



---

Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?

Author(s): Sherry B. Ortner

Source: *Feminist Studies*, Autumn, 1972, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 5-31

Published by: Feminist Studies, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3177638>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Feminist Studies, Inc.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Feminist Studies*

## IS FEMALE TO MALE AS NATURE IS TO CULTURE?<sup>1</sup>

Sherry B. Ortner

Much of the creativity of anthropology derives from the tension between the demands for explanation of human universals on the one hand and cultural particulars on the other. By this canon, woman provides us with one of the more challenging problems to be dealt with. The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact. Yet within that universal fact, the specific cultural conceptions and symbolizations of woman are incredibly diverse and even mutually contradictory. Further, the actual treatment of women, and the relative power and contribution of women, vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions. Both of these points--the universal fact, and the cultural variation--constitute problems for explanation.

It goes without saying that my interest in the problem is more than academic: I wish to see genuine change come about, the emergence of a social and cultural order in which as much of the range of human potential is open to women as to men. The universality of female subordination, the fact that it exists within every type of social and economic arrangement,

and in societies of every degree of complexity, indicates to me that we are up against something very profound, very stubborn, something that can not be remedied merely by rearranging a few tasks and roles in the social system, nor even by rearranging the whole economic structure.

First, it is important to sort out the levels of the problem. The confusion can be enormous. For example, depending on which aspect of Chinese culture we looked at, we might extrapolate entirely different guesses concerning the status of women in China. In the ideology of Taoism, yin, the female principle, and yang, the male principle, are given equal weight; "The opposition, alternation, and interaction of these two forces give rise to all phenomena in the universe."<sup>2</sup> Hence we might guess that maleness and femaleness are equally valued in the general ideology of Chinese culture. Looking at the social structure, on the other hand, we see the strong patrilineal descent principle, the importance of sons, and the patripotestal structure of the family. Thus we might conclude that China is the archetypal patriarchal society. Next, looking at the actual roles played, power and influence wielded, and material contributions made by women in Chinese society, all of which are, upon observation, quite substantial, we are tempted to say that women "really" are allotted a great deal of (unspoken) status in the system. Or again, we might focus on the fact that a goddess, Kuan-yin, is the central (most-worshipped, most depicted) deity in Chinese Buddhism, and we might be tempted to say, as many have tried to say about goddess-worshipping cultures in pre- and early-historical societies, that "actually" China is a sort of matriarchy. In short, we must be absolutely clear about what we are trying to explain, before explaining it.

We may isolate three levels of the problem. (1) The universal fact of culturally attributed second-class status to woman in every society. Two questions are important here. First, what do we mean by this, what is our evidence that this is a universal fact? And second, how are we to explain the fact having established it? (2) Specific ideologies, symbolizations, and social structural arrangements pertaining to

women which vary widely from culture to culture. The problem at this level is to account for any particular cultural complex in terms of factors specific to that culture--the standard level of anthropological analysis. And (3) observable on-the-ground details of women's activities, contributions, powers, etc., often at variance with cultural ideology, and always constrained within the assumption that women may never be officially pre-eminent in the total system. This is the level of direct observation, often adopted now by feminist-oriented anthropologists.

This paper is primarily concerned with the first level of the problem: the universal devaluation of women. It thus depends not upon specific cultural data but rather upon an analysis of "culture" taken generically as a special sort of process in the world. A discussion of the second level, the problem of cross-cultural variation in conceptions and relative valuations of women, must be postponed for another paper, since it will entail a great deal of cross-cultural research. As for the third level, it will be obvious from my approach that I would consider it a misguided endeavor to focus only upon women's actual, though culturally unrecognized and unvalued, powers in any given society, without first understanding the overarching ideology and deeper assumptions of the culture that renders such powers trivial.

What do I mean when I say that everywhere, in every known culture, woman is considered in some degree inferior to man? First of all I must stress that I am talking about cultural evaluations; I am saying that each culture, in its own way and in its own terms, makes this evaluation. What would constitute evidence, when we look at any particular society, that it considers women inferior?

Three types of data would be evidence: a) elements of cultural ideology and informants' statements that explicitly devalue women, according them, their roles, their tasks, their products, and their social milieu less prestige than men and the male correlates; b) symbolic devices, such as the attribution of defilement, which may be interpreted as making a statement of in-

ferior valuation; and c) social rules that prohibit women from participating in or having contact with some realm in which the highest powers of the society are felt to reside. These three types of data may all of course be interrelated in any particular system, but not necessarily. Further, any one of them will usually be sufficient to make the point of female inferiority in any given culture. Certainly female exclusion from the most sacred rite or the highest political council is sufficient evidence. Certainly explicit cultural ideology devaluing women (and their tasks, roles, products, etc.) is sufficient evidence. Symbolic indicators such as defilement are usually sufficient, although in a few cases in which men and women are equally polluting to one another, a further indicator is required--and is, as far as my researches have ascertained, always available.

