An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
Women Writers and the Female Experience

by Elaine Showalter

Elaine Showalter has been active in women's liberation for three years. At the first Congress to Unite Women in New York, she met two academic women working on women's studies and discrimination; they encouraged each other to get women's studies going in several universities. Since then she has taught courses in women's studies at Douglass College and done research on women writers. Currently she is a member of the Modern Language Association Commission on the Status of Women and the Rutgers University Committee on the Status of Women. She has published several articles and edited a book on women's liberation and literature. The following was given as a speech in 1971.

You might expect that women writers would be the most emancipated women in the world for a number of reasons. First of all, they have been allowed to practice their profession since the end of the eighteenth century: writing was a cheap hobby for daughters, and also a harmless one. Virginia Woolf, for example, recalls her father approving of the cheapness of paper and ink. Also, unlike many professional women, women writers could work at home. And this meant that they could work while they were baking the bread, which is what Emily Brontë did. And also that they could work at odd hours while the rest of the family was asleep. There have been many women writers like Frances Trollope, the mother of the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope, who habitually got up at 4 A.M. and wrote a chapter before the baby woke up.

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You might also expect that the length and breadth of the feminine experience would be recorded in the novels and poems and plays of women writers, because they couldn’t have described anything else. After all, they didn’t go to the university, they didn’t go to the office, and they didn’t go to war. Nonetheless, these expectations would be false, for the truth is that women writers, who are the second oldest of the female professions, have neither escaped the hostile stereotypes and repressive practices which have bound them from the beginning in their literary undertakings, nor have they succeeded in defining for the world the experience of their half of the human population.

We need not go back to 1850 to find hostile male criticism of female writers. Let me give you some recent examples. From the New York Review of Books in June, 1965, Bernard Bergonzi writes:

Women novelists, we have learned to assume, like to keep their focus narrow. The female observer is happy with fewer properties; between one and four persons with bruised lives and fine understandings. I have an idea that female writers, in a fervor of emancipated zeal, have accepted too eagerly one of the major premises of modern—or at least post-Freudian—fiction, namely that sex is more important than money.

Taking an opposing viewpoint on this question, John Hollander wrote a double dactyl on the subject of sexual equality in literature, which goes as follows:

Higgledy piggledy,
Dorothy Richardson
Wrote a huge book with her delicate muse,
Where, though I hate to be
uncomplimentary,
Nothing much happens and nobody screws.

Or, in the New York Times in May, 1970, the young male novelist, L. Woiwode, writing in review of female novelist Joanna Ostrow, said in praise, “Simon is one of the most four-square, full-bodied persons I’ve met in recent fiction. Everything about him rings true,

and I find it almost inconceivable that he was created by a woman.”

And, of course, the champion at this kind of thing, our archetypal male chauvinist, Norman Mailer, who has said about women writers:

The sniffs I get from the ink of the women are always fey, old hat, quaintsy, goysy, tiny, too dikily psychotic, crippled, creepish, fashionable, frigid, outer-baroque, maquillé in manniquins whimsey, or else bright and stillborn.

And he concludes here, in a sentence, “In short, a novelist can do without everything but the remnants of his balls.” You don’t have to be an expert in syllogistic reasoning to understand that this effectively excludes women. More recently, in The Prisoner of Sex, Mailer has made some concessions about women writers: now, he says, they’re writing like “tough faggots.”

But even very conservative and very orthodox twentieth-century critics have treated women writers as an inferior group of artists who are inherently limited by their sex and easily identifiable in their language and style. For example, Ernest Baker, who has written a classic ten-volume history of the novel, devotes a separate chapter to women writers, and defends himself by saying:

The woman of letters has peculiarities of race or ancestral tradition. Whatever variety of talent, outlook or personal disposition may be discernible in any dozen women writers taken at random, it will be matched and probably outweighed by resemblances distinctively feminine.

