

## Women and Society in Twenty First Century Literature

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Exploring the role of women during the twentieth century means considering the evolution of feminism, a loaded word that implies a variety of ideas and arouses conflicting reactions. Feminism suggests a practical determination to alter unjust laws, whether about divorce, property, or voting rights. But it also implies a philosophical questioning of traditional values and ideas, from women's intellectual and emotional capacities to male and female relationships to the ways women and men think, act and feel. A lot of happened to women's roles and the women's movement during this period of ferment. The greatest visible changes occurred in family life, education and jobs, areas that affect all aspects of human existence.

England and America share a heritage of culture, assumptions, laws, and beliefs. American law has its origins in British common law, American literature has often imitated England's and America's dominant religions came over with the pilgrims. Until the nineteenth century, philosophical and realistic movements tended to cross the Atlantic from east to west. In the 1800, however, America found that unique political, economic, and social realities in the New World required new attitudes, laws and literature. Through war and economic expansion, the American territory spread from sea to sea and beyond. Westward pioneers pursued dreams of land, freedom, and wealth, and the creation of canals and roads suggested that the vast land could become one nation. Sectional differences threatened the fragile alliance, painfully reasserted through the civil war. An earlier war separated the American colonies from England, but by the nineteenth century the British Empire stretched from Africa to Asia, from the Indian Ocean to Caribbean.

The nineteenth century is often seen as a time of relative stability, when people shared the values of family, progress, patriotism and God. But it was truly an era of change. Cities and industries erupted in the countryside. Social reform, new educational opportunities and jobs and writings like Darwin's origin of species challenged the established order of the universe and the position of humankind. Romanticism legitimized individuality, imaginative expression, and freedom, fostering and atmosphere in which to explore feminist ideas. In the era of search, change and retreat, familiar patterns seemed sometimes a comforting sanctuary sometimes a trap to destroy. Accepted values and behaviors sanctified by lip service could mask a reality quite different from the myth. The impact of change is especially obvious in women's lives.

Women's position at the end of the eighteenth century was little changed from the middle ages. According to British Common law and thus American law, women were essentially men's property; before marriage, a woman's life was determined by her father; after marriage by her husband; the unmarried woman was considered

somehow unnatural. A woman's social status and economic well being depended on the man in her life, and to a very large degree, her happiness depended on his good will. She had almost no opportunity for education, no chance to develop special interests or chosen career other than wife and mother.

In establishing its constitution, the United States made it clear that neither slaves nor women deserved the full rights of citizenship. A few years after emancipation, male former slaves were granted the right to vote, but it took another half century for women of any color, born slave or not, to the same right in the United States and in England. Symbolically and actually, women were seen as less than fully human.

The Bible defines woman as Saint and sinner, mother of human race, source of suffering and source of salvation. Eve, tempted by the devil, in turn tempts Adam to Sin, and thus sorrow and death enter the world. Mary untouched by sexuality gives birth to the son of God and thereby offers a path out of sin and sufferings. The Old Testament God is a patriarch; The New Testament offers God the Father and God the Son. The most significant women in the Judeo-Christian tradition appear only in relation ship to male figures, as wife or mother. So women were defined for centuries.

Woman who maintain socially acceptable relationships with men are good women. Those who defy the norms are bad. The archetypal good woman starts as a virtuous, obedient daughter and ends as a submissive wife and nurturing mother. If, through fate or accident, she remains unmarried, she can become a saint, devoting her life to religion, good works, her parents, or perhaps her orphaned nieces, nephews. The archetypal bad woman undercuts the role and power of men. If married, she becomes a shrew or nag; if unmarried, she might be seductive, perhaps bearing a child out of wed lock, or mannish, perhaps seeking an education or career. Even her unintentional defiance of the norm disturbs society's equanimity.

