"I was broken in two/By sheer definition." May Sarton’s Duality of Love, Life, and Lesbian Literature

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First-Year Award Winner

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Reflective Essay
In the middle of the past fall semester, Professor Redford’s section of Women in United States History spent one and a half hours browsing primary resources in the Ella Strong Denison Library. From suffragist pamphlets to mid-nineteenth century song books, Library Associate Dorran Boyle provided an eclectic grouping of resources for my classmates and me to skim. After some time, I made the decision that I would be interested in pursuing literary analysis; as a first-year, I had little college experience writing lengthy papers, yet after years of literary intensive high school classes, I felt comfortable in taking a literary approach for our final research paper.

Weeks later I set up an individual meeting with Dorran Boyle to decide on a topic and begin gathering sources for an annotated bibliography. Boyle introduced me to the May Sarton, who has a significant amount of writing in the Ida Rust MacPherson Collection at Denison Library, comprised of over 3000 volumes written by women. Sarton was a prolific writer, whose work I, nor my professor, was familiar with. Sarton spoke at Scripps Convocation in 1957 and 1959, which lead her to begin interactions with Dorothy Drake, the librarian emerita of Denison Library. The May Sarton collection contains four boxes of manuscripts, postcards, speeches, letters, pamphlets, and poems. After reading up on biographical information on Sarton—the breadth and depth of her work, her family history, her relationships—I was interested in pursuing more of Sarton’s work.

While the draft of Sarton’s work in the Ida Rust MacPherson Collection initially piqued my curiosity, further biographical reading began to shift the topic of my project. While Sarton’s work was widely received by the community, her writing never gained critical reception. As I continued to read through the manuscripts and drafts, I concluded that there was nothing stylistically unique about Sarton, but her subject matter and her voice throughout her journals, novels, and poems were of significance. My paper began to describe how a woman so open to writing about queerness, aging, and mental health would be pushed out of the critical literary sphere.

I consulted The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature from the Honnold-Mudd Library to find background on contemporary mid-20th-century fiction that had characters engaging in queer relationships. Lesbian pulp fiction became the lens of analysis for Sarton’s
work because it was one of the only other types of texts that featured lesbian relationships at that time. My research began to become a blending of Sarton’s work—its subjects, themes, and reception—contextualized by the same aspects in lesbian pulp fiction. As I began to draw similarities and differences between the two, it became easier to understand how the mass public was able to latch on to Sarton’s work but the literary circle, in a means of censorship, either condemned or completely ignored her writing.

Drawing connections between Sarton’s work and lesbian pulp fiction also became a means of distinguishing my research from previously done work. When Sarton’s work had been initially published, it was ignored by or received backlash from critics. Towards the end of the 20th century, however, feminist scholars began to review her novels. *That Great Sanity: Critical Essays on May Sarton*, found in the Honnold-Mudd Library, allowed me to read a sampling of critical pieces done on Sarton’s writing. While some of the critical essays did recognize discrepancies in the public versus critical reception of Sarton’s work, none were grounded in the history of lesbian fiction.

Throughout my research process, I determined that there was more information available than could be covered in an undergraduate research paper. A simple search of “May Sarton” on the Claremont Colleges Library Database pops up 132 book results alone. As a potential Gender and Women’s Studies major at Pitzer College, May Sarton’s work may be a topic that I would like to explore more at depth for a thesis project. Although I read through three of the four May Sarton manuscript boxes in the Ida Rust MacPherson Collection at Denison Library, her drafting process—an initial point of interest to me—never made it into the completed paper, due to limitations to the scope of this research.
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Research Project

“‘I was broken in two/By sheer definition.’
May Sarton’s Duality of Love, Life, and Lesbian Literature”
“I was broken in two/By sheer definition:”
May Sarton’s Duality of Love, Life, and Lesbian Literature

