



Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton and Cather

Elsa Nettels

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Between January 1880 and December 1889, Harper's Monthly Magazine published 263 works of fiction; half of these were written by women. Judging by the popularity of contemporary mass-circulation magazines, women writers of the late nineteenth century enjoyed equal opportunity in the world of commercial publishing. Yet although they wrote best-sellers and won prizes, the institutions that keep writers and their reputations alive chose not to sustain these writers, and few are familiar today; Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton.

Elsa Nettels suggests that this lack of parity is not surprising in a culture that for centuries has used "masculine" to describe all things strong and dominant, while "feminine" has signified weakness and inferiority. In Victorian America, the relation of literary style to gender became of increasing interest as women writers became ever more prominent. In the influential magazines of the late nineteenth century -- Harper's, Century, Scribner's, Atlantic Monthly, Cosmopolitan, and Ladies' Home Journal -- writers directly or implicitly reflected society's views of the sexes and the proper roles of men and women.

In this intelligent and accessible book, the author examines how William Dean Howells, Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather helped both to perpetuate and to subvert Victorian America's ideology of language and gender. All had fruitful careers as novelists, editors, and critics, and she demonstrates that each was in a unique position to affect popular language and gender stereotypes. To gauge their responses to the pervasive assumptions held by the magazines that published them, Nettels traces how these writers defined "masculine" and "feminine" in their works, how they characterized women's speech and language, how they distinguished male and female discourse, and where they invested authority in matters of usage.

Taking into account others engaged in the Victorian construction of gender such as grammarians, linguists, sociologists, and writers on etiquette, Nettels offers a compelling look at the cultural perpetuation of ideologies, as well as fascinating scholarship on four authors who manipulated social mores to establish their place in American literature.

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