Gotham's Daughters:

Feminism in the 1920s

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Literature on the 1920s has been fraught with conflicting views, with scholars suggesting that the postsuffrage generation both rejected and embraced feminism.[1] American periodical fiction of this era offers information on the debate over feminism because it provided models and fantasies of new roles for women. A sample of more than six hundred stories from the *Delineator*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *McCall's* and *Pictorial Review* for the years 1920 through 1929 reveals the concerns of large numbers of women that mirrored in significant ways white middle-class culture in the years after the national suffrage amendment.[2] These stories defined a range of attributes for the New Woman of the 1920s. Often they portrayed a new yearning for change as women rebelled against parental strictures, marriage and domesticity, and family tradition. Revolt led characters to flee to the city, often New York, in search of individual freedom, new work roles and equal access with men to the market place, but Gotham offered peril as well as success. Not all men respected the New Woman's independence, and some women themselves questioned whether or not the struggle was worthwhile. Even the boldest of rebels had limits in this fictional world: the sense of sisterhood was undercut by the heroine's own independence and the notion of a gender-blind society was naive. Nonetheless, the themes of the stories suggest widespread enthusiasm among middle-class women for substantial rethinking of gender roles.

The issue of whether the "Woman Movement" survived the 1920s has been somewhat resolved by recent studies that point to the complexity of American thought on gender during this critical decade and which further indicate that the twenties was a watershed era, defining modern conceptions of sex roles. There seems to be a consensus that the decade after the national suffrage amendment

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became law in 1920 marks the consolidation of a new emancipatory vision, in revolt against the old order, which included suffragists, but in decided harmony with modern feminist concepts: egalitarianism, vocational commitment outside the home, personal autonomy and empowerment, freedom of sexual expression.[3] While these theorists disagree over when to date the declining influence of feminism, they see evidence throughout the twenties that women wanted access to public life, greater latitude of action and to establish personal relationships of equality with men, despite their rejection of many tenets held by suffragists.

No one, as yet, has looked at popular imaginative literature from these important years. My perusal of women's magazine fiction indicates that notions described by these studies found within feminist organizations and in universities were also contained in fantasies designed for mass consumption. The persistent appearance of New Woman heroines in publications that tapped a huge, white, middle-class, female audience suggests that such ideas were deeply embedded in American culture.[4] Moreover, these fantasies furnish insight into attitudes that coalesced at this time. Specifically, they mediated two contradictory impulses evident in popular culture: the desire to assimilate into the modern world and to flee from it, the rejection of a separate sphere for women and the fear of losing human connections when leaving that sphere. We are given a complex portrait of characters in flight from domesticity and eager to conquer new territory, but also experiencing losses of community, humane values and affectional ties with other women. From this vantage point, we can see the ways popular stories bridged a shift from separate gender roles to modern notions of companionate marriage and women's participation in the public arena.

The twenties heroine in fiction is not an overt feminist but shares with her politically active counterpart a determination to go beyond the traditional role for which she has been groomed, to find a vocation that will afford some measure of creativity and independence, and to explore an exciting world unknown to her mother. Believing she has a right to "live like a man," she follows paths women rarely choose in order to achieve something meaningful and lay claim to a new mythos that individuals are free to develop their potential no matter what their gender. Characters rebel against familial expectations and demands with only a vague notion of how their personal situation is linked to a systemic oppression. Their dissatisfaction, however, clearly arises from an unwillingness to occupy the position assigned to women. The heroine may refer to her mother's "enslavement," for instance, vowing never to fall into the same domestic trap, or she may run away from a widowed father who has pressed her into service as a surrogate wife. Patriarchal oppression is represented here by the tyrannical husband who makes his wife miserable with incessant demands or by the abusive father who, having forced his wife into an early grave, keeps his daughter from developing herself in order to meet his own needs. The heroine's home is a repressive environment, suffocating in its enveloping bonds of filial duty, sealed from outside influence, run by a rigid deadening schedule of routines.

Two stories illustrate the oppressive power of the patriarch quite well. In "Chained Eagles," a 1928 *McCall's* piece, Ann Satridge has spent all of her thirty-seven years with a widowed father described as "a selfish man" who snaps at her for any housekeeping delays. Prevented from living a self-determined life, Ann identifies with an eagle whose broken wing she repairs on their Oregon ranch. The bird comes to represent her desire for autonomy, and its release from captivity reminds her of the invisible domestic chains that bind her even though she is ready to soar.[5] Similarly, Jahala Chandler, of "Dance Magic," from the *Ladies Home Journal* suffers under her father's tyranny as a child. A sensualist and natural dancer, she is forbidden to dance, then forced to be a housekeeper when her mother dies. When her one source of moral support—a teacher—is fired for conceiving a child out of wedlock, Jahala rages against the injustice of it and rebels against her own victimization by running away to New York, determined to avoid "sinking, as other women of Ripley Bridge had sunk, into spiritual acquiescence." After a great struggle in which her desire to dance and form her own values overcomes her provincial background, Jahala successfully defies her father to make a life for herself in the city: "She was thinking of . . . her mother's suppression. She—Jahala—could never, never submit to such things. She must not be tied, imprisoned. She must be her own, always her own."[6]

