Nostalgia Is Not Enough
Why Elizabeth Hardwick Misreads Ibsen, Plath, and Woolf

Elizabeth Hardwick's *Seduction and Betrayal*, subtitled "Women and Literature," might deceive the unwary reader into thinking that Hardwick is a feminist or that the book contains some theoretical ideas about heroines of literature or female writers. The title essay (also the most serious) is fascinating. In a high elegiac style (and style is Hardwick's forte), she mourns the loss to literature of all the seduced and betrayed heroines as subjects or objects of the reader's pity, now that sex is no longer considered a tragic subject. While most critics seem considerably cheered by this prospect, Hardwick is saddened. Were the author's name absent, the reader might assume, with some justification, that the book is a pastoral elegy by a Southern gentleman-scholar for the good old days when seduced and abandoned women aroused the reader's sorrow and pity. The book is an exercise in nostalgia for woman as victim.

Hardwick's essays are personal, subjective, and ahistorical, if not antifeminist, to a surprising degree. Both literary criticism by women and feminist literary criticism have histories; the latter category, for example, contains a recognizable subgenre of social or socialist feminist literary criticism. Hardwick's writing is a rearguard pretense that one can write outside ideology, from some pure objective position, about a literature that was composed outside ideology. The vigorous defense of Hardwick by Susan Sontag might lead one to believe that Hardwick thinks of her own work as a contribution to the some form of feminist debate, even to its subgenre of socialist feminism; but she is mistaken. For Hardwick, the essential problem is power, and she finds abhorrent the search for it, even when power simply means the quest for identity.
by a fictional heroine or an actual female writer. She blames the wives and sisters of great writers (e.g., Jane Carlyle and Dorothy Wordsworth) for not themselves becoming great; yet the women writers who do become powerful are therefore frightening. Heroines of the benighted past, on the other hand, are “interesting”—because they have been betrayed (Donna Elvira, Hester Prynne). “Seduction and Betrayal” contains this statement:

For us now, the illicit has become a psychological rather than a moral drama. We ask ourselves how the delinquent ones feel about their seductions, adulteries, betrayals, and it is by the quality of their feelings that our moral judgments are formed. If they suffer and grieve and regret, they can be forgiven and even supported. If they boast or fall into an inner carelessness, what they are doing or have done can seem to be wrong. Love, even of the briefest span, is a powerful detergent, but “destructiveness” is a moral stain.¹

At the risk of sounding very unfashionable and conservative, I beg to differ. The capacity for moral judgment has not changed simply because Freud has given us tools for understanding human motivation. Even the problems of sexual “sins” have moral solutions, whether Hardwick recognizes them or not. The literary critic’s potency is weakened by Hardwick’s refusal to accept the critical role of making moral as well as artistic judgments. The refusal of this power, by arguing that one can no longer make moral judgments about literature, is irresponsible. That a woman critic who writes about heroines in novels and about women writers should abjure moral power at a time in history when she has a chance of being heard is puzzling to say the least.

“The idea of sexual responsibility for the passions of youth cannot be understood as an ethical one,” Hardwick writes of An American Tragedy. She argues that modern readers do not share Tolstoy’s characters’ view in The Kreutzer Sonata that “real debauchery consists in freedom from the moral bonds toward a woman with whom one enters into carnal relations.”² Stoicism in the face of sexual betrayal is the
quality Hardwick most values in women. It is no wonder that Tess of the d’Urbervilles is her favorite heroine. “Transcendent stoical suffering” at the hands of men and fate have made Tess too impossibly passive for many modern readers; yet Hardwick mourns her passing. Sex is no longer a serious subject; alas, the victim can no longer claim our pity. Anyone who was equally nostalgic about the loss to literature of the subject of slavery or child labor would appear ridiculous.

Yes, we do need female literary critics of authority and perception. But let Hardwick put her pearls away, and hang around her neck a magnifying glass, a pair of scissors, and a pen with a very sharp point. Let her take the long historical view and ask the right questions. Virginia Woolf did it; her essays on Jane Carlyle and Dorothy Wordsworth praise the writing and power of observation of the two. Woolf asked how it was possible for Jane Carlyle to write at all, given the demands her husband made on her time and her health. She found the answer in Jane Carlyle’s relationship with another female writer, Geraldine Jewsbury, a relationship both provoking and sustaining, a clue to how many nineteenth-century women “managed” to write. Hardwick is determined to make us feel that Carlyle overpraised his wife’s writing out of guilt for being a bad husband.

By placing the reader in the subject’s time and social circumstances so that we may see the restrictions on her freedom, the bravery and struggle it took to be creative, Woolf set an example for the female critic. By digging up and preserving the lives and work of women writers, she called on women to write the history of women and to keep it alive in books and libraries and women’s colleges. Hers was a call for alternative institutions based on the knowledge that there can be no creativity without power. She saw the female artist’s struggle as economic and historical. “For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice,” Woolf wrote in A Room of One’s Own. In that book she urged college women to rewrite history with women in it, and she berated earlier generations of women for giving money to Oxford and Cambridge, urging present and future genera-
tions to concentrate and collect the history and experience of women because "we think back through our mothers." *Three Guineas* warns women of the dangers of entering the male professions in very specific terms; it was as a socialist and feminist that Virginia Woolf refused the order of Dame of the British Empire. She always wrote and acted as a woman first.

