

The Form and Ideology of Woman's Fiction

Works of the genre that I am calling woman's fiction meet three conditions. They are written by women, are addressed to women, and tell one particular story about women. They chronicle the "trials and triumph" (as the subtitle of one example reads) of a heroine who, beset with hardships, finds within herself the qualities of intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage sufficient to overcome them. The genre began in America with Catharine Sedgwick's *New-England Tale* (1822), manifested itself as the favorite reading matter of the American public in the unprecedented sales of Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* (published late in 1850), and remained a dominant fictional type until after 1870.

The critical, as opposed to popular, reception of these novels in their own time was mixed. Theoretical opposition to the novel was by no means dead in mid-nineteenth-century America, and popular successes naturally bore a significant percentage of the attack. The moralistic tone of much woman's fiction did not placate antagonists; on the contrary many clerical opponents of the novel thought that women were trying to take over their functions and hence attacked all the more fiercely. Similarly, some

male authors felt threatened by the apparently sudden emergence of great numbers of women writers. Their distress showed itself in expressions of manly contempt for the genre, its authors, and its readers.

On the other hand, the women had a powerful ally—their publishers, who not only put these works into print but advertised them widely and enthusiastically. Many reviewers approached these works as serious entrants in the race for literary reputation, and wrote about them with attention and respect. They distinguished between the works of the different authors, identified individual strengths and weaknesses, and gave no sign that they considered woman's fiction a subliterary or quasi-literary genre. The contemporary critics were particularly alert to each writer's contribution to the depiction of American social life, especially to regional differentiations in manners and character types. But on the whole they showed themselves uninterested in the story that this fiction tirelessly repeated, or its significance.

After the great vogue of this fiction had passed its practitioners were forgotten. By the end of the nineteenth century a canon of classic American writers was being fixed, and of the many active women authors only Harriet Beecher Stowe and Louisa May Alcott survived the winnowing process. Stowe, however, had written no woman's fiction until after 1870, and her reputation rested on antislavery and regional-religious literature. Alcott, for her part, presided over the waning days of woman's fiction, when it permuted into children's literature. By the early decades of the twentieth century these two women had also disappeared from the pantheon. Until recently, nothing was remembered of this great burst of feminine literary activity among readers or even scholars at large. It had no students except the cultural historians, most of whom approached it prejudicially. Recent scholarship in woman's history and literature has created both a context and a reason for reexamining this literature. I hope in this book to recapture for others a sense of what this fiction was like.

Before we can see what this fiction is, or was, however, we must

*of American
or Victorian*

