

# **A New Woman or an Old-Fashioned Girl? the Portrayal of the Heroine in Popular Women's Novels of the Twenties**

**Patricia Raub**

In *Perils of Prosperity: 1914-32*, published in 1958, historian William E. Leuchtenburg observes that the woman of the 1920s “wanted the same freedom of movement that men had and the same economic and political rights,” and, he concludes, “by the end of the 1920s she had come a long way” toward reaching these goals.<sup>1</sup> More recently, historians have begun to question just how far Twenties women did come and to discover that their progress fell far short of previous estimates. Far from achieving economic parity with men, William H. Chafe writes, “most female workers were poorly paid, most were denied the opportunity to participate in occupations not already defined as ‘women’s work,’ and most were treated as ‘temporary employees.’”<sup>2</sup> Far from voting as a ‘bloc’ to win passage of legislation which served their interests, most women voted as their husbands or fathers did—if they voted at all.<sup>3</sup>

Even if historians have been forced to accept the notion that women made relatively modest political and economic strides during the decade, many scholars still maintain that women gained substantially greater personal freedom. Historians have spoken of the Twenties as a decade in which there was a “revolution in morals.”<sup>4</sup> Our image of the Twenties woman is that of the flapper, who has thrown off the conventions of her Victorian predecessors to crop her hair, shorten her skirt, and dance the Charleston. But how far did this “revolution” actually go? If the young women of the period thought of themselves as flappers, what did

being a flapper mean to them? Were the changes in women's morality in the Twenties as thorough-going as we have been lead to believe?

One place where the parameters of the modern woman's conduct and values were being explored was in the bestselling women's novels of the day. Published in hard-cover editions and often serialized in women's magazines, these novels were written by such popular women writers as Temple Bailey, Kathleen Norris, and Dorothy Canfield. Although little information exists as to the gender of the readers of these best sellers, it is likely that women constituted the bulk of the audience for most popular novels, especially those written by women. A study of library-borrowers conducted in the 1930s found that the best-selling authors of the day had a much larger following among female readers, especially housewives, than among male readers.<sup>5</sup> While no contemporary investigations of the readers of popular fiction in the Twenties have been undertaken, Twenties literary critics and popular novelists themselves believed that the best-selling novels by women were read primarily by other women. One reviewer recommended Susan Ertz's *Nina* in 1924 by predicting that "every woman will be charmed with this novel because it is veracious in its feminine psychology, as most novels by men are not. . . ."<sup>6</sup> Another remarked of Dorothy Canfield's *The Homemaker* (1924) that the "reader's interest in the book will depend largely upon his—or perhaps it would be better to say her—sympathy with the author's point of view."<sup>7</sup> Of Temple Bailey's *Blue Window* (1926), the *New York World* sniffed, "There are worse books published for the feminine masses . . . but not much worse."<sup>8</sup> The *New York Tribune* wrote of Mary Robert Rinehart's *Lost Ecstasy* (1927), "It is a woman's story and there is too much in it of 'what every woman knows' to make it quite comfortable reading for men. . . ."<sup>9</sup>

Who were the women who read these novels? It seems likely that most of them were middle-class. In his study of American best sellers, Erik Lofroth reminds us that best-seller lists were compiled from sales figures obtained from the nation's largest bookstores, retail outlets predominately patronized "more by upper and middle income groups than by lower."<sup>10</sup> When the works of popular novelists like Kathleen Norris or Temple Bailey appeared in women's magazines, it was in those periodicals that were aimed at middle-class women—*Ladies Home Journal*, *The Delineator*, *Good Housekeeping*, or *Woman's Home Companion*—that these writers chose to place their short stories and novels; not in the confession magazines which had a largely working-class readership.<sup>11</sup>

Even if we grant that most of the readers of popular women's novels were middle-class women, we cannot, of course, assume that such readers found themselves realistically depicted in these novels; it is unlikely that these books can provide us with a literal transcription of the actual lives led by their readers. It is equally unlikely that a given popular author expressed precisely the views and emotions of the majority of her readers. Nevertheless, by isolating patterns embedded in a number of successful works of the period, we can uncover values and attitudes widely held by middle-class women of the era—and reveal the

notions about which these women remained ambivalent. As John Cawelti observes, popular writing rests on a “network of assumptions” shared by writer and reader alike.<sup>12</sup> By examining the basic beliefs that writers affirmed in these books, we can begin to determine the social and ethical values which readers accepted. By analyzing incongruities among novelists in their depiction of their female protagonists, we can see which aspects of the “New Woman” were still open to question in the 1920s.<sup>13</sup> As many historians of women have observed, the Twenties was a decade in which a new morality was in the process of being negotiated, a decade in which women were beginning to try on new social roles. A close examination of the popular women’s novels of the period helps us discern the degree to which ordinary middle-class women of the day were beginning to accept these new values and roles.

Proceeding on the assumption that readers bought the novels featuring the heroines whom they most admired or with whom they could best empathize, what are these fictional characters like? Are they traditional in their morality or have they discarded the conventions of the previous generation? This essay will attempt to answer this question by examining those novels written by best-selling women novelists which feature young, unmarried, female protagonists. In order to locate books fitting these criteria, I examined *The Bookman’s* yearly best-seller lists from 1920 to 1929; based upon sales figures submitted by selected bookshops and department stores across the country, these lists indicate the ten top-selling works of fiction for the year. Of the approximately ninety books on these ten lists (some books appear on two consecutive years’ lists), thirty-three were written by women, twenty by American women. Of these twenty novels, seven deal with young unmarried female protagonists in a contemporary setting; all of these seven books are discussed in this article. Although *The Sheik* was written by an Englishwoman, it has also been included in this study due to its spectacular success in the American bookmarket.<sup>14</sup> I have also included women’s novels which appeared on the *Bookman’s* monthly best-seller lists from 1920 to 1929. Of the approximately sixty novels written by American women authors on these lists, the majority of those featuring young, unmarried heroines were written by Kathleen Norris, who authored fifteen monthly best sellers in addition to one yearly best seller, and Temple Bailey, who published four books during the Twenties which became monthly best sellers as well as two yearly best sellers.<sup>15</sup>

The books included in this study, then, are those produced by the best-selling American novelists of the day. More specifically, they are those popular women’s novels which deal with unmarried female protagonists in a contemporary setting—those books which address most directly issues regarding the social behavior of young women of the Twenties. Other popular novels of the era, such as those written by Dorothy Canfield and Edith Wharton, feature married and divorced women; some portray pioneer and farm women, as do Edna Ferber’s *So Big* (1924), Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground* (1925), and Bess Streeter Aldrich’s *A Lantern In Her Hand* (1928); a few deal with working women, like Fannie

Hurst's *Lummo* (1923); and a number focus upon the heroines of family or historical sagas, as does Kathleen Norris in *Little Ships* (1921). These types of books I have examined in a longer study of women's popular novels of the Twenties and Thirties. While the overall number of books considered in this article is small, one can argue that the popularity of these novels, measured by their sales figures, indicates that they reflect the interests and tastes of a significant proportion of middle-class women of the era; thus, it is appropriate to examine in some detail the values and assumptions presented in these widely-read novels.