On any or all of these counts, we find women subordinated to men in every known society. The search for a genuinely egalitarian, let alone matriarchal, culture, has proven fruitless, and it is important for the woman's movement at large to face up to this fact. An example from one society that has traditionally been on the good side of the ledger vis-a-vis the status of their women will suffice. Among the matrilineal Crow, Lowie points out that "Women...had highly honorific offices in the Sun Dance; they could become directors of the Tobacco ceremony and played, if anything, a more conspicuous part in it than the men; they sometimes played the hostess in the Cooked Meat Festival; they were not debarred from sweating or doctoring nor from seeking a vision." Nonetheless, "Women [during menstruation] formerly rode inferior horses and evidently this loomed as a source of contamination, for they were not allowed to approach either a wounded man or men starting on a war party. A taboo still lingers against their coming near sacred objects at these times." Further, Lowie mentions, just before enumerating women's rights of participation in the various rituals noted above, that there was one particular Sun Dance Doll bundle that was not supposed to be unwrapped by a woman. Pursuing this trail we find: "According to all Lodge Grass informants and most others, the doll owned by Wrinkle-face took precedence not only

of other dolls but of all other Crow medicines whatsoever....This particular doll was not supposed to be handled by a woman....<sup>3</sup>

In sum, the Crow probably provide a fairly typical case. Yes, women have certain powers and rights, in this case some that place them in comparatively high positions. Yet ultimately the line is drawn; menstruation is a threat to warfare, one of the most valued institutions of the tribe--one central to their self definition--and the most sacred object of the tribe is tabooed to the direct sight and touch of women.

Similar examples could be multiplied ad infinitum, but I think it is time to turn the tables. The onus is no longer upon us to demonstrate that female subordination is a cultural universal; it is up to those who would argue against the point to bring forth counter-examples. I shall take the universal secondary status of women as a given, and proceed from there.

If the devaluation of women relative to men is a cultural universal, how are we to explain this fact? We could of course rest the case on biological determinism: There is something genetically inherent in the males of the species that makes them the naturally dominant sex; that "something" is lacking in females, and, as a result, women are not only naturally subordinate but, in general, quite satisfied with their position, since it affords them protection and the opportunity to maximize the maternal pleasures that to them are the most satisfying experiences of life. Without going into a detailed refutation of this position, it is fair to say that it has failed to convince very few in academic anthropology. This is not to say that biological facts are irrelevant, nor that men and women are not different; but it is to say that these facts and differences only take on significance of superior/inferior within the framework of culturally defined value systems.

If we are not willing to rest the case on genetic determinism, it seems to me that we have only one other way to proceed. We must attempt to interpret female subordination in light of other universals of the human condition, factors built into the structure of the most generalized situation that all human beings,

in whatever culture, find themselves in. For example, every human being has a physical body and a sense of non-physical mind, is part of a society of other individuals and an inheritor of a cultural tradition, and must engage in some relationship, however mediated, with "nature" or the non-human realm, in order to survive. Every human being is born (to a mother) and ultimately dies; all are assumed to have an interest in personal survival; and society/culture has its own interest in (or at least momentum toward) continuity and survival that transcends the lives and deaths of particular individuals. And so forth. It is in the realm of such universals of the human condition that we must seek an explanation for the universal fact of female devaluation.

I translate the problem, in other words, into the following simple question: What could there be in the generalized structure and conditions of existence, common to every culture, that would lead every culture to devalue women? Specifically, my thesis is that woman is being identified with, or, if you will, seems to be a symbol of, something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being at a lower order of existence than itself. Now it seems that there is only one thing that would fit that category, and that is "nature" in the most generalized sense. Every culture, or, generically, "culture," is engaged in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest. We may thus equate culture broadly with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to rise above and assert control, however minimally, over nature.

Now the categories of "nature" and "culture" are of course categories of human thought--there is no place out in the real world where one could find some actual boundary between the two states or realms of being. And there is no question that some cultures articulate a much stronger opposition between the two categories than others--it has even been argued that primitive peoples (some or all) do not see or intuit any distinction between the human cultural state and

the state of nature at all. Yet I would maintain that the universality of ritual betokens an assertion in all human cultures of the specifically human ability to act upon and regulate, rather than passively move with and be moved by, the givens of natural existence. In ritual, the purposive manipulation of given forms toward regulating and sustaining order, every culture makes the statement that proper relations between human existence and natural forces depend upon culture's contributing its special powers toward regulating the overall process of the world.

These points are often articulated in notions of purity and pollution. Virtually every culture has some such notions, and they seem in large part (though not, of course, entirely) to be about the relationship between culture and nature.<sup>4</sup> A well-known aspect of purity/pollution beliefs cross-culturally is that of natural "contagion" of pollution--pollution (for these purposes grossly equated with the unregulated operation on natural energies) left to its own devices spreads and overpowers all it comes in contact with. Thus the old puzzle--if pollution is so strong, how can anything be purified? When the purifying agent is introduced, why does it purify rather than become polluted itself? The answer in line with the present argument, is that purification is effected in a ritual context--that purification ritual, as a purposive activity that pits self-conscious (symbolic) action against natural energies, is more powerful than those energies.

In any case, my point is simply that every culture implicitly recognizes and asserts the distinction between the operation of nature as such and the operation of culture (human consciousness and its products), and further, that the distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can under most circumstances transcend natural givens and turn them to its purposes. Thus culture (i.e., every culture) at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from, but superior in power to, nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform--to "socialize" and "culturalize"--nature.