Whether there are, in fact, these resemblances which are distinctly feminine is a question I’m going to try to discuss, because it is my experience, first of all, that the term “feminine” as it is used by literary critics is a pejorative. For example, Katherine Anne Porter said in an interview in the Paris Review a few years ago,

If I show wisdom, the critics say I have a masculine mind. If I’m silly and irrelevant—and Edmund Wilson says I often am—then they say I have a typically feminine mind.

And in a very witty book about female stereotypes, Thinking About Women, Mary Ellmann says that with regard to literature, “femininity” means formlessness, passivity, instability, piety, materiality, and compliancy.

If it is true that women share literary traits, I think we’re not in
a society free enough to discover them. But we can say and agree that women have experiences in common—the experiences of daughterhood, adolescence, sexual initiation, marriage, and childbirth. In addition to these, women writers have their own individual experiences of life, and particularly their experiences as artists. It is my contention that these feminine experiences have not been fully explored, or honestly expressed by women writers, and that women have, in fact, been kept from their own experience by a double critical standard, by a double social standard, by external censorship, and, most dangerous, by self-censorship—which is sometimes exercised in self-defense, more frequently in self-hatred.

In order to demonstrate what I consider the longevity and the universality of these problems, I would like to focus on four books, by four different women: Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847; George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, 1859; Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, 1899; and Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*, 1963. The first two of these are by British women; the last two by American women.

First, Charlotte Brontë I think is a particularly good example of the double critical standard, because she published *Jane Eyre* under a masculine pseudonym. She used the name Currer Bell, and her two sisters used the names Ellis and Acton Bell, because, as she wrote:

Without at the time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what was called feminine, we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice. We notice how sometimes critics use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward a flattery which is not true praise.²

In 1847 the stereotypes for male and female writers were very rigid. Critics expected from a male writer strength, passion, and intellect, and from a woman writer they expected tact, refinement, and piety. They depended on these stereotypes so much, in fact, that they really didn’t know how to proceed, what to say, or what to look for in a book if they were unsure of the author’s sex.

So *Jane Eyre* created a tremendous sensation, and it was a problem for the Brontës. The name Currer Bell could be that of either a man or a woman and the narrator of *Jane Eyre* is Jane herself. The book is told as an autobiography. These things suggested that
the author might have been a woman. On the other hand, the novel was considered to be excellent, strong, intelligent and, most of all, passionate. And therefore, the critics reasoned, it could not be written by a woman, and if it turned out that it was written by a woman, she had to be unnatural and perverted.

The reason for this is that the Victorians believed that decent women had no sexual feelings whatsoever—that they had sexual anesthesia. Therefore, when Jane says about Rochester that his touch “made her veins run fire, and her heart beat faster than she could count its throbs,” the critics assumed this was a man writing about his sexual fantasies. If a woman was the author, then presumably she was writing from her own experience, and that was disgusting. In this case we can clearly see how women were not permitted the authority of their own experience if it happened to contradict the cultural stereotype.

But even more shocking than this to the Victorians was Jane’s reply to Rochester, a very famous passage in the novel. He has told her he is going to marry another woman, an heiress, but that she can stay on as a servant. Jane answers him thus:

“I tell you I must go,” I retorted, roused to something like passion. “Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton, a machine without feeling and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I’m soulless and heartless? You think wrong. I have as much soul as you and full as much heart. And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should’ve made it as hard for you to leave me as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionality, nor even of mortal flesh. It is my spirit that addresses your spirit, just as if both had passed through the grave and we stood at God’s feet equal—as we are.”

This splendid assertion violated not only the standards of sexual submission, which were believed to be women’s duty and their punishment for Eve’s crime, but it also went against standards of class submission, and obviously against religion. And this sort of rebellion was not feminine at all.

The reviews of Jane Eyre in 1847 and 1848 show how confused the critics were. Some of them said Currer Bell was a man. Some of them, including Thackeray, said a woman. One man, an American
critic named Edgar Percy Whipple, said the Bells were a team, that Currer Bell was a woman who did the dainty parts of the book and brother Acton the rough parts. All kinds of circumstantial evidence were adduced to solve this problem, such as the details of housekeeping. Harriet Martineau said the book had to be the work of a woman or an upholsterer. And Lady Eastlake, who was a reviewer for one of the most prestigious journals, said it couldn’t be a woman because no woman would dress her heroines in such outlandish clothes.

