

What Can a Heroine Do? or Why Women Can't Write

The following essay was written in 1971 and published in 1972 in Susan Koppelman's *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, one of the earliest pioneering anthologies in a field that was later to blossom as the rose. Although the jargon common today in so much feminist literary criticism and even in queer literary criticism did not exist then (cheers! say I), we were aware of the same issues, and we wrote about them. I do not think that now I would conclude a manifesto like this one with praise of science fiction (it can be just as good or bad as anything and just as timid, clichéd, and dull), but at the time I was, I think, getting ready to write my own science fiction and was—without being explicitly aware of it—looking for a way out of the cultural deprivation described in the essay. That so many women like myself could actually read and enjoy (or watch and enjoy) the kind of white boy's fiction (Susan Koppelman's phrase) that all of us had spent our life reading, explicating, analyzing, and assuming to be Fiction itself is, I think, a tribute to the unselfishness and empathy of the human imagination. But how much more fun it is (not to mention enlightening) to see through the assumption . . . and change it. The essay was written in the years immediately following a three-day symposium on women, hosted by the (then) School of Home Economics during the 1969–1970 intersession. No other college in Cornell University would touch the subject. The result was a ferment of talk (reflected in the attributions listed in the notes) that lasted for years. I went home feeling that the sky had fallen. One of the most immediate results was my understanding that "English literature" had been badly rigged, and out of that insight came this essay.

1. Two strong women battle for supremacy in the early West.

2. A young girl in Minnesota finds her womanhood by killing a bear.

3. An English noblewoman, vacationing in Arcadia, falls in love with a beautiful, modest young shepherd. But duty calls, she must return to the court of Elizabeth I to wage war on Spain. Just in time the shepherd lad is revealed as the long-lost son of the Queen of a neighboring country; the lovers are united and our heroine carries off her husband-to-be lad-in-waiting to the King of England.

4. A phosphorescently doomed poetess sponges off her husband and drinks herself to death, thus alienating the community of Philistines and businesswomen who would have continued to give her lecture dates.

5. A handsome young man, quite virginal, is seduced by an older woman who has made a pact with the Devil to give her back her youth. When the woman becomes pregnant, she proudly announces the paternity of her child; this revelation so shames the young man that he goes quite insane, steals into the house where the baby is kept, murders it, and is taken to prison where—repentant and surrounded by angel voices—he dies.

6. Alexandra the Great.

7. A young man who unwisely puts success in business before his personal fulfillment loses his masculinity and ends up as a neurotic, lonely eunuch.

8. A beautiful, seductive boy whose narcissism and instinctive cunning hide the fact that he has no mind (and in fact, hardly any sentient consciousness) drives a succession of successful actresses, movie producers, cowgirls, and film directresses wild with desire. They rape him.

Authors do not make their plots up out of thin air, nor are the above pure inventions; every one of them is a story familiar to all of us.¹ What makes them look so odd—and so funny—is that in each case the sex of the protagonist has been changed (and, correspondingly, the sex of the other characters). The result is that these very familiar plots simply will not work. They are tales for heroes, not heroines, and one of the things that handicaps women writers in our—and every other—culture is that there are so very few stories in which women can figure as protagonists.

Culture is male.² This does not mean that every man in Western (or Eastern) society can do exactly as he pleases, or that every man creates the culture *solus*, or that every man is luckier or more privileged than every woman. What it does mean (among other things) is that the society we live in is a patriarchy. And patriarchies imagine or picture

themselves from the male point of view. There is a female culture, but it is an underground, unofficial, minor culture, occupying a small corner of what we think of officially as possible human experience. Both men and women in our culture conceive the culture from a single point of view—the male.

Now, writers, as I have said, do not make up their stories out of whole cloth; they are pretty much restricted to the attitudes, the beliefs, the expectations, and, above all, the plots that are “in the air”—“plot” being what Aristotle called *mythos*; and in fact it is probably most accurate to call these plot-patterns *myths*. They are dramatic embodiments of what a culture believes to be true—or what it would like to be true—or what it is mortally afraid may be true. Novels, especially, depend upon what central action can be imagined as being performed by the protagonist (or protagonists)—i.e., what can a central character *do* in a book? An examination of English literature or Western literature reveals that of all the possible actions people can do in this fiction, very few can be done by women.

Our literature is not about women. It is not about women and men equally. It is by and about men.

