

LIMINALITY AND DISSENT OF CONSCIOUSNESS:  
A Feminist View of Contemporary Women's Memoir

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Women's Memoir

*Women will starve in silence until new stories are created  
which confer on them the power of naming themselves.*

—Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar

Feminist writer, Carolyn Heilbrun, in Women's Lives: The View from the Threshold, asserts that traditional criticism has assumed the universality of the male paradigm and that “until the day before yesterday, all narratives and plots were modeled and identified with the linear pattern of male sexuality” (33). Heilbrun reiterates Yale Professor Peter Brooks' idea of the “masterplot” which uses such terms as “arousal” and “awakening” to describe the way narrative progresses towards “significant discharge.” Brooks, according to Heilbrun, believes the recognition of this pattern to be essential in understanding all literature. But some women writers have resisted this perspective preferring neither a straight path nor a linear rise and fall, choosing instead a narrative consisting of a series of circles, a rhythm “unfamiliar, repetitive, and declining to proceed to a single ordained finale” (34). Defying this male pattern, feminist critics have observed that women writers who overthrow the ‘masterplot’ are labeled as dissenters. In fact, Heilbrun reports, until recently it was almost impossible for one individual to successfully dissent from the prevailing male-oriented culture. Because of this, women have formed groups to advocate the dissenting consciousness that thrusts them into a state of liminality, a condition which by definition, according to Heilbrun, is unstable (34).

If we consider how feminism, beginning in the late sixties, and feminist interpretation of literature, still vibrant today, have affected the literature itself, it is no

exaggeration to suggest that the way we read all literature has been indelibly, and, let's hope, irrevocably transformed. Furthermore, feminism's efforts to move women from the margins of life and literature to the center of human experience and possibility have caused great numbers of women and women writers to enter states of transition in their lives and work. A state of transition, Heilbrun says, is a threshold experience or the condition of liminality, concepts she borrows from anthropologists Victor Turner and Tom Driver whose book, Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual, characterizes people in liminality as "necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony" (158). Heilbrun distills Turner and Driver's idea of 'threshold people' as being "poised upon uncertain ground, to be leaving one condition or country or self and entering upon another. But the most salient sign of liminality is its unsteadiness, its lack of clarity about exactly where one belongs and what one should be doing, or wants to be doing" (Women's Lives 3).

Ultimately, Turner and Driver's studies claim that women turn to the experience of liminality to "help them find viable alternatives to patriarchy" (37). Heilbrun takes Turner and Driver's results further, contending that the literature of the last two centuries stands as evidence of that liminality, characters on the threshold, always "betwixt and between" and that the essence of liminality is revealed once women are willing to depart from convention. Heilbrun suggests that women must overcome both the difficulty of

individual dissent and the oppression that is masked as women's choice, what, as Freud said, women want.

The states of liminality evident in contemporary women's memoir prove that "alternatives to patriarchy" are not only "viable," but also necessary as forms of narrative self-expression. The 1973 publication of May Sarton's Journal of a Solitude has become a watershed in women's autobiography since the 1960s because it is the first of its kind to offer an honest account of personal rage and pain. Other examples include Vivian Gornick's Fierce Attachments, which grapples primarily with the dysfunction of the mother daughter relationship, Molly Peacock's Paradise, Piece by Piece, an exploration of her conscious decision not to have children, and Mary Karr's Liars' Club, which investigates the harsh landscape of childhood neglect. In each of these memoirs, the narrator/author writes from the state of liminality and a consciousness of dissent, each encounters and breaks free from an oppression not of her own making.

Plant Dreaming Deep, May Sarton's an extraordinary and beautiful account of her adventure in buying a house and living alone, was published in 1968, but Sarton became disillusioned with it because she realized that it revealed none of the anger, passionate struggle, and despair of her life. She hadn't intentionally concealed her pain, but had followed the formula of the old genre of female autobiography, which "tends to find beauty even in pain and to transform rage into spiritual acceptance" (Writing a Woman's Life 12). The changing times, together with the women's movement, which was just gathering steam, helped Sarton understand that what she had thought was an exemplary memoir was unintentionally less than honest.

In her next book, Journal of a Solitude, Sarton decided to recount the years of pain omitted in Plant Dreaming Deep. “Begin here,” Sarton tells herself and us in the opening page of her book, “I am here alone for the first time in weeks, to take up my ‘real’ life again at last. That is what is strange—that friends, even passionate love, are not my real life unless there is time alone in which to explore and discover what is happening or has happened” (11). This is how Sarton begins to explain her mission to “crack open the inner world” of anguish in her life. As a result, Sarton’s descent plunges her into a state of liminality in which she openly records her life from the front-line of unexplored territory:

The anguish of my life here—it rages—is hardly mentioned. Now I hope to break through into the rough rocky depths, to the matrix itself. There is violence there and anger never resolved. (12)