Eventually Charlotte Brontë revealed her identity, and then these attacks which had been general became personal. People introduced her as the author of a naughty book; they gossiped that she was Thackeray’s mistress. They speculated on the causes of what they called “her alien and sour perspective on women.” She felt during her entire short life that she was judged always on the basis of what was becoming in femininity and not as an artist.

When she died—ironically enough, from complications of pregnancy at the age of thirty-nine—her close friend and sister novelist, Elizabeth Gaskell, wrote a biography, in part to defend Charlotte Brontë’s reputation against the implications of being unladylike and unwomanly. The effect of this biography, though certainly not its intention, was to provide those critics who had never been able to accept the idea of female genius with a theory which explained things for them. The Brontës had a brother, Branwell, who was an alcoholic and an opium addict; he died at thirty-one. The theory was that Branwell had written not only Jane Eyre but also Wuthering Heights. Branwell was sick, violent, and weak, but at least he was a man, and occasionally one finds articles and tracts claiming his genius even today.

George Eliot had a confrontation with Victorian society which was even more explosive than Charlotte Brontë’s. Her use of the male pseudonym—her real name was Mary Anne Evans—was not merely to avoid unjust criticism because she was a woman, although that was what she claimed. She had to use a pseudonym because she was living with a married man, George Henry Lewes, in defiance of all the codes of Victorian society, and her publishers were really in fear that moral outrage at her life style would affect the review and sales of her books.

Her first novel, Adam Bede, was published in 1859. It contained
an episode which deals with the plight of an unwed mother, an igno-
orton dairymaid named Hetty, who gives birth to her child under 
tragic circumstances and subsequently murders it. This plot had 
been used previously by Sir Walter Scott in The Heart of Midlo-
thian, but Scott was a stern moralist. George Eliot, on the other hand, 
views the incident from the point of view of the girl herself: a girl 
who is young and naive and terrified. She presents with sympathy 
the torment of this trapped creature, who also has a rather limited 
intelligence.

George Eliot’s publishers were highly alarmed by this aspect of 
the book, not because Hetty murders the child but because she is 
said to be pregnant at all. To be on the safe side, the publishers sent 
the manuscript to the head physician in charge of obstetrics at the 
University of Edinburgh, who was to make sure that it was all de-
cent. He did give it his seal of approval and sent it back, but they 
were still very anxious.

In spite of their fears, Adam Bede was an instant success; every-
one acclaimed it, and virtually everyone took for granted this time 
that the author was a man. As the Saturday Review wrote, the book 
was thought “too good for a woman’s story.” The Westminster 
Review, another Victorian journal, wrote that there wasn’t a woman 
in England capable of the intellectual profundity of Adam Bede. 
This comment was particularly ironic because George Eliot had 
edited the Westminster Review for three years. (Of course, she did 
it behind the scenes: she didn’t get paid, she didn’t get the credit—
she let her lover take both of those.)

But Adam Bede was so good that people had to find the author 
... they had to find George Eliot. They went out to look for him 
using various clues in the book. And before long, they actually 
found him. A man named Joseph Liggins who lived near Nuneaton, 
George Eliot’s home town, admitted very modestly that he had writ-
ten Adam Bede and that he had also written the book of stories by 
George Eliot which had preceded it. Liggins, who was obviously a 
lunatic, received pilgrims at his home, where he would discourse on 
the art of fiction.