But (you might object) aren't our books and our movies full of women? Isn't there a “love interest” or at least a sexual interest in every movie? What about Cleopatra? What about Juliet? What about Sophia Western, Clarissa Harlowe, Faye Greener, Greta Garbo, Pip's Estella, and the succession of love goddesses without whom film history would hardly exist? Our literature is full of women: bad women, good women, motherly women, bitchy women, faithful women, promiscuous women, beautiful women? Plain women?

Women who have no relations with men (as so many male characters in American literature have no relations with women)?

Oddly enough, no. If you look at the plots summarized at the beginning of this article, and turn them back to their original forms, you will find not women but images of women: modest maidens, wicked temptresses, pretty schoolmarms, beautiful bitches, faithful wives, and so on. They exist only in relation to the protagonist (who is male). Moreover, look at them carefully and you will see that they do not really exist at all—at their best they are depictions of the social roles women are supposed to play and often do play, but they are the public roles and not the private women;³ at their worst they are gorgeous, Cloud-cuckooland fantasies about what men want, or hate, or fear.

How can women writers possibly use such myths?

In twentieth-century American literature there is a particularly fine example of these impossible "women," a figure who is beautiful, irresistible, ruthless but fascinating, fascinating because she is somehow cheap or contemptible, who (in her more passive form) destroys men by her indifference and who (when the male author is more afraid of her) destroys men actively, sometimes by shooting them. She is Jean Harlow, Daisy Faye, Faye Greener, Mrs. Macomber, and Deborah Rojack. She is the Bitch Goddess.

Now it is just as useless to ask why the Bitch Goddess is so bitchy as it is to ask why the Noble Savage is so noble. Neither "person" really exists. In existential terms they are both The Other and The Other does not have the kind of inner life or consciousness that you and I have. In fact, The Other has no mind at all. No man in his senses ever says to himself to *himself*: I acted nobly because I am a Noble Savage. His reasons are far more prosaic: I did what I did because I was afraid, or because I was ambitious, or because I wanted to provoke my father, or because I felt lonely, or because I needed money, and so on. Look for reasons like that to explain the conduct of the Bitch Goddess and you will not find them; there is no explanation in terms of human motivation or the woman's own inner life; she simply behaves the way she does because she is a bitch. Q.E.D. No Other ever has the motives that you and I have; the Other contains a mysterious *essence*, which causes it to behave as it does; in fact "it" is not a person at all, but a projected wish or fear.

The Bitch Goddess is not a person.

Virgin-victim Gretchen (see number five, above) is not a person. The faithful wife, the beautiful temptress, the seductive destroyer, the devouring momma, the healing Madonna—none of these are persons in the sense that a novel's protagonist must be a person, and none is of the slightest use as myth to the woman writer who wishes to write about a female protagonist.

Try, for example, to change the Bitch Goddess/Male Victim story into a woman's story—are we to simply change the sex of the characters and write about a male "bitch" and a female victim? The myth still works in male homosexual terms—Man and Cruel Youth—but the female equivalent is something quite different. Changing the sex of the protagonist completely alters the meaning of the tale. The story of Woman/Cruel Lover is the story of so many English ballads—you have the "false true lover" and the pregnant girl left either to mourn or to die, but you do not have—to indicate only some elements of the story—the Cruel Lover as

the materially sumptuous but spiritually bankrupt spirit of our civilization, the essence of sex, the "soul" of our corrupt culture, a dramatization of the split between the degrading necessities of the flesh and the transcendence of world-cleaving Will. What you have instead, if the story is told about or by the woman, is a cautionary tale warning you not to break social rules—in short, a much more realistic story of social error or transgression leading to ostracism, poverty, or death. Moral: Get Married First.

No career woman, at least in literature, keeps in the back of her mind the glamorous figure of Daisy Faye, the beautiful, rich, indifferent boy she loved back in Cleveland when she was fighting for a career as a bootlegger. Reversing sexual roles in fiction may make good burlesque or good fantasy, but it is ludicrous in terms of serious literature. Culture is male. Our literary myths are for heroes, not heroines.

What can a heroine do?

What myths, what plots, what actions are available to a female protagonist?

Very few.

