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CHALLENGING FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM'S MISREADING OF SPECIFIC AMERICAN NOVELS FROM THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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This paper responds to specific questions raised in the author's previous research on five American novels from the first half of the twentieth century which concern sexuality, abortion, and male-female relationships: Pearl Doles Bell's *Gloria Gray, Love Pirate* (1914); Floyd Dell's *Janet March* (1923); Viña Delmar's *Bad Girl* (1928); Christopher Morley's *Kitty Foyle* (1939); and Nancy Hale's *The Prodigal Women* (1942). The paper concludes that interpretations of the characters' religious, moral, and sexual lives from a standard feminist perspective are insufficient to account for the works' larger didactic purposes. Moreover, the paper asserts that an application of the more comprehensive Judeo-Christian approach to sexuality and related topics would assist twenty-first century readers to appreciate the works.

Keywords: Literary criticism, Sexuality, Abortion.

Introduction

As this author has mentioned elsewhere,[1] researchers studying how the right-to-life issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia were presented in the early twentieth-century owe a debt of gratitude to Meg Gillette, whose 2012 analysis considers how the first life issue (abortion) was treated in numerous fictional works from the first half of that century. A key paragraph in Gillette's research is necessary to repeat for purposes of this paper if one is to understand the myopic perspective which frames much discussion of texts such as those which Gillette identifies as significant works addressing women's concerns in the early twentieth century. Gillette states the focus of her research thus:

> Today abortion is not just a transitive act in a woman's life, but the political issue on which nearly everyone has an opinion. Modern abortion narratives helped pave the way for this politicization of abortion. While, no doubt, modern abortion plots aren't just about abortion—they deal with a host of other issues ranging from "spiritual sterility" to "modern individualism" to "female creative power" to the "failure of left-wing politics", etc.—certainly, one of the things modern abortion narratives are about is abortion. Taking advantage of its generic possibilities—its creative license to draw connections

[1] Please see the author's "Abortion Distortion: Correcting Literary Criticism's Misreading of Early Twentieth-Century Abortion Fiction", published on LifeIssues.net at http://www.lifeissues.net/writers/kol/kol_37abortiondistortion.html.

> and invest symbolic meaning, its cloak of authorial innocence (i.e., the writer isn't speaking publicly about abortion, the fictional characters are), its broad audience of diverse reading publics—modern literature created a significant abortion discourse during the early twentieth century, *one that moved abortion into the realm of social reality, shattered the medical community's hold on abortion, and created interested publics ready and authorized to judge abortion for themselves*. (680; citations omitted; italics added)

Again, while it is not this author's intent to repeat previous research (where the italicized apposition at the essay's end is challenged as a site where traditional feminist literary theory has skewered a more comprehensive interpretation), Gillette's work can be improved by considering several questions which have been overlooked by contemporary literary criticism. Instead of demonstrating the liberation of women from oppressive patriarchal structures (the standard summary of terms used in feminist criticism), what can be determined as key principles of the literature which Gillette identifies? This author believes that the works illustrate much more significantly the following causal chain: an absence of religious-inspired moral directives, which then leads to the destruction of traditional sexual ethics, ultimately resulting in altered interpersonal relationships where fornication or adultery are contemplated or practiced. Furthermore, if a pregnancy results from the fornication or adultery, the couple is faced with the subsequent moral issue of abortion. This causal chain will be examined in detail in five novels identified by Gillette as representative of early twentieth-century fiction on women's issues. Proceeding chronologically, they are: Pearl Doles Bell's *Gloria Gray, Love Pirate* (1914); Floyd Dell's *Janet March* (1923) and Viña Delmar's *Bad Girl* (1928); Christopher Morley's *Kitty Foyle* (1939); and Nancy Hale's *The Prodigal Women* (1942).[2]

Pearl Doles Bell's *Gloria Gray, Love Pirate* (1914)

In many ways, Gloria, the main character in Pearl Doles Bell's *Gloria Gray, Love Pirate* (1914), may be a stereotypical character. She is a young woman who comes to the big city seeking financial security and who is seduced by a married businessman. She becomes pregnant and, fearing shame for her otherwise morally correct family, aborts the child. On her lover's death, Gloria becomes rich enough to endow a charity to help young women. However, her original desire to secure her financial future through her own success in the business world surrenders to the plot resolution of a marriage with a successful man who has loved her for years—a marriage to which she happily assents. Thus, this novel of a young woman's attempt to achieve personal fulfillment in the modern world ends with an altogether standard denouement of a stable, secure, and traditional marriage.