The unexplored territory, what had been previously forbidden, Heilbrun says, is anger and the open admission of the desire to control one’s life. If one is not permitted to express anger, Heilbrun continues, or even to recognize it within oneself, one is by extension, refused both power and control. Often women who are forbidden anger and have no voice in which to complain, take refuge in depression or madness. For women who do complain, the epithet most often applied is *shrill*. Something written by a woman is *shrill*, or something not written by a woman is not *shrill*. To denounce women in this way is another way of denying them any right to power. In trying to deal honestly in written form with their past lives, women have had to confront issues of power and because this is declared ‘unwomanly’ and because many women would prefer, or think they prefer, a world without the obligation of power and the control it represents, women

have been deprived of the narratives, texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume this power and take control of their own lives (Writing a Woman's Life 15-17). Ultimately, Heilbrun claims that a woman's right to her own story depends upon her ability to assume this power not only privately, but in the public domain. Heilbrun defines power as "the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter" (18).

In Journal of a Solitude, May Sarton embraces what was becoming a feminist ideology; not only to try to understand the life of a woman, but to inquire honestly into the life of her mind. She chooses the journal structure to frame her writing and thoughts, but rather than write as a diarist would with trivial and often nostalgic and romantic musings, Sarton's entries are thoughtfully and selectively written; a private writing that offers continuity of form and idea separate from her substantial body of fiction and poetry. Two subjects inform both her memoirs and journals: the creation of home and the nature of solitude. As literary explorations, they record a philosophy worked out through daily experience and, as Suzanne Owens notes in her essay, "House, Home and Solitude: Memoirs and Journals of May Sarton," filtered through a "particularly sensitive and attuned consciousness" (53).

Solitude as a literary subject grows out of Sarton's earlier consideration of the environment of 'home' in New Hampshire. She sees the house not only as a physical structure, but as an intersection between solitude and society. Sarton hopes that the true image of her life will become clear as she examines her episodes of depression, anger, and frustration as they occur, correcting what she believes is a false public self:

I live alone, perhaps for no good reason, for the reason that I am an impossible creature, set apart by a temperament I have never learned to use as it could be used, thrown off by a word, a glance, or rainy day, or one drink too many. My need to be alone is balanced against my fear of what will happen when suddenly I enter the huge empty silence if I cannot find support there. (12)

Perhaps a bit brooding, Journal of a Solitude reveals the woman as artist in the throes of a solitude that is not a temporary predicament, but rather a life condition which often becomes the source of acute distress. At the very beginning, Sarton reminds us that “there is no cushion against attacks from within, just as there is nothing to help balance at times of particular stress or depression” (16). For example, when an elderly couple, “friends of the work” as she calls her readers, knocks on the door hoping to be able to meet her, Sarton is horrified to find herself pouring out all her troubles to them, perfect strangers: “here the innermost person is the outer person. It is what I want, but that does not make me any less absurd” (22). Sarton is often unpredictable in her writing, appearing enmeshed in dark humor and high tension, then breaking suddenly into small considerations of nature, providing a distraction from inner turmoil for the writer and the reader: “the ash has lost its leaves and when I went out to get the mail and stopped to look up at it, I rejoiced to think that soon everything here will be honed down to structure” (34). The value of the journal form is that it allows for just such unpredictable moments in which experience is never set up as final, but instead becomes a way to strip away restraint in an acceptable form. Yet Sarton also tells us that she needs structure in her daily living and the journal is certainly that, holding together the emotional fragments

a woman alone must face: “I have been thinking about the fact that, however terrible the storms may be, if one’s life has sufficiently stable and fruitful structure, one is helped to withstand their devastating after-effects” (84). In other words, Sarton works hard to maintain a balance between spontaneity of her feelings and the structure with which she contains it.

At times, the journal becomes a collection of essays devoted to topics prompted by her daily experiences in a small town in New Hampshire. Housekeeping, gardening and all the other physical demands of the house and grounds become subjects of daily concern and contrast the intensely inner work that is taking place as a result of solitary living. In fact, the simplicity of physical isolation is at times both refreshing and deeply disturbing for Sarton and she becomes aware of her isolation as a solitude in the spiritual sense: “We are aware of God only when we cease to be aware of ourselves, not in a negative sense of denying the self, but in the sense of losing self, in admiration and joy” (99). Sarton loses herself in the minutiae of the mundane:

I feel myself sucked down into the quicksand that isolation sometimes creates, a sense of drowning, of being literally *engulfed*. When it comes to the important things one is always alone, and it may be that the virtue or possible insight I get from being so obviously alone—being physically and in every way absolutely alone much of the time—is a way into the universal state of man. The way in which one handles this absolute aloneness is the way in which one grows up, is the great psychic journey of everyman. (107)

As Sarton comes to terms with her existence, solitude takes on a new meaning—

“a fabulous gift of the gods” (109). Her journal begins to draw to a natural end as the house that began as a refuge, a new beginning, a way to reshape the self and recreate home becomes, in her mind, mythical, and she contemplates a move from New Hampshire to the Maine coast.