For example, it is impossible to write a conventional success story with a heroine, for success in male terms is failure for a woman, a "fact" movies, books, and television plays have been earnestly proving to us for decades. Nor is the hard-drinking, hard-fighting hero imagined as female, except as an amusing fluke—e.g., Bob Hope and Jane Russell in *The Paleface*. Nor can our heroine be the Romantic Poet Glamorously Doomed, nor the Oversensitive Artist Who Cannot Fulfill His Worldly Responsibilities (Emily Dickinson seems to fit the latter pattern pretty well, but she is always treated as The Spinster, an exclusively female—and sexual—role). Nor can a heroine be the Intellectual Born into a Philistine Small Town Who Escapes to the Big City—a female intellectual cannot escape her problems by fleeing to the big city; she is still a woman and Woman as Intellectual is not one of our success myths.

With one or two exceptions (which I will deal with later) all sub-literary genres are closed to the heroine; she cannot be a Mickey Spillane private eye, for example, nor can she be one of H. Rider Haggard's adventure-story Englishmen who discovers a Lost Princess in some imaginary corner of Africa. (She can be the Lost Princess, but a story written with the Princess herself as protagonist would resemble the chronicle of any other monarch and would hardly fit the female figure of Haggard's romances, who is—again—the Other.) The hero

whose success in business alienates him from his family is not at all in the position of the heroine who "loses her femininity" by competing with men—he is not desexed, but *she* is. The Crass Businessman genre (minor, anyway) is predicated on the assumption that success is masculine and a good thing as long as you don't spend all your time at it; one needs to spend the smaller part of one's life recognizing the claims of personal relations and relaxation. For the heroine the conflict between success and sexuality is itself the issue, and the duality is absolute. The woman who becomes hard and unfeminine, who competes with men, finally becomes—have we seen this figure before?—a Bitch. Again.

Women in twentieth-century American literature seem pretty much limited to either Devourer/Bitches or Maiden/Victims. Perhaps male authors have bad consciences.

So we come at last to the question of utmost importance to novelists—What will my protagonist(s) do? What central action can be the core of the novel? I know of only one plot or myth that is genderless, and in which heroines can figure equally with heroes; this is the Abused Child story (I mean of the Dickensian variety) and indeed many heroines do begin life as Sensitive, Mistreated Waifs. But such a pattern can be used only while the heroine is still a child (as in the first part of *Jane Eyre*). Patient Griselda, who also suffered and endured, was not a Mistreated Child but the adult heroine of a peculiar kind of love story. And here, of course, we come to the one occupation of a female protagonist in literature, the one thing she can do, and by God she does it and does it and does it, over and over and over again.

She is the protagonist of a Love Story.

The tone may range from grave to gay, from the tragedy of *Anna Karenina* to the comedy of *Emma*, but the myth is always the same: innumerable variants on Falling In Love, on courtship, on marriage, on the failure of courtship and marriage. How She Got Married. How She Did Not Get Married (always tragic). How She Fell In Love and Committed Adultery. How She Saved Her Marriage But Just Barely. How She Loved a Vile Seducer And Eloped. How She Loved a Vile Seducer, Eloped, And Died In Childbirth. As far as literature is concerned, heroines are still restricted to one vice, one virtue, and one occupation. In novels of Doris Lessing, an authoress concerned with a great many other things besides love, the heroines still spend most of their energy and time maintaining relations with their lovers (or marrying, or divorcing, or failing to achieve orgasm, or achieving it, or worrying about their sexuality, their men, their loves, and their love lives).

For female protagonists the Love Story includes not only personal relations as such, but *bildungsroman*, worldly success or worldly failure, career, the exposition of character, crucial learning experiences, the transition to adulthood, rebellion (usually adultery) and everything else. Only in the work of a few iconoclasts like George Bernard Shaw do you find protagonists like Vivie Warren, whose work means more to her than marriage, or Saint Joan, who has no "love life" at all. It is interesting that Martha Graham's dance version of Saint Joan's life turns the tale back into a Love Story, with Saint Michael (at one point, in the version I saw) inspiring Joan by walking astride her from head to foot, dragging his robe over her several times as she lies on her back on the stage floor.

How she lost him, how she got him, how she kept him, how she died for/with him. What else is there? A new pattern seems to have been developing in the last few years: authoresses who do not wish to write Love Stories may instead write about heroines whose main action is to go mad—but *How She Went Crazy* will also lose its charm in time. One cannot write *The Bell Jar*, or *Jane Eyre*, good as it is, forever.