Although literary criticism is scant, there are opportunities for a deeper discussion of key ideas in the novel in two significant passages. The first passage has Gloria recounting her first sexual episode with Mr. Cunningham in language which must have been outrageously bold for its 1914 audience:

> "Stop," I cried. "Stop!" You mustn't talk so!"
>
> But he didn't hear me. He was taking the hair pins from my hair and when I tried to rise he held me back. He was still on his knees at my side and when finally my hair tumbled in shimmering waves over the side of the bed the man seemed to go utterly mad.
>
> He was something primeval; a man of the stone age. This mad, wild thing seemed to fit in with the storm outside. He was a cave man of the time when brute strength was the only law. He was anything but Mr. Cunningham of Chicago.

[2] As helpful as Gillette's research is in having identified the novels under discussion, exploring the causal chain may add an important aspect to an otherwise scant critical landscape, which ranges from Lesley Hall's reduction of the abortion element of Bell's novel to a one-sentence plot summary ("the heroine, a secretary in a long-term affair with her employer, has a frankly depicted abortion"), to Meg Gillette's reworking of her ideas about fiction in the early twentieth century in her article "Making Modern Parents in Ernest Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants' and Viña Delmar's Bad Girl", to a Wikipedia entry on *Kitty Foyle*.

> I tried to scream but like one in a nightmare no sound seemed to come or if it did, no one heard it above the howl of the storm. Almost roughly he tore the lace from my neck and his lips were hot against my throat.
>
> I cried and beat against his face, but he didn't know it. I had kindled a fire that I could not extinguish and my frightened nerves cried out against my folly. Unwittingly I had put the cave man in power and brute strength was Law. (164-5)

While the twenty-first century reader may find the above passage histrionic, if not laughable, it does illustrate the position of young women at the turn of the twentieth century who were subject to economic and patriarchal forces beyond their control.

The second passage, the abortion chapter in the novel, is as packed with emotion as the above passionate love scene.

> I had been taking treatments from a downtown physician who was none too reputable, and the day I was taken to the hospital I had gone home at noon with a chill. Fifteen minutes after I had arrived at home one of the city's prominent surgeons called, whispering to me at his first opportunity that Mr. Cunningham had sent him.
>
> I do not know what he told mother was the cause of my illness, nor what sort of an operation would have to be performed, but I do know he did not tell her the truth and that the maid was told that I had appendicitis. (234)

An explication of these two passages depends on consideration of several questions emanating from the causal chain identified above. First, the absence of religious-inspired moral directives is pronounced throughout the novel. The word *God* is referenced many times, but only as an apostrophe or an interjection. Gloria's use of the divine name is limited. Gloria vows that "God knows" that she will always wear a bracelet given to her by Burt, the man who truly loves her and who will eventually be her husband, but this is a vow that is easily broken later (127). Another instance of the use of "God" is noteworthy for its rhetorical distance; instead of praying herself to God, Gloria visualizes a seafaring character's mother asking her son "to put his trust in God" so that he would return home (144).

The number of "God" references diminishes further with other characters. Gloria's friend Verona writes the vocative "O my God" in her suicide note (208); Verona again mentions "God" and "Gods" interchangeably in another letter to her former lover (222, 223, and twice on 225). Gloria's mother uses the vocative "Oh, dear God", expressing joy that Gloria has survived her surgery, which, unknown to her mother, was her abortion (233). Mr. Cunningham utters "thank God" as an interjection to affirm that he is "not weak" in his resolve to treat Gloria fairly (295). "My God" and "God!" are his further exclamations used not as prayer, but as interjections, the second instance to accompany the more sensuous following sentence: "God! The pressure of her body against mine as I held her there—the clinging of her little hands to mine—the perfume of her hair in my nostrils, drove me mad!" (296).

As casual as the references to "God" are, the religious foundations of the characters appear just as spontaneously. Religious principles are derived almost spontaneously instead of under logical progression of moral absolutes taught within Judeo-Christian values. Gloria's casual reference to freemasonry occurs only as an aside to her reflecting on social mores regarding her being with Mr. Cunningham: "I was rather inclined to believe it a part of the freemasonry that seems to exist among certain people" (140-1). "Faith" is mentioned once, but only as the second of four items in a rhetorical question asking "Whither have they flown?" (51). The closest that Gloria comes to understanding that her moral sense has been altered by her sexual relationship with Mr. Cunningham occurs in introspection while viewing the ocean, not in any place of worship where the Deity is invoked; this extensive discourse spans all of chapter XXVIII (246-262).

