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Preface

In order to study feminine consciousness in relation to the American novel, I have re-examined the works of some American women writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – Kate Chopin (1851-1935), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), Edith Wharton (1862-1937), Ellen Glasgow (1873-1945) and Willa Cather (1873-1947). They did not overtly form a group such as the Bloomsbury Group, but they are writers who broke literary taboos and dared to subvert the literary codes of their time. They were, however, treated as peripheral; generally dismissed as ‘regionalists’ and ‘local colorists’.

These writers displayed artistic craftsmanship as well as the courage to subvert patriarchal norms and literary codes that prioritized male experience. The thematic emphasis in their novels is on the plight of woman in a man’s world. The most singular similarity in their novels is the creation of strong, independent heroines, who could serve as role models for emancipated women of the time.

I have based my study on the hypothesis that, though not part of the literary canon of their time, these women writers did produce literature of a high order. The object of my exercise was to find the disguised messages that women’s writing has encoded, by finding a reading strategy that goes beyond apparent and surface meaning. It is my contention that women’s literature has something unique to contribute since it portrays female subjectivity and life experiences, which have a different perceptual and emotional basis than those of men.

My analysis will establish that instead of reading a few ‘great works’ by canonical writers, feminist analysis can embrace an understanding of the full range of literary forms which are used by women. In order to portray the emotional aspects of women’s lives,

and the psychic realm of experience, alternative structures were used which resulted in deviations from patriarchal modes of writing. These writers wrote in ways that were undervalued or misunderstood. Apart from the novel of manners and local color techniques, they also made use of the pastoral, utopian and science fiction, the gothic novel, autobiography and flashback, and the unfurnished novel (*roman démeublé*).

In my introduction I have charted the history of women in American Society, based on socio-cultural changes; traced the beginnings of feminism and the rise of the Female Hero; and mentioned the theories of feminist criticism on which this study is based. The subsequent chapters examine the works of individual authors to reveal the ways in which their protagonists challenge the social order of the day in their search for selfhood; the pitfalls of motherhood and matrimony; the sexual mores and repercussions on those who break them; and the inevitable confrontation with society which any woman seeking emancipation faces.

In the concluding chapter I have summarized the findings of my analyses' reiterating the premise that these women who were relegated to the position of minor writers by a male-formulated canon, were worthy of greater acclaim due to their significant contribution to the field of literature.

Its development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries coincided with a historical shift in women's position. The novels of this...
Austen is perhaps the first of the woman writers to receive a great deal of critical attention and work has been done on several aspects of her novels. Conventional approaches have focused on the Comedy of Manners, on the sense of prudence and morality and the didactic element; on the centrality of the marriage theme in her novels, on the minuteness of social depiction and class differences.
feminine awareness developed by earlier women writers. Like them, she [Austen] focused on an intelligent young woman, through whose eyes she presented women, men, and, the world. 5.