A woman writer may, if she wishes, abandon female protagonists altogether and stick to male myths with male protagonists, but in so doing she falsifies herself and much of her own experience. Part of life is obviously common to both sexes—we all eat, we all get stomach-aches, and we all grow old and die—but a great deal of life is not shared by men and women. A woman who refuses to write about women ignores the whole experience of the female culture (a very different one from the official, male culture), all her specifically erotic experiences, and a good deal of her own history. She falsifies her position both artistically and humanly: she is an artist creating a world in which persons of her kind cannot be artists, a consciousness central to itself creating a world in which women have no consciousness, a successful person creating a world in which persons like herself cannot be successes. She is a Self trying to pretend that she is a different Self, one for whom her own self is Other.

If a female writer does not use the two, possibly three, myths available to a she-writer, she must drop the culture's myths altogether. Is this in itself a bad thing? Perhaps what we need here is a digression on the artistic advantages of working with myths, i.e., material that has passed through other hands, that is not raw-brand-new.

The insistence that authors make up their own plots is a recent development in literature; Milton certainly did not do it. Even today,

with novelty at such a premium in all the arts, very little is written that is not—at bottom—common property. It's a commonplace that bad writers imitate and great writers steal. Even an iconoclast like Shaw "stole" his plots wholesale, sometimes from melodrama, sometimes from history, sometimes from his friends.⁴ Ibsen owes a debt to Scribe, Dickens to theatre melodrama, James to other fiction of his own time—nothing flowers without a history. Something that has been worked on by others in the same culture, something that is "in the air" provides a writer with material that has been distilled, dramatized, stylized, and above all, clarified. A developed myth has its own form, its own structure, its own expectations and values, its own cues-to-nudge-the reader. When so much of the basic work has already been done, the artist may either give the myth its final realization or stand it on its head, but in any case what he or she does will be neither tentative nor crude and it will not take forever; it can simply be done well. For example, the very pattern of dramatic construction that we take as natural, the idea that a story ought to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, that one ought to be led to something called a "climax" by something called "suspense" or "dramatic tension," is in itself an Occidental myth—Western artists, therefore, do not have to invent this pattern for themselves.

Hemingway, whom we call a realist, spent his whole working life capitalizing on the dramatic lucidity possible to an artist who works with developed myths. The Bitch Goddess did not appear full-blown in "The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber"—one can find her in Fitzgerald—or Hawthorne, to name an earlier writer—or Max Beerbohm, whose *Zuleika Dobson* is certainly a Bitch Goddess, though a less serious one than her American cousins. "Macomber" is the ultimate fictional refinement out of the mess and bother of real life. Beyond it lies only nightmare (Faye Greener in West's *Day of the Locust*) or the half-mad, satiric fantastications Mailer uses to get a little more mileage out of an almost exhausted pattern.

"Macomber" is perfectly clear, as is most of Hemingway's work. Nobody can fail to understand that Mrs. Macomber is a Bitch, that the White Hunter is a Real Man, and that Macomber is a Failed Man. The dramatic conflict is extremely clear, very vehement, and completely expectable. The characters are simple, emotionally charged, and larger-than-life. Therefore the fine details of the story can be polished to that point of high gloss where everything—weather, gestures, laconic con-

versation, terrain, equipment, clothing—is all of meaning. (Compare "Macomber" with *Robinson Crusoe*, for example; Defoe is much less sure from moment to moment of what he wants to say or what it means.) One cannot stop to ask why Mrs. Macomber is so bitchy—she's just a Bitch, that's all—or why killing a large animal will restore Macomber's manhood—everybody knows it will—or why the Bitch cannot tolerate a Real Man—these things are already explained by the myth.

But this kind of larger-than-life simplicity and clarity is not accessible to the woman writer unless she remains within the limits of the Love Story. Again: what can a heroine do?

There seem to me to be two alternatives open to the woman author who no longer cares about How She Fell in Love or How She Went Mad. These are (1) lyricism, and (2) life.

By "lyricism" I do not mean purple passages or baroque raptures; I mean a particular principle of structure.