In the Twenties, as historian Paula Fass observes in *The Damned and The Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, young men and women challenged the conventions and mores of their parents' generation. Their apparently iconoclastic behavior prompted conservative social critics to denounce them as a threat to the established social order. Young women received more than their share of opprobrium. The "flapper" became the symbol of the hedonism, the indifference to traditional standards, and the unrestrained sexuality which conservatives believed to be characteristic of the young women of the era. "Gazing at the young women of the period," Fass writes,

the traditionalist saw the end of American civilization as he had known it. Its firm and robust outlines, best symbolized by the stable mother secure in her morality and content in her home, were pushed aside and replaced by the giddy flapper, rouged and clipped, careening in a drunken stupor to the lewd strains of a jazz quartet.<sup>16</sup>

Popular women novelists of the decade could not have been unaware of the flapper and her critics. The flapper "phenomenon" was the subject of scores of magazine articles, movies frequently featured "jazz-age" heroines, and young women's appearance and conduct was the topic of dinner-table conversation in countless dining rooms across the country. In their fictional treatment of young women in their books, women novelists both reflect widespread changes in female attitudes and behavior in the postwar era and implicitly comment upon these trends. A close analysis of young, unmarried, female protagonists in popular women's novels of the Twenties indicates that most fictional flappers, much like many of their real-life sisters, were more traditional at heart than their breezy demeanor—and F. Scott Fitzgerald's depictions of flappers—led observers to believe.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, there is enough diversity in the treatment of young female characters by various best-selling women novelists, especially with regard to the expression of sexuality, to indicate that in some ways the nature of the middle-class woman was being contested—was in the process of redefinition. In particular, middle-class women were beginning to assert themselves as sexual beings, with sexual needs as legitimate as those of men.

Some best-selling women writers were quick to draw upon the trend toward more liberal sexual attitudes in creating young female protagonists. As I have argued elsewhere, even though British writer E. M. Hull's depiction of an apparently independent and self-sufficient female conquered by a masterful lover in *The Sheik* (1921) appears to reflect conservative reaction against women's attempts to redefine their status and roles in contemporary society, at the same time, Hull's novel strongly hints that in at least one area, the bedroom, women could now be perceived as the equals of men. As sexual beings, women, like men, could openly and unashamedly enjoy intimate physical relations with their partners.<sup>18</sup> Hull's protagonist Diana Mayo is affected by her captor's sensuality from the very start: when he first embraces her, "the truth of his scorching lips, the clasp of his arms, the close union of his warm, strong body robbed her of all strength, of all power of resistance." His kiss is "like a narcotic, drugging her almost into insensibility."<sup>19</sup> Once she discovers that she loves him, she finds it harder and harder to "make a show of reluctance when she was longing to give unreservedly."<sup>20</sup> Finally her passions overwhelm her, and "for the first time she surrendered to him wholly, clinging to him passionately, and giving him kiss for kiss with an absolute abandon of all resistance."<sup>21</sup>

*The Sheik* was one of the few novels of the decade to make the American best-seller list two years in a row, ranking sixth among the top ten best-selling works of fiction in 1921 and rising to second place in 1922. Paramount's 1921 silent film version of the story starred Rudolph Valentino in his first successful and best remembered role, and the word "sheik" entered the American language as a slang expression referring to a man with sex appeal.

Another popular novel of the decade also featured a passionate and sensual heroine. *Wild Geese* (1925), winner of a prize offered by the Pictorial Review, the Dodd, Mead Company, and the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, was written by Martha Ostenso, a writer of magazine stories and novels. Born in Norway in 1900, she emigrated with her parents to America when she was two. During her childhood her family lived in a succession of small towns in Manitoba, Canada. She later wrote that it was "during a summer vacation from my university work . . . that I went into the lake district of Manitoba, well toward the frontier of that northern civilization. My novel, *Wild Geese*, lay there, waiting to be put into words. Here was human nature stark, unattired in the convention of a smoother, softer life."<sup>22</sup> In *Wild Geese*, Ostenso presents Judith Gare, the hot-blooded daughter of a cruel and repressive father. When she becomes old enough to become aware of the urges of her body, Judith submits to her feelings. In an early scene, she is alone in the woods. Ostenso writes:

It was clingingly warm, as before rain. Not knowing fully what she was doing, Judith took off all her clothing and lay flat on the damp ground with the waxy feeling of new, sunless vegetation under her.<sup>23</sup>

Judith's sexual desires become more focused when Sven Sandbo returns to the area. The first time Judith sees Sven, she knows that he is watching her riding her colt and she is "conscious of the picture she made, magnificently riding."<sup>24</sup> The second time they meet, Judith feels a strong physical attraction for Sven. Filled with an uncontrollable desire for him, she begins to wrestle with Sven—and Ostenso devotes two full pages to a graphic description of their struggle. The author concludes this passage by writing:

Her panting body heaved against his as they lay full length on the ground locked in furious embrace. Judith buried her nails in the flesh over his breast, beat her knees into his loins, set her teeth in the more tender skin over the veins at his wrists . . . Sven's breath fell in hot gusts on Judith's face . . . Sven released the arm that he had bent to the breaking point. He was trembling.

"Judie," he muttered. "Judie—look at me."

Judith raised her eyelids slowly.

"Kiss me—now," she said in a breath.<sup>25</sup>

Matters do not end with a kiss. Judith gets pregnant. She and Swen secretly make plans to elope after the haying is finished, but their arrangements become unnecessary when her dictatorial father is killed in a fire at the end of the novel.

Judith Gare is depicted as a woman who is scarcely more inhibited by social conventions than is her colt. In abandoning herself to her physical desires, she breaks more decisively with the restraints imposed upon women than does Diana Mayo, who reacts to rather than acts upon her feelings. Diana responds to the Sheik's caresses, but she does not have to take responsibility for her behavior: she is cast in the traditional female role of victim; she is not taking on the male role of aggressor. Judith, on the other hand, is not forced into physical intimacy with Swen; she enters willingly into their wrestling match, and it is she who demands that he kiss her. Ostenso's steamy treatment of Judith's sexual awakening did not succeed in making *Wild Geese* the runaway best seller that *The Sheik* had become. Ostenso's novels were never more than minor successes, appearing briefly on the monthly lists of best-selling novels but not on the yearly lists. Ostenso's shaky character development and her use of improbable and melodramatic plot devices may have limited her popularity: critics of her books objected to the "theatrical action and the pompous prose"<sup>26</sup> and to her "conception of character which is undeniably sentimental and a little false."<sup>27</sup> At the same time, readers may well have felt uneasy with Ostenso's rendering of female passion.

A more popular novel of the Twenties than *Wild Geese* portrays a protagonist who, like Judith Gare, is not reticent about initiating sexual encounters. With the help of her love-charm, Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary*, in the 1928 best-selling novel of the same title, deliberately entices a whole succession of men

to her bed. Mary is an African-American woman who lives in the Quarters at the Blue Brook Plantation on the coast of South Carolina. When the story opens, she is fifteen, “a slender, darting, high-spirited girl, a leader of the young set” who is about to marry July, “perhaps the wildest young buck in the Quarters.”<sup>28</sup> For the first months of their married life, they are happy together, but soon after the birth of their first child, July starts seeing another woman. Mary goes to old Daddy Cudjoe to get a charm to win back July’s affections but before she can use it he leaves her. As the days and weeks go by with no sign of July, Mary grieves and pines. She loses her strength and her looks. Finally, she rallies. She turns to her love-charm. With its help, she conceives her second child, a daughter by July’s brother June.