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Abstract:
May Sarton (1912-1995) was a contemporary author whose published work comprised 51 poetry books, novels, and nonfiction journals written from 1937 until 1994. Although her writing career was prolific and Sarton gained a tremendous amount of positive attention from the general public, critical reception of her work either ignored or undervalued her writing. By contextualizing Sarton’s work through lesbian pulp fiction, the primary source of fiction featuring same-sex relations in the mid-to-late-twentieth century, this paper aims to give a historical background to receptions of modern queer literature. By exploring parallels between censorship of lesbian pulp fiction and the condemnation of Sarton’s novels, it was determined that lesbianism was the primary source of backlash against Sarton’s work, despite Sarton’s denial that queer characters were not the focus of her writing.
“I was broken in two/By sheer definition.”
May Sarton’s Duality of Love, Life, and Lesbian Literature

Despite countless centuries of female same-sex relationships in literature, heteronormative constraints and the lack of intersectionality between class, culture, and ethnicity, have led to challenges in identifying and determining the aptness of labeling works as *lesbian literature*. This struggle of articulating female intimacy challenged female authors in the mid-20th century, especially as men and women’s claim to their homosexual identities slowly expanded into the public sphere. Lesbian pulp fiction, cost-effective and mass-consumed media first present in 1950, was the first time sapphism was marketed to the press; soon after, female sexuality was further explored in-length in novels. May Sarton was a contemporary author whose published work comprised 51 poetry books, novels, and nonfiction journals written from 1937 until 1994. To comprehend the reception of Sarton’s publications, it is significant to reconceptualize May Sarton and her works through the prism of lesbian pulp fiction—the primary set of literature featuring same-sex relationships at the time Sarton was writing. Unlike lesbian pulp fiction, which was produced with the intent to portray stereotypes of deviant lesbians, Sarton’s upbringing and romantic relationships, not specifically her homosexuality, were influential in shaping her published work. As a result, Sarton was able to appeal to the female masses who connected with her struggle to achieve intimacy, but her novels were dismissed because of stigmas against homosexuality based on heteronormative-constructs of femininity, which dismayed the majority-male circle of critics—preventing Sarton from escaping the harsh critique that lesbian pulp fiction novels were able to evade.

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2 Fulk, Mark K. *Understanding May Sarton*. (Columbia: U of South Carolina, 2001), 5.
Born May 3, 1912 in Wondegem, Belgium—a year before Marcel Proust published *In Search of Lost Time*, the first modern book to openly discuss homosexuality—Eleanore Marie Sarton spent the first two years of her life in her natal home.³ After German troops invaded Belgium, her family fled to Ipswich, England, where they lived with her grandmother for a year. With the prospect of a job at Harvard University, her father, a science historian, packed up the family and moved them to Massachusetts. Sarton’s transition between Europe and America marks the first time that she is caught in a limbo between two spheres, an occurrence that will also be presented in the dichotomy between her relationship with her two parents, the confines of heteronormativity and queerness, and “the ‘masculine’ world of critical establishment and the ‘feminine’ world of wife and motherhood.”⁴

Her relationship with her father was marked by strain. While she idolized him, his prioritization of work made him physically and emotionally distant. Her father founded a scientific journal, *Isis*, and Sarton described that her “father always referred to us together and dedicated one of his books to ‘Eleanor Mabel, mother of those strange twins, May and Isis.’”⁵ Her father’s acknowledgement of his detachment adds a level of self-deprecating humor that, in retrospect, allowed Sarton to cut some of the tension between her and her father. Though he could not always understand her, he still valued her. “It took many years for me,” Sarton wrote in *Endgame: A Journal of the Seventy-Ninth Year*, “to accept his attitude towards me, his inability to ever discuss anything rationally where money was involved, big wounds like suddenly shouting at me, ‘Why don’t you get married?’” when I was deeply involved with a woman with

whom I could not live.” She later recounted, his “passion that drove him towards accomplishing what he dreamed,” despite having to “carry on that struggled alone,” inspired her and pushed her towards success. The complexity of her relationship with her father resulted in emotionally-charged relationships with other men, her yearning in life and in her fictitious work to seek close relations, and her twisted view of marriage. It was not until Sarton met Julian Huxley that she was able to see eye-to-eye with men. Sarton wrote, Julian “was kind and generous and remarkably understanding about my love for women . . . He helped me to know that I could have ‘normal’ feelings for a man.” Nonetheless, Sarton ironically fell in love with Julian’s wife, Juliette, with whom she had a 60-year friendship, which exiled Sarton from heteronormative constructs of monogamy and heterosexuality.

