CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42870-5 - 19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies
Susan K. Harris
Excerpt
More information

PART I

INTRODUCTION

I have been reading *Ruth Hall* and I must say I enjoyed it a good deal. The woman writes as if the devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading. . . . Can you tell me anything about this Fanny Fern? If you meet her, I wish you would let her know how much I admire her.

(Nathaniel Hawthorne to William Ticknor, his publisher, 1855)[1]

"Hell has no fury like a woman scorned," and one may add, no fight is so relentless as a family row. [Fanny Fern] threw her grievances into the novel *Ruth Hall,* a book characterized by Beers as a "caricature." In it, he says, she "washed a deal of family linen in public". . . . Doubtless Hawthorne, totally unaware of the family feud and the rage of the scorned author, attributed the intense atmosphere of the novel and its over-done picturings of the effects of extreme poverty upon a struggling feminine soul for genius, and had commended it.

(Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Feminine Fifties*, 1936)[2]

How do we make sense of a book? Or, more specifically, what are the conditions under which nineteenth-century American women's novels have had meaning for twentieth-century critics? The passages quoted above reveal radically different constitutive conventions: For Hawthorne, writing in the 1850s, anger and passion lend merit to *Ruth Hall* regardless of the author's identity; the text has meaning *within* his associations with passion and anger and *outside* his associations with the general run of women's writing. In contrast, for Fred Lewis Pattee, writing in the 1930s, the text can only be interpreted in terms of what he sees as wom-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42870-5 - 19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies
Susan K. Harris
Excerpt
More information

en's innate vindictiveness. Here, passion and anger are seen only in the context of the circumstances that fueled them; unlike Hawthorne, who processes the book first, then seeks information about its author, Pattee does not separate the text, the artifact, from the matrix originating it.

This chapter is designed to help us reconsider twentieth-century readings of mid–nineteenth-century American women's novels, and to suggest means for expanding our own reading strategies. Section 1 surveys those major twentieth-century critical works that focus on the American women novelists of the 1850s and 1860s, tracing the constitutive conventions that these critics (all working within the assumptions of traditional Anglo-American literary criticism) have brought to their subjects, and tracking shifts over time. Section 2 presents the responses of some nineteenth-century readers to what they read, and proposes a multileveled hermeneutic for nineteenth-century women's texts. Section 3 presents alternative reading strategies that help us retrieve some of those novels' possible meanings. In addition, the final section provides the context for (and in the process shows the indebtedness of) my work in relation to the work of all those critics who have also struggled with this literature and with the means they have had for interpreting it.

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S TEXT AND THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY ACADEMIC READER: STUDIES IN CONSTITUTIVE CONVENTIONS

It may not be fair to start a review of twentieth-century critical approaches to women's novels of the preceding century with Pattee's *The Feminine Fifties* – it is an easy book to shoot down – but the text occupies an important place in the critical history because it so crudely exhibits assumptions guiding many subsequent critics' evaluations. In his survey of nineteenth-century women's novels, Pattee demonstrates a methodology commonly applied to those texts by twentieth-century critics writing before 1978: a critical strategy that starts with assumptions about the author's sex, moves out to her autobiography, and proceeds to examine her work as an extension of her biological structure and life experiences. In addition, until recently most critical assessments of nineteenth-century American women's novels assumed the primacy of authorial intent and then criticized nineteenth-century women writers' intentions for being either pernicious, confused, or escapist. Consciously or not, these studies have acted in complicity with the cultural assumption that women's writing – with women's oral discourse – was testimony to female irrationality and emotionalism and to American women's struggle to emasculate the American male.

A man who bridged the centuries (he was born in 1863 and died in 1950), Pattee produced many literary histories that helped introduce

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42870-5 - 19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies
Susan K. Harris
Excerpt
More information

American writers to an academic audience still uneasy with the idea that American literature could be academically respectable. On the whole, his work is measured, informed, and fair. *The First Century of American Literature, 1770–1870* (1935), for instance, has an excellent chapter on annuals and gift-books, two genres important for the study of women's literature that have generally been either ignored or maligned. In addition, Pattee's chapter on women's literature of the 1850s is generally favorable to writers like Sarah Josepha Hale, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Alice and Phoebe Cary. But when he came to expand that chapter (also titled "The Feminine Fifties") into a book, his entire focus shifted.

