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LOVE AND IDEOLOGY:
FEMINISM AND BRITISH FICTION, 1880-1950.

by

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SUMMARY

As women are emancipated into civil society, the ideology of their roles and even their nature is subjected to questioning, and so too are the traditional forms of relationship between the sexes. "Love" becomes a problematic concept. In late nineteenth-century Britain, criticisms of marriage as an institution coincide with a new assertion of the individual will against social restraints. In the literature of the period discussed in Chapter One, the figure of the "New Woman" is associated with wide-ranging demands for social change. Fiction produced by women writers at this time is beset by ideological inhibitions and artistic difficulties, the work of Olive Schreiner being the most significant example (Chapter Two). Hardy's last novel turned the "fiction of sex and the New Woman" into a tragedy of modern love, the defeat of an ideal spiritual affinity by the "cruel law of nature and society," and it is suggested in Chapter Three that the tragic undercurrent of Lawrence's Sons and Lovers springs from the same ideological conflict. This loss of faith in the possibilities of social liberation is evident in novels dealing with the Suffragette period, where political action is commonly eschewed in favour of retreat into marriage (Chapter Four). In The Rainbow and Women in Love, Lawrence explores the problematic nature of relations between the sexes, but it is demonstrated in Chapter Five that his idea of the salvation of the individual and the restoration of community in "ultimate marriage" fails. During the inter-war period the feminist movement disintegrated, but women's hopes of participating equally with men in the social world and freely developing their individuality were disappointed: in Chapter Six Virginia Woolf's feminist essays are read as representing and commenting on this phenomenon. Her self-assigned project as historian of the "obscure lives of women" in this period of transition is illustrated in a discussion

of The Voyage Out, To the Lighthouse and Between the Acts in Chapter Seven. Themes which she treats elegiacally -- the young woman's emergence from the patriarchal family, her conflict between love and independence, the effort to find new modes of relationship -- are presented in an optimistic light in Christina Stead's The Man Who Loved Children and For Love Alone; but in later novels by this writer the "free" woman's quest for love is viewed ironically (Chapter Eight). In the work of both these women writers, the patriarchal ideology of sexual roles and relationships appears to be the major deterrent to the free development of women, the reinvention of love, and the creation of a new human community.