If the narrative mode (what Aristotle called "epic") concerns itself with events connected by the *chronological order* in which they occur, and the dramatic mode with *voluntary human actions* which are connected both by *chronology and causation*, then the principle of construction I wish to call lyric consists of the *organization of discrete elements* (images, events, scenes, passages, words, what-have-you) around an *unspoken thematic or emotional center*. The lyric mode exists without chronology or causation; its principle of connection is *associative*. Of course, no piece of writing can exist purely in any one mode, but we can certainly talk of the predominance of one element, perhaps two.) In this sense of "lyric" Virginia Woolf is a lyric novelist—in fact she has been criticized in just those terms, i.e., "nothing happens" in her books. A writer who employs the lyric structure is setting various images, events, scenes, or memories to circling round an unspoken, invisible center. The invisible center is what the novel or poem is about; it is also unsayable in available dramatic or narrative terms. That is, there is no action possible to the central character and no series of events that will embody in clear, unequivocal, immediately graspable terms what the artist means. Or perhaps there is no action or series of events that will embody this "center" at all. Unable to use the myths of male culture (and apparently unwilling to spend her life writing love stories), Woolf uses a structure that is basically non-narrative. Hence the lack of "plot," the repetitiousness, the gathering-up of the novels into moments of epiphany, the denseness of the writing, the indirection. There is nothing the female characters can do—except

exist, except think, except feel. And critics (mostly male) employ the usual vocabulary of denigration: these novels lack important events; they are hermetically sealed; they are too full of sensibility; they are trivial; they lack action; they are feminine.⁵

Not every female author is equipped with the kind of command of language that allows (or insists upon) lyric construction; nor does every woman writer want to employ this mode. The alternative is to take as one's model (and structural principle) not male myth but the structure of one's own experience. So we have George Eliot's (or Doris Lessing's) "lack of structure," the obviously tacked-on ending of *Mill on the Floss*; we have Brontë's spasmodic, jerky world of *Villette*, with a structure modeled on the heroine's (and probably author's) real situation. How to write a novel about a person to whom nothing happens? A person to whom nothing but a love story is *supposed* to happen? A person inhabiting a world in which the only reality is frustration or endurance—or these plus an unbearably mystifying confusion? The movement of *Villette* is not the perfect curve of *Jane Eyre* (a classic version of the female Love Story)—it is a blocked jabbing, a constant thwarting; it is the protagonist's constantly frustrated will to action, and her alternately losing and regaining her perception of her own situation.⁶ There are vestiges of Gothic mystery and there is a Love Story, but the Gothic mysteries turn out to be fakery, and the Love Story (which occupies only the last quarter of the book) vanishes strangely and abruptly on the last page but one. In cases like these the usual epithet is "formless," sometimes qualified by "inexperienced"—obviously life is not like *that*, life is not messy and indecisive; we know what life (and novels) are from Aristotle—who wrote about plays—and male novelists who employ male myths created by a culture that imagines itself from the male point of view. The task of art—we know—is to give form to life, i.e., the very forms that women writers cannot use. So it's clear that women can't write, that they swing wildly from lyricism to messiness once they abandon the cozy realms of the Love Story. And successes within the Love Story (which is itself imagined out of genuine female experience) are not important because the Love Story is not important. It is a commonplace of criticism that only the male myths are valid or interesting; a book as fine (and well-structured) as *Jane Eyre* fails *even to be seen* by many critics because it grows out of experiences—events, fantasies, wishes, fears, daydreams, images of self—entirely foreign to their own. As critics are usually unwilling to believe their lack of understanding to

be their own fault, it becomes the fault of the book. Of the author. Of all women writers.

Western European (and North American) culture is not only male in its point of view; it is also Western European. For example, it is not Russian. Nineteenth-century Russian fiction can be criticized in much the same terms as women's fiction: "pointless" or "plotless" narratives stuffed with strange minutiae, and not obeying the accepted laws of dramatic development, lyrical in the wrong places, condensed in the wrong places, overly emotional, obsessed with things we do not understand, perhaps even grotesque. Here we have other outsiders who are trying, in less than a century, to assimilate European myths, producing strange Russian hybrids (*A King Lear of the Steppe*, *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk*), trying to work with literary patterns that do not suit their experiences and were not developed with them in mind. What do we get? Oddly digressive Pushkin. "Formless" Dostoevsky. (Colin Wilson has called Dostoevsky's novels "sofa pillows stuffed with lumps of concrete.") Sprawling, glacial, all-inclusive Tolstoy. And of course "lyrical" Chekhov, whose magnificent plays are called plotless to this very day.

There is an even more vivid—and tragic—example: what is an American Black writer to make of our accepted myths? For example, what is she or he to make of the still-current myth (so prominent in *King Lear*) that Suffering Brings Wisdom? This is an old, still-used plot. Does suffering bring wisdom to *The Invisible Man*? When critics do not find what they expect, they cannot imagine that the fault may lie in their expectations. I know of a case in which the critics (white and female) decided after long, nervous discussion that Baldwin was "not really a novelist" but that Orwell was.