There are instances when fathers are supporters and sources of inspiration, but the dominant image is that of a dictator whose paternal demands stifle the heroine's independent spirit. The consistent portrayal of filial duty as onerous and crippling, with specific reference to care of the father and victimization of the mother, suggests a profound alienation from Victorian conceptions of home life. The mother and then daughter fill a role that carried power in fiction before the vote, yet here it is experienced as enfeebling, restrictive, a position created by male privilege. In order to be herself, the heroine must leave the patriarchal home and reject her mother's way of life.[7]

A 1928 story from *Pictorial Review* that captures in some detail the sense of how stultifying traditional domesticity came to seem by the 1920s casts as its main character a woman of the previous generation. Missie Colfax is raised by her paternal grandmother and suffers from the repressive conventionality of the household. She is brought up to be a lady, taught "a cult of the male," and encouraged to fear the world outside: "It was a queer repressed life . . . the anemia of [it] was making its impression on Missie. She was growing silent, repressed." To escape, she marries a man her father's age, symbolizing her failure to escape the demands of an older generation steeped in male supremacy. A sign of impending disaster, the flowers at her wedding remind Missie of a funeral, and she remembers her deceased mother's warning that men are not to be trusted. The marriage is governed by socially accepted values relegating wives to a subordinate role but, inwardly, Missie rebels against a meaningless, loveless life. Only a child and limited options keep her from divorce.[8]

Sensing that more is available to them than running a home and fearing marriage means the permanent loss of freedom, heroines resist matrimony throughout the twenties. Brides run away before the wedding ceremony, ambitious professionals put off an insistent suitor, widows and older, single women refuse second offers. They are not uninterested in love, but their passion for independence, creativity and experience proves more compelling. One of the central subjects of the decade is the dilemma faced by a woman of achievement or ambition when she falls in love. Reluctant to abandon her dreams, yet in need of companionship, she goes through considerable anguish as she grapples with a relationship that threatens even at it nourishes her. Connie Davison in the *Ladies Home Journal*'s "They Walk in Darkness" is a typical character of this sort and, further, represents the New Woman's hunger for city life. Striking a familiar theme, the story establishes her motives for avoiding marriage early on when we learn that she is appalled by an aunt's having forsaken teaching for marriage: "Marriage isn't fair to women. It isn't an equal relationship . . . When a woman marries she begins a life sentence of work." Characteristically, too, she goes to New York and begins on the bottom rung of what she hopes will be a career in business by getting a clerical job. She loves the city's anonymity, its cultural variety, its vitality: "All my five senses were alert and the mere consciousness of my existence was a thrilling fact to me . . . I ran through the various love stories with a contented chuckle . . . They were all based upon the age-old assumptions that love was the only thing in the world." Her experiment in single living—and happiness—come to an end when a broker wears down her resistance. She is won over by his glamorous stories of adventure, which make her life seem dull by contrast, but discovers that marriage is as inhibiting as she feared it would be. Though she returns to work to help finance their extravagant lifestyle, her joy and spirit have been irrevocably damaged by a kind of romance that deflected her from autonomy.[9]

Another young woman reluctant to marry the man she loves and ultimately betrayed by him is Sylvia Hawthorne, a professor of architecture in "The Thread of Gold," a serial from *Good Housekeeping*. She has found the ideal comrade in Richard Branch, a mine engineer, but is afraid she would, as his wife, be "a shadow" and lose her identity. He wins her over with assurances that he will support her choices, and they embark on a two-career marriage. On the surface, Richard adapts to Sylvia's becoming a professional but confesses to a friend that he wishes she were "his little doll," and when he takes a new job where there are no teaching positions, he insists she give their relationship higher priority than her work. Loving him deeply, Sylvia makes the move but finds herself tormented by the loss of her career: "It was as if she was maiming herself . . . She would never be happy again with all of her." After trying to do things his way, she begins remodeling homes for a living, declaring to him that being a housewife is not enough for her, that she is haunted by thoughts of her mother "crystallized and outgrown" in that role.[10]

More is going on in these stories than a simple rebellion against domestic roles. The heroine's resistance to traditional bromides about hearth and home is symbolized by her flight from a small town, generally in the midwest, to a metropolis, usually New York City. Her defiance of family demands, therefore, is linked to abandonment of a settled, marginalized lifestyle in favor of open-ended individual effort within the heart of urban society. Blanche Gelfant has identified this journey as the heroine's existential voyage toward self-definition: "Freedom seems to her inherent in a fluid if disorganized urban society, one that by its disorder and indifference has released her from the roles assigned to women by history and myth."[11] Anonymity gives her the chance to remake herself into a New Woman in harmony with the dawning new age. Indicative of this empowerment, stories commonly relay the heroine's exuberance as she enters the city. The protagonist of "Harriet Struts Her Stuff," for instance, a 1927 narrative in *The Ladies Home Journal*, joyfully abandons her birthplace of Cedar Falls for New York City and feels liberated from the domestic life she was leading upstate: "In her mind was the determination that come what might, she would express her own personality, she would hew straight to the line of her own individual nature."[12] In like fashion, the aspiring doctor of a 1922 *Good Housekeeping* story, "The Thrill-Chaser," begins her new life in Chicago exhilarated by the city's tempo: "The thrill of her participation in the great game of existence shot through her... Even more than she wanted a home, she wanted to explore the city."[13] The heroine substitutes a liberated vision of her homeland for the familial home, and symbolically appropriates as her own territory the male sphere of commerce and urban life. She hungers for knowledge, variety, transformation.