Returning now to the issue of women, in my initial thinking on the subject, I formulated the argument as follows: the pan-cultural devaluation of



woman could be accounted for, quite simply, by postulating that woman is being identified with, or symbolically associated with, nature, as opposed to man, who is identified with culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if woman is a part of nature, then culture would find it "natural" to subordinate, not to say oppress, her. While this argument could be shown to have considerable force, it also seems to over-simplify the case. The formulation I would like to defend and elaborate on, then, is that women are seen "merely" as being closer to nature than men. That is, culture (still equated more or less unambiguously with men) recognizes that woman is an active participant in its special processes, but sees her as being, at the same time, more rooted in, or having more direct connection with, nature.

The revision seems minor and even trivial, but I think it is a more accurate rendering of cultural assumptions concerning women. Further, the argument cast in these terms has several analytic advantages over the simpler formulation; I will discuss these later. It might simply be stressed here that the revised argument would still account for the pan-cultural devaluation of women, for, even if woman is not equated with nature, she is still seen as representing a lower order of being, less transcendental of nature than men. The next question is why she might be viewed that way.

It all begins of course with the body, and the natural procreative functions specific to women alone. We can sort out for discussion three levels at which this absolute physiological fact has significance. (i) Her body and its functions, more involved more of the time with "species life," seem to place her closer to nature, as opposed to men, whose physiology frees them more completely to the projects of culture. (ii) Her body and its functions put her in social roles that are in turn considered to be at a lower order of culture, in opposition to the higher orders of the cultural process. (iii) Her traditional social roles, imposed because of her body and its functions, in turn give her a different psychic structure--and again, this psychic structure, like her physiological nature and her social roles, is seen as being more "like nature."

My argument that woman's physiology is seen as "closer to nature" has been anticipated, with great subtlety and cogency, and a lot of hard data, by de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir reviews the physiological structure, development, and functions of the human female and concludes that "the female, to a greater extent than the male, is the prey of the species." She points out that many major areas and processes of the woman's body serve no apparent function for the health and stability of the individual woman; on the contrary, as they perform their specific organic functions, they are often sources of discomfort, pain and danger. The breasts are irrelevant to personal health; they may be excised at any time of a woman's life. "Many of the ovarian secretions function for the benefit of the egg, promoting its maturation and adapting the uterus to its requirements; in respect to the organism as a whole, they make for disequilibrium rather than for regulation--the woman is adapted to the needs of the egg rather than to her own requirements." Menstruation is often uncomfortable, sometimes painful; it frequently has negative emotional correlates and in any case involves bothersome tasks of cleansing and waste-disposal; and--a point that de Beauvoir does not mention--in many cultures it interrupts a woman's routine, putting her in a stigmatized state involving various restrictions on her activities and social contacts. In pregnancy, many of the woman's vitamin and mineral resources are channelled into nourishing the fetus, depleting her own strength and energies, and finally, childbirth itself is painful and dangerous. In sum, de Beauvoir concludes that the female "is more enslaved to the species than the male, her animality is more manifest."<sup>5</sup>

De Beauvoir's survey is meant to be, and seems in all fairness to be, purely descriptive. It is simply a fact that proportionately more of woman's body space, for a greater percentage of her life-time, and at a certain--sometimes great--cost to her personal health, strength, and general stability, is taken up with the natural processes surrounding the reproduction of the species. Further, in physiological structure, the woman is weaker than the man, "her grasp on the world is thus more restricted; she has less firmness and less steadiness available for projects that in general she is less capable of carrying out."<sup>6</sup>

De Beauvoir goes on to discuss the negative implications of woman's "enslavement to the species" and general physical weakness in relation to the projects in which humans engage, projects through which culture is generated and defined. She arrives thus at the crux of her argument: "Here we have the key to the whole mystery. On the biological level a species is maintained only by creating itself anew; but this creation results only in repeating the same Life in more individuals. But man assures the repetition of Life while transcending Life through Existence [i.e., goal-oriented, meaningful action]; by this transcendence he creates values that deprive pure repetition of all value. In the animal, the freedom and variety of male activities are vain because no project is involved. Except for his services to the species, what he does is immaterial. Whereas in serving the species, the human male also remodels the face of the earth, he creates new instruments, he invents, he shapes the future.<sup>7</sup> In other words, woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, on the other hand, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, "artificially," through the medium of technology and symbols. In so doing, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables--human beings.

This formulation opens up a number of important insights. It explains, for example, the great puzzle of why male activities involving the destruction of life (hunting and warfare) have more charisma, as it were, than the female's ability to give birth, to create life.<sup>8</sup> Yet within de Beauvoir's framework, we realize that it is not the killing that is the relevant and valued aspect of hunting and warfare; rather it is the transcendental (social, cultural) nature of these activities, as opposed to the naturalness of the process of birth: "For it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, if male is everywhere (unconsciously) associated with culture, and female seems closer to nature, the rationale for these associations is easy to grasp,

merely from considering the implications of the physiological contrast between male and female. At the same time, however, woman cannot be consigned fully to the category of nature, for it is perfectly obvious that she is a full-fledged human being, endowed with human consciousness just as man is; she is half of the human race, without whose cooperation the whole enterprise would collapse. She may seem more in the possession of nature than man, but, having consciousness, she thinks and speaks; she generates, communicates, and manipulates symbols, categories, and values. She participates in human dialogues not only with other women, but also with men. As Lévi-Strauss says, "woman could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man's world she is still a person, and since insofar as she is defined as a sign she must [still] be recognized as a generator of signs."<sup>10</sup>