Sarton’s relationship with her mother, on the other hand, was much more developed. Sarton, herself, describes that they “were intimate friends rather than mother and daughter.” For Sarton’s 31st birthday, her mother recounted a memory she had before May’s birth in a letter:

> It was a dreamy wondering and with a warm secret conviction that you would be very close to me whatever and whoever you proved to be . . . and I was right, wasn’t I? and I haven’t held you too tight, dear Pigeon, have I? because I do count freedom as among the most precious things in the world . . . and so have always wanted it for you.

The strength of May Sarton’s relationship with her mother permeated through the rest of May’s life as a model of femininity and sisterhood: a “mysterious thread,” that connected the two women. The recurrence of strong, yet multifaceted women that fall into periods of weakness—Sarton’s mother suffered nervous breakdowns, which prevented her from continuing a career

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7 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
painting miniatures— in Sarton’s novels and Sarton’s search for an intimate and codependent relationship, is the result of Sarton’s bond with her mother.

Sarton’s family life presents a juxtaposition between an aloof father and a doting mother, and a complicated vision of independence. Her father emphasized marriage and was incapable of speaking to her about money—a reflection of his inability to promote her economic and social independence. His view was impractical for Sarton’s need for solitude and her inability to emotionally and sexually intimate with men. Her mother, was the polar opposite of her father, and, despite her emotional attachment, emphasized a need for freedom. Even her mother’s nickname for her, “Pigeon,” reflects independence due to flight.  

May inherited the duality of her mother and father, which she took claim to in a 1972 interview: “I’m at the same time a tremendously emotional, aware, perhaps over-sensitive, even neurotic person and I am a highly disciplined person.” Her dichotomous personality aided Sarton in creating realistic portrayals of multifaceted women, a feature that lesbian pulp fiction lacked.

Ironically, despite her sexual identity and desire for solitary spaces, Sarton maintained some idealism of the traditional nuclear family that her father promoted. As a columnist for *Family Circle*, she refuted fans and critics that interpreted her work as a means of preaching lesbianism over family. At one point, Sarton even wrote in a letter to one of her closest friends, “I wish that I could marry” for the sake of wholesomeness and stability. Yet, Sarton was aware that for her to fully commit herself as an artist, she would have to compromise heteronormative relationships and constructs of femininity.

Although Sarton received a scholarship to attend Vassar College in 1929, she chose to join Eva Le Gallienne’s Civic Repertory Theatre in New York instead, an event that further

12 Ibid.
14 Sarton, *Dear Juliette: Letters of May Sarton to Juliette Huxley*, 129.
distanced her from her father whose career as an intellectual lead him to favor education. Le Gallienne grew closer to Sarton and provided a model that lesbian women could devote their lives to causes greater than men, marriage, children, and the domestic sphere. Sarton returned to the United States to found her own theatre group. Yet, in the face of the Great Depression, Sarton disbanded her troupe. What she had left was poetry, a passion that flourished into a book of poems, *Encounter in April*, which was published in 1937.

Bonnie Zimmerman’s exhaustive study on lesbian fiction came to the apt conclusion that lesbian literary criticism is “plagued with the problem of definition” because featuring same-sex relationships should not necessarily dictate the genre and reception of the work. In spite of developments in the school of thought on the intersection of gender and sexuality, work with lesbian themes have been “variously addressed, avoided, embraced, rejected, centralized, or marginalized the lesbian in their analyses of gender and sexuality” in the academic setting. Sarton’s work, though it is significant in its representation of queer women, has been condemned for portraying homosexuality in a positive light, and otherwise overlooked by critics and academics.

By using lesbian pulp fiction novels as the template for analyzing the work of May Sarton, however, there is a risk of following in the footsteps of literary critics and the public—pigeonholing an eclectic work without holistically analyzing the different dimensions of her craft. Of her novels, only *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* (1965), *A Reckoning* (1978), and *The Education of Harriet Hatfield* (1989) contain characters that have same-sex relationships. While the sexuality of her characters is not at the forefront of the novels, stigmas

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16 Ibid.
against lesbianism overtook the content and style of the writing, and the books were either trivialized or radically condemned by critics and academics.