The flight from a small town, where the heroine's mother endured a selfless, unstimulating existence, represents the shattering of an old consensus about the nature of women and progress in which suffragists maintained that women rightly occupied unique space, separate from the world created by men. Their complaint was that men's sphere had grown too powerful and they insisted on strengthening women's domesticating influence.[14] Both Rosalind Rosenberg and Nancy F. Cott argue that the distinguishing feature of modern feminism was the assertion of an essential sameness between women and men and the ensuing demand that women have equal access to the public marketplace.[15] This core tenet of postsuffrage feminist thinking is fictionally represented as the small town which is a dying vestige of woman's past isolation from civilization's inner workings. The New Woman heroine of the 1920s leaves behind whatever power she had available to her in the middle-class, familial community because, while safe, it is on the periphery of life; its separation from the real workings of society make her vulnerable to following an agenda, to a deathlike passivity that comes from being irrelevant.

The country to city tale had been a staple of women's magazine fiction since 1910, when periodicals began to publish stories in quantity.[16] Prior to World War I, it invariably ended in disillusionment with life outside the home town. Heroines traveled a circular path, similar to the pattern found in early twentieth-century British fiction, whereby they return from the city in search of familiar, stable values.[17] The dream to carve out a life unlike the mother's is shown to be false and the city a corrupter of youthful idealism. The 1914 *Ladies Home Journal* protagonist of "Ruth Grenville—Feminist: Her Adventures in the City That Doesn't Care" is a typical heroine from this era who leaves a male suitor and loving parents in the town of Mercerville to find a vocation in New York. Ruth's father is Chair of the Greek Department at Mercerville's small college and has given his daughter a classical education. When Ruth applies the humanistic values she has learned at home to her life in New York, she finds obstacles at every turn, including a parasitic labor organizer and a cynical actor. In contrast to these self-absorbed men, the boy she left behind has given up a chance to attend Oxford in order to support his family through hard times. Though he is a man, this sweetheart lives by female values in the old Victorian code and his position as Assistant Professor of Ethics and Comparative Religions at the local college symbolizes his commitment to the principles Ruth finds lacking in the city she thought would nourish her independence. Crestfallen, Ruth comes back to Mercerville acknowledging her mistaken faith in urban adventure:

> . . . for all my longings to be free of convention, this little social sphere chains me, and the others—well they disgust a little. I'm that awful thing—the modern feminist problem! I've been educated beyond the old social bonds and standards of my sex, yet I'm tied down by invisible bonds I cannot break to that old sphere, 'the home.'[18]

Such stories carried on a literary formula from the turn of the century when New Woman heroines returned to the hearth after daring forays into male territory, chastened by the knowledge that the world of achievement was overwhelmingly cold and harsh.[19] What is different about the twenties is that the questing woman perseveres and often triumphs by making the city her home turf. Jahala Chandler, for example, of the aforementioned "Dance Magic," is put off by many of her bohemian friends in Greenwich Village, at one point feeling as if her soul were lost. She even returns to Ripley Bridge and her patriarch father with his repressive views. Appalled once again, though, by the stultification there, she moves back to New York, ultimately committing herself to a dance career: "Her decision, whatever it was to be, must be made here; her future, however it was to shape itself, must take form in this place." Frequently lonely, subjected to sexual harassment, unable to earn a decent wage, the woman who wants more than marriage often feels cast adrift on an alien sea, but rarely does she give up her dream of participating in the larger world.

The central contradiction posed by the abandonment of separate spheres is the heroine's revulsion toward the very thing that beckons. She arrives in the metropolis alight with ideals for refashioning not only her life but also intimate relationships. She thinks the inclusion of women in American society signals a new phase of growth for humanity wherein comradeship will prevail and prejudice fall. It is startling, therefore, when she encounters economic exploitation, uncaring landlords, male chauvinism or hedonistic nihilism, all of which conflict with her messianic quest for a better world. The city, she discovers, is a mixed blessing. It frees her from the shackles of home, but it is full of false gods and is based on the principles of self-aggrandizement, competition and materialism, which are alien to her feminine upbringing. For all her rebellion against conventional morality, the heroine finds that the world built by men is not exactly what she wants.

Significantly, the most dangerous suitors for the New Woman heroine are businessmen, engineers and architects. They pay lip service to her goal of independence and equality, but, once married, revert to the old views of the heroine's father. The professor of architecture in another aforementioned story, "The Thread of Gold," for instance, is bitterly disillusioned when her mining engineer husband demands that she give up her career to be with him. His work is closely allied to the industrial, male-dominated arena she is trying to join and, metaphorically, it takes him to a region where there is no place for her. Male writers, actors and artists can also operate by chauvinistic rules, but they are more likely to recant and recognize the validity of a woman's career. Those men who are representative of the commercial, industrial enterprise attempt to circumscribe the heroine, disempower her, and reassert the old doctrines she had hoped were fading away.