Indeed the fact of woman's full human consciousness, her full involvement in and commitment to culture's project of transcendence over nature, may, ironically enough, explain another of the great puzzles of "the woman problem"--woman's nearly universal unquestioning acceptance of her own devaluation. For it would seem that as a conscious human and a member of culture she has followed out the logic of culture's arguments, and reached culture's conclusions along with the men. As de Beauvoir puts it: "For she, too, is an existent, she feels the urge to surpass, and her project is not mere repetition but transcendence towards a different future--in her heart of hearts she finds confirmation of the masculine pretensions. She joins the men in the festivals that celebrate the successes and victories of the males. Her misfortune is to have been biologically destined for the repetition of Life, when even in her own view Life does not carry within itself its reasons for being, reasons that are more important than life itself."<sup>11</sup>

In other words, woman's consciousness--her membership, as it were, in culture--is evidenced in part by the fact that she accepts her own devaluation and takes culture's point of view. Because of woman's greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than men. Yet, in part because of her consciousness and participation in human social dialogue,

she is recognized as a participant in culture. Thus she appears as something intermediate between culture and nature, lower on the scale of transcendence than men.

Woman's physiological functions may thus tend in themselves to motivate (in the semantic sense) a view of woman as closer to nature, a view that she herself, as an observer of herself and the world, would tend to accept. Woman creates naturally from within her own being, while men are free to, or forced to, create artificially, that is, through cultural means, and in such a way as to sustain culture. In addition, woman's physiological functions have tended universally to limit her social movement, and to confine her universally to certain social contexts which in turn are seen as closer to nature. That is, not only her bodily processes, but the social situation in which her bodily processes locate her, may have that significance. And insofar as she is permanently associated (in the eyes of the culture) with these social loci, they add weight (perhaps the decisive part of the load) to the view of woman as closer to nature. I refer hereof course to woman's confinement to the domestic family context as a "natural" extension of her lactation processes.

Woman's body, like that of all female mammals, generates milk during and after pregnancy for the feeding of the new-born baby. The baby cannot survive without breast milk or some highly similiar formula at this stage of life. Since it is in direct relation to a particular pregnancy with a particular child that the mother's body goes through its lactation processes, the nursing relationship between mother and child is seen as a "natural" bond and all other feeding arrangements as unnatural and makeshift. Mothers and their children, culture seems to feel, belong together. Further, since children as they get beyond infancy are not yet strong enough to engage in major work, yet are mobile and unruly and not yet capable of understanding various dangers, they require supervision and constant care. Mother is the "obvious" person for this task, as an extension of her "natural" nursing bond with the children, or because she has a new infant and is involved with child-oriented activities anyway. Her own activities are

thus circumscribed by the limitations and low levels of her children's strengths and skills; she is confined to the domestic family group; "woman's place is in the home."

Woman's association with the domestic circle contributes to her being seen as closer to nature in several ways. In the first place, infants and children might easily be considered part of nature. Infants are barely human and utterly unsocialized; like animals they do not walk upright, they excrete without control, they do not speak. Even slightly older children are clearly not yet fully under the sway of culture; they do not yet understand social duties, responsibilities, and morals, their vocabulary and their range of learned skills is small. One can find implicit recognition of an association between children and nature in many cultural practices. For example, the majority of cultures have initiation rites for adolescents (primarily for boys, of course--I will return to this point below), the point of which is to move the child ritually from a less-than-fully-human state into full-fledged society and culture; and many cultures do not hold funeral rites for children who die at early ages, on the explicit notion that they are not yet full social beings. It is ironic that the rationale for boys' initiation rites in many cultures is that the boys must be purged of the defilement accrued from being around mother and other women so much of the time, when in fact it might be the case that some of the women's defilement derives from being around children so much of the time.

The second major problematic implication of women's close association with the domestic ambiance derives from certain structural conflicts between the family and the society at large in any social system. The implications of the "domestic/social opposition" in relation to the position of women have been cogently developed by Rosaldo<sup>12</sup> and I merely wish to show its relevance to the present argument. The notion that the domestic unit--the biological family charged with reproducing and socializing new members of the society--is opposed to the social entity--the superimposed network of alliances and relationships which is the society, is also the basis of Lévi-Strauss' argument in The Elementary Structures of Kinship. Lévi-Strauss argues

not only that this opposition is present in every social system, but further that it has the significance of the opposition between nature and culture. The universal incest prohibition and its ally, the rule of exogamy, ensures that the risk of seeing a biological family become established as a closed system is definitely eliminated; the biological group can no longer stand apart, and the bond of alliance with another family ensures the dominance of the social over the biological, and of the cultural over the natural.<sup>13</sup> And while not all cultures articulate a radical opposition between the domestic and the social as such, nonetheless it is hardly contestable that the domestic is always subsumed by the social; domestic units are allied with one another through the enactment of rules which are logically at a higher level than the units themselves, and which create an emergent unit--society--which is logically at a higher level than the procreative units of which it is composed.

Now, since women are associated with and indeed more or less confined to the domestic milieu, they are identified with this lower order of social/cultural organization. What are the implications of this for the way they are viewed? First, if the specifically biological (reproductive) function of the family is stressed, as in Levi-Strauss' formulation, then the family, and hence woman, is identified with nature pure and simple, as opposed to culture. But this is obviously too pat; the point seems more adequately formulated as follows: the family (and hence woman) represents lower-level, socially fragmenting, particularistic sorts of concerns, as opposed to inter-familial relations, which represent higher-level, integrative, universalistic sorts of concerns. Since men lack a natural basis (nursing, generalized to child care) for a familial orientation, their sphere of activity is defined at the level of interfamilial relations. And hence, so the cultural reasoning seems to go, men are the "natural" proprietors of religion, ritual, politics, and other realms of cultural thought and action in which universalistic statements of spiritual and social synthesis are made. Thus men are identified not only with culture, in the sense of all human creativity, as opposed to nature; they are identi-



fied in particular with Culture in the old-fashioned sense of the finer and higher aspects of human thought--art, religion, law, etc.

Once again, the logic of cultural reasoning here, aligning woman with infra-culture and man with culture, is clear, and, on the surface, quite compelling. At the same time, woman cannot be fully consigned to nature, for there are aspects of her situation, even within the domestic context, which undeniably demonstrate her participation in the cultural process. It goes without saying, of course, that except for nursing new-born infants (and even here artificial nursing devices can cut the biological tie), there is no reason why it has to be mother as opposed to father or anyone else who remains identified with child care. But even assuming that other practical and emotional reasons conspire to keep woman in that sphere, it is possible to show that her activities there could as logically put her squarely in the category of culture, thus demonstrating the relative arbitrariness of defining her as less cultural than men. For example, woman not only feeds and cleans up after children in a simple caretaker operation--she is in fact the primary agent of their socialization. It is she who transforms the newborn infant from a mere organism into a cultured human, teaching it manners and the proper ways to behave in order to be a bonafide member of the culture. On the basis of her socializing functions alone, she is as purely a candidate to be a representative of culture as anyone might be. Yet in virtually every society there is a point at which the socialization of boys is transferred to the hands of men. The boys are considered, in one set of terms or another, not to have been "really" socialized yet; their entree to the realm of fully human (social, cultural) status can be accomplished only by men. We can still see this in our own schools, where there is a gradual inversion of proportion of female to male teachers as one progresses up through the grades; most kindergarten teachers are female, most university professors are male.<sup>14</sup>

Or again, we might look at cooking. In the overwhelming majority of societies cooking is the woman's work. No doubt this stems from practical considerations--since she has to stay at home with the baby,



it is convenient that she perform the chores that are centered in the home. But if it is true, as Levi-Strauss has argued,<sup>15</sup> that transforming the raw into the cooked may represent, in many systems of thought, the transition from nature to culture, then here we have woman aligned with this important culturalizing process, which could easily place her in the category of culture, triumphing over nature. Yet when a culture (e.g., France or China) develops a tradition of haute cuisine--"real" cooking as opposed to trivial ordinary domestic cooking--the high chefs are almost always men. Thus the pattern replicates that in the area of socialization--women perform lower-level conversions from nature to culture, but when the culture distinguishes a higher level of the same functions, the higher level is restricted to men.

In short, we can see once again the source of woman's appearing more intermediate than men with respect to the nature/culture dichotomy. A member of culture, yet appearing to have stronger and more direct connections with nature, she is seen as something in between the two categories.

The notion that women have not only a different body and a different social locus from men, but also a different psychic structure, is most controversial. I would like to argue that she probably does have a different psychic structure, but I will draw heavily on a paper by Chodorow which argues convincingly that that psychic structure is not innate, but rather is generated by the facts of the probably universal female socialization experience. Nonetheless, my point is that, if we grant such a thing as the (non-innate) feminine psyche, that psyche has certain characteristics that would tend to reinforce the cultural view of woman as closer to nature.

It is important that we specify that aspect of the feminine psyche which is really the dominant and universal aspect. If we say emotionality or irrationality, we come up against those traditions in various parts of the world in which women functionally are, and are seen as, more practical, pragmatic, and this-worldly than the men. The relevant, non-ethnocentric dimension seems to be that of relative concreteness vs. relative abstractness: the (non-innate) feminine personality tends to get involved with concrete

feelings, things. and people, rather than with abstract entities: it tends toward personalism and particularism.

