

Oates, Lessing and Jong:

The Burden of Tradition

by Jean Kennard

Women's Studies, which are rightly interdisciplinary, share a problem with all interdisciplinary studies: the relationship of the traditional disciplines--particularly of their methodology--to the new core. One of the major difficulties as far as literature is concerned is the tendency in interdisciplinary programs to treat literature as historical document. Interdisciplinary studies are usually organized around an aspect of the human condition; they were in fact reborn in the sixties partly in response to student demand for greater relevance, a more obvious relationship between academic work and actual experience. Black Studies, Women's Studies, Canadian Studies have the human fact of being black, female or Canadian as their center. In these programs literature tends, therefore, to be seen as mimetic in the simplest way, as the documentation, more or less accurate, of certain human experiences. This is, of course, particularly true of the novel with its strong realistic tradition.

This is not intended as an objection to interdisciplinary studies; their new approaches have contributed too much to the study of literature in the past few years to make it sensible to resurrect new criticism's cry against literature

as sociology. But I do suggest that feminist criticism recognize a potential problem: that the tendency to treat fiction as documentation may prevent our distinguishing between social and literary conventions. It is a failure to make this distinction which seriously mars Jane Rule's Lesbian Images, most of the reviews of Kate Millett's Flying and, to some extent, Elizabeth Hardwick's Seduction and Betrayal. Francoise Basch attempts to deal directly with the problem in Relative Creatures.

This point can be illustrated through a discussion of a structural problem found in many contemporary novels, one which is often treated as sociological but is more correctly perceived as artistic. The question raised is to what extent novelists are limited by fictional conventions or are free to ignore tradition and create new forms. It asks whether some form of what Harold Bloom has called "the anxiety of influence" exists for novelists as well as for poets. In order to examine this problem it is necessary first to define a convention which was firmly established in the tradition of the novel by Jane Austen.

In a great many nineteenth-century novels with developing female characters,



the heroine's growth towards maturity is measured by a definition of her character in terms of two men: the wrong suitor whose qualities she initially shares and must reject; the right suitor who is an embodiment of those qualities which she lacks and must acquire before the author will call her mature and allow her marriage.(1) What works structurally for Jane Austen, however, works less satisfactorily as the concept of female maturity becomes more modern and, indeed, inseparable from the ideas of independence and self-reliance.

While marriage itself is not necessarily incompatible with a modern definition of maturity, the novelistic structure implied by the two suitors convention is. Since in order to reach maturity, the heroine must accept certain values and since the repository of those values is, according to the convention, the right suitor, at the end of the novel she invariably appears to have subordinated her identity to that of the hero. The convention tends, therefore, to imply that the good man, who held the virtues first, is superior to the woman who can merely be taught to emulate him. Maturity for her lies in approximating the male reality and in denying rather than in bringing to fruition much of what had earlier seemed to be herself. Surprisingly, few even of the greatest nineteenth-century novels avoid some difficulties with this convention. It is a problem to Jane Eyre, to Middlemarch, to The Egoist. One of the few novels that does attempt a different

structural skeleton and defines women as workers as well as lovers is George Gissing's The Odd Women.

Few novelists, however, have pursued the path Gissing indicated and this is partly because the early twentieth century saw some dramatic changes in the subject matter and techniques of fiction. The most exciting British novelists of this period--with the exception of D.H. Lawrence--were not interested in writing the kind of apprenticeship novel I have mentioned. Reality no longer seemed so fixed, so ascertainable, and therefore maturity could hardly lie in perceiving it. The subjectivity of the individual vision was to many the only certainty and the dramatization of this required techniques which would convey the activity of the mind itself. The novels of Virginia Woolf, then, provide no solution to the structural problems raised by the novels of Charlotte Brontë or of George Eliot because they aim to do something quite different. Lily Briscoe, for example, may develop during the action of To the Lighthouse, but her growth is not the kind of societal maturing which Dorothea Brooke undergoes.