Writing about a lesbian protagonist was risky; the latest feminist movement had overlooked intersectionality and the queer rights movement was quietly evolving behind the scenes. “The fear of homosexuality is so great that it took courage to write Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing,” Sarton wrote in Journal of a Solitude; “to write a novel about a woman homosexual who is not a sex maniac, a drunkard, a drug-taker, or in any way repulsive, to portray a homosexual who is neither pitiable nor disgusting, without sentimentality.”\(^{17}\) While her novel was written ahead of its time, its merits have been ignored by the overall lesbian feminist movement due to Sarton’s isolationism and reluctance to conform to the militant attitude of the lesbian movement.\(^{18}\) Sarton’s personal conflict between heteronormativity and queerness was also problematic because she was quick reject other lesbian literature, even novels that dismissed heteronormative stereotypes, and considered them to be “simply terrible.”\(^{19}\) Margaret Cruikshank commented on the lapse of significance Sarton achieved in her time and that if “a lesbian writer is more broadly defined as a woman whose creative work sheds light on lesbian lives past and present, then Sarton is easily included.”\(^{20}\) By even writing about lesbians as multifaceted human characters and placing them prominently in her novels, Sarton is making a political statement.\(^{21}\) Yet, the lack of analysis on her work discounted her from recognition as a prominent author in lesbian feminism.

In *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*, homosexual and heterosexual love interests intersect as Hilary Stevens recounts her relationship with a much older woman, Willa MacPherson, who’s past is troubled by her previous male lover. Under the lens of that time, Mrs. Stevens’s relationships would have been perceived as anomalies. While same-sex relationships were slightly visible in other parts of the western world in the early 1900s, the United States lagged behind. It was not until after World War I and the dissemination of Sigmund Freud’s sexology work into mainstream culture that female homosexuality was slowly being integrated into the American viewpoint. Thus, heterosexualism was prominent and all other sexualities were considered deviant. Buffy Dunker described that in the late 1920s,

> Sex was seldom talked of, if at all, and we knew very little about expressing our sexuality except through marriage. In spite of our feelings of being different, lots of us did marry to escape . . . most disturbing in those days, wondering if we were lesbian . . . Because our strong attraction to women wasn’t considered “normal,” it wasn’t unusual for some of us to develop bad feelings about ourselves. It seemed clear that we had to keep our true feelings secret.  

Because women’s writing was defined as confessional in nature and homosexuality was still far-removed from the public view, the public viewed Sarton as condoning homosexuality to an audience that viewed it as newly suspect, and as exposing the nature of her own sexuality as well. Sarton attributed some of her success with the public’s perception that she was primarily writing about homosexuality: “Because of it,” Sarton explained, “I have become a sort of hero. I have lost jobs because of that book, but I have never been exposed to contempt.”  

While the novel is fictitious, Sarton discusses complications in her own life—dealing with being a single woman and what it means to be a female writer—layered with generalized American struggles of finding intimacy, honing one’s craft, resorting to sexual encounters in the face of fear, and coming to terms with one’s identity. Sarton’s personal identity in her writing is also evident in

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23 Sarton, *Dear Juliette: Letters of May Sarton to Juliette Huxley*, 313.
her pseudonym. Although most female authors at the time adopted pen names to conceal their identity, Sarton’s derived from her familial nickname. Thus, Sarton’s sexuality and personhood became nearly synonymous.

Lesbian pulp fiction, named after the cheap pulp paper that they were printed on, was cost-effective, typically ten-cent to ninety-five-cent books, that widely circulated in the mid 1950s. The affordability of these books allowed them to be consumed by members of the working class, teenagers, and young adults. The outside covers frequently featured scantily dressed women. In some women leered at one another, while in others, women publically undressed (Figure 1). In contrast, the cover art of Sarton’s novels rarely featured women. Many displayed fragments of images, symbolic of the fractured identity that many of her protagonists had (Figure 3). Another major facet of lesbian pulp fiction was that one of the two women was a portrayed as femme: she wore feminine clothing, outwardly had distinct feminine features, and wore make-up. The other female often was then portrayed as butch: she wore more masculine clothing, appeared androgynous, and did not wear make-up (Forrest, 2005). Often, this dichotomy was represented in cover art (Figure 2). The female lovers in Sarton’s novels worked outside of typical masculine-feminine constructs.