Interestingly, it is not clear whether Pattee actually read many of the novels about which he writes in *The Feminine Fifties*. Judith Fetterley has already noted how Pattee quotes reviewers and parodists of women's fiction rather than the novels themselves.[3] Pattee's insistence that the novels' themes functioned only to pander to women's hysterical tendencies – an extraordinary feat of interpretive blindness for anyone who has even casually perused them – fuels suspicions. Pattee's remarks are relentlessly invidious. If we can interpret authorial bias through key words and syntactical patternings – and I think we can – Pattee's vocabulary quickly reveals that he is repelled by emotional display. In this text Pattee characterizes the 1850s in terms of excess, especially emotional excess, and he does not like it: Using words like "flush," "fervid," "intense," "emotionalism," and "explosion," he sneers at "the effeminate early Tennyson" (27) and declares that Dickens's influence on American writers was "unquestionably . . . bad. . . . In an overemotional age he added emotion" (72). For Pattee, women were both the cause and the representatives of this excess: irrational, unreasonable, and – excessive; spilling over with feeling and, worse, expressing it verbally. Claiming that the decade was "a feminine period, undoubtedly," (11) Pattee introduces his chapter on agitation for women's rights by noting that "During the 1850s, American women had reached a point where they were handed everything a woman could dream of possessing with one single exception – their 'Rights,' and for these the sex arose in a rebellion that made the decade a battlefield – of words" (92). Pattee's syntactical patterning exploits cultural associations of women with irrationality and verbosity: In his initial clause he suggests that women's demands for the franchise were unreasonable, first, by implying that women were spoiled (they already "were handed everything a woman could dream of possessing") and second, by belittling the concept of civil rights through enclosing the word *rights* in quotation marks, thus signaling the reader to alter his or her reception of that generally revered American sign. In the final clause of the sentence, Pattee continues undermining the women's rights movement by provoking associations of women with excessive speech.[4] Later

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42870-5 - 19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies
Susan K. Harris
Excerpt
More information

in the same chapter, he employs a brief syntactical construction to provoke yet another invidious association with women: Commenting on a dispute over the naming of Vassar College, he declares "But a woman always wins her fight" (105). Both through careful manipulation of syntax and wording and through overt statements, Pattee shows that his approach to the literature he is to analyze is at least in part motivated by bias against emotional display and the women who, to him, represent it. Consequently the constitutive conventions he employs in reference to the novels can only make sense of them *as* contributions to that excess.

The Feminine Fifties was the first full-scale twentieth-century study to focus exclusively on American women writers of the preceding century, and it is an important text for us to examine because it appears in subsequent bibliographies and exhibits constitutive conventions that appear – generally more subtly – in subsequent texts. As part of the "critical background" its interpretive conventions became part of the consciousness of succeeding critics, influencing their own approaches to nineteenth-century women's novels. Herbert Ross Brown's *The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789–1860* (1940)[5] demonstrates that legacy by extending the onus against feeling into an attack on the novels' ahistoricism. If women's novels only had meaning for Pattee through their contribution to emotional excess, their major meaning for Brown came through their contribution to emotional "escapism." Following Van Wyck Brooks's indictment of "much of our literature" for catering to "a national mind sealed from experience," in *The Sentimental Novel in America* Brown extends this to the female sentimentalists: "His [Brooks's] indictment applies with peculiar force to the writings of the sentimental novelists. They were escapists, artfully evading the experiences of their own day. . . . They fed the national complacency by shrouding the actualities of American life in the flattering mists of sentimental optimism" (360). Generalizing remarks like these are telling: Coming, as these do, after lengthy chapters demonstrating these same novelists' thematic absorption in the national debates over temperance, slavery, and theological shifts; in the cult of domesticity that formed the secular humanism of the day; and in the "isms" (phrenology, Spiritualism, Transcendentalism, etc.) that absorbed both elite and popular cultures, it is clear that some criteria other than textual evidence is guiding Brown's evaluation. Clues to those criteria perhaps lie in sentences such as "authentic artists like Nathaniel Hawthorne might well ask about the mysterious appeal of these popular books which found their way into the hearts of so many readers and sold by the hundred thousand" (322) or "The enlarged heart of sentimentality is a disease to which those who readily respond to the appeal of human nature are peculiarly susceptible. It is the excess of a virtue, the perversion of an ideal" (369).

