Some Have Greatness
Thrust upon Them: The
Politics of Canon Formation

To answer that the best novels survive is to beg the question.
Excellence is a constantly changing, socially chosen value.
Richard Ohmann, "The Shaping of a Canon"

As I have been arguing, then, texts are often ambiguous; even
readers committed in principle to reading as authorial audience
may find that in practice novels often provide insufficient guid­
ance for their own proper decoding and may apparently offer them­selves up to contradictory interpretive keys. But it does not follow
that they are infinitely open. If a text does not impose itself on
readers, it is resistant to certain interpretations. Let me return to
the swing-set metaphor of the first chapter. As I noted there, if you
make a mistake in the process of constructing the swing set, you
may erroneously produce something internally consistent—and
hence never notice your error. But in the process of putting it
together, you may also find yourself in a self-contradictory posi­
tion that forces you to rethink what you have done so far.

There are two circumstances under which this can happen. First,
the swing set itself may be defective—the author may have made a
mistake, providing signals that encourage readers to apply inap­
propriate strategies. This can happen with respect to any of the
four categories of rules. Thus, for instance, in The Idiot, Dos­
toyevsky seems to invoke the rule of notice that a character whose
moral choice generates the primary action is to be read as an
important character. Nastasya Filippovna throws a hundred thou­sand rubles into the fire, in order to see if Ganya is venal enough to
pull it from the flames. At this point, the concentration on Ganya's moral choice—and particularly on his moral victory—confirms our initial impression that he is to be a major force in the novel. But he virtually drops out for most of the rest of the book, and his disappearance has no apparent rhetorical function—that is, the violation of the rule does not appear to be aiming at any particular effect. [Dostoyevsky compounds this flaw by a violation of a rule of configuration: he fails to follow through on the conflict set up in the first volume between Myshkin and Ganya.] Knowing the genesis of the novel, one can well understand why Dostoyevsky shifted direction at this point, and why he could not rewrite part 1 (the novel was being published serially while it was being composed); as The Idiot stands, though, Ganya's flickering presence remains a weakness in its construction.

Rules of signification can be badly handled, too. Leon Howard, for instance, criticizes Chandler's Long Goodbye for failing to conform properly to what I have called the rule of realism.

The reader of course is given the same information that enables Marlowe to infer that Terry's farewell letter is a fake—i.e., the reference to a mailbox which would not be found in a Mexican village. The validity of this clue for the reader, however, depends upon his faith in Chandler's conformity to a reality that exists outside the novel itself; and this faith cannot be claimed by an author who asks the reader to believe that Terry could be presumed dead and still maintain control over a substantial fortune which he could not have taken with him in his sudden flight.

Similarly, with configuration, it generally mars a novel when an author sets up expectations that are neither fulfilled nor effectively undermined, but simply unutilized. In Southworth's double-vol­umed novel, The Changed Brides/The Bride's Fate, the victimized heroine, Drusilla, learns midway through the narrative that she is an heiress. There are, though, a number of potential obstacles standing between her and her considerable fortune; and the way

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that they are mentioned in the text, combined with the abuse Drusilla has received so far, encourages the reader to expect her to confront them. In fact, she gets her rightful money with no difficulty at all, denying us the anticipated pleasure of watching her rise to the challenges.

Authorial failures respecting rules of coherence are most likely in those genres where the pleasure of the conclusion depends on shared notions of fair play. For instance, readers of classical detective fiction expect not only that a coherent solution will be offered, but also that it will be of a specific type—that is, rational. Without this assumed agreement between author and reader, the reader has no grounds for his or her guesswork. Under the circumstances, how is a reader likely to approach Reginald Hill's Killing Kindness?

It opens with a medium talking to the spirit of a recent murder victim; later, much of what she says turns out to be true. Given the genre, we are entitled to assume that the supernatural cannot intrude, and we are therefore entitled to draw conclusions based on the assumption that the medium must have gotten her knowledge in some other way. The actual solution is therefore likely to frustrate any experienced detective story reader. Although nothing in the text signals the suspension of the convention of rationalism, it turns out that she really is a medium.

If that were all there were to it, evaluating texts—at least, with regard to their technical competence—would be fairly easy. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to distinguish between a defective swing set and a bumbling do-it-yourselfer—and when a text fails to respond to the rules applied to it, it is not always clear whether the text or the reader is at fault. To put it in other terms, there are two ways of rethinking your reading experiences when a text fails to respond to the strategies with which it is approached: You can keep the text and change the strategy, or you can keep the strategy and toss out the text on the assumption that it is thin or incoherent. And when particular reading strategies—such as the New Critical strategies that dominated the 1940s and 1950s—are normalized, the latter course is the more likely, regardless of where the problems lie. Indeed, David Daiches goes so far as to validate this procedure explicitly. For the New Critics (including himself),

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he argues, value is a matter of the "degree to which the work lends itself to" the "kind of treatment" New Critical theory demands.\(^2\)