The works of feminist literary criticism we learn from now (1978) are Virginia Woolf's essays, the work of de Beauvoir, of early Rebecca West, of Millett and Greer and Brigid Brophy, despite some lapses, Elizabeth Janeway, Mary McCarthy, and currently Adrienne Rich and Tillie Olsen. Patricia Spacks's *The Female Imagination* made little theoretical advance and suffers because the author condescends to her subject, to her reader, and to the students she taught. Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* brilliantly gives feminists new categories of thought and experience to analyze and takes into account women's influence on each other. Hardwick's work resembles Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* in that neither author writes as a woman. Fearing male criticism, both writers, to avoid provoking it, conceal female identity and use the "least feminine" critical weapons, wit, irony, and intellect. They are never angry or earnest; they do not espouse causes or make moral judgments; they never say "I think," much less "I, a woman, think..." This technique works. Ellmann writes down to the reader. Hardwick has not, in fact, been attacked by male critics, and one does not imagine that Mary Ellmann would take Norman Mailer's wrath seriously. But they have confused their female critics and readers. This is not to say that a feminist literary critic must be personal, or that she must devote all her energies to the cause. She might take all literature as her province. But, like their distinguished forebear Virginia Woolf, feminist critics speak and write proudly as women, and as feminists they assume a female authority in tone; they never let an opportunity slip by to correct the errors of their male colleagues. They seem to like being women; they like other women. (Virginia Woolf said, "The truth is, I often like women, I like their unconventionality. I like their subtlety. I like their anonymity.") They know the history of women writers and critics and write as part of
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that history, acknowledging by what they do Virginia Woolf's prophecy that it will take generations of women writers and critics to develop the social conditions necessary to produce a great woman writer, a "Shakespeare's sister."

Feminism has its fellow travelers as well as veterans of its battles and scalers of barricades. *Women and Literature*, the subtitle of Elizabeth Hardwick's book, is as misleading as *Essays in Literature and Society*, the subtitle of her earlier book, *A View of My Own*. (In that title the words *My Own* invite comparison to Woolf's *One's Own*: while Woolf regards herself as the voice of silent thousands, Hardwick stresses her singularity.) Like her publishing in *The New York Review of Books*, Hardwick's subtitles imply social conscience or at least social consciousness on the part of the literary critic. There appears to be some buried wish in the author to make these essays socially useful, but the wish is not fulfilled. She really is not sure she likes women at all, not sure of what she thinks their lives should be. In the earlier book there is an extremely ambivalent essay on Mary McCarthy. Hardwick admires McCarthy—in fact, it may have been the challenge of McCarthy's essays on Ibsen in *Sights and Spectacles* that inspired her own work. She admires the "subversive soul sustained by exceptional energy." But she writes as if they did not share the same sex: "She is an odd woman, and perhaps oddest of all is this stirring sense of the importance of her own intellectual formulations. Very few women writers can resist the temptation of feminine sensibility; it is there to be used as a crutch, and the reliance upon it is expected and generally admired."

What is one to make of this? Like Shaw, Hardwick finds the intellectual and political female writer so alien a creature as to warrant the creation of a third sex to accommodate her ego. Worst of all to Hardwick is McCarthy's ruthless morality, which becomes aesthetically acceptable only if one admires the daring exploit and adventure of a woman writing from moral conviction. The critic praises by denying sisterhood under the skin with the writer. She wonders—like Dr. Johnson regarding that odd animal the passionate woman preacher—that she can do it at all. "A career of candor and dissent is not an easy one for a
woman," Hardwick explains, "the license is jarring and the dare often forbidding. Such a person needs more than confidence and indignation. A great measure of personal attractiveness and a high degree of romantic singularity are necessary to step free of the mundane, the governessy, the threat of earnestness and dryness." To whom, we ask, is the license jarring? If one has beauty, class, and style, one can afford to be serious, political, and moral. These words do not come from the woman's side of the fence as a friendly warning to women, but from the other side; they are exactly the words of kind male professors to their earnest female students.

Susan Sontag has come to the defense of Seduction and Betrayal in The New York Review of Books while attacking Adrienne Rich for being too earnest, "governessy," and moral. That publication, using Virginia Woolf and Adrienne Rich as scapegoats, seems to be leading a crusade against our best feminist artists and two who coincidentally have expressed strong political views and a concern for the study of motherhood as a social construction. Seduction and Betrayal, Sontag says, is the "most remarkable of recent contributions to the feminist imagination of history." I assume from this that Sontag and Hardwick wish the book to be classified as feminist; yet it altogether lacks the imagination of history as well as of feminism.