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42870-5 - 19TH-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies
Susan K. Harris
Excerpt
More information

As with Pattee, though with far less venom, these remarks suggest that what is at fault is an excess of feeling; key words here are "excess," "heart," and – used in contrast to them – "authentic." Writing in a decade dominated by Dos Passos, Farrell, Wolfe, and Steinbeck, Pattee and Brown reflect 1930s' writers' concern for the meaning of American life – a meaning threatened by the failures of the Depression. They saw sentimental literature – and women – as irrelevant because they could not see that women's literature, too, engaged in the national dialogue about the American Dream; that women's novels emphasized feeling did not, within their historical context, preclude their engagement with American history or American ideals. Assuming that Hawthorne's writing did not appeal to the heart (an assumption not supported by contemporary readers, who tended to share diarist Mary Ann Parker's opinion that ". . . Hawthorne has so many bright and happy thoughts – It is pleasant to read his writings aloud and hear the electric current at the same moment strike another mind"[6]), Brown takes his assessment of Hawthorne's work from other twentieth-century critics who devalued sentiment and valorized historical allegory; he uses Hawthorne's work as a standard for evaluating Hawthorne's contemporaries. Consequently, in Brown's usage, the word "sentiment" always has pejorative implications. Rather than exploring the nineteenth century's valuation of the heart within the context of the history of ideas – as Fred Kaplan has recently done in his study of British Victorian sentimentality[7] – Brown sees it through a twentieth-century ideology that rejects the notion that human nature contains within it the possibility of achieving the high moral plane posited by sentimental idealism.[8] Moreover, he equates "excess" and "the heart" with women. The result is, in effect, a deep-seated repulsion from the feminine, for everything that points to "excess" and the "heart" in this literature is, by definition, within that realm. Despite his *knowledge* that women's novels treated a broad range of contemporary issues, Brown's constitutive conventions only permitted him to see their contributions to a pernicious emotionalism.

Helen Waite Papashvily's 1956 *All the Happy Endings*[9] extends the contradictory critical situation Brown's text initiates. Papashvily shows an informed sense of the novels' thematic and structural movements, recognizing an intentional bifurcation in many that makes them critically intriguing and that reflects a sexual bifurcation in the society that produced them. Yet Papashvily's interpretive conventions are also predicated on her distrust of women's nature and intentions. Her own rhetorical form – the paragraph construction she uses first to summarize, then to analyze, and finally to generalize the action of any given novel – is homologous to the rhetorical forms that, as I shall argue later, rule one category of these novels themselves; she develops an idea that emerges from her reading

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42870-5 - 19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies
Susan K. Harris
Excerpt
More information

and then tags on an evaluation that comes from her assumption that women want to emasculate men.

Papashvily views midcentury women's novels as representative of a social state in which women were striving to become the superior sex – an observation, I hasten to add, that may well be true. But Papashvily's a priori assumption is that this goal is undesirable and that the women seeking it were psychologically warped. Taking her evaluative line from Pattee and Brown, she casts the women novelists as aggressors and the male characters they create (as well as various real husbands they possessed) as victims. For instance, in her introduction she begins developing the idea that men and women read the domestic novels of the 1850s differently, a possibility that I, too, will explore in this study. But Papashvily's interpretation of the function of the literature is that, for women, the novels "were handbooks . . . [for] a pattern of feminine behavior so quietly ruthless, so subtly vicious" that it was subversive of the culture as a whole. Words like "ruthless" and "vicious" occur frequently in *All the Happy Endings;* to borrow a schema from Nina Auerbach for a moment, all Papashvily's women authors are demons. Thus she reads the convention of female moral superiority as one strategy to mutilate the male, suggesting that women portrayed female competence in practical affairs and superiority in religious ones not only in order to undermine male hegemony but also to undermine male confidence. "To maim the male, to deprive him of the privilege of slavery and the pleasure of alcohol was not, of course, enough," she begins her chapter on religion in nineteenth-century women's novels. "Female superiority at the same time had to be established and maintained" (95). Despite recognizing the social – if not the ethical – usefulness of abolitionism and prohibitionism, Papashvily is constitutionally incapable of affirming women's leadership in those areas; her ironic tone undermines any legitimacy the women reformers might have had. *All the Happy Endings* concludes with a peroration about sexual relationships among Papashvily's contemporaries, another sign that the criteria she brings to nineteenth-century novels were shaped by the sexual perceptions of her own decade – the decade of the War between the Sexes, of "The Honeymooners" and "The Bob Cummings Show," of *Peyton Place* and of Levittowns where good women devoted themselves to domesticity – in short, the decade whose repressive sexual definitions stimulated Betty Friedan to write *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Papashvily's final lines, in which she claims that "It still takes more courage than many women can muster to love a whole man. So the emasculation process continues. . . . when at last whole men and whole women are free to love as equals, they will find the real happy ending" (211), suggest that by the conclusion of her study she was no longer sure whether she was writing literary criticism about the past or sexual criticism about her present.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42870-5 - 19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies
Susan K. Harris
Excerpt
More information

