



Nina Baym. Photograph by Anne Lattimore.

## Interview with Nina Baym

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*Sharon Lewis*

NINA BAYM, PROFESSOR of English and former Director of the School of Humanities at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, recently delivered two talks at the University of Iowa as an Ida Beam Lecturer: "Ideal Canons and Real Anthologies" and "Writing a Chapter of Women's Literary History." These talks reflected upon Baym's recent experiences as an editor for the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* and *The Columbia History of American Literature*. Baym's awards, professional activities, and publications are extensive. To mention only a few: National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship for Independent Study and Research, 1982-83; Senior University Scholar Award, University of Illinois, 1985; Editorial Consultant, W. W. Norton; American Studies Association National Council; chair of the American Literature section of MLA; author of *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (1976), *Woman's Fiction* (1980), *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers* (1984), *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* (1986), and of numerous chapters in books, as well as articles and book reviews. The following interview was conducted at The University of Iowa, April 8, 1987.

*Let's start with a question on reading. Your essay "Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Mother: A Biographical Speculation" (1982) struck me as being a wonderful example of revisionary rereading. And now I see you have a new book out that originally was to be called The Scarlet Letter: A Method for Reading. What do you mean when you speak of "method," and is there a correlation between what I see you doing in the essay and the method you address in the new book? Do you have advice for encouraging sensitivity in reading?*

"Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Mother" is a different kind of piece from *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*. The new book is a Twayne book and

is written for undergraduates and their teachers. In it, I deal with formal analysis. I still believe that the best way to make people more sensitive readers is, first, to make them very sensitive to the details, the surface details of a literary text. I myself feel that a lot of what we do in the literature class is to teach students to ignore the surface. And since I believe that most of the pleasure in reading is actually a response to surface, I like to make my students much more sensitive to the surface of the text. (Pleasure here being an immediate manner of response.) To me, that really does mean formal matters because a lot of the history and a lot of the theory are not part of the immediate pleasure of the text or even part of the pleasure that you can get out of the text fairly quickly. My recipe, then, for getting people to be better readers or more sensitive readers is really to encourage much more sensitivity to the superficial, which sounds like a contradiction but I don't mean it to be.

*In the sense of plot, characterization . . .*

Well, character, or all the old things that people feel now are too—when talking about narrative—too unsophisticated or naive to discuss—yes, I mean that. Character, plot, then easily lots of material about the narrator who's telling the story: can we say anything about the quality of the narrator? And then, setting, and, too, symbolism, if things present themselves to a reader as symbols—that is to say, present themselves as being inadequately accounted for somehow just by taking them at their face value. I prefer to let symbols suggest themselves to readers as they read rather than telling them that there's a symbol here and they have to discover its meaning. My recipe for that kind of reading—and that's the kind of reading I'm working with in *The Scarlet Letter* book—is to pay very close attention to surface.

*So you really don't get into a discussion of, say, the resisting reader—I'm thinking here of Judith Fetterley's book by the same name—or into a discussion of the gendered reader?*

Not in the Twayne book. I feel that's another subject. I'm not too coherent on this, but I feel that sometimes the creation of the "gendered reader" is an artifact of criticism. That is to say, sometimes we come in telling people how they *ought* to be reading in terms of "the gendered reader," and that may not be the way our students are reading at all.

Along with a concentration on the surface, I do very much like to work with "real" responses of "real" readers when I talk about reader

response, which is, I think, a vitally important element of the reading. After all, what is reading *but* response? When somebody says, "If you are a woman, *this* is the way you will read this book," I hear, in its own way, at least, the possibility of a coercion. And I resist *that*, which is not to say that I don't believe that some texts are probably read resistingly by some people.

Not very long ago I went to a theoretical talk with responses presented by a group of feminists, or rather two feminists and one non-feminist. The first respondent, who was a feminist Lacanian psychoanalytic woman critic, took the occasion to explain how a woman reads *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. I haven't read *Lady Chatterley's Lover* since I was fifteen, but I have a very strong memory of how I read that book, and it isn't the way she said I read it.