This, I would argue, is one of the major ways in which the academy makes its evaluations.\(^3\) Canonization is, at least in part, a process by which certain texts are privileged because they work with a normalized strategy or set of strategies. As Annette Kolodny argues, "Frequently our reading habits become fixed, so that each successive reading experience functions, in effect, normatively, with one particular kind of novel stylizing our expectations of those to follow."\(^4\) Thus, for instance, Leon Howard is able to denigrate Chandler's *Long Goodbye*, not only for the problem with significance cited above (which he relegates to a footnote) but even more because it fails to conform to the configuration he expects of a work of the genre he assumes it to be. More specifically, he starts out with the presupposition that the novel fits what I have shown to be popular patterns; when he finds an unexpectedly long epilogue, he blames the text rather than the bias with which he approaches it.\(^5\) Such an evaluative procedure is far from atypical; as a result, canons are always ideological at base, not only in terms of their treatment of content, but even more in their treatment of form, since the reading

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3. Of course, the belief that, as Paul Lauter puts it, "Standards of literary merit are not absolute but contingent" ("Introduction," xx) has become increasingly common in the American academy. See, for instance, Richard Ohmann, "The Shaping of a Canon": "Who attributed [excellence] to only some novels, and how?" Ohmann's concern in his essay is somewhat different from mine: he is looking at the social processes by which the choices of particular readers get institutionalized in the form of a canon. In contrast, I am interested in the ways that the process of reading itself helps lead to those initial choices. I view these approaches as complementary, not contradictory. For some other recent views, see Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* and "Reading about Reading"; Annette Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield" and "A Map for Rereading"; Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*; and the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* (10, no. 1) in which Ohmann's essay appears, and which includes the essay by Barbara Hermstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value" [1--35].
4. Kolodny, "Dancing through the Minefield," 11. See also Terry Eagleton: "Literary theorists, critics, and teachers, then, are not so much purveyors of doctrine as custodians of a discourse. . . . Certain pieces of writing are selected as being more amenable to this discourse than others, and these are what is known as literature or the 'literary canon’" ([*Literary Theory*], 201).
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strategies to which they owe their existence always have ideological implications.

The best way to see how politics puts pressure on readers as they evaluate texts is to look closely at a particular pair of texts: one that has succeeded and one that has not. For my first, I have chosen The Great Gatsby, almost universally—if sometimes grudgingly—recognized as a classic of American literature. For the second, I have picked Margaret Ayer Barnes' 1935 novel, Edna His Wife, since it deals similarly with the difficulties of the long climb up through the American class structure—and, coincidentally, with misplaced Midwesterners in New York. Edna is clearly a novel with something to offer, at least to some readers, since it was quite popular at the time it was written; even among scholars of American literature, however, it has been all but forgotten by now. The difference in their status, I would argue, can never be explained by what John Guillory aptly calls "the massively resistant tautology of literary history: that works ought to be canonized because they are good." Rather, Gatsby has been canonized and Edna tossed in the can at least partly because of a political bias in the way we have been taught to read. But in order to see how this is so, it is necessary to know something about Barnes' novel.

The story begins in 1900. Edna Losser, whose father is the station master of the Blue Island depot of the Rock Island Line, seems about to marry her shy and clumsy railroad beau, Al. But while at a picnic with her almost-fiance, she meets the handsome and upwardly mobile young lawyer, Paul Jones. When her bicycle breaks down, he gallantly but forcefully takes her home on a tandem he manages to borrow and—to her shock—kisses her with the somewhat cynical claim, "I always do what I want." Whether by nature or by upbringing, Edna is a "romantic" at heart and is attracted by his appearance, by his energy, and by his self-confi-

7. In my discussion of Barnes' novel, I am especially indebted to Nancy S. Rabinowitz, with whom many of these ideas have been jointly worked out. For a fuller discussion of the structure, meaning, and critical reception—such as it is—of Edna His Wife, see our "Legends of Toothpaste and Love."
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dence—as well as by the fact that he is a foundling. At first, Paul
doesn't consider the possibility of a lasting attachment, since mar­riage does not fit into this stage of the life he projects for himself.
But he is swayed by "her small mouth, quivering like a child's
mouth . . . her blue eyes, shining with the silver iridescence of a
woman's tears" [63; pt. 1, chap. 2.1]. Since her parents raise ques­tions about his background, they elope. The remainder of the novel
chronicles their worldly rise in the wake of Paul's professional
success. Starting in a small Chicago flat, they move to suburban
Oakwood Terrace, then to a more fashionable residence on Chi­cago's North Side, and finally to a chic, modernistic Park Avenue
penthouse. But the more Paul succeeds, the less he has in common
with Edna, and the more pointless Edna's life becomes. With abun­dant financial resources and servants to do all her domestic chores,
she has less and less intimacy with her family. Remaining very
much the same working-class woman whose aesthetic values were
derived from Gibson drawings, she finds herself increasingly cut
off from the society in which she is supposed to move; the final jolt
to her self-esteem comes when Edna learns that, for the last fifteen
years, Paul has been having an affair with Katharine Boyne, a fa­mous sculptress of whom she has never heard.