Chodorow accepts a view of the feminine personality along these lines; she states that "female ego qualities...include more flexible ego boundaries (i.e., less insistent self-other distinctions), present orientation rather than future orientation, and relatively greater subjectivity and less detached objectivity." She cites various studies which have tended to confirm that this is indeed a relatively accurate picture of the female personality; these studies are primarily taken from Western society, although Chodorow suggests that in a broad way the difference between male and female personality--roughly, men as more objective or category-oriented, women as more subjective or person-oriented--are "nearly universal."<sup>16</sup>

The thrust of Chodorow's very elegantly argued paper is that these differences are not innate or genetically programmed, but arise from "nearly universal features of family structure, [namely] that women are largely or entirely responsible for early child care and for (at least) later female socialization, [and that this is] a crucial asymmetry in male and female development." She introduces the object-relations theorists' distinction between "personal" and "positional" identification as psychological processes, "personal identification" being "diffuse identification with the general personality, behavioral traits, values, and attitudes of someone one loves or admires," "positional identification" being "identification with specific aspects of another's role," rather than with the whole person.<sup>17</sup> Chodorow argues that, because the mother is the early socializer of both boys and girls, both develop personal identification with her. The boy however must ultimately shift to a masculine role identity, which involves building an identification with the father. Since father is almost always more remote than mother (he is rarely involved in child care, and perhaps works away from the home much of the day), building an identification with father involves a positional male role as a collection of abstract elements, rather than a personal one with father as a real individual. Further, as the boy enters the larger social world, he finds a world in fact organized

around more abstract and universalistic criteria,<sup>18</sup> as indicated in the previous section; thus his earlier socialization prepares him for, and is reinforced by, the type of social experience he will have.

For girls on the other hand the personal identification with mother created in early infancy can persist into the process of learning female role identity. Because mother is immediate and present to the daughter during the learning of role identity, "learning to be a woman...involves the continuity and development of a girl's relationship to her mother, and is based on generalized personal identification with her rather than on an attempt to learn externally defined roles categories."<sup>19</sup> This pattern of course prepares the girl for, and is fully reinforced by, her central role in later life--motherhood; she will become involved in the world of women, characterized by few formal role differentiations,<sup>20</sup> and specifically in relationships with her children involving again "personal identification," and so the cycle begins anew.

Chodorow demonstrates, to my satisfaction at least, that the source of the feminine personality lies in social structural arrangements rather than innate differences. But, for my purposes, the significant point is that, insofar as a "feminine personality," characterized by personalism and particularism, has been a nearly universal fact, albeit an unconscious by-product of social arrangements, then having such a psyche may have contributed to the universal view of women as somehow less cultural than men. That is, woman's dominant psychic modes of relating would incline her to enter into relationships with the world that culture might see as being more "like nature," immanent and embedded in things as given, rather than, like culture, transcending and transforming things through the superimposition of abstract categories and transpersonal values. Woman's relationships to her objects tend to be, like nature, relatively unmediated, more direct, whereas men not only tend to relate in a more mediated way, but in fact, ultimately, often relate more consistently and strongly to the mediating categories and forms than to the persons or objects themselves.

If women indeed have this sort of psyche (albeit as a product of social arrangements), it is not difficult to see how it would lend weight to a view of them as being "closer to nature." Yet at the same time, this sort of psychic mode undeniably plays a powerful and important role in the cultural process. For though unmediated relatedness is in some sense at the lowest end of the spectrum of human spiritual functions, embedded and particularizing rather than transcending and synthesizing, that quality of relatedness also stands at the upper end of that spectrum. That is, mothers tend to be committed to their children as individuals, regardless of sex, age, beauty, clan affiliation, or other sorts of categories in which the child might participate. Now, any relationship which has this quality--not just mother and child of course, but any sort of highly personal, relatively unmediated commitment--may be seen as a challenge to culture and society "from below," insofar as it represents the fragmentary potential of individual loyalties over the solidarity of the group. But it may also be seen as embodying the cement or synthesizing agent for culture and society "from above," in that it represents generalized human values above and beyond particular social category loyalties. Every society must have social categories that transcend personal loyalties, but every society must also generate a sense of ultimate moral unity for all members above and beyond those social categories. Thus that psychic mode which seems to be typical of women, which tends to disregard categories and to seek "communion"<sup>21</sup> directly and personally with others, while appearing infra-cultural from one point of view, is at the same time associated with the highest levels of the cultural process. And thus, too, once again, we see a source of woman's apparent greater ambiguity with respect to culture and nature.

My primary purpose here has been to attempt to explain the universal secondary status of women. Intellectually and personally, I felt strongly challenged by this problem; I felt it had to be dealt with before an analysis of woman's position in any particular society could be undertaken. Local variables of economy,

ecology, history, political and social structure, values and world-view--these could explain variations within that universal, but they could not explain the universal itself. And if we were not to accept the ideology of biological determinism, then explanation, it seemed to me, could only proceed by reference to other universals of the human cultural situation. Thus the general outlines of the approach--although not of course the particular solution offered--were determined by the problem itself, and not by any predilection on my part for global abstract structural analysis.

I argued that the universal devaluation of women could be explained by postulating that woman is seen as "closer to nature" than men, men being seen as more unequivocally occupying the high ground of "culture." The culture-nature scale is itself a product of culture, culture being seen as a special process the minimum definition of which is the transcendence, by means of systems of thought and technology, of the natural givens of existence. This of course is an analytic definition, but I argued that at some level every culture incorporates this notion in one form or another, if only through the performance of ritual as an assertion of the human ability to manipulate those givens. In any case, the core of the paper has been concerned with showing why woman might tend to be assumed, over and over, in the most diverse sorts of world-views, and in cultures of every degree of complexity, to be closer to nature than men. Woman's physiology, more involved more of the time with "species life;" woman's association with the structurally subordinate domestic context, charged with the crucial function of transforming animal-like infants into cultured beings; "woman's psyche," appropriately molded to mothering functions by her own socialization, and tending toward greater personalism and less mediated modes of relating--all these factors make woman appear to be rooted more directly and deeply in nature. At the same time, however, her "membership" and fully necessary participation in culture is recognized by culture and can never be denied. Thus she is seen as something in between culture and nature, occupying an intermediate position.

