Chapter IV

Gendering the Text: Symbols and Symbolism in Fay Weldon’s Fiction

The literary symbol, defined straightforwardly by Kant (who, in his *Critique of Judgement*, 1970, calls it an ‘aesthetic idea’) in terms of the ‘attributes’ of an object ‘which serve the rational idea as a substitute for logical presentation, but with the proper function of animating the mind by opening out for it a prospect into a field of kindred representations stretching beyond its ken’... ¹

We know that a symbol, in the broadest sense, is anything which signifies something. In discussing literature however, we not only call to mind the above definition by Kant, but can more simply consider it the way M.H. Abrams puts it—i.e. ‘the term symbol is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself.’²

In *Birth of the Symbol* (2004), Peter T. Struck explores the ancient Greek literary critics and theorists who invented the idea of the poetic ‘symbol’. The book notes that Aristotle and his followers did not discuss the use of poetic symbolism. Rather, a different group of thinkers—the allegorists—were the first to develop the notion. Struck extensively revisits the work of the great allegorists beginning with the less-known late-Roman writer Proclus, an interpreter of Homer’s works, and the Neo-Platonists of Late Antiquity and links their interest in symbolism to the importance of divination and magic in ancient times. ‘They see the whole of great poetic language as deeply figurative,’ he writes, ‘with the potential always, even in the most mundane details, to be freighted with hidden messages.’³ Therefore, what Struck gives, is a resolute appraisal of a persistent
and accepted way of understanding literature, a method of interpretation which, in opposition to Aristotelian rhetoric, tries to get beyond the limits of the text in order to find a surplus of meaning, to achieve ‘more’ or ‘deeper’ insights.

The use of symbols, (as metaphors, dream visions or allegorical emblems), were fairly common in medieval English literature but the actual ‘Symbolist Movement’ may be said to have begun with the *Romantic Period*, with Novalis and Hölderlin in Germany and Shelley in England, often using private *symbols* in their poetry. Shelley especially, repeatedly made use of objects as the morning and evening star, a boat moving upstream, winding caves, and more famously the West Wind (in *Ode to the West Wind*). In America, a symbolist procedure was noticeable in the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, the prose of Emerson and Thoreau, and the poetic theory and practice of Edgar Allan Poe. These writers derived the mode in large part from the native Puritan tradition of typology, and also from the theory of correspondences of the Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772).

In nineteenth-century England, the Industrial Revolution made quite a racket with its booming factories, roaring steam engines, and great, groaning machines. Surrounded by such unprecedented noise, it didn’t take long for Victorian writers such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot to consider the possibilities of sound and silence as powerful literary symbols for their characters’ psychological insights and sympathetic relationships. ‘Up until then, nobody really bothered to pay attention to noise. It was just something in the background,’ explains John M. Picker in his book *Victorian Soundscapes* (2003). While examining how the era’s scientific and technological innovations changed perceptions and interpretations of sound and listening, particularly in literature, he
writes— 'On a larger scale than before, noise began in this period to alter the agents, subjects, and conditions of artistic and intellectual occupations.'

The era's scientific and artistic developments marked a shift away from the pastoral experience celebrated by Romantic writers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, and granted sound and listening exalted literary roles previously reserved for those stalwarts of perception: sight and gaze. Dickens was particularly enchanted by the notion of sound waves' permanence and the implied promise of immortality— a theory expressed by his friend Charles Babbage, the inventor and mathematician. Dickens not only referred to this theory in *Dombey and Son* (widely considered the novelist's breakthrough work), but tested it in pursuit of what Picker calls 'the fantasy of literary immortality'.

On the other hand, George Eliot's notebooks reveal her interest in the German scientist Hermann von Helmholtz's (1821-1894) groundbreaking theories, particularly the phenomenon of 'sympathetic vibration': when the vibration of one sonorous body (such as a ringing bell) produces a sound of the same pitch in a neighbouring sonorous body. Thus, in "Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story" from *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Eliot describes a character's emotional response to a harpsichord's notes:

The vibration rushed through Caterina like an electric shock: it seemed as if at that instant a new soul was entering into her, and filling her with a deeper, more significant life.

However, the expression Symbolist Movement designates specifically a group of French writers beginning with Charles Baudelaire and including such later poets as Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Valéry, who exploited an order of private symbols in a poetry of rich suggestiveness rather than explicit signification— which had an immense
influence throughout Europe, and (especially in the 1890s and later) in England and America on poets such as Arthur Symons and Ernest Dowson as well as W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas, Hart Crane, E.E. Cummings, and Wallace Stevens. The French Symbolists reacted against realism, concerning themselves with general truths instead of actualities, exalting the metaphysical and the mysterious, and aiming to unify and blend the arts and the function of the senses.

The decades after World War I, witnessed many of the major writers exploiting symbols which are in part drawn from religious and esoteric traditions and in part from their own invention. Some of the works of the age are symbolist in their settings, and their actions, as well as in the objects they refer to. Instances of a persistently symbolic procedure occur in lyrics (Yeats’ “Byzantium” poems, Dylan Thomas’ series of sonnets Altarwise by Owl-light), in longer poems (Hart Crane’s The Bridge, T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, Wallace Stevens’ “The Comedian as the letter C”), and in novels (James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury).

The use of symbols is therefore, one of the indispensable techniques used by writers to enhance the aesthetic appeal of language, and W.B. Yeats goes so far as to claim that, a ‘continuous indefinable symbolism’ is ‘the substance of all style’ (The Symbolism of Poetry, 1900). Abrams classifies the symbol under two major categories—‘conventional’ or ‘public’; and ‘private’ or ‘personal’ symbols. Thus, ‘the Cross’, ‘the Rose’, ‘the Eagle’ are terms that refer to symbolic objects of which the further significance is determinate within a particular culture or of a particular concept, and are considered as ‘conventional’ symbols. ‘Private’ symbols on the other hand, largely generate their own
significance, which pose a more difficult problem in interpretation. Abrams however, omits further classification of the 'symbol'.