The portrait of a social landscape inimical to the heroine's ambitions, frequently symbolized by the engineer or businessman, suggests that the notion of integration repelled even while it enchanted. The journey toward equality threatens to end in loneliness and abandonment of humanistic values. If the world one entered were corrupt, then one could not conquer new frontiers and remain a spiritually viable human being. The nightmare of gaining success only to lose one's moral bearings is depicted in "Susan Shane: A Story of Success." It begins with the heroine's rejection of a marriage proposal: "[I have vowed] to let no weakness, no love for man, nothing at all, interfere with my life and my business and my great—my great success." Her ambition causes Susan to harden herself against anything that might distract from the accumulation of profit, including compassion. She fires a sobbing waitress from her tea-room for getting pregnant, verbally abuses her employees, and, when war breaks out, is concerned only about its impact on her business. Significantly, her thwarted suitor is studying to be a sculptor, and she keeps her distance from a flute-playing father whose music disturbs her even as it attracts. As I will later argue, Susan's insensitivity to these artists is a sign of an impoverished, mercenary spirit as is her indifference to human feeling. She has confused climbing the ladder of success with fulfillment. Having achieved her goals, Susan wastes one last opportunity to have a meaningful relationship when the sculptor offers marriage again, along with his willingness to help run the tea-room as a business partner. Afraid that love will sap her energies, Susan instead accepts the proposal of a wealthy businessman. The story ends with her staring at the empty lot where the family home once stood. She has torn it down to build a modern house, symbolizing the razing of solid, family values in favor of a cold, calculating success ethic.[20]

Susan Shane is a destructive figure, not because she chooses something other than homemaking for a career, nor because she refuses to marry until she has accomplished her goal; rather, she has failed to question the ethical base of the modern enterprise. She flees from the people who stimulate her imagination out of fear that they will take her away from herself, when the opposite is true. She follows the false song of a profit-oriented, materialistic muse which takes her so far away from the people-centered virtues of the family hearth that she betrays the best parts of herself.

Unwilling to retreat from the dream of autonomy and adventure, yet alienated by an absence of warm, sustaining relationships, the ideal New Woman character transforms what she finds into a humane system, creates a community of women to replace the one that confined her, and persuades a man who admires her that a relationship of equality will enhance his life. The transformative aspect of twenties fiction mediated the shift from old to new feminist thought, the leap from female culture to male. Breaking the old bonds to family and the ideal of selfless service, the New Woman must find a way to connect emotionally as well as to establish an independent identity. Characters who fail to do this are often left spiritually impoverished and miserable—the great actress with adoring fans and no mate is lonely, the aspiring painter struggling to make ends meet in a cold city yearns for the comforts of a solid home. If the heroine is forced to choose between her career and love, she suffers. It is essential, then, that she negotiate a lifestyle compatible with her needs, one that can be integrated with the modern scene and nourished by an intimate relationship.

One of the period's major fantasies is that of a suitor attracted by the heroine's self-sufficiency but who tries to control her. The feminist belief in gender equality lies at the heart of this fantasy, for the relationship desired by the heroine is one of camaraderie in which she and her lover contribute to society, share power in the home and delight in each other's good fortune. Although marriages are occasionally shown to be happier with a domestic woman at the hearth, the usual course of events leads from male lack of support for the heroine's right to pursue an independent vocation to major disruptions in their lives: affairs, illness, failure at work, divorce. Men who can overcome short-sighted selfishness or a false sense of pride at being the breadwinner find their wives and sweethearts eager to make them happy, as long as the women feel free to develop their talents. These are the relationships most likely to succeed, as are those in which the wife does not outshine her husband, so upsetting an egalitarian balance.

Male chauvinists do not fare well in this fiction. Oppressive fathers are abandoned by unruly daughters and ill wives; men who insist woman's primary task is to serve their needs become paralyzed or die of a sudden heart attack; husbands with Victorian views of wives as homemakers jeopardize their marriages. In "Henry's Divorce," for example, a late decade piece from the *Ladies Home Journal*, the protagonist has been happily wed to a department store manager for five years until he gets a notion that he is being unmanly not to have a wife at home tending to the housework: "The time had come for him to assert himself." Though she runs an efficient household, Henry goes home to mother for nursing when he contracts the flu, piqued over his feminist wife's determination to keep her job. To his consternation, he is smothered by his mother's constant attention and is intensely annoyed by her ignorance of nonfamily affairs. Humbled, he returns to his modern wife, grateful for her assertive sophistication.[21]

The theme of New Women embarking on modern marriages with enlightened men is in harmony with Rosalind Rosenberg's assessment of leading male intellectuals at the turn of the century who, she says, were alienated by many aspects of Victorianism. Rosenberg describes the support these men gave to women graduate students challenging the doctrine of female uniqueness, even though most maintained traditional marriages.[22] This moderation of nineteenth century views is reflected in the fact that male writers were as apt as women to create New Woman heroines who convert men to egalitarian ideas, which suggests that the ideal of companionate marriage, in theory if not in practice, gained a rather secure foothold in the middle class at this time.