Behind the straightforward story is a strong demystification of
democratic capitalist ideology, specifically of the myth of upward
mobility—the belief that social advancement is both desirable and
possible through shrewdness and hard work. Barnes undermines
this myth—not by suggesting, as did many of her contemporaries,
that such success is unattainable, but rather by showing that it
comes at high personal cost and that the structure of society forces
women to pay more than their share. This critique, in turn, forces
Barnes into particular rhetorical maneuvers.

For instance, Edna His Wife stands in sharp contrast to many
apparently similar novels (particularly modern novels) that show
how some extraordinary woman (usually artistically talented) is
held back by social oppression: Erica Jong's Fear of Flying, Mar­garet Drabble's Waterfall, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's Falling.
Powerful as those novels can be, they tend to sidestep one crucial
aspect of Barnes' analysis. Democratic society, after all, is the­oretically structured to protect the interests of the ordinary, not
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the extraordinary; artists, male and female alike, have traditionally found it hard to adapt. Thus, in Fear of Flying, it is hard to tell to what extent Isadora Wing's problems result from her being a woman and to what extent they stem from her being an artist. In order to make sure that her novel has no such ambiguity, Barnes focuses on a woman who is bland to her very core, and thus shows that the ungifted woman is crushed by social inequities, too, simply because she is a woman.

For this reason, she has had to create a heroine whose limitations are frankly crippling. Next to Edna, to paraphrase Vladimir Nabokov, Emma Bovary is a Hegel. Emma, at least, reads; since her world view comes from books, there is always the remote possibility that she might stumble upon one that could serve as a corrective. Edna, in contrast, prefers pictures, especially those that tell stories [e.g., 230, pt. 2, chap. 5.2], hence her love of movies. Early on, Paul lends her “a book called ‘The Origin of Species’, but she could make neither head nor tail out of even the first three pages” [58; pt. 1, chap. 2.1]. She doesn’t read newspapers, and her ignorance about serious art, music, and literature is almost total. Not surprisingly, Edna’s limitations are reflected in a difficulty with words. She thinks in clichés, and stress renders her inarticulate. The best she can manage by way of conversation is a “complicated pretence of interests utterly foreign to her nature, assumed in a passionate desire to please” [58, pt. 1, chap. 2.1]. Even when trying to describe something as simple as Mount Vernon, she can only stumble out with, “It's somehow—American” [318; pt. 3, chap. 1.3].

Now on the surface, neither Barnes’ plot nor her aims nor her consequent rhetorical choices would necessarily seem to predetermine the quality of her book—it ought to be possible to write a good novel within these parameters, just as it is possible to write a bad one. In fact, I think Barnes has succeeded in writing a good book. I am not going to try to prove that here; rather, I am going to try to show that adequate assessment of the novel is rendered unlikely—not impossible, but unlikely—by a masculinist bias in the normalized techniques of reading most academics have been trained to use.

We can see the mismatch between Edna and traditional reading
strategies if we look at how actual readers are likely to apply the various rules of reading to Barnes' and Fitzgerald's texts. Let me start with rules of notice. As I have pointed out, one way in which a given element becomes noticeable is through the placement of the text on an intertextual grid—that is, one of the effects of a literary tradition is that it provides a stock of familiar details, the echoes of which, in subsequent texts, become charged. As a consequence, texts that partake of the academic tradition (which is primarily male) will seem, to academic readers, richer in their details. And given our tendency to associate richness of detail with literary quality (as Brooks argues, "A poem . . . is to be judged . . . by its coherence, sensitivity, depth, richness, and tough-mindedness"),9 such texts will, other things being equal, appear to be better. Thus, Letha Audhuy is able to justify focusing attention on a few apparently invisible lines in Gatsby because they echo The Waste Land;10 T. Jeff Evans is able to center on the word "raw" by holding the text up to "Daisy Miller";11 John Shroeder can privilege certain details in Gatsby because they parallel (perhaps unintentionally) certain details in Mardi;12 other critics can "notice" elements in Gatsby by holding it up to the tradition of Chaucer,13

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Coleridge,14 Conrad,15 and Citizen Kane16—to limit ourselves arbitrarily to male texts centering around the letter C. . . . And because of such interpretive strategies, Gatsby is made to seem rich indeed. To be sure, there are occasional references to female texts in the studies of Gatsby. Michael A. Peterman, for instance, sees the influence of Wharton.17 But for the most part, to read the criticism, the novel appears to spring from fathers alone.

