The development in the sixties of birth control methods meant that for unmarried women a new morality was possible, a morality no longer grounded in the threat of pregnancy. Married women also realized a new control over family size. Along with this new freedom came the legalization of pornography in the late fifties, which seemed to turn women into consumable luxury goods. With this changing attitude of the era, social problems such as child abuse, wife beating and rape increased, perhaps because of a greater awareness on the part of the public because of these issues. Sexual liberation and women's liberation were certainly not identical.

Betty Friedan, in The Feminine Mystique (1963), defined the emptiness of the suburban housewife in the 1950s. Women were discovering through contemporary literature written by women (as well as their involvement in the civil rights movement and later in the peace movement), that they wanted more out of life than being the dutiful robot-like wife and mother in the suburbs. Women, both those in favor of their own liberation and those opposed to it, began to organize. This can be seen in the fight

over (and defeat) of the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. The founding of NOW (The National Organization of Women) in 1966 had its supporters and detractors, but NOW has continued to be a force in presenting women's issues. As a national organization, NOW works within the established economic and political systems to advocate for social changes on behalf of women.

Despite all of these controversies and differences among women, a significant phenomenon occurred during this period: the development of women's studies as an area of intellectual concern in colleges and universities. Educators of all areas joined during the seventies and eighties to undertake an interdisciplinary examination of women's role in history and society. Journals began exploring not only the gender pressures all women seemed to share, but also the distinctive perspectives that marked the lives of disparate groups and cultures - blacks, lesbians, Hispanics, working class women and others. The effort was to widen the scope of scholarly inquiry from a study of a male culture to a study of human culture.

Whether they defined themselves as feminists or not, women writers from the forties through the eighties wrote out of a double consciousness: on the one hand, a new intense awareness of their role as female artists who had inherited an increasingly great tradition; and on the other hand, a new sense of their vulnerability as women who lived in a society hostile to female ambition and who held an often mistaken image of women as individuals. The work of many women writers exhibits an

identification with a "sisterhood" and with literal or literary mothers. In coming to terms with both the male and female forces that shaped them, contemporary writers were consistently struggling to define the cultural forces that had formed their personal and artistic identities. It was during this period that female writers proliferated in almost every genre.

Such a search for the roots of selfhood became important for women, and especially for those with racial, ethnic and lesbian subcultures. In defining both themselves and their worlds, women writers, no matter what the genre, explored their diverse cultural and sexual heritages.

More and more, women began to reflect these changes in writings of their own. They began to investigate and examine their historical and social roles from the distinctive perspective they owned as women. Their writing thus explored the problems and pressures shared by all women, while at the same time tracing a number of distinctive pressures which mark the lives of different subcultures within the framework of a "female culture."

From their earliest roles as helpmates and mothers, through the nineteenth century struggles for reform, to contemporary struggles to define their public roles and the meaning of gender equality, American women are continually challenging and redefining the boundaries of their lives, both private and public. An integral ingredient in each of these evolving roles has been a sense of bonding and connectedness that is shared by women.

This thesis examines how the images of American women in the

twentieth century are defined (and perhaps redefined) by women writers. I will look at the writings of various American women, including representative poetry, fiction, essays, memoirs -always with an emphasis on the unique vision of women's images.

Part I, **A New Consciousness**, examines the "woman question" and the changes occurring as women awaken to a new search for personal freedom and self-realization. I have included writings by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, all late nineteenth century and early twentieth century writers.

Part II, **Among Women**, looks at the experiences of women through female friendships, mother-daughter relationships and the bond between sisters. Literature in this section includes works by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Barbara Lazaar Ascher, Susan Glaspell, Toni Morrison, Lillian Hellman, Alice Walker, Jill Robinson, Tillie Olsen, Marge Piercy, Adrienne Rich and Candace Flynt.

The thesis concludes with Part III, **A New Woman**, an examination of the redefinition of feminism in the fifties and sixties, followed by an overview of how women in the seventies and eighties have attempted to reshape their tradition into lifestyles that provide them with more choices and alternatives. This section includes work by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Betty Friedan, Sylvia Plath, Sue Kaufman, Erica Jong, Marilyn French, Marge Piercy, Joyce Carol Oates, Alix Kate Shulman and May Sarton.

PART I

A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

She walketh veiled and sleeping,
For she knoweth not her power;
She obeyeth but the pleading
Of her heart, and the high leading
Of her soul, unto this hour.
Slow advancing, halting, creeping,
Comes the Woman to the hour! -
She walketh veiled and sleeping,
For she knoweth not her power.
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman

American women entered the twentieth century with the same sense of obligations and responsibilities they had always felt. They continued as the managers and nurturers of the home and family and maintained their involvement in volunteer work and social organizations, at least to the extent that society permitted. Yet, they began to feel the need for recognition that they were, indeed, an equal part of humanity. Women writers began, more than ever before, to examine the lives of women who were victims of a patriarchal society.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the "woman question" had been a matter of public discussion for many years, and changes were taking place. The two national suffrage organizations merged for the final push for the vote, which would take another thirty years to accomplish. Upper class women were attending college in increasing numbers, starting to enter professions previously not open to them, and seeing improved medical care and dress reform. Women's organizations were numerous, and even the lower-class women who worked and had no time for such social organizations, found unity in organizing into unions to combat poor working conditions. Women at all levels of society were becoming a part of a movement which was beginning to demand more personal freedom for women as they increasingly moved into the public sphere.

The "woman question" involved more than an awareness of the need for more educational opportunities, better working conditions, or more involvement in the public sphere, - although these were, of course, important. More important, perhaps, was the question of autonomy that women were beginning to demand. A change was taking place in women's consciousness with a realization that there was value in their thoughts, their feelings, and their creativity. With this new awakening, women at the turn of the century began to experience a new sense of self and a different way of viewing the world.

With this new attitude of "liberation" came the issue of laws governing the rights of women, because women were still without

political power and were economically oppressed and undereducated. Women attempted through reform groups to extend their role as nurturers and moral teachers from the domestic to the public sphere. They increased their demands for female enfranchisement, and women's publications began to appear which openly focused on issues associated with the problems of women (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:966).

This new genre - women's literature - created an awareness in women that their experiences were indeed shared, even common; that they were not mad, and that other women felt the same way. Women began to realize a need for literature that named their pain and allowed them to see the emptiness and isolation in their lives as an insight rather than as one more indication of their worthlessness. One of the means of this expression for personal freedom was found in the women's rights movement.

Many notable American women are recognized for their lifelong leadership of the nineteenth century women's rights movement, - Susan Anthony, the Grimké sisters, Lucretia Mott, Catherine Beecher, Lucy Stone, to name a few. Perhaps, though, the suffragist who most embodies the ideals of this century of struggle is Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Her insistence on including the demand for woman suffrage in the Declaration for Sentiments of the 1848 Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention was controversial, but it is now believed that she had the vision to see that the demand for suffrage was the key to political consciousness. Stanton also insisted on the inclusion of an examination of what constituted the

rights of women.

In a speech delivered in 1892, "The Solitude of Self", Stanton advanced the belief that, ultimately, life made the same demands of women as of men, required the same resources of them, and therefore, should provide them with the same individual rights. In this speech, her emphasis was on a description of the inner experience common to both men and women. In discussing the rights of women, she proposed that we must first consider what "belongs to her as an individual, in a world of her own, the arbiter of her own destiny" (DuBois 1981:247). She went on to reflect that:

....there is a solitude which each and every one of us has always carried with him, more inaccessible than the ice-cold mountains, more profound than the midnight sea; the solitude of self. Our inner being which we call ourself, no eye nor touch of man or angel has ever pierced....Such is individual life. Who, I ask you, can take, dare take on himself the rights, the duties, the responsibilities of another human soul? (DuBois 1981:253).

As the suffrage movement shaped the writing of women in this period, literary women also began to help clarify the aims of turn of the century feminism. During these years, women writers felt themselves to be living through a period of transition, for they were writing in an age when thousands of women were attempting to cross the threshold from the private to the public sphere. Unlike many of the women writers of the Victorian era, literary women no

longer felt so constrained to write covertly about their rebellion against roles determined by society. Rather, many writers felt free to write both of their protests and of a vision of a world in which women might experience complete freedom (Gilman & Gubar 967).

Kate Chopin was such a writer. In all her short stories, Chopin wrote of escape from tradition and authority. A number of stories examined the inequities of traditional marriage, and some looked at other ways in which society might be changed to allow women opportunities for emotional, sexual and intellectual freedom.

In one of her best known short stories, "The Story of an Hour," Chopin describes the response of a woman who receives the news that her husband has been killed in a railroad accident; she weeps uncontrollably and then realizes that she is "free, free, free." The feelings of liberation felt by Louise Mallard were clear:

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial...She saw a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome (Dietrich & Sundrell 1983:73).

Louise Mallard realized that she would be able to live for herself in the coming years; there would be "no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe that they have a right to impose a private will upon a

fellow-creature" (Dietrich & Sundrel 1983:73). Ironically, her short-lived liberation turns to shocking reality as her husband safely returns home.

This short story led the way to Chopin's best known novel, The Awakening, published in 1899. In this novel, human freedom is at the center of everything, and Chopin is attacking the impositions of society upon human freedom, especially for women.

In this novel, Edna Pontellier, a young woman in her late twenties, is married to a successful New Orleans businessman and is the mother of two young children. While on a summer holiday, Edna is attracted both to the sea and to a young man, Robert. She soon finds herself awakened socially and sexually to "her position in the universe as a human being" (Culley 1976:14).

It is this "awakening" that starts Edna on her search for self. She learned as a young girl to live the dual life - "that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (Culley 1976:15). Now, she begins asking the basic questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the universe? In looking for answers, Edna realizes that she must break long-standing habits of seeking approval, of trying to please parents, lovers, husbands, friends, children, but never herself. In examining her life, she realizes that she has never known personal freedom, but that her life belongs to others.

Edna feels affection and concern for her husband, but has become more and more stifled by his polite, unspoken demands for her submissiveness and acquiescence as a proper wife and mother.

She is his prized possession and he feels a proprietary ownership over her.

Such an instance occurs early in the novel when Edna has just returned from an afternoon of swimming in the gulf with young Robert Lebrun. Her husband, waiting for her under a sunshade at the cottage, exclaims: "You are burnt beyond recognition," and he looks at his wife "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Culley 1976:4).

We are told that Mr. Pontellier is a "rather" courteous husband "so long as" his wife was submissive. Once she is not, he becomes angry and "rude". Edna is accustomed to an authoritarian patriarch since her father "had coerced his own wife into her grave," and this attitude of patriarchal authority is present in her marriage as her own husband nags in "a monotonous, insistent way" (Culley 1976:7).

At one point, early in the novel, Mr. Pontellier awakens Edna when he comes in late from the club and instructs her to get up and care for one of the children who appeared ill to him. He then immediately goes off to sleep and Edna cares for the child, who is not ill. Afterwards, she begins to cry: "She could not have told why she was crying." Edna is accustomed to such incidents in her married life, but for the most part they seem unimportant because of her husband's kindness at other times. However, "an indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, ...it was strange and

unfamiliar; it was a mood" (Culley 1976:8).

In a later scene, Edna makes another trip to the beach with Robert, and she is again moved:

A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her, - the light which, showing the way, forbids it...At the early period it served but to bewilder her. It moved her to dreams, to thoughtfulness, to the shadowy anguish which had overcome her the midnight when she had abandoned herself to tears.

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her (Culley 1976:15).

Edna discovers that she is not a "mother-woman." Indeed, she often sends her children to her in-laws, much to the dismay of the two other significant women in the novel, Mademoiselle Reisz and Madame Ratignolle, who constantly remind Edna of her duties as a wife and mother. She loves her children, sees to their needs and care, but is not comfortable with the traditional role of wife and mother. Yet, she has difficulty imagining alternatives. Using Virginia Woolf's description of "the angel in the house", Chopin describes the "mother woman" as being thoroughly self-sacrificing. "They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings, as ministering angels" (Culley

1976:10). Edna cannot bring herself to be one of those women.

Edna has always felt that a part of her being belongs only to her. She has thoughts and emotions which "never voiced themselves," and perhaps it is because of these feelings that she feels apart from her children. As she "awakens", she tells Madame Ratignolle "that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one....I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (Culley 1976:48).

As these yearnings for independence and self-discovery increase in Edna, she begins to abandon her duties as a "good housewife" and refuses her social responsibilities as the wife of a businessman on the rise. She moves, alone, to a cottage where she may be free to see her own friends and to paint. Her husband is puzzled:

Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife. But her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him. Then her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him. When Mr. Pontellier became rude, Edna grew insolent. She had resolved never to take another step backward (Culley 1976:57).

Mr. Pontellier is bewildered that Edna is unhappy in her role as wife and mother. "It seems to me the utmost folly for a woman at the head of a household, and the mother of children, to spend in

an atelier days which would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family" (Culley 1976:57). What he cannot see is that "she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world" (Culley 1976:57).