The early feminist movement, from late in the nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth, addressed both practical and theoretical issues. Feminists sought to change marriage laws, control their own property, and obtain jobs and education. They wanted political power. The voice or representation to make laws themselves. But they also attempted to change their second class status in another sense, desiring recognition as independent people defined by their actions and valued in and for them. These philosophical issues lay beneath the surface of pragmatic actions and goals. By the early twentieth century, feminists made many practical gains, but women's position and did not yet equal men's. The nineteenth century feminists left a legacy of change, but also a legacy of work yet to be done. They sought as today's feminist still seek true equality.

Fiction dominated the literary scene. The chosen vehicle for many great writers, the novel reached the widest and most varied audience and most directly revealed social change. Because it was women who most often read and wrote novels, changing attitudes toward women's roles are most reflected in and perhaps influenced by fiction. Finally, as Virginia Woolf suggests in the words heading this chapter, many women wrote about and for themselves. Thus, the best literary source for considering women's changing roles in fiction, especially the realistic novel.

Some historians use fiction as a source, arguing that since history tends to ignore women, novels provide more useful information about their lives. Theorists may even challenge the objectivity of history itself, suggesting that it too, is fiction. Further complicating matters, some literary critics argue that the author is also a kind of fiction. Yet clearly literature has an author, a human being influenced by the beliefs and events of the time and whose writings are likewise colored. Clearly, regardless of bias, historians use facts differently from novelists.

They use social data not necessarily to provide an accurate picture of society at a given time and place but to enhance some element of fiction. Given that purpose, they distort fact, whether consciously or unconsciously. To expect fiction to serve as a literal source of history is to ignore what makes it art. Yet, while not social documents, novels are closer to reality than most other genres.

The fictional use of realistic details from and affirms an aesthetic theory and philosophical stance with these premises. It is real and significant in itself, not just in relation to the perceiver. When these ideas lost their widespread acceptance around 1900, the nature of the novel began to change.

Twentieth century fiction presents a fairly consistent picture of daily life. Husband and wife live comfortably with one or two children and at least one servant in a fairly large private house. Each day except Sunday. The man goes to work in one of the professions or in business. The woman spends her days close to home, visiting neighbors, performing charitable acts, sewing, reading, or subtly forwarding her daughter's chances of marriage. The boys attend school and perhaps college, while the girls receive little education but acquire a few graceful arts. Marriages almost never work outside the home. But social reality did not always match this picture for a variety of reasons.

Because even the most realistic novel is still art, it reflects literary convention as much of social reality. Understanding how writers define women's changing roles and the evolution of feminist thought requires recognizing the interrelationship between literature and reality and knowing something about literary heritage.

Nineteenth century life in England and America was extremely diverse. To identify the typical reader or character, one must consider a variety of issues, including place, time and social class. As America grew from a strip of land along to Atlantic Ocean to a nation stretching beyond continental bounds, where are lived implied differences in citizenship, economics, and life style. While social distinctions outweighed regional ones in England, agriculture dominated the south, factories the midlands and the north. A London home could be a slum tenement, a fine urban residence, or a house in a garden suburb. Each variation profoundly affected daily life, from religion to education to attitudes about women.

Literature about slum life and industrialization became popular, especially during times of agitation for reform. Yet even that literature was directed at the middle class formed both subject and audience of the most important literature.

We cannot know from sure which novels were most popular, or which best represent contemporary life. Given the steer volume of literature produced and the fact that some is unavailable, we cannot read exactly what Victorians read. But we know that fiction was the most popular genre and within that genre, the most popular was the realistic novel dealing with and read by the middle class. We also know that a fair representation must include novels that, through now unread, were once popular enough to leave a mark on literature and society. Remembering Woolf's words at the head of the chapter, we know that women were central, as both writers and readers. Women both influenced and were influence by social change, and they both influenced and were influenced by the literature. Novels written by, about and for the middle class reveal a great deal about women's roles. People's reactions to these roles, and the evolution of feminism.