One reason I felt impelled to keep this journal for a year was because I think that Plant Dreaming Deep has created the myth of a false Paradise. I want to destroy that myth. In fact, I see my function as quietly destroying myths, even those of my own making, in order to come closer and closer to reality and to accepting reality. (276)

In the final entry of Journal of a Solitude, Sarton breaks her ties from the house, myth, and all old lessons:

This journal began a year ago with depression, with much self-questioning about my dangerous and destructive angers . . . I made great efforts . . . I begin to have intimations, now, of a return to some deep self . . . that self tells me that I was meant to live alone, meant to write poems for others . . . so perhaps we write toward what we will become from where we are. (208)

Clearly, what May Sarton did in Journal of a Solitude was write a new plot for women, a new script. Ultimately, what is celebrated in the memoir is neither the house, nor its occupant struggling with loneliness and the harshness of nature; what is celebrated is the survival of the solitary female artist in the face of the inevitable pain of life, and the need to rage alone against that pain.

Feminist critic and writer, Nancy K. Miller says in her book Bequest & Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death that “memoirs are documents about building an identity—how we come to be who we are as individuals—and a crucial piece of that development takes place in the family” (xi). This is not necessarily good news, she says, depending on what kind of family you come from. But happy or unhappy, families provide a scenario in which we get to try out ideas about ourselves and who we would like to be. This is not without limits, however, and the limits set by the family constitute the “blueprint of the self, the outlines of autobiographical space.” Miller says we could think of this as the family plot in which the project of autobiographical writing is “tied to this intergenerational, historical, and spectral matrix of identifications.” We elaborate an individual identity, Miller believes, in relation to that “set of finalities which are also possibilities, for the present and for the future” (xii).

We expect our parents to die, Miller explains, especially when they are old and we are well into middle age, but losing a parent in middle age is a drama of a more subtle sort because though we are no longer young, in our primal relation we are still children. The terrible truth is that watching a parent shrink is one of the most devastating experiences anyone could have. It seems that parents either live too long, or not long enough.

But what about the boundaries between mother and daughter? In the chapter, “Mothers and Daughters: The Price of Separation,” Miller asks, “Are our mothers ourselves” (58)? Or do we become our mothers? The anxiety of resemblance to our mothers or “matrophobia”: the fear of “becoming one’s mother” as Adrienne Rich has called it, can be seen as the splitting of the self in the desire to be free once and for all of

our mother's bondage. Accordingly, the mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman. Our personalities seem to dangerously blur and overlap with our mothers' and wanting to resist the mother's power, the daughter strikes out against her mother, not realizing that she also strikes out against herself. The confusion of boundaries between mothers and daughters, Miller reports, has been described as desirable and terrifying, productive and destructive (58).

So what do a mother and daughter want from each other? Miller purports that it is "one and the same thing: recognition. To see the other *for*—not in—herself" (58). But you can't get your mother to see you if neither of you can tell the difference. Vivian Gornick, author of Fierce Attachments: A Memoir, understands her enmeshment in the family plot and the price she has paid for her complicity in its stories, and wants to profile a living history of her relationship with her mother before her mother dies. Gornick's memoir is an immediate and interactive search for identity in which she engages her mother directly to find the answers she is looking for. Fierce Attachments details the difficult if not impossible relationship between the author and her mother:

My relationship with my mother is not good, and as our lives accumulate it often seems to worsen. We are locked into a narrow channel or acquaintance, intense and binding. For years at a time there is an exhaustion, a kind of softening, between us. Then the rage comes up again, hot and clear, erotic in its power to compel attention. (6)

The opening segment—the book has no table of contents and none of the segments are titled or numbered, more blurring boundaries—begins with mother and daughter in a typical domestic scene; they are going out to the grocery store or on some

other errand: “We walk the streets of New York endlessly. We both live in lower Manhattan now, our apartments a mile apart, and we visit best by walking. My mother is an urban peasant and I am my mother’s daughter” (6). Gornick and her mother have habitually walked the streets together doing errands since childhood, but Gornick’s conversations with her mother and the shared recall of certain events while walking in each other’s company, reveal to us the history as well as the joy and conflict of the relationship.