Now, in the seventies, the situation of women in society is once again a topic of major concern and novels dealing with the maturing of a central female character are appearing with a frequency unknown since the nineteenth century. With the renewal of this interest has come a rebirth of the two suitors con-

vention, updated, of course, in modern dress, but the same convention nonetheless. The formula of the contemporary version of the two suitors convention is basically that of a much earlier novel, D.H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover (1928): a woman leaves her husband, who, as the representative of the dead, traditional life, is the wrong suitor, and takes a lover, the embodiment of freedom and of sexual/spiritual rebirth, and therefore the right suitor. It is the formula suggested in an 1899 American novel, Kate Chopin's The Awakening, now enjoying a revival of popularity precisely because it is so like a novel of the nineteen seventies.

In spite of the raised consciousness about the situation of women, a great number of female novelists seem as trapped in the two suitors convention as their ancestors. And, surprisingly, one must include among them the very writers who are considered most aware of and most sensitive to the issue of woman's position in contemporary society: Doris Lessing, Joyce Carol Oates, Erica Jong. I do not mean to suggest that these novelists are part of a movement; like Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot before them, they have expressed their desire to be thought of as writers rather than as women writers. But simply because they have helped to change the contemporary consciousness about women, they might be expected to find new fictional structures to express their insights.

In 1973 each of these writers published a novel. Joyce Carol Oates' Do With Me What You Will is an excellent example of the problems with the contemporary version of the two suitors convention. Elena Howe, blonde, exquisitely beautiful but totally passive, is symbolic of the traditional woman. Her awakening is expressed in terms of her rejection of husband, Marvin Howe, for lover Jack Morrissey. In spite of raising interesting thematic questions about the viability of law and of arguing for a concept of universal love in Meredith Dawe, Oates defines her heroine's maturity as an awakening to a rather limited sexual love. She asks us to accept the ending as a triumph for Elena. She waits for Jack outside his apartment building; he comes down to join her. "They smiled as if seeing each other for the first time," writes Joyce Carol Oates, "a look between them of pure kinship, of triumph."⁽²⁾ There is no questioning of the validity of this resolution; the drums roll as they do for Ladislav and Dorothea Brooke. Yet it is hard for the reader to believe that Elena has arisen from her passivity to adopt a vital new self because the structure so clearly implies that she has merely substituted Jack for Marvin, who had originally taken over from Daddy.

Doris Lessing's The Summer Before the Dark reflects a greater awareness of the problems with the convention but provides no solution to them. The first half of the novel is similar in structure to Do With Me What You Will, al-

though the heroines are very different. Kate Brown, English, forty-five years old, has been married to Michael Brown, the wrong suitor, for twenty-five years. She is fully aware of her own dissatisfactions and what they mean. She lacks choice; she is forced to fit herself to certain roles: suburban housewife, mother; she describes herself as "a doormat," "a cripple." One summer, looking back on her life, she decides she has acquired not virtues but a form of dementia.

In an attempt to find the "real" Kate, she takes a job which does not provide the answer. The real Kate, symbolically represented in her dreams as a sick seal that must be carried to safety, is still unfulfilled. The job does, however, provide Jeffrey Merton, a thirty-two year old American who is apparently to be the right suitor. He offers Kate a chance of freedom through sexual expression, as Jack offered it to Elena. What is more, Kate finds in Jeffrey a definition of her own choice. He, too, is torn between conventional responsibility and freedom; in his case between a law career in New York and a life of continued wandering in Europe. She chooses an affair with Jeffrey and a vacation in Spain but all she acquires from him is a strange illness which leaves him in Spain and brings Kate back to London.

