

Domestic Fiction

This genre of novels and stories celebrate the Cult of True Womanhood (see link online), a belief, common in the nineteenth-century, that middle and upper-class white women (and those who aspired to such class and color) were "Angels of the Hearth," moral and religious exemplars who offered, in their homes/shrines, a respite from the vagaries of the cold, cruel world. This cult entails submission to authority (typically, though not always male), piety, purity, and attention and skill in domestic affairs (creating a comfortable home).

The critic Nina Baym (who edited our textbook with those erstwhile companions *et al.*) offers a succinct plot of a typical Domestic novel: "In essence, it is the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her throughout life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world. This young girl is fittingly called a heroine because her role is precisely analogous to the unrecognized or undervalued youths of fairy tales who perform dazzling exploits and win a place for themselves in the land of happy endings. She also fits the pattern of comic hero, whose displacement indicates social corruption and whose triumph ensures the reconstruction of a beneficent social order. In Jungian perspective, her story exemplifies the difficult but successful negotiation of the undifferentiated child through the trials of adolescence into the individuation of sound adulthood. The happy marriages with which most -- though not all -- of this fiction concludes are symbols of successful accomplishment of the required task and resolutions of the basic problems raised in the story, which in its most primitive terms is the story of the formation and assertion of a feminine ego" (11-12).

"This story itself exists in two parallel versions. In one, the heroine begins as a poor and friendless child. Most frequently an orphan, she sometimes only thinks herself to be one, or has by necessity been separated from her parents for an indefinite time. In the second, the heroine is a pampered heiress who becomes poor and friendless in midadolescence, through the death or financial failure of her legal protectors. At this point the two plots merge, for both show how the heroine develops the capacity to survive and surmount her troubles. At the end of the novel she is no longer an underdog. The purpose of both plots is to deprive the heroine of all external aids and to make her success in life entirely a function of her own efforts and character. The idea that a woman's identity or place in life is a function of her father's or husband's place is firmly rejected, not merely on idealistic but also on realistic grounds. In the orphan's rags-to-riches story caught one aspect of American life and faith, the heiress's riches-to-rags caught another. As some moved up, others fell down. When men fell, their dependent women fell with them. Several women authors began their careers as a direct result of financial catastrophe in their families; as we will see, the Panic of 1837 created a large new group of women authors. Their novels showed how women were forced to depend on themselves. They asserted that women had to be prepared for both economic and emotional self-support, ..."

There are two kinds of heroine in this novel, the flawless and the flawed. The flawless are those who already possess the emotional [36] strength and stability to function when adversity strikes. The flawed are those whose characters are defective, so that triumph in adversity becomes a matter of self-conquest as well as conquest of the other. Some novels present more than one heroine. A flawed and a flawless heroine may counterpoint one another. Again, two kinds of flaws will be opposed, such as excessive dependency against excessive self-will. The overly dependent woman has to acquire firmness, the self-willed woman learns to bend so as not to break. The idea of what is, and what is not, a flaw varies according to the perspective of the individual author, yet all agree that some degree of self-control is a moral and practical necessity while total self-abnegation is suicidal. The writers' conviction that character had to adjust to limiting circumstances, their belief that suffering and hardship could not be avoided in any human life, and their strenuous insistence that such trials, because they called out otherwise dormant abilities, could become occasions for 'perfecting' the character imply a deeply Victorian world view" (Baym 35-36)

See Catherine Beecher Stowe and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *American Women's Home* for a period guidebook.

Baym, Nina. *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1978. Print.