

## FEMINISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE:

### FOUR MODