

Mary Morris (1947-) has travelled extensively and uses her travels in both fiction and non-fiction publications. An important theme in her writing is the tension between home and away. She has received many prizes and awards. Her latest novel is *Revenge* (2004), she lives in Brooklyn, New York, and teaches writing at Sarah Lawrence college.

Mary Morris

Women and Journeys (1992)

The late John Gardner once said that there are only two plots in all of literature: you go on a journey or the stranger comes to town. Since women have for so many years been denied the journey, we were left with only one plot to our lives – to await the coming of the stranger to town. Indeed, there is no picaresque tradition among women novelists. Women's literature from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf is mostly a literature about waiting, and usually waiting for love. Denied the freedom to roam outside themselves, women turned inward, into their emotions. As the feminist critic Elaine Showalter puts it: "Denied participation in public life, women were forced to cultivate their feelings and to overvalue romance. Emotions rushed in to fill the vacuum of experience."

For centuries it was frowned upon for women to travel without escort, chaperone, or husband. To journey was to put one at risk not only physically but morally. A little freedom could be a dangerous thing. Erica Jong chose well when she picked the metaphor of fear of flying to depict the tremulous outset of a woman's sexual liberation. The language of sexual initiation is oddly similar to the language of travel. We speak of sexual "exploits" or "adventurers." Both body and globe are objects for exploration and the great "explorers," whether Marco Polo or Don Juan, have traditionally been men.

By contrast, I find it revealing that the bindings in women's corsets were called stays. Someone who wore stays wouldn't be going very far. The binding of feet in the Orient or the corseting of the body in the West were ways of restricting women's movement. There is an interesting reference to stays in the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montague, who

went to Turkey with her husband in 1716. Upon visiting a Turkish bath where the women implored her to undress, Lady Mary wrote, "I was forced at last to open my shirt and shew them my stays; which satisfied them well for, I saw, they believed I was so locked up in that machine that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband."

It was my mother who made a traveler out of me, not so much because of the places she went as because of her yearning to go. She used to buy globes and maps and plan dream journeys she'd never take while her "real life" was ensconced in the PTA, the Girl Scouts, suburban lawn parties, and barbecues. She had many reasons – and sometimes, I think, excuses – for not going anywhere, but her main reason was that my father would not go.

Once when I was a child, my parents were invited to a Suppressed Desire Ball. You were to come in a costume that depicted your secret wish, your heart's desire, that which you'd always yearned to do or be. My mother went into a kind of trance, then came home one day with blue taffeta, with fishnet gauze, travel posters and brochures, and began to construct the most remarkable costume I've ever seen.

She spent weeks on it. I would go down to the workroom, where she sewed, and she'd say to me, "Where should I put the Taj Mahal? Where should the pyramids go?" On and on, into the night, she panted and sewed and cursed my father, who it seemed would have no costume at all (though in the end my bald father would win the first prize with the toupee his barber lent him.)

But it is my mother I remember. The night of the ball, she descended the stairs. On her head sat a tiny, silver rotating globe. Her skirts were the oceans, her body the land, and interlaced between all the layers of taffeta and fish net were Paris, Tokyo, Istanbul, Tashkent. Instead of seeing the world, my mother became it.

From Penelope to the present, women have waited – for a phone call, a date, a proposal, the return of the intrepid man from the sea or war or a business trip. And Penelope, the archetypal waiter, is awaiting the return of the traveler. To wait is to be powerless. Like patients and prisoners women have waited for the freedom to enter the world. Now if we grow weary of waiting, we can walk out the door. The other half of the plots of all literature are now open to us: we can go on a journey, though perhaps a bit warier, more self-conscious than the other half of our species. We can be the stranger who comes to town.

im'plore vb bede indtrængende
shew = show
con'trивance sb indretning
a'ttribute vb tillægge
yearning sb længsel
en'sconce vb forskanse
PTA (fork) Parent-Teacher Association
Girl Scouts sb pigespejdere
su'burban adj forstads-
Su'ppressed De'sire sb undertrykt ønske
taffeta sb taft (stof)
gauze sb gaze (stof)
inter'lace vb indflette
pro'posal sb frieri
in'trepid adj frygtløs
arche'typal adj arketypisk
weary adj meget træt
wary adj varsom
self-conscious adj forlegen
species sb art



Christen Dalsgaard, *I wonder when he will come* (*Man han dog ikke skulle komme?*) (1879) Den Hirschsprungske Samling, København

Pre-reading

Discuss the following questions:

Can mothers travel without their children? If no, why not? If yes, for how long: 1 week, 2 weeks, 2 months, 6 months, 2 years?

Is it acceptable for a mother to go diving, to go deep-sea diving, to hitchhike alone in Africa, to cross the Atlantic in a sailing boat, to climb Mount Everest?

By comparison, are any of these things acceptable for a father?

Analysis and Interpretation

1. What are the two plots in all of literature?
2. In which of these two plots are – were – women situated?
3. What is women's literature mostly about?
4. How is this explained by the feminist critic Elaine Showalter?
5. How does Mary Morris present the situation of women and travelling from a historical point of view?
6. How have women's movements been restricted quite literally?
7. How was Mary Morris inspired by her mother to a life of travelling?
8. Why did her mother not go herself?
9. Comment on the mother's costume for the Suppressed Desire Ball.
10. What is the story of Penelope? What is the lesson to be learnt from Penelope?
11. In general, how have women compensated for and coped with the restrictions imposed on their freedom of movement?
12. How and why has this changed? And what are the consequences?