Pattee, Brown, and Papashvily can be seen as an early group of critics whose general vision of women's texts is ruled by their sense of women as Monstrously Female: excessive and vicious. The majority of academic works focusing on nineteenth-century women's texts produced in recent years has rejected such assumptions, in large part because the academics writing them are women who have emerged from the consciousness raising of post-1960s feminism and who no longer see either themselves or other women as biological anomalies. One recent text, however, spans the gap between the pre- and postfeminist critics, Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977).[10] On the one hand, Douglas's study of nineteenth-century American women's literature as the formative factor in the development of modern consumerism throws the texts into a new arena: part of the study of mass culture. On the other hand, Douglas brings with her many of the values implicit in the earlier works. While Pattee and Brown interpreted women's texts through their vision of women's emotionalism, and Papashvily interpreted them through her vision of women's misandry, Douglas interprets them through her vision of the deterioration of the Puritan ethic, the spread of sentimentality, and the pernicious effects of women's complicity in the development of a consumer economy.

Although it has been seen as a central text in women's literary studies since its publication, *The Feminization of American Culture* actually devotes very little of its attention to analysis of the novels and poems produced by nineteenth-century American women. Douglas's contextual/historical approach to the marketing process and its effects on readers-as-consumers places women's texts within a self-consciously "transactional" relationship between writers and readers, a fruitful line of investigation for critics interested in reader-response studies. However, Douglas forecloses such lines, choosing to project this relationship as an aspect of the shaping, and degrading, of American literary taste. Perhaps ironically, *The Feminization of American Culture* is the only book concerning nineteenth-century women's literature to have gone into an inexpensive paperback edition and to have been marketed through national chain bookstores. The materials it uncovers in its survey of the roots of mass literary culture have lent themselves to a widespread developing interest in the evolution of modern society. As part of this investigation, *The Feminization of American Culture* is a valuable book. Its conclusions and methodology are inappropriate, however, when it is viewed as a study of nineteenth-century women's literature because its exclusive focus forbids the activity of taking the novels on their own ground and subjecting them to literary critical – as opposed to historical/contextual – analysis. In other words, Douglas's focus on the development of the marketing process creates a critical worldview that prohibits other approaches to the women's novels she surveys.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42870-5 - 19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies
Susan K. Harris
Excerpt
More information

Like Pattee, Douglas's underlying – even a priori – premise about the women's novels is that these are bad books, not, as with Brown and Pattee, because they show an excess of feeling, but because they contribute to a cultural phenomenon that does not meet standards of taste established by the Calvinist legacy. Her key words for acceptable literature suggest the value stance she holds – creative works are valuable if they show "mastery," "control," "history" (i.e., linearity), and "uncompromised detail." Since the literature she examines, especially given the methodology she employs, does not demonstrate these qualities, it is not treated from a literary critical point of view. Her reading of Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World,* for instance, presents it as an "economic handbook" that teaches its readers how to shop for writing tables and bibles; the protagonist's experience of "the world" from which she shrinks is seen as an experience of male commerce. By focusing so exclusively on her consumerist framework Douglas excludes exploration of the other definitions of "the world" the text contains – such as its insistence on the young female's powerlessness.[11] Similarly, her reading of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *We and Our Neighbors* as the record of a "parasite" who "consumes" rather than "produces" limits her appreciation of a novel that attempts to bring its author's long-standing concern for rural domestic values into the urban landscape. In fact, *The Feminization of American Culture* is not actually "about" women's literature at all because it contains no premises that admit the legitimacy of nineteenth-century women's concerns. Beginning by setting up the Calvinist clergy as a standard from which to compare and contrast the female literary establishment, *The Feminization of American Culture* ends with Margaret Fuller's and Herman Melville's "revolt" from those "self-announced refugees from history" (223) whose works are "courses in the shopping mentality" (73). For Douglas, as for Brown, nineteenth-century women refused to confront history; the difference is that Douglas's women escape into department stores instead of into tears.

Most studies of nineteenth-century American women's texts published since the mid-1970s reject assumptions about women's innate hysteria, misandry, and degraded values. Rather than beginning with the biological, most have begun with the social, examining women's writing within the context of their social status and the constraints that entailed for women seeking a voice in a culture that forbade them power in the verbal/political sphere. In addition, they have begun focusing on the texts as well as the writers, bringing traditional literary critical methods to bear on their analysis. The results of these studies have been remarkably fruitful, generating further discussion (as the earlier studies did not) and fueling the emerging field of women's studies. Working almost exclusively within the Anglo-American tradition of literary criticism, these studies have helped expand the American literary canon.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42870-5 - 19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies
Susan K. Harris
Excerpt
More information

Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–1870*[12] (1978) is the first full study to analyze seriously mid–nineteenth-century women's novels for characterization and plot. *Woman's Fiction* is a pioneering work in more than one respect: It introduces a body of literature to a generation that had been taught to ignore its existence other than as a despicable genre; it approaches the material on its own terms; it questions the prevailing criteria for determining the "greatness" of individual texts; it brings literary criteria to bear on its analysis of the materials; and it takes nineteenth-century feminist ideologies – in all their manifestations – seriously.