Fifteen years pass. Through judicious use of her love-charm, Mary now has nine children, all of different fathers. Mary’s satisfaction with her unconventional lifestyle is shattered when her first child Unex abruptly dies. Fearing that God is punishing her for her sinful life, Mary goes into the woods, prays, and has a vision. The deacons decide that she has had a genuine conversion and welcome her back into the church. They would not perhaps have been so quick to readmit her had they overheard her conversation with Daddy Cudjoe after the church meeting. When he asks for his love-charm back, assuming that the reformed Mary will need it no longer, she refuses to return it: “I’ll lend em to you when you need em, Daddy, but I couldn’t gi way my love-charm. E’s all I got now to keep me young.”<sup>29</sup>

*Scarlet Sister Mary* was written by the daughter of a prominent South Carolinian physician whose wife died soon after her daughter’s birth. Julia Peterkin was raised by a black nurse, and as a child she spoke both standard English and the Gullah dialect of her “Mauma.” In 1903, shortly after graduating from college, she married William Peterkin, whose family owned and operated one of the largest and most productive plantations in the state. As mistress of the estate, she came into daily contact with the four to five hundred black workers on the plantation. Mrs. Peterkin began writing seriously after 1920, at the age of forty. She took as her subject the Gullah blacks and their culture. While her early efforts were generally applauded by both black and white critics, it was not until the appearance of *Scarlet Sister Mary* in 1928 that she achieved popular success as well. Awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the best novel of the year and later the vehicle for Ethel Barrymore’s “first and not altogether successful experiment in playing black face” on the stage,<sup>30</sup> the book eventually sold over a million copies. The late Twenties was a propitious time for bringing out a novel set in a black community. The Harlem Renaissance was in full swing, and both black and white writers were winning acclaim for their portrayal of African-American life.

There is no doubt that the novel’s heroine is accepting of extramarital sex; yet, we should not read too much into Mary’s example. One reviewer wrote that *Scarlet Sister Mary* “evidently presents an authentic picture of Negro life, standards, morals, viewpoint, and character close to the soil.”<sup>31</sup> The operative

word in this review is “Negro”: it is precisely because Mary is a woman of color that middle-class white readers could permit her greater latitude of action than they would be likely to condone in white protagonists. White critics and, presumably, readers saw Mary and her people as “exotics,” as children of nature, “close to the soil” and pre-moral in their standards. Black poet Ruth G. Dixon commented upon this phenomenon in a poem published in *The Crisis* in 1930. Addressing her verses “To the lovers of ‘Porgy,’ ‘Scarlet Sister Mary,’ and other stories ‘characteristic’ of Negro life,” Dixon remarks:

You cry “Eureka!” and rejoice.  
You’ve found at last the Negro!  
Primitive! Beautiful! Untarnished  
By the light of your civilization,  
Unfettered by your laws  
Of social decency.<sup>32</sup>

In some ways, Diana Mayo, Judith Gare, and Scarlet Sister Mary are all “unfettered” by the “laws of social decency”: the action of *The Sheik* takes place beyond the boundaries of “civilization,” where the conventions do not apply; Judith Gare is a child of nature, a home-grown exotic whose story is told sympathetically but with some degree of distance by a more traditional heroine, the new school teacher who is boarding with the Gares for the year; and Mary is a member of a “primitive” race of people whose mores are not expected to conform to those of conventional white society. When we turn our attention to popular heroines who seem to be more typical of young middle-class white women of the Twenties, we find at least a few who appear to have broken as completely with the conventions of the past as have the three atypical heroines described above. The best known of these protagonists is Lorelei Lee in Hollywood screenwriter Anita Loos’ first work of fiction, “*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.” The novel first ran in installments in *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1925. Illustrated by the celebrated Ralph Barton, the story was hugely popular. The book was even more successful. A publisher friend of Loos first brought out a small “vanity edition” of fifteen hundred copies which sold out the very day it reached the bookstores. A second edition of sixty thousand copies sold out nearly as quickly. As Loos recalled, “I believe the book ran into forty-five editions before the early demand had ceased.”<sup>33</sup> The novel rose to second place on the best-seller list for 1926. In the fall of 1926, a stage production of the story began a six-month run in New York. Two years later Paramount released a movie version of the best seller. In 1953, Howard Hawks directed a remake of the 1928 movie, starring Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell.<sup>34</sup> It was Monroe’s performance in this film classic which has established Lorelei Lee firmly in the popular imagination as the archetypal flapper.

The story starts in New York and follows dizzy blonde Lorelei Lee and her brunette friend Dorothy on a tour of Europe—paid for by Lorelei’s gentleman



friend Mr. Eisman, known in Chicago as “the Button King.” Rather foolishly, Mr. Eisman leaves Lorelei and Dorothy to make most of the trip on their own, and Lorelei turns a number of male heads along the way, trading sexual favors for expensive gifts. Eventually, on a train to Vienna, Lorelei meets Henry Spoffard, scion of an old and wealthy Philadelphia family—and a bachelor. She wastes no time in setting her cap for him, despite the fact that Spoffard and his mother disapprove of the kind of fast living that is Lorelei’s trademark. With an eye for the main chance, Lorelei instantly changes her demeanor. A consummate actress who believes in giving her public what it wants, Lorelei immerses herself in her new role and remains in character even in the privacy of her diary. In it, she writes that Henry has never married

because his mother does not think that all of the flappers we seem to have nowadays are what a young man ought to marry when a young man is full of so many morals as Mr. Spoffard seems to be full of. So I told Mr. Spoffard that I really felt just like his mother about all of the flappers because I am an old fashioned girl.<sup>35</sup>

Henry proposes and Lorelei accepts. After their marriage they move to Hollywood, where Spoffard finances movies in which Lorelei stars. Everyone, including Lorelei, is happy, and she concludes her diary, “feeling that, after all, everything always turns out for the best.”<sup>36</sup>

If we point to “*Gentleman Prefer Blondes*” as evidence, it certainly appears that women’s values and behavior were undergoing dramatic change in the Twenties. Lorelei Lee may pretend to be an old-fashioned girl, but she is a flapper through and through. The Barton illustrations show an attractive young woman, with bobbed hair, rouged lips, and short skirts. Lorelei has none of the traditional feminine reticences concerning sex. Lorelei is a professional gold digger, ready to take what she can get, to sell her sexual charms to the highest bidder. Seldom romantic but always materialistic, Lorelei writes in her diary that “kissing your hand may make you feel very very good but a diamond and safire [sic] bracelet lasts forever.”<sup>37</sup> Like a conventional woman’s novel, “*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*” ends with matrimony; yet, “*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*” is hardly a conventional woman’s novel, and Lorelei is scarcely about to settle down to a life of domestic bliss. She has established herself in Hollywood, where she is beginning a new career in which she can charm men en masse instead of one at a time.

Popular though it undoubtedly was, “*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*” should not be regarded as a typical woman’s novel of the Twenties. For one thing, Anita Loos was a writer of movie and play scripts by profession and a popular novelist only by accident; a novelist, moreover, whose single best seller owes no debts to the traditions which shape the plot, characterization, and tone of other popular women’s novels of the decade. For another thing, “*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*” was intended and received as a farce.<sup>38</sup> Irritated that H. L. Mencken preferred a

“witless blonde” over her brunette self, Anita Loos allegedly wrote the story as a joke at Mencken’s expense. Loos later claimed that Mencken called her the “first American writer ever to make fun of sex!”<sup>39</sup> Unlike the protagonists of other women’s novels, Lorelei Lee was not meant to be taken seriously.