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Figure 1 (left): Lesbianism was stigmatized as unfeminine. The caption links “ambitious” women to “lesbian” women. Taken from https://jonmwessel.wordpress.com/2011/12/27/the-art-of-packaging-lesbian-pulp-fiction/ (1964).

Figure 2 (right): Typical lesbian pulp fiction covers featured the dichotomy between femme and butch lesbians in various stages of undress. Note that the cover pithily addresses social stigmas against same-sex lovers; they “live in the shadow world” and have “hidden ecstasy [sic].” Taken from https://jonmwessel.wordpress.com/2011/12/27/the-art-of-packaging-lesbian-pulp-fiction/ (1954).
Because many lesbians were hiding their sexual orientation at the time, pulp fiction provided a means of escaping the confines of their marriages and allowed them to cope with their feelings of isolation and shame. Since the fiction was widely distributed, these women were also able to understand that other women shared similar sentiments. However, lesbian pulp fiction often displayed women in a negative light, thus limiting the constructiveness of the fiction in a wider social scheme. Lesbian stereotypes of sexual promiscuity, rather than legitimate love, were perpetuated. In stark contrast, Sarton’s characters, though not always monogamous, had greater depth to their relationships than sexual tension. Mrs. Stevens infatuation with women is discussed as not being purely sexual but romantic as well. Details of her childhood infatuation
with her governess in the early 1910s and multiple relationships with women from the mid-1920s up to the early 1940s reveal that Mrs. Stevens has had a lifetime of emotional attachments to other women, unlike the relationships pursued at whim in lesbian pulp fiction.

In 1952, the House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Material utilized the pulp fiction novel *Women’s Barracks* as an example of literature “promoting moral degeneracy.”27 In order to escape legal consequences, publishers would often force lesbian pulp fiction authors into writing unhappy endings. Typically, one of the women would be shipped off, one woman would commit suicide, or both women would die tragically.28 29 These forms of peripetia were ways that publishers could show that they did not openly condone homosexual relationships.30 31 Lesbian characters were also featured as suddenly returning to heterosexual tendencies, which paralleled and perpetuated suppression of the homosexual identity that many lesbian women were forced into at the time. It became evident that lesbian women, in real-life and in fiction, could not achieve happiness whether they were open about their same-sex relationships or not. As the genre developed, however, the endings of the books became generally more positive in response to relaxed censorship. Because lesbian pulp fiction was in such high demand—record sales were up to five million copies—authors of lesbian pulp fiction were able to find agency in the genre’s popularity, break the norm, and grant their protagonists happy endings.32

Sarton’s novels are also marked by unsatisfactory endings featuring dying women or women estranged from their lovers. Unlike lesbian pulp fiction, however, these endings were a reflection of Sarton’s lack of achievement of intimacy. In *A Reckoning*, the protagonist Laura

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28 Ibid.
29 Forrest, *Lesbian Pulp Fiction*.
30 Keller, “Was it right to.”
31 Forrest, *Lesbian Pulp Fiction*.
32 Keller, “Was it right to.”
passes away, in *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*, Hilary Stevens consummates her relationship with Willa MacPherson, only to have Wila MacPherson suffer from a stroke and fall down a flight of stairs, and in *The Education of Harriet Hattfield*, Rose Donovan moves away from the protagonist and their relationship is cut short. While Sarton had long-term relationships—notably to Judith Matlack, with whom Sarton lived with for 15 years, and Juliette Huxley, with whom she had a 60-year long friendship—these bonds were transient and could not parallel the level of intimacy that Sarton’s relationship with her late mother had achieved. “You say I exaggerate, dear Juliette,” Sarton transcribed in one of her letters, “but how do you know. I mean how does anyone really know about another person’s feelings.”³³ Despite their lengthy relationship, Juliette Huxley was never able to understand Sarton in the way that Sarton yearned for. True and deep emotional and physical relationships were never reached in Sarton’s life, and likewise, the protagonists in her novels were left dissatisfied in an open-ended search for rapport. Sarton later affirmed, “the fact is that I don’t hold any brief for such a [lesbian] life and feel that it usually ends in tragedy of one kind or another.”³⁴ Thus, Sarton’s closings are projections of her own experience, not a way to condemn homosexuality. Despite their unhappy endings, Sarton viewed these novels as the ones most successful in engaging with women. In an interview (1991) she claimed “*Hatfield* I love, but I don't think it's as good a novel as one of the others. *A Reckoning, As We Are Now*, and *Mrs. Stevens. Mrs. Stevens* has helped a great many women recognize what they were feeling.”³⁵ Unhappy endings in lesbian pulp fiction were a means of oppressing homosexual women; in Sarton’s novels they added realism and were embraced by the public.