*But you wouldn't read that book the same way now, of course.*

I certainly wouldn't. But I wouldn't want to have to be put in the position of denying the way I had read it when I read it the first time, and I don't want to be put in the position of saying, "Well, I'm a woman now, but I wasn't a woman then." I was a young woman then and I'm an older woman now. Now I'm a feminist and also I've lived an adult life, so I wouldn't read it now the way I read it then. But I did read it one way then, and if I was a woman both times, I have to allow for the validity of both of those responses. I have to, in my own view, not deny my gender in either of the readings. So, resisting reader, "yes," but coerced reader, "no."

*Yes, but it seems to me that the greatest error in our reading comes from our acceptance. What Ruth Bleier says about the hunter-gatherer myth in her Science and Gender illustrates what I'm referring to—that this "story" is only one of a multitude of possibilities of explaining why things are as they are, but we take this story as a given. In my own teaching, I encourage students to question their acceptance of the "story" as a given. It's your resistance to the given that I refer to when I speak of my reaction to your "Hawthorne and His Mother" essay.*

I agree, but let me go back to a question brought up earlier today in a class I visited. The question was "Who is the main character in *The Scarlet Letter*?" This is obviously an arguable question since it has a history of being argued. It took me back to my early days of teaching when a male student, not a female, pointed out to me that, in his opinion, it was not Dimmesdale who was the hero of *The Scarlet Letter*, but rather it was Hester. Based on a formal response (what I would

now characterize as a formal response) that student, who happened to be male, said, "Look, no matter what we think of her, we have to think of Hester as the hero of the book." Some of the women did not see that at first because for various reasons (remember, this was a long time ago) Hester wasn't a well-behaved woman, and young women then preferred to think of the heroines of texts as being better-behaved women than Hester. This suggests to me the fact that an emphasis on the "gendered reader" might discourage the kind of inclusive reading I see, I saw, in my young male student.

The article on Hawthorne's mother did not come about as a result of reading *The Scarlet Letter* per se, although it is true that I had already decided that Hester was the main character and had written a whole book redoing Hawthorne as a Romantic. [*The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (1976)] But the story behind the essay did not come from reading *The Scarlet Letter*. The impetus for that article was much more scholarly. It came out of reviewing the two biographies that had been written about Hawthorne—one by Arlin Turner and then almost immediately another one by James Mellow (1980). Both of these biographers, whose books came out long after I was committed to what I call a feminist cause, wrote about Hawthorne as though he had no mother at all.

In these biographies, he was a Hawthorne, with all his traits coming from the Hawthorne side of the family. There was a myth about his mother's being an absentee mother, yet these biographies were quoting letters and comments that made it very clear that Hawthorne's mother was not absent. So, perhaps you could say, the simple scholarly perception—that I was enabled to see because of a feminist interest—was that there was something missing in these stories, that there was something wrong: nobody was saying anything about Hawthorne's mother.

Well, we knew that Hawthorne grew up in his mother's family. There was *evidence* of this—letters to her, letters from her—evidence that his mother was an influence in his life. So it's more a scholarly than a reading interest I had—a sense that a piece of the record was absent. And I've always been interested in that as a scholar, the piece of the record that is absent, the piece of the record that for one reason or another has been omitted.

That's where I really began as a scholar—noting what is missing. And the questions that I'm still asking myself now or the questions that interest me are not only the questions of what's omitted, but the question of *why* the omission. There are a lot of different reasons why something is left out.