Totally different in mood from the light-hearted “*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*” is the darker *Ex-Wife*, published in 1929 by magazine writer Ursula Parrott. Nevertheless, the two books do have a superficial similarity. Like Loos’ novel, *Ex-Wife* is written in the first person, a relatively uncommon novelistic format for fiction of the day. Similar to Lorelei Lee, Parrott’s heroine Patricia (who is not given a last name) is a thoroughly modern young lady: Patricia drinks alcohol, frequents Manhattan speakeasies and Harlem nightclubs, smokes cigarettes, uses profanity upon occasion, wears makeup, and dresses in the latest styles. While Loos only implies that Lorelei has sex with men in return for diamond bracelets and the like, Parrott is explicit in informing the reader that Patricia sleeps with a succession of lovers. More innocent, perhaps, than Lorelei, Patricia refuses to accept gifts from those who share her bed: refusing a present from a would-be lover, Patricia reflects that the “only thing I have left to cherish is my amateur standing.”<sup>40</sup>

*Ex-Wife*, which sold one hundred thousand copies, was a “*succès de scandale*,” as Parrott’s son recalled some sixty years later.<sup>41</sup> Yet, Patricia becomes a “loose” woman against her will. Following her confession of infidelity, her husband Peter rejects her. Patricia devotes a good deal of effort to winning him back, a goal with which few readers today would be likely to empathize, given Peter’s own marital faithlessness and his brutal physical abuse of his wife—on one occasion he hits her across the mouth and on another he pushes her through a glass door. As an “anaesthetic” to assuage the grief she experiences when her husband leaves her, Patricia moves through a series of one-night stands. Patricia may be sexually liberated, but she is certainly not a feminist. In fact, as one of the few women novelists of the day to comment directly on feminist politics, Parrott, though Patricia’s friend Lucia, blames the women’s movement for the plight of Patricia and ex-wives like her:

“We are *free*. Applesauce! Free to pay our own rent, and buy our own clothes, and put up with the eccentricities of three to eight men who have authority over us in business, instead of having to please just one husband. . . .

“Women used to have status, a relative security. Now they have the status of any prostitute, success while their looks hold out. If the next generation of women have any sense, they’ll dynamite the statue of Susan B. Anthony, and start a crusade for the revival of chivalry.”<sup>42</sup>

Eventually, Patricia recovers from the breakup of her marriage, stops sleeping around, falls in love with a married man and renounces him for the sake of his

family, and remarries on the rebound, promising her new husband rather wearily that she means to make him a “perfect wife.”<sup>43</sup>

Although some of its action seems contrived, the emotional tone of *Ex-Wife* seems genuine. Despite the fact that one reviewer complained that the book had “neither sociological nor literary value,”<sup>44</sup> another was so taken by the psychological realism of the novel that this reviewer assumed that the book was based upon the author’s own life, writing that *Ex-Wife* was a “sincerely written autobiography, presented as fiction.”<sup>45</sup> Another judged that the “narrative seems to be authentic: it has a certain intangible quality of truth.”<sup>46</sup> Yet another promised readers that “you can learn about women” from Parrott’s novel.<sup>47</sup>

In spite of the striking difference in tone between the two novels, the reviewer for the *Herald Tribune* associated Parrott’s book with Loos’, claiming that *Ex-wife* had “about the same fidelity to life as ‘*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*’.”<sup>48</sup> It appears that what this book critic meant by “fidelity to life” was simply both authors’ willingness to discuss, in the critic’s words, “casual immoralities [with] unabashed frankness.”<sup>49</sup> Both books, of course, do feature heroines who are relatively unconstrained by conventional sexual standards. That Parrott’s novel lacks the lighter touch of Loos’ book probably accounts for the fact that *Ex-Wife* never matched “‘*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*’” in sales figures. While Parrott’s descriptions of her heroine’s love-trysts were hardly as vivid as Ostensó’s depictions of Judith Gare’s sexual encounters, perhaps readers nevertheless felt uncomfortable with so blatantly promiscuous—and so bitterly rendered—a heroine. As the reviewer for *Bookman* perceptively remarked of *Ex-Wife*, “beneath the alluring glamour of . . . [sexual] freedom can be felt the hopeless despair of wrecked ideals.”<sup>50</sup> *Ex-Wife* was hardly the novel with which to curl up on the sofa and while away an idle hour.

It is important to note that the more sexually liberated heroine was the exception rather than the rule in fiction written by popular women novelists in the Twenties. While most middle-class women readers may have read *The Sheik* and “*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*”—or seen the movies—the fictional flappers whom they encountered in greater number were those created by such well-known women writers as Temple Bailey, Gene Stratton-Porter, and, especially, Kathleen Norris. Unlike Anita Loos or Julia Peterkin, each of whom produced only one major best seller, and unlike Martha Ostensó or Ursula Parrott, whose books never sold in sufficient quantities to enable them to enter the ranks of top best-selling writers, authors such as Bailey, Stratton-Porter, and Norris churned out one best seller after another, attracting and cultivating a loyal readership who remained faithful to them throughout their long careers. While readers may have maintained their distance from the burlesque of a Lorelei Lee, the primitivism of a Scarlet Sister Mary, or the exoticism of Diana Mayo’s plight; they could perhaps more closely empathize with the domestic melodrama of a Kathleen Norris or Temple Bailey character, whose background, behavior, and values seemed more akin to their own.

More typical of the fictional heroines of the Twenties than Diana Mayo or Lorelei Lee were those created by Gene Stratton-Porter, one of the most popular woman novelists of the era, who was known for her nature books and her editorials on *McCall's* "Gene Stratton-Porter Page" as well as for her novels. At the time of her death in 1924, more than ten million copies of her books had been sold—and four more books were published after her death.<sup>51</sup> Beginning with *The Harvester* in 1911 and concluding with the posthumously published *Keeper of the Bees* in 1925, six of her twelve novels made the best-seller list, ranking among the top ten works of fiction for the year in terms of sales. Stratton-Porter was one of the first popular novelists to see her books recreated on film: over twenty movies were made from her novels—many produced by the author's own movie production company, Gene Stratton-Porter Productions, which she formed "to protect the moralistic tone of her work."<sup>52</sup>

Stratton-Porter established the pattern for her heroines with her depiction of Elnora Comstock in *A Girl of the Limberlost*, published in 1909, and the characterization of her protagonists remained virtually unchanged thereafter. Wholesome, sensible, and beautiful, Elnora is also compassionate, self-reliant, and intelligent: "There was no form of suffering with which the girl could not sympathize, no work she was afraid to attempt, no subject she had investigated she did not understand."<sup>53</sup> When the handsome young hero arrives on the scene, he is immediately captivated by Elnora, even though he is already claimed by a physically attractive but selfish society girl. Elnora's virtue wins her the hero. Association with Elnora prompts the society girl to reform: she vows to be more like Elnora in the future.

While one would hardly expect Stratton-Porter to portray the heroine of her 1909 novel as a flapper, it is perhaps surprising that in *Her Father's Daughter*, published in 1921, the novelist presents a protagonist whose virtues and behavior are equally old-fashioned. Seventeen-year-old Linda Strong lives with her older sister Eileen. Linda is unaffected, honest, resourceful, and highly patriotic. More interested in getting good grades and continuing her late father's nature studies than in attracting male attention, she defends her unfashionable clothing as "practical." Eileen, on the other hand, has succumbed to modern fashion. Flapper-like, she wears her dresses short, smokes—in secret—and uses make-up; but her behavior only proves her capacity for deception. As Linda remarks:

"I never knew Eileen to be honest about anything in her life unless the truth served her better than an evasion. Her hair was not honest color and it was not honest curl. Her eyebrows were not so dark as she made them. Her cheeks and lips were not so red . . . her form was not so perfect. Her friends were selected because they could serve her."<sup>54</sup>

By the end of the novel, Eileen has reformed somewhat, but it is the natural Linda, not the artificial Eileen, who has captured the most eligible bachelor. Stratton-Porter

is topical in her inclusion of a flapper in her cast of characters, but, although she acknowledges the “revolution” in female appearance and behavior underway by the early Twenties, she refuses to make any concession to it; it is the “old-fashioned” female who triumphs in the end—by eliciting a marriage proposal from the most eligible male character in the novel.