The year 1922 alone was signalised by the simultaneous appearance of such monuments of modernist innovations as Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (not to mention T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*). The catastrophe of World War I had shaken faith in the continuity of Western civilization and raised doubts about the adequacy of traditional literary modes to represent the harsh and dissonant realities of the post-war world. In a review of Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1923, Eliot stated that the inherited mode of ordering a literary work, which assumed a relatively coherent and stable social order, could not accord with 'the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.' Like Joyce and Ezra Pound in his *Cantos*, Eliot experimented with new forms and a new style that would render contemporary disorder, often contrasting it to a lost order and integration that had been based on the religion and myths of the cultural past. In *The Waste Land*, for example, Eliot replaced the standard flow of poetic language by fragmented utterances, and substituted for the traditional coherence of poetic structure a deliberate dislocation of parts, in which very diverse components are related by connections that are left to the reader to discover, or invent.

Major works of modernist fiction, following Joyce's *Ulysses* and his even more radical *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), subvert the basic conventions of earlier prose fiction by breaking up the narrative continuity, departing from the standard ways of representing characters, and violating the traditional syntax and coherence of narrative language by the use of *stream of consciousness* and other innovative modes of narration. These new forms of construction in verse, prose, and narrative were emulated and carried further by many poets and novelists, and
have obvious parallels in the violation of representational conventions in *expressionism* and *surrealism*, in the modernist paintings and sculpture of Cubism, Futurism, and Abstract Expressionism, and in the violations of standard conventions of melody, harmony and rhythm by the modernist musical composers Stravinsky and Schoenberg, and their radical followers.

After World War II (1939-45), the effects of Western morale of the first war which mirrored the tensions and strains of a civilised liberal democracy on the verge of dissolution, was greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb, the progressive devastation of the natural environment, and the ominous fact of overpopulation. This resulted in countertraditional experiments of modernism, and also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had inevitably become in their turn conventional, as well as efforts to reject the elitism of modernist ‘high art’ by taking recourse to the models of ‘mass culture’ in film, television, newspaper cartoons, and popular music.

Many of the works by Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Pynchon, Roland Barthes, and many others--- so blend literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, the serious and the playful, that they resist classification according to traditional literary rubrics. These literary anomalies are paralleled in other arts by phenomena like pop art, op art, the musical compositions of John Cage, and the films of Jean- Luc Godard and other directors. The objective in most cases, is to subvert the foundations of our accepted modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the ‘meaninglessness’ of existence and the underlying ‘abyss,’ or ‘void,’ or ‘nothingness’ on which any supposed security is conceived to be precariously suspended.
Simultaneously, there has been an explosion of feminist writings which, as Elaine Showalter has remarked, displays the urgency and excitement of a religious awakening. Thus, we have writers like A.S. Byatt, Antonia White, Jean Rhys, Eva Figes, Edna O’ Brien, Muriel Spark and others, whose fictions not only illustrate the simultaneous change in contemporary social and literary forms, but describes and criticises convention both in narrative technique and in views of sexual role, especially in the way the latter affects the position of women in society.

In fact, by going back to the mid-1890s, one finds women writers and readers associated with an entirely different kind of feminization or feminine invasion of fiction in the form of ‘the novel of the modern woman’ written ‘by a woman, about women from the standpoint of Woman’. The novel of the modern woman was, for the most part, produced by the so-called New Woman writers, who not only self-consciously addressed themselves as women sensitive to the circumstances of women’s lives, but who also developed a new range of fictional forms and techniques for the purpose. Some (as Mona Caird, Iota, Menie Murial Dowie) focussed on the restrictive, social and economic realities of women’s lives, mixing forensic or journalistic detail with hortatory feminist (or sometimes anti-feminist) rhetoric. Some (Sarah Grand and Olive Schreiner) developed visionary, allegorical, or utopian forms as a way of representing the present and envisioning a better future for women. Others experimented with new fictional forms. George Egerton and Ella D’Arcy, for example, self-consciously distanced themselves from the traditional plots of the three-volume novel in an effort to find an appropriate form for exploring and articulating the inner lives of women. In so
doing they made an important contribution to the relatively new form of the short story which, according to H.G. Wells, 'broke out everywhere' in the 1890s.

In short, many of the New Woman writers of the 1890s were seeking to tell a new story about women, and they sought new forms in which to do it. The New Woman novelist was herself regarded as 'advanced' and very much associated with the modern world, and one of the striking features of many New Woman novels is that they are peopled with female writers of feminist fiction: e.g. Beth, in Sarah Grand's novel *The Beth Book*, is a novelist, as is the eponymous heroine of *Ideala* by the same author; Hester Gresham in Mary Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage* writes fiction, and in Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* the New Woman of the piece is Valeria Du Prel, a close older friend of the heroine Hadria Fullerton. There is therefore, a close association in this fiction between novel-writing and feminist activism: writing itself being seen as a liberatory activity. Laura Marlhom Hansson explicitly linked the new view of women to a renovation of fiction:

> Now that woman is conscious of her own individuality as a woman, she needs an artistic mode of expression, she flings aside the old forms and seeks for new.6

Such writing may be said to initiate feminist criticism in literature resulting in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) in England, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) in France, and Mary Ellman's *Thinking about Women* (1968) in America. Ellman's work especially discusses about the derogatory stereotypes of women in literature written by men, and also about the alternative and subversive points of view in some writings by women.

Even more influential was Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, which referred to Western social arrangements and institutions as covert ways of manipulating
power so as to establish and perpetuate the dominance of men and the subordination of women. She does not merely attack the male bias in Freud's psychoanalytic theory, but also analyses selected passages by D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet as revealing the ways in which their authors, in fictional fantasy aggrandise their aggressive phallic selves and degrade women as submissive sexual objects.

When one considers women writers and their works, it becomes pertinent to explore the nature of what has been termed as 'the women's novel.' Is it simply a novel written by a woman or is it a different kind of novel? Does it have a different collective character from that written by men? Nicola Beauman has observed that “there is a category of fiction written for women—‘the women’s novel.’” It is 'a novel which in some way or another illuminates female attitudes to experience, throws light on the texture of women’s lives.'