Most feminists have read Hardwick's work as antifeminist. And rightly so. Not because we are self-righteous and anti-elitist, as Sontag asserts (although we are often both—with some historical justification), but because the sides have been drawn in these battles and Hardwick, sometimes too ladylike to fight at all, has written in defense of the view of women held by the supposed legions of men who are grieving over the loss to literature and culture of "feminine sensibility." Hardwick supposes in another essay, called "The Subjection of Women," that "there is bound to be a little laughter in the wings at the mere thought of this madly sensible and brilliantly obscure tome by Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex." We can only assume the author of this faint praise to be among the laughers. One thing partisans of the same cause have in common is the enemy, but he must be named to be known.
Hardwick writes from an ivory tower where novels and their characters exist outside of literary history, outside of social context and social history, like well-matched pearls on a string. The effect of these pearls is superficially glamorous, charming, and ladylike, but ornamental. The book's one solid virtue is its good taste—sometimes good taste is bad form. *Seduction and Betrayal* is as well written, mannered, and gently unideological as Quentin Bell's biography of Virginia Woolf. That book, in Rebecca West's words, turned literary biography into a "blood sport," conducting its slaughter of the reputation of a great writer in tones of an aristocratic assumption of superiority; the Hardwick book elegantly deals a similar blow to women's literary criticism. In her attack on Woolf, her reviling of the great heroines of Ibsen, Hedda Gabler and Rebecca West, and her making fun of Mrs. Linde and Hilda Wangel, she reminds one of those critics of the 1890s who called *Hedda Gabler* "an open drain," "a dirty act done publicly." To praise Thea and Beata and all the self-sacrificing women in Ibsen's plays is not only to misread Ibsen but to sneer at anyone who has found joy and strength and wisdom in the "Northern Wizard's" knowledge of the human heart and of bourgeois society.

I would like to argue with Hardwick's readings of Ibsen, of Plath, and of Woolf. These writers and their works have been the subjects of much critical controversy. Are they feminists? Are their works feminist? Woolf and Ibsen are; in my view Plath is not. Hardwick's view is the opposite.

One mark of Hardwick's failure as a critic is, I believe, her use of indirect discourse, a device she shares with Mary Ellmann. In earlier times this mode and its sister modes of pseudonymity and the epistolary style were often subversive and feminist. As Virginia Woolf used them, they were. The indirect discourse of *A Room of One's Own* is balanced by the direct factual attacks in the footnotes, and by the time Woolf wrote *Three Guineas* she had transformed the polite tone of a lady writing a letter into direct and angry polemic. The past had its uses to Woolf; history armed her with facts about women. Hardwick, on the contrary, is sentimental about the past; she is nostalgic about the literature of women's oppression. Hardwick's publishers call her
“America's foremost woman of letters.” This title—conferred, not won—acts as a territorial warning to other female literary critics: recognition and power are for the well-mannered noncombatants in the current ideological battles. Her recent essays praising Simone Weil show unblushingly an admiration for the brilliant martyred woman. The tragedy of self-immolation and destruction escapes Hardwick, for she does not see it in social terms. Simone Weil's life is a frightening cautionary tale, but she insists on seeing it as a romantic opera.

“That profoundly interesting subject, the value that men set upon women's chastity,” would make an interesting book, Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own*; and “Chastity had then, it has even now, a religious importance in a woman's life, and has so wrapped itself round with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest.” One wishes that Hardwick had the courage, for she writes so well, to mock the male fetishism that made heroines into victims. Instead, she yearns nostal­gically for a sentimental view of women. I wish she would write, with something like Woolf's galloping good humor and political wit, of the real heroines: Antigone, Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Medea, Rosalind and Lady Macbeth, Nora, Hedda, Hilda Wangel, and Rebecca West. Woolf names her heroines and then is struck by the historical contradic­tions. Why did the Greeks, she wants to know, and Shakespeare and Ibsen, who came from societies supposedly so repressive to women, produce such magnificent heroines? But Hardwick is not concerned with these questions. Let us look at her reading of Ibsen.

For Ibsen's real heroines she has nothing but reproach, and she sets about finding her own heroines, the victims: Thea, Beata, and Mrs. Solness. It would be very interesting to see her reading of *When We Dead Awaken*, Ibsen's most difficult and disturbing play, about the artist's abuse of muse, the model, the victim, and her revenge.

Hardwick says that Hedda Gabler has “no motivation whatever” and wishes that, like the Greek heroines, Hedda's destructiveness could be explained by sexual betrayal. Hardwick cannot see Hedda's social role as important. In the classroom the students will say of this praise of victims, long-suffering women, the self-sacrificers:
“Ah, but you have missed the point. The Theas, Beatas, and self-sacrificing aunts are the enemies of freedom. Hedda is all of us. She is the type of the female artist. In her despair at her lack of education and experience, Hedda kills her fellow artist, her ‘brother.’ She is like Wilde’s Salomé, a woman, an artist, and a revolutionary. Social conditions and family life have destroyed the possibility of freedom. She makes her death a work of art, as Salomé makes John the Baptist’s death and her own into art.”

“Yes,” they will say, “one should be afraid of Hedda. But she is not fully responsible for the evil she causes. Ibsen’s genius is shown not only in Hedda’s tragedy but in the details of her despair. Tesman’s aunt gives her George’s slippers, carefully wrapped, as a symbol of domesticity and service, the passing of the role from aunt to wife, accompanied by some teasing remarks about Hedda’s pregnancy. That Hedda attacks only the aunt’s hat is a miracle of restraint. Tesman has spent their honeymoon doing research on the domestic industries of Brabant in the Middle Ages. Hedda is horsewoman, free spirit, motherless daughter of a powerful father. Like all of Ibsen’s heroines, she is neither industrious nor domestic. She is the class enemy of bourgeois life. Her first weapon is idleness, as upsetting to those who live by the Protestant work ethic as passive resistance was to British soldiers in India.”