Edna lives alone in her cottage, trying to make a life for herself with friends and her painting (from a small inheritance received from her mother). She even has a brief and not especially rewarding sexual affair with a friend, Alcee Arobin. Yet, Edna continues to long for Robert, who left because he could not bring himself to become involved with a married woman. When he does return, Edna believes that they can find happiness. However, when Robert tells her of his dreams to make her his wife, if Mr. Pontellier will only set her free, Edna laughingly tells him:

You have been a very, very, foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both (Culley 1976:106).

Immediately following this declaration, Edna leaves Robert briefly to attend to her friend's difficult childbirth; and when she returns she finds him gone. He views the relationship quite differently from Edna and feels that only marriage would make her

his own. Certainly, he believes in marriage in the same way that Mr. Pontellier does. When Edna finds his note telling her that he has left for good, she despairs. Because of her dependence upon Robert, Edna is actually not as free as she believed herself to be. She has not been able to fully realize the meaning of her awakening. Her husband has scoffed at her revolt by referring to her as having "some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women" (Culley 1976:65). Edna seems to be defeated by all of society's forces, and she sees no solution to her recent awakening. The future seems to represent nothingness to her. Shortly thereafter, she returns to the scene of her original "awakening", undresses on the beach, and naked, swims out to her death. Her awakening thus leads to her suicide.

One of the tragedies of the ending of the novel is that despite her need for release and her desire for life and joy, Edna's fantasy of freedom depends on another human being. Though she moves close to personal freedom when she moves into her own house, Edna cannot completely break free because she is not able to depend on her own resources for strength and support. Rather, she continues to depend upon another person, Robert, and when he deserts her, she feels that she cannot survive. Edna sees that to return to her former life would be to permit her husband and children "to possess her, body and soul" and she is determined never again to subordinate her individuality to others. She has a choice of no freedom in her life with Pontellier or of her freedom in death. She doesn't feel that she has the independence to make

a life for herself alone over all the barriers of society, and so she chooses to escape those constraints. She chooses death with the realization that the world will not permit her to have her life. Death seems to be the only available escape for her, given her sense of hopelessness.

In looking beyond what some consider "selfishness," or "being a bad mother and wife," there is the waste, - the waste of a person's life who just woke up too late to do anything to change her life. Edna's awakening tells her that she has no existence apart from her children, her husband and other men. And without "existence", there is no point in living. If she can no longer be just a wife, mother or mistress, then what is she? Is she doomed to be nothing? Chopin says of Edna, near the end of the novel, "There was no one thing on earth that she desired." To want nothing is to feel utterly hopeless - indeed suicidal.

It has been said of The Awakening that it is a very odd book to have been written in America at the end of the nineteenth century. However, there were many changes taking place at the turn of the century. Feminism was hardly a new idea even then, and Edna herself seems a symbol of the shifts occurring as America moved into the twentieth century.

The Awakening received extremely negative reviews. In fact, the book was banned in some cities (including Chopin's native St. Louis), and it was fifty years before the book received the attention it deserves. However, the great achievement of Kate Chopin is that she broke new ground in American literature. She

was the first woman writer in her country to accept passion as a legitimate subject for serious fiction, and she opened the door to this type of fiction by women writers.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a contemporary of Kate Chopin's, is another female writer who writes of women's struggle for personal freedom and self development. Gilman understands the psychological cost to women of domestic seclusion and denounces the exclusive use of female energy into the service of what she considered a declining tradition. In Women and Economics, (which will be discussed in a later section), and other works in which she explores alternatives to free women from domestic subservience, Gilman establishes the argument for the claim that women's economic dependency on men inhibited not only their intellectual and emotional growth, but also the healthy development of the human species (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:1147).

Gilman devoted most of her adult life to advancing the proposition that women's economic independence is essential to her personal freedom. However, she also wrote fiction about women who have no control over their lives.

Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper", was published about the same time as The Awakening. The story is an autobiographical account of Gilman's rest cure following the birth of her child, prescribed by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, who became famous for prescribing total inactivity for women with emotional problems. The treatment was for bed rest and complete isolation. Not surprisingly, women who were already bored, restless or anxiety

ridden from inadequate contact with the outside world, were made even worse by this prescription.

The main character, who remains nameless throughout the story (signifying a lack of identity), is suffering from depression following the birth of her child. Her husband has taken her to an isolated colonial mansion to spend the summer recovering from her illness, far removed from family and friends. At her husband's insistence, she is confined to a large room with patterned yellow wallpaper and bars at the windows. The only piece of furniture in the room is a huge bed which is fastened to the floor.

The woman's husband, John, is a physician and insists that she follow his orders, "for the sake of her family and herself." He assures everyone that there is nothing the matter but temporary nervous depression. John is "very careful and loving," but treats his wife as a child, believing that he knows what is best for her. She is a writer, but he refuses to allow her to write for fear that she will tire too easily. She tries to protest, but he lovingly refuses any request for activity. She realizes that she is being treated as a child, but with each proclamation of protest, exclaims, "What is one to do?" She wants to write, to see friends, to engage in stimulating conversation, but her husband insists that she must not engage in any of these activities, - only rest, so that she will get well.

This story is about a woman who has no control over her body or her life:

I sometimes fancy that in my condition, if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus - but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad...

I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more (Gilman & Gubar 1985:1148).

The woman, over a three month period, goes mad. She objects to the yellow wallpaper from the beginning: "I never saw a worse paper in my life, one of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin." As time goes on, she begins to tear at the wallpaper and eventually becomes obsessed with tearing it all off, as she begins to see shapes "...like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern." The progression of her madness is matched with her progress in completely stripping the room of the wallpaper.

As in The Awakening, John's wife realizes that she has no "self." She is the sole property of her husband. He never calls her by name and refers to her only as "my dear," "my blessed little goose," "my darling," "little girl," - only a possession. One is left with the feeling that her struggle for an identity of her own is stifled and smothered, not only by a loving husband, but by a society which cannot - will not - recognize that women are more and more beginning to experience the need for their own

validation.

Most of Gilman's fictional writing appeared in the first two decades of the twentieth century and can be read as an effort to expand the suffrage struggle: to encourage the women's movement to address larger issues, especially in terms of recognizing women as human beings.

In addition to her works on the economic independence of women and her fiction, Gilman also wrote poetry, much of it aimed at women, always urging them to pursue more than a passive life of subordination. In the poem "Women of To-Day", Gilman admonishes:

You women of to-day who fear so much
The women of the future, showing how
The dangers of her course are such and such -
What are you now?
Mothers and Wives and Housekeepers, forsooth!
Great names! you cry, full scope to rule and please!
Room for wise age and energetic youth! -
But are you these?

* * *

And still the wailing babies come and go,
And homes are waste, and husbands' hearts fly far,
There is no hope until you dare to know
The thing you are!

(Stein 1974:128)

In this new fiction, the feminist plea is often not as bold as with Chopin and Gilman, yet the struggle for personal freedom is often present. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, a popular writer of the time, writes about New England women who live austere lives in village farming communities. Freeman's heroines recognize their isolation and defiantly struggle to preserve their integrity against the demands of a patriarchal society.

In one story by Freeman, "A New England Nun," Louisa Ellis waits fifteen years for her betrothed to return from Australia, where he has gone to make his fortune. When he comes back, she learns that he loves another woman. Marriage had been expected of Louisa, just as it was of all young women; but it was not necessarily a life she would have chosen. She releases him from his obligation to her because she does not want to change the comfortable routine that she developed during his absence. The author concludes:

If Louisa Ellis sold her birthright she did not know it, the taste of the pottage was so delicious, and had been her sole satisfaction for so long. Serenity and placid narrowness had become to her as the birthright itself (Freeman 1967:17).

American fiction rarely projected the message that women might be content to remain unmarried. But "serenity and placid narrowness" suggests a life of happiness, not of frustration. Another theme, which would become much more explicit in the

twentieth century also appeared in "A New England Nun": that a woman could, and would, consciously choose spinsterhood and risk the unpleasantness which that status suggested, rather than live with a man she did not love (Sochen 1982:196).

In another short story by Freeman, "The Revolt of Mother", the main character, Sarah Penn, asserts her right to control the domestic sphere in which she is placed. In the rural, farmland setting, Sarah Penn has raised her family in a run-down shack on the family farm while her husband has continued to build large, modern barns for the farm animals. She begs him to provide more adequate housing for his family rather than continue with the barn buildings which are no longer needed. He ignores her request and builds still another barn while she remains silent. Just as the barn is completed, Mr. Penn is called out of town for the purchase of some farm animals. While he is away, Mrs. Penn and the two children move all of the household belongings to the new barn and set up housekeeping there. When the father returns, he is astonished and bewildered by what has happened.

In this story, it is not winning a battle or triumphing over her husband that Sara is seeking but basic comforts:

"Now, father, you needn't be scared. I ain't crazy. There ain't nothn' to be upset over. But we've come here to live, and we're goin' to live here. We've got jest as good a right here as new horses an' cows. The house wasn't fit for us to live in any longer, an' I made up my mind I wa'n't goin to stay there. I've done my

duty by you forty year, an' I'm goin' to do it now; but I'm goin' to live here" (Hogins 1984:93).

Earlier, Sara tells the minister, who has come to admonish her for not accepting her husband's actions:

"...I've been a member of the church for over forty years. I've got my own mind an' my own feet, an' I'm goin' to think my own thoughts an' go my own way, an' nobody but the Lord is goin' to dictate to me unless I've a mind to have him" (Hogins 1984:92).

Sarah recognizes the limited extent to which she can control her own life. Yet, she comes to realize that her life has worth and that she has rights within her family and community. She is a woman of integrity who works hard for her family and keeps her word even if her husband does not.

American women entered the twentieth century with the same obligations and responsibilities that had always occupied them. They continued to manage the home and the family. They remained the providers and preservers of a warm, stable home atmosphere. Yet, they began to demand the recognition by society that they were an equal part of humanity; that the need for personal freedom and individualism is as great for women as it is for men.

More than woman's desire for equality, feminism has, in most of these writings, been regarded as an expression of woman's desire for self-sufficiency. There were many women writers of the early

twentieth century - Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ellen Glasgow, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and many more - who showed woman struggling, not to be man's slave nor his master, but to exist as an independent entity. We owe much to these early twentieth century women writers who helped to express for all women that search for self.

PART II
AMONG WOMEN

Women have a need for other women from birth to death. The experience of female friendships, mother-daughter relationships and the attachment between sisters, all represent a bond, a connectedness, a network of emotional attachments. The love between mothers and daughters and the bond between sisters is an anchor of security, rootedness and belonging, even when there are tensions and problems. Female friendships can often represent greater risks than family and blood ties because the commitment is bound only to the desire for companionship and support of another individual. Yet, there are certain uniquely female rituals that draw women together during every stage of their lives, from adolescence through courtship, marriage, childbirth and childrearing, death and mourning. Women, through relationships with other women, are able to explore and examine their search for an identity - a self-awareness.

FRIENDSHIPS

The truth is that friendship to me
is every bit as sacred and eternal as
marriage.

-Katherine Mansfield, writer

Friendship between women can take different
forms. It can run like a river, quietly and
sustainingly through life: it can be an inter-
mittent, sometime thing; or it can explode
like a meteor, altering the atmosphere so
that nothing ever feels or looks the same
again.

-Molly Haskell, critic

The experience of female friendships is like a breath of fresh air, like a first day of Spring. Such friendships represent a bond of connectedness, a network of emotional attachments and expectations. We have choices in friendships. One can take and leave a friend with more ease than one can leave a mother, sister, aunt, or grandmother. As girls grow into adolescence and adulthood and begin to move from this anchor of familial commitment, they begin to move in a world of friends with greater risk, but also with less assurance (Bernikow 1980:113).

Women are able to be free with other women, - to share the joys and energy of their individual lives; but at the same time to know that in friendship it is their choice to give themselves freely to another person.

If, as stated earlier, literature is a sort of mirror that reflects the ways of the world, then it is understandable that it is not until well into what we think of as the modern world that much has been written on the subject of female friendships. History and literature rarely celebrate female friendship as they do male camaraderie. Rather, we find endless portrayals of women as one another's best enemies and fierce rivals (Block 1985:3).

Now, however, we have come to know that this negative characterization of women has been distorted and overblown. In fact, we have found that friendships between women are deeper, more enduring and more plentiful than those between men. Women have been brought up to share feelings and concerns with others; they are able to offer support for one another during their worst times as well as their best. Female friendships can be intensely loving, sustaining and supporting; however, when they have gone amiss, they are envious, deceitful and hurtful.

In actual life, the encounter of woman with woman occurs in domestic settings more often than not. Women seek opportunities for involvements with family and friends. In the past, especially, this meant those relationships would develop within close proximity to home. The ancient talk of women at the village well can be traced through time to the talk of women at the quilting bee. These are not women who "make" history; neither their activities nor talk is recorded in history or literature, so we can only imagine and speculate about them. Yet, from diaries and letters written by women over the centuries we know that intimate

female friendships did exist.

In early Colonial America, the need for friendship with other women was so strong that women turned many of their household chores into social occasions. With all other social outlets barred, women saw each other by washing clothes together, organizing sewing circles, getting together in groups to put up food for the winter, and visiting and caring for the sick. Because families often lived in isolated areas away from the extended family, there was an intense need for companionship among women, and women turned to other women for advice and support (Block 1985:21).