*So a good piece of advice to give young readers is to be sensitive to what they sense is a gap, an omission?*

Right, right. Except that the gaps I'm talking about here are more in the way this work is being presented to you than in the "text" itself, because the text itself doesn't have gaps until somebody calls them to your attention. I guess the first thing I say is that you should take the text for itself and try to get the fullest sense of its qualities. Then if you (the student) look at interpretations, including your teacher's interpretations, ask yourself what these interpretations might have left out. What in the way the text is presented to *you* doesn't correspond with what you thought you saw in the text? This doesn't mean that you're necessarily "right," but at least it gives you a place to start—or at least it gave me a place to start. Feminism was very good to me in that respect because all these women had been left out, you know. So there I had something.

*That leads me into a procedural question: Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870 (1978) but even more so Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America (1984) must have required an extremely well organized plan of execution. I would be very interested in hearing how you laid your work out, what assumptions you started with, all of these kinds of things.*

Both of those books follow from my notion that the way to do scholarship is to look for what's not there or what's been left out. The way that I got to the woman's book [*Woman's Fiction*] was that I found over and over again people were quoting this sentence, or actually phrase, from Hawthorne's letter in which he described, or referred to, that "damned mob of scribbling women," and yet nobody had done much work on these women so they had simply disappeared, sunk out of historical trace. This made me interested in going back to them. I set up a problem-solving exercise, in other words. There are these women: who are they? what did they do? what was their writing like? I like to think that I began that project without very much in the way of a *set* idea of what I would find, and I do think that you get the best results in your own scholarship if you *don't* go in certain of what you will find.

It's always the unexpected thing. I don't mean that you don't have some ideas of what you might be looking for, but I think if you go in knowing what you're going to find, you're not going to do anything interesting. And, incidentally, that is *one* of the things that I object to in a lot of theoretical discourse. It is so programmatic—it is given in

the theory what you're going to come out with in the end. I, however, always like the accident. My career, my life, has been a set of accidents. So why is it that in reading and in scholarship suddenly we're trying to make a field where no accidents can take place? And I think that in science, too, everybody—all the scientists that I know—talks about the accident. It's the accident that enables them to make the advance. Of course, they're looking for it, but it's the nature of the accident that they don't know what it is going to be. So there was this accidental phrase, you might say, of Hawthorne's—the “damned mob of scribbling women”—that became my motive.

Then I read a lot of books. Luckily, I'm a fast reader. Once I had read the books, it seemed to me that the way to organize those books was around the major authors, although it was a strange concept to import into a study of these writers, to talk about “major.” In this case by “major,” I just meant “most read, most popular.” It seemed to me that the most popular writers would be the ones to study for this kind of project.

And that, in a sense, led to my next project, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, because what was not in *Woman's Fiction* nor in the first Hawthorne book were the readers. If certain books were popular, they were made popular by virtue of their having been read by a lot of people. So then the question that came to my mind was, “Just exactly how *did* people look at novels in those days?” Well, that's a very difficult question to answer. It's even a difficult question to answer today, in our much more sociologically minded age in which a lot of people give out a lot of questionnaires. But they didn't do such things in the 19th century. You could go back to diaries; you could go back to library books, personal and public library books, and try to look for marginalia; you could look in journals; you could look at letters. But you could spend your whole life doing this, and even then you would have a very, very tiny set of data. So the question in my mind was “Is there some place that I can find a lot of responses to novels, if there are any?” Once I posed the question that way, the answer came to be “reviews.”

Now, there are real objections to using reviews because reviews are the articulations of a literary establishment, and the establishment is not necessarily, of course, the reader, or rather it represents a very special kind of reader because reviewers have a very special additional mission. So what I tried to do when I read those reviews was to read them not only for what they said and therefore for what they revealed about the establishment, but also for what they appeared to be taking into account—what they were responding to. They weren't only responding to the books; they were also responding to the way those

books were already being received.

*You say in "Melodramas of Beset Manhood" (1981) that reviewers exact a certain amount of control over what they're receiving. Did you find this to be applicable in this project?*

I have the feeling that in that era the reviewers often came in after a book had already become popular. And you know that is still true. That is, somebody publishes a first novel, and it's overlooked, as, for example, *The Valley of the Dolls*, which was not initially reviewed by any respectable reviewer. But after *The Valley of the Dolls* broke every single record for sales, well Jacqueline Susann got reviewed, subsequently. Here is a case in which the reviewers were responding to something that readers had done.