The real George Eliot had some difficulty claiming that she actu-
ally had written the book. She wrote letters to The London Times, 
for example, but ultimately it was necessary for her to drop her 
pseudonym and to reveal her identity in order to scotch the rumors.
So about 1860 people knew that George Eliot was, in fact, a woman. And then what happened to *Adam Bede*? Some critics went back and read it again. And this time they discovered that it was really not as distinguished a book as they had first believed. The editor of *The Athenaeum*, for example, wrote:

> It is time to end this pother about the authorship of *Adam Bede*. The writer is in no sense a great unknown. The tale, though bright in parts, and such as a clever woman with an observant eye and an unschooled moral nature might have written, has no great quality of any kind.\(^4\)

Also in 1860, George Eliot's second novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, appeared. This time, knowing that the author was a woman, the critics preached long sermons in their reviews on the indecency of the book. The indecency consists of the heroine, Maggie Tulliver, awakening to a physical passion for a man who is engaged to her cousin. She knows she has to resist this passion and ultimately she does and is drowned at the end of the book.

Critics couldn't deny the truth of what she wrote; *The Mill on the Floss* contains a woman's very modest acknowledgement of sexual feeling. The most daring scene involves a kiss on the arm. Critics did, however, object to sexual knowledge of any sort on the part of a woman, and particularly if it was accurate. The *Saturday Review*, for example, wondered if women ought to even *think* about sex:

> We are not sure that it is quite consistent with feminine delicacy to lay so much stress on the bodily feeling for the other sex. George Eliot lets her fancy run to things which are not wrong, but are better omitted from the scope of female meditation. Perhaps we may go further and say that the whole delineation of passionate love as painted by modern female novelists is open to very serious criticism.\(^5\)

After this novel, George Eliot virtually dropped the autobiographical and personal element in her fiction and turned to historical and political modes. Her real experience—her life experience as a woman defying social convention—could not be used in any explicit or even subtle way in her novels without risking her private happiness. For example, although her whole life was affected by the British divorce laws—or rather the lack of British divorce laws—she could not have protested them in her books without incurring serious scandal.
What happened then to women who actually tried to write, using their own names, about feminine experience? Kate Chopin did try this in *The Awakening*, a novel about a young mother, Edna Pontellier, in New Orleans at the turn of the century, married to a very rich, adoring and demanding husband. She has stifled, more from inertia than from will, a real sense of herself, of her abilities, her needs, her wishes. In the course of the book she is awakened sexually by falling in love with a young man, and this sudden understanding of her physical nature awakens her entire individuality.

This awakening is tragic for her. She can’t fit into her society once she is awake. She gives up her social obligations: she tries to become a painter but she is not really a genius—she doesn’t have that kind of discipline. She moves out of her home, she offers to get a divorce, but of course her lover won’t marry her because he is going to protect her reputation. And so, in the last chapter of the book, there is nothing left for Edna and in a kind of hazy and sensual trance, she walks into the sea and drowns.

The book has recently been compared to *Madame Bovary*, and to the novels of D. H. Lawrence. It has been called “the most important piece of fiction about the sexual life of a woman written to date in America.” So why have we never heard of it?

*The Awakening* was published in April, 1899. It was first reviewed in St. Louis because Chopin was a local author. Within twelve days it had been condemned by every critic in St. Louis; they said it was poisonous. One critic said that it was unacceptable that a real American lady should be allowed to disrupt “the sacred institution of marriage and American womanhood, and to disregard moral concepts without repenting it.”

The book was banned first in St. Louis and then nationally from Boston to Los Angeles. By the time Chopin had written a kind of ironic half-defense—not an apology, but a kind of grudging statement—the book had disappeared. Subsequently Kate Chopin discovered she could no longer get her short stories accepted for publication; even a collection which had previously been accepted for publication was returned. She lost confidence in her ability as a writer and, probably coincidentally, died shortly thereafter in 1904.

*The Awakening* is certainly not obscene. Male writers in the same period had published works which were equally frank and much more perverse: Strindberg, for example; Zola, Dreiser. But what
was shocking in this was the insistence of the author, a woman, on defining the shape of her own experience. Even more disturbing was her rejection of the myth of domestic fulfillment.

Edna says to her best friend, "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." She loves her children, but they don't fulfill her. Without being militant in any sense, she is also not apologetic. She simply seeks an authentic life for herself, however tragically and unsuccessfully, as a human being, with a kind of steadiness and quiet purpose.