“We seem able to accept Russian nihilists as heroes, and even the sorrows of young Werther as social, romantic, and revolutionary. With Mann’s guidance we can even see that aesthetes and dandies under the banner of art for art’s sake began the revolt against Victorian values. Why can’t Hedda be seen as a heroine?”

Elizabeth Robins, the great Ibsen actress who almost single-handedly produced, directed, and played the leading role in Hedda Gabler, and who was largely responsible for the staging of most of the Ibsen plays in London in the 1890s, came to Hedda’s defense in her Ibsen and the Actress. No man except that wizard Ibsen could understand Hedda, she said. Men couldn’t see her in their own wives and daughters. She was “a bundle of unused possibilities.” But Robins rejected the temptation to make Hedda “sympathetic.” She never wanted to “whitewash
General Gabler’s somewhat lurid daughter; Hedda was “piteful in her hungry loneliness,” but insolent—and tragic. Robins saw that Hedda’s life was constricted by fear, that she had the courage nevertheless to refuse life on certain terms, and that she did not choose to submit herself to bourgeois respectability or even to comfortable adultery. General Gabler’s pistols guaranteed her the right to suicide, a right that we perhaps do not take seriously today but which those socialists or social Darwinists of the 1890s, Elizabeth Robins and Henrik Ibsen, considered one of the few rights that gave dignity to the lives and deaths of the oppressed.

“Certainly the particular humiliations and enslavements that threaten women do not threaten men. Such enslavements may seem so unreal to decent men as to appear as melodrama,” wrote Robins. To create the effect of the stunted artist, the plunderer of beauty, Robins played Hedda in a feather boa. Shaw said that the blood of the slaughtered birds would load her down at Judgment Day, but the fashionable ladies of London took it up immediately. Its exotic concentration of death and sexuality persists today. Ibsen would have liked that touch, as appropriate as Hedda’s treasured, rather phallic, pistols.

The feminist critical consciousness has no need to remake Hedda into a suitable propagandistic model. She exists, as Ibsen created her, as a horrifying example of the personal and social consequences of neglecting to give women useful and interesting work of their own. Hedda is the universal of the unawakened female artist. She cannot make the transition from daughter to wife because neither role has allowed her to find her own identity. She wishes that the vine leaves of her bitter jokes could crown her own head or give her some connection with the creative life of the artist. She shudders at the thought of the life in her womb because she, a dependent creature, will be responsible for another creature. The ties of marriage and motherhood will then be strengthened, and she will participate in perpetuating the very social structure that so restricts her freedom. It is interesting in this context to note that there are other objections to Hedda as heroine than Hardwick’s horror. Some modern readers don’t find the struggle of the middle-class artist truly universal. Meredith wrote, to mystified
nineteenth-century readers, that he looked forward to the day when his individual artist-heroine, Diana of the Crossways, would be seen as reactionary because she did not represent the aspirations of all women for freedom. Perhaps we are free enough to be approaching that day in reading Ibsen.²

It is no accident that allusions to syphilis constitute a strong undercurrent in both *Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll's House*, constantly pulling us back to a realization of havoc wreaked on society by the double standard. The unseen fathers play a huge role in Ibsen’s plays. They pass on syphilis, insanity, and debt to their sons, but desire for an impossible freedom to their daughters. Hedda tells Judge Brack that she wanted to jump out of the train on her honeymoon, but was terrified that her stockings would show. Ibsen dramatizes in this detail the whole conflict in her character between desire for liberty and fear of it.

Hedda thinks perhaps that women are freer in Mme. Diana’s whorehouse, but her status excludes her from Judge Brack’s “stag party,” which brings Ibsen’s concern for the separation of the sexes to a mythological climax. It is at Mme. Diana’s that Lovborg, like Actaeon, meets an ugly and ignominious death. Accidentally shooting himself in the bowels, he is like Actaeon surprising Diana and her nymphs bathing. Did Ibsen name his whore “Diana” to make us question what has happened to the ideal of womanhood?

When Hardwick writes that Ibsen’s heroines were created out of suspicion, she is wrong. “The old man” seems often to have known women better than they know themselves. When she revives the idea that Ibsen was not a feminist, one wonders what her motives are. Ibsen wanted to make it clear that he was an artist, not a politician, and his statements that he was not a socialist or a feminist must be taken in the context of a lifetime of work for both causes. Instead, Hardwick suggests that there was some misogynist motive behind Ibsen’s destructive women.

Max Beerbohm explained this problem very well. He suggested that Ibsen was perhaps not a feminist in the strict sense of the word, but a poet of the human heart’s longing for freedom. In Ibsen’s experience
it was middle-class women who embodied that desire most fully. So he took them as his subject. In our own time, somewhat the same struggle persists. In Meredith's terms (described above), it will take a great measure of psychological as well as political freedom to make the individual middle-class heroine's struggle obsolete because too individualistic. Ibsen explores the personalities of those women who hold back the freedom of others very well, the self-sacrificers and self-appointed "muses." There are fewer Theas about, but those meek girl graduate students do seem to inherit the earth. Thea found another "professor" to serve before Lovborg was cold in his grave. The future belongs to Tesman and Thea at the depressing end of the play.