On the other hand, women as represented in novels written by men, are quite naturally a representation of observation from an exterior point of view. In fact, most literature throughout history has portrayed women as inferior and reliant on men. That until recently, men have been the leaders and the responsible figures in society, has forced women to become repressed and helpless not only in public life, but has found expression in literature as well. Therefore, in William Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Othello, and John Milton’s Paradise Lost, Ophelia, Desdemona and Eve are subservient to the men in their lives, which leads them to tragedy and sin.

In her oft-quoted words, Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out how men see women as 'the other'. In Beauvoir’s words:

... she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute—she is the other.
In the social system of patriarchy, the term ‘man’ stands for the norm and woman is defined in relation to what man is not. Having no identity of her own, she often serves as an empty space, upon which he may project his desires and fears. Examples of women depicted as paragons of feminine virtue, or as domineering viragoes or shrews, abound in literature written by men. Governed by their own projections on a female otherness, men lose contact with women, as they really are.

Since the male point of view has been accepted as the norm, even women tend to internalise the culturally conditioned and received image of women. Therefore, sometimes even women-authored texts present images of women, which conform to the male typecasting of women. In her essay “Fictional Heroines and Feminist Criticism” (1974), Ruth Yeazel has relevantly observed that such stereotyping results see women as ‘flat embodiments of a particular force or theme,’ and ‘mythically, allegorically, symbolically, but never realistically as fully rounded complex human beings.’ Inspired by works like The Second Sex, Thinking about Women and especially Sexual Politics, feminist criticism in its first phase, began by rereading literature authored by both sexes, in order to expose the extent of misinterpretation of women, in the canonical ‘classics’ of literature, revealing as a result, the unreal images of women, in fiction written by both sexes.

Thus, while critically analysing and evaluating works of literature, feminist criticism brings under purview the status of women and men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic. From the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophy to the present, the female tends to be defined by negative reference to the male as the human norm, hence as an
Other, or kind of non-man, by her lack of the identifying male organ, of male characteristics. One of the barriers to sisterhood as a source of solidarity and confidence is women's tendency to internalise the reigning patriarchal *ideology* (that is, the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority), and thus, to antagonise their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination.

Antagonism may stem from differences of economic position between women or from priorities regarding sacrifice of self-fulfilment and intellectual ambitions on the alter of motherhood and domesticity. Such destructive combination of self-contempt and scorn for members of one's own sex which characterises women's attitudes is aptly summed up by Adrienne Rich as 'horizontal hostility' (which runs counter to the idea of 'horizontal sublime' already discussed in Chapter III) which she defines as 'the fear and mistrust of other women, because other women are ourselves'—an attitude which continues to persist despite the emergence of the Women's Movement in the early 1970s as evident in the propensity to ignore or trivialise the 'woman in the text' and female friendships as reflected in textual omissions, as well as in contradictions of authorial attitude and stance.

On the other hand, patriarchal (or 'masculinist' or 'androcentric') ideology pervades those writings which have been considered great literature, and which until recently have been written almost entirely by men for men. Typically, the most highly regarded literary works focus on male protagonists—Oedipus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Tom Jones, Captain Ahab, Huck Finn— who embody masculine traits and ways of feeling and pursue masculine interests in masculine fields of action. To these males, the female characters, when they play any role, are marginal and subordinate, and are represented as complementary to or in opposition to masculine desires and enterprises.
Works of literature, lacking autonomous female role models, and implicitly addressed to male readers, either leave the woman reader an alien or else solicit her to identify against herself by taking up the position of the male subject and so assuming male values and ways of perceiving, feeling and acting. This has resulted in the appraisal of literary works on the basis of masculine assumptions, interests and ways of reasoning, so that the standard rankings, and also the critical treatments of literary works have in fact been tacitly but thoroughly gender-biased.

Thus, revisionary rereadings of literary works by feminist critics also entail the identification of recurrent ‘images of women,’ (especially in novels and poems written by men). These are often represented as falling into two antithetic patterns. On the one hand, we find idealized projections of men’s desires (the Madonna, the muse of the arts, Dante’s Beatrice, the pure and innocent virgin, the ‘Angel in the House’ represented by the Victorian poet Coventry Patmore); on the other hand are demonic projections of men’s sexual resentments and terrors (Eve and Pandora as the sources of all evil, destructive temptresses such as Delilah and Circe, the malign witch or witch-like women as Medea, and Clytemnestra, the castrating mother):

... Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena——woman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress; she is man’s prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his raison d’être. \(^\text{10}\)

However, such rereadings have also encouraged the identification of male writers, who are believed to have risen above the sexual prejudices of their time sufficiently to understand and represent the cultural pressures that have shaped the characters of women and forced upon them their negative or subsidiary social
roles. Such examples abound in the selected works of authors as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Samuel Richardson, Henrik Ibsen, and George Bernard Shaw.

The questions which arise at this juncture are--- can the symbol be in any way considered as connected to the stereotype (especially of conventional projections of women)? If so, can symbols be then ‘gender-biased’? In the pathbreaking work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar have persuasively argued that the apparently conservative literary texts by the nineteenth-century women writers, contain a hidden subversive element. According to them, the nineteenth-century women writers do not project any rebellious impulses onto the heroines, but they express them through creating mad or monstrous women. Although these characters are ‘suitably punished in the course of the novel,’ they also convey the author’s ‘own self-division,’ resulting from ‘a desire both to accept the structures of patriarchal society and to reject them.’ Thus, the discarded, mad wife, who is locked up in the attic in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, is interpreted as an archetypal figure, who recurs in nineteenth-century texts, as an aberrant and fiercely independent character. Also, Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, meets a tragic end as a punishment for her sexual transgression.

Josephine Donovan, one of the main exponents of ‘Images of Women’ criticism (which is predominantly concerned with how women characters are represented in literature), asserts that:

Women in literature written by men are for the most part seen as Other, as objects, of interest only insofar as they serve or detract from the goals of the male protagonist. Such literature is alien from a female point of view because it denies her essential selfhood.¹¹

Thus, works (as for example, Homer’s *Odyssey*), ‘considered archetypal masterpieces of the Western tradition’, are accused for adopting a ‘sexist
ideology' which influence the creation of 'simplistic stereotypes of women'. This is why, in her essay "Towards a feminist poetics", Elaine Showalter criticises the 'Images of Women' approach (which she refers to as 'feminist critique'):

One of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-oriented. If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be. 12

It is this 'sexist ideology' which determines the growth of the 'individual' in works of literature with the relevant use of symbols, which in turn become 'sexist' as well when utilized to convey meanings to particular situations. Sigmund Freud's analysis of dreams, for example, was a strategy for getting at the unconscious and uncovering problems in childhood development, and is often criticised for being 'phallocentric'. Decoding dreams, to him, is like decoding literature—meaning is displaced and condensed into symbols, images and characters.