The lack of religious principles contributes to the grounding of the novel's sexual ethics on a purely naturalistic foundation. The otherwise gentle Mr. Cunningham becomes dehumanized when his sexual desires manifest themselves; he becomes "something primeval; a man of the stone age" and, elsewhere, a "beast", which, by definition, is any non-human creature.

Allowing sexual passion to become dominant not only dehumanizes Mr. Cunningham; Gloria also becomes its victim. The last line of the sexual passion passage indicates that her dehumanization, when faced with the "man of the stone age", is probably more severe than that of Mr. Cunningham. Saying "Unwittingly I had put the cave man in power and brute strength was Law" indicates that she has lost rational power ("Unwittingly"). She has acted against the best interests of helping a fellow human being by placing only the instinctual portion of a man in "power." Finally, Gloria voices the nineteenth-century idea, carried well into the twentieth, that it is not God's law of love and justice which control, but that mere power is dominant ("brute strength was Law", the capitalization of the term substituting the capitalization ordinarily reserved to the Deity).

Once these premises are accepted, it should be no wonder, then, that Gloria's relationship with the adulterous Mr. Cunningham lasted for several years, precluding her marriage with the patient lover who eventually marries her. It is also no wonder that, once the adultery has occurred, the child resulting from their affair would be aborted on the moral conviction that society tolerates moral indiscretions only if they are kept secret. As Mr. Cunningham affirms, "My dear, in this age anything is proper if it isn't found out. It is only the things that are found out that are bad. The wrong doesn't lie in committing the crime, but in being caught" (157). This mere assertion, of course, summarizes many principles at odds with Judeo-Christian values, namely, that there is objective evil manifested in sinful acts and that admitting responsibility for one's sinful actions is necessary for confession of sins and resulting absolution. Unfortunately for Mr. Cunningham, his untested philosophy affects not only himself, but also Gloria and (most drastically) their aborted child.

Floyd Dell's *Janet March* (1923)

The religious position of Janet, the main character in Floyd Dell's *Janet March* (1923), is clear; she writes in her diary that "I do not think I believe in God" (99). Given her explicit statement about religion, Janet's view towards traditional sexual ethics, then, is ineluctable; she argues for pre-marital sex without having the "church and state interfere" (142). The nineteenth century belief in "law and order" (198) continues in Janet's view of sex as "'Biology,' thought Janet. / Not love" (204). Janet has an abortion, and the longest paragraph in the novel ensues, an elaboration of the opening sentence that her abortion "wasn't sin" (212-6). When she is pregnant again, Janet affirms that she will have the baby as emphatically as she claimed that her first abortion was not sinful: "And I'm going to *have* this one,' she said defiantly, 'whether you like it or not!'" (455; italics in original). Speaking about the baby with Roger, the father, Janet proclaims, "at last you know what everything's all about!" (456).

As with Bell's novel, key passages in *Janet March* can be clarified once the causal chain identified above is applied to the work. Given the clear enunciation of her atheism and sexual ethics leading to her fornication, Janet expounds on the altered relationship with the father of the aborted child in one segment of the longest paragraph in the novel (a four-page internal dialogue about her relationship with her lover and the consequences of the abortion) thus:

> Let the butcher threaten her with his bloody hands, she did not care! It *had* been beautiful! And—yes, that, too—sad, even in its beauty. Because he hadn't wanted her love. She knew now, she had discovered in these wakeful nights, how ready she had been to love him. And he hadn't had any real use for her love. She was glad she hadn't—quite—loved him. That was all. No, there was one thing more. Hate. A fierce blind hate—for him—because he took no risk, faced no danger for her as she had faced danger for him. She had known, even then, that if this happened it would have no real meaning for him; and that was why when it did happen she had chosen not to let him know. It was a thing that she must go through alone. Oh, it wasn't fair to hate him for that; it was quite absurd. But she had hated him for it—even in her happiness. And she hated him now.
>
> And thus came sleep [….] (215-6; italics in original)

The abortion episode and Janet's internal dialogue occur halfway through the novel, and the reader should appreciate that Janet has learned not only from her failed love experience with the father of the aborted child, but also from the abortion itself (remember that she exclaims towards the novel's conclusion, "I'm going to *have* this one", an obvious contrast to her life-denying choice over the first pregnancy).