There are fewer Beatas who kill themselves because of their barrenness when it is their husbands who are impotent; there are fewer Beatas who fight with those weapons of passive aggression so well known to women throughout the centuries, the absolving letter that blames, the revenge after death. There are fewer frigid Mrs. Solnesses, clutching their childhood dolls, for whom marriage, childbirth, and death are only a long slow retreat from the promises of girlhood. But you can meet Hilda Wangel, with her knapsack and her mountain boots, in the street or in the classroom any day. She may not be a feminist, but she has no intention of ending up like Mrs. Solness. "Radiantly, unscrupulously, immorally sane," as William Archer said, she will drive her teachers to their deaths, to acts of heroism and creation that go beyond themselves—that is, unless she is given the education and training to build her own "castles in the air." Hilda is the stereotype of the "woman behind every great man" pushed to the extreme. She is Ibsen's attack on the social convention of woman as "inspiration" to the artist.

In *The Master Builder* we have a warning to men of genius to teach the next generation, not to rely on the young for new visions or potency (the climax is appropriately sexual, when Solness crowns the spire with a wreath and plunges to his death), but to provide them with the tools to make their own way in the world. *The Master Builder*, like many of Ibsen's plays, explores the male artist's need and guilt in using woman as muse for inspiration as well as the
woman-as-object's intricate forms of revenge. Hilda is both angel and troll, virgin and witch. If this young artist finds no way open to her desire for power and freedom, she will find it in human relationships. She will be the siren, the muse who inspires but destroys.

The ghost of Rebecca West, radical, feminist, and "New Woman" is also still abroad. Like some nineteenth-century critics of Ibsen, Hardwick concentrates on the wronged wife, ignoring the havoc Beata's ignorance and innocence can wreak. For Rosmersholm is a play about how society controls its dissidents. Rebecca brings down reactionary Rosmersholm and all it stands for. But the liberals, not the radicals, benefit. It will certainly be easier for the liberals to take over the town once the purists of both right and left have been eliminated.

The revelation that Dr. West was Rebecca's real father is the climax of the play, and one need not consult Freud's brilliant essay (which Hardwick dismisses) to know that Rebecca's guilt about her sexual desires for Dr. West and her realization that her mother had been not only his servant but his mistress cause her downfall. She is Rosmer's servant and has helped to drive his wife insane. She confesses her sexual desires for Rosmer, her new father figure. But he retreats from her as he had from Beata's sexuality. Rosmer traps Rebecca's idealism and guilt in his demand that she match the self-sacrifice of Beata's love. Does she love him enough to die for him? Rebecca is converted to Rosmer's "higher love," and they go off to drown in the millrace. Whose is the victory? It is a lesson in social control. Radical idealists can be destroyed by guilt about their family and sex lives; the conscience is conservative. Think of all the young radicals following ascetic gurus. Yes, Rebecca is still with us.

Hardwick's essay on A Doll's House misinterprets the pivotal role of Mrs. Linde and revives the old "How could Nora leave her children?" complaint. Hardwick argues that Mrs. Linde is "dependent" and therefore cannot be the agent of "independent" Nora's liberation. But Mrs. Linde is one of Ibsen's self-sacrificing women who have changed. She now regrets the past and seeks her own happiness. She can help the dependent Nora, who is a secret self-sacrificer, to rid herself of her illusions. Hardwick says, "It drops a stain on our admiration of Nora.
Ibsen has put the leaving of her children on the same moral and emotional level as the leaving of her husband, and we cannot, in our hearts, assent to that." In the 1890s the critics were cruder, and several of them rewrote the ending. One classic of wish fulfillment had Nora return to find Torvald a drunkard, her daughter a prostitute, and her son an embezzler. Hardwick is more delicate, but just as judgmental.

For a woman in a play, Nora has caused an extraordinary century of trouble. When she slammed the door on that bulwark of patriarchal society, the middle-class family and motherhood, she aroused as much fury as if she had spat on the flag.

It seems to me that one of Ibsen's major themes is sisterhood. Nora can escape from the doll's house only with the help of her old Nanny and her childhood friend, Mrs. Linde. Hardwick has harsh words for Krogstad; she fails to see that the Krogstad-Mrs. Linde subplot functions as a Shakespearean one, as a foil to the main plot. Krogstad did exactly what Nora did; he forged to save his family. Ibsen wanted to show that the law applied only to men. Krogstad was punished. Torvald's fury was not based on fear that Nora would go to jail but on his "honor." What would have happened if the secret got out? All Christiania would have known that Mrs. Helmer had sacrificed for years to save her husband's life. As a member of the rising bourgeoisie, Helmer wanted an idle, beautiful wife as an object to remind his friends of his power, wealth, and masculinity.