Walking brings out the best in us. I am forty-five now and my mother is seventy-seven. Her body is strong and healthy. She traverses the island easily with me. We don’t love each other on these walks, often we are raging at each other, but we walk anyway. (7)

Often, depending on Gornick’s mood (“I’m feeling fat and lonely and trapped in my lousy life”) the conversation triggers a sensitive issue over which they may either rant and rave, or retreat into silence and despair. Whether they walk uptown to attend a lecture or visit a gallery or downtown for a leisurely lunch, their behavior is always unpredictable creating a palpable and illuminating drama:

‘You hate me. I know you hate me’ . . . she’ll say to anyone in the room, ‘She hates me. What she has against me I don’t know, but she hates me’ . . . When we’re out walking, ‘This is my daughter. She hates me.’ Then she’ll turn to me and plead, ‘What did I do to you, you should hate me so?’ I never answer. I know she’s burning and I’m glad to let her burn. Why not? I’m burning, too. (6)

Gornick and her mother are happiest when they are reminiscing about the past. These memories are full of lessons; Gornick's childhood is rife with examples of love, sex, partnership, domesticity. Gornick remembers listening to the women in her building gossip in the kitchen over coffee or at the clothesline, watching carefully the way these women dressed and spoke, and what they spoke about. At the center of all this is, of course, Gornick's mother, "The kitchen, the window, the alley. Here she was smart, funny, and energetic, could exercise authority and have impact" (15). But Gornick's mother felt contempt for her environment: "'Women, yech!' she'd say. 'Clothesline gossip'" (15). So this was her mother's condition. In the kitchen she knew who she was even though she was restless and bored in the kitchen she functioned admirably yet despised what she did. She would become angry over what she called "the emptiness of a woman's life"—she knew there was another world—the world—and sometimes she thought she wanted that world. Gornick describes her mother as "passive in the morning, rebellious in the afternoon, she was made and unmade daily" (16).

When comparing herself to the other women in the building, Gornick's mother believes herself a person of higher thought and feeling—believing in love, in marrying for love, and in championing love in all her relationships: "Love in my mother's lexicon wasn't love, it was *love*. Feeling of a high order, a spiritual nature, a moral cast" (24). Gornick's mother believed a woman's life was determined by love. When a neighbor said she was dead wrong and that she was a slave to her idea of marriage, Gornick's mother responded, "'An undeveloped woman. She doesn't know life'" (24). Full of contradictions and high ideals, Gornick's mother is an impossible figure. She is what Miller calls, "The Omnipotent Mother," a powerful Western cultural image that

dominates every stage of child development. Given this inherently unequal relationship, it would seem that Gornick's exchanges with her mother can never be symmetrical, and, moreover, that the "power of a mother's voice," her demands and desires ultimately shape the daughter's life (59).

When Gornick's father dies suddenly, Gornick's relationship with her mother only gets worse. Gornick's mother, severely depressed, is forced out into the working world. She remains distant, depressed, and trapped within what she thinks is her duty during the remainder of Gornick's childhood and adolescence creating more maternal resentment for Gornick. Clearly, Miller writes, there are many styles of maternal resentment and there is something about the social position of the mother that the daughter finds intolerable:

This is the mother we think didn't love us, the mother we don't think we loved. This is the mother who betrayed us, for whom one daughter should have been enough. This is the mother whose recognition we seek ceaselessly, uselessly, and whose darkness has migrated within us. This is the mother who keeps us imagining—and longing for—the Good Mother. (71).

If our mothers could only see things the way of our generation, Gornick posits, then, perhaps, they could overcome the emptiness of a woman's life in which they are both victim and perpetrator. This seems to be a crucial point of disagreement between Gornick and her mother. Gornick's angst and struggle are apparent not only in the relationship, but also in her writing. Gornick takes big risks revealing exactly what happened and exactly how she feels, and, as a result, finds herself closer to the truth than

ever before. This kind of writing requires a strong sense of self-trust, self-love, and self-knowledge, but Vivian Gornick is up to the task.

In a final passage, Gornick and her mother are arguing again. Each wants sympathy and understanding from the other, but, at the moment, what Gornick wants is sympathy from her mother for love recently lost. But instead of providing this comfort, Gornick's mother says, "Well, now perhaps you can have a little sympathy for *me*. What it's been like all these years." Gornick flies into a rage, "Does my life mean nothing to you" (202)? A heated exchange follows until Gornick confronts the central issue, "You were forty-six when he [Papa] died. You could have gone out into life. Other women with a lot less at their disposal did. You *wanted* to stay inside Papa's love. It's crazy! You could have had a life (203)." They sit in stony silence for a very long time until Gornick's mother finally says, "Why don't you go already? Why don't you walk away from my life? I'm not stopping you" (204). But it's not that simple.

Leaving home, according to Miller, does not go easily for women, even at the end of the twentieth-century, "You leave home, cut yourself off. What you left is your material" (94). In maternal memoir, the narrative of one's life is filtered through the telling of a mother's story, and, as a result, autobiography and biography blur in much the same way the mother/daughter relationship boundaries blur. And so, you make reparation for leaving, Miller continues, by writing, and by this act you return home, but this time as the author of your life: "You've written the story, rewritten the story that wrote you. Earned and betrayed the bequest" (94). Gornick leaves and returns both metaphorically and physically, over and over, consciously choosing a narrative that is a series of circles, a rhythm "unfamiliar, repetitive, and declining to proceed to a single ordained finale"

(Women's Lives 34). Clearly, Gornick is more interested in the exploration process than the outcome of her narrative and she is certainly “poised upon uncertain ground” (34) at the center of liminality with all its instability.

