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Mirrors: Feminist Theory and New Concepts of
the Self in the American Novel*

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Prefatory Note

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Prefatory Note

One of the most consequential results of the past twenty years of feminist theory and literary criticism has been the dismantling of traditional norms of what constitutes the self and individual identity. Carol Gilligan, Mary Field Belenky, and Elizabeth Abel – to name only the most widely read – have demonstrated that the American ideal of developing an individuated, authentic, and autonomous self does not rest on universal psychological and moral principles but is primarily a “fiction” created by masculine discourse. Jane Clifford, an English Professor in Gail Godwin’s novel *The Odd Woman*, vividly articulates the impact of this argument on concepts of the self:

Beyond the problem of her frustrated expectations of others was the ever-present problem of her unclear, undefined, unresolved self. Sometimes, lately, she wondered if the concept of the “self” was a myth which had died with the nineteenth century . . . Was there – had there ever been – such a thing as a basic personality, or was that only a bygone literary convention? . . . Was “personality” just one more bad trip humans laid on themselves, . . . covering their animal nakedness in the clothing language and then mistaking these clever noises they had learned to make about themselves and others for their “personalities”? She had recently read an article by a psychiatrist who believed this to be so.

The following critical essays focus on four of the most memorable individuals in American literature – Isabel Archer from Henry James’ *The Portrait of a Lady*; Lily Bart from Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*; and Carrie Meeber and George Hurstwood from Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* – in order to explore new ways of looking at the self in the wake of feminist theory and criticism.

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