Temple Bailey’s heroines seem equally as unsophisticated in their behavior and outlook as do Stratton-Porter’s. Bailey began her literary career writing stories for women’s magazines and later turned to novels. *The Dim Lantern* and *The Blue Window* appeared on the yearly best-seller lists for 1923 and 1926, respectively, and several other Bailey romances were reported among the monthly best sellers during the decade. In 1942, the editors of *Twentieth Century Authors* estimated that “at least three million of her books, including reprints, have been sold, and her readers must be reckoned at many millions more, since nearly half these sales are made to circulating libraries.”<sup>55</sup>

Bailey is only slightly more accepting of modern female behavior than is Stratton-Porter. Jane Barnes in *The Dim Lantern* (1923) has some of the attributes of a flapper, as her “bobbed hair emphasized the boyish effect of her straight, slim figure.”<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, “Jane might have bobbed hair, but she did not have a bobbed-hair mind.”<sup>57</sup> The author portrays her as having “old-fashioned domestic qualities.”<sup>58</sup> She keeps the house spic and span, cooks for her brother, and economically mends and remends her old frocks. She dreams of marrying, settling down in a snug little house, with a little garden, and raising a family. By the end of the novel, her dream has come true. It is her old-fashioned charm which has won the heart of the hero.

Bailey’s other novels are remarkably similar to *Dim Lantern* in characterization and plot. Her heroines are all “child-women.” In *The Blue Window* (1926), Hildegard Carew’s charm for one suitor “lay . . . in a sort of quaint childishness, in her hot little tempers, her quick repentances. She was so utterly herself, without affectation.”<sup>59</sup> In *Wallflowers* (1927), Rufus Fiske thinks of Sandra Claybourne as a “little girl, with . . . engaging charms of youth and naïveté. . .”<sup>60</sup> Bailey surrounds her heroines with an assortment of worldly and sophisticated young women, thus highlighting her protagonists’ freshness and lack of artifice. As in Stratton-Porter’s novels, the more “worldly” female characters are clearly on the wrong track. In *Wallflowers*, Stephanie Moore is “delightful to look at, delicate, sophisticated, with a thousand subtle perfections,”<sup>61</sup> but in Bailey’s lexicon, sophistication and subtlety are not positive female attributes. Stephanie deliberately pursues Gale Markham, even stooping to tell him, untruthfully, that Theodora Claybourne is engaged to another man. In the end, Stephanie’s machinations fail, and the reader is left with the decided impression that Stephanie has only herself to blame for losing the man she loves to her rival. In *The Blue Window*, Sally Hulbert appears at first to be another Stephanie Moore: “Sally, with her impertinences, and revealing franknesses. The worldly Sally, with her copper-colored bob, and her lip-stick”<sup>62</sup> seems merely a foil for the

ingenuous Hildegarde. It turns out that Sally is more traditional than she appears. When she finally marries the man of her dreams, she writes Hildegarde to say that “each day I am falling more in love with him. Which sounds as brazen as a brass band, but it isn’t. A wife should love her husband—and I am as meek as they make ‘em. Old-fashioned.”<sup>63</sup>

For the Bailey heroine, life consists of passively waiting and hoping for marriage to the right man. (Only the villainesses view the situation as a contest between rivals for the affections of the hero. The villainesses deliberately scheme to ensnare the men of their choice; the heroines, meanwhile, gain the hearts of the heroes by remaining above the fray.) The Bailey heroine spends her time falling in love, being separated from her true love for a variety of fairly minor reasons, being pursued by wealthy suitors who can offer her riches but not happiness, and finally being reunited with her beloved and entering into a life of marital bliss.

Love, in a Bailey novel, has little hint of physical passion. The Bailey heroine refuses even to kiss a suitor until she has accepted his hand in marriage. Crispin Harlow, Hildegarde’s childhood sweetheart in *The Blue Window*, wants to kiss her good-bye when she moves away from home. He assures her, “‘It won’t tie you to anything. But it will make you remember that I—care.’ She stood very still, then: ‘Crispin, it would tie me—I mustn’t.’”<sup>64</sup>

More important, apparently, than physical expression of their love is the couple’s achievement of a spiritual and emotional unity, a unity which will be consummated in marriage. Temple Bailey thus reflects relatively modern notions of wedlock: in her novels, husband and wife are companions, and the goal of marriage is their mutual happiness and personal fulfillment. Nevertheless, this model of the “companionate” marriage is joined in Bailey’s fiction with the more traditional doctrine of separate spheres, in which the woman is to provide her husband with peace and security in exchange for his support and protection.<sup>65</sup>

The cult of domesticity informs Bailey’s conception of the ideal wife. Suitor after suitor imagines his beloved sitting beside the hearth in a little house in the country. Crispin even purchases the house he hopes to share with Hildegarde before she has accepted his hand in marriage. He moves into the house on his own, seeing Hildegarde “in every room, but most often by the fireplace . . . And far away in the future . . . around the hearth . . . a small and shining troop . . . flitting back and forth in the firelight.”<sup>66</sup> Likewise, in *The Dim Lantern* Evans Follette dreams of a little house in which Jane Barnes will live as his wife. He dreams of a “living-room where a fire burned bright . . . [and a] kitchen, a shining place, with a crisp maid to save Jane from drudgery. Two crisp maids, perhaps, some day, if there were kiddies.”<sup>67</sup> One assumes that the heroes’ dreams are, in fact, Bailey’s own, that the author has projected her idea of the perfect marriage—complete with “crisp maids”—into the thoughts of her principal male characters. It is a feminine picture of domestic bliss which is articulated by the leading men—and quickly embraced by the heroines themselves.

The emphasis upon hearth and home in Bailey’s novels underscores her conception of the ideal wife in terms of the cult of domesticity. Suitor after suitor

follows Crispin's example in imagining his sweetheart beside the fireplace in a little house in the country. Bailey's heroines, moreover, share their lovers' dreams. We know that Sally Hulbert in *The Blue Window* is not the flighty girl she appears on the surface when she admits that "underneath I want to wear [old-fashioned] caps and part my hair and warm my toes at the fire."<sup>68</sup> Sandra Claybourne initially conceives of her relationship with Rufus Fiske in terms of romance, not domesticity. She tells him: "At first, I didn't think of hearthstones, Rufus. I thought of gardens and secret stairs and Romeo and Aucassin." But eventually Rufus' vision replaces her own. She confesses to him that "now . . . it is the thought that I'm your wife . . . that I shall sit by your fire. . . ." that is her deepest desire.<sup>69</sup> In Temple Bailey's world, by avoiding the artificiality and cunning of the flapper, her old-fashioned, simplehearted heroines are able to become madonnas of the hearth.