Perhaps the easiest point in the causal chain to consider is the abortion episode. Nowhere else is the demarcation between ethics based on religious principles and those derived from secular formulations more evident than in abortion decisions made by mothers bereft of religious convictions. Janet March is no exception, as when she asserts, "Sin? No, sin was something strange and terrible and mysterious. It wasn't sin. What was it, then? It was—freedom" (213). The denotation of *sin* as a violation of a religious principle which breaks the bond between the human being and the Creator is not eradicated simply by a character asserting that aborting a child is not sinful and then using a series of three adjectives in a stipulative definition to deflect attention away from the killing of the unborn child, followed by yet another negation, and concluding with, from her perspective, a definition by synonym. A stronger case can be made that Janet's redefinition is antonymic, since *sin* is theologically defined as an act which enslaves one to a belief or practice which alienates him or her from God, in whom is total freedom. Thus, a sinner, trapped in the traditionally worded "snares of the Devil", does not experience freedom as Janet asserts, but its opposite.

This maze of definitions may be an effective rhetorical ploy in literature to show the spiritual distress that an aborted mother feels when confronted by the cognitive dissonance of her act. However, contemporary feminist thinkers like Gillette have cited this passage as an example supporting the claim that, "Unapologetic and committed to women's reproductive autonomy, these narratives sound much like the arguments made by the 1960s women's movement, which years later would also hold controlling one's reproduction was a right, not a sin" (672). That Gillette uses the verb "hold" suggests that the logical progression of a literary passage like this one is affirmed. However, the force of the natural law which Jews and Christians have enunciated for millennia is not reversed by a mere fictional character in an American novel from last century, and to argue that such a character's claim counters the theological basis on which Western moral principles is based (the Judeo-Christian religion) may be politically expedient for those who hold life-denying principles and who support abortion under any and all circumstances, but it is simply illogical, specifically, an overgeneralization to support an ethical position on the force of one fictional character's beliefs.

Secondly, the narrator's inability to recognize that the pagan delight in the body which the March circle of friends espouses could be the Judeo-Christian (and even more specifically the Catholic) joy of the created world is astounding to the twenty-first century reader. This intellectual dissonance is especially pronounced now that St. John Paul II's theology of the body occupies a dominant position in Catholic sexual ethics.[3] (Whether this claim is an anachronistic fallacy is easily refuted; the audience being appealed to is the twenty-first century one, aware of the saint's treatises, not the original reading audience of 1923.) Thus, Janet's mere reduction of the proper relations which should obtain to humans involved in affection, romantic love, and sexual love in marriage resulting in the possibility of children seems woefully myopic. Janet's "'Biology' [….] Not love" distinction reduces what should be a multifaceted approach to human marital and sexual relations to biological destiny instead of free choice between human beings who wish to care for and love another.

A final question concerns the curious philosophical revelation that Janet, an atheist, reaches at novel's end. If having a child helps a woman to "know what everything's all about!", then does such an exclamation verify the existence of a natural law which pertains to men and women? If such a natural law exists, then voluntary abortion, which breaks the normal progression of that law, is an evil which must not be experienced not only for the (obvious) benefit of the unborn child, but also for his or her

[3] The author is indebted to colleagues at Notre Dame College (South Euclid, Ohio) and to his graduate students at Catholic Distance University for locating a compendium of the pope's teachings on the theology of the body on the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) website.

mother and father and for society. Many contemporary feminist activists do not recognize the humanity of the unborn child as being equivalent with that of his or her mother since the mother is deemed to have property rights over the unborn child, much as slave owners' property rights over other human beings who were of a different social class or color were constitutionally recognized by many Western nations until the nineteenth century. The father, of course, is always rendered powerless in abortion decisions since abortion is a necessary practice for a mother to exercise, showing her liberation from patriarchal forces, the most patriarchal (in their estimation, apparently) being that of a man who wants to show love for his spouse by raising children with her. The twenty-first century reader, well-versed in the oft-mocked standard feminist vocabulary, may find Janet March's realization of the importance of the unborn child to her own liberation a refreshing alternative to the stifling, life-denying philosophy which has seized much of academia for the past fifty years.

Viña Delmar's *Bad Girl* (1928)

Dot Haley and Eddie Collins in Viña Delmar's *Bad Girl* (1928) are irreligious, racist, and anti-Semitic. They fornicate, and, quickly marrying, Dot becomes pregnant. Dot seems to consider abortion as birth control. When abortifacients fail, Dot's friend, who has a secular view of life, suggests "an operation" (107) and even recommends an abortionist. After consulting another friend, Dot decides to have the baby, investigating a sanitarium where she would deliver. Afterwards, Dot vows that she "would try not to have any more children" (266).