The female friendship of the nineteenth century is an aspect of the female experience about which very little has been written. In this century, women met and became friends through various clubs that were organized for women, such as the Sorosis Club, the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Young Women's Christian Association. They began to move into the public sphere and form friendships outside the framework of family and friends living within a small area.

In the late nineteenth century, female friendships flourished, but since little fiction has been written about them, the best source of information we have is found in diaries and letters. Many women active in the Women's Movement kept diaries and exchanged letters which, fortunately, have been preserved. One example of a close, intimate friendship that lasted over a lifetime is found in letters exchanged between Elizabeth Cady Stanton and

Susan B. Anthony. Their friendship was anchored in their involvement and dedication to the Women's Movement, and in a letter to Anthony in 1898, Stanton wrote:

So closely interwoven have been our lives, our purposes and experiences that, separated, we have a feeling of incompleteness - united, such strength of self-assertion tht no ordinary obstacles, difficulties or danger ever appear to us as insurmountable (Pogrebin 1987:303).

Another time, Stanton wrote to Anthony: "No power in heaven, hell or earth can separate us, for our hearts are eternally wedded together." She often reminds Anthony to "dress loosely" so that she can retain her health and mobility. To Lucy Stone, she writes, "All you need is to cultivate your power of expression." To Antoinette Brown: "Don't hesitate, but in the name of everything go forward" (Bernikow 1980:142).

The friendship between Antoinette Brown and Lucy Stone seems to be as intense. The two women meet at Oberlin College and, although there are many differences between them (one likes stark Quaker clothing and the other dresses in fancy clothes and decorated hats), they become good friends. On one occasion, Brown writes to Stone:

My heart has just been called back to the time when we used to sit with our arms around each other at the sunset hour and talk and talk

of our friends and our homes and of ten thousand subjects of mutual interest until both our hearts felt warmer and lighter for the pure communion of spirit (Bernikow 1980:142).

Thirty years later, the two women are still exchanging letters and sharing intimacies about their lives and their families.

By analyzing the letters and diaries of women of the nineteenth century, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, in her book, Disorderly Conduct, has discovered "a vast spectrum of women's intimacy". Intense, loving, even sensual feminine friendships were deeply important to Victorian women and were considered "both socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage" (Smith-Rosenberg 31). One such woman, Mary Foote, for example, wrote to her beloved friend, Helena Gilder:

I wanted so to put my arms around my girl of all the girls in the world and tell her...I love her as wives do love their husbands, as friends who have taken each other for life (Pogrebin 1987:282).

After both women were married and Mary was pregnant, Helena wrote:

Yours is the warm close clasping woman's hand leading me step by step through the sacred mysteries of wifehood and motherhood. Yes, my darling - even in that last awful mystery must blind my shuddering eyes - I could bear it better because I know that you have borne it and lived and kept your sweet faith whole (Pogrebin 1987:292).

It is difficult for contemporary women to read these words without assuming a sexual involvement in these friendships. However, Smith-Rosenberg discounts this idea as "just the way Victorians wrote: openly, emotionally and unashamed of their friendships" (Block 1985:23). Whether these friendships were, indeed, romantic or a nineteenth century way of expressing deep affection, they were certainly cherished friendships that provided a richness and validity to women's lives.

The establishment of schools and colleges for girls in the late 1800s provided greater opportunity to meet other women. They provided a place outside the family for a girl to come and know another female person. The way seemed to be opening for young girls, as they became women, to share intellectual interests and form friendships and bonds outside the small world in which they had been confined.

Women share a oneness with each other that is hard to describe. Writer Barbara Lazear Ascher, in a 1983 essay, describes this feeling of kinship whenever she sees a bag lady, and sees herself "slipping past the edge of time and space into an abandoned doorway." She tells of riding a bus when a bag lady climbed on, heaving herself and her possessions with her. As she pushed herself to the back of the bus, the men ignored her and continued to read their papers. "But the women became very intense, as if she were sending a current through them, and when she got up to leave, there wasn't a woman who didn't turn to watch her safely

down the steps, watching until she was out of sight." What the bag lady left behind is what women have always felt about the plight of other women - a scent of vulnerability. "It is a fearful scent of our own; it sets off our own imaginings" (Newhouse 1985:223).

Such a feeling of vulnerability and imaginings also existed among women in the early twentieth century. In Susan Glaspell's 1916 play, Trifles, (a short story version, "A Jury of Her Peers", was later published), two women watch as a story unfolds about the lonely, desperate life of a friend who has been abandoned and neglected by her family, neighbors and community.

Minnie Foster Wright lives with her husband, John, on a run-down, isolated farm. They have had little contact with the community, John being considered an outsider and a "hard man." One morning, a neighboring farmer stops by to see John and Minnie tells him that John has died in bed during the night. When asked what her husband died of, Minnie replies in a strained voice, "He died of a rope round his neck."

Minnie is arrested for her husband's murder and the following day, the sheriff, the county attorney and a neighbor, Mr. Hale, go out to the farm to look for evidence against Minnie. Mrs. Hale and the sheriff's wife, Mrs. Peters, are asked to go along to gather clothes and necessities to take to Minnie. When they arrive they find the house in disarray. The men notice that the kitchen cupboards are a sticky mess and it is discovered that Minnie's home-canned jelly has frozen during the night and the jars have burst, just as she had worried from the jailhouse that they would.

The men break into laughter: "Well, can you beat the women! Held for murder, and worrying about her preserves!....well, women are used to worrying over trifles" (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:1391).

The men go off looking for evidence and laughingly tell the women to keep an eye out for anything that might be of use: "No telling; you women might come upon a clue to the motive...but would the women know a clue if they did come upon it?" (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:1392)

It is at this point that the two women begin to look around and discover their own evidence. They see signs of disturbance that are not apparent to the men. Looking around, they see the way that Minnie has lived. The house is shabby; her clothes are rags; the stove is broken; there is no phone for outside communication. They recall that in her youth, Minnie was a happy, vibrant, outgoing young lady. However, John's harsh, overbearing ways stifled and strangled the joy from her life and she now lived a solitary, lonely life, without social contacts, struggling with the bare necessities of life.

The women talk of the strange way for someone to kill a man - "slippin' a rope under his neck while he was sleeping." They continue to speculate as they look around the house, finding things begun, and not finished, and they begin to realize that something terrible has happened in this house. They also begin to feel guilty about not visiting Minnie:

I tell you what I do wish, Mrs. Peters. I wish I had come over

sometimes when she was here...I could've come. I stayed away because it weren't cheerful - and that's why I ought to have come. It's a lonesome place, and always was. I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometime (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:1396).

As the women look around, they notice that the bird cage is empty and wonder what has happened to the bird. Straightening the quilting basket, they both express surprise at the sloppy quilting left by Minnie, and realize that she must have been agitated when she was working on it. Mrs. Hale quickly tears out the threads, replacing the bad sewing with good and wondering at the same time what Minnie had been so nervous about.

The women agree that Minnie would want her quilting basket at the jail house and when they pick it up, they discover a box with a piece of red silk inside. Opening it, they see the dead bird; its neck has been wrung.

It is at this point when the women, without speaking, both realize what has probably taken place. "It was an awful thing was done in this house that night," said the sheriff's wife. "Killing a man while he slept - slipping a thing round his neck that choked the life out of him." Relating the deaths of the man and the bird, Mrs. Hale sighed as she looked at the bird:

His neck. Choked the life out of him...If there had been years and years of - nothing, then a bird to sing to you, it would be awful - still - after the bird was still (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:1398).

In realizing the lonely and oppressed life that Minnie - once so vibrant and alive - had been forced to live for the past twenty years, the two women began to examine their own past actions:

I might'a known she needed help! I tell you, it's queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together, and we live so far apart. We all go through the same things - it's all just a different kind of the same thing! If it weren't - why do you and I understand? Why do we know - what we know this minute? (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:1398)

The men return without finding any evidence and the women make their decision. Without any evidence, it will be difficult for Minnie to be convicted. As their eyes meet, Mrs. Hale snatches the box containing the dead bird and buries it in her coat pocket.

Minnie Foster Wright is judged by a jury of her peers. She is not judged on the basis of whether or not she killed her husband, but on the circumstances surrounding the death. The two women, in realizing Minnie's oppressed and confining environment, realize that they share experiences with her that the men can never understand. They regret that they have neglected the friendship and come to believe that they share in the tragedy for not coming over once in awhile. "That was a crime! That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?" (Gilbert & Gubar 1985:1398)

Women have been brought up to relate to people, to share feelings and concerns with each other, and to offer support for

each other during their worst times as well as their best. Yet, not all friendships are lasting and wonderful. Neglect can hurt friendships. Feelings of abandonment can hurt and create long, unbreakable silences. Such feelings are found in Toni Morrison's 1972 novel, Sula, a story which traces the lives of two black heroines - from their growing up together in a small Ohio town, through the different paths each takes to womanhood, and finally to their ultimate confrontation and reconciliation.

Morrison describes the complex agony of a friendship between Nel and Sula, who "met in dreams" because:

each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on (Morrison 1972:52).

Their girlhood friendship develops into the most profound bond of intimacy:

Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden....They never quarreled, those two, the way some girlfriends did over boys, or competed against each other for them. In those days a compliment to one was a compliment to the other, and cruelty to one was a challenge to the other (Morrison 1972:53).

Morrison's novel begins in 1919 and moves through many years - to Nel's realization of what her friendship with Sula has meant. Nel marries and Sula leaves town to seek her fortune in the outside world. When Sula returns, Nel thinks of that return as being "like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed." With Sula, she laughs and of that laughter Morrison says:

It has been the longest time since she had had a rib-scraping laugh. She had forgotten how deep and down it could be. So different from the miscellaneous giggles and smiles she had learned to be content with these past few years (Morrison 1972:98).

After Sula's return there is an estrangement between the two friends because of an involvement between Sula and Nel's husband. Nel's husband leaves and Nel takes on the burden of raising her three children alone. Nel confronts Sula with the blame of breaking up her marriage:

"Why didn't you think about me?...What did you take him for if you didn't love him?...I was good to you, Sula"... Not wanting to let it go, Nel continues: "We were friends...and you didn't love me enough to leave him alone....why don't that matter?" Sula turned her head away...her voice was quiet. "It matters, Nel, but only to you...Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky" (Morrison 1972:145).

There are no attempts by the women at a reconciliation until just before Sula's death from a painful illness, when the two friends' visit brings them close together. In considering her friendship with Sula, Nel concludes that the bond between them was the most important thing in her life. The novel closes with Nel's words, "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude" (her husband). And the loss pressed down on her as she cried, " "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (Morrison 1972:174).

The affection and laughter shared by adolescent friendships can include or grow into sharing feelings and ideas of the mind, as young women grow into adulthood. In Lillian Hellman's Julia, two grown women struggle with moral and political issues, not with whether a man will call or whether the kitchen floors will shine. The story deals with the intensity of an adult female friendship between two women.

Julia and Lillian, friends since childhood, have grown apart but the bond of friendship has remained strong. As young girls, they spent Saturday nights together at Julia's grandparents, lying in bed reciting odds and ends of poetry to each other. As they grew into young adulthood, each went away to different schools, but the bond remained strong between them and they stayed in contact by exchanging letters and gifts. During summer vacations, they would often go off camping together, catching up on what was happening in each other's lives.

Eventually, Julia becomes a revolutionary against Hitler's Germany, and Lillian is on the road to success in a more conventional way. At one time, in the 1930s, Lillian is in Europe when she receives word that Julia is in the hospital in Vienna. Lillian risks the dangers of travelling in Vienna as a Jew and immediately goes to her friend's bedside, where she stays for several days. After that, they do not see each other again for some time, but keep in touch through letters and friends.

The next contact that Hellman has with Julia is when she is asked to help the cause for which Julia has devoted her life. They meet secretly in a restaurant in Berlin to make the arrangements. It is the first time they have seen each other in several years and Hellman describes the meeting:

I...was so shocked at the sight of Julia at a table that I stopped at the door. She half rose, called softly, and I went toward her with tears that I couldn't stop...I said, 'You look like nobody else. You are more beautiful now.' She said, 'Stop crying...Lilly, don't cry for me. Stop the tears. We must finish the work now (Hellman 1973:137).

As Hellman leaves to catch the train, Julia takes her hand and raises it to her lips and says, "My beloved friend." Lillian faces grave danger as she carries a large sum of money into Germany so that her friend can use it to ransom Hitler's prisoners.

The meeting in Berlin is the last time they ever see each

other. A few months following that meeting, Hellman receives word that Julia has been killed. She goes to London to claim the body. Her friend's death haunts her and, in the next few months, Lillian says, "I found I dreamed every night about Julia" (Hellman 146).

What Lillian is asked to do tests her loyalty and her courage in the face of danger; but it also tests the strength of the bond of love between the two women.

Women are able to share feelings and concerns with each other. While it is true that friendship between women can take different forms, when a loving, caring friendship exists between two women, it is a wonderfully unique experience.

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Mother
I write home
I am alone and
give me my body back
-Susan Griffin

Creation often
needs two hearts
one to root
and one to flower
One to sustain
in time of drouth
and hold fast
againt winds of pain
the fragile bloom
that in the glory
of its hour
affirms a heart
unsung, unseen.
-Marilou Awiakta

A daughter looking at her mother's life is looking at her own. The first experience any woman has of warmth and tenderness comes from her mother. That earliest connection of one female with another might later be rejected, but it forms a bond that, for most women, lasts throughout their lifetime, even after mother or daughter has died. From generation to generation, the idea of heritage appears and reappears, like mirrors, daughter reflecting mother, mother reflecting grandmother.

Alice Walker sees such a reflection of continuity in

describing her mother's garden as the mirror of her own creativity as a writer. In Search of our Mothers' Gardens is a tribute by Alice Walker to mothers and grandmothers "whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held." Yet, in whatever ways they could find they used their creativity:

For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release. They were Creators, who lived lives of spiritual waste because they were so rich in spirituality - which is the basis of Art - that the strain of enduring their unused and unwanted talent drove them insane (Walker, In Search 1983:233).

Walker wonders at the cruelty and abuse endured by black women who were forced to work from morning until night in the fields under the threat of a white overseer's lash, when they "cried out in her soul to paint watercolors of sunset"; or at a body broken and forced to bear children to be torn from her arms to a life of slavery themselves, when her dream was "the thought of modeling heroic figures of rebellion, in stone or clay" (Walker, In Search, 1983:233).

How was this creativity kept alive? It survived through whatever means could be found. A woman expressed herself through using whatever scraps of material could be made into quilts enough

to cover all the beds, by standing over a hot stove in the summer canning fruits and vegetables, or by lovingly planting and tending a flower garden around a shabby, rundown house.

The creative force for self expression was so great that these women left their mark by using whatever means they had available to them, and by doing this they "handed on the creative spark" to their children and grandchildren.

Novelist Jill Robinson, in a short essay on mothers and daughters, has described the difficulty in separating the longing for traditional mothering from the recognition of one's mother's ambitions. Robinson traces the differences in her own life as a writer, and her daughter's acceptance of that role, to her attitudes about her own mother's ambitions as an artist.

Robinson tells of going on a business trip, leaving her ill daughter at home: "Just go, mother, do your work and have a good time," her daughter tells her. As she stands at an exhibit at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., she reflects on the way that she turned away from art as a youngster mainly because her mother loved it. "Aggressions toward mother," her mother had lovingly said.

As she looks at the paintings she realizes that her own mother's work is "very, very good, cruelly unrecognized." She discovers, years too late, how considerable her mother's talent really was. She is shamed by her own failure to appreciate that excellence, and even more shamed by her failure to acknowledge the achievements that her mother was able to make, despite the demands

of a home and family:

We talk of the expectations parents give children! My God - the expectations I had for my mother. Imagine: she was to be sexless, except that I should be her gently eroticized obsession. She would give me her total attention - but leave me alone, except when I needed her and then she was to be there instinctively. If my mother had troubles, I was not to hear about them, although she was to listen endlessly to mine, to offer only pleasing advice (Newhouse 1985:25).

Robinson looks at her relationship with her own daughter and she realizes that her mother gave her the license to pursue her own creativity by "showing me her own longing." In understanding this, she longs to be able to tell her mother that, although she resisted every word of that teaching, she now turns to that world of her mother's art for pleasure and relaxation (Newhouse 1985:26).

The quality of a mother's life - however embattled and unprotected - is her bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create livable space around her, is showing her daughter that those possibilities exist. Because the conditions of life for many poor women demand a fighting spirit for sheer physical survival, such mothers have sometimes been able to give their daughters something to be valued far more highly than full-time mothering. Often, the irony is that to fight for her child's

physical survival the mother may have to be almost always absent from the child, as in Tillie Olsen's story, "I Stand Her Ironing" (Rich 1976:247).

As she stands ironing, a mother reflects on the life of her young daughter, just out of high school. It has not been a happy life for them. Before the child was a year old the father left them because "he could no longer endure sharing want with us" (Dietrich 1983:179). The mother is forced to leave her infant daughter while she works to support them, and she emotionally separates herself from her child because she cannot meet all of the demands being made on her life, - working at a job, caring for a new husband and other children and maintaining a home. She loves the child, but does not express it, even with a smile. Although the child withdraws into her own world, she grows up taking refuge in comedy. She becomes an entertainer, winning performance competitions, as a way of blocking out her unhappy childhood. The mother reflects on her own failures and in her mind passes them on to her daughter:

She has much to her and probably little will come of it. She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear...Let her be. So all that is in her will not bloom...There is still enough left to live by. Only help her to know...that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron (Dietrich 1983:178).

Mother love often displaces the self. The loved self, the

interior of our being, is suppressed or displaced and put into our children, especially when a need is apparent. For some mothers, that need in their children becomes more valuable, more beautiful, more wonderful than self.

Such is the case in Toni Morrison's novel, Beloved. In this story, Sethe, a runaway slave and her children are about to be recaptured, and she slashes her infant daughter's throat rather than see the child in chains. Sethe is arrested, but eventually is freed and returns to her mother-in-law's house and lives there with her three remaining children. The two young boys leave when they are thirteen years old and are not heard from again, although Sethe longs and hopes for their return. In time, the mother-in-law dies, and Sethe and her remaining daughter, Denver, are alone.

Eighteen years after the infant child, Beloved, has been killed, a young woman suddenly appears and Sethe and Denver believe that she is the slain infant returned to earth. The young woman, who calls herself Beloved, comes to live with Sethe and Denver. She has no explanation for her past and they don't ask for one. She is accepted, eventually, as the slain child returned to her family.

After Beloved's return, Sethe begins to reflect on her life as a slave and what it means to be free. She remembers that on the afternoon that she is discovered, she is squatting in the garden, working. As she sees the white men coming, she panics:

No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit

of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them (Morrison 1987:163).

Intending to slay all of her children and then herself, Sethe was able to kill only her infant daughter before she was stopped. She later tells Beloved:

My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is. They stopped me from getting us there, but they didn't stop you from getting here. Ha ha. You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which is what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one.

When I put that headstone up I wanted to lay in there with you, put your head on my shoulder and keep you warm. I couldn't lay down nowhere in peace, back then. Now I can...She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine (Morrison 1987:203, 204).

Sethe was the happiest she had ever been, having her daughter back:

I won't never let her go. I'll explain to her...she'll understand. I'll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a

daughter...Beloved...Beloved (Morrison 1987:200).

There is no doubt that Sethe did something terrible to her infant daughter. As a mother, she was trying to have something to say about her children's lives in a slave system that said to blacks, "You are not a parent, you are not a mother, you have nothing to do with your children." Sethe loved her baby so powerfully that she acted in the only way she could think of at the moment to save her children from a life of slavery: "Counting on the stillness of her own soul, she had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl" (Morrison 1987:5).

Following the publication of this novel, Toni Morrison stated during an interview: "It was absolutely the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it. I think if I had seen what she had seen, and knew what was in store...I think I would have done the same thing. But it's also the thing you have no right to do" (New York Times, Ag.1987).

Sethe saw this action as her only alternative. Her motherly instinct would not allow her to accept the possibility of having her children torn from her and placed in a life of slavery. They represented everything in life that was good:

The best thing that she was, was her children...her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing - the part of her that was clean (Morrison 1987:251).

Relationships between mothers and daughters are at times

wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy. The loss of the daughter to the mother or the mother to the daughter is one of the most devastating events in a woman's life. In her poem, "My Mother's Body", Marge Piercy explores that part of herself which no longer exists physically after her mother's death, but realizes that "My mother is my mirror and I am hers."

In this poem, the daughter is living fifteen hundred miles from home, yet knows the instant her mother dies: "In my mind I felt you die./First the pain lifted and then/you flickered and went out." She tells of returning home to see that "Those candles were laid out,/friends invited,..." and as she views the body of her mother she observes that:

The angel folded you up like laundry
your body thin as an empty dress.
Your clothes were curtains
hanging on the window of what had
been your flesh and now was glass.

As she "walks through the rooms of memory", she recalls how their roles reversed as her mother aged:

Remember me dressing you, my seventy-year-
old mother who was my last doll baby,
giving you too late what your youth had wanted.

The daughter begins to reflect on what she has inherited from her mother:

What is this mask of skin we wear,
What is this dress of flesh,

She recalls the "hips, thighs and buttocks" that provided cushioning for her grandmother, her mother and for herself and she realizes the bond these women share, to be passed from one generation of women to the next,

and we all sat on them in turn, those major
muscles on which we walk and walk and walk
over the earth in search of peace and plenty.
My mother is my mirror and I am hers.

Finally, the daughter reflects on the mother/daughter conflicts during her growing up years:

You pushed and you pulled on my rubbery
flesh, you kneaded me like a ball of dough.
I became willful, private as a cat.
You never knew what alleys I had wandered.
You called me bad and I posed like a gutter
queen in a dress sewn of knives.

And then comes the end of the mother's life, but not the end, because within this daughter is a part of her mother and a part of her grandmother, each longing for a better life for their own daughters:

I became the daughter of your dream.
This body is your body, ashes now
and roses, but alive in my eyes, my breasts,
my throat, my thighs. You run in me
a tang of salt in the creek waters of my blood,
you sing in my mind like wine. What you
did not dare in your life you dare in mine.

(Piercy, *My Mother's Body* 1988:26)

THE BOND BETWEEN SISTERS

she held her head on her lap
the lap of her sisters soaking up tears
each understandin how much love stood between them
how much love between them
love between them
love like sisters

-Ntozake Shange

For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.

- Christina Rossetti

The presence of sisters can be a wonderful thing, standing for companionship, physical intimacy, warmth and some vague sense of female protection. Sisters might also have deep antagonism and resentment and feelings of competition toward each other, especially during the adolescent years. However, sharing life with a sister represents a devotion different from other kinds of relationship. Life's relationships might change as a woman becomes a wife and mother, or enters into a separate life, but the affection between sisters - albeit rocky at times - and the easy communication of feelings, hopes and dreams, remains unique.

Such an affectionate devotion between two sisters is found in Alice Walker's 1982 novel, The Color Purple. Celie and Nettie's

love and devotion as sisters stem partly from their abuse and mistreatment as children. Alphonse, the "father" sexually abuses Celie, telling her, "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker, *Color Purple* 1982:3). Thus begins Celie's one-sided correspondence with God. She fears that her younger sister, Nettie, will also be sexually abused by the "father" and begs him "to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick" (Walker 1982:9).

As the relationship between Celie and Nettie grows and as Celie's self-awareness grows, she stops writing to God and addresses all of her letters to her sister, Nettie. Through the letters, Celie and Nettie shape themselves before our eyes, helping us understand a grief that stretches over thirty years. The poignancy of Celie's grief lies in her need for her sister and her inability to reach her or the children born in terror because of her stepfather's sexual abuse. Celie's recounting of her life, and eventually being able to control and shape it, comes from the feelings of self-expression and self-worth realized in her letters to Nettie, even though the letters are not exchanged immediately.

Although Celie was able to speak to God about family matters, her letters to Nettie become more personal. After discovering Nettie's letters, which had been hidden by Celie's husband, Albert, Celie begins to feel as though she does have some worth, that she does matters:

Now I know Nettie alive I begin to strut a little bit.

Think, When she come home us leave here. Her and me and our two children (Walker, Color Purple 1982:138).

As the letters are now exchanged openly, they help Celie to recognize what Nettie has faced in Africa during the years of their separation, but she also learns about herself and understands how she appears to others. She also begins to realize what she can become. Without the letters, Celie's feelings about her worthlessness, both physically and psychologically, would have continued. She believed Albert when he told her, "You skinny, you shape funny...you black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman...you nothing at all" (Walker 1982:175).

After all her mistreatment by Albert, Celie is finally able to say defiantly, "Nettie and my children coming home soon...and all of us together gonna whup yur ass" (Walker 1982:170). Celie's exchange of letters with her sister and her use of language gives her the power to affirm her own existence, to announce herself to the world: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly...but I'm here" (Walker 1982:176).

After thirty years and many changes, Celie and Nettie finally meet again. Their lives have taken very different paths. Nettie spends most of her adult years living in Africa, learning a new language and a different culture. Celie lives most of her life in the rural area of her childhood, but sees a whole new world when she moves to Memphis with Shug. The years have brought about a change in Celie's use of language, as well as in Nettie's educated

language of the outside world, and there is a fear that this will represent something of a barrier when they see each other again. The barrier is removed, though, as soon as the two sisters see each other and discover that the wonderful bond of love is as strong as it ever was:

Us totter toward one nother like us use to do when us was babies. Then us feel so weak when us touch, us knock each other down. But what us care? Us sit and lay there on the porch inside each other's arms (Walker 1982:243).

A sister can be seen as someone who is both ourselves and very much not ourselves - a special kind of double. Sometimes sisters do not overtly express the depth of their feelings for one another, while at other times, the language that surrounds them forces us to acknowledge the closeness. Sisters speak of being "wedded" to one another, of being "irreplaceable" in one another's lives, of caring in ways that lie beyond the limits of socially defined sisterhood. When one sister dies, the other is often lost and confused by unresolvable feelings. If sisters become estranged, their letters and diaries may reflect real pain and longing, a sense of having been split from themselves violently, inexplicably. When such estrangements can be healed, their joy and relief often equal the earlier despondent and/or destructive feelings. Even when one sister senses that resolution will not be forthcoming, the struggle to figure out the rift, to work out the damage, goes on

until something changes or some peace is achieved.