Even more popular a novelist than either Gene Stratton-Porter or Temple Bailey was Kathleen Norris. Over a career spanning five decades, Norris produced eighty-one novels, two autobiographies, and scores of short stories and magazine articles. Her first novel to appear on the best-seller lists was *The Heart of Rachael*, which ranked tenth in sales among works of fiction for 1916. Four years later, *Harriet and the Piper* (1920) was also tenth in fiction sales for the year. Nearly two dozen Norris novels were monthly best sellers during the Twenties and early Thirties, the period of Norris' greatest popularity. Fourteen years after her death in 1966, a biographer observed that "Kathleen Norris was one of the most popular and commercially successful authors of her time, her books selling ten million copies."<sup>70</sup>

Like Bailey, Norris is somewhat more receptive to postwar changes in young women's appearance and behavior than Gene Stratton-Porter; thus, Norris creates heroines of the Twenties who take on at least some of the characteristics of the flapper. Nevertheless, Norris tends to incorporate the flavor but not the substance of the flapper in her protagonists. It is probable that Norris's moderation in her depiction of the flapper contributed to her popularity in a decade in which public opinion of new modes of behavior was sharply divided. As film historian Kevin Brownlow has remarked, "the conflict [over moral behavior] was particularly harsh in the twenties, for Victorians and religious fundamentalists were living in the same communities with flappers and their sheiks. The [movie] industry had the impossible task of appealing to both extremes"—and so did popular novelists.<sup>71</sup> Thus, Norris's heroines bob their hair and wear short dresses. They even return young men's kisses, sometimes with passion, as does Juanita Espinosa in *The Seagull* (1927). Norris writes:

Juanita, not knowing what she did, raised her face, in the dim gloom, and Kent bent to her for his first kiss. And for a long minute they clung so, the girl's slender body close to his, their hearts beating together, and all the world whirling about Juanita in a storm of ecstasy and fear and joy.<sup>72</sup>

But those characters who defy the moral strictures of their elders come to regret their actions. In *The Foolish Virgin* (1929), Pamela Raleigh's mother predicts darkly that Pamela is riding for a fall:

“no chaperons . . . Drivin' about with boys in speed cars, smokin'—when I kissed you now all I could smell on yo' hair was smoke—drinkin'—I tell you, Pam, it's dangerous an' it's bad, an' the time's comin' when you're going to see it like I do . . .”<sup>73</sup>

All too soon, Pamela discovers that her mother is right. Late one Saturday night she goes driving with Chester Hilliard. Seventeen miles from town they run out of gas and they are forced to spend the night in an abandoned cabin. Although they are innocent of sexual wrongdoing, Pamela is ostracized from polite society. She is forced to take a job as companion and helper on a country ranch, where her new-found seriousness and competence attracts the eye of her employer. By the end of the novel, he has proposed to her and they are preparing to live happily ever after—now that she has given up her “foolish” modern ways.

Other Norris heroines' youthful indiscretions are more difficult to live down. In *Harriet and the Piper* (1920), Harriet Field is mesmerized by the unscrupulous Royal Blondin when she is seventeen, and she enters into a brief secret marriage with him. Even though she later realizes ““there had been no marriage, of course, either in law or in fact,””<sup>74</sup> the incident still haunts the heroine and almost wrecks her chances for future happiness. Even more disastrous is young Julia Page's youthful affair with an importunate suitor in *The Story of Julia Page* (1915). She feels obliged to confess her transgression to Jim Studdiford when he asks her to marry him. Although Studdiford maintains that he loves her anyway, his knowledge of her past sours their marriage. Julia comes to understand that she can never expect happiness: she “knew now that life to her must be a battle; whatever the years to come might hold for her, they could not hold more than an occasional heavenly interval of peace.”<sup>75</sup>

Kathleen Norris and Temple Bailey were both in their forties in the 1920s and Gene Stratton-Porter was in her fifties. They were scarcely flappers themselves. Perhaps we must turn to younger writers to find more whole-hearted acceptance of sexually liberated behavior for young women. Vina Delmar's first novel *Bad Girl* was published in 1928 when Delmar was twenty-three. The book achieved unexpected success, ranking fifth among best-selling fiction for the year. The following year, Delmar published another novel, *Kept Woman*, and a collection of short stories entitled *Loose Ladies*. Delmar's heroines appear at first glance to have shed traditional mores once and for all. The very model of modern flappers, they behave in a manner calculated to shock their elders. Delmar's young typists, salesclerks, and housewives bob their hair, rouge their lips, and roll their stockings above their knees. They smoke; they drink; they cross their legs in public. They are practiced at the quick comeback, at brittle repartee. When Eddie,



for instance, first meets Dot in *Bad Girl*, he asks, ““What about it? . . . Want to see me again?”” Dot promptly retorts, ““I should say not, but accidents do happen.””<sup>76</sup>

The young women in Vina Delmar’s stories and novels are more casual about sex than Stratton-Porter’s, Bailey’s, or Norris’s heroines could be. They think nothing of kissing a young man on the first date. They are not adverse to petting, but for Delmar’s characters, as for the young female population in general during this period, petting stops short of sexual intercourse.<sup>77</sup> Soon after first encountering her on board a Hudson River excursion boat, Eddie considers his chances with Dot in *Bad Girl*. Based, apparently, upon previous experience with young women of Dot’s presumed type, he predicts to himself that,

she would move with him into a darkened corner and permit him to kiss her, to paw her unrestrainedly. The limit? No, she would not go the limit. She would lie against his shoulder, moist-lipped, panting, but ever alert lest the purely physical barrier that guaranteed her self-respect be taken away from her.<sup>78</sup>

One fails in the attempt to imagine the suitors of virginal Linda Strong or Jane Barnes entertaining such calculations. In Dot’s case, she eventually surpasses Eddie’s expectations: she goes the limit. Immediately afterward Dot is ashamed of herself and Eddie is unable to reassure her.

“I wish everybody didn’t think it was wrong,” said Dot, very low.

“I guess other people have wished that.” He sighed heavily.

“Don’t you suppose,” Dot asked, “that somewhere there are nice people who would think it was all right?”

“Maybe in France,” Eddie replied, doubtfully. “Even the high-toned people over there are kind of loose, I’ve heard.”

“Gee, Eddie, I’ll feel awful down at work. I bet the girls will be able to tell right off that I’ve gone bad.”<sup>79</sup>

For the young woman in a Delmar novel, then, even one sexual indiscretion threatens to ruin her reputation: she fears that her family, her friends, and her co-workers will all repudiate her. Only if her partner in scandal offers to marry her, as Eddie does in *Bad Girl*, can she regain her good name. (The young man involved, it goes without saying, is not sullied by the experience; the double standard is intact in the world of Delmar’s characters—and, presumably, of Delmar’s readers.) Dot quits her job and settles down contentedly to a life of domestic bliss.

Until she gets pregnant. Dot fears that Eddie will not want a child so, when she breaks the news to him, she is “careless and hard in the telling.”<sup>80</sup> Eddie therefore believes that she does not want the baby. Dot and Eddie spend the next

nine months deceiving one another. Each secretly wants the baby but is unable to admit it to the other. Dot, desperately eager to please Eddie, shrinks from acknowledging that she looks forward to something that he is apparently against. Eddie, habitually inarticulate and fearful for Dot's health during childbirth, cannot erase her misconceptions of his true feelings. It is not until they are on their way home from the hospital after the baby is born that Dot finally realizes that Eddie cares deeply for the child. Dot is now free to admit her own pleasure at being a mother. Thus, Delmar's heroines may shock their elders by their clothing, their cigarettes, their rouged lips; they may affect the "hard-boiled" wit of their generation; they may even transgress the sexual mores of their age; but, beneath their jazz age exteriors, they cling to the old-fashioned values of marriage and motherhood—just like Stratton-Porter's and Bailey's heroines.