Dot's and Eddie's religious orientation is stereotypical for characters in novels recognized by feminist critics; they both have no formal religious affiliation and do not engage in religious thinking or utterances. One religious practice, prayer, exists in the novel, but only when it is performed in secret or is uttered by another character. Two episodes illustrate both conditions. Wondering about her ability to control the pain of her pregnancy, Dot's prayer is recorded vicariously; that is, the narrator interjects a direct address to God, apparently on Dot's behalf:

> Isn't there anybody up there who looks after the comfort of pregnant women, God? Couldn't somebody give, say, an hour a day to mapping out a few hours of calm for them? They are so at the mercy of chance visitors, of climate, of financial conditions. Couldn't it be arranged, God, please? (207)

Eddie's distress on not being able to assist his wife is conveyed similarly; while he indeed vocally prays, it is the narrator who expounds on the conditions surrounding the prayer:

> Eddie went into the bathroom. He had to be alone for a minute. He walked over to the narrow frosted window and threw it open. He looked up at the warm, star-splashed sky. There were a lot of things he wanted to say, but there was nothing that could be worded. How could you say something without putting it into words? Eddie slammed the window shut. He looked up at the celling and said, "God, don't let her die." It was the best he could do. And it wasn't a real prayer, he told himself, not a real prayer. (214)

Comparison between the two prayers is minimal; both center on the problem of not finding sufficient words, in Dot's case literally, since the narrator has to say the words on her behalf, and in Eddie's case, stated explicitly. At least three contrasts between the two prayers, however, are noteworthy. That the narrator has to intervene on Dot's behalf to invoke the Deity suggests that Dot is most likely atheist while the narrator is agnostic. In contrast, Eddie is obviously theist as his direct address to God implies. Second, Dot's prayer uttered through the narrator manifests an ignorance of spiritual forces "up there" that Jews and Christians rely on (angels, saints, and God Himself) to help one through the vicissitudes of life; Eddie, at least, acknowledges such aid by direct address to God instead of any intermediary. (This

may be typical for a character raised in an America still dominantly labelled Protestant Christian in the early twentieth century.)

The final contrast involves the rhetorical positions from which Dot and Eddie utter their prayers to the Divine Being. While it may initially read as an arrogant plea, the narrator's plea for Dot betrays a confidence in the power of God. After all, when one asks "Couldn't it be arranged", the change in syntax from the declarative "It could be arranged" to the interrogative renders the prayer as a statement of confidence, the etymology of which (to "have faith with") further enhances Dot's situation. Eddie's contrasting prayer is spoken from a position of humility. This last difference between the two prayers is especially interesting, because humility is customarily a characteristic of women, not of men, who are traditionally characterized by a confidence in their authority and power. It is interesting, however, that Dot's use of the interrogative maintains some of the humility characteristic of women, but even this qualification is not Dot's, but the narrator's, the person responsible for the interrogative.

Moreover, the causal chain which controls the works studied in this paper demonstrates that other issues result from positions which are in conflict with religiously-based ethics. For example, racist and possibly bigoted comments pepper the novel, with explicit references to "niggers" occurring twice (162 and 241) and an episode of being "contaminated" by an African-American person shortly after the baby's birth (266).

African Americans are not the only ones who suffer indignity in the novel. Although there is the customary comment about Al Smith not being electable "because he's a Catholic" (176), more negative attention is given to a Jewish aborted mother, who, instead of being shown compassion, is viewed as an artifact for observation: "The Jewess had a sister-in-law who had had eleven abortions. Dot was promised a glimpse of her [….] Dot would know her by the big diamond she wore" (233).

With such derogatory and stereotypical statements, can a life-affirming act such as the birth of a child be celebrated? The answer can be affirmative for the rhetorical moment, and the twenty-first century reader, as his or her counterpart in the early twentieth, would rejoice as Dot and Eddie have over the birth of the child. (After all, no one, even in an abortion-saturated Western society, rejoices over the abortion of a child.) However, the racist and bigoted statements of the main characters testify to an enduring problem which this work of fiction cannot resolve. If one is able to attack another human being, then one's ethics are obviously not based on the Judeo-Christian imperative to love all persons just because all are made in the image and likeness of God.