Scholars have established that the ideological movement from separate spheres to a model of companionship with men resulted in losses as well as gains for middle-class women. One loss was, in the words of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "the female world of love and ritual," which reached its zenith in the nineteenth century and which fostered strong affectional ties between women.[23] Some have argued that women cut themselves off from a vital political base in penetrating male professions. Eschewing a gender-based culture, they lost the sense of identity and support that had propelled demands for women's rights. Paradoxically, their vision of gender equality led to the disappearance of feminism as a political movement.[24] Simultaneously, homophobic attacks on lesbianism during the 1920s made problematic the committed relationships between women that had become increasingly popular among female professionals and artists.[25]

This shift is reflected in the tendency of heroines to be cut off from other women when embarking on their journey and in literary treatment of the mother, who frequently dies at the beginning of the heroine's quest. There is a theme that mitigates the isolation of urban life, however, and that is the heroine's attempt to build a community of women who are themselves struggling toward fulfillment outside the family. She frequently finds a roommate, for instance, who familiarizes her with the city, or she enjoys a close friendship with a woman she respects. In addition, while the mother is usually absent, symbolizing the death of a past, home-centered community, a memory of her remains both as a negative role model and as a source of love and moral support. Frequently a mother or an aunt has left the heroine an inheritance that finances her escape, metaphorically linking the New Woman to a female heritage of strength. While she is casting her lot with male comrades, in other words, she relies on the help of other women.

One substantial shift that occurs in the decade that weakens this tie to other women is the undermining of what Lillian Faderman calls "passionate friendships" between unmarried women.[26] There are instances in magazine fiction when women form companiate relationships with each other that withstand a marriage offer to one of the couple. Most often, though, the heroine's companion will introduce her to a relative, who has all the qualities of her friend but whose maleness opens her mind to marriage. This plot convention occurs in *The Delineator*'s "Tornado," whose protagonist, Annabelle Parkinson, is a Latin teacher in her forties. Her fifteen year relationship with co-worker Anne Posey is disrupted by the appearance of a high school sweetheart who jilted her, propelling her flight from Indiana to New York twenty years previous. She and Anne are close enough that they are planning a vacation to Europe and have spent many week-ends together in visits to Anne's mother. They are close enough, indeed, that Annabelle blushes with guilt during their daily lunches because she is contemplating marriage and dares not mention it. She is ambivalent about dating a man, flattered by the attention but happy with her life and "uncomfortable" about her friend. Anne soon divines the reason for Annabelle's distress, promptly throwing her together with a younger brother recently returned from seven years in China. The brother strikes Annabelle as lovable, with "the same sweetness and spirit and sturdiness" of Anne. While she "falls in love" with him, he alarms her with his whirlwind energy and desire to take care of her, hence the story's title, which suggests the ruinous, destructive impact of a man on this passionate friendship. She feels smothered by his ardent courting, at one point shrinking from his embrace and feeling strangled. Despite the obvious inappropriateness of a male lover, Annabelle commits herself to Anne's fraternal double with the full approval of Anne herself, who feels that such an arrangement will cement their bond.[27]

The facile substitution of a brother for what is obviously the heroine's primary relationship rings false and disturbs with its heterosexist implications, but it tells us something about the transitional quality of the postsuffrage era. Committed to leaving hearth and home behind while looking for a relationship of equality, New Woman characters were situated in contexts that made relationships with men look essentially like the same-sex friendships of the previous generation. They could find love without being condemned as lesbians, hold to an independent course, and enjoy the companionship of women too. The spectre of the lonely pilgrim, childless and unwed, that stalks fictional pioneers into new realms for women is shown to be an outmoded stereotype. On the negative side, however, bonding between women, a source of strength to suffragists and female professionals in particular, is subordinated to marriage.

Despite the prominence of love, the theme of transformation is most pronounced in the ubiquity of artist heroines. Although New Women do pursue business careers, they are more likely to be singers, actresses, dancers, writers or illustrators. Such vocations signal the self-expressive nature of the female quest, a search for individual creativity rather than devotion to others' welfare. They also represent commitment to feeling and aesthetics in a society that valued efficiency or logic. These were, of course, areas associated with women's separate sphere, which indicates an impulse to preserve elements of the old order even while establishing that women and men were basically alike. Moreover, a career in the arts underscores the heroine's attempt to live by humanistic values and rise above the materialistic competitiveness she finds in the city.

The idea that such values were endangered in the metropolis and could be, perhaps, preserved by dedication to art had already appeared in turn-of-the-century American novels when female characters similarly migrated to urban centers. In his study of Chicago novels from this period, Carl S. Smith argues that art is connected in the stories to freedom, imagination, love and a humane moral order, with women largely representing that configuration. It is counterposed to the alienation of city life and used to call into question a disturbingly empty modern ethos.[28] Unlike the earlier era, when artistic powers are not enough to create a humane atmosphere within alien territory, the twenties artist generally comes to feel at home in her environment. Her struggle to find a place is successful.