In her poetry, Adrienne Rich explores the importance of the relationship between sisters. She writes of the dilemma in recognizing both her likeness to and difference from her sister. The recognition of similarity and difference complicates a common double image, that of the sister as a mirror, or as "what I might have been."

Having faced the problems of sisterhood, Rich suggests in her poetry, ways of moving toward a more sustaining relationship. Rich portrays the changing relationship between sisters, especially the differences in sisters: the sister is "who I might once have been." Rich's sister represents both an aspect of her self and the possibility of realizing a relationship among all women.

Rich only implies a sister relationship in the title of "A Woman Mourned by Daughters". The daughters are united by their estrangement from their dead mother. For Rich, sisters united as these daughters are have not achieved true sisterhood. In "Sisters", Rich implies that estrangement between sisters is inevitable. In both of these poems Rich conveys a sense of emptiness in what might have been intimate, sustaining relationships. This sense of failure and estrangement reappears in a later poem, "A Primary Ground", in which Rich suggests an acknowledgement of estrangement of sisters from each other.

In her first step toward sisterly closeness, in "Flesh and Blood," Rich moves back into memories of childhood:

Everyone else I've had to tell how it was,
only not you.

....

Doors slammed. We
fell asleep, hot Sundays, in our slippers,
two mad little goldfish

fluttering in a drying pond.

Nobody's seen the trouble I've seen
but you.

Our jokes are funnier for that
you'd say

and, Lord, it's true.

(McNaron 1985:115)

The sisters don't have to explain their pasts to each other, and can enjoy each other by laughing together, and going to sleep wrapped in that bond of togetherness. As the sisters see their childhood world diminished, the bond continues to grow as Rich expresses in "Blood Sister":

we sit at your table drinking coffee
light flashes off unwashed sheetglass
you are more beautiful than you have ever been

...

ice fits itself around each twig of the lilac

like a fist of law and order

your imagination burns like a bulb in the frozen soil

(McNaron 1985:117)

The strength of the sisters' bond allows Rich to contemplate the future with assurance, as the poem ends:

when summer comes the ocean may be closed for good

we will turn

to the desert

where survival

takes naked and fiery forms.

(McNaron 1985:117)

In another poem "Sibling Mysteries", Rich takes the sisters into the past and looks at their common experience. The poem's first four sections search out a female past. Part 1 is the plea: "Remind me how we walked/trying the planetary rock." Part 2 recounts the daughters' memories of the mother, the timeless experience of love, betrayal and loss, "and how we thought she loved/the strange male body first." In Part 3, Rich reaches out to their special bond: "we told/among ourselves our secret,..../....piercing our lore in quilted galaxies." Rich recalls "how sister gazed at sister/reaching through mirrored pupils/back to the mother," suggesting a spiritual link that goes beyond death. Even with conflicts and differences, she speaks of their shared beginnings: "yet our eyes drink from each other/our lives were driven down the same dark canal" (McNaron 1985:116).

In her poem "Transit" (from the collection A Wild Patience Has

Taken Me This Far), Rich realizes that sisters can't rely on the past alone to bind them together:

When sisters separate they haunt each other
as she, who I might once have been, haunts me
or is it I who do the haunting
halting and watching on the path
how she appears again through lightly blowing
crystals, how her strong knees carry her,
how unaware she is, how simple
this is for her, how without let or hindrance
she travels in her body
until the point of passing, where the skier
and the cripple must decide
to recognize each other?

(McNaron 1985:119)

Rich emphasizes the paradox of likeness and difference between sisters. The recognition of likeness enables each to know herself and her relationship to others through knowing her sister. The recognition of difference brings a sense of mystery, of the limits of relationship, and of the need to protect one's own and one's sister's integrity.

The difficulty of dealing with likenesses and differences between sisters can be compounded even further when there is discord created in the family, especially by their mother. In a short story version of the opening episode of Candace Flynt's

novel, Mother Love (1987), three sisters, now grown, are still not at peace with their memories of themselves or their deceased mother.

The three sisters, Katherine, Jude and Louise, on certain occasions, get together to visit the gravesite of their mother. On these occasions, they take turns telling "mother stories," - some about how loving and carefree their mother was and some about how thoughtless and immature she often was. On this Christmas season, they have gone to the cemetery together. It is cold outside and they feel a closeness with one another as they stand together, the three of them sharing two coats. "Why weren't we ever like this when she was alive?" Jude asks in a soft voice. "She wouldn't let us be," Katherine murmurs. "We were like this when she was alive," Louise says. "Sometimes we were friends; sometimes we weren't. You can't make everything her fault" (Cahill 1989:312).

On the ride back to town the sisters are quiet as they reflect about each other. They can be comfortable together in long periods of silence as long as it is a peaceful silence. If one senses that something is wrong, then an argument usually occurs.

Of the time she spends with her sisters, Louise likes it best when they are like this. She can feel close to them and not have to listen to their ideas about what she should be doing in her life. Between them, her sisters have persuaded her not to quit college, to go abroad for a year, and to dump her boyfriend, Billy. Now, she is close to getting her degree, and Louise realizes that

it was good to take advantage of their experience and listen to them. However, she isn't about to make such an admission openly (Cahill 1989:318).

Of all the time Katherine spends with her sisters, she likes it best when the conversation is honest and careful. She loves her sisters as she loves her different children, each for different reasons. She knows so much about these two sisters since she was the one to assume the role of surrogate mother after their mother died. She encouraged them to believe she was invincible, but she is surprised that they still think that of her (Cahill 1989:319).

Of the time Jude spends with her sisters, she likes the sparring best. "Not that she likes to fight - well, maybe she does - but mostly she likes the mental exercise." She's so much nicer to her kids after she has spent time with her sisters. She's more persuasive than the other two and she feels a certain power over them. Talking to her sisters helps her define what she wants out of life, even if it isn't the same things they want. For years she would give in to Katherine's wisdom, but Katherine is no longer wiser. "She's become like every other married person: complacent, self righteous and boring. Safe, too. But she's also the sister that Jude at one time would have died for" (Cahill 1989:320).

The sisters argue on and off all the way home, but for the most part enjoy each other's company. They feel a certain warmth and security being together. Jude is driving and looks tired. Louise notices and almost without realizing it puts her arm lightly around her. Katherine, sensing the gesture, puts her arm around

Louise:

Tears that she is proud of fill Louise's eyes. Katherine is flooded with relief and gratitude and, once again, hope. Jude says gruffly, 'What's all this?' But she feels that someone has wrapped her in the red velvet comforter Mother used to tuck around them when they were sick. The feeling is reflected in her voice (Cahill 1989:323).

PART III

A NEW WOMAN

The period from the 1950s through the 1980s was a time of great transition and change for the American woman. Following the war years, women found themselves struggling with the meaning of "true feminism" and discovered that in trying to perpetrate the myth, they had no identity of their own. The emergence of the women's liberation movement helped to create the new ideal "woman as person" in which women began finding fulfillment in their own accomplishments. It was during this period that women writers began, at first, to focus on the "problem that had no name", and then to explore changes and alternatives that were opening up to women.

RE-DEFINING FEMINISM

...sometimes
i get so low so low
sometimes
i get so depressed
as though i lost
a part of me that loved me
the part that knew me best...
my right hand fills the china teacups
and needlepoints with old maid aunts
my right hand clings to rosary beads
and waters dying plants
but it's never painted a picture
nor run for president
my left hand
might have done these things
if its roots
had not been bent
a sculptor, a poet
it might have been
instead of a useless thing
to decorate with bangles and bracelets
and my mother's wedding ring
(Dory Previn, "Left Hand Lost")

In 1960 Good Housekeeping magazine published an article entitled "How to Know When You're Really Feminine." The male author assured his readers that he could correct the age-old misconceptions causing confusion and self-doubt in women. It seemed that the problem was that women were "womb-centered" and that for the true woman, children and husband would come first, far before self. This attitude was in no way unique, since the question of "true femininity" has been debated for centuries (Dorenkamp 1985:1).

Society devalues the role of women in American society. The

suggestion that "true femininity" requires the true woman always to place the needs of her husband and children before her own - "far before" her own, certainly implies a deprecation of women. The husband and children are assumed to be worthy and important; the self-sacrificing woman is not. For women to embrace these cultural definitions means to sacrifice the fulfillment of certain fundamental human needs - such as the need for self-expression, autonomy and self-regard - in order to avoid the loss of satisfaction of other, equally basic needs. Not to live up to accepted standards means to invite rejection and to be classified as unnatural or unwomanly. And, for women who have been trained from early childhood to accept the view that their identity rests in their relationships with others, and that their "niceness" and interpersonal sensitivity are their great powers, that is an unacceptable prospect.

It is ironic that when the little girl grows into a woman and assumes the role that is expected of her - that of mommie and homemaker - she discovers the contradictory view that society takes of her role. It is her function to teach and preserve the moral fiber of society, and to manage and maintain the home and family; but the role of mother/homemaker is devalued in the "real" world.

Women's work in the labor force has also always been devalued. Women have always worked - poor women at paid jobs, though not at decent wages; middle-class women, for the past hundred years or so, at professional jobs, again usually at inequitable wages. But almost all American women have worked at unpaid jobs: as wives,

mothers, housekeepers, farmers, and as volunteer workers in social causes.

During the colonial period, women and men worked together in the home in family groups. But the early nineteenth century movement of the workplace out of the home led to a new concept of the home and of woman. With industrialization came the division between the world of work and the home. Men, who would find themselves in the work of the world, would become autonomous. Women who would stay at home and manage the home and family would be supportive and dependent. When "home" began to be thought of, not as a bustling center of familial livelihood, but instead as a place of tranquility and love in an increasingly urbanized and industrialized society, a narrow and restrictive view of woman developed.

Partly as a result of the nineteenth century women's movement, women began to enter the paid labor force in substantial numbers, but they were relegated to jobs that were considered an extension of their domestic work. They found themselves in jobs as maids, textile workers, stenographers, saleswomen or teachers. Because a woman was supposed to work only until she was married, employers excused her low wages and deplorable working conditions (Hoffman 1979:xxii).

The Victorian cult of "true womanhood" denigrated the role of the working class woman, driven by the necessity to work, just as it considered a married woman working outside the home an unfortunate social condition, a "fall from grace" (Kolbenschlag

1979:81).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in her book Women and Economics, published at the turn of the century, makes revolutionary proposals regarding women's work and child care. Gilman argues that the subordination of the female sex had been necessary in the past for human evolution, but that in the twentieth century, there must be a cooperation between males and females. She believes that progress in the machine age had to be accompanied by greater opportunities for human development - most notably female development. Society could not hope to achieve its full human potential without permitting women to realize and express their special talents:

This inordinate demand for the life and time of a whole woman to keep half a dozen people fed, cleaned and waited on, keeps up in us a degree of self-indulgence we should, by every step of social development, have long since outgrown (Sochen 1982:192).

Gilman suggests that the subordination of women could only end when women led the struggle for their own autonomy and equality, thereby freeing men as well as themselves from the "distortions that come with dominance." The task ahead, said Gilman, was to apply the advanced technology of industrialization in the home and thus free women from household drudgery. She suggested collective cooking and cleaning functions; homes in which expert cooks prepared food for many families and expert nurses who cared for

pre-school children. Then career-minded and professionally trained mothers could do the kind of work that brought them the highest satisfactions:

The more absolutely woman is segregated to sex functions only, cut off from all economic use and made wholly dependent on the sex relation as means of livelihood, the more pathological does her motherhood become (Sochen 1982:192).

Little did Gilman know in the early twentieth century that many of the technological changes she advocated would ultimately be made in American homes - but without her hoped for changes in women's lives.

Even before World War I, many women had entered the permanent labor force, and the availability of new job opportunities and a more tolerant attitude toward working careers made women in the 1920s somewhat more economically independent than they had ever been. Increasing social approval of college education for women, moreover, freed them from the conception of themselves that they were fitted only to be wives and mothers.

Yet, the public perception was that the woman's place was in the home, and this attitude was apparent in women's magazines. That the wife and mother's role could be a sufficient source of fulfillment was argued by Elizabeth Cook in "The Kitchen Sink Complex" and by Rose Wilder Lane in "Woman's Place Is In The Home". Both of these essays, published in the thirties in the Ladies' Home

Journal, are representative of the continuing defense in women's magazines of the view that women would find greater happiness in the home than at the office (Springer 1977:274).

During World War II, women took over formerly "male jobs" in unprecedented numbers, just as they had during World War I. But, ironically, the end of World War II signaled the appearance of the most restrictive and demanding domestic feminine ideal of the century. Indeed, a major thrust of the current women's movement has been to undo the image of woman that developed during the 1950s.