So I tried to look at the reviews both for what they were saying about the literary establishment and for what they were implying (I guess that's the way to put it) about readers. And I found, for example, that there was a positive mania for French fiction in the 1840's until the supply was cut off by the French Revolution, and the American reviewers were very distressed, or at least appeared to be, because they thought these books were immoral. But apparently the American readers loved these books. And the way I concluded that this was the case was that every single review of French fiction remarked about how incredibly popular these books were and how bad it was for the moral tone of the nation that all these books were being read.

And you know—that's still the way books are reviewed.

So, if you kept that in mind, you could say, "Look, here is a reviewer who is telling you that this is an awful book, but he is also telling you that this is a book that everybody wants to read." And so I tried to be attentive to both strands in that reviewer's discourse. That way I thought maybe I could somewhat surmount the problem of the parochialism of the literary establishment—and the possible fact that the reviewer was not a good spokesperson for the whole readership—that is, if I noticed that the reviewer was also commenting on the readers.

*Your two strands then would be the way that the reviewer thought the books should be read and the way that the reviewer responded to the actual way these books were indeed being read?*

That's right. And I thought it was actually rather amusing because the reviewers were clearly trying to close down the American public appetite for all kinds of fiction. And that's the thing. You ask in the



written text of your questions what some of my most interesting finds were. Well, to me, *the* most interesting thing was this American appetite for fiction. Because a lot of our study of mid-nineteenth century fiction, which is where I began, is predicated on the assumption that Hawthorne's and Melville's problem was that nobody read fiction, that there was this Puritanical streak among Americans that made them very hostile to fiction. That clearly was not the case. I finally had to decide that what was wrong with Hawthorne and Melville was not that they were writing fiction, but that in some funny sense, they *weren't* writing fiction. They were writing whaling treatises, or I don't know what—allegories—they were not writing fiction, in the normative sense of fiction. Now, that may not *seem* like a major modification, but I think it probably *is* a major modification. I kept finding these quotations in which the reviewers would preface their reviews by saying, "I don't have enough time in the day to read all the novels that are on my table." Now, there's no way you can make that reconcilable with the notion that Americans weren't reading fiction.

*What about the actual logistics of putting this whole project [Novels, Readers, and Reviewers] together? You must have spent a lot of time travelling . . .*

Fortunately, I'm at an institution that has a magnificent nineteenth-century collection. What I did was get a pool of magazines, and I used magazines that had (according to Frank Luther Mott) substantial circulation and a national audience. I tried not to use parochial and limited or small, elitist magazines. The only exception I made to that was *The North American Review*, which was so powerful because all the other magazine editors read it and did a lot of cribbing from it, so that it kind of percolated out. So, I used the *NAR*; otherwise, I used only large circulation journals with a national audience, or with a hoped-for national audience. I chose about two dozen such magazines. Then I just started reading.

I didn't know what I would find. I didn't know (since I began with the presumption that Americans didn't like fiction) *if* I would find anything. My first discovery, and it was a wonderful discovery, was that there were hundreds and hundreds of fiction reviews, just hundreds of them. Some were very short, like *The New Yorker's* "Briefly Noted," no more than a paragraph. But even the paragraphs were full of language that was useful for this particular project. So I just read and read and read. I had a year's leave. Without that I think this project would have taken me a lot longer. I read and I read and I took very extensive notes.

*On the computer?*

Well, I was starting with a typewriter. I didn't have my computer then. I propped the journal up next to me, and I just typed away. I'm a very fast, although not a very accurate, typist. I typed and typed and typed until I had hundreds and hundreds of pages of notes. I think when I was through I had about four hundred pages of single-spaced notes. That formed my data base, I guess that's what you could call it, for this particular project. As I was taking these notes, I was becoming more and more sensitive to the recurrence of certain words—what a social scientist would call a “key word” approach. And I think in an intuitive way that's what I took—a key-word approach.