The admission of ambition has always been a considerable hurdle in the progress of women's narratives, Carolyn Heilbrun says. Well into the twentieth-century, women writers, even though they were writing in a genre that implied self-assertion, implicitly denied their own accomplishments, employing instead “a rhetoric of uncertainty.” Unless they were authorized by “a spiritual call” to a higher cause other than themselves, as was Florence Nightingale, for example, women writers could not even envision writing about their own achievements. Above all, the public and private lives of women could not be linked, as in male narratives, because any kind of personal satisfaction derived from achievement presented a conflict with what Heilbrun calls the marriage plot. Unable to tell the truth about their lives, these women writers dared not offer themselves as models, but only as exceptions, chosen by destiny or chance (Writing a Woman's Life 24-5).

Highly gifted women, who, Heilbrun asserts, fail to lead a conventional life or to find the conventional way early, may well be struggling to form a life in service of a talent felt, but unrecognized and unnamed. “This condition,” Heilbrun continues, “is marked by a profound sense of vocation with no idea of what that vocation is, and by a strong sense of inadequacy and deprivation” (53). For these women, youth is less a time of hope as one of uncertainty or at worst, a time of depression and wild sexual experimentation as a distraction from the “blunted female destiny” of flirtation, wedding, and motherhood. But more prevalent today, Heilbrun says, a woman may find herself in a

position where vocation is possible and the marriage plot with its “demands not only that a woman marry, but that the marriage and its progeny be her life’s absolute and only center, becomes insufficient or even unattractive” (51).

Until recently, the roles of women and feminine gender identity have been historically and traditionally constructed around motherhood, but current research reveals a growing trend among women who chose to remain childless or “childfree” according to Rosemary Gillespie in her report, “Childfree and Feminine: Understanding the Gender Identity of Voluntarily Childless Women.” Most women become mothers at some point in their lives, Gillespie says, and for many, the urge to have a child is both a powerful and complex force. However, at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, significant transformations in women’s reproductive experiences have emerged. In the United States, United Kingdom, and Western Europe, Gillespie tells us, women are having fewer children and later in their lives, or electing to remain childfree. Researchers attribute this trend to social forces: the rise of feminism, broader access to reproductive choice, the importance of partners in decision making, and wider participation of women in the paid workforce (122-3). But Gillespie argues that “although social change, the support of partners, and women’s greater autonomy may be prerequisites for choosing to remain childfree, they do not fully explain why in Western society only a small portion of women make this choice while the majority continue, at some stage in their lives, to become mothers” (123).

Moving beyond the social change explanation, Gillespie’s study provides a fuller account of the meaning and significance of remaining childfree. She focuses on what motivates individual women to remain childfree, and how this decision might broaden

our understanding of gender identity beyond the traditional view which posits that motherhood is the ultimate fulfillment for women and “the cornerstone of feminine identity” (123). What Gillespie suggests is that not only are some women deciding not to have children because of what they perceive to be advantages associated with a childfree lifestyle, such as career opportunities, and financial freedom and security, but also that a more radical rejection of motherhood is taking place.

“When I was three,” Molly Peacock says in the opening chapter of her memoir, Paradise, Piece by Piece, “I decided not to have children” (3). It isn’t quite that simple, of course, and we have to read through the layers of Peacock’s life to find that her decision was not a single emphatic decision; rather, it was more of an evolution to a certain state of mind:

As it turns out, my choice not to have children has defined my adult life. It’s been like hacking through the undergrowth while walking down a hardly used, perfectly paved way . . . In fact, on that path my choice not to be a mother became more of a discovery of a decision . . . It took insight to see and release it—an insight I didn’t always have . . . this is a decision you do not make once, but many times. I would leave the idea of not having children behind, only to face it again and again as I went on. (9)

Gillespie makes clear that both “active” and “passive” forms of decision making occur when women consider a childfree lifestyle. In active decision making, women might decide as early as childhood that they will remain childfree whereas in passive decision making, women become increasingly clear over a long period of time that they never wish to become mothers. Although some women may remain childless by default

due to ambivalence about motherhood, those who choose to remain childfree face the pervasive pronatalist, cultural discourse that often views women who choose to remain childfree “as deviant, unfeminine, unnatural, unhealthy, psychologically flawed, and selfish” (124).

In Peacock’s case, both active and passive forms of decision making are clearly evident. At an early age she heard her grandmother say, ““don’t ever have children Molly, unless you want to,”” and from her father, ““that’s right. Don’t let nobody say you have to have kids,”” and her from her mother, ““you can always do anything you want”” (8). Having to cope with an alcoholic father and an absent mother, Peacock internalized these statements in her early childhood and thought: “Their lives would be better if they didn’t have kids. . . . Didn’t have me. . . . I’m not having any children. . . . Somehow at five, I was past childbearing age” (8).