Lessing is apparently not content to make a young lover the solution to the

problems of a forty-five year old woman. For a while Kate shares the apartment of a young girl in London. Once again she falls into the role of mother but the girl has no desire to play daughter. If Kate learns anything here, it is not easy to see what. Yet at this point Lessing asks us to believe that Kate has grown, has changed. She returns to her old suburban street, thinner, her hair no longer dyed, and the neighbors do not recognize her. The seal in her dream has recovered, a sign, one supposes, of Kate's maturing.

But what has brought about this maturation? Has Jeffrey changed her or not? Lessing's answer is not clear. The ambiguity of Jeffrey's position gives rise to a greater structural difficulty. Lessing may have rejected the contemporary version of the two suitors convention as dishonest, but where is she to go with this novel? She has defined Kate's experience up to this point through her relationships with two men and a girl. But what now? What is Kate to do with this freedom she has supposedly gained? Lessing apparently has no other answer than to return her neatly to husband Michael. Kate and Doris Lessing are, it seems, certain that she will not succumb to the old submissive ways but it is hard to agree with them. It is even harder to accept this supposedly significant spiritual growth as sufficiently expressed in a change of hair style: "She was saying no: no, no, no, no: a

statement which would be concentrated in her hair." (3) Yet Lessing does not seem to recognize the triviality of this image, shows no awareness of the irony involved in expressing Kate's new life through something symbolic of the imprisoning domesticity of the old. It is not, after all, setting one's hair in acceptable suburban fashion that is the trap but concentrating one's energies on hair at all. The Summer Before the Dark, then, is finally a confused statement, confused, in part at least, because Lessing has no alternative yet to some form of the two suitors convention.

Erica Jong's Fear of Flying is not the best of these three novels but it is perhaps the most interesting in terms of this discussion because Jong is so obviously aware of the convention within which she is writing. Isadora Wing, the heroine, starts where Kate Brown does. She is married to Bennett Wing, a Chinese psychiatrist, and is bored. Like Kate Brown, she understands her dissatisfaction and blames it as much on the institution of marriage itself and its failure to fulfill the expectations of a modern American female as upon the specific faults of her husband. Isadora wants to discover if she "is still whole after so many years of being half of something (like the back legs of a horse outfit on the vaudeville stage)." (4)

At a psychiatric convention in Vienna she meets Adrian Goodlove, a tweedy English psychiatrist, and lusts after

him. In spite of the frequently noted feminist reversal in this novel which makes the man a sex object, Jong is nevertheless working, structurally, within a very old convention. And she knows it. Adrian, the representative of freedom, is undercut from the beginning. His existentialism, which he defines as never talking about the future, has been learned in a one week's crash course with a French prostitute. He offers Isadora freedom--an unplanned car trip around Europe--but she regresses to adolescence and practices writing her new name on scraps of paper: Mrs. Adrian Goodlove. She leaves Bennett and runs off with Adrian. "What else could I do?" Erica Jong remarks self-consciously through Isadora, "I had painted myself into a corner. I had written myself into this hackneyed plot." (p.173)

Fear of Flying seems set to become a parody of the contemporary two suitors convention at this moment but, unfortunately, it slips back into a mere illustration of it. Erica Jong has realized the absurdity of being given freedom by the new lover but she has nowhere to go now with her novel. The trip with Adrian is a disaster and so is the plot from this point on. The next several chapters consist of Isadora's description of her earlier relationships with men. The book degenerates into a series of short stories, none of them essential to the plot or a significant comment on the present action.

Finally, after Adrian has left--the man with the unplanned future turns out to have an unbreakable commitment to meet his ex-wife for a vacation--Isadora returns to the hotel in London where she believes her husband is staying. She goes to his room to wait for him. This is The Summer Before the Dark once again; but Erica Jong struggles overtly with the structural problem. She even entitles this chapter "A 19th-Century Ending." She tries to suggest the ending is open but knows it is not. Isadora says, "It was not clear how it would end. In nineteenth-century novels, they get married. In twentieth-century novels they get divorced. Can you have an ending in which they do neither? I laughed at myself for being so literary. 'Life has no plot' is one of my favourite lines." (p. 311)

But novels of course do have plots and, when the heroine's development has been described entirely in terms of "them," then the ending requires that "they" do something. As Isadora is washing her hair, Bennett walks in. The two suitors convention has forced an ending. Erica Jong's awareness of the falsity of the seventies adaptation, which would have left Isadora with Adrian, has only driven her back to the nineteenth-century version.