Nevertheless, in Interpretation of Dreams (1900), while speaking of 'dream-thoughts', Freud tries to provide a preliminary idea of the use of objects (or 'dream-contents') as symbols which link up together to convey the overall (but latent) meaning of a dream:

The dream content, on the other hand, is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts. If we attempted to read these characters according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation, we should clearly be led into error. Suppose I have a picture-puzzle,... It depicts a house with a boat on its roof, a single letter of the alphabet, the figure of a running man whose head has been conjured away, and so on. Now I might be misled into raising objections and declaring that the picture as a whole and its component parts are nonsensical. A boat has no business to be on the roof of a house, and a headless man cannot run... and if the whole picture is intended to represent a landscape, letters of the alphabet are out of place in it since such objects do not occur in nature. But obviously we can only form a proper judgement of the rebus if we put aside criticisms such as these of
the whole composition and its parts and if, instead, we try to replace each separate element in some way or other. The words which are put together in this way are no longer nonsensical but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance...  

Freud is quite clear when faced with a dream, we must absolutely avoid the search for the so-called 'symbolic meaning' of its totality or of its constituent parts. We most not ask the question--- 'What does the house mean? What is the meaning of the boat on the house? What could the figure of a running man symbolise?'--- and so on. What must be done is to translate the objects back into words, replace things by words designating them. Freud opines that in a dream, 'things' themselves are already 'structured like a language', so that their disposition is regulated by the signifying chain for which they stand. The signified of this signifying chain, obtained by means of a retranslation of 'things' into 'words' is the 'dream-thought'.

Thus, Freud's use of symbols is more reliant on their organic unity rather than as autonomous objects which conforms to the theories of the Greek allegorists (mentioned by Peter Struck) and opposes the definition of Kant. Since both instances advocate the indispensability of 'symbols' as signifiers, it would be prudent to adopt the all-embracing stance taken by Abrams.

But what makes 'objects' function as 'symbols' is the frequency with which they are associated to certain preconceived circumstances or ideas. Thus, we have conventional allegorical emblems as the 'pearl' (signifying purity and perfection, as in the medieval allegorical poems *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*). In both cases the allegory is obviously religious in essence. On the other hand, the 'green girdle' in *Sir Gawain* proves to be an interesting symbol for it not only represents Gawain's guilt, but is a part of the Green Knight's 'masculine' attire. Again, the Eagle (in secular poems), the Cross, even the Tiger
(in Blake’s poem of the same name), can be considered ‘masculine’ symbols.

Also, in the following lines of *The Tiger*—

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What the hammer? What the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? What dead grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp? 14
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--- ‘hammer’, ‘chain’, ‘anvil’, are not merely workmen’s tools, but signify the ‘masculine’ strength of the Creator not to mention that ‘brain’ signifying intelligence, is applicable to a ‘male’ Creator.

Conversely, the Rose, the Mirror, even Cinderella’s slipper can be considered ‘feminine’ symbols. It will be relevant in this context to consider Elizabeth Siddal’s portrayal of the Lady of Shalott (see Plate V, p.243) which feminist critics have often related to images of ‘madness’. The cracking mirror in the picture can be seen as a symbol of the cracking sanity of the Lady, who is faced with irreconcilable demands as she tries to negotiate the role she is expected to play--- a role symbolized by the oppressive system of constraints to her freedom (as signified by the ‘loom’)—and her own wishes and (sexual) desires. Siddal’s treatment of the cracked mirror and the theme of fractured identity can be associated with the stereotype of the ‘madwoman’ which the Lady signifies.

Similarly, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (written between the years 1890 and 1892), the peeling, faded yellow wallpaper is somehow symbolic of the heroine’s madness. In “Paradoxes and Dilemmas: the Woman as Writer” (1976), Margaret Atwood refers to ‘The Quiller-Couch Syndrome’ which defines ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ styles in writing:

The ‘masculine’ style is, of course, bold, forceful, clear, vigorous, etc.; the ‘feminine’ style is vague, weak, tremulous, pastel, etc. In the list of pairs you can include ‘objective’ and ‘subjective,’ ‘universal’ or ‘accurate depiction of society’ versus ‘confessional,’ ‘personal,’ or even ‘narcissistic’ and ‘neurotic.’ It’s roughly seventy years since Quiller-
Couch’s essay, but the ‘masculine’ group of adjectives is still much more likely to be applied to the work of male writers; female writers are much more likely to get hit with some version of ‘the feminine style’ or ‘feminine sensibility,’ whether their work merits it or not.  

Similarly, objects chosen as symbols by male and female writers usually belong to their own respective worlds—public and private—which once again explains why they acquire sexist overtones.

A more complex form of symbolism is evident in the works of Virginia Woolf, especially in the much-quoted passage from Mrs. Dalloway where Clarissa recalls her short affair with Sally Seton:

...Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally.  

The ‘stone urn with flowers’ symbolises the moment turned into eternity for it stands for both life (the flowers) and death (the urn itself). When Clarissa is rudely jolted back to reality it is ‘like running one’s face against a granite wall in the darkness! — and the ‘granite wall’ (though unreal), gathers significance in denoting a cruel, lifeless existence.