The "New Woman" who appears in *Bad Girl* and in most popular novels written by women in the Twenties is somewhat different from the heroines featured by Scott Fitzgerald, the most influential interpreter of the flapper, a creature whom he described as "lovely, expensive—and about nineteen."<sup>81</sup> Unlike Daisy Buchanan, who lives for the moment, has become cynical about marriage, and contemplates an affair with Jay Gatsby, the women who most frequently people best-selling novels by female writers are seldom as "liberated" as we might have expected. In novel after novel, the protagonist is a woman who has adopted the veneer of flapperdom: the clothing, hair style, slang of the times; but who remains an old-fashioned girl at heart. This is consistent with the message presented in films of the period. As Sumiko Higaski observes in her study of the American silent movie heroine, "... if women rebelled by behaving like rather than opposite men, their unconventional actions led to a conventional end. The flapper may have been sexually prococious but in fact, she was not really so distant from the sentimental heroine in terms of her goal": marriage to a physically attractive and economically dependable young man.<sup>82</sup> Even the apparent "sexual procociousness" of the movie heroine was restricted. Based upon her analysis of women's images in movies of the Twenties, Mary P. Ryan concludes that "it would be very difficult . . . for a movie-going girl to receive the idea that sexual promiscuity was an approved form of behavior in the nineteen-twenties. The movie heroine was always chaste at heart . . . Sex in the films of the twenties . . . heightened sexual awareness without promising ultimate gratification."<sup>83</sup> Likewise, movie historian Molly Haskell remarks that the "American [movie] flapper was, by definition, only superficially uninhibited. She was, after all, the middle-class . . . daughter of puritans, and she would pass this heritage on to her daughters and granddaughters."<sup>84</sup>

If we accept the analyses of Higaski, Ryan, and Haskell with regard to the morality and behavior of movie heroines of the Twenties, it appears that the flappers featured in popular women's fiction of the decade simultaneously resemble and differ from the those portrayed on the silver screen. In at least a few popular novels of the period, the heroines cast off traditional middle-class

inhibitions to assert themselves more boldly than their celluloid sisters dared to do. Although most of these novels end with the heroine's marriage (or remarriage, in the case of *Ex-Wife*), one ventures to predict that these heroines will be as likely to exhibit their independence and their frank pleasure in sex after they are wed as they did before. In the majority of women's novels of the Twenties, however, as in most films of the day, the protagonists are more restrained. For Delmar's Dot Haley or Norris' Pamela Raleigh, being a flapper seemed to be only a matter of going through a "phase," negotiating a brief period of life between childhood and adulthood when a young woman was at liberty to act out a rebellion against the traditional values which she in fact never really abandoned; once she had taken on her "real" role as wife and mother, she cast aside all pretense of insurrection and settled down to a life of domesticity. Temple Bailey's or Gene Stratton-Porter's heroines, moreover, assume few of the mannerisms or behaviors commonly associated with the flapper; far from being intent on having a good time while they are young and single, their objective is to marry "Mr. Right," settle in a house in the country or the suburbs, and start a family.

The very fact that popular women novelists of the decade offered readers a Diana Mayo or a Lorelei Lee at the same time that they offered a Pamela Raleigh or a Jane Barnes suggests an ambivalence among women of the day as to the behavior and values they deemed appropriate for themselves. That the popular novelists of the day did not speak with one voice demonstrates that at least some of the traditional expectations for women were being renegotiated. In particular, a new morality was being established: some women were coming to see themselves as sexual beings, with desires which were no longer to be repressed—after marriage, at least. Many women were also beginning to expect more emotional satisfaction from marriage, to look for a mate who would treat them as a partner, not as a subordinate. When it came to abandoning the cult of domesticity altogether, however, most Twenties couples were unprepared to take so drastic a step. Women fully expected and wanted to be wives and mothers, to devote their undivided attention to the fulltime occupation of homemaker. If the popular novels written by women for women in the Twenties are any indication, an era widely touted as one of sweeping social transformation produced only modest changes for most middle-class young women.<sup>85</sup>

## Notes

1. *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago, 1958), 159.
2. *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (Oxford, 1972), 65.
3. Chafe, 33. For a detailed account of the shifts in historians' interpretations of Twenties' women, see Estelle B. Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," *Journal of American History* 61 (September 1974), 372-93. For a comprehensive description of the goals and strategies of the feminist movement in the Twenties and an assessment of its success in achieving equal rights and equal status for women of the period, see Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, 1987).

4. For example, Leuchtenberg titles a chapter in *Perils of Prosperity* "The Revolution in Morals"; in *Women and the American Experience* (New York, 1984) Nancy Woloch subtitles a section of her chapter on women in the Twenties "The New Morality." James R. McGovern claims that this "revolution" occurred earlier than historians have heretofore suggested; see "The American Woman's Pre-World War I Freedom in Manners and Morals," *Journal of American History* 55 (September 1968), 315-33.

5. Erik Lofroth, *A World Made Safe: Values in American Best Sellers, 1895-1920* (Stockholm, 1983), 17.

More recently, the readership of the mass-market romance has been more thoroughly analyzed than that of any other type of twentieth-century women's fiction. Studies show that the vast majority of these books have been read by women. See, for example, Leslie W. Rabine, "Romance in the Age of Electronics: Harlequin Enterprises," *Feminist Studies* 11 (Spring 1985), 39-60; Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (Urbana, 1987), 113-38; or Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984).

6. Grant Overton, *Cargoes for Crusoes* (New York, 1924), 175.

7. *New York Times* (May 25, 1924), 22.

8. *New York World* (April 11, 1926), 7.

9. *New York Tribune* (June 19, 1927), 10.

10. Lofroth, 17.

11. Donald R. Makosky, "The Portrayal of Women in Wide-Circulation Magazine Short Stories, 1905-1955 (Diss. University of Pennsylvania 1966), 12.

12. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago, 1976), 33.

13. Obviously, we can do no more than speculate as to how readers responded to popular novels of the Twenties. Furthermore, this study cannot prove that the attitudes presented in women's novels were held by a substantial proportion of their readers. The best way to provide conclusive evidence of readers' reactions to books and the relationship between readers' and novelists' values and assumptions is to interview readers, as Janice Radway does when she questions a small number of romance novel readers in *Reading the Romance* (1984). Failing direct contact, the eliciting of letters and written questionnaires can also provide valuable insight regarding contemporary reader response, as Helen Taylor's *Scarlett's Women* (New Brunswick, 1989) makes clear. Since those women still alive today who read the best sellers of the Twenties when the books were first published are now three-quarters of a century removed from their reading experience, it would be difficult for them to recall their initial responses to these books with any degree of reliability. For this reason, I felt that it would not be practical to attempt to reconstruct readers' responses and reactions to the novels examined herein. The one remaining approach would be to analyze letters written by readers to the various popular women novelists, if such correspondence does, in fact, exist. Such an approach awaits further study.

14. The silent film version of the book, which was produced by the American movie studio Paramount in 1921, was perhaps even more successful among American audiences than the book had been.

15. I also discuss Ursula Parrott's *Ex-Wife* (1929), which was neither a monthly nor a yearly best seller. Nevertheless, *Ex-Wife* was hardly ignored by the reading public, as the novel sold 100,000 copies. (See Francine Prose, introduction to 1989 reprint edition of *Ex-Wife*, p. xi.) *Ex-Wife* is introduced in this study to demonstrate that there was an alternative view to the issue of sexuality besides the one usually articulated by best-selling novelists, not to argue that Parrott is typical of popular women novelists with regard to her handling of this issue.