As I began to be more and more sure that certain words were the focal points in these reviews for other statements and sentences, I became more and more attentive to them. And it was those key words that became the organizing principles of my chapters. Then, what I did—because I certainly couldn't parcel all those notes out and retype four hundred pages in every which way—what I did was to color-code my notes. I worked with different chapter arrangements, and finally I decided on the chapter arrangement that was most useful to gather together the largest amount of material with the least amount of repetition. And then I chose a different color for each chapter. I then went through these notes and underlined with my different colored pencils so that I could pick up any page and see how many different chapters this particular page would be useful for. I then began to organize the material in draft chapters. Of course, my first draft was much, much too long. Then I began to cut. That was very painful because I loved every single quote and I didn't want to sacrifice a one. But I did. And indeed, after I submitted the manuscript and it was accepted, I still had to cut it because of the economics of publishing. I might have cut another twenty per cent out of it. But I've saved all my drafts. And that, I think, is the story of the methodology of that particular project.

*It's a wonderful story, and book. Would you say that that book has given you the most pleasure of the four?*

Yes, I think it has, and I will say that Cornell is going to bring it out in paperback, which I'm very happy about because it's too expensive, really, for people to buy and just have, to underline and use for themselves. So up to now, it's mostly been bought by libraries.

*The originality of your approach must have made your project doubly enjoyable.*

Oh yes. There really hasn't been anything like it. There are reception studies. But these always focus on major authors, and that was exactly what I didn't want to do. I didn't want to know what people had to say about Melville; I knew that already. I wanted to know what they had to say about everything. It was a much more omnivorous approach.

Then there are a lot of studies about American attitudes towards fiction, and since my own study revealed such a different perspective from the other studies on this topic, I really did wonder why there was that difference. I think the explanation lies in the kind of data that is used to create the study. All the writers on American attitudes towards fiction before my book have used sort of patriotic, formal statements for their sources, such as commencement addresses, Fourth of July orations—public statements about a national literature. So naturally in that context everybody was talking about epics and odes and a whole other kind of literature, and nobody spent very much time on fiction. A different data base will reveal a different result.

*I recently read your essay "Artifice and Romance in Shirley Hazzard's Fiction" (1983). I was impressed by its informative nature, of course, but more than that, I remember the excitement I felt—how you made me want to read everything Hazzard has written. But also, I was struck by your comment on aesthetics. I really felt that you were saying some very strong things about why you thought this particular writer was valuable, and, of course, we here are getting into the realm of aesthetics, which is important to me because of the idea of canon formation, etc. Would you care to comment on this aspect of the Hazzard essay?*

In the written version of your questions, you quote me as saying in this essay: "If the language of literature is particularly distilled and intense, it nevertheless must always retain its referential awareness; if it does not, the lifeline between literature and human experience is severed, and literature loses its character as a human product." I will confess first of all that I probably wouldn't write that sentence quite that way again, or any more. I don't like the use of the word "must" in any criticism, and I see that there I said literature "must always." I don't like that. I don't like having written that, in fact, because you're quite right. It's not a pluralist's stance to say that anything in literature must always be one way. [The question read: "Given your historicist approach and your commitment to canon reformation, are you not here approaching literature with a predefined concept of aesthetics,

which would preclude openness to history and/or canonical reformation? Does such a statement contradict your pluralist stance?" I think what I was trying to get at there was a way of justifying what Hazzard was doing in a very strong academic atmosphere—*very* strong at that time, I don't think even a few years later it's as strong as it was—in which referentiality was *really* under attack, and everybody was saying that even if a work looks as though it's referential, it really *isn't*. It seems to me that here is a clear connection between the pleasure of a text and some kind of reference.