In Perversions: Psychodynamics and Therapy (1965), Jacques Lacan refers to the symbolic as the ability to symbolize, to communicate through language: ‘to be understood by others’. He opines that, in everyday experience, the symbolic is manifest in the logic that brings imaginary fears into perspective. In the analytic, therapeutic situation, its presence is felt through a different chain of reasoning, found in free association. In fact, the imaginary and the symbolic co-exist throughout life, the extent to which one dominates over the other fluctuating.
Fay Weldon’s novel *Puffball* (1980) is a case in point. The main characters Liffey and Richard undertake what proves to be the hazardous project of moving from the city to the country, deciding to start a family. The natural setting in the novel is ominous; nature here is not bucolic and peaceful but frightening, a place where the unnatural occurs. The ‘puffball’ literally refers to mushrooms around the cottage, but symbolically refers to the novel’s main theme---pregnancy, around which are centred Liffey’s ‘imaginary fears’:

Giant puffballs had pushed up out of the ground a yard or so from where they lay. How could she not have noticed them before? Three white globes, giant mushroom balls, each the size and shape of a human skull, thinned in yellow white, stood blindly sentinel. Liffey was on her feet, shuddering and aghast...

The matter was that the smooth round swelling of the fungus made Liffey think of a belly swollen by pregnancy, and she said so.19

Liffey becomes pregnant during the course of the novel, and the symbolic and the mythical coalesce when the ominous Mabs wants to become pregnant too (her mythical name referring to the Welsh word for baby---*Mab*).

On the other hand, in presenting sexual reproduction as the hub of the battle between the sexes, Weldon explores the key question: is woman’s capacity to bear children a source of power or of vulnerability? Her answer is equivocal. Liffey discovers, on becoming pregnant, that her power in the *public* world decreases. She loses her money and becomes socially and economically dependent on her husband Richard, and also becomes vulnerable to the manipulation of Mabs and Tucker. But again, Weldon announces triumphantly that at the same time, Liffey gains new *psychic* powers. These, represented by Liffey’s ability to communicate with her unborn child and its ‘singing’, are described as strong enough to compete with Mabs’s witchcraft and noxious potions which ironically stem from her maternal status.

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An ingenious feature of most of Weldon's novels, one which deserves comment, is the symbolic element apparent in the design. Thus, in *The President's Child* (1982), the narrative plot she uses mirrors and enacts the mechanics of the 'patriarchal plot', the conspiracy devised by Dandy and his henchmen to destroy female opposition and achieve total power. The maze-like conspiracy concocted by Dandy and his supporters to trap and subjugate Isabel resembles the feminist theorist Mary Daly's description of 'the man-formed mythic maze' that is constructed to confuse and dominate women in general. Like Daly, Weldon portrays men as cementing bonds with their fellows by means of the exchange and violation of women. They also successfully manipulate reality by means of language and myth.

Here again, as in *Puffball*, by organising her novel around the theme of patrilineal kinship structures, Weldon opens the way for the investigation of one of her favourite themes--- the contradictions of vulnerability and power which women’s reproductive capacities involve. Isabel’s bearing of a son to Dandy, the presidential candidate, as she herself dimly perceives, alters her status in a male-dominated society. In fact that ‘she had a womb, and it worked’, while making her prey to male manipulation and endangering her life, is simultaneously a source of power. In Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, it gives her direct access to the phallus. In struggling to keep possession of her son, she temporarily transcends woman’s designated role as object of exchange. She intervenes in and disrupts the male supremacist structures of history--- in this case, the contest for the American Presidency.

Conversely, in *Praxis* (1978), 'incest' and 'infanticide' become symbolic acts which bring the deeper, darker side of human consciousness to the surface,
questioning what is natural and what is hidden. Women have been conditioned by society at large to feel guilty about sex and to sacrifice themselves for their children. Praxis, by the end of the novel, does neither, an anti-heroine who not only rejects conventional roles but acts in ways that deny all concepts of the feminine ideal reminding us strongly of Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders (in the novel of the same name). These extreme examples examine the codes of correct behaviour. The primal has been all but erased in women, yet it lies beneath layers of social conditioning. In Praxis’s behaviour Weldon undoes the cultural notion of women as pure and sacrificial, and Praxis comes to realise that:

Nature does not know best; for the birds, for the bees, for the cows; for the men, perhaps. But your interests and Nature’s do not coincide.
Nature our Friend is an argument used, quite understandably by men.20

It is however, Praxis’s smothering of the mongoloid baby which is the extreme form of rebellion. By killing it, she enacts a symbolic turning point for all women, freeing them to pursue independent, self-fulfilling lives (and in this case, Mary is free to return to her career as a doctor). Women must take action to bring about their own liberation--- their figurative orgasm will only occur when they surrender passive, self-effacing roles and pursue their own destinies.

_The Fat Woman’s Joke_ (1967) and _The Life and Loves of a She-Devil_ (1983) are both structured in a manner notably reminiscent of myth and fairy tale, on the antithetical pair of stereotypical female figures, good girl and shrew. Esther the eponymous fat woman with the enormous appetite represents symbolically a protest against woman’s lack of power and an attempt to achieve ‘a unified condition of the self’. Esther’s most important function in the narrative, is to draw attention to marriage and the female body as sites of woman’s oppression and feminist struggle. She points out that men, motivated by misogyny, treat women
as domestic slaves: by expecting them to look slim and fragile, they seek to reduce them to 'a piece of docile flesh'. Susan, Esther's young rival who tries to steal her husband, ironically agrees with her analysis. She complains that, while men are admired for their solidity (physical and mental), women are always praised for the opposite. The reason why a slender, petite woman is attractive to men is, she suggests, that her lack of flesh negates her.

Many of the themes of *The Fat Woman's Joke* reappear in a more provocative and symbolically contrived form in Weldon's later novel *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. The black comedy of revenge enacted in the novel is symbolic of a strongly radical feminist spirit and is inseparably linked to the stereotypes of femininity, psychological as well as physical, created by men. It is the taunts and insults uttered by her husband Bobbo which initially goad Ruth to play the role of 'She-Devil' and to undergo a series of complicated and risky surgical operations which transform her tall, substantial figure into a petite simulacrum of her rival's.