Instead of having children, Peacock’s life journey leads to writing, once she is able to recover from the brutality of being raised in an alcoholic home—although one never completely recovers from these effects. But even the act of writing exacts a price. By sheer force of will, Peacock extricates herself from the poverty of her youth and attends college, an opportunity that leaves her with a severe sense of guilt for having left her sister and mother behind. Peacock’s narrative about reproductive choice includes her relationship with her sister and how they navigate their lives in separate and distinct ways. Both become fiercely independent and both choose not to have children, and, unbeknownst to each other, both eventually opt for sterilization. But Peacock’s sister remains trapped in a life of poverty, ignorance, relationship instability, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, chronic unemployment, and poor health while Peacock

increasingly manages to distance herself from her mother and her troubled sister to pursue a writing career.

Peacock enters a first marriage from which she gradually emerges, gets a divorce, and studies at Johns Hopkins before eventually moving to New York:

I was not having children, I was pruning the family tree. This was it. Now I would live alone, cook alone, drive alone, and do my new job solo . . . Days I taught alone . . . nights I wrote alone, bathed in the rainwater of calmness, never intruded upon, growing greener, and brighter, and, even one day, happier, deep inside a landscape I had carefully fenced for myself, into which only the privileged were allowed. (139)

Yet, Peacock could not quite build as deep a defense against the world as she wanted. Something within her kept extending itself and it wasn't long before she was embroiled in a long-term affair with a married man. She describes her Hungarian lover, Tilla, with his "odalisque" calm and "clean barrel chest" with its "pink nipples planted in pectoral muscles which were almost rectangular," as he feels her own breasts like fruit at the market: "'Beautiful,' he whispered. He didn't seem to be lying. He had a kind of surrender in his eyes. 'Lie back for me,' he suggested, and held my chin in his hand as he kissed me . . . As he had told me, he knew my body better than I did" (182). This was the perfect arrangement for Peacock because she could maintain her independence, continue to work on her career, and remain childless. "I have a voracious lust for freedom," Peacock once said to a friend. 'All writers need privacy,' he responded. Not like I do" (138).

Certainly, for women, "childlessness always needs to be accounted for" according

to Margot Livesey in her New York Times review of Peacock's memoir. Although the memoir is not an overt feminist argument, Livesey says, it does present an argument nonetheless. But Livesey is careful not to suggest that the book is all argument, and says that what she believes will stay with readers, is the vivid picture Peacock paints of the loneliness women often feel in dealing with the social pressures concerning motherhood and contraception.

Throughout her memoir, Peacock reveals her changing relationship with contraception. In young adulthood, she refers to her diaphragm as "a kind of pet: to be fed and cared for, to be kept clean and refitted and replaced. . . . I like the silkiness of the creams, the wetness of the jellies. . . . I was in charge of protection, of reproduction; it was my responsibility, my joy" (111). But later, she describes her struggles with contraception when she worries that her diaphragm has a tear, and when after she fails to use it, accidentally becomes pregnant. After agonizing conversations with Tilla, Peacock decides to have an abortion and the procedure leaves her feeling broken. "I'm in a mental wheelchair," she tells her therapist. "I look normal, but I'm not" (220). Subsequently, Peacock becomes allergic to the contraceptive jelly she uses with her diaphragm and after exploring every means of contraception, each unbearably unsuitable, at the age of forty-one, she decides that "having children won't define who I am" and has a tubal ligation (239).

After finally breaking free from Tilla, Peacock reconnects with and marries her high school sweetheart, Michael Groden, who also does not want to have children. By the time the memoir ends, her mother and sister have died of cancer and all that remains of Peacock's family is a few cousins. But Peacock has survived, matured, and even

triumphed: “How do you grow up if you don’t have children? How do you remake the original love—mother love—into a mature love? Becoming a parent provokes this conversion, but transformation into adulthood without bearing children means metamorphosis” (307). Peacock’s ambition as a writer was the driving force that fueled her ultimate transformation, enabling her to re-examine old habits, ideas, and loyalties in order to move into a different, as yet unscripted, life—a tenuous liminality—always on the threshold, always in between, never accepting the old or quite succeeding in establishing the new.

The old forms of family, marriage, parenting, children, solitude, aging as well as the old forms of our professions still have to be dealt with by most women writers. However, instead of trying to fit new ideas into these old forms, today’s women memoirists must invent or create a new form of memoir in which they discover themselves, reach fame, and recreate themselves. This new form will not be the apologetic denial of traditional female autobiography, but one, as Heilbrun says, that is “a new admission, indeed a claim, of intention, ambition, and the suffering involved” (Women’s Lives 67).