Critical bias aside, all artists are going to be in the soup pretty soon, if they aren't already. As a culture, we are coasting on the tag-ends of our assumptions about a lot of things (including the difference between fiction and "propaganda"). As novelists we are working with myths that have been so repeated, so triply-distilled, that they are almost exhausted. Outside of commercial genres—which can remain petrified and profitable indefinitely—how many more incarnations of the Bitch Goddess can anybody stand? How many more shoot-'em-ups on Main Street? How many more young men with identity problems?

The lack of workable myths in literature, of acceptable dramatizations of what our experience means, harms much more than art itself. We do not only choose or reject works of art on the basis of these myths;

we interpret our own experience in terms of them. Worse still, we actually perceive what happens to us in the mythic terms our culture provides.

The problem of "outsider" artists is the whole problem of what to do with unlabeled, disallowed, disavowed, not-even-consciously-perceived experience, experience which cannot be spoken about because it has no embodiment in existing art. Is one to create new forms wholesale—which is practically impossible? Or turn to old ones, like Blake's Elizabethan lyrics and Yeats's Noh plays? Or "trivial," trashy genres, like Austen's ladies' fiction?

Make something unspeakable and you make it unthinkable.

Hence the lyric structure, which can deal with the unspeakable and unembodiable as its thematic center, or the realistic piling up of detail which may (if you are lucky) eventually *add up to* the unspeakable, undramatizable, unembodiable action-one-cannot-name.

Outsiders' writing is always in critical jeopardy. Insiders know perfectly well that art ought to match their ideas of it. Thus insiders notice instantly that the material of *Jane Eyre* is trivial and the emotionality untenable, even though the structure is perfect. George Eliot, whose point of view is neither peccable nor ridiculously romantic, does not know what fate to award her heroines and thus falsifies her endings.⁷ Genet, whose lyrical mode of construction goes unnoticed, is meaningless and disgusting. Kafka, who can "translate" (in his short stories only) certain common myths into fantastic or extreme versions of themselves, does not have Tolstoy's wide grasp of life. (That Tolstoy lacks Kafka's understanding of alienation is sometimes commented upon, but that does not count, of course.) Ellison is passionate but shapeless and crude. Austen, whose sense of form cannot be impugned, is not passionate enough. Blake is inexplicable. Baldwin lacks Shakespeare's gift of reconciliation. And so on and so on.

But outsiders' problems are real enough, and we will all be facing them quite soon, as the nature of human experience on this planet changes radically—unless, of course, we all end up in the Second Paleolithic, in which case we will have to set about re-creating the myths of the First Paleolithic.

Perhaps one place to look for myths that escape from the equation Culture = Male is in those genres that already employ plots not limited to one sex—i.e., myths that have nothing to do with our accepted gender roles. There seem to me to be three places one can look:

(1) Detective stories, as long as these are limited to genuine intellectual puzzles ("crime fiction" is a different genre). Women write these; women read them; women even figure in them as protagonists. The slang name, "whodunit," neatly describes the myth: Finding Out Who Did It (whatever "It" is).

(2) Supernatural fiction, often written by women (Englishwomen, at least) during the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries. These are about the intrusion of something strange, dangerous, and *not natural* into one's familiar world. What to do? In the face of the supernatural, knowledge and character become crucial; the accepted gender roles are often irrelevant. After all, potting a twelve-foot-tall batrachian with a kerosene lamp is an act that can be accomplished by either sex, and both heroes and heroines can be expected to feel sufficient horror to make the story interesting. (My example is from a short story by H. P. Lovecraft and August Derleth.) However, much of this genre is as severely limited as the detective story—they both seem to have reached the point of decadence where writers are restricted to the re-enactment of ritual gestures. Moreover, supernatural fiction often relies on very threadbare social/sexual roles, e.g., aristocratic Hungarian counts drinking the blood of beautiful, innocent Englishwomen. (Vampire stories use the myths of an old-fashioned eroticism; other tales trade on the fear of certain animals like snakes or spiders, disgust at "mold" or "slime," human aggression taking the form of literal bestiality (lycanthropy), guilt without intention, the *lex talionis*, severe retribution for venial faults, supernatural "contamination"—in short, what a psychoanalyst would call the "archaic" contents of the mind.)