Moreover, one of Weldon's achievements in the novel is to invert and valorise the abusive epithet 'She-Devil', identifying it with female independence and resistance. In fact, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* can be aptly called an 'inverted fairy tale' which re-works motifs from *Little Mermaid* and *Cinderella*. Indeed, Weldon's treatment of Ruth's story possesses strong affinities with Mary Daly's interpretation of the Cinderella story. Daly sees the Ugly Sisters' mutilation of their feet to fit the glass slipper presented by the Prince as representing the self-destructive acts which patriarchal stereotypes of beauty encourage women to perform.
However, Weldon’s critique of the empowered begins in her novels of the late ’80s and early ’90s to encompass the derailed condition of postmodern culture; science, technology and capitalism are her targets. Domestic and romantic scenarios parallel the political line, with children and women grouped among the powerless who, especially those of the lower classes, remain victims of the powerful.

Therefore, the overtly allegorical novel *The Sharpnel Academy* (1986) satirises the history of warfare and weaponry, set in ‘an institution dedicated to the memory of that great military genius Henry Sharpnel--- he who in 1804 invented the exploding cannonball’. The first-person narrator relates a rather fantastical story of a group who come to the academy for a lecture by a General Leo Makeshift on the “Decisive Battles of World War II”. The academy houses an uncertain number of immigrants (mostly illegal) who work and live below the first floor. They represent the underprivileged classes, mostly of darker skin, who have found refuge there unbeknownst to the hostess Joan Lumb who thinks her staff consists of 36 servants and employees:

*The Sharpnel servants slept in dormitories in the semi-basement and basement which made up the kitchen and service areas of the great house. And if they slept five to a bed, and six under it, Joan Lumb was not to know. Their children were trained not to cough or cry when she was on her monthly round of dormitory inspection. Old ladies stayed their wheezing and old men their coughing, while Joan Lumb strode by. They pressed themselves into the cupboards and alcoves of this dank, subterranean world, and lived to see another day.*

The symbolic setting contrasts this group with the guests upstairs, the privileged, who are to be served by those of the lower class. Acorn, the butler from Soweto, is the leader and representative of the oppressed ones, declaring war in the kitchen below while the statused guests drink and eat on the floor above. Nevertheless,
despite its sardonic tone and serious subject matter, the novel fails to provide any satisfying conclusion to the conflict between the groups.

The Cloning of Joanna May (1989) too, depicts a postmodern world with scientific and technological advancement that have brought humankind to the verge of ecological holocaust. The novel’s horror arises from the misuse of these by Carl May, a sinister technocrat whose company rehabilitates nuclear power stations. But it is his cloning of his wife Joanna in a pervert attempt to control her, which is the central concern of the story. However, while trying to kill Joanna’s selfhood by creating those identical to her, Carl actually helps his former wife to discover herself. Symbolically, the clones-- Alice, Julie, Gina and Jane,--- are the repressed aspects of Joanna that she had not realised. Upon meeting, Joanna and the clones identify with one another in mutual suffering and experience. As Joanna explains, ‘We are one woman split five ways, a hundred ways, a million million ways’. The discovery of one another symbolically engages Joanna and the clones in finding themselves in other women:

They could see now that was the trouble--- they’d been lonely. They used men to stop them being lonely. No wonder it all went wrong. Now they had each other, nothing need be the same.

The clones form a community, helping one another with child rearing and offering respite from bad relationships. Joanna has the help of Alice, for example, who gives birth to Carl’s clone.

The same sense of ‘community’ comes to the fore in The Heart of the Country (1987) when Sonia the outcast, the madwoman, rallies a group of women to burn effigies of their oppressors Angus and Arthur. The crowd cheers, recognising the absurd symbol of the parasitical property owners who take advantage of the less fortunate. When Sonia sets Angus’s effigy on fire, she fulfills
the purpose of carnival but unwittingly causes the death of Flora, the housekeeping princess. Sonia has not intended anyone to be hurt, but she recognises that in effect Flora’s death is symbolically a ‘virgin sacrifice’. Weldon overturns the patriarchal virgin sacrifice, giving the rite to women who burn the concomitant image of housewife and virgin, reclaiming their own self-definition.

Other than using single events or objects as symbols, Weldon uses common motifs to convey her heroines’ angst against a hostile world. Therefore, in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, Ruth begins her new role of ‘she-devil’ by burning her house and taking the children to the tower to live with Mary and Bobbo. She then disappears, plotting the destruction of Mary’s idyllic life, which Mary now shares with Ruth’s husband. The presence of the children in the tower brings the first taste of reality to Mary’s world, causing disturbances in the household:

The children pressed dirty palms against snowy surfaces and kicked footballs against shiny glass and sprawled over the backs of sofas, breaking them, and stretched quilts to make trampolines, and tripped and sent family heirlooms flying. Andy, trying to play polo from the back of a Doberman, sent Mary Fisher’s great-uncle’s grandfather clock crashing to the ground. Mary Fisher wept.

In *Life Force* (1992), Nora sets fire to Leslie Beck’s studio and the paintings with it, thus figuratively ending his hold over her and the others, bringing the novel to an end. Like Nora, Alexandra in *Worst Fears* (1996) sets The Cottage on fire before Jenny, her dead husband’s mistress, can take possession of it. Margaret Mitchell comments (in *British Writers*, 1997) on Weldon’s heroines who burn down their houses:

It is a symbolic gesture with considerable literary resonance, for the house is the most tangible symbol of the myth of bourgeois domesticity. To burn it down can be seen as the ultimate act of protest against the perpetuation of that myth.
Leaving the myth behind, they begin new lives gained through self-awareness and self-confidence. This in fact, is strongly akin to Bertha Mason’s burning down of Rochester’s mansion in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Though Bertha herself jumps into the flames, her counterpart Jane escapes unnoticed and embarks on a quest for the self. On the other hand, it is the fear of losing ‘homes’ which prevents women from taking action when necessary. As Chloe says in *Female Friends* (1974):

> Marjorie, Grace and me. How do we recover from the spasms of terror and resentment which assail us, in our marriages and in our lives? When we lie awake in bed and know that the worst is at hand, if we do not act (and we cannot act)—the death of our children, or their removal by the State, or physical crippling, or the loss of our homes, or the ultimate loneliness of abandonment. When we cry and sob and slam doors and know we have been cheated, and are betrayed, are exploited and misunderstood, and that our lives are ruined, and we are helpless. When we walk alone in the night planning murder, suicide, adultery, revenge—and go home to bed and rise red-eyed in the morning to continue as before. 27

The burning chateau in *The Hearts and Lives of Men* is however an exception in that it serves the purpose of providing impetus to the story of Nell’s adventures after a brief but necessary phase of tranquillity.