This intermediacy, further, has several implications for analysis, depending upon how it is read. First, of course, it answers my primary question of why woman is everywhere seen as lower than men, for even if she is not seen as nature pure and simple, she is still seen as achieving less transcendence of nature than men. Here intermediate simply means "middle status" on a hierarchy of being from culture to nature.

Second, "intermediate" may have the significance of "mediating," i.e., performing some sort of synthesizing or converting function between nature and culture, here seen (by culture) not as two ends of a continuum, but as two radically different sorts of processes in the world. The domestic unit and hence woman who in virtually every case appears as its primary representative, is one of culture's crucial agencies for the conversion of nature into culture, especially with reference to the socialization of children. Any culture's continued viability depends upon properly socialized individuals who will see the world in that culture's terms and adhere more or less unquestioningly to its moral precepts. The functions of the domestic unit must be closely controlled in order to ensure this outcome as far as possible; its stability as an institution must be placed as far as possible beyond question. We see this protection of the integrity and stability of the domestic group in the powerful taboos against incest, matricide, parricide, fratricide,<sup>22</sup> and so forth. These sorts of injunctions are clearly so vital for society that they are made to appear rooted in the fundamental order of existence; to violate them is to act "unnaturally," and the sanctions are often automatic and supernatural rather than merely social and dependent on the vagaries of human moral will. In any case, insofar as woman is virtually universally the primary agent of socialization, and is seen as virtually the embodiment of the functions of the domestic group, she will tend to come under the heavier restrictions and circumscriptions which surround that unit. Her (culturally defined) intermediate position between culture and nature, here having the significance of her mediation (i.e., performing conversion functions) between culture and nature, would thus account not only for

her lower status, but for the greater restrictions placed upon her activities. In virtually every culture, her permissible sexual activities are more closely circumscribed than man's, she is offered a much smaller range of role choices, and she is afforded direct access to a far more limited range of the social institutions. Further, she is almost universally socialized to have (and the contexts she lives in as an adult reinforce her having) a narrower and generally more conservative set of attitudes and views than men; this of course is another mode of restriction, and would clearly be related to her vital function for society of producing well-socialized members of the group.

Finally, woman's intermediate position may have the implication of greater symbolic ambiguity.<sup>23</sup> The point here is not so much her location between culture and nature, as the fact of marginality per se in relation to the "centers" of culture, and the ambiguity of meaning which is inherent in a marginal position. If we think of the "margins" of culture as a continuous periphery, rather than as upper and lower boundaries, we can understand the notion that extremes, as we say, meet--that they are easily transformed into one another in symbolic thought, and hence seem unstable and ambiguous.

These points are quite relevant to an understanding of cultural symbolism and imagery concerning women. As we know, female imagery in cultural constructs of various kinds is astonishingly variable in meaning; frequently within a single cultural tradition it embodies radically divergent and even polarized ideas. In the discussion of the "female psyche," I said that the psychic mode associated with women seems to stand both at the bottom and the top of the scale of human modes of relating. That mode tends to cause involvement more directly with others in themselves than as representatives of social categories of one kind or another; this mode can be seen either as "ignoring" (and thus subverting) or "transcending" (and thus achieving a higher synthesis of) those social categories, depending upon how culture cares to look at it for any given purpose. Thus we can account easily for both the subversive female symbols--witches, evil eye, menstrual pollution, castrating mothers--and the feminine sym-



bols of transcendence--mother goddesses, merciful savioresses, female symbols of justice, and the strong presence of feminine symbolism (but not actual women) in the realms of art, religion, ritual, and law. Further we can understand the penchant of polarized feminine symbols, like all marginal symbols, to transform into one another in rather magical ways: the whore, it seems, can be redeemed to sainthood more easily than the faithful housewife.

If woman's (culturally viewed) intermediacy between culture and nature has this implication of generalized ambiguity of meaning characteristic of marginal phenomena, then we are in a better position to account for those cultural and historical "inversions" in which women are in some way or another symbolically aligned with culture and men with nature. A number of cases come to mind: the Siriono, among whom, according to Ingham, "nature, the raw, and maleness" are opposed to "culture, the cooked, and femaleness;"<sup>24</sup> Nazi Germany, in which women were said to be the guardians of culture and morals; European courtly love, in which man was said to be the beast and woman the pristine exalted object--a pattern of thinking that persists, for example, among modern Spanish peasants;<sup>25</sup> and there are undoubtedly other cases of this sort. These instances (in fact, of course, all cultural symbolic constructs) still require detailed analysis of cultural data, but the point of woman's generalized marginality with respect to culture, and particularly the polarized ambiguity, from the point of view of culture, of the feminine mode of interpersonal relations, may at least lay the groundwork for such analyses.