In returning to Krogstad, whom she had truly loved, Mrs. Linde is recovering from the misery that self-sacrifice for her family has caused her. Nora takes courage from her friend's example. Nora has sat up at night for years, sewing to pay back the debt that saved her husband's life. She has twisted her whole personality to save his honor. She has not even the dignity of the traditional bowed head to bless her sacrifice, or Torvald's self-esteem would collapse. Those aching fingers must shake the tambourine as if their only experience has been pleasure. The body bent from "fancy work" must sway to the rhythm of the tarantella—Italian, erotic, and exotic. The "angel in the house" must dance to exorcise the devils in Helmer and his friends. Nora's dance
has a witchery like a ritual of health but also, because of Helmer's schoolmasterish rehearsals, a *Red Shoes* mood of possession. She is a puppet on a string. And we are reminded of the history of women's dancing to please men in the harem. Her frivolity reflects the young banker's capital, her dance his sexual prowess. Neither gives him private pleasure; his excitement is derived from the jealousy of his friends.

As the action of the play moves from the sham reverence of a family Christmas (with Krogstad reminding Nora of debt) to the sham revelry of New Year's Eve (with Rank announcing his imminent death), both grim realities reach Nora through the letterbox, a miniature prison that is a model of the prison of her home. For all the joy, domestic and sexual, brought to this house by Nora is based on a lie. She has been acting one half of an ancient chivalric code of courtly love. But Helmer's character has been formed by capitalism; he is not her knight but her keeper. He will not lay down his life to protect her, and that is her ultimate humiliation.

The fuss over the children has obscured the issue of Nora's identity for long enough. Nora honestly believes that she is not a fit mother for Helmer's children. Since they are his "property," it would be useless to appeal to the law. Her old nanny will bring them up. There is as strong a bond between them as Nora has with Mrs. Linde. Nora's father had taken the nurse in to care for his motherless daughter when she was rejected by her own aristocratic family for refusing to reveal the identity of the lover who had brought her dishonor. In one sense Nora, Mrs. Linde, and the nurse represent a feudal morality that is being crushed by a capitalist one. Their hopes for an ideal love have been disappointed, but they have helped one another.

Since Hardwick's essays on Ibsen are written with such praise of self-sacrificing women and with such blame of destructive ones, her essay on Sylvia Plath is somehow bewildering. Plath's life and work are full of violence, self-destruction, hate, and anger. She is Hedda Gabler with a Smith College diploma. And yet Hardwick seems to admire her. She criticizes her for being too victorious a victim, un-feminine in the defiance of her poetic stance. It is not so much that
the suicidal poet abandoned her children, though some blame is meted out for that; Plath's anger, "the destructive contempt for her family," upsets Hardwick. And yet, after praising Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore, she expresses admiration for Plath as the abandoned wife of the poet, even if insufficiently stoical in her suffering.

Sylvia Plath made a gas chamber out of her own kitchen and became both victim and murderer, both the foot in the boot and the crushed Jews of "Daddy." Her suicide was an act of self-destruction, revenge, and, in an odd way, a "work of art" like Hedda's suicide. It and her life and the novel are inseparable from the poetry. The Bell Jar is so autobiographical a piece of fiction that one can hardly judge it by the rules of art or of life. Esther and her creator are so blurred that the reader is not sure what to think of an author who speaks through so self-pitying a narrator. Confessional whining in the novel makes one squirm.

Unable to accept Hardwick's view, I think The Bell Jar can be read only as a sociological document of the American fifties. The book is the female twin of Goodbye, Columbus. The reader, put off by the self-pitying and defensive tone in each case, cheers for Buddy and Brenda, bruised objects of artistic ego. It is, in fact, crucial that The Bell Jar opens with the execution of the Rosenbergs and later refers to Esther's shock treatment in terms of their gruesome deaths in the electric chair. The comparison is audacious, but Plath's capacity as a poet to enshrine private pain and suffering in terms appropriate to the suffering of millions appeals to that special audience which needs to feel that its private suffering is unique and colossal.

Students respond to Plath very personally. They often identify strongly with the angry victim-narrator in "Daddy." For some of the suffering young, the murder of six million Jews is exactly equal to the rage felt twenty years later at a father's death. Perhaps some archetypal experience has been articulated in the poem, for Plath has harnessed hatred, thrown a controlling net around the howling beast of rage. She has syncopated the howls, orchestrated the groans of self-destruction, revenge, and despair.

Surely one cannot demand that poetry be written by the happy and
the good for the happy and the good. But one can signify one's response by the right name. I have heard Plath's poetry used for propaganda purposes. Robin Morgan whipped an audience into a frenzy of man-hating, ending by reading a poem of her own that exhorted the hearers to take revenge on Ted Hughes and save the children. The shame that I felt after this orgy of anger was based on the recognition of those emotions in myself. It is the living husband, the male poet, who intrigues Morgan as well as Hardwick, although in a different way. It is Plath's "daring," her boldness, that Hardwick admires. Plath, like Mary McCarthy, seems to have had enough "class and style" for Hardwick to admire her as a rebel. But Plath does not rebel for all of us. She offers no solutions except Hedda Gabler's. Gas ovens for mothers' daughters, guns for fathers' daughters; neither are weapons to help us make ourselves into our own women.