Women were changed by their wartime work experiences. Feminists of the period often urged women to change, and such publications as Women's Home Companion also sounded the call for change:

In free nations, I can, with man, help build a better world, Or I can shirk the responsibility and assume again the status of an inferior creature. The one way is hard and burdensome for I must think and act in my own right. The other way is easy. I have known it for centuries. (Women's Home Companion, February, 1943)

In their ways and actions it is clear that working class women subscribed to these ideas. One of the striking themes in Sherna Gluck's 1987 collection of oral histories in Rosie, The Riveter Revisited is the desire of the women to test themselves, stretch themselves and prove themselves.

It had been believed initially that women were called out of the home to perform their patriotic duties during World War II "for the duration" and had then happily returned home to motherhood in postwar suburbia. However, contrary to popular myth, this was not the case. Many women interviewed for this book told that their wartime work experiences changed the way they felt about themselves. Being able "to hold their own with men", as one of the interviewees put it, gave a new sense of self, of competency, not only to women new to the world of work outside the home, but also to those who had worked at traditional women's jobs. Women in the 1940s were accustomed to their work being devalued - whether in the home or the workplace. During the war, for the first time in their lives, many women performed jobs that were viewed by the public as necessary and valuable, and that were often physically challenging. Finally valued by others, they came to value themselves more (Gluck 1987:265).

As the war ended, the alarm was sounded about women workers and their postwar plans. Surveys revealed that a majority of the women wanted to continue to work after the war, and this included former homemakers who had never worked outside the home. Furthermore, most women who planned to continue wanted to keep the jobs they had (Gluck 1987:16).

By late 1944, women's magazines were running ads promoting all-electric kitchens for the "after-victory" homes. These advertisements played a dual role: they suggested how wartime savings could be spent, and they served to remind women of their

proper domestic role. Most women defense workers, however, did not have a voice in their postwar plans. Massive layoffs occurred as soon as peace was declared, and the proportion of women in the workforce began to decline.

After the war years, which had followed on the heels of the Great Depression, the country started gearing up for a return to "normalcy." The entry of married women into the labor force since the 1920s had been a constant source of controversy. Now it was approaching the norm. During this time, a new definition of the housewife's role - child centered, consumer conscious and fully responsible for all housework - had begun to take shape. Women's magazines filled their pages with advertising and stories that promoted a renewed domesticity. In this idealization of family life, male and female roles were once again polarized (Evans 234).

The call for domestic bliss, advanced by women's magazines, continued well into the 50s and 60s. Suburban home ownership, coupled with a soaring birthrate, seemed to lend credence to the reality of this image of stability and happy return to the status quo. Then, in the early 1960s, with The Feminine Mystique, Betty Friedan exposed the myth (Gluck 1987:268).

Friedan writes of the deep yearnings for security and stability at the end of the war:

We were all vulnerable, homesick, lonely, frightened. A pent-up hunger for marriage, home and children was felt simultaneously by several generations; a hunger which, in the prosperity of postwar

America, everyone could suddenly satisfy (Friedan 1974:174).

Friedan based her material on interviews with women of the upper middle class who believed they had been overeducated for the conventional role of wife and mother. Their education had promised them intellectual stimulation and instead, they married, had children and were bored by the busywork of keeping house in the suburbs. Friedan blamed advertisers, women's magazine editors and the general mystique of the culture for women's unhappiness. In essence, Friedan's proposed solution to women's dilemma was that they find stimulating, personally rewarding work outside the home - either a career that could be interrupted for childbearing or an interesting part time job.

Friedan stated that the fact that American women were kept from growing to their full human capacities was taking a far greater toll on the physical and mental health of our country than any known disease. She called it "the problem that has no name" (Friedan 1974:364).

Ten years after the 1963 publication of The Feminine Mystique, Friedan reflects:

...I wasn't even conscious of the woman problem. Locked as we all were then in that mystique, which kept us passive and apart, and kept us from seeing our real problems and possibilities, I, like other women, thought there was something wrong with me because I didn't have an orgasm waxing the kitchen floor (Friedan 1974:5).

It is true that in the early 1960s, nearly half of all women in the United States were already working outside the home to help pay the mortgage or grocery bill. Those who did felt guilty, too - about losing their femininity, threatening their husband's masculinity and neglecting their children. It was not acceptable for women to identify with anything beyond the home.

It was during this postwar era that women's fiction began to challenge the notion that a man's world is different from a woman's world and a man's emotions are different from a woman's emotions; that marriage and motherhood represent the only fulfillment for a woman.

Sylvia Plath's 1971 novel, The Bell Jar, describes a young woman's struggle for her own identity in the 1950s. The book deals with growing up female in America with all the role restrictions and psychological hurdles that a woman may face. Because of the social barriers, Esther feels stifled - as though suspended in a bell jar.

Esther Greenwood is an unusually ambitious girl, successful in every apparent way. She now wins a contest to work for Ladies' Day fashion magazine in New York for one month during the summer. While she is not unattractive, Esther never considers herself a beauty and is overwhelmed by the world of fashion among her new friends and the clientele of Ladies' Day.

Esther's companions are Doreen and Betsy, the stereotypical "bad" girl and "nice" girl. Esther plays each part in turn, both

unsuccessfully. None of the females in her life fit her perception of herself, partly because her own sense of self is so fragmented. This desire to be someone else is a form of escape from a feeling of her own failure (Bundtzen 117):

All my life I'd told myself studying and reading and writing and working like mad was what I wanted to do, and it actually seemed to be true. I did everything well enough and got all A's, and by the time I made it to college nobody could stop me...and now I was apprenticed to the best editor on an intellectual fashion magazine, and what did I do but balk and balk like a dull cart horse (Plath 1971:26).

The feminine roles examined by Esther are those of young women who have no feelings of self-worth and allow men to maul them. For these women, relationships with men take precedence over self-achievement. Living in a man-centered culture, Esther feels hemmed in by the belief that "what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from" (Plath 1971:79). However, Esther rejects all these passive and unrewarding roles and decides instead:

The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket (Plath 1971:92).

What Esther cannot accept is the limitation imposed on her by a double standard and the sexual hypocrisy permitted men in society. When Esther's mother sends a Reader's Digest article, Esther refuses to accept "the main point" of her culture's sexual attitudes:

I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not...Finally I decided that if it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying pure myself and marry somebody who wasn't pure either. Then when he started to make my life miserable I could make his miserable as well (Plath 66).

One of Esther's chief preoccupations is how she can sidestep the rigors of the double standard without becoming a Doreen (the "bad" girl). Yet, every man she meets seems to think of women in these terms. The male image of The Bell Jar has room for only the pure and the impure. Her college friend, Eric, tells her that "if he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business" (Plath 1971:64).

After her distressing stay in New York, Esther feels a numbing depression and she returns to Massachusetts where she takes up her uneventful, sheltered life with her mother. She refuses to marry

Buddy, an eligible (but doltish) medical student. She sees marriage as a plot to subordinate women, especially talented women:

I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems any more. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state (Plath 1971:69).

Esther has no actual experience of marriage and motherhood, but observations give her an expectation of what life is like for a housewife in America, a life of mundane boredom. She is a young woman, but cannot imagine what the course of her life is to be:

I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires...and try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth (Plath 1971:101).

This feeling of purposelessness leads to her suicide attempt. In her refusal to be like other women and to be happy with the role prescribed by society, she closes off her life; she finds no alternative and is trapped in "the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby," suggesting an image of women being glassed, molded, bottled, into conforming to society's expectations (Plath 1971:193).

Plath's own life took a very similar path, only, unfortunately, her own suicide attempt in 1963 was successful. The waste of her gifts and her life is a crucial loss. Yet, it raises the question: What is a woman to do with her life if she does not follow the conventional pattern of wife and mother? Is there no other valid existence for her?

Following the conventional pattern of being a dutiful wife and mother is the heroine of Sue Kaufman's Diary of a Mad Housewife (1967). Tina Balser is a woman successful by most of society's standards. Married to a rising young lawyer, the mother of two daughters, she has no financial worries and lives in a large, comfortable New York apartment. She discovers, however, that she is slipping away from reality, and in order to retain some sense of herself, she decides to keep a diary. We learn that her husband is selfish and demanding and that her life consists mainly of following his instructions and orders, but somehow she always falls short of his expectations. Her husband controls everything; she has no money except for the small allowance she receives from Jonathon. Any purchases she makes are billed to her husband. He decides when redecorating needs to be done; when purchases should be made; when they should entertain; what clothes she should wear; when she should shop for them; what hairstyle she should have. Tina is a woman who has lost her "self" to her husband and children. She has no self-image at all.

Gradually, however, Tina starts to realize the emptiness of her life. She starts speaking up to her husband, refusing his

every demand. She tries having an affair with a cynical writer, but finds that he verbally abuses her as much as her own family does. One night, after her husband has been badgering her about returning to her psychiatrist because of her refusal to follow his daily instructions, she lashes out at him, telling him to go and see the psychiatrist himself:

...the model husband for the cured analysand. And after you're done telling him all about me, tell him all about yourself...he would find it such a relief to listen to a really effective man...A completely masculine man who's absolutely clear on what a woman's role in marriage ought to be. Above all don't leave that out. You must give him your views on what **both** working roles in a successful marriage should be...You know - the Forceful Dominant Male, the Submissive Woman? The Breadwinner who has every right to expect the Obedient Wife to carry out all his orders? (Kaufman 1967:221)

Tina breaks off the unsatisfactory love affair and vows to start over with her husband, "but I felt nothing, nothing, nothing... pick up the pieces and start **what** again?" (Kaufman 1967:300)

Ultimately, Jonathon admits to a need for psychiatric help and confesses his employment problems and his own infidelity to Tina. She assures him that he can change back to the person that he was when they married, and he tells her:

I didn't change. I was always what I am now - greedy, aggressive, hostile, dishonest, and ambitious beyond belief. It was just that I managed to hide it better at one time (Kaufman 1967:307).

Thus, the implication of the end of the story is that things will return to normal as soon as he can find help. Tina has probably not learned something that will cause her to change her life. She only hopes that once his demands have become reasonable and his attitude toward her more positive, that their life together will continue. The fact that her role as wife and mother does not change is not disturbing; rather, it is the feeling that she will continue to accept the image created by others rather than discovering her own identity as a person.

The message that women are powerless, that men have all the power, continued in women writer's fiction into the 1970s. In her first novel, Fear of Flying (1973), Erica Jong makes the point that although women may think they are sexually and politically "liberated", in actuality, they aren't. This is especially true of many of the attitudes found in fiction toward unmarried women. Isadora Wing, the heroine of the story, fears being the butt of ridicule, since a woman alone "is a reproach to the American way of life" (Mickelson 1979:11). Accustomed to being dependent first on father, then on husband, she is timid about losing dependency on some man. She dreads being alone, so she marries and finds out that her loneliness is even worse: (Mickelson 1979:36)

Five years of marriage had made me itchy for...men, and itchy for solitude. Itchy for sex and itchy for the life of a recluse...I knew my itches were un-American - and that made things worse. It is heresy in America to embrace any way of life except as half a couple. Solitude is un-American. It may be condoned in a man - especially if he is a "glamorous bachelor"...But a woman is always presumed to be alone as a result of abandonment, not choice (Jong 1973:11).

Although Jong concentrates on woman's body, its urges, its drives, the novel is mainly the story of a dying marriage and a woman's search for love. The book poses the question: what is it to be a woman? Isadora is conscious of her sexuality and her body, and she finds satisfaction in her physical appearance. On one occasion, she strips off her clothes and climbs into the bathtub. As she immerses herself in water up to her neck, she contemplates her body: "A nice body," she says. "Mine. I decided to keep it." However, Isadora still does not have a sense of her own identity, "Growing up in America. What a liability!" (Jong 1973:335)

Isadora leaves her uncommunicative, boring psychiatrist husband for her newly found lover, Adrian Goodlove. Adrian offers her the promise of sensual love and the promise of a life which he calls "twentieth century existentialism." He is sensual in public where consummation is impossible, and impotent in private. He makes all the rules for the relationship while pretending there are none, and he does have plans of his own, which include going back

to his wife and children. Realizing that he is going to leave her, Isadora puzzles over how she misjudged his motives:

Suddenly...I knew what I had done wrong with Adrian and why he had left me. I had broken the basic rule. I had pursued him. Years of having fantasies about men and never acting on them - and then for the first time in my life, I pursue a man I madly desire...and what happens? (Jong 1973:295)

Isadora concludes that her fling with Adrian "has been desperation masquerading as freedom."

At the end of the novel, after Adrian has left, Isadora decides to return to Bennett. She doesn't know if he will want to resume their marriage, nor if that is, indeed, what she wants. Yet, she has come to some sort of terms with her life:

I hugged myself. It was my fear that was missing. The cold stone I had worn inside my chest for twenty-nine years was gone. Not suddenly. And maybe not for good. But it was gone...whatever happened, I knew I would survive it. I knew, above all, that I'd go on working. Surviving meant being born over and over. It wasn't easy, and it was always painful. But there wasn't any other choice except death (Jong 1973:335).