*The feeling I got from reading this essay was that you were trying to salvage something that you thought was being threatened.*

That's right, and I think that it's worth saying apropos of this, that literary criticism, and even academic criticism, is ephemeral in this sense. That is, it is responsive to whatever is going on in the profession at the moment, or going on in literary criticism. A few years later, the criticism is more dated than the texts. A reading of *The Scarlet Letter* from the 1950's would look about as bizarre as one's grandmother's shoes, whereas *The Scarlet Letter* itself keeps on generating new readings.

I think that we critics and we scholars sometimes think we're writing for all time, but that's not true. We're really not. At the time of my review of Hazzard, the best contemporary fiction was thought to be that kind of fiction that is entirely self-reflexive and in-grown and which doesn't have any relation to human experience. Now, Hazzard has always been a very romantic writer. She talks a lot about love and death and time and all those old themes, and I felt that that was an important aspect of what she was doing. And that's also an important aspect of the old-fashioned novel. It may be why the best sellers still are seldom the academic favorites. They may be crude, they may be badly written, but they sure do make a pitch for experience.

*Well, that perhaps explains my perplexity in reading your essay "The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory" (1984). In the first page of this essay, you speak sharply about theory, saying it really binds one, that it doesn't allow freedom. And yet, as I read your essays, I find a lot of theoretical underpinning. I wonder if you wouldn't agree—it seemed to me in this essay you were being, uncharacteristically, reductive. A denial of your own pluralism, so to speak. It seems to me that this essay comes out of an anger, perhaps with some feminist theory—*

Yes, I think that's a very good way to describe it. For one thing, I am

not anti-theory. In point of fact, I read all the theory I can. I think it's very important, partly because the profession is becoming increasingly theoretical, and one does not wish to be back there with the dinosaur. You have to know what's going on. That's just pragmatic. It's survival. In addition, I think that theory is extremely useful and helpful. It reminds you of things, things that you've forgotten—talking about gaps. It calls your attention to things you haven't examined, to assumptions that you have let pass without examining them, and to the extent that theory is an aid to increasing self-awareness and critiquing and critical thinking, I think that it's absolutely crucial. I believe that "The Madwoman and Her Languages" was inspired by what seemed to me to be the direction that feminist *literary theory* was taking. And I don't mean feminist theory in general; I mean literary theory. (The essay was also occasional, although I still haven't deviated from the position that it takes; if anything, I might hold to that stance more strongly now than I did then.)

It seemed to me that the literary feminists—perhaps without examining their own movement—had allowed themselves to become entranced with what I see as misogynist discourses. And by that I do mean Freud and I do mean Lacan. I do not mean that Freud and Lacan should be ignored. I think they are both magnificent and provocative thinkers. And one of them, Freud, has been immensely influential. But I don't think that either of them has a whole lot to tell us about women. They have a lot to tell us about people. That is, when they talk about repression and when they talk about defense mechanism, or whatever, those are crucial things to think about whether you're a man or a woman. All right. They have a lot to tell us about people, and they have a lot to tell us about men, but I think the weakest point in both Freud and Lacan—and I have read a lot of Lacan and I have read the Lacanians, who don't always get him right in my view, but there you are—the weakest point in both of these men's theorizing and studying is women.

And I also think, and I believe I made this point in "The Madwoman," that both of them in the later part of their careers, coincidentally, became virulently anti-feminist. First, it happened to Freud—feminist analysis, you know—and then it happened to Lacan. Within the ranks, women psychoanalysts suddenly began having all these critical ideas. And both Freud and Lacan in the latter part of their lives were modifying their own theories in ways that undercut some of the things they had said earlier—as a response, as a hostile response, to feminism. So my question was, "Why should feminists ground their own theoretical enterprise in misogynist and anti-feminist theory?" There are answers like, "Let's always do the thing

that's most difficult," or whatever. But to me this seemed to be absolutely counter-productive, and in a way, that was the main point that I was trying to make in "The Madwoman," although I was making some other points also. I really felt, let's say, that this one's infatuation with Lacan or that one's infatuation with Freud was rewriting the same old story that I thought we were trying to get out of, if that's clear. I thought feminism was supposed to be about getting out of that particular narrative, and I didn't see how starting from within it could really help you get out of it.