A woman writer might very well not wish to partake of that tradition (although her novel may well be tied to a different and forgotten tradition of women's writing), especially if she is writing about a woman who has not been to college and does not read. Sly references, in a book like Edna, to Conrad and Eliot could only come from the narrator—and they could only serve the end of increasing the authorial audience's sense of distance from the heroine, which would seriously compromise the intended effect. Nor is Barnes able to use cataclysmic events as a way of attracting notice. This is a novel about a life "dulled by habit" and by "the monotonous recurrence of . . . domestic cares" (128; pt. 2, chap. 2.1). One of the points of the novel is that Paul's financial generosity provides physical comfort only by cutting Edna off from any real engagement with life—and that includes engagement with the historical events that surround her. Being the wife of a successful and brilliant man, she is protected from the war and the Depression—she is "too busy hemming window curtains to hear the shot at Sarajevo" (243; pt. 2, chap. 5.3)—which therefore hardly appear in the novel except in terms of their effect on Edna's domestic life:

17. Peterman, "A Neglected Source." Oddly, given Peterman's claims about "Daisy Miller," he provides no solid evidence that Fitzgerald had ever read The Spark.
the war, to a large extent, is a matter of using Crisco instead of butter.

Of course, this failure to employ certain traditional rules of notice does not mean that other kinds of notice have not taken their place. In a novel based on different rules, however, crucial details may well be invisible to the reader without the proper key. Writing of a particular textual feature she finds in women's texts, Nancy K. Miller points out, "When these modalities of difference are perceived, they are generally called implausibilities. They are not perceived, or are misperceived, because the scripting of this fantasy does not bring the aesthetic 'forepleasure' Freud says fantasy scenarios inevitably bring."18 And Naomi Schor defines a whole school of feminist criticism in terms of rules of notice: "The clitoral school of feminist theory might then be identified by its practice of a hermeneutics focused on the detail, which is to say on those details of the female anatomy which have been generally ignored by male critics and which significantly influence our reading of the texts in which they appear."19 And indeed, there is a great deal to notice in Barnes' book as well, but only if you are prepared to pay attention to the ways that Edna dresses or—even more important—to the fate of particular pieces of furniture amid the shifting interior decors as Edna moves socially. But men, at least—and canons are still formed primarily by men—are trained to prick up their ears at an echo of T. S. Eliot in a way that they are not trained to notice dining room tables. If no details stand out, of course, then all details are equally important. Readers who fail to apply proper rules of notice may well, therefore, think that Barnes' novel is written "in too great detail,"20 that in comparison to Fitzgerald's, it is undifferentiated and (what amounts to the same thing) boring.

Let me give a particular example. I noted earlier that Edna had difficulty with language. At first, this might seem reminiscent of such characters as Akaky Akakievich in Gogol's "Overcoat" and Golyadkin in Dostoyevsky's Double—and for good reasons, since

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in our literary culture, a rule of signification almost inevitably makes linguistic failure stand for broader social incapacity. But if we simply compare Barnes to the male Russians, we are bound to be disappointed. Gogol and Dostoyevsky's own command of language was so great that they were able to portray the stutterings of Akaky Akakievich and Golyadkin in a way that is colorful and amusing.

"Well, you see, Petrovich, I—er—have come—er—about that, you know . . ." said Akaky.

It might be as well to explain at once that Akaky mostly talked in prepositions, adverbs, and lastly, such parts of speech as have no meaning whatsoever. If the matter was rather difficult, he was in the habit of not finishing the sentences, so that often having begun his speech with, "This is—er—you know . . . a bit of that, you know . . ." he left it at that, forgetting to finish the sentence in the belief that he had said all that was necessary. [Ellipses in original]21

Next to this, Edna's "It's somehow—American" seems simply drab. (So, for that matter, does Daisy's response to Gatsby's shirts: "They're such beautiful shirts. . . . It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before."22 But Daisy is not the center of her novel.)

There is, however, another perspective from which to look at this phenomenon. If we take our rules of notice not from traditional male texts, but rather from the female tradition, other elements are foregrounded. As feminist critics have pointed out, there is a special kind of denial of access to language that is peculiarly imposed on women. Lawrence Lipking puts it well: "A woman's poetics must begin . . . with a fact that few male theorists have ever had to confront: the possibility of never having been empowered to speak. The right to mythos is the first law of literary creation; not even God could have created light without a word. And women have not been able to forget that law."23 It is not

accidental, for instance, that in Alice Walker's *Third Life of Grange Copeland*, when Brownfield wants to destroy his "tender" wife, "the first thing he started on was her speech."\(^{24}\)

Awareness of this female tradition provides a different kind of notice, and makes certain aspects of Edna's inarticulateness stand out. We are more apt, for instance, to notice the small gestures that Paul makes just after their elopement, when it is necessary to send a telegram to Edna's parents telling them about their marriage. Edna finds it hard to write; Paul, in his efficiency, takes over the task, literally taking "the yellow blank from her flaccid fingers" and writing "firmly."