The symbolism becomes all the more metaphorical and complex in *Growing Rich* (1992). In the novel the Devil as the driver, symbolises the social evils that propel stereotypes and expectations of women. The conventionally beautiful woman has copious opportunities; the homely or unattractive one must settle for gross labour. Carmen, for example, in her beneficent body is offered a job as a stewardess, but her friends must settle for menial labour in a chicken factory or at Bellamy House. When Carmen refuses the job, her body returns to its previous unexceptional form. The Devil, then, is women’s lack of economic
opportunity, the disregard for their actual worth and the physical requirements that determine how they are valued in society.

The symbolism in Weldon’s novels thus become gender-oriented in their depiction of how the biological legacy of humans affect their behaviour. While gender stereotyping feeds into sexist notions of the roles that women and men should play, there are also dark, unflattering portrayals of women who are (actually) victims of the romantic scenario which entraps and seduces them. As a result, some misguided ones are enmeshed in an illusory world of innocence, prey to the devious, sometimes evil control of others. Self-sacrifice causes some to give up their identities in order to fulfil social expectations. Some are ruthlessly determined to gain power, causing harm to anyone, including other women and children who get in their way. Such actions arise, however, from social otherness, from the exploitation they experience in a sexist culture.

Weldon’s men, on the other hand, are selfish and cruel because of their predominant role in culture. They are insensitive fathers and disloyal husbands, leaving domestic concerns to their wives. Even as the women gain some economic power through the decades, her men continue to assume that women’s pursuits should take second place to theirs; and women, contrite and obliging more often than not, assume too that their jobs and aspirations hold less significance than that of their male counterparts. As Ann Hebert argues:

That no one is innocent, man or woman, complicates her searing critique of the current construction of heterosexual gender relations and makes her novels unsettling to conservatives and feminists alike. 28

Under such circumstances, we find evident a process of redefinition of symbolic signification which becomes in part, a reaction to or against social changes, particularly changes in the roles of women and changing gender
relations, and partly a reaction to perceptions about the gender of fiction, or of language used in fiction. Sometimes, the symbolism may go as far as to demolish literary forms— as for example, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* stages a confrontation between genres— Gothic versus romantic fiction— thus making novelistic conventions themselves the protagonists. Or to put it another way, the characters here are authors: not only the blonde, petite, pretty Mary Fisher, who’s a best-selling romantic novelist, herself a heroine of her own imagining; but also Ruth, whose transformation from huge, clumsy, apologetic housewife to vengeful demon releases a flood of inspiration, making her horribly inventive enough to enable her to sabotage the story of love triumphant in a viciously funny advertisement for the criminal application of domestic skills.

In *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France* (1991), Susan Sellers refers to Jacques Derrida’s argument that the strategy of rebellion adopted in writing, allows other possibilities to come to the fore. Therefore, ‘feminine’ excess in writing entails the possibility of a plurality which deconstructs phallogocentric conceptual systems. Derrida consequently urges writers to employ a multiplicity of styles and to work to keep the opportunities for meanings open, by attending to and incorporating the myriad other pathways that are generated as one writes.

Derrida’s opinion is shared by Hélène Cixous who feels that writing presents an unbounded space on which the self that strives to constitute itself through mastery of the other (the phallogocentric system, in this case), is relinquished and in which the other can finally be received. Consequently, she suggests that the feminine writer’s task is to actively inscribe the heterogeneous promptings that are thrown up by the process of writing, an endeavour that will
bring an alternative mode of perception, relation and expression to that decreed by
the prevailing schema.

The psychoanalyst and critic Julia Kristeva, associates the process of
language acquisition with the infant’s developing sense of itself as distinct from
its mother’s body and surroundings, and the accompanying requirement for it to
control its innate instincts to conform to social convention. She argues that in
order for writing to contravene the rules we have been taught it must return to us
to the metaphorical scene of castration, in other words to the point of separation
between our unsocialised, drive-governed selves and our constitution within a
’symbolic’ order of precepts, so that we can re-experience and perhaps redraft the
premises which currently organise this division. The writers’ task is to embrace in
their writing the ‘semiotic’ or heterogeneous corporeal energies which reject,
disrupt, supplement and alter the terms of one’s relation to the cultural contract, a
practice radically at odds with the monological procedures of the present
patriarchal regime.

Luce Irigaray on the other hand, stresses that woman under the patriarchal
regime exists only in relation to man: she is the other in an exclusively male
scheme, with no value or attributes of her own apart from her reflective capacity.
Irigaray contends that language is the mainstay and medium of this order but
argues that women can at present do little more than ‘mimic’ the discourse they
have had no part in creating. In fact, any attempt to speak will merely reproduce
its repressive hierarchy. Despite the bleakness of her denunciation, Irigaray’s
writing indicates a possible subversive tactic as it strives to disclose the
mechanisms of the phallogocentric procedure and identify alternatives.
Thus, the impatient and mocking mannerisms which mark Weldon's narrative style, call into question the *solidity* of conventional fiction. As a result, her women live out roles they have sold themselves, including ‘the fulfilling of other people’s needs...’ that have made the realist novel so congenial. On the other hand, her heroine Praxis is a special case because she enacts the contradictions in exaggerated, emblematic fashion, performing a set of confidence tricks on herself. In one of her several lives, for instance, she flourishes in a high-powered job in advertising, selling domestic appliances and (naturally) ‘domesticity’—

“God made her a woman,” she wrote blissfully, “love made her a mother--with a little help from electricity!”

As Kristeva points out, women must adopt the socio-symbolic code in order to function, and their revolts will be fruitless unless they occur within it in ways that can be understood.