Mary Karr risks creating a new form for women’s writing with her memoir The Liars’ Club in which she fulfills Heilbrun’s criteria for success: Karr is never apologetic and never denies the truth of what she discovers in remembering her tumultuous childhood. Karr is also both ambitious and successful. Of her motivation to write the book, Karr says in a Seattle Arts & Lectures interview, “My marriage ended, and I needed the money. I didn’t have a car. I didn’t have any furniture.” Clearly this claim of

intention is a new admission, and Karr unravels the suffering involved in her family in a way that does not elicit pity. In fact, The Liars' Club hits the reader between the eyes with horrific experiences—alcoholism, attempted infanticide, and sexual molestation to name a few—yet remains oddly hopeful and darkly comic, mostly because of Karr's gritty use of an East Texas idiom and her evocation of the strong emotional ties that bind the family together, despite the debauchery and pain.

In an audio interview with Bill Goldstein, book editor of The New York Times on the Web, Karr addresses the popularity of her book and the memoir form:

Because of the advent of recording media, we've become interested more in what is subjectively remembered, because what is objectively remembered is so ruthlessly documented. . . . What is of interest to people is an experience that's intensely subjective. . . . You get an intensely personal, emotional engagement that is very interior.

Usually, Karr continues, we remember ourselves in reductive form, like a CV—a packaged account of history—that doesn't reflect our actual job experience the way that we lived it—subjectivity has been left out. People want some sort of moral compass when they read memoir, and the subjective voice suddenly has new power because it measures how we're doing as a culture in which church, community life, religion, government, and certain kinds of values no longer mean what they once did.

But The Liars' Club is by no means a cautionary tale; Karr tells her childhood story unflinchingly. “If you're a writer and grow up in a family like mine, you have to go out of your way not to write about it” (Seattle Arts). Karr begins and ends her narrative

with stories about her mother—no surprise there. As Carolyn Heilbrun has already argued, mothers are the single greatest problem in the stories women write about:

“For most daughters, mothers evoke what Aristotle recommended as the ideal response to tragedy: pity and terror. Pity for the mother’s condition, and terror that one might resemble her” (Women’s Lives 61). But Heilbrun also says that even if a mother is not the object of resentment, she is rarely able to endow her daughter with the tools needed to realize ambition. Mothers, she says, tend to counsel discretion and modesty, and exist in a no-win position of the patriarchy. Almost every child “prefers the father, who returns from the outside world; who enters to break up a tense duo; who represents freedom, adventure, and gaiety” (61).

Heilbrun asserts that no matter how devoted the mother is to her children or even if both parents pay equal attention, or equal lack of attention, it is the father who wins his children’s affection and who encourages their ambitions. This does not seem fair, but it does ring true as evidenced in Karr’s memoir when she is the only child allowed to accompany her father to meet with his male friends at the American Legion bar where they drink and tell stories:

I was the only child allowed, a fact frequently held up as proof that I was hopelessly spoiled. I would ask Daddy for money for the Coke or shuffleboard or to unlock the pool table, and it was only a matter of time before somebody piped over at us that he was spoiling me and that if he kept it up, I wasn’t going to be worth a shit. . . . But Daddy would just wag his head at whoever spoke. ‘Leave her alone. She can do anything she’s

big enough to do, cain't you, Pokey?' And then I would say I guessed I could. (14-15)

Karr was permitted inside the patriarchal realm and listened to the men compete to tell the tallest tale, observing, internalizing, and judging for herself who told the best story; who was most convincing. Karr revered her father as a champion mythmaker and these exclusive outings with him were a welcome escape from the turmoil at home. But Karr's 'membership' in The Liars' Club was by default—she was not allowed to participate and could remain as long as she kept herself invisible.

Expressing disappointment with female memoirs, Simone de Beauvoir said, 'Very often women think all they need to do is tell . . . the story of an unhappy childhood' (qtd. in Women's Lives 76). But Karr never says she is unhappy nor does she present her childhood as specifically unhappy; she presents it as if it were the most normal childhood possible under the circumstances. These circumstances are revealed in the first chapter as Karr sets the scene and tone: a doctor, the sheriff, highway patrolmen, firemen, an ambulance, a barking dog, and no parents to be found anywhere. Karr's mother has been taken "away" due to her "nervous" condition and her father is working the graveyard shift at the refinery. Meanwhile, a gasoline bonfire of unknown origin burns in the backyard (6).

At this point, the child's narrative is interrupted and Karr switches to an adult voice, "Because it took so long for me to paste together what happened, I will leave that part of the story for a while. It went long unformed for me, and I want to keep it that way here" (9). Normally, this kind of self-consciousness in a narrative would not work; most audiences do not want to be directed in their reading. But Karr is skillful at letting us

know that her narrative is as much about the nature of memory as it is about content and she wants to be careful in the retrieval of her memories so that she can be a participant in both. This is a crucial point in the narrative because we are alerted to certain facts: not only is a story about to unfold, but also that the process of remembering will cost the narrator something and that the answers are worth delaying:

When the truth would be unbearable the mind often just blanks it out. But some ghost of an event may stay in your head. . . . You keep studying the dim shape of it, as if the original form will magically emerge. This blank spot in my past, then, spoke most loudly to me by being blank. It was a hole in my life that I both feared and kept coming back to because I couldn't quite fill it in. (9)

As a result, readers are invested and engaged in Karr's unfolding narrative process as much as they are entertained by the honesty and salty diction of the child's narrative. Of course, the child's voice is always informed by the adult's, but we don't mind because Karr does such a good job portraying the child as a character, depicting the seven-year-old matter-of-factly as scrappy, ferocious, stubborn, tough, and enduring. Karr has her mimic the language of the town's tough-talking people and as readers, we accept this strategy because it is amusing to hear a child speak this way and because we want the young Karr to be heroic given what she is going through; we want her to be victorious.