*Yes—and the "Madwoman" essay was also interesting to me because of its focus on the French feminists, to over-generalize here, on their stressing of a female language, and also the psychoanalytic theorists, such as Chodorow here in America. Are you making a point here about essentializing?*

I think I am. I think they are both a-historical; Lacan is clearly a-historical. I mean, there is no allowance for any moment of social production: this happens; it happens by means of society, but it happens universally, which means as far as I'm concerned that it's a-historical. Lacan claimed that by moving from biology into language, he was moving away from essentialism. But his language idea is just as essentialist as Freud's biology. So I don't see any gain. And Chodorow, although her modification is not without interest, grounds herself in a similarly essentialist vision. What she claims happens to all daughters of mothers I think is just ridiculous. If you believe in experience at all, which I think is a problematic question, then you have to believe in individual experience. You can't simultaneously ground yourself in universal experience, which Chodorow is doing. This is a little different for Freud and Lacan because they don't talk so much about experience, but she does. If you ground yourself in experience, you cannot impose one experience on all women.

*Right. Well, I thought another interesting point in that essay was your point about writing as pragmatics—about the kinds of writing which many, if not most, women actually do—and the question of privileging which a female language suggests—*

I think that that's another line I throw out in "The Madwoman." I think that what is called woman's writing is probably an artifice. And it's social artifice. That is, "At this particular historical time, this is the way you're supposed to write if you're a woman," and so you do. According to this, Sandra Day O'Connor is no woman. Well, she is a woman, and yet she's perfectly capable of writing a judicial decision,

and I am unwilling to say that that's not woman's writing.

*Very good point. Just quickly, did you get a lot of discussion from this essay?*

I have gotten either stony silence or letters of gratitude. Yes, some prominent women feminists wrote and said, "Thanks for doing that," which made me feel all the more that we were talking about a take-over, if people were afraid or felt grateful that somebody had written this article. And that did show that there was a movement of the feminist theorists into a closed position.

*Is there something that we haven't talked about or that you would have liked to talk about that I haven't brought up in my questions?*

Only one, which also comes out of question four in your written text, which I will quote: "Your essay 'The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory' (1984) puzzles me. It seems to me your complaint is not against feminist *theory* but rather against the way it frequently is practiced. I have a hard time separating criticism from theory. The assumption in your essay seems to be that your critical stance and method, pluralism, has no theoretical underpinning. As I read your books, essays, reviews, however, I read a vigorous theoretical underpinning. I realize the contentions within feminist literary criticism, but I still find your stance in 'The Madwoman' troubling. Could you comment on this essay?"

I am sure that what I do has a theoretical underpinning, but I do believe that there is a difference between having a theory and doing a theory. It seems to me that what the theorists are mostly doing is writing about other theorists. And I don't have a whole lot of interest in writing about theorists, except in "The Madwoman" article and possibly in book reviews. I heard a literary theorist say, "I would much rather read Stanley Cavell's *The Senses of Walden* than read *Walden*." And I know that if I had my choice, if I were going to read one or the other, I would rather read *Walden*. I'm still much more interested in reading what I call primary literary texts or primary cultural texts and not theoretical texts. So I would make a distinction between the notion that "your work has a theoretical underpinning," which it probably does, and the notion that that's equivalent to doing theory.

Just let me end with saying that I get very nervous when people start saying feminists "must."

*Yes. In the final footnote to "The Madwoman and Her Languages," you quote*

*from a feminist critical essay in which appear the phrases "She must . . . she must . . . she must." Let's end with your reply to this:*

If that *she* is *me*, somebody (once again) is telling me what I 'must' do, asserting (not incidentally) her own monopoly on truth as she does so. I've been here before.