

FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION

Lecture Twenty-Two: Feminism and Gender Theory (1)

Ultimate objective: the achievement of complete economic, social and cultural equality of women with men. As literature serves as a source of polemic material for feminists and an outlet for their critique of the status quo, there is now a distinct literary theory serving feminist needs. The movement has a predominantly middle-class character.

Some history: Britain

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) coming close on her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). W. addresses the arguments justifying the inequalities between men and women in education, career opportunities and marriage, and draws attention to the underlying economic injustice. She demonstrates the untenability of the belief that women are physically and intellectually inferior. Rejects the educational theory of Rousseau in *Émile* (1762) as perpetuating unjust conditions of women.

■ Current positions on gender anticipated: much of “the distinction of sex,” “the supposed sexual character” is “inculcated before nature makes any difference,” which education would prevent. Calling for a revolution in “female manners” = the rejection of stereotypes, that is, gendered roles.

The period 1830-1930 described as “The Sexual Revolution” by Kate Millett (*Sexual Politics* [1971]). Questioning of Victorian morality and institutions intensifies in closing decades of the 19th c. Radically new approaches to sexuality and marriage, compare Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (6 vols., 1897-1910); Edward Carpenter, *Marriage in a Free Society* (1894), *Woman and Her Place in a Free Society* (1894). The significance of the *Married Women’s Property Act* of 1882.

■ The anthropological dimension: the forms of family in societies (North American Indian, Asian, aboriginal Australian, African) representing an earlier stage of development teach lessons to Europeans about the nature and future of the institution. Marx and Engels envisage the abolition of the bourgeois family (based on money-relations) in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Engels predicts an end to the monogamous family in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). Also, he demonstrates a direct connection between monogamy and class antagonism: “The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male.”

■ The idea of woman refashioned as the New Woman—unconventional, independent and autonomous; compare Thomas Hardy (Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* [1895]), G. B. Shaw (Vivie in *Mrs Warren’s Profession* [1898], the figure of Saint Joan in the eponymous play [1923]) and of H. G. Wells (*Ann Veronica* [1909], *Marriage* [1912]). But the most complex fictional portrayals of the sexual awakening of women are to be found the works of D. H. Lawrence.

Feminism and English socialism; the Labour Party (1900); Mrs **Emmeline Pankhurst** and the Women’s Social and Political Union (1903)→campaigning for the vote for women: the suffragettes. Some excesses: “Life is feminine,” “Women are superior to men,” “Male and female created She them” (Genesis). Women bent on looking like men. Suffrage for women on the same conditions as for men is achieved only in 1928.

Some history: America

The Women’s Movement, for obvious reasons, started later in America, but gathered momentum quickly, as is reflected by Henry James finding in “the agitation on their [the women’s] behalf” the “very American theme” he was looking for when planning his *The Bostonians* (1886). Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), is in fact a personification of issues (in a 17th-c. Puritan garb) which his 19th-c. contemporaries were preoccupied with. Consider the meditations of social outcast Hester:

As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change [. . .].

Margaret Fuller (the original of Hester; a Transcendentalist), *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), partly inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft. She connects women's emancipation with that of "the enslaved African" and evokes the American constitution in arguing her case: "All men are born equal"—a verity ignored in the treatment of women, of the Red Man and of the Black Man. NB. "By Man I mean both man and woman." If, as is believed, America is "destined to elucidate a great moral law," the oppression of women, like the oppression of ethnic minorities, as well as expansionism (cf. the imminent annexation of Texas), violates "a great moral law." Clearing away the "bad forms of society" must go hand in hand with changing individual human beings (see Hester Prynne's monologue above).

Change, like in Britain, slow: women admitted to the vote in 1920.

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Virginia Woolf. Loving portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft in *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1932). On Wollstonecraft's two *Vindications*: they "are so true that they seem now to contain nothing new in them—their originality has become our commonplace" = the changes envisaged in those books have not materialized.

A Room of One's Own (1928). England is a patriarchy built on the assumption that the female sex is mentally, morally and physically inferior—an indirect expression of weakness, resorted to in order to boost shaky male self-confidence. Women function as looking-glasses for men in which to pose, because "mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action." Women are ignored in social, political and literary history. This raises the question of women and writing, a women's tradition in literature. It is not enough to grant a place to the greatest women writers in literary history, minor figures (Mrs Aphra Behn, Dorothy Osborne), like the obscure and unrecorded lives of women in their works, would thus have a place in literature. Tradition is important because

Without those forerunners, Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot could no more have written than Shakespeare could have written without Marlowe or Marlowe without Chaucer, or Chaucer without those forgotten poets who paved the ways and tamed the natural savagery of the tongue.

Woolf's idea of tradition—"books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately"—is like T. S. Eliot's in "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

Consider also Woolf's distinction between male and female rhythm in writing (mechanical and suggestive, respectively) and androgyny (discussed under rhythm and metre).

Woolf's (middle-class) feminist enterprise culminates with *Three Guineas* (1938).

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Some of Woolf's ideas—women as mirrors for men, androgyny, the elimination of stereotypes—are taken up by **Simone de Beauvoir** in *The Second Sex* (1949). Reckons with "the imperialism of the human consciousness," the ingrained desire to dominate, which is also responsible for the subjection of women. Although with technological development physical strength matters less, true liberation will be achieved only with economic equality, enabling woman to refuse to identify with male society's myths, thus to cease to be an object, that is, the Other for men.

▀The book, on account of explicitly or implicitly addressing such questions as patriarchy, the feminine, androgyny, the Other and gender, might have become a catalyst but had only a delayed effect. Advocates of the cause in the new phase (the 1970s and later) "may have become feminists for the reasons I explain in *The Second Sex*; but they discovered those reasons in their life experiences, not in my book" (Beauvoir in 1976, emphasis added).

But in the new phase the problem is placed in the broader perspective of gender.