In short, the postulate that woman is viewed as closer to nature than man has several implications for further analysis, and can be read in several different ways. If femaleness is read simply as a middle position on the scale of culture to nature, then it is still seen as lower than culture and thus accounts for the pan-cultural assumption that women are lower than men in the order of things. If it is read as a mediating element in the culture-nature relationship, then it may account in part for the cultural tendency not merely to devalue women but to circumscribe and restrict their func-



tions, since culture must maintain control over its (pragmatic and symbolic) mechanisms for the conversion of nature into culture. And if it is read as an ambiguous status between culture and nature, the ambiguity may help to account for the fact that, in specific cultural ideologies and symbolizations woman can occasionally be categorized as "culture," and can in any event be assigned widely divergent and even polarized meanings in symbolic systems. Middle status, mediating functions, ambiguous meaning--all are different readings, for different contextual purposes, of woman's assigned intermediate status between nature and culture.

Ultimately, of course, it must be stressed that the whole scheme is a construction of culture rather than a given of nature. Woman is not "in reality" any closer to (nor farther from) nature than man--both have consciousness, both are mortal. But there are certainly reasons why she appears to be that way. The result is a vicious circle: various aspects of woman's situation (physical, social, psychological) lead to her being seen as "closer to nature," while the view of her as closer to nature is embodied in institutional forms that regenerate her situation. The implications for social change are similarly circular: a different cultural view can grow only out of a different social actuality, a different social actuality can grow only out of a different cultural view.

Women cannot change their bodies. But it seems unlikely that the physiological difference between men and women would be adequate to motivate the devalued view of women were that view not lent further weight by the social and psychological variables discussed above. While I am not prepared to put forth a detailed program of social and cultural renovation, it seems clear that the way out of the circle involves society's allowing women to participate in, and women's actively appropriating, the fullest range of social roles and activities available within the culture. Men and women can, and must, be equally involved in projects of creativity and transcendence. Only then will women easily be seen as aligned with culture, in culture's ongoing dialectic with nature.

## Notes

1. The first version of that paper was presented in October 1972 as a lecture in the course "Women: Myth and Reality" at Sarah Lawrence College. I received helpful comments from the students and from my co-teachers in the course--Joan Gadol, Eva Kollisch, and Gerda Lerner. A short version of the lecture was delivered at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Toronto, November 1972. In the interim, I received excellent critical comments from Karen Blu, Robert Paul, Michelle Rosaldo, and Terence Turner, and the present version of the paper, in which the thrust of the argument has been rather significantly changed, was written in response to those comments. I of course retain responsibility for its final form, which will appear in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., Woman, Culture and Society (Stanford: Stanford University Press) later this year. The paper is dedicated to Simone de Beauvoir; The Second Sex, published in 1949, remains in my opinion the best single comprehensive statement of "the woman problem."

2. R. G. H. Siu, The Man of Many Qualities (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), p. 2.

3. Robert Lowie, The Crow Indians (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1956), pp. 61, 44.

While we are on the subject of oppression of various kinds, we might note that Lowie secretly bought this doll, the most sacred object in the tribal repertoire, from its custodian, the widow of Wrinkled-face. She asked \$400 for it, but this price was "far beyond [Lowie's] means," so he ultimately got it for \$80 (p.300).

4. Sherry B. Ortner, "Sherpa Purity," American Anthropologist 75:49-63; and Ortner, Purification Beliefs and Practices," Encyclopedia Britannica (forthcoming).

5. Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), pp. 60, 24, 24-27 and passim, 239.

6. Ibid., p. 31.

7. Ibid., pp. 58-59.

8. Indeed, it is one of the more egregious injustices of cultural thought that, in most cultural symbolic concordances, woman is associated with death rather than with life.

9. Ibid.

10. Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Elementary Structures of Kinship, trans., J. H. Bell and J. R. von Sturmer, ed., R. Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 496.

11. De Beauvoir, Second Sex, p. 59.

12. Michelle Z. Rosaldo, "Introduction," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, Woman.

13. Lévi-Strauss, Elementary Structures, p. 479.

14. I remember having my first male teacher in fifth grade, and I remember being excited about that--it was somehow more grown-up.

15. Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Raw and the Cooked, trans. J. and D. Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

16. Nancy Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, Woman, pp. 14, 1. (Page numbers of articles cited from Woman refer to manuscript pagination.)

17. Ibid., p. 26.

18. Rosaldo, "Introduction," pp. 17-18; Chodorow, "Family Structure," p. 15.

19. Chodorow, "Family Structure," p. 9.

20. Rosaldo, "Introduction," p. 18.

21. Chodorow, "Family Structure," p. 13, following David Bakan, The Duality of Human Existence (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

22. Nobody seems to care much about sororicide.

23. Rosaldo, "Introduction."

24. John M. Ingham, "Are the Siriono Raw or Cooked?"  
American Anthropologist 73:1092-1099.

Ingham's discussion is rather ambiguous itself, since women are also associated with animals: "... the contrasts man/animal and man/woman are evidently similar...hunting is the means of acquiring women as well as animals." (p. 1095) A careful reading of his data suggests that both women and animals are mediators between nature and culture in this tradition.

25. Julian Pitt-Rivers, People of the Sierra (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); and Rosaldo, "Introduction."