She had read the message over his elbow as he was writing it and she did not dare to criticize. But the word "cordiality" dismayed her. It was an icy word. Broken phrases of excuse and love and explanation were stumbling through her head—simple phrases, more eloquent than Edna knew in their simplicity—"I'm sorry—I loved him so—forgive me—I love you"—but they were not phrases that she could conceive of confiding to a telegraph operator, or even to William Losser for that matter, a shy and inarticulate man. [88; pt. i, chap. 2.3]

Paul has, in essence, taken over her right to the word—as he does again and again in the book. When Edna turns down an invitation to the fashionable Wintringhams' in order to watch Jessie perform in the school play, Paul insists that they go to the party after all, and Edna is forced to substitute for her own note of regret an acceptance note written "on Paul's curt dictation" (201; pt. 2, chap. 4.2).

Rules of signification work in a parallel way. First of all, in a move clearly linked to our dismissal of the so-called popular, academic critical practice teaches us to value works that stress signification (especially symbolism) over works that depend largely on, say, configuration. Cleanth Brooks, for instance, takes it as an "article of faith" that "literature is ultimately metaphorical and symbolic."\(^{25}\) And while New Criticism may no longer be in vogue,


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the critical revolution of the past two decades, whatever else it has
done, has done little to counteract the stress on the figurative. As a
consequence, there is a tendency to denigrate the real world; good
works, we are told, should reveal another plane beyond our mund-
dane lives. Allen Tate, for instance, felt that literature was de-
meaned by the doctrine of relevance, which claims that subject
matter should be "tested . . . by observation of the world that it
'represents.'"26 And Tate's position is still widely held. Highly
wrought and abstract works are thus deemed better than works
that deal more directly with the concrete aspects of our experience.
Edna herself, though, casts some doubt on this mode of interpreta-
tion. At the fateful picnic, before she meets Paul, she listens to a
sentimental song "written on a tragic plane." But she immediately
rejects the gesture of abstraction, her thoughts "busy with Al. A
brakeman had to be away a lot" (29; pt. i, chap. 1.3). And much
women's fiction, including Edna itself, because it rejects that auto-
matic preference for the abstract, seems too immediate to be taken
seriously. It is for this reason that Lloyd C. Taylor, Jr., is able to
claim that "Barnes's reputation will rest upon her accomplish-
ment as a social historian rather than as a literary artist . . . . Her
writing has none of the presently popular symbolic or poetic
quality."27

But in addition, even the signification that women's novels do
possess is apt to be missed by academic critics. We have been
taught, as Nina Baym puts it, that whaling ships are a better "sym-
bol of the human community" than the sewing circle,28 just as we
have been taught simply not to notice the symbolic richness of
women's worlds. As Annette Kolodny puts it,

There was nothing fortuitous, for example, in Charlotte Perkins

26. Tate, "The Present Function of Criticism," in Essays in Modern Literary
27. Taylor, Margaret Ayer Barnes [New York: Twayne, 1974], unnumbered page
[Preface].
28. Nine Baym, Woman's Fiction, 14. See also Paul Lauter's claim: "Some of the
most popular texts in United States literature present hunting—a whale or a bear—
as paradigms for 'human' exploration and coming of age, whereas menstruation,
pregnancy, and birthing somehow do not serve as such prototypes" ("Introduction,"
xiv).
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Gilman’s decision to situate the progressive mental breakdown and increasing incapacity of the protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper* in an upstairs room that had once served as a nursery (with barred windows, no less). But the reader unacquainted with the ways in which women traditionally inhabited a household might not have taken the initial description of the setting as semantically relevant; and the progressive infantilization of the adult protagonist would thereby lose some of its symbolic implications.  

In part, that is because we have grown up in a culture in which the phallus is the privileged signifier. In Ernest Jones’ phrase, “there are probably more symbols of the male organ itself than all other symbols put together.” Less literally, our culture still supports Thomas Dixon, Jr.’s claim that “war is always the crisis that flashes the search light into the souls of men and nations.” In other words, we already have a well-developed arsenal of techniques for drawing out symbolism latent in male experiences and the objects of male interest. No college student has trouble writing a paper that takes off from the implications of guns, bootleggers, or a gambler who fixes the World Series. *Gatsby* has thus been a gold mine for critics predisposed to privilege its equation of woman as bitch—or prepared to follow up the implications of its symbolic use of the automobile, a symbol that almost inevitably carries with it a certain attitude toward women [indeed, the Jordan automobile company, one of the apparent sources for Jordan Baker’s name, ran ad campaigns that, even more than those of other manufacturers, “associate[d] automobiles with girls and young women”].

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ing an essay on the implications of such female experiences as child raising and homemaking, or such activities as "reversing a puffed sleeve, or turning a full skirt, or freshening a faded bodice with a new velvet bolero or a satin revere" (16; pt. 1, chap. 1.1)—experiences and activities that form a crucial part of Edna—is more difficult for a reader trained in normalized techniques.

Indeed, male texts—at least, American male texts from this period—are apt to parody such concerns. In Raymond Chandler’s "Red Wind," Marlowe is having a beer in a bar when a man enters looking for a woman: "‘tall, pretty, brown hair, in a print bolero jacket over a blue crepe silk dress. Wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat with a velvet band.’" Before the man finds her, he is shot down; shortly thereafter, Marlowe meets a woman in his apartment building.