In Sarton’s work, the protagonists originally come from a state of heteronormativity and

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³³ Sarton, *Dear Juliette: Letters of May Sarton to Juliette Huxley*, 312.
³⁴ Cruikshank, "A Note on May Sarton," 153.
³⁵ Sarton, *Conversations with May Sarton*, 63.
as the novels develop, gender and sexual standards dissipate—the reverse of lesbian pulp fiction, where the main characters go from queerness to heteronormativity. At the opening of the novel, Mrs. Stevens rejects homosexuality and acknowledges the dominance of maleness: she “had no idea what these two [men] would be like together alone, in their world, the impenetrable masculine world.”36 She also makes claims like: “The women who have tried to be have always lacked something,” and that “women do not thrive in cities.”37 By, the end of the novel, Mrs. Stevens has embraced her sexuality and denounced her earlier way of thinking.

While the protagonists engage in homosexual relationships, it is challenging to classify them as lesbians. In Harriet Hatfield, Harriet and her lover and partner of 30 years, Vicky, never self-identify as lesbians but society pushes the label onto them at the time of Vicky’s death. In a situation that nearly parallel to the media’s association with Sarton as a lesbian writer upon the publication of Mrs. Stevens, it is the Boston Globe, who’s newspaper article entitled “Lesbian Bookstore Owner Threatened,” that launches Harriet Hatfield as a lesbian.38 Likewise, Sarton never labels Hilary Stevens as lesbian or homosexual. And while lesbian pulp fiction was based on the premise of sexual tension, Sarton’s character’s same-sex relationships were built on the foundation of emotional attachment—much like what Sarton herself sought after. In a 1995 letter she wrote, “I am not a special pleader for the homosexual, quite the contrary—but for wholeness.”39 Regardless of Sarton’s intention, lesbianism became the primary feature of her work by critics.

For May Sarton, Carolyn G. Heilbrun wrote in the 1974 introduction of Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing, “there has been little organized acclamation, no academic

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
attention, indifference on the part of critical establishment.” In the span of 1942-92, the primary period that Sarton was publishing work, there were only nineteen references to Sarton on MLA Bibliography critiquing her work. Lore Dickstein’s 1978 commentary on A Reckoning in The New York Times Literary Supplement was Sarton’s most notable case where a novel of hers was dismissed as lesbian literature:

Cancer and homosexuality are, admittedly, difficult subjects to write well about; until recently, they were, for different reasons, unmentionable as well. But this novel does not deal effectively with either; it is marred by Miss Sarton's style, which tends toward the ready cliché and occasionally teeters on the edge sentimentality. Miss Sarton is best at evoking the private sensibility of one person. But in “A Reckoning,” where separate voices and the fabric of other lives are necessary to create a world outside the main character, this kind of interior singularity approaches solipsism.

Dickstein’s testament that A Reckoning was a concealed homosexual novel lacking rhetorical style sent Sarton reeling and further into her depression. When the novel was finally published in England in 1980, she admitted to Juliette Huxley, “I nearly died of [the TLS review] over here in the Times two years ago.” Because of the stigmas against lesbian fiction at the time, Sarton ardently remained certain that she could not be labeled a lesbian writer. In an interview in Writers Digest, Sarton testified that prior to the publishing of A Reckoning, “only one of [her] books,” Mrs. Stevens, “deals with that subject.” The weight of the label as a lesbian author prevented Sarton’s recognition in the larger literary field.