What are the problems for such novelists as Oates, Lessing and Jong? Is it possible that they really believe women's lives are defined entirely through their relationships to men? That seems unlike-

ly. Their own existence as writers surely denies the implications of their novels' structures. "Why," asks Norma Rosen in a recent New York Times article, has no contemporary female novelist "created a character whose inner life approached anything like the scope or the range of possibility of the creator's own?"(5)

Is it, then, that they cannot yet see other possibilities for the novel, that they are indeed victims of literary convention? This seems more probable, and is supported by the fact that the female poets of the seventies have developed new styles while the novelists have not. This simply could not have been the case if the problem was sociological rather than literary. Adrienne Rich's article, "When We Dead Awaken,"(6) discusses her artistic development from the point when she realized that her style had been created by the formalism of such modern male poets as Auden, Stevens, MacNeice to her acceptance of the need to describe her own experiences directly in her poems. The identifiable style of the new feminist poets has involved, as Rich says, a breaking with the formalism of modern poetry which demanded a non-female universality.

The novelists, however, have faced different problems. In spite of the modern experiments of such novelists as Joyce, the novel has always sustained some sort of realistic tradition, has seen its basic function as more closely related to social experience. For this reason,

with the renewed interest in a social issue which fiction seemed admirably suited to discuss, it is understandable that contemporary novelists should return to the forms of an earlier strong tradition of realistic fiction. It seems more probable that Doris Lessing has been influenced by George Eliot, for example, than that Adrienne Rich should be affected by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Only gradually, if at all, are contemporary female novelists becoming aware that in returning to a nineteenth-century concern, they have also revived a nineteenth-century convention. The two suitors convention may have been established and sustained to a large extent by women writers but it is, of course, patriarchal in nature. Its structure implies the inferiority and necessary subordination of women. The women who used it, even while struggling to express feminist views within it, were writing for male judges and often under assumed male names.

Contemporary novelists have yet to devise a satisfactory fictional structure in which the heroine's development is not expressed entirely through her relationships with men. Few even have attempted to. Doris Lessing struggles

towards it in The Summer Before the Dark; Margaret Laurence's The Diviners examines the woman's situation within a mythic framework, though once again the heroine undergoes an adaptation of the two suitors convention. Perhaps the most interesting experiment to date is Gail Godwin's The Odd Women which is as concerned with its heroine's experiences as a college teacher as with her affair with her married lover. Indeed, Godwin takes as her subject the relationship between love and personal independence. It is interesting that in doing so she adapted Gissing's title and used allusions to The Odd Women throughout the novel. As far as I know, she is the first to recognize the importance of the path Gissing opened up in 1898, a path which few others have yet seen fit to follow.

NOTES

1. So Emma must reject the vanities of Frank Churchill for the social responsibility of George Knightley; in Pride and Prejudice Elizabeth Bennet must reject the superficial charm of Wickham for the true bride of Darcy.
2. Joyce Carol Oates, Do With Me What You Will (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Crest, 1974), p. 541.
3. Doris Lessing, The Summer Before the Dark (New York: Bantam, 1974), p. 244.
4. Erica Jong, Fear of Flying (New York: Signet, 1974), p. 10. All subsequent page references to this novel are to this edition.
5. Norma Rosen, "Who's Afraid of Erica Jong?" The New York Times Magazine, 28 July 1974, pp. 8, 38, 46-50, 54.
6. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," College English, 34, No. 1 (Oct. 1972), pp. 18-25.