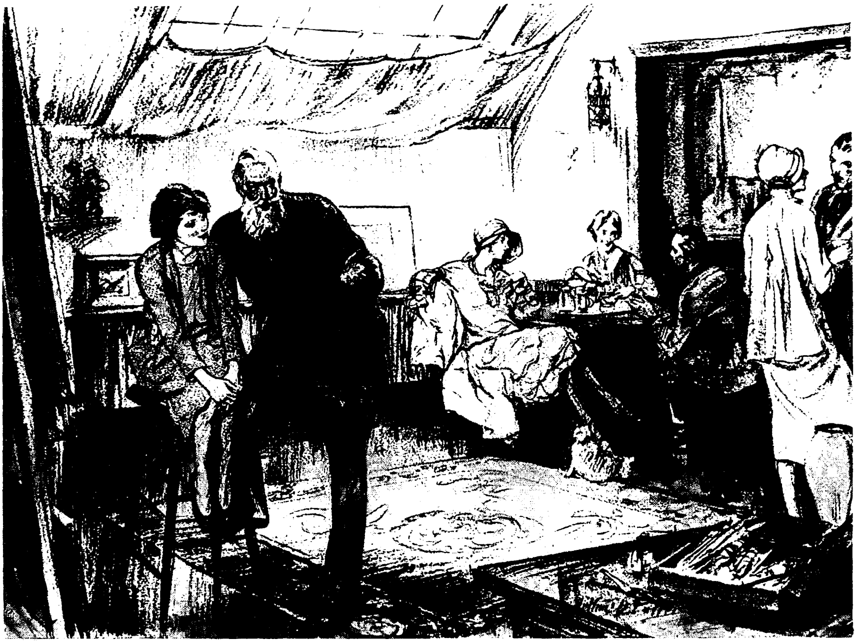
The painter is a primary figure in New Woman fiction, appearing repeatedly from 1920 to 1930. A young woman who puts creative work at the center of life, the painter comes to the city looking for culture. Her provincial community not only frowns on female attention to a private vision, but it is devoid of culture because it is steeped in a rigid work ethic that leaves no room for "luxuries" like self-expression. Indeed, the heroine's desire to engage in such activity alienates her from the traditional woman's world of family/community service and marks her as a modern person. The figure of the painter served a variety of important functions in the transition to new conceptions of women. For one thing, the artist worked alone and claimed private space when women's family role entailed rather constant interaction with others. In addition, it produced lasting work as opposed to the unceasing chores of housework. More importantly, though, art bridged the gap between woman's traditional sphere and the new ideal of assimilation into public roles. It both captured one aspect of nineteenth century conceptions—the responsibility of women for cultural elevation—and merged it with the idea of individual endeavor outside the home. It could legitimize women's right to express themselves in an independent, nongender-defined way yet link that autonomy with woman's nineteenth-century responsibility for cultural advancement.

The passion for art, furthermore, implicitly challenged male values in the marketplace, because it elevated emotion, beauty and intuition over rationality. The artist was, above all, a person of feeling who believed that beauty deserved as large a role in progress as business. In this sense, the New Woman artist partially echoed the cry of early feminists who wanted to see female influence on civilization increase.[29] She also resolved the problem of assimilation in which female characters entered the public realm but were defeated by its exploitative, uncaring aspects. The artist could appropriate space as well as move into it by transforming what she found into her own idiom.

The following two stories represent this complex covert message. The first concerns a common protagonist in twenties periodical fiction: an independent, artistic, restless woman coming of age in a repressive environment. Avery Madden in *The Woman's Home Companion*'s "The Tyrant," by Sophie Kerr has had to shoulder family responsibilities soon after high school when her father dies, leaving a wife "who had lived only to pleasure and spoil her roistering, good-looking husband." The contrast between an earlier generation steeped in male supremacy and ill-equipped for the modern world, and the new is clearly drawn from the story's outset as Avery "takes hold bravely" of a desperate financial situation, while her mother loses all sense of direction. Her entry into the public arena of paid labor is characteristically deadening at first. Avery's first job is in a factory, and she can afford only a couple of rooms in a poor section for her and her mother. The heroine steps into a male role, a lock-step occupation, that she experiences as "nauseating drudgery."

The route to meaningful work is provided in two formulaic ways typical of New Woman fiction as the story progresses. Characteristically, the initially dispirited heroine learns that women will help her find human space in a mechanistic, cold society, as Avery is quickly befriended by an idealistic female college graduate "with theories to burn on uplifting the working classes" who finds her a position with a publishing house. Second, Avery's passion is painting, and she lives for her art class, even though her mother objects to such "obstinate idleness." The artist in New Woman stories, who is similarly centered on her work, generally manages to support herself with her art, thus meshing personal values with the practical necessity of earning a living. Following this pattern, Avery begins decorating rooms for wealthy clients by painting original murals on their mansion walls. Metaphorically, the heroine is putting her creative stamp on the world, a theme more strongly developed later in the narrative when Avery is hired by an architectural firm in New York to decorate commercial buildings. She has moved from domestic to public architecture, a point emphasized by her employer, who persuades Avery to take his offer with the following: "You can have the big things, the public buildings, the new sort of business buildings—you'll be in at art in the making." He tells her, moreover, that he has been wanting to "get a lot more color into architecture," and that she possesses the special gifts to do it. The transformation of commerce into something with which the heroine can have a human relationship is here represented by the heroine putting warmth, "color," into the public arena she is trying to inhabit; appropriately enough, Avery's first assignment is to decorate a bank.

The story connects Avery's artistic career with the fundamental premise of new feminism that men and women are capable of equal contributions to the social enterprise as well as an egalitarian intimate relationship. Avery's "femininity," for one thing is downplayed. She cares nothing for fashionable clothes, is "skinny and pale from overwork," and has an androgynous name. In addition, reversing the traditional pattern, she falls in love with a male social butterfly, who argues that she should give up her work to be his wife. In reply to his insistence that men, unlike women, need not sacrifice vocation for marriage, Avery articulates the new feminist idea that gender should not result in separate or



The New Woman at her easel. From "The Tyrant," by Sophie Kerr, *Woman's Home Companion*, 1926.