Yet, poor reviews were not the worst reception to Sarton’s books. Penny Culliton, a New Hampshire teacher, was fired in 1995 for assigning high school students to read novels that featured characters involved in homosexual relationships—including Sarton’s The Education of

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41 Swartzlander, That Great Sanity.
44 Sarton, Dear Juliette: Letters of May Sarton to Juliette Huxley, 313.
45 Sarton, Conversations with May Sarton, 63.
Harriet Hatfield—due to an attempt at addressing negative portrayals of characters with same sex relationships. While lesbian pulp fiction was never condoned, it evaded censorship on the principle that it perpetuated negative stereotypes of lesbian women. However, once lesbian women were viewed in a positive manner, in the case of Sarton’s novel, they were not acceptable.

Sarton’s work did not achieve critical acclaim, yet her fan base was wide. Her works refused to portray the expected behavior of women, and thus inspired courage in many young women. A woman wrote to her, “you prove that a woman can be alone and be,” another wrote that, “You remind me that woman’s power and achievements are not won from men, they are won by her courage and from herself. I feel awe and joy in knowing that you . . . have written a woman’s experiences of human connection.” These responses to Sarton’s work are aligned with the outcome of David Bleich’s study on the role of gender in reader reception. Bleich describes a typical male pattern of reading as seeing “the novel as a result of someone’s action and constru[ing] its meaning or logic in those terms.” With this more logical framework, it is easier for men to attempt to reject or dominate literature if they find it to be a perturbation, while women are unlikely to employ this strategy. Women, on the other hand, “enter the world of the novel” and are able to more freely interpret the contents. With existing gender bias against women holding occupational fields, let alone one like May Sarton—a lesbian, unmarried women, whose books contained positive female protagonists engaged in same-sex relationships—it was easy for male critics to attempt to constrain and to impose moral corrections to the texts. This

47 Swartzlander, That Great Sanity, 178.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
approach of gender-differentiated reception supports the female response to Sarton’s work.

Women, though confined by heteronormative standards, were more readily able to accept the text and attach themselves to it.

Women were able to latch themselves to Sarton because her writing not only expressed a shared conflict of conforming to the rigid constructs of femininity, but also because her works were tangible rejections of the confines. Sarton, “would have liked to be a woman, simply and fruitful, a woman with many children, a great husband . . . and no talent.” Sarton’s emotional complexities that paralleled her mother and her devotion to her craft that paralleled to her father led her to seek out solitude—the first rejection of standards. Her sexual preference and propensity to stay away from monogamy, possibly influenced by above, were a second. The third, is the absolute rejection of femininity that came with being an artist. Gender Scholar and Essayist Carolyn G. Heilbrun relates artistry with a rejection of “powerlessness and passivity,” the archetype of femininity, and the ability to take power over “their own destiny.” She relates, “Art cannot be achieved by those whom anything else matters more. Art, like passion, is not-a part-time occupation.” The concept of artistry is projected into Sarton’s works which feature numerous artists. Most notable is Hilary Stevens, who realizes after her death of her husband that she never dedicates nor writes a poem about him. Sarton therefore argues that women do not need to uphold feminine standards that have made women subordinate to men, a concept that she embodied as an unmarried woman. The conflicts of Sarton’s life permeated into her works, which allowed women, oppressed by their unhappy marriages and domestic lives, to project themselves into fiction, and to process and validate their feelings.

51 Cruikshank, "A Note on May Sarton," 153.
53 Ibid.
54 Cruikshank, "A Note on May Sarton," 153.
At a time where women struggled with pre-existing definitions of femininity and female sexuality, published work that featured females engaged in same-sex relationships provided means for women to determine that there was more to their lives than marriage and the traditional nuclear family unit. Sarton’s work, though not adequately represented literary criticism, provided agency to many women at a time where other forms of fiction by women and for women suppressed their true identities. However, as in most cases where women challenge societal constructs—even inadvertently in the case of May Sarton who used writing as an outlet for her struggle to achieve success and find intimacy—these acts could not proceed without backlash.

Bibliography


