“The Wife” (1819) Washington Irving (1783-1859)

This story is instructive as a pure example of Victorianism, reduced in literary value by its adherence to the conventions of popular culture: “The Wife” was politically correct in 1819. It is like an embroidered sampler on a cozy wall of home sweet home. Irving wrote to please genteel married women, the great majority of his readers. He caters to their view of themselves, introducing his story with a quotation exalting “women’s love” and the bliss of domestic life. He follows that with an opening paragraph heaping more praises on “the softer sex” for their strength, fortitude, resilience and “intrepidity”--their ability to survive “disasters which break down the spirit of a man and prostrate him in the dust.” Men fall prostrate while women have such an “elevation to their character that at times it approaches sublimity.” This imagery, in the tradition of Medieval chivalry, defines the Victorian paradigm of gender roles in marriage: attributing “sublimity” to the wife, who is idealized as an iconic Angel in the House. Just as modern readers are conditioned by political correctness to make stock responses, Victorians were conditioned by stories such as this one. After the 1960s, the Victorian paradigm was replaced by the Feminist paradigm of gender roles. The new political correctness turned many traditional values into taboos, such as the mutual dependence of husband and wife. Consequently, most readers today are disconnected from the Victorian deification of women and are shocked and offended by the second paragraph of this story. Some readers are so unfamiliar with the past they cannot imagine it. Gasping, they infer that the second paragraph just has to be satire. On the contrary, a Victorian wife would not have resented being represented in metaphor as a clinging vine, because she was also empowered in marriage with the moral authority of an Angel: As the vine, which has long twined its graceful foliage about the oak and been lifted by it into sunshine, will, when the hardy plant is rifted by the thunderbolt, cling around it with its caressing tendrils and bind up its shattered boughs, so is it beautifully ordered by Providence, that women, who is the mere dependent and ornament of man in his happier hours,

should be his stay and solace when smitten with sudden calamity, winding herself into the rugged recesses of his nature, tenderly supporting the drooping head, and binding up the broken heart. This second paragraph is a single periodic sentence, a branching metaphor that expresses mutual dependency, with emphasis on the emotional dependence of a husband on a wife. This is the message wives wanted to hear. And still do. That they are needed, that they are indispensable, even that they are divine. The metaphor is drawn from Nature, which is “ordered by Providence”--by Almighty God--and is the basis for Victorian gender roles. In the real world of 1819, women on the whole were in fact dependent on men, the great majority of whom were farmers. Wives and husbands are business partners on a farm. Crèvecoeur records in Letters from an American Farmer (1782) that whereas European women worked alongside men in the fields, as soon as they could American farmers freed their wives from hard labor to make the home a heaven on earth. Irving’s “The Wife” is not a farm wife with modest agrarian values, she is urban upper class. The story is a soap opera that dramatizes the conflict between pastoral values--simplicity, peace and love in the countryside, the Garden (or suburbs)--and the puritan values of money and status attained through competition and dedication to business in the City. Like soap operas in the 20th century, this one is pitched mainly to a middle-class audience of women who aspire to be upper class. Accordingly, the worst disaster they can imagine is a loss of status. Most women secured and improved their status through marriage like the wife of Leslie in the story. He has an “ample” fortune, but she has none, like Lily Bart in The House of Mirth (1905) by Edith Wharton. The second paragraph expresses the perspective of an ideal Victorian husband: Prostrate before his wife’s sublimity in the first paragraph, in the second he is a strong oak tree that lifted her into sunshine. The Victorian husband was expected to be a strong provider outside the home, chivalric and attentive to his wife inside. Like too many husbands, the one in this story has been inclined to undervalue his wife during their prosperity, as “the mere dependent and ornament of his happier hours.” He should know better. Irving agrees with both his Victorian readers and with the modern

Feminist about male condescension and he teaches the husband a lesson, the moral of the story: “No man knows what the wife of his bosom is--no man knows what a ministering angel she is--until he has gone with her through the fiery trials of this world.” [italics added] Victorian women collectively increased their status and political influence by promoting marriage, which secured, protected and empowered them. Their provinces became the home, the schools and the churches. They dictated morals, manners and ministers. They created and largely controlled American popular culture while men were busy with competitive business. Wives provided “a little world of love at home...Whereas a single man is apt to run to waste and self-neglect, to fancy himself lonely and abandoned, and his heart to fall to ruin like some deserted mansion for want of an inhabitant.” The home is the metaphor of the heart, also embodied in the wife. The husband is the head in complementary relation to his wife, deferring to her within her sphere of responsibility. This husband, Leslie, is a “romantic” in a chivalric popular culture and carries his responsibility to protect his wife to an unrealistic extreme: “’Her life,’ said he, ‘shall be like a fairy tale’.” But then he loses all his money. The narrator, or Irving, advises him to be realistic: “But how are you to keep it from her?” Persuaded, Leslie breaks the news to his wife. “And how did she bear it?” “Like an angel!” ... “You call yourself poor, my friend; you were never so rich--you never knew the boundless treasures of excellence you possess in that woman.” The couple move out of the city into a small cottage “humble enough in its appearance for the most pastoral poet, and yet it had a pleasing rural look. A wild vine had overrun one end with a profusion of foliage; a few trees threw their branches gracefully over it...flowers...a wicket gate.” This lovely cottage in the country is the American Dream, for most people. Most readers would love to live in a place like that. Yet Leslie feels ashamed that his wife has been “reduced to this paltry situation--to be caged in a miserable cottage--to be obliged to toil almost in the menial concerns of her wretched habitation.” Ironically, he sounds like a modern Feminist complaining about housewives being caged at home. Irving sets up a polarity between the City as the place of prosperity and the country or Garden as the place of

material “poverty” and spiritual wealth. The values of the heart embodied in the wife and imaged in the pastoral cottage are implicitly divine. That is the lesson the husband learns, that he should give the highest priority to his wife and the spiritual and domestic values she represents. Yet as soon as possible, by implication the couple moves right back to the City, giving a higher value to status and money than to all that is glorified in the wife: “The world has since gone prosperously with him.” [italics added] Catering to his audience Irving gives no evidence that he realizes the contradiction. Victorians wanted virtue to be rewarded. The story ends in the old Puritan tradition of belief that God rewards the virtuous elect with prosperity. Later in the century, in The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885), Howells depicts Silas the successful businessman heeding his Victorian wife as a conscience and retreating from corruption in the City to his family farm. Today the Postmodernists who dominate American culture are atheist urbanites who scorn rural values, especially traditional marriage and religion. Art in a culture unified by a common ideology and consensus about values tends to be iconic, like Medieval and Victorian art. Icons are images with fixed meanings commonly understood, as in religions. Irving and Hawthorne in particular use cultural icons and conventional motifs: in this story the virginal Victorian wife is an angel, she plays a harp, her name is Mary, she makes their home a heaven on earth, she wears a white dress with flowers in her hair and she serves him strawberries and cream. The story is a conventional allegory of iconic signs: The husband (head) learns the true value of his wife (heart), their union is strengthened and they are both rewarded for their virtue. Michael Hollister (2015