Any hope that Dot and Eddie have learned to become more loving now that they have an innocent new human being in their midst is dashed, however. Before being discharged from the hospital, Dot's thoughts are emphatically recorded:

> There would very likely be no serious illness which would send her to the hospital, and she would try not to have any more children. No, never again would a tray be brought to her bedside. Hospitals were the only places where that was done, and she never expected to enter another. (266)

This reflection can be clarified further to show one more result of a marital situation not connected with the Judeo-Christian perspective of marriage. While she may appreciate her newborn son, either out of love or out of selfishness, her desire to "try not to have any more children" shows that she is clearly not open to the transmission of new life, which is the second element of Christian marriage (the first being the unity of the husband and wife through their pleasurable sexual activity). The novel does not contain evidence of the birth control movement's influence in secular American society, which, emerging as a social force at the time of the novel's writing, sought to divorce the two aspects of marriage. The closest the novel comes to suggesting birth control are a couple of feeble assertions that Dot and Eddie's friends may know about such practices or that Eddie might know about how to obtain an abortionist (104). Thus, the passage asserting that no more children would be birthed suggests that Dot views her marriage contrary to its intended purposes as a contract with her husband for their mutual satisfaction, let alone as a sacramental commitment with her spouse. Eddie's thoughts on having more children are not revealed.

The altered relationship between the spouses which is evident from this passage has significant consequences; unfortunately, the twenty-first century reader can only speculate what tension would occur in such a decidedly one-sided marriage.

Christopher Morley's *Kitty Foyle* (1939)

Christopher Morley's *Kitty Foyle* (1939) continues the exploration of, if not racial, then ethnic diversity involved in novels showing women emerging into higher social positions. While the autobiographical style of the narrative briefly notes an abortion mentioned early in the novel, Kitty rebounds from her first love affair with Wyn, heir to one of Philadelphia's established Main Line families, when she finds a more enduring romance with Dr. Mark (Marcus) Eisen, who is Jewish and, besides being "so hairy", is identified as a different "race" (280). These characteristics signify the important theme of religious and ethnic tolerance apparent throughout the novel.

Kitty's toleration can be accounted for because of her own religious indifference. Although her family heritage is Orange Irish, her attitude towards organized religion is casual: "It seems funny I pick up so many little bits of other people's religions and don't get hold of one of my own" (325). That this realization is stated only fifteen pages from the end of the work can indicate that the autobiography is as much a spiritual journey as it is an account of a failed romance, an abortion, and a successful romance. Her maturity manifests itself not only in tolerance towards other ethnicities (her friends include the French Delphine and the Russian Fedor), but also in ecumenism. Even though anti-Catholicism was still vibrant at the time of the novel's writing, Kitty expresses admiration for Catholic support of a maternity hospital:

> [Fedor] was telling me about the Cardinal in Chicago who instead of bawling in the pulpit about contraceptions and abortions went ahead and got an inexpensive maternity hospital started. Of course you've got to be legally wedlocked before you can use their delivery room, that's a disadvantage, but the point is they sell you the whole doings for $50 and people that couldn't afford it otherwise can throw a baby there and like it.
>
> That's what I call citizenship. (311)

This ecumenical appreciation may account for a changed attitude towards sexuality. Although her affection toward Wyn became sexual instead of developing as a romance (thus evidence that she did not follow traditional sexual norms that sex should occur within marriage), Kitty has strong opinions about birth control which, unlike the situation of the characters in Viña Delmar's *Bad Girl* eleven years earlier, had become more pronounced as an accepted marriage practice. Well before the above ecumenically-friendly passage, Kitty's explanation of how she became pregnant illustrates an instinctive reaction against contraception: "You can't always take precautions, it wouldn't be human. Maybe I'm kind of proud we didn't" ([257]). After this ecumenical passage, her attitude towards birth control is reaffirmed in a more exasperated manner; Kitty exclaims that a woman "gets tired being told Birth Control is the solution for everything. She's got a right to a baby if she needs one" (326).

Perhaps because of such intellectual maturity, Kitty reflects on the life of her aborted child often. Thus, this novel joins the ranks of many other fictional works, documenting post-abortion syndrome long before it ever became a concern of psychotherapists (albeit one challenged by those who are decidedly in support of abortion and wish to minimize the effects of abortion on the mother). Moreover, from the perspective of the twenty-first century reader—anybody who has seen the disastrous effects of legalized abortion on the Western world—that post-abortion syndrome frames the entire work to make it coherent is a unique fictional approach, one which shows that fiction can assist the reader not only in understanding, but also negotiating the problems of contemporary life.