It may appear that these are all ancient cases, that today women writers are free from this kind of Victorian prudery and sexual stereotyping. So I would like to consider, finally, the case of Mary McCarthy.

Mary McCarthy is, first of all, the only one of these four women who had a university education: she went to Vassar. She and Kate Chopin had children, the others did not. This, again, is not coincidental. Women writers—women artists in general—have always operated in a tradition where creativity for women meant childbearing, and where there is a kind of assumption that biological and literary creativity are mutually exclusive.

Like many American writers, Mary McCarthy has used her life as the basis for her fiction. Many men have done this: Fitzgerald not only used his life but Zelda's. As Nancy Mitford's recent biography of Zelda tells us, when she wrote her own autobiographical novel, he insisted that she cut parts of it out because he was the great writer in the family and her life was his material. Philip Roth, for another example, has used so many incidents from his teaching experience at the University of Chicago in his novel, Letting Go, that Chicago people call this book "The Gripe of Roth."

But when the artist is a man, we make allowances for this. We don't criticize or tax these writers for their lack of personal loyalty, but rather we admire their daring, their honesty, and their ruthless appropriation of life for their art. But with women the case is something different. With Mary McCarthy, a very similar kind of artistic pattern has earned her the title (from Life magazine) of "The Lady with the Switchblade," or the title (from critics): "The Modern American Bitch."

In fact, up until 1963, when Mary McCarthy published The
Group, she had been a good girl—as men define a good girl. She wrote her first short stories because her husband, Edmund Wilson, ordered her to produce fiction. As she describes it in an interview in the Paris Review, "He put me in a little room. He didn't literally lock the door, but he said 'Stay there.'" And so she wrote her stories. Her story is something like Rumpelstiltskin: the princess shut up to spin flax into gold; and I think this experience probably contributed to her continuing vision of her heroines as fairy tale princesses. The girls in The Group live in a tower; Polly is later described as living like Snow White surrounded by little dwarfs. It is generally one way of looking at women in her fiction.

But other aspects of her early career also show that she was accepting pretty much the work men gave her to do, and the view that they had of her. She said about her first job, which was as a theater critic for the Partisan Review:

I was sort of a gay, good-time girl from their point of view. They were men of the thirties—very serious. That's why my position was so insecure on Partisan Review. It wasn't exactly insecure, but lowly. That was why they let me write about the theater. Because they thought the theater was of absolutely no consequence.7

But in The Group she said goodbye to all of that and struck out on her own. First of all, she was writing about feminine experience: the loss of virginity, buying a diaphragm, pregnancy, maternity, nursing a baby, marriage, adultery, masturbation, lesbianism. These are not themes likely to please male critics: they're feminine themes, and therefore trivial.

Reading the reviews of The Group which came out around 1963 and 1964, one senses the delight of male critics that they were at last able to convict her of writing a female book. Norman Podhoretz wrote, for example, that The Group was "a trivial lady writer's book." And, of course, Norman Mailer went wild. He wrote a very lengthy essay called "The Case Against McCarthy." In this essay he raves against the detail of The Group, seeing in it what he calls "the profound materiality of women." In a classical Freudian equation, Mailer describes this detail as "the cold lava of anality which becomes the truest part of her group, her gloop, her impacted mass."

In short, his theory of Mary McCarthy is that as a writer she is constipated, and her characters are shit. He can, in fact, see to a limited degree what she is trying to do in this book; but he can't
understand why. He can see in some way that she is writing about the inexorable socialization of women into roles they never intended to choose; that these women wind up as what he calls "these piss-out characters with their cultivated banalities, their lack of variety or ambition."  