Karr's decision to let her young narrator speak the way she does overthrows the 'master plot' in every way because it does not conform to ideas of femininity, specifically in regard to diction. The kind of off-color language Karr's narrator uses is generally reserved for male authors and/or male narrators and characters. Male authors for the most

part, according to literary critic Paul de Man, are not guilty of catachresis—of using strained figures of speech—because they are allowed to speak honestly no matter how offensive or insensitive their speech might be. Behind de Man’s high rhetorical stance, according to one feminist critic, is the eternal insistence on the part of male scholars, *and authors* [my addition] to retain a master language (Women’s Lives 76). But Karr ignores the critics and breaks all the rules:

Lecia and I both behaved like savages at any opportunity. When she was only twelve, Lecia could beat the dogshit out of any neighbor boy up to the age of fifteen. For my own part, I can remember standing behind the drainage ditch in our yard cussing at Carol Sharp for bloodying my nose . . . I couldn’t have been more than six, but I was calling her an ignorant little bitch. (40)

Karr illustrates what it is like to grow up female in America in the sixties recreating aspects of all our childhoods and the adults who encouraged, or failed us. Her mother, who fancied herself as a sort of “bohemian Scarlett O’Hara,” was gifted, having attended a New York art school in her youth, yet utterly frustrated by the hollowness of her life and was inclined to binge drinking, nervous breakdowns, and long-drawn-out fights with her husband. Karr’s father, an oil worker and union man, whose main talents were drinking and storytelling, loses the family in divorce only to win them back again later. Karr’s environment was hostile and untrustworthy. The only response was to either surrender or fight—Karr chose to fight, whether it required actual physical fighting, or fighting with words when she later became a writer. However, the task of writing became overwhelming:

When I started unpacking my memory and sitting in the middle of it all day, I had the most bizarre experiences—I'd write an hour and a half or two hours and then lie down on the floor of my study and sleep the sleep of the dead. (Seattle Arts)

The act of remembering and writing is dangerous for Karr, yet she pushes through to the end and the discovery of the mother's secret history, which explains so much of what happened in Karr's childhood that she emerges with a new understanding and compassion for her mother. Heilbrun would say that it has always been the mother who stands behind each woman as a major force in her life and that it is "the inadequacy of the mother's life that whets the daughter's appetite for achievement and eventually, for the strength to fight" against whatever institutions block the way (Women's Lives 86). Karr's achievement is the direct result of embracing the feminist paradox, which is the desire to be equal and the desire to be different. Heilbrun reminds us that "there is no transcendence, no third course" (79), only an urgent contradiction which thought alone cannot dissolve—the very essence of liminality.

To be in conflict between existentialism and equality feminism is to find oneself in a state of liminality '[with] its lack of clarity about where one belongs and what one should be doing, or wants to be doing,' primarily because the old structures still prevail for the most part: dating, marriage, childbirth, and motherhood. These structures persist precisely because in adhering to them, liminality can be avoided. One can avoid hovering on the threshold, avoid having to make brave decisions, and then having to live with the anxiety and uncertainty those decision inevitably produce. It is easier to do what is

expected than to live in ‘intensity and suspense,’ it is better to be safe than sorry. But a life with no risk and with no question about what the future may hold is not a life; it is a carefully structured drama in which our parts are written for us “by the patriarchy, by male-founded religions, and protected by women who fear anxiety, uncertainty, liminality, that place occupied by our mothers” (Women’s Lives 102).

The place of feminism, Heilbrun explains, is “amidst, among, atwixt, rooted nowhere except in the realm of questioning, experiment, and adventure, and as it questions everything, it uses what it finds befitting” (Women’s Lives 98). Change and risk are in this state of liminality. However, those of us who believe that we live in a post-feminist era are not facing reality, according to Margaret Atwood, who said, “The goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved and those who claim we’re living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the whole subject” (qtd. in Women’s Lives 100). One consolation, according to Heilbrun, is that when today’s women students discover that not all has been won, they will find that others before them have recorded their experiences. They will know that help is available in naming their anger, and they will find companionship in enduring it. Heilbrun tells us that the threshold was never meant for permanent occupation, and that the women writers who “occupy the thresholds, hover in the doorways, and knock upon doors,” know that they are in between destinies because this is the place they choose to be. The threshold, then, is the place where as women and as creators of literature, we can write our own lines—our own stories.

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