Neither husband nor lover provides Isadora with a sense of her own identity or gives her any security. Ultimately, she has to

try, as all women must, to determine her own sense of destiny: "You do not have to apologize for wanting to own your own soul. Your soul belonged to you...when all was said and done, it was all you had" (Jong 1973:310). Isadora's search gives good insights into how difficult this is for women in our society. Although Jong's book deals more with sexual needs, her conclusion is basically the same as other books of this period. Woman is helpless. Man is powerful (Mickelson 1973:311).

Some women, dissatisfied with their traditional role of wife and mother, chose a different path in their search for fulfillment. In The Women's Room (1977), Marilyn French writes about women who are deserted, divorced, neglected, struggling to be father and mother to their children, and searching for some meaning to their lives.

The time period for this novel is somewhere between the Fifties and Sixties. The story begins with 38 year old Mira cowering in the women's lavatory of Harvard University. She has retreated to this place because of her feeling of isolation, invisibility to the people about her. She notices that the sign on the door "Ladies Room" has been crossed out and someone has pencilled in "Women's Room." She retraces her life up to this point.

Mira leaves college to marry Norm, who is going to medical school; they live in a tiny apartment and she works to support them. Norm is a nice guy, but has the accepted attitudes about a wife's subordinate role. When Mira asks for the car in order to

get to her job, he insists that "You don't want to work in the city with all those men. You don't know men like I do." Grateful for Norm's concern, Mira takes a dull job nearby, so that she can walk to work. When Mira becomes pregnant, he accuses her of ruining his life - it is all her fault.

Mira comes to the realization that Norm thought the same way as other men: "He, like them, believed he had innate rights over her because he was male and she was female. But he was gentle and respectful; if he was like them, there was no hope" (French 1977:45).

After Norm finishes medical school, he moves his family of Mira and two young sons to the suburbs, which is the setting for the first half of the book. Thus, a group of young housewives with growing children are left to take care of their homes and families. The young mothers meet daily to talk about diapers, sterilizing bottles, formulas and recipes, never dreaming to suggest that their lives are boring and meaningless. The men go out in the world to pursue careers, talk to everybody, have expensive company lunches, keep a close watch on money and expect peace and harmony when they return home at the end of the day.

Eventually, Norm tires of Mira and leaves her for another woman. Mira is devastated, but after the divorce, she decides to return to college, applies to Harvard and is admitted. She leaves the suburbs and the setting of the novel, then moves to the college campus. It becomes the place for a group of educated women, some young and some not so young. Yet, the problems remain the same.

Mira sees that the young university wives are combining domesticity with graduate work and finding their own work and personal needs are secondary to those of their husbands. The message is that man's work is so powerful and important that a woman does not have the right to intrude on her husband's time with any problem of her own. She is aware that her husband regards her as his resource, and his home as a place of solace and privacy.

Mira finds a small, shabby apartment, - a far cry from the fancy house she had just left. Cambridge is full of young people, seeming full of life and sure of themselves. But Mira could not identify with that feeling:

She saw everything in terms of herself...She sat late at night...realizing how all her life she had maintained her ego by things like the butcher smiling when he saw her, complimenting her on her appearance; or the floor waxer looking at her with a glint in his eye. How do you stop that? How can one maintain oneself by such absurdities? How can one rid oneself of them? (French 1977:232)

Mira, still feeling like the discarded wife, meets a new love and discovers that the "liberal" man, Ben, is as ready to abandon her when she fails to meet his plans for marriage and children as was Norm, her former husband. When she refuses to give up her own graduate school plans and move to Africa with Ben, he leaves without her. He eventually returns with a wife, children and a prestigious, well-paying job. Mira, on the other hand, finishes

her Ph.D. dissertation and because she is a forty-year old woman, has trouble finding a position. She finally gets a teaching position in a small community college in Maine.

The author of this book seems to be a very angry woman and she uses the heroine, Mira, to prove why every woman needs to be angry. It is her position that woman has little or no chance in our present male-dominated society. In our last glimpse of Mira, she is walking the beach, alone and with no one. By her refusal to play by the rules of society, - to follow the social norms and follow her man to the place of his choice, bear his children (though she already has children by a former marriage), give up her creative work, or do it only when it is convenient for others, - Mira faces life alone. As she walks the beach, she thinks about the women in her life who were always seeking ways to be "a woman":

What's to fear, after all, in a silly woman always running for her mirror to see who she is? Mira lived by her mirror...a lot of us did: we absorbed and believed the things people said about us. are you a good wife? a good mother? are you keeping the romance in your marriage? So I went out and bought "The Ladies' Home Journal" and "Good Housekeeping"...I read them like the Bible, trying to find out how to be a woman (French 1977:233).

Mira comes to realize that in refusing to conform to the societal roles prescribed for women, she is alone, and as she walks the isolated beach, she reflects on her life:

It comes to me that this is the first time in years, maybe in my life, that I am completely alone with nothing to do. Maybe that is why everything comes crowding in on me now. These things that jar their way into my mind make me think that my loneliness may not be entirely the fault of the place, that somehow or other - although I can't understand it - I have chosen it (French 1977:13).

RESHAPING THEIR TRADITION

and he said: you pretty full of yourself ain't chu
so she replied: show me someone not full of herself
and i'll show you a hungry person
-Nikki Giovanni

i found god in myself
and i loved her
i loved her fiercely
-Ntozake Shange

Other novelists, such as Joyce Carol Oates and Marge Piercy, have written about women in a different and larger context, combining their perceptions about the future of women's experience with a vision of women sharing equally with men in that experience (Springer 1977:310).

Marge Piercy, in her feminist novel Small Changes (1973), imagines an alternative world in which the power politics of sexual relationships are replaced by something better - a concern for each person as an individual and a respect for mutual needs. Piercy takes her two central characters, Beth and Miriam, through a variety of experiences with men, but she shows very carefully that male-female relationships as they now exist are intimately bound up with a social structure that defines roles for men and women according to its economic needs.

Small Changes deals with the period of the Sixties and its themes are conventional marriage, women's escape from marriage, their efforts at communal living, and their struggles to form relationships with men or with women based on mutual enjoyment and respect for each other. Beth and Miriam come from different backgrounds but their lives meet, cross and recross.

The novel begins with Beth. Jim, her husband, expects her to work, keep house, breed children, and receive her sexual pleasure from his own satisfactions. Beth's parents give her an expensive, elaborate wedding, - enough money that it would have financed college for Beth, an idea which they reject. Once she was married, she was treated differently by other women in the family:

Since she was married, her mother and Marie talked to her differently. They complained about their husbands. They assumed a common level of grievance. That was being married. They saw a certain level of war as normal: women had to get things indirectly, wives had to plot and manage and evade. "You have to make him think he's getting his way," Marie warned. "Don't cross him directly. You have to coax him along" (Piercy, *Small Changes* 1973:23).

Beth struggles along in her marriage trying to play the role of the submissive wife. They both work all day at their jobs, but when they arrive home at night, he leans back in his recliner, expecting Beth to prepare a full meal. When she objects, he becomes angry:

He did not grow fearful before her temper as she before his. Her attempts to express anger, to defend herself, ended in tears, in begging forgiveness, in taking back her words abjectly, in a sense of humiliation and insulted flesh and bruises. The upper hand, he called it. Keeping the upper hand. A man wore the pants, he said, or he was henpecked (Piercy, *Small Changes* 1973:25).

Eventually, Jim decides that it is time for them to start a family. Beth pleads with him that she is not ready for a baby, but he will not budge. She feels hemmed in, uncertain of whether she wants to spend the rest of her life in this one-sided marriage: "There had to be more than this! They were not really together." Yet, she knows that if she has a child she will be trapped, because then she will not be able to leave:

Till that moment...she did not even know she had imagined leaving. Getting away. Escaping. From what? Him? Her family? The box. It was all in the box. There had to be something more to living, there had to be, or there was no point (Piercy, *Small Changes* 1973:29).

Beth runs away from Jim and from her family. She catches a plane and goes to Boston, where she finds a job and a small apartment. For the first time in her life, she is on her own, free to make her own choices and decisions.

From this point in the book, the style changes, and we are

introduced to a world of communal living in which relationships form, dissolve and disappear. Though Beth's transformation from being a passive young woman to an activist is abrupt, Beth's singleness of purpose is to free herself from dependency on man for approval, protection and love. She is determined to be strong enough to put her life in order.

In the section of the book about the other major character, Miriam, there is one major theme - that Miriam is a woman who on the surface appears liberated but who actually is anxious to please everyone, and above all, to please men. She wants to be loved and her fear of being without love dominates her actions and her life. The men in her life use her but always leave her terrified that she will lose them. She finally marries Neil and has children. In the final scene, Miriam, terrified of losing Neil and the children, plans to be more diligent in anticipating his needs and meeting them. Ironically, Neil already has plans of his own and they do not include Miriam, but another woman. Unlike Beth in her marriage, Miriam tries to content herself with the crumbs of approval Neil throws to her when she succeeds in momentarily pleasing him.

Piercy is a feminist, convinced that society has indoctrinated men with a concept of manhood which is based on success in making money and in controlling women - sexually, economically and politically. All through the book are clear indications that women, especially married women, do not pay enough attention to money. They allow husbands to write off their household work as

non-productive because it doesn't bring income. They do not insist on equitable control of monies in the household. They lower themselves to the status of beggars asking for every penny to buy a book, a dish, a pair of pants. "It's like being fifteen again," Miriam says, "and having to ask Daddy for an allowance" (Piercy, *Small Changes*, 1973:410).

The book's message is found in the ironic title Small Changes. Women's lives can change if women are honest and willing to risk change from their traditional pattern of dependency on man. Piercy centers on the man-woman relationship as it has existed in the past and suggests alternate ways for women to live.

The theme of a modern woman searching for self-understanding and fulfillment without dependency on a man is found in Joyce Carol Oates's novel, Marya: A Life (1986). Oates traces Marya Knauer's life through its significant stages, from early childhood spent in violence and poverty until her mid-thirties, when she is quite famous.

When Marya is eight years old, her father is killed in a barroom brawl. Her mother disappears shortly thereafter, leaving Marya and her two younger brothers homeless. They have lived in squalor and poverty all of their lives and have become accustomed to upheaval in their young lives. They are taken in by their uncle and his family. Marya's teenage cousin, Lee, over a period of two or three years, repeatedly sexually abuses Marya in the front seat of an old car parked in the yard, but he warns her never to tell anyone and she doesn't. She escapes into herself and this becomes

a pattern of her life. As a child, Marya wants to be like "the others", but she does not make friends easily and is considered something of a loner. By the time she reaches high school, she knows that she is different and chooses to go her own way. Her teachers tell her she is "too bright" to fit in; she is singled out by her priest; her aunt tells her she is too mouthy and smart-alecky.

Marya goes through high school as the top student in her class, winning scholarships to attend college. She spurns the attention of a high school boyfriend because she can't bear the thought of remaining in the town where she grew up. She can't wait to leave Innisfail and vows to never return: "If I fail...if I have to come back home...I'll kill myself" (Oates 1986:107).

Marya excels in school academically but fails abysmally socially. She finds it difficult to make friends, and prefers spending time alone in her small room. It is the first time in her life that she has known privacy: "She prized her cubbyhole of a room because it was hers; because in fact she could lock the door for days on end....Marya prized her aloneness" (Oates 133). She becomes friendly with one classmate, Imogene, but because of her unwillingness (or inability) to engage in the give and take of friendship, they have a bitter fight and the friendship is ended.

Marya finishes college and goes on to earn her Ph.D. As a graduate assistant she becomes involved in a love affair with one of her instructors, Dr. Fein. It is the first romantic involvement for Marya since she left Innisfail, and she is not accustomed to

feeling affection for others:

Marya had never deeply loved anyone; Marya had never been attracted to anyone - except briefly perhaps to Emmett Schroeder. Since the day after the going away party, Marya had declared herself inviolable - autonomous - entirely self-sufficient (Oates 1986:207).

Falling in love with a married man leaves Marya with no feelings of guilt or remorse: "As for the cravings of others, of men - why should she honor them? Why even take them seriously?" (Oates 1986:207). Yet, the relationship is on Fein's terms, since he has a wife and family to consider:

Gradually, it happens that there are two "times" in Marya's experience, two aspects of time. One is vivid and pulsing with life (the hours she spends with Maximilian), the other is bleak, drab, achromatic (the hours apart from him - which in fact constitute most of her experience). A familiar story - a woman yearning to be completed in a man, by way of a man. As if she hadn't a soul of her own (Oates 1986:212).

Dr. Fein dies quite suddenly and Marya is again alone. She moves on to a small college where she gets a job as an English instructor. She becomes involved in research and writing and is beginning to become well known in literary circles.

Eventually, she leaves college teaching and moves to New York

where she again falls in love with a married man, Eric Nichols, a well known magazine editor. Marya becomes quite famous as a critic and intellectual commentator, and is a frequent American delegate to international conferences. It is while she is attending such a conference that her lover dies, and Marya is once again alone.