But although Mailer thinks of himself as the guru of good sex, he can't see that one of the most famous sex scenes in the book—Dotty's sexual initiation—features the good old Freudian orgasm: one vaginal, one clitoral—with Dotty, who is obedient and brainwashed, feeling exactly what her college textbooks have told her to feel. Dotty evaluates her experience in the terms which she has been taught:

This second climax, which she now recognized from the first one, though it was different, left her jumpy and disconcerted. It was something less thrilling and more like being tickled relentlessly or having to go to the bathroom. "Didn't you like that?" he demanded. Slowly Dotty opened her eyes and resolved to tell the truth. "Not quite so much as the other, Dick." Dick laughed. "A nice, normal girl. Some of your sex prefer that." Dotty shivered. She could not deny that it had been exciting, but it seemed to her almost perverted.

She is describing the clitoral orgasm, and recalling the "vaginal" one.

All of the women in The Group, I think, are similarly alienated from their own experience. They feel what they have been programmed to feel. In this sense, The Group is really a subversive novel about women's roles, and about marriage. It is not an accident that the most liberated woman in this book is a lesbian, and that she challenges Harold on his own territory, which is the bed. She suggests to him on their way to bury Kay, the heroine, that she has been there before him, that she has seduced Kay, and this suggestion defeats him totally. It is clear why Mailer hated this book.

Other male critics, like Brock Bower, took a different approach to Mary McCarthy. They treated her with chivalry, with charming condescension. Brower's profile of Mary McCarthy for Esquire, for example, doesn't say very much about her art; he doesn't talk about her particularly as a writer. But he starts with the description of her beautiful smile, and he ends with a lengthy account of her in the kitchen blissfully whipping up her famous cassoulet.
Where are women writers going to go from here? In the past, feminine experience has probably been more of a hindrance to women writers than a help. Katherine Anne Porter, for example, said it took her twenty years to write *Ship of Fools,*

...because you're brought up with the notion of feminine availability in all spiritual ways, and in giving service to anyone who demands it. And I suppose that's why it's taken me twenty years to write this novel. It's been interrupted by just anyone who could jimmy his way into my life.

There are some women who have made money out of the domestic cage that keeps other women from finding the time or the peace to write: Jean Kerr and Phyllis McGinley, for example, selling their housewives' trials, or Pearl Buck who advertises the Famous Writers' School as a service to homemaker shut-ins.

But in the future, women artists are going to have to be encouraged to take themselves seriously and perhaps even selfishly... selfishly enough to make their work come first. More important, I think, women have been taught always to regard their experience as dull and minor and tame, which is, of course, what "domestic" means. As Hortense Calisher says, "We've been taught that a man's role is to hunt experience, a woman's to let it come upon us." And Elizabeth Hardwick writes: "Women have much less experience of life than a man, as everybody knows." But I suggest that no one has less experience of life than somebody else. We have different kinds of experience. We don't want now to have female versions of men's books; we don't want the female version of Portnoy's Complaint.

But women have always been overshadowed by the literary tradition which is masculine and splendid. Like the Romans inheriting Greek culture, we are not going to find our own originality as women by copying such a powerful past. If women artists are to liberate themselves from this past and discover their own originality, they are going to have to turn within and to explore the rich dowry of feminine experience which they all possess.

I think that this is taking place now. Some of the women writing today are engaged in this kind of search and exploration, coming into a kind of furious encounter with the fact of being female—the experience of being female—and I can give only a very brief sampling of what some of this new literature is like.
It is not feminine in any sense of that stereotype, but it is female. As Alicia Ostriker, a poet, writes in her long poem about pregnancy, "Once More Out of Darkness"* (which is written in nine parts and a post-partum):

What I have said and what I will say is female, not feminine. Yes, I said yes, not analytical, not romantic, but the book of practical facts.

Women's poetry is extremely varied. There are some women poets like Elizabeth Sargent who are now trying erotic verse, enjoying the freedom to use sexual metaphors which were formerly taboo or reserved only to men.

There are others who are writing about the cages of sex roles. This is Anne Sexton's poem, "Housewife":*

Some women marry houses. It's another kind of skin; it has a heart a mouth a liver and bowel movements The walls are permanent and pink See how she sits on her knees all day faithfully washing herself down Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah into their fleshy mothers A woman is her mother That's the main thing.