16. Fass, 25.

17. Fass concludes that, "although mating choices, sexual expression, and cultural forms had been newly tuned to an emerging American life style, they were still very much within the main line of the culture." *The Damned and the Beautiful*, 366.

18. See Patricia Raub, "Issues of Passion and Power in E.M. Hull's *The Sheik*," *Women's Studies* 21 (1992): 119-28.

19. *The Sheik*, 58.

20. *The Sheik*, 146.

21. *The Sheik*, 148.

22. Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, editors, *Twentieth-Century Authors* (New York, 1942), 1059.

23. Martha Ostenso, *Wild Geese* (New York, 1925), 66.

24. *Wild Geese*, 97.

25. *Wild Geese*, 118.

26. *Saturday Review* (October 15, 1927), 197.

27. *New York Times* (September 1, 1929), 7.

28. Julia Peterkin, *Scarlet Sister Mary* (New York, 1928), 15.

29. *Scarlet Sister Mary*, 345.
30. Kunitz and Haycraft, 1097.
31. *Springfield Republican* (December 9, 1928), 7.
32. Quoted in Maureen Honey, *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick), 83.
33. "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" (New York, 1963 reprint of 1925 edition), xv.
34. For an analysis of this film, see Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Gold Diggers of 1933: Howard Hawks' Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," *Sight & Sound* 54 (Winter 1984/85), 45-49. See also Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, "Pre-Text and Text in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," and Maureen Turim, "Gentlemen Consume Blondes," both in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, edited by Patricia Erens (Bloomington, 1990).
35. "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," 139.
36. "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," 217.
37. "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," 100.
38. Nancy Walker presents a somewhat different interpretation of the novel, suggesting that it is a satire rather than a farce. Thus, Walker contends that Loos is attempting to subvert existing stereotypes of women rather than merely trying to poke fun at them. See *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis, 1988).
39. Quoted in Anita Loos, *Cast of Thousands* (New York, 1977), 77.
40. Ursula Parrott, *Ex-Wife* (New York, 1989 reprint of 1929 edition), 174.
41. *Ex-Wife* (afterward), 219.
42. *Ex-Wife*, 70.
43. *Ex-Wife*, 218.
44. *Springfield Republican* (August 25, 1929), 7.
45. *Bookman* (September 1929), xx.
46. *Nation* (September 18, 1929), 310.
47. *New York Herald Tribune* (August 11, 1929), 6.
48. *New York Herald Tribune*, 6.
49. *New York Herald Tribune*, 6.
50. *Bookman*, xx.
51. Grant Overton, *The Women Who Make Our Novels* (revised edition, 1928; Freeport, 1967 reprint of 1928 edition), 312. See Bertrand F. Richards, *Gene Stratton Porter* (Boston, 1980) and Judith Reick Long, *Gene Stratton-Porter: Novelist and Naturalist* (Bloomington, 1990) for background on Stratton-Porter's life and work.
- Given the fact that the protagonists of Stratton-Porter's best-known books—*Freckles* (1904), *A Girl of Limberlost* (1909), and *Laddie* (1913)—are children or adolescents, one might assume that Stratton-Porter's work is aimed at children rather than at adult women. Although two of her collections of stories, *After the Flood* (1911) and *Morning Face* (1916), were written explicitly for children, it seems clear that her novels were intended for an adult readership. Three of her books were serialized in *McCall's*, a magazine which catered to a middle-class adult female audience, and one of her biographers points out that she "was published consistently and simultaneously" in both *McCall's* and *Good Housekeeping*. (Richards, 125) While some of Stratton-Porter's novels appear to be fictionalized accounts of the author's childhood—and earned her the reputation of being the writer of "nothing but sugary romances and molasses fiction" (Richards, 87), other books deal with problems besetting more mature characters, such as the "love-triangle" which drives the plot of *At the Foot of the Rainbow* (1907) or the greed, bankruptcy, illegitimacy, suicide, and dementia which bedevil the characters in *The White Flag* (1923).
52. Jane S. Bakerman, "Gene Stratton-Porter," in *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present*, Volume 4, edited by Lina Mainiero (New York, 1979), 180.
53. Gene Stratton-Porter, *A Girl of the Limberlost* (New York, 1909), 130.
54. *Her Father's Daughter* (New York, 1921), 26.
55. Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, editors, *Twentieth Century Authors* (New York, 1942), 61.
56. *The Dim Lantern* (New York, 1923), 10.
57. *The Dim Lantern*, 135.
58. *The Dim Lantern*, 135.
59. *The Blue Window* (New York, 1926), 95.
60. *Wallflowers* (Philadelphia, 1927), 109.
61. *Wallflowers*, 112.
62. *Blue Window*, 113.
63. *Blue Window*, 318.
64. *Blue Window*, 22.
65. Her study of short stories published in popular women's magazines in the Twenties leads Maureen Honey to conclude that these "fantasies for middle-class women after the vote provided a

bridge from the doctrine of separate spheres to a recognizably modern model of gender relations. . .” (“Gotham’s Daughters: Feminism in the 1920s,” *American Studies* 31 [Spring 1990], 25-40). My reading of women’s popular novels of the decade has led me to a slightly different conclusion. While many of the novels do present a somewhat more modern model of gender relations, based upon the concept of “companionate marriage” popular in the Twenties, few books abandon the doctrine of separate spheres. Thus, as Nancy F. Cott concludes, it appears that the traditional power structure within marriage remains intact throughout this period. See note 85 below.

66. *Blue Window*, 313.

67. *Dim Lantern*, 203.

68. *Blue Window*, 113.

69. *Wallflowers*, 350.

70. Elinor Richey, in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, edited by Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, 1980), 510.

71. *Beyond the Mask of Innocence* (New York, 1990), 29.

72. *The Sea Gull* (New York, 1970 reprint of 1927 edition), 154.

73. *The Foolish Virgin* (Garden City, 1929), 5.

74. *Harriet and the Piper* (New York, 1920), 295.

75. *The Story of Julia Page* (Garden City, 1929), 418.

76. *Bad Girl* (New York, 1928), 15.

77. See Fass, 262-76.

78. *Bad Girl*, 7.

79. *Bad Girl*, 56.

80. *Bad Girl*, 103.

81. Quoted in Leuchtenburg, 172.

82. *Virgins, Vamps, and Flappers: The American Silent Movie Heroine* (Montreal and St. Albans, 1978), 15.

83. “The Projection of a New Womanhood: The Movie Moderns in the 1920’s,” *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought*, 2nd ed., edited by Jean E. Friedman and William G. Shade (Boston, 1976), 373.

84. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York, 1974), 79.

85. My conclusion essentially supports Nancy F. Cott’s observations regarding marriage in the Twenties. She writes, “incorporating sex and marital camaraderie, and yet leaving intact the sexual division of labor, the companionate marriage model was broadcast far afield of the Feminist camp by a range of spokesmen and women.” (*The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 157) While feminists critiqued the traditional marriage relationship as one in which the wife remained subordinate to her husband, popularists of the “companionate” marriage concept ignored the feminists’ main point and fastened on those aspects of marriage that did not threaten the distribution of power between husband and wife. Popular women novelists of the decade tended to fall into the popularists’ camp: as we have seen, some writers acknowledged women’s sexual drives while others focused upon the emotional intimacy to be achieved through marriage. Almost forgotten, however, was the feminists’ indictment of the gender inequalities inherent in the middle-class marriage.