Furthermore, that Gillette focuses on Kitty Foyle's exclamation that her abortion was not sinful ("I couldn't feel any kind of wrongness. I did what I had to do" 672) is interestingly one-sided, but what were neglected were Kitty's expressions of post-abortion syndrome and regret carried to the end of the

novel. It must be remembered that the entire work is Kitty's retrospective, and an essential component of that memory concerns her abortion. It is mentioned on unnumbered page 27, and her desire for the Catholic sacrament of confession twenty pages later (44) is predicated on her abortion experience. Her post-abortion reflection on page 272 is a literary pivot necessary to lead the protagonist to her future love. Seeing Wyn's seven-year-old son is an opportunity for her to reflect that the little boy "might have been *my* baby" (288; italics in original). Fourteen pages from the end of the novel, Kitty reflects that her aborted child would have been seventy in 2000 (326). Such speculation can be accounted for only by post-abortion syndrome. Kitty could have forgotten her love affair with Wyn as other fornicating persons easily do; what makes this episode in her life unforgettable is the choice of having aborted their child.

Nancy Hale's *The Prodigal Women* (1942)

Nancy Hale's *The Prodigal Women* (1942) connects the experiences of several women whose sexual passions and life ambitions converge: Leda March, whose distinguishing characteristic is her contradictory love of solitude and social success; the aptly-named Maizie Jekyll, who has a continuing and unhealthy relationship with Lambert Rudd; and Betsy, Maizie's sister.

The overt religious content of the novel is minimal; for example, one clear reference to religious language cites Leda being "revolted" over her mother's suggestion that marriage "can be a sort of sacrament" (214). One of the more curious passages concerning religious values blends the first two aspects of the causal chain in a nearly incoherent rant—peppered with frequent mentions of "Jesus", "Christ", and the combination of the names as mere interjections—and about the proper roles of the wife of a male artist, especially regarding sex. The relevant excerpts from Lambert's philosophy argue that

> An artist ought to be so damned crazy about his work and so busy doing it that he hasn't got any time to pinch girls' knees. He ought to be living a big full life full of his work, giving it the works and expressing all he's capable of to the last drop in him. But he's still a man. That's why painters have wives. It's his wife's job to take care of that part of him, do a good job on his physical life so that he doesn't think about it, so he can give his guts to his work. […] If the wife can't put out what he needs, you'd say he could just sock it to his painting and do all the better for it. But it doesn't work that way. Sex has to be sex, and then you're rested and renewed and have more to give your work. (157-8)

Ignoring the admittedly clever yet odd phallic- and semen-focused references ("big full" and "to the last drop") as those of a sexually frustrated man, how far Lambert's views depart from the Judeo-Christian view of sex within marriage is easily summarized. The nature of work is misunderstood as an end instead of a means; Lambert is ignorant of an essential difference between his view of work and that of Judaism and Christianity (that work allows humans to join with the Creator in sanctifying the earth to assist them in their eventual goal of being with Him in the afterlife). The reasoning given for artists having wives is incomplete and selfish, marriage being for the benefit of both spouses, not just for the satisfaction of a husband's sexual desires. Finally, the tautological definition "Sex has to be sex" imparts no useful knowledge to the reader about Lambert's view on sexuality in general, excepting the probable interpretation that he views what should be mutual satisfaction of the spouses with the opportunity for the creation of new life as mere animalistic activity.

Lambert's distorted discourse on the nature of sexuality within marriage roughly a third (28%) into the novel can be compared with another misogynistic and distorted view of marriage almost exactly two-thirds (68%) into the work. The following episode between Betsy and Hector illustrates what Lambert's philosophy could lead to if the spouses adopt positions where they are not equals in the marriage, as Judaism and Christianity teach:

> "Don't you criticize me. Don't you dare. Who are you to judge anyone? You bitch." He got up and came to her in one step. He struck her across the face as she sat there,

> and struck her again, knocking the chair over; she fell inside its arms. [….]
>
> "Stop looking saintly," he said. "You bitch. You ought to be down on your knees."
>
> She slipped out of the chair and knelt by it without taking her eyes from his face.
>
> "Please forgive me…."
>
> "Oh for Christ's sake get up."
>
> She got back into the chair.
>
> "If you knew what it's like to look at that lying, half-witted face." He walked with hard, quick steps to the place on the floor where he had left his full drink, picked it up, and threw the contents in her face. Slowly she took a handkerchief from the pocket of her suit and wiped the water and the whisky away. He came to her and struck her. All at once he turned away and went and lay down on the bed, face down, silent.
>
> "Darling…poor darling…. Forgive me…" she murmured. (377-8)

The violence inflicted on Betsy and her tolerance of such violence is as reprehensible for the twenty-first century reader as it should have been for his or her mid-twentieth century counterpart.