Examining the works of the major women writers between 1820 and 1870, Baym identifies an "overplot" in which all the novels participate and which defines this exclusively female genre. Briefly, this overplot mandates that the heroine of any given work will be left destitute – usually financially; will struggle for physical subsistence; and, in the process, will learn to value independence. Baym sees this overplot as imposing a "formulaic restraint" on the individual works produced in the genre, and is concerned to show, primarily through plot analysis, how individual works simultaneously observe those restraints and create variations on the basic theme. While marriage terminates the adventures of nearly all nineteenth-century heroines, for instance, Baym points out how strongly the novels by women emphasize female self-reliance. Thus she says of Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* that the theme of "the gifted, virtuous heroine mistreated by her family" is "hardly something new"; recognizes the anger expressed in the book as a common theme in the genre (noting, for instance, that *The Lamplighter* and *The Wide, Wide World* share it though they handle it differently); and sees its triumphant denouement as in common with other women's novels that all "permitted their heroines to triumph in satisfying ways over their enemies, thereby indulging the readers' wish for revenge" (252). But Baym also highlights *Ruth Hall's* deviations, pointing out that it advocates independence over dependence for women and suggesting that its successful protagonist is best left unmarried and self-supporting.

Baym's own textual restraints necessarily limit her study. First, although she has included an extraordinary number of writers within her purview, her definition of women's writing as including only those texts that fit within the restraints created by their participation in the overplot prevents her from including others. Her own difficulties with this limitation are evident in her discussions of why she does not include the novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe in her study. Another significant writer she does not mention is Elizabeth Drew Stoddard, whose novels, unconventional by any nineteenth-century standard, do not conform to the definition of women's fiction as Baym sees it.

In addition to her own definitional restraints, Baym also exhibits an

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-42870-5 - 19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretive Strategies
Susan K. Harris
Excerpt
More information

evaluative conflict arising from the contradiction between her training in canonical American literature and her interest in nineteenth-century women's novels. Like Pattee and Papashvily, in *Woman's Fiction* Baym segregates women's writing from other writing of the period. On the one hand, given her genre exclusions, this is a strategic necessity. But it also highlights the evaluative impasse that Baym shares with other American critics, a dilemma of which she is fully conscious and which is the impetus behind her later examination of American interpretive conventions in her essay "Melodramas of Beset Manhood."[13] Even in that essay, however, she questions prevailing conventions rather than attempting to re-evaluate nineteenth-century American women's texts. Admitting in her introduction to *Woman's Fiction* that "I have not unearthed a forgotten Jane Austen or George Eliot, or hit upon even one novel that I would propose to set alongside *The Scarlet Letter*," (14) Baym, like the scholar/critics who preceded her, shows her entrapment in the interpretive conventions of the American academic literary establishment. The dearth of interpretive means that she rightly identifies as critics' major problem with nineteenth-century women's fiction is, finally, also her own. Despite this impasse, *Woman's Fiction* is path breaking in its attempt to escape the restraints imposed by most earlier American critics' visions of women's nature and literary intentions; its openness to the legitimacy of women's concerns broke genuinely new ground for American literary criticism.

Mary Kelley's *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (1984)[14] follows Baym in approaching the novels for what they are trying to do and evaluating them on those terms. Rather than viewing her materials through a formal lens, that is, through a common structural component, as Baym does, Kelley views them through a psychosocial lens, seeing the works, and their authors, as embodying conflicts arising from the social definitions of women's place in nineteenth-century American culture. By far the most contextually layered study of mid–nineteenth-century American women's novels to date, Kelley's approach is primarily historical. It does, however, also consider the works from traditionally literary points of view.

Like *The Sentimental Novel in America* and *The Feminization of American Culture*, *Private Woman, Public Stage* is an ambitious book, casting its net widely into the cultural sea from which these novels sprang. One of the study's points of origin is publishing history, and its chapter chronicling the publication histories of the twelve novelists Kelley treats rivals the work of John Tebbel[15] and Frank Luther Mott.[16] But, in addition to the publication context, Kelley surveys the social milieu in which her subjects matured, seeing their lives and work in terms of their conflicts between the socially mandated "privacy" of the domestic sphere and the necessary

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org