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distinct roles: "In my world there's only one rule, one law, and that is, if you have any gift, you must not cheat it or play with it . . . talent has no sex, Robert." The fiancé's tyrannical views on marriage prove to be an impassable barrier, and, though she is sad to see him go, Avery raises her arms in "winged triumph" at the end of the story, secure in the conviction that creative work must animate all people, male or female. She resists "the tyrant" of patriarchal dominance in favor of a relationship based on respect for her abilities with an employer who believes women and men can be committed to the same values.[30]

The working out of women's place in modern life also lies at the heart of a *Ladies Home Journal* story entitled "The Girl Who Slept in Bryant Park." The opening scene evokes our sympathy for an impoverished artist, appropriately named Bella, seated on a park bench in New York City. She has fled the midwest and a fiancé to develop her skills in the metropolis, something her father has forbidden and her mother fails to support since she reflects her husband's views "as a good wife should." Having defied parental injunctions and resisted pleas of the man she loves to give up her work and become his wife, Bella despairs of making a life for herself after eight months of vain attempts to sell her paintings. She is down to her last two dollars, lonely, homesick and ready to return to Toledo. It is generally necessary for the artist heroine to lose everything familiar or safe in order to make the city her home, and Bella is reduced to sleeping in the park because she cannot pay her rent; "fearfully shabby," she avoids human contact. Bella's outcast status represents her inability to replace woman's traditional sphere, the world she has abandoned, with the autonomous vision that has enchanted her. While happy when absorbed in her work, she is dispirited by her failure to achieve recognition or to find a human side of the urban landscape.

The narrative associates Bella with qualities that are implicitly undervalued in the male-dominated work world she is trying to penetrate. We are told that she finds contentment when painting from the depths of her "subconscious mind" and that she shuns rationality, which she calls "man's most misguiding faculty." Her very name means beautiful, feminine, and she is struggling to find a niche for these qualities in a man-made, commercial environment. It is only when Bella gives away her last two dollars to an equally impoverished man and sells her engagement ring that she is able to paint the city as her unconscious mind has revealed it to her: "all its discords harmonized," "[a place where] the great destiny of humanity should be worked out." Symbolically rejecting both commercial activity and domesticity, Bella relies on her own imagination to transform the city into a magical place where all things are possible. Once finished with the painting, she is ready to accept Henry's marriage proposal because her vision is as powerful as his; he will not be able to dominate her.

The tension between an old conception of male supremacy and the heroine's belief in a liberating future is not resolved, however, until Henry sees the portrait, allows the feelings it evokes to override his businesslike masculine outlook, and embraces the dream his sweetheart has put on canvas. His conversion is made more significant because he owns a drop-forge company; he is as connected to the machinery of civilization as she is to the mysteries of emotional transport. Henry moves his business to New York and celebrates his wife's gallery exhibition, declaring: "Compared to what you have done, my factory isn't worth a fig." Not only are the heroine's talents validated, but it is her vision that becomes central to the marriage.[31]

It is becoming increasingly clear that the 1920s marks neither the triumph of feminism nor its defeat. From examining periodical fiction, which achieved its peak of popularity during this time, we can see that middle-class conceptions of gender roles shifted toward a belief in integration of male and female interests, capabilities and activities but within a context of individual effort and transformation. On the negative side, a sense of political sisterhood is weak in New Woman stories, although not entirely absent by any means, and there is a naive faith that American society was developing along egalitarian lines. The commitment to autonomy, in addition, is undercut by homophobic attacks on female-female primary relationships and ironically, by the misperception that sexism was on its way out.

Despite these serious shortcomings, fantasies for middle-class women after the vote provided a bridge from the doctrine of separate spheres to a recognizably modern model of gender relations, and it is in this capacity that they are, perhaps, most revealing to us. Plot patterns suggest that women were looking for new postures, seeking empowerment and declaring their right to express who they were as individuals, apart from gender. At the same time, they allude to a desire to infuse an industrializing society with warmth, emotional vitality and activity meaningful to women. These impulses became separate strands, however, in the fabric of modern feminism that was woven after suffrage, for the desire to transform what one entered was never overtly articulated. It remained submerged within the metaphorical journey of the artist, running parallel to the quest for equality but left unrelated to issues of gender. These threads were not to be connected until the second women's rights movement in the 1970s when feminist critiques explored the ways women were excluded from public agendas by the very structure of social institutions. The route to women's liberation, therefore, included a radical questioning of the rules men had devised even as women demanded opportunities to play the game. In the 1920s, women could envision autonomy, but they had only the vaguest of notions concerning a public sphere that would speak to their concerns and provide meaningful experience. Until they could link overtly male oppression to the nature of public activity as well as to the home, the dream of empowerment would remain a fantasy and the ability to transform what one claimed a hazy illusion.