While the difference in receptions of the passage for both readers is that Western culture has benefitted from a greater appreciation of women, it is unfortunate, however, that such aggressive and disheartening women's narratives gave feminists in the second half of the twentieth century an opportunity to promote their life-denying version of feminism. No doubt the numerous abortion episodes in the novel contributed to the idea that many women would rather abort their children than bring them into a chauvinistic world where women are treated as sex objects and physically abused. All three major women characters suffer from this life-denying view. When Maizie first becomes pregnant, Lambert suggests "a man" who could "do something about it" (57); when she is pregnant again, Lambert wants "it [sic] stopped" (187). Betsy's abortion is not so much an event which alters her function as a mother, but one which is as perfunctory as diseases that she suffered: "It was nothing very bad [….] Betsy had had, in five years, a few colds, a case of trench-mouth, and influenza twice" (343-4). Leda's response to the dehumanization which men force on women is absolute; she is emphatic that she was "never going to have any children. I don't want any" (155) because "She wanted self-indulgence, and flattery, and peace", not "other people's hells" (189).

Suggested Literary Research Questions

The twenty-first century reader has more than half a century of standard feminist analysis of literary work from an aggressive era when *feminism* meant a radical departure from Judeo-Christian values on the importance of the sexes, their respective roles in marriage, and their vital functions as parents. Fortunately, this often strident and life-denying perspective of the older feminist literary movement can be balanced with more inclusive ecclesial and papal statements and secular research which address the concerns of radical feminist thought and which support religious values practiced by couples who wish to maintain the importance of the purposes of marriage even though contemporary forces attack those values. Three categories of questions can further help to guide the twenty-first century reader as he or she reinterprets works of literature analyzed only from the traditional and increasingly outdated feminist perspective.

First, consonant with the initial step of the causal chain, all of the novels discussed suffer from a focus on sex per se instead of sex as a means that the Deity established to unite human beings in an ordered union called marriage, an institution which has the dual purposes of the sexual satisfaction of the spouses and the procreation of children. Why delight in the body is necessarily pagan and not, for example, a religious appreciation of the beauty of the body escapes Janet March and her circle of friends. In fact, this idea escapes all of the characters studied, since they all lack knowledge of basic Judeo-Christian tenets about the beauty of the created and, specifically, gendered human body. Adopting

these tenets would certainly preclude characters like Maizie being categorized as "She was evil" (Hale 337).

Second, that the lack of religious principles leads to the destruction of traditional sexual ethics is ineluctable. Some further commentary can be provided, however, regarding the altered interpersonal relationships where fornication or adultery are contemplated or practiced. Why men do not understand their good fortune in being fathers is understandable when every male character is unable to invoke either a role model in Heaven or on earth to guide him. No father invokes a St. Joseph or seeks the counsel of his own father or father figure. It is as though the entire male population of these novels is bereft of male support. The closest episode which approximates this need for male companionship is Eddie's brief and utterly feeble internal counterargument regarding finding an abortionist: "A fellow didn't go in a pool room and get hold of a guy he knew, tell his story, and see if the guy could suggest a drug or a doctor" (Delmar 104). A "fellow" or a "guy" is not equivalent to a father, a male relation, or a father figure such as a priest, minister, or rabbi to whom a young man could seek counsel for the express purpose of helping him assume his responsibilities as a father. The generations of "lost boys" in popular culture should be encouraged that they do not have to follow the spiritually vapid option that Eddie considers; thanks to the growing men's movements, both secular and religious, communities of faithful men are eager to assist them.

Finally, if the fornication or adultery depicted in the fiction leads to pregnancy, contemporary readers can find encouragement that Judeo-Christian values have important ideas to counter the numerous life-denying attitudes and actions depicted in the novels. That abortion violates the natural law applicable for religious persons and atheists may not have been evident to a fictional population ignorant of religious principles; perhaps this can be attributed to the intent of their authors to focus on sexual activity as the *sine qua non* of life. Now, however, as the experience of the United States and many other Western nations over the past forty years has demonstrated (especially where abortion has been legalized either in special circumstances or up to the full nine months of pregnancy for any reason whatsoever), it is apparent that a return to Judeo-Christian norms for the protection of human life at all stages can prevent other social disasters such as legalized infanticide and extensive euthanasia. Fortunately, current research predicated on life-affirming principles enunciated in Judaism and Christianity is expanding the corpus of works dealing with these controversial life issues so that, besides enjoying the works as literature, society can learn from the mistakes of fictional characters in the past to protect and improve human life in the future.

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