The hatred in the poetry is enhanced by the elegance of form, the strength of the line, irony, wit, and control (all qualities lacking in the novel). Can one allow oneself to participate in the celebration of death as revenge, to vocalize the violence of one's feelings on aesthetic grounds? No. The hatred of men is obscene. Like the fascism or the anti-Semitism of Yeats and Pound, it cannot be condoned on the grounds of the poet's style. Sylvia Plath was not a feminist; her novels and poems are not feminist. Her hatred of men was as real as Pound's hatred of Jews and must be opposed on the same grounds.

Beardsley's drawings are a case in point. The message is plain—hatred and fear of women. At the same time, elegance, wit, and extraordinary use of line and curve, expressive control of black and white spaces cannot be denied him. Beardsley had as good an eye as Plath's unerring ear. But absolute technical control is no excuse. One can admire the technique of a murderess, an artful suicide. One can even explain the act as ritual. In a way Sylvia Plath was and is a scapegoat for the anxieties and wishes of many people. But such poetry palls. In the end we weary of reading it, because we do not always wish to die. Children say in fits of angry self-destruction, "I'll be dead and you'll be sorry!" but they grow out of it. Plath is dead; we are sorry, but sorrow will not revive her.
Exaggeration of sex hatred is one of the qualities Plath shares with Beardsley. Literary historians will eventually see her poems as anticipatory to the new wave of feminism, as Beardsley's work was in the 1890s. One wonders if economic inflation has literary consequences. The proper use of the word *genocide* was recently debated in the columns of the *Times Literary Supplement*, with participants arguing over just which modern atrocities could equal Nazism. In Plath's case the images work inward to encourage private triumph over pain. Had she been a great poet, a great woman, the images would have worked outward, to explain the pain of all women.

Even so lovely a poem as "Nick and the Candlestick" ends with a frisson of horror. The mother's voice of despair and pain relieves itself with:

You are the one  
Solid the spaces lean on, envious.  
You are the baby in the barn.

The outrageous comparison of the male child with Christ sums up brilliantly the delusions of our patriarchal culture. The lost lives of all the mothers who tried to find freedom in the lives of their sons is appallingly caught, hurled at us. "Your son may be the Messiah" are words that have imprisoned women, not liberated them.

Sylvia Plath was, let us not forget, an American poet. She wrote also as a woman and as a romantic, clothing death with negative excitement. Angst ruthlessly examines itself, exposes its wounds, calls on history's most wicked deeds as witness to the truth of her pain: "The blood jet is poetry, there is no stopping it."

One of Plath's special qualities, one that links her to the exiled writers of the twenties, is the ironic stance of the exile. She is as tough as Lauren Bacall in films or a feminine Humphrey Bogart. Brief, challenging messages, delivered straight from the shoulder, straight from the hip, mimic, mock, and simultaneously enshrine both English and American ordinary speech. The trained ear of the self-exile (imitating her father's exile in America), aware of and oversensitive to class and national distinction, captures and pins like a wriggling insect the
language of the fifties. "Doing their blue dissolve" makes a noun out of a verb in the best Madison Avenue style; "Tate and Lyle . . . the refined snow" particularizes sugar, mocking a similar habit in British speech. "With holes where to hide" would never be said by an American. Like "not to worry," it is a construction of the ordinary Englishman that Plath's ear picks up. "Snazzy" is American slang from the forties given a new transatlantic life. She says of eyes, "they are no stool pigeons," and both English and American speech are exactly caught in

With a goddam baby screaming off somewhere.
There's always a bloody baby in the air.

She uses "cross" for angry, "glass" for mirror, "torch" for flashlight, "drawing pins" for tacks; the details catch the American reader unawares. How does the English reader respond to "blown your tubes" or "your cute decor"? The whole of "The Applicant" is interwoven with the American "backtalk" of a teenager trying out irony as a weapon against adults and the fast patter of a door-to-door salesman: "Come here, sweetie, out of the closet."

It is the ear for common speech that makes Plath a good poet. All her intelligence was spent on style. What the poems say, as the wife throws her "cloak of holes" like a net, flashes her smiles like hooks, is "don't abandon me." May the net and the hooks soon be in a mausoleum of memory of what a dependent woman's pain and anger were like, and Sylvia's Plath's name on the wall as its best recorder. Hardwick says, "There is no need to wonder whether her awful black brief was worth it," but there is a crying need to wonder, and to explain.

Hardwick's attack on Virginia Woolf is based on fear of Woolf's creative and critical power. In fact, the fear is so strong as to pretend not to recognize the power. "Nostalgia is the emotion most deeply felt in Virginia Woolf's novels," Hardwick writes (136). "Nostalgia is passive, the books are passive." Surely such a misstatement was not conceived in ignorance. To accuse Virginia Woolf of a fault that is unmistakably her own and utterly inconceivable as a critical response to Woolf, the least sentimental, most painfully objective, impersonal,
and active of modern novelists, betrays a severe disability. The most "interesting" aspect of Virginia Woolf was her suicide note. Quentin Bell's biography and Leonard Woolf's were only sources in which Hardwick could satisfy her curiosity about the details of Virginia Woolf's mental breakdowns.