Notes

1. For an overview of the literature on this point, see Estelle Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," *Journal of American History* 61 (September 1974), 372-393. Scholars such as Anne Firor Scott and Clarke Chambers portray the 1920s as a period of social ferment with significant gains being made by women eager to enter the public world and exert their newly-won political clout. Clarke Chambers, *Seedtime of Reform: American Social Service and Social Action, 1918-1933* (Minneapolis, 1963); Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago, 1970). See also J. Stanley Lemons, *The Woman Citizen: Social Feminism in the 1920s* (Urbana, Illinois, 1973); Kenneth A. Yellis, "Prosperity's Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper," *American Quarterly* 21 (Spring 1969), 44-64; Frank Stricker, "Cookbooks and Law Books: The Hidden History of Career Women in Twentieth Century America," *Journal of Social History* 10 (Fall 1976), 1-19.

Many studies, however, portray the first generation to experience enfranchisment as a conservative one, alienated from those who fought for its liberation and, despite its surface rebellion against conventional morés, eager to establish traditional homes. William O'Neill, for example, concludes that young women of the 1920s repudiated feminism, turned away from careers, and believed in marriage as the primary route to happiness. William O'Neill, *Everyone Was Brave: A History of Feminism in America* (New York, 1971), 47, 309, 353. In a more recent assessment, Winifred Wandersee similarly maintains that most women during the interwar period held to a traditional pattern of family values, for instance. She argues that most women perceived feminism as irrelevant to their lives because it was equated with rejection of marriage, an unrealistic and unattractive option. Winifred Wandersee, *Women's Work and Family Values, 1920-1940* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981), 4. Others who argue along these lines include Joan M. Jensen and Lois Scharf, *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940* (Westport, Connecticut, 1983); William Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York, 1972); Leila Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton, 1978); Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "Two Washes in the Morning and a Bridge Party at Night: The American Housewife Between the Wars," *Women's Studies* 3 (1976), 147-172.

2. In order to draw meaningful conclusions from popular culture, one must choose pervasive media and use a representative sample. This study is based on a reading of five best-selling magazines for women, each of which had a circulation of at least two million: *Good Housekeeping*, *Pictorial Review*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *The Delineator*, and *McCall's*. I read the first story from each issue of *Good Housekeeping* and the *Ladies Home Journal* for the years 1920 through 1929 and from every

other year for the other three. I supplemented this sample with all stories from these issues that appeared to concern women's role in American life since many of the first stories were mysteries, adventures, historical pieces and the like. The total sample consists of 625 stories, many of which were serials with five or six installments.

3. Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, 1987); Rosalind Rosenberg *Beyond Separate Spheres: The Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, 1982); Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920's* (New York, 1977).

4. The combined circulation for the five magazines I studied during the twenties was in the neighborhood of two hundred million. Theodore Peterson *Magazines of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, Illinois, 1956). This decade witnessed the booming growth of periodicals made possible by advertising revenues and a rising middle-class market. Leading periodicals of the period were saturated with fiction that editors found could boost circulation.

5. Virgie E. Roe, "Chained Eagles," *McCalls* (July 1928).

6. Clarence Budington Kelland, "Dance Magic," *Ladies Home Journal* (November 1926-February 1927).

7. For discussion of the cult of domesticity in literature before the twenties, see Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca, New York, 1978).

8. Mary Roberts Rinehart, "This Strange Adventure," *Pictorial Review* (October 1928-February 1929).

9. Frederick Orin Bartlett, "They Walk in Darkness," *Ladies Home Journal* (March 1920).

10. Margaret Widdemar, "The Thread of Gold," *Good Housekeeping* (April-October 1927).

11. Blanche H. Gelfant, "Sister to Faust: The City's 'Hungry' Woman as Heroine," in Susan Merrill Squier, ed., *Women Writers and The City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism* (Knoxville, Tennessee, 1984).

12. George Weston, "Harriet Struts Her Stuff," *Ladies Home Journal* (September 1927).

13. Mary Synon, "The Thrill-Chasher," *Good Housekeeping* (February 1922).

14. Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres*, 14-17, 152-3.

15. *Ibid.*, 54-83; Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 278-283.

16. My review of the presuffrage period covers the same five journals from which I read the lead story for every issue in alternate years, 1910-1920.

17. The fiction from England is described as a spiral journey in Susan Merrill Squier, "The Classic City Novel and *Night and Day*" in Squier ed., *Woman Writers and the City.*

18. Walter Prichard Eaton, "Ruth Grenville-Feminist," *Ladies Home Journal* (August 1914).

19. Carolyn Forrey, "The New Woman Revisited," *Women's Studies* 2 (1974), 37-56.

20. Roger Burlingame, "Susan Shane: A Story of Success," *Pictorial Review* (May-August 1926).

21. Edith Bernard Delano, "Henry's Divorce," *Ladies Home Journal* (June 1929).

22. Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres*, xvii. The men to whom Rosenberg is referring include Franz Boas, John Dewey, James R. Angell and George Herbert Mead.

23. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs* 1 (Autumn 1975), 1-29.

24. Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres*, 110-111; Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930," *Feminist Studies* 5 (Fall 1979), 512-529.

25. Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York, 1981); Cott, 158-159.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Sarah Addington, "Tornado," *The Delineator* (July 1927).

28. Carl S. Smith, *Chicago and the American Literary Imagination, 1880-1920* (Chicago, 1984), 7-9.

29. Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres*, 16.

30. Sophie Kerr, "The Tyrant," *Woman's Home Companion* (July 1926).

31. Scammon Lockwood, "The Girl who Slept in Bryant Park," *Ladies Home Journal* (February 1920).