Actually, Marya has always been alone. She has chosen what to some appeared to be a very satisfying life, but she never is able to find satisfaction in her life. She has succeeded in forging an independent life, but has never learned to examine and find satisfaction with her inner life:

These days, Marya thought, she often wasn't herself. The very question of "self" intrigued her. (For if she could raise her emotional confusion to a philosophical plane, might she not be redeemed? It was an old, old tradition.) (Oates 1986:290)

In trying to cope with her grief over the loss of Eric, Marya begins to think of trying to find her mother, who had disappeared thirty years ago. She returns to Innisfail and begins the search. The novel ends with Marya receiving a letter containing a snapshot of a "middle aged woman with stiff gray hair, shadowed eyes, a taut suspicious expression...Marya's own cheekbones and nose. Her eyes" (Oates 1986:310). She discovers that she is badly frightened, but for the first time since she was a small child, she finds herself willing to reach out to others.

Being able to make choices in one's life is the theme of Alix Kate Shulman's novel, In Every Woman's Life (1987). The story is about three women who are linked not only by the ties of family and friendship, but by bonds created by empathy for one another. The choices they face, their decisions, the humor and strength with which their decisions are made, connect their lives.

Rosemary has been married to Harold Streeter for nearly 20 years. She is an attractive, energetic wife and mother who has recently obtained her degree and teaches college math two days a week. Harold is a college professor and writer.

The Streeters have raised two children and have a secure, comfortable home. There has been infidelity on the part of both of them in the past, but from all outward appearances, they are a happy, devoted couple. They are determined to keep their marriage together for the sake of their children. Each of them is now involved in another affair, but they take all the necessary steps to keep others from knowing. Rosemary's current affair with a younger, unmarried man has caused her to wonder if it is not just her marriage that has stagnated, but she as well.

Nora Kennedy, whom Rosemary has just met again after many years, is unmarried and is a well known journalist. She has no desire for marriage, having made her freedom her first priority. She has been involved in several love affairs over the years and is presently having an affair with a married writer. She constantly questions Rosemary's commitment to the confinements of marriage. On one occasion, Rosemary tells her, "I have my family,

work, security, - what more is there?" Nora replies:

'Freedom.' The great god of refusal, whom she's worshipped all her life, to whom she has made all her offerings, all her sacrifices: freedom. For freedom she refuses to be bought or sold, coddled or kept. To freedom she gave her firstborn, aborting herself on her wedding day. For freedom she had her tubes tied. In freedom she's managed to create a proud if difficult life for herself, risky and brave. And for the joys of freedom she is willing if necessary to endure loneliness, slights, slander, even scorn (Shulman 1987:91).

However, Rosemary views freedom from another perspective.

"Freedom to do what?" she asks. "I do everything I want. Harold and I are each so busy that, between our work and our kids and everything else, we hardly see each other. What couple could be freer than that?...actually marriage frees me" (Shulman 1987:91).

The third female character in the novel, Daisy Streeter, is the daughter of Rosemary. She is bright, perceptive, beautiful and thinks of her mother as a friend in whom she can confide. Now, Daisy is taking a look at her own life's decisions. Having graduated from college, working and being independent, Daisy falls in love and becomes pregnant. Her dilemma is whether to marry, raise the child as a single parent, or openly live with her boyfriend, Michael, without marriage. She looks at the painful experiences her own mother has had with marriage, and remembers the sacrifices her mother made because of her family. She also looks

at the independent life that Nora has chosen:

Like everyone, Daisy wants everything, all the pleasures and rewards of existence: safety and freedom, trust and passion, family and work and love. Who wouldn't? But how could she pull it off? (Shulman 1987:299)

As Daisy considers her options, she realizes that the dream of having it all is a myth:

Most people marry. Some do it blindly: they step out to the end of the rocks, hold their noses, squeeze their eyes closed and leap. Others go slowly, one step at a time - the courtship, the affair, the shared apartment, the engagement, perhaps a pregnancy - until they feel they have no choice left...Some choose chastity, some fidelity, some adultery, some polygamy. But all settle for less than all (Shulman 1987:301).

The choice is no longer simple. The rules have changed for women, and although there are at least now choices to be made, the dream of "having it all" is not a reality:

Daisy can marry like her mother and her mother's mother and all her ancestors. Or she can refuse the bondage of the past and go her own way. Or she could marry Michael in every sense but the legal. This presented another possibility - a secret marriage (Shulman

1987:300).

Daisy and Michael are secretly married, and so to the outside world they are two single people living together and raising a child. Whatever advantage Daisy sees in this arrangement is not made clear, but she feels that she has at least exercised an alternative to traditional expectations.

Rosemary and Harold are divorced and go in different directions. Rosemary feels satisfaction in having stayed in the marriage until her children reached adulthood and were on their own. She now feels free to live in a lifestyle of her own choice: she teaches, travels and has short and long term love affairs - the choice is hers.

Nora's lover dies and leaves her with feelings of anger, guilt and desperation; but these feelings pass and she continues to enjoy the life of freedom that she has chosen for herself.

As Daisy realizes, her grandmother and her ancestors did not have the alternatives in their lives that are now possible. These three women, - Rosemary, Nora and Daisy - are able to make choices in their lives, finding a personal freedom denied to so many women before them.

Personal freedom in sexual preferences became more of a reality following World War II. The slow development of an urban gay subculture in the twenties and thirties touched the lives of only a few, and most homosexuals remained isolated in a hostile culture. But just as heterosexual women and men found that the war

reduced the authority of traditional standards, homosexuals, too, discovered that the war created a situation in which a homosexual identity could be recognized (Evans 1989:228).

The women's movement of the sixties provided a means of examining social realities of all women - heterosexual and homosexual - which resulted in a "sisterhood" allowing many women to claim their identity as lesbians. However, within the radical branch of the movement, the matter of sexual preference created dissension within the membership. Lesbian feminists argued that lesbianism represented the most complete form of female autonomy and they took the position that the exploitation of homophobia was a means of undermining feminism:

As long as the label "dyke" can be used to frighten women into a less militant stand, keep her separate from her sisters, keep her from giving primacy to anything other than men and family - then to that extent she is controlled by the male culture (Evans 1989:294).

Lesbians began to realize that they had to struggle for a new identity against cultural prejudice and began to look for identity themselves within a lesbian community. As a group they were able to start moving beyond the fear of being discovered and rejected, and they began rejecting the self-hatred and invisibility inflicted by a culture that called them abnormal. As lesbians became more comfortable with their public role, they were able to proclaim and defend their love for other women without feelings of guilt.

The theme of openness about sexual preference is the topic of May Sarton's 1989 novel, The Education of Harriet Hatfield. It is a story about Harriet Hatfield, who at sixty years of age finds herself alone. Her friend of thirty years, Vicky, has died and left her enough money to live comfortably as she chooses. The two women had lived together for many years in a Boston suburb; they had been friends, lovers, companions, but had never considered openly admitting that they had a lesbian relationship, not even to their families. It was assumed by everyone, but never discussed. Such things were kept quiet. Vicky was a successful, well known publisher who moved in intellectual circles. She was a strong, opinionated woman and Harriet was willing to allow her to have the dominant role in their relationship. Harriet was the homemaker, gardener, keeper of their private lives.

After Vicky suddenly dies, Harriet feels a certain liberation from her self-imposed confinement. She had been terribly happy with Vicky, but now she feels a desire to make changes in her life. She has always been involved with books and so decides to open a bookstore for women. She leaves her comfortable home with its gardens and servants and finds an old Victorian house in the run-down, blue collar neighborhood of Somerville. With the help of a few friends, she opens her bookstore, Hatfield House: A Bookstore for Women.

Harriet feels a lot of trepidation about taking on such an endeavor, but is excited at the prospect of providing a place for women from all walks of life to meet and enjoy each other while

they browse in the bookstore. Since Harriet has never openly admitted or discussed her homosexuality with others, it doesn't occur to her that the neighborhood will object to her store.

Women from many different backgrounds visit the bookstore: Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, immigrants, wealthy and poor, married and single, young and old. Some are heterosexual and some are homosexual, but Harriet pays little attention until she discovers the openness of some of the younger women. When two young women visit the store, one of them introduces herself as Teddy: "I'm going for engineering at M.I.T." Pointing at her friend, Teddy says: "She's my lover; she has a job with an architect's office" (Sarton 30). Thus begins the education of Harriet Hatfield.

Soon after the bookstore has opened, Harriet receives an anonymous threat and obscenities begin to be painted on the outside windows. In her anger and fear, she agrees to an interview with The Boston Globe reporter to discuss her bookstore. She has decided to be open and direct and admits to the reporter that she is, indeed, a lesbian, but that is certainly not the focus of her store, only a part of it. When the article appears, the headline announces that a lesbian bookstore owner has been threatened. Harriet has never before thought of herself as a member of a persecuted minority. Now she has "come out" and she becomes a target for some and a heroine for others.

The novel deals both with problems of homosexual and heterosexual women. Joan, a young woman Harriet hires to help in the book store, has recently been divorced. It was a no-fault

divorce and Joan admits her bitterness:

Martin got what he wanted and in the process left me nearly penniless...After twenty years of marriage, being the housekeeper, cook, cleaning woman, and chauffeur for Martin, I got half of what our house was worth and that was all.

There is a huge emphasis these days on happiness, on being fulfilled - I believe that is the word - whatever the cost to anyone else. People are greedier about sex than even about money, as I see it. Enjoyment, taking what you want, has become a kind of imperative (Sarton 1989:35).

The two women band together to overcome the hatred and prejudice that confronts them. After receiving the anonymous hate letter, telling her to close the store and leave, Harriet is disturbed by the hatred:

...it is illuminating in a way. I have never felt like a leper before, an outcast. But huge numbers of people in our society do, of course...So at last I can laugh at myself and the whole stupid world. I don't know...I probably asked for this without even knowing what I was doing. A women's bookstore is going to attract all sorts of women. That is what I wanted, after all...It's the young who have no doubts, you see. They introduce a friend as their lover. I must say it does amaze me. It even shocks me (Sarton 1989:77).

Yet, in reflection, Harriet can see that the door is starting to open for women to have choices and to be able to make those choices openly:

I like honesty...I like it that they include me. And that's what I want of this place: an open door and no judgmental values (Sarton 1989:77).

Harriet has many friends with diverse backgrounds. A widow with whom she has had a long-lasting friendship asks Harriet why women love women and Harriet grapples with an answer:

For a woman, another woman is not primarily a sexual object, whereas for a man she often is. A woman wants to be recognized as a person first, to be understood and cherished for what she is, and especially perhaps in middle age she may find this kind of understanding and recognition from another woman, a woman she admires as I admired Vicky (Sarton 1989:170).

The turning point for Harriet's acceptance in the neighborhood is one evening when someone shoots and kills her faithful dog as they are out walking. It is the dog's death that brings Harriet's detractors to the realization that things have gone too far and that the results of the hatred are far worse than the effects of a women's bookstore in the neighborhood. Harriet doesn't back away

from her goal of furnishing a place for women to congregate and discuss their lives and make friends. Neither do those people who fear a different lifestyle change their attitude, but they do become more tolerant.

Through the changes that take place in her life, Harriet goes from being reserved and reticent to an involved and determined woman who realizes that she has the choice to face the challenges that come about because of her decision to become involved in life:

Many women have to conceal their private lives, for fear of being fired, so it is time someone like me, who can't be fired, come out with who and what I am. Homophobia seems to be based on some way-out image of a lesbian as a girl in trousers and a man's shirt who picks up women in gay bars!...I want it known that an elderly woman, as you see I am, can be a lesbian and...a distinguished member of society. Isn't it time a whole submerged part of respectable society came out into the open? (Sarton 1989:102)

All women - Black, White, Native-American, Hispanic - share an identification through oppression as women and through being denied the experience of developing their potential as full participants in society. The yearning in women for self-realization and personal growth is seen more and more in the voice of women through contemporary literature, as expressed in Marge Piercy's poem, "The Longings of Women":

But we are many and hungry
and our teeth though small are sharp.
If we move together
there is no wall we cannot erode
dust-grain by speck, and the lion
when he lies down is prey
to the army of ants.

(Piercy, *My Mother's Body* 1988:95)

CONCLUSION

The twentieth century has seen tremendous changes in the roles of American women, both in the public and private spheres. In examining the images of women through literature, one can see periods of complacency as well as periods of energy and innovation in their struggle for personal freedom.

An indestructible element in each of these roles has been the link of "sisterhood", a connectedness shared by all women. It has been through the combined, determined efforts of women that change came about. From the turn of the century when women began to write about "the woman question", through the early decades when women struggled to define their public roles, to recent years, American women have tried to expand the boundaries of their lives.

In the seventies and eighties, through a new awareness of experiences and perspectives, women explored changes and alternatives to their lives, searching for ways of overcoming societal barriers. New realities deeply affected the experiences and expectations of all women during this period. Females were still finding discrimination in the workplace; many women put off marriage and childbearing; they began "dressing for success" and looking for ways to "have it all." Many found the life of superwoman extremely stressful as they tried to meet the standards of success for both professionals and housewives (Evans 1989:311).

While two-income professional families brought about a higher

standard of living, the numbers of low income female heads of households grew in the 1980s. During the 1980s, women's actions powerfully reshaped the structure and meaning of family and private life, as well as changes in public life.

From the beginning, women have brought about reform and redefinition of public policy with their spirit of determination and tenacity. They have a long history on which to build in their continuing struggle "to claim for themselves the status of full participants in the construction of the American dream" (Evans 1989:314).

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