It is impossible here to deal with Hardwick's statement that Virginia Woolf's novels "aren't interesting," that they are circular and boring. It is a question of taste. Some people find *Ulysses* boring and circular and Woolf a source of endless delight. But some specific points can be dealt with. Miss Kilman is not "the object of the author's insolent loathing." She is seen entirely from the point of view of Clarissa Dalloway, who feels that "there but for fortune go I." Mrs. Dalloway, whose most intense feelings have been for other women, chose, against her instincts, to be the frigid wife of Richard. She is a little guilty. "I failed him once at Constantinople." But we see her rationalizations. She understands Miss Kilman's desire for her daughter, Elizabeth; she remembers Sally Seton's kiss. The fear and loathing are not the author's but the character's, at the recognition of her double, distanced by poverty and a superior education.

Hardwick may be right, I suspect, in her accusation of snobbery against James and Forster. But to link the writer of the "glass box" essay—the critic constantly concerned with "class in English fiction" who sought to quell her father's masculine and snobbish *Dictionary of National Biography*—with her own "Lives of the Obscure," is getting a little tiresome. It is time, however, for critics to read Virginia Woolf's novels and essays and to stop repeating the same old husbands' tales about Bloomsbury snobbery and "poetic" prose. The prose, in point of fact, is hard, concrete, and Anglo-Saxon. The intellectual position, clearly stated, is that of a committed and active socialist, pacifist, and feminist. "Exegesis about Virginia Woolf" is not "a trap." For readers of twentieth-century fiction who are concerned not only with stylistic experimentation but also with social history and the philosophy of art, reading Virginia Woolf is an education.

Hardwick's dismissal of Virginia Woolf as a snob, and the attack on the novels that claims that she despised the lower classes, deserve
NOSTALGIA IS NOT ENOUGH

Both Hardwick and the New York Review, Forster and Scrutiny, took that recognizable, morally self-righteous role of the liberal. Mrs. Leavis viciously attacked Three Guineas, ad feminam, not for its ideology, but because Woolf had no children and therefore no right to speak as a real woman. For Hardwick, Woolf's class background must disqualify her as a serious socialist. Woolf's fictional "ordinary people" are not nice. She does not romanticize or make heroic her working-class characters. That she was telling the truth as she saw it is irrelevant to the "liberal imagination." Such critics ferociously bark from the secure position of the liberal bandwagon that Woolf was morally and socially unenlightened because Miss Kilman's dirty mackintosh frightens Mrs. Dalloway.

But when the "liberal" critics cry "naughty, naughty" over the unsavoriness of Virginia Woolf's lower-class characters, they betray an utter failure to take into account her own standards of artistic honesty, not to mention the clearly radical political views stated in her essays.

Virginia Woolf wrestled her whole life with the problem, "What is the role of the intellectual in relation to the working class?" Obviously, this is a question that serious socialists like Virginia Woolf took seriously then, and that serious socialists take seriously now. It is here that the liberal imagination boggles. It does not take these questions seriously and cannot understand anyone who does. (Miss Kilman is not nice; therefore Virginia Woolf was a snob.) For a radical visionary like Woolf, the solution to her artistic problem was to create a revolutionary form for the novel, since she felt that its content was determined by the limitations of its middle-class origins. She never failed to praise a novelist who could capture honestly the rhythms of working-class life. Woolf's essays on feminism, socialism, and pacifism, her lifelong work for the Working Women's Cooperative Guild, her encouragement of working women's writing, can stand by themselves as arguments
for the passion of her commitment to political causes.

But she despised the reformer's temperament, the middle-class preacher in fiction or in politics who went as missionary to the masses to solve their problems for them. Because she respected her common reader she would neither lecture in her fiction nor hold her sharp tongue in her polemics. She made enemies then and, obviously, she still makes them.

It is sad to see a practicing woman critic rejecting the best in her heritage. Virginia Woolf remarked in *A Room of One’s Own* that “we think back through our mothers.” Through her essays on women writers and women in fiction, her analysis of feminine style, and her demand for a new feminine historical and critical consciousness and new female forms of writing, Woolf left us an example of how to be a literary critic, and a woman. The trouble with Hardwick is that she takes no risks; she seldom says where she stands, whether she is for or against an issue. Ethics is excluded from her definition of criticism. Reading Virginia Woolf, one is always sure that the feminism is socialist, that the socialism is feminist, and that the high standards of literary criticism do not exclude readers or writers because of class or fashion. It is all clearly explained. Hardwick wants us to infer from the company she keeps (*The New York Review of Books*) that she has liberal views, while abjuring the responsibility of stating them. In the June 12, 1975, issue she writes of Vietnam, “I feel some hesitation about a final statement. One's adjectival vehemence has been used up.” She who hesitates is lost—as a critic of culture at any rate. While the vehemence of one's adjectives may not be a sure measure of the passion of one's commitment to truth and justice, one may still make clear, even in the gentlest of words, where one stands.

Hardwick is thinking back through the wrong mothers, the seduced and betrayed, the victims and the self-haters. But it is not too late. Her essay on Woolf ends with belated praise of “a great mind working” in Virginia Woolf’s novels. Perhaps she could learn to think of this “great mind” as the mother of her own.
READING PRACTICE II

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The Socialist Critic
Reads Virginia Woolf