Kristeva obviously, was commenting on the way one should interpret mythic symbols. In fact, it has to be admitted that ‘myth’ plays a considerable role in giving birth to certain popular symbols. Unlike Lewis Spence who in *An Introduction to Mythology* (1921), defines myth as the accounts of the deeds of a god or supernatural being, often devised in order to explain our relation to the universe, the environment or a social programme, Carl Jung argues in his essay entitled “The Undiscovered Self” (1957), that myths are much more than allegorical expressions of natural phenomena. They are the symbols of inner, unconscious drama which only become accessible through projection and telling. As such they offer, crucial messages, providing insights into unrealised or neglected aspects of personality and issuing warnings of imbalance or wrong action. Also, Jung insists that it is the structure rather than the content of myth
which constitutes its power, since the structure is transhistorical while the content is relevant only within a specific time and place. The myths and folk tales we have inherited are consequently expressions of the archetype which have received a specific time stamp and been handed down. Thus, the comparison between Clifford’s ‘rise in the world’ and ‘the force and energy of Polaris rising from the sea’ in *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, becomes highly suggestive.

In *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), Mary Daly argues that patriarchal myths have derived their potency from ‘stolen mythic power’. Daly’s insistence that mythologies around the world originated in the worship of the mother goddess as the source and destination of all life, is elucidated by Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor in *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth* (1987). Sjöö and Mor show how pregnancy and childbirth which were earlier considered as involving a magical connection between woman and the fertile earth, or else an act of parthenogenesis with the woman as autonomous creator, was later co-opted by male groups devising their own imitations of menstruation and childbirth, resulting in the debasement of actual menstruation and childbirth.

Jack Zipes (in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, 1991) goes even further in emphasizing on how folk and fairy tales share common roots with myth in their endeavour to explain natural occurrences and social customs. He demonstrates how early tales deriving from a matriarchal world-view underwent successive stages of ‘patriarchalization’ to reflect the conditions of feudal society so that by the Middle Ages, the goddess had been recast as evil witch, bad fairy or malevolent step-mother, and the emphasis on maturation and integration had become subordinate to the exploits of a male protagonist intent on domination and
wealth. Zipes documents how matrilinear marriages and family ties were
subsumed under the new patriarchal economic order, with the result that the
ancient matriarchal symbols were altered or rendered benign. Thus, for example,
'Rumpelstiltskin' which began as a tale concerning the female activity of spinning
was retold by the Grimm brothers in terms of nineteenth-century industrialisation
and the concomitant transfer of power into male hands, thus devaluing spinning
itself since what counts is its transformation into gold. Feminists however, prefer
to refer to 'spinning' as a symbol of imprisonment (as indicated in the 'Lady of
Shalott' myth).

Feminist writing can therefore, be thought of in two categories: as an act
of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women,
and as a task of construction--- of bringing into being enabling alternatives.

But what will be the effect of all this on the reader? Kristeva argues for a
mode of reading that involves the reader's active participation in the multifarious
movements of the text, which, she contends, bring into play the drive-governed
terrain of sexuality and the unconscious and consequently return us to the
unordered realm of the pre-Oedipal before the divisions and requirements of
social-symbolic law. Like Cixous, Kristeva believed that this should influence our
choice of reading, which should continually call us to question rather than assist
the desire for mastery. We must reject those texts which flatter our position and
work with those which, through their pluralizing and disruptive tactics, force us to
consider our constructions and tenets. The reader, she insists, must refuse the
demands of the super-ego for dominion, seeking, once the reading is over, to
restore the relation to the cultural contract but with a new awareness of what is at
stake.
Thus, in the following works—*The Hearts and Lives of Men, Life Force,* and *Growing Rich*—of the late '80s and early '90s, Weldon experiments with self-conscious narrative structures which reveals her preoccupation with literary aesthetics. In both *The Hearts and Lives of Men* and *Life Force,* artists and art play a significant part in the novels' thematic concerns, mocking the art world populated by the vain and insipid, who have little to do with aesthetics. *The Hearts and Lives of Men* takes place within the marketplace of art, with two narcissistic figures, an art dealer and an angry artist who vie for power; *Life Force* revolves around a painting that brings a former group of friends together again, and *Growing Rich* is a tale about the evils of a society enraptured by image and money. But under the garb of commenting on the value of art and the concept of good and bad art, the author exposes the novels' concerns with writing itself as artifice. In her non-fictional work entitled *Letters to Alice: On First Reading Jane Austen* (1984), while exhorting her 'niece' to read the 'boring, petty and irrelevant' Jane Austen, 'Aunt Fay' delicately informs her of a literary tradition which requires that reading must go beyond personal limited interests. One does not read well without contextualizing, and without the understanding that great works of literature speak to one another through similar concerns.

However, one may conclude by stating that feminist interpretations of 'symbols' in myths, fairy/folk tales and literary texts actually seek to break away from formalist and traditional criticism. In fact, a feminist position does not signify a mere literary criticism, but entails a study of social and political changes. This in turn, according to Josephine Donovan, help to change the world as far as marginalization of women is concerned. The goal of this form of feminist interpretation is obviously political since its aim is to create a situation in which
'literature will no longer function as propaganda furthering sexist ideology'. It undoubtedly possesses a refreshing directness which encourages one to see even the most familiar works in a new light.

But on the other hand, if it is felt that feminist criticism undermines any basis for literary discrimination, then it will meet strong opposition not only from traditional forces within the literary institution, which are still powerful, but also from certain contemporary approaches which are reluctant to abandon the notion of conventional literary value—especially of sentimental and romantic fiction.

Nevertheless, one of the most powerful features of feminist criticism has been its ability to question in a more direct way whether the aesthetic (dependent upon symbolism and mythopoeia) and the ideological (involving the aim behind the use of symbols in contemporary contexts), belong to different realms and thus to undermine the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgements and values. Indeed, what is likely to keep feminist criticism at the forefront of literary interpretation is that it incorporates within itself and in a particularly powerful form conflicts and tensions that are central to contemporary literary texts in general so that their interpretation may develop most interestingly and productively within a feminist context. For this reason it seems certain that feminism will have a powerful role to play in literary interpretation for a presumably foreseeable, ideal future.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


15. Elizabeth Siddal (1834-1862), popularly called Lizzy, besides being the mistress, wife and model of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was a talented artist—albeit untrained— who took her own life. Perhaps it is telling that Siddal was among the first to paint the sad and mysterious Lady of Shalott.


18. Ibid., p.38.


22. Ibid., pp.45-46.


24. Ibid., p.251.