(3) Science fiction, which seems to me to provide a broad pattern for human myths, even if the specifically futuristic or fantastic elements are subtracted. (I except the kind of male adventure story called Space Opera, which may be part of science fiction as a genre, but is not innate in science fiction as a mode.) The myths of science fiction run along the lines of exploring a new world conceptually (not necessarily physically), creating needed physical or social machinery, assessing the consequences of technological or other changes, and so on. These are not stories about men *qua* Man and women *qua* Woman; they are myths of human intelligence and human adaptability. They not only ignore gender roles but—at least theoretically—are not culture-bound. Some of the most fascinating characters in science fiction are not human. True, the attempt to break through culture-binding may mean only that we

transform old myths like Black Is Bad/ White Is Good (or the Heart of Darkness myth) into new asinities like Giant Ants Are Bad/People Are Good. At least the latter can be subscribed to by all human races and sexes. (Giant ants might feel differently.)

Darko Suvin of the University of Montreal has suggested that science fiction patterns often resemble those of medieval literature.⁸ I think the resemblance lies in that medieval literature so often dramatizes not people's social roles but the life of the soul; hence we find the following patterns in both science fiction and medieval tales:

I find myself in a new world, not knowing who I am or where I came from. I must find these out, and also find out the rules of the world I inhabit. (the journey of the soul from birth to death)

Society needs something. I/we must find it. (the quest)

We are miserable because our way of life is out of whack. We must find out what is wrong and change it. (the drama of sin and salvation)

Science fiction, political fiction, parable, allegory, exemplum—all carry a heavier intellectual freight (and self-consciously so) than we are used to. All are didactic. All imply that human problems are collective, as well as individual, and take these problems to be spiritual, social, perceptive, or cognitive—not the fictionally sex-linked problems of success, competition, "castration," education, love, or even personal identity, with which we are all so very familiar. I would go even farther and say that science fiction, political fiction (when successful), and the modes (if not the content) of much medieval fiction all provide myths for dealing with the kinds of experiences we are actually having now, instead of the literary myths we have inherited, which only tell us about the kinds of experiences we think we ought to be having.

This may sound like the old cliché about the Soviet plot of Girl Meets Boy Meets Tractor. And why not? Our current fictional myths leave vast areas of human experience unexplored: work for one, genuine religious experience for another, and above all the lives of the traditionally voiceless, the majority of whom are women. (When I speak of the "traditionally voiceless" I am not pleading for descriptions of their lives—we have had plenty of that by very vocal writers—what I am talking about are fictional myths *growing out of their lives* and told by themselves for themselves.)

Forty years ago those Americans who read books at all read a good deal of fiction. Nowadays such persons read popularized anthropology, psychology, history, and philosophy. Perhaps current fictional myths no longer tell the truth about any of us.

When things are changing, those who know least about them—in the usual terms—may make the best job of them. There is so much to be written about, and here we are with nothing but the rags and tatters of what used to mean something. One thing I think we must know—that our traditional gender roles will not be part of the future, as long as the future is not a second Stone Age. Our traditions, our books, our morals, our manners, our films, our speech, our economic organization, everything we have inherited, tell us that to be a Man one must bend Nature to one's will—or other men. This means ecological catastrophe in the first instance and war in the second. To be a Woman, one must be first and foremost a mother and after that a server of Men; this means overpopulation and the perpetuation of the first two disasters. The roles are deadly. The myths that serve them are fatal.

Women cannot write—using the old myths.

But using new ones—?

NOTES

1. Number three is a version of *The Winter's Tale*; number four, the life of Dylan Thomas, as popularly believed; number five, the story of Faust and Marguerite; and number eight, a lightly modified version of part of *The Day of the Locust*. The others need no explanation.

2. I am indebted to Linda Finlay of the Philosophy Department of Ithaca College for this formulation and the short discussion that follows it.

3. I am indebted to Mary Uhl for the observation that Dickens's women are accurately portrayed as long as they are in public (where Dickens himself had many opportunities to observe real women) but entirely unconvincing when they are alone or with other women only.

4. An overstatement. The plot of *Widowers' Houses* was a gift.

5. Mary Ellmann, *Thinking about Women* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968). See the chapter on "Phallic Criticism."

6. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1970), pp. 140–47.

7. In comparison with the organic integrity of Dickens's, I suppose.

8. In conversation and in a paper unpublished as of this writing.