She wants you to think about the title of the poem—"Housewife," the wife of the house. Many more women, like Adrienne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, and Denise Levertov, are writing frequently about the cultural exchanges between men and women that we call love.

Less well known right now than the poets, but extremely exciting, are the new women writers who are working with fiction. Margaret

Atwood, a Canadian novelist, has written a funny, scary book called *The Edible Woman*. It is a kind of satire about a woman who is engaged and who suddenly feels: (a) that she is being consumed as a person, particularly by her fiancé, and (b) that she can’t eat any more. First she can’t eat steak and then she can’t eat pork, and then she can’t eat chicken and then she can’t eat eggs, and then she can’t eat rice pudding, and she is finally subsisting on vitamins. At the end of the novel, in a terrible crisis at an engagement party, she rushes home and bakes a cake in the shape of a woman, and frosts it and decorates it to look like herself. Then she calls up her fiancé and tells him to eat the cake and to leave her life alone.

In a more serious mode, a novel that seems part of the new wave of what women are doing as writers is British writer Margaret Drabble’s *The Waterfall*, published in this country by Knopf. The novel begins with a childbirth scene: a woman is alone in a house; her husband has left her. She has moved into one bedroom, the only room that has heat, and she gives birth to a daughter during a snowstorm, with only a midwife present. The book begins with the mystery and beauty of the heroine in this warm, hidden place with the child. While she is still convalescing from childbirth, she begins an affair with the husband of her cousin, who has come to be with her in her isolation. He is somehow captivated and seduced by the state of the mother and child. Most of what follows is about their love affair and about the heroine’s sense of her life, for which the waterfall is a metaphor. At one point, the heroine, considering her life—a typical woman’s aimless life—tries to compare it to the past and particularly to heroines of fiction:

Sometimes, once a week or so, I would get myself into a total panic about the extent of my subjugation, and I even went so far as to look it up in a sexual textbook, an old-fashioned one, Have-lock Ellis, where I found the word “bondage,” which seemed quite elegantly to describe my condition. I was in bondage. Having discovered this, I flipped through the rest of the book, gazing in amazement at all those curious masculine perversions, wishing I could attach myself to something more easily attainable than a living man. Perversions are cruel, but surely love is as cruel. It is too relative, too exclusive, too desperately mortal.

There didn’t seem to be very many female perversions in that book. Perhaps that was because it was old. Perhaps women have developed these things more recently as a result of emancipation.
But love is nothing new. Even women have suffered from it in history. It is a classic malady and commonly it requires participants of both sexes. Perhaps I'll go mad with guilt like Sue Bridehead, or drown myself in an effort to reclaim lost renunciations like Maggie Tulliver.

Those fictional heroines, how they haunt me. Maggie Tulliver had a cousin called Lucy, as I have, and like me she fell in love with her cousin's man. She drifted off down the river with him, abandoning herself to the water, but in the end she lost him. She let him go. Nobly she regained her ruined honor and, ahh, we admire her for it, all that superego gathered together in a last effort to prove that she loved the brother more than the man.

She should have... well, what should she not have done? Since Freud we guess dimly at our own passions, stripped of hope, abandoned forever to that relentless current. It gets us in the end; sticks, twigs, dry leaves, paper cartons, cigarette ends, orange peels, flower petals, silver fishes. Maggie Tulliver never slept with her man. She did all the damage there was to be done to Lucy, to herself, to the two men who loved her, and then, like a woman of another age, she refrained. In this age what is to be done? We drown in the first chapter.

In 1923, the poet Louise Bogan wrote, "Women have no wildness in them." She was wrong. Feminine experience is the wildness which women writers have only started to chart.

Footnotes

2 Biographical Notice of Anne and Emily Brontë, prefaced to 1850 edition of Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey.
5 Saturday Review, p. 471.
6 See Per Seyersted, Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography, University of Louisiana Press, 1969, for details of the critical reception of The Awakening.