She had brown wavy hair under a wide-brimmed straw hat with a velvet band and loose bow. She had wide blue eyes and eyelashes that didn’t quite reach her chin. She wore a blue dress that might have been crepe silk, simple in lines but not missing any curves. Over it she wore what might have been a print bolero jacket.

I said: "Is that a bolero jacket?"

She gave me a distant glance and made a motion as if to brush a cobweb out of the way.35

It is not simply the academy’s stress of male objects themselves that skews the issue; the process of symbolization itself, as taught, tends to be male. As Judith Fetterley has cogently argued, in canonical American literature universality is defined "in specifically male terms"—a definition that automatically makes Gatsby a more “American” book than Edna, and hence more appropriate for teaching and research. But masculinization is not found simply in such broad critical maneuvers; the tendency to masculinize as we symbolize is found in our smallest interpretive gestures as well.

36. Fetterley, Resisting Reader, xiii.

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Glass objects in *Gatsby*, we're told by Robert Carringer, represent not only "the ideal West versus the corrupt East" and "childhood innocence versus adult experience," but also "the loss of a woman."  

Third, let us turn to configuration. The canonical, we are often told, transcends the temporary and eccentric, revealing instead what is universal to "mankind." Once we accept this view, the patterns articulated by our traditional genres—tragedy, detective story, *Bildungsroman*—turn out to be more than merely formal. Since those canonical forms encapsulate the essence of being human, they imply what kind of life is worth telling about, and hence what kind of life is most worth living.

Thus, for instance, the aesthetic value of well-roundedness, of consistently returning characters, privileges a certain kind of life and makes other kinds of social reality all but impossible to portray without departing from "good" structure. Well-roundedness might therefore well be incompatible with a realistic slave narrative, since the very point of that narrative might be precisely that you lose your friends and family—indeed, your whole past and any possibility of order, much less progress, in your life—as you are shuffled around.

From a traditional aesthetic perspective, therefore, not only is a novel like Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* episodic, in making that apparently formal judgment, the very life portrayed in that novel—especially its final chapter—is implicitly devaluated in favor of a bourgeois story where relationships grow and develop. From a different perspective, though, one that sees the value of art partly through its ability to articulate social injustices, *Our Nig* would seem far more cannily composed. As Barbara Foley argues in her discussion of "the unremittingly episodic structure of most abolitionist documentary novels," "the hero's destiny was intended to illustrate social trends and conflicts, but it was not conceived as a synecdochic reconciliation of those trends and conflicts. Rather, in the frequent arbitrariness of its conclusion, the abolitionist novel proposed that the conditions for formal completeness and closure were dictated by extratextual as well as textual considerations."  

Indeed, from this second perspective, a novel like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* might be downgraded, not because of its episodic nature (often held against it in the academy), but rather for the opposite reason, because Stowe tries too hard to round it off at the end, thus submitting to precisely those social values she is trying to critique. This coincidence between plot structure and implied social value means, among other things, that the actions of those with access to power (with its corollary, violence) lend themselves to sharply outlined patterns of the sort we have been taught to seek in literary texts. It is easier, that is, to write a traditionally well-formed story about a businessman or a cop than it is to write one about a housewife who doesn’t seem to do anything. Such a domestic story, because it will not fit the norms of the adventure story or the tragedy, is apt to appear shapeless and diffuse, or—as Herschell Brickell said about Barnes’ *Within This Present*—“unnecessarily long.”39 It is not exactly that women’s lives are inappropriate to narrative fiction. We have canonical plot structures that deal with women who ruin themselves in adultery (*Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina*) or who remain self-sacrificially steadfast even under extreme adversity (*Southworth’s Changed Brides/The Bride’s Fate*). But the potential roles for women in such plots are restricted. As Alice Jardine puts it, “If the author is male, one finds that the female destiny (at least in the novel) rarely deviates from one or two seemingly irreversible, dualistic teleologies: monster and/or angel, she is condemned to death (or sexual mutilation or disappearance) and/or to happy-ever-after marriage. Her plot is not her own.”40 In other words, traditional patternings, even though they may vary by genre and nationality, make it difficult to write about particular kinds of women.

