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MACMILLAN MODERN NOVELISTS
SIX WOMEN NOVELISTS

Merryn Williams

Olive Schreiner
Edith Wharton
F. M. Mayor
Katherine Mansfield
Dorothy L. Sayers
Antonia White

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MACMILLAN

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General Editor's Preface

The death of the novel has often been announced, and part of the secret of its obstinate vitality must be its capacity for growth, adaptation, self-renewal and even self-transformation: like some vigorous organism in a speeded-up Darwinian ecosystem, it adapts itself quickly to a changing world. War and revolution, economic crisis and social change, radically new ideologies such as Marxism and Freudianism, have made this century unprecedented in human history in the speed and extent of change, but the novel has shown an extraordinary capacity to find new forms and techniques and to accommodate new ideas and conceptions of human nature and human experience, and even to take up new positions on the nature of fiction itself.

In the generations immediately preceding and following 1914, the novel underwent a radical redefinition of its nature and possibilities. The present series of monographs is devoted to the novelists who created the modern novel and to those who, in their turn, either continued and extended, or reacted against and rejected, the traditions established during that period of intense exploration and experiment. It includes a number of those who lived and wrote in the nineteenth century but whose innovative contribution to the art of fiction makes it impossible to ignore them in any account of the origins of the modern novel; it also includes the so-called 'modernists' and those who in the mid- and late twentieth century have emerged as outstanding practitioners of this genre. The scope is, inevitably, international; not only, in the migratory and exile-haunted world of our century, do writers refuse to heed national frontiers – 'English' literature lays claim to Conrad the Pole, Henry James the American, and Joyce the Irishman – but

geniuses such as Flaubert, Dostoevski and Kafka have had an influence on the fiction of many nations.

Each volume in the series is intended to provide an introduction to the fiction of the writer concerned, both for those approaching him or her for the first time and for those who are already familiar with some parts of the achievement in question and now wish to place it in the context of the total *oeuvre*. Although essential information relating to the writer's life and times is given, usually in an opening chapter, the approach is primarily critical and the emphasis is not upon 'background' or generalisations but upon close examination of important texts. Where an author is notably prolific, major texts have been selected for detailed attention but an attempt has also been made to convey, more summarily, a sense of the nature and quality of the author's work as a whole. Those who want to read further will find suggestions in the select bibliography included in each volume. Many novelists are, of course, not only novelists but also poets, essayists, biographers, dramatists, travel writers and so forth; many have practised shorter forms of fiction; and many have written letters or kept diaries that constitute a significant part of their literary output. A brief study cannot hope to deal with all these in detail, but where the shorter fiction and the non-fictional writings, public and private, have an important relationship to the novels, some space has been devoted to them.

NORMAN PAGE

Introduction

In the memorable year 1900, Olive Schreiner was interned in war-torn South Africa writing *Woman and Labour*; Edith Wharton was living in the United States with her husband and had just brought out her first short novel; Flora Mayor had published no novels yet, but was living unhappily with her parents in England and hoping to become an actress. Kathleen Beauchamp was a schoolgirl in New Zealand; Dorothy Sayers a child growing up in the Fens; Eirene Botting a small infant in London.

They were all born in the second half of the nineteenth century, but in four different continents and with forty-four years between the oldest and youngest, and so far as I know, none of them ever met any of the others. All were old enough to experience the First World War, though at second hand; none, as it happened, had a husband or son at the front. By 1914 they were all in Europe (the three who were born outside it having fought very hard to get there). Olive Schreiner, her best-known novel thirty years behind her, was in England, sick and out of the mainstream but still protesting against the war. Edith Wharton, now a famous novelist, was helping to organise the French war effort. Flora Mayor and Katherine Mansfield were living on the fringes of the war and doing what they could to put it out of their minds. The two youngest were still students when the war broke out and inherited a world which, everyone agreed, had been transformed.

But there had been enormous and far-reaching changes long before that – in most spheres of life, and especially in the position of women. I was asked to write this book as a kind of sequel to my *Women in the English Novel 1800–1900* (1984), which tried to describe what was happening to English women in the nineteenth century and how the novel reflected this. The

changes continued into the twentieth century, and they are certainly not yet over. Women got the vote in New Zealand when Katherine Mansfield was a child, and in England just after the war. The other great change in their situation was that, in the 1890s and afterwards, middle-class girls began to leave home. They got jobs or did war work; they were affected by the sexual revolution, the loosening of family ties and the weakening of religious belief. Whereas nearly all the Victorian novels I studied finished with the heroine getting married, this is not often the case in the novels of these six women – or in many serious twentieth-century novelists, come to that. Their heroines die, go mad, are tried for their lives, or end up emotionally alone.

Why these six and not others? I was forced to exclude some distinguished women writers, such as Virginia Woolf, because they already have books to themselves in this series. I chose these particular novelists (Katherine Mansfield is not a novelist, strictly speaking, but both the general editor and I felt that she should not be excluded) because I admired them and felt that in some cases – such as Olive Schreiner's *From Man to Man* and both Flora Mayor's novels – their work had not had enough attention. All the books I discuss are easy to obtain, many having been reprinted in the last few years as Virago Modern Classics. I have tried to give an adequate account of each woman's personal literary achievement. But there is a connecting theme, and that is the experience of women in societies which are undergoing massive changes and giving them confused and contradictory messages. The central character is almost always a woman who cannot fit in.

I was not looking for connections between their private lives, but I found them. They were all striking and unconventional personalities, who cared a good deal about issues outside themselves. Half of them came from a clerical background and religion was an important question for at least four. Five out of six suffered from a very severe physical or mental illness which profoundly affected their work. They were all either childless or had little contact with their children, and all had great problems in their closest relationships. I am not suggesting that this need always be so, but it is part of the price that unusual and pioneering women have traditionally had to pay.

I am grateful to Lyndall Passerini for reading the chapter on
Antonia White.

MERRYNN WILLIAMS

May 1986

Note on Citations

In this text, quotations from the author's works are identified by chapter and part where applicable. A single number in parentheses following a quotation indicates the chapter where the passage appears; two numbers indicate both the part and the chapter. Thus, (3) means Chapter 3 and (2,1) means Part 2, Chapter 1.