41. Nancy K. Miller puts it well: “Now, if the plots of male fiction chart the daydreams of an ego that would be invulnerable, what do the plots of female fiction reveal? Among French women writers, it would seem at first blush to be the obverse negative of ‘nothing can happen to me.’ The phrase that characterizes the heroine’s posture might well be a variant of Murphy’s law: If anything can go wrong, it will. And the reader’s sense of security, itself dependent on the heroine’s, comes from feeling not that the heroine will triumph in some conventionally positive way but that she will transcend the perils of plot with a self-exalting dignity. Here, national constraints on the imagination . . . do seem to matter: the second-chance rerouting
Because she is not one of those stereotyped female characters, Edna does not lead a life that fits the conventional patterns. The point of the book, as I have argued, is not only to describe the experiences of women and others with limited opportunities for action, but also to cry out against those limitations. Such sharply focused actions as Gatsby's violent death are thus ruled out, and one traditional means of producing what the reader will see as a well-structured story is unavailable. The plot of accepted self-denial is equally ruled out. Barnes' problem is made more difficult by Edna's dullness—and especially by the combination of her dullness and the novel's feminist perspective. There are surprisingly few novels about stupid people—and it is not accidental that most of those in that small pool succeed in achieving traditionally acceptable configurations in part because they have a masculinist perspective. For instance, Marquand's *Melville Goodwin, USA* (1951), about an unsophisticated general who, like Edna, is out of place in the chic social set in which he finds himself, might seem roughly analogous in certain ways to Barnes' novel. But that novel shows us what makes Barnes' task so difficult. Goodwin is a male, and since men (especially military men) have adventures in our society, even the most dull-witted among them have more novelistically shapely things to offer us. Edna is, to my mind, a well-shaped book. But to see that shape, we have to be prepared to accept the possibility that the trajectory of a woman's socially determined decline from a useful and pretty young housewife to a fat, elderly cast-off might provide just as good a shape for a novel as the rise and fall of a self-made man chasing the American dream.

Coherence, in many ways, is the most interesting of our categories, partly because it has until recently probably been the most highly regarded aesthetic virtue, but also because coherence is especially subject to prejudgment. As I said earlier, texts do resist some readings: not every critic can turn *Hamlet* into a comedy. But texts rarely resist imputations of coherence: any well-wrought academic who begins with a serious belief that a text is coherent will ultimately be able to make it so. This tends to perpetuate canons, we are more likely to assume (and hence to find) high
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levels of coherence in famous books, like Fitzgerald's, than in forgotten novels, like Barnes'.

But the finding of coherence is not entirely a subjective process. Even a reader prepared, from the start, to find coherence in a text would have less trouble with *Gatsby* than with *Edna*, for two reasons. First, coherence, like notice, is often a function of the intertextual grid on which a text is placed; books that are like other canonized texts are deemed coherent by similarity, almost as if they shared a club membership. Indeed, it may not be accidental that critics often fall into figurative language that supports just this notion. David Daiches, for instance, notes that a work "is either admitted into the canon, as it were, or is not. Those admitted have all an equal status."\(^{42}\)

And as I have tried to show, we are more familiar with the male literary tradition. Second, and even more important, one way of finding coherence in a text is to apply rules of naming, specifically to find a universal theme—a central metaphor—that holds it together. Even today, in our supposedly post-structural world, this may still generate more critical writing than any other interpretive gesture. And if your stock of themes consists primarily of such goods as "The American Dream,"\(^{43}\) "The Earth Mother,"\(^{44}\) "The Grail,"\(^{45}\) or "The Homecom-

\(^{42}\) Daiches, *Critical Approaches to Literature*, 302. See also George P. Elliott's discussion—tongue-in-cheek, to be sure, but nonetheless revealing—of "whether Chandler will ever be elected into literary history," whether his "nomination for membership" will be "seconded" by those with "the power to vote him in" ("Country Full of Blondes," *Nation*, April 23, 1960, 354).


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ing”\(^46\)—whether or not those themes are seen ironically, as many of them are in analyses of Gatsby—male-centered texts will almost automatically seem more coherent, since these themes are more appropriate to male experiences. The same is true if your cohering lens comes from Freudian psychology—for that, too, at least until recent feminist revisions, has presupposed certain limited roles for women.\(^47\)

Edna is held together in a radically different way. Yes, the book, like Gatsby, reflects back and forth on itself, repeating themes with subtle variations. But these themes are not “The Grail” or “The Homecoming”—the novel gravitates, rather, around changing attitudes toward birthing, methods of raising children, and the ways that middle age and domesticity can reduce a woman to invisibility. In our current critical climate, few nonfeminist critics are likely to take these as serious themes. It is thus not surprising that Barnes’ felicities have gone unrecognized—or, even worse, have been viewed as flaws by critics who refuse to start with the assumption that she knew what she was doing.

Of course, I do not pretend to have given a full account of the reasons behind the relative rankings of authors; canonization is a complex process, and our culture’s preferences have multiple causes, many of which I have not even touched on. As I pointed out earlier in the chapter, some texts are, even from the standpoint of their authorial audience, less well put together than others, in the sense that they simply don’t do what they’re supposed to do when they are transformed by the interpretive procedures they themselves call for. Furthermore, the technology and the economic structure of the publishing industry have their roles in canon formation, as does, in the words of Jane Tompkins, “an author’s rela-

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tions to the mechanisms by which his or her work is brought before the public."48 And it is probably the case that texts that disturb in certain ways are less likely to be canonized than others that are safer. Of course, we make a great show of our belief that the point of literature is to get us out of ourselves and to learn new experiences. And there is no doubt that many canonized novels do confront difficult issues in ways that can hardly be considered comforting. But there is a certain kind of repetition in the canon as well, at least in its focus. As Judith Fetterley provocatively puts it, "If a white male middle-class literary establishment consistently chooses to identify as great and thus worth reading those texts that present as central the lives of white male middle-class characters, then obviously recognition and reiteration, not difference and expansion, provide the motivation for reading."49 To put it in other terms, we may readily canonize books that raise problems—but we seem to prefer it if those problems are the problems of a certain dominant group, for then at least the centrality of that group remains an implicit assumption.

Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that the canon grows as well from the interpretive principles we take for granted. Specifically, part of the preference for Fitzgerald stems from the ways we've been taught to approach literature; many of the criticisms leveled against Barnes—to the extent that she is mentioned at all—are likewise built into our prefabricated ways of reading. To say that the "range of her fiction appears extremely narrow" when compared to Fitzgerald's,50 much less to criticize her writing for appealing primarily to women,51 is to say less about the quality of her work itself than about the antifeminism implicit in our most familiar reading strategies.

In arguing this way about Barnes' novel, however, I am not merely making a plug for a favorite text. Nor am I simply attempting to provide an explanation—however incomplete—for a particular canonical choice. Rather, I hope that my arguments will raise

48. Tompkins, Sensational Designs, 32.
49. Fetterley, "Reading about Reading," 150.
50. Taylor, Margaret Ayer Barnes, 129.
questions about how we should act in the face of our culture’s evaluations. If canonization resulted merely from inherent qualities in the text, of course, standard academic practice would be justified; we could continue, without worry, to read, study, and teach those texts that are inherently better. If such subjectivists as Robert Crosman and David Bleich were right that readers “make” the texts they read, then there would be no particular reason to change our practices either, since no choices would be demonstrably better (or more harmful) than those that the academy has already made. But if, as I have tried to argue, reading strategies can be more or less appropriate to particular texts, and if there are valuable experiences to be gained from an authorial reading of Barnes’ novel, experiences that have been blocked by the imposition of inappropriate interpretive moves, then another course of action suggests itself: to teach ourselves to read in new ways (not simply in a new way), ways that are self-conscious about how interpretation itself can be ideological, and ways that can thus help us to make the most of the rich literary heritage that has been passed down to us.

In order to do this, we will have to break away from some strongly entrenched notions—for instance, from the traditional reliance on close reading, which is valorized by New Criticism and post-structuralism alike. Whatever its values—and close reading is certainly a useful skill—it can, if overemphasized, distort our literary experiences. To be sure, close reading is necessary for authorial readings of certain texts, especially a particular kind of lyric poetry. But to the extent that canons celebrate texts that work with approved strategies, treating close reading as a synonym for good reading—as it is generally treated in this country—elevates that kind of poetry into the ideal literary type. As Terry Eagleton puts it, “To call for close reading... is to do more than insist on due attentiveness to the text. It inescapably suggests an attention to this rather than to something else: to the ‘words on the page’ rather than to the contexts which produced and surround them.”

In so doing, it fosters the false belief that highly wrought works are necessarily the best, and that texts—even narratives—that do not share the virtues of Donne and Yeats are inferior, rather than just

52. Eagleton, Literary Theory, 44.
different. As long as we privilege close reading as it is currently conceived, without questioning it, we will end up accepting, with but minor modifications, the canon erected on it, with all its ideological biases.

Furthermore, the stress on close reading—which means, among other things, slow reading—tends to restrict the number of texts a reader is likely to be familiar with, and there is no reason to believe that this is inevitably a good thing. Receptiveness to new texts and new literary experiences, after all, does not depend solely on the care with which you approach them. If my arguments here have any validity, receptiveness depends as well on the range of your reading, on the variety of interpretive strategies that you have at your disposal. The best readers—at least among college students—tend to be those who were the most voracious readers as children; I am not sure that training them, as we do in high school AP classes and in college, to read not widely, but too well—that is, encouraging them to substitute intensive for extensive reading—is an unmitigated blessing. New Critical dogma may insist that, in the words of Brooks and Warren, “before extensive reading can be profitable, the student must have some practice in intensive reading’’; but the opposite may well be the case: intensive reading may well be a worthless skill for someone who has not already devoured a large and heterogeneous collection of texts. Deep reading, in other words, can complement wide reading, but it cannot replace it, for by itself it is not the magic key to literature; it will open some texts, but will shatter when turned in others.

It is not simply that learning these new, more flexible, and more self-conscious modes of reading will increase the number of texts that we can enjoy and learn from. Indeed, were quantity the issue, we could rest content with the current canon, which has more than enough texts to fill up a lifetime. Rather, these new kinds of reading will allow us to enjoy a broader range of texts, texts that may give us a perspective on unquestioned cultural assumptions that canonical texts do not. Only in this way, I believe, can reading really serve the process of self-liberation, for only this kind of reading can make us aware of—and hence able to escape from—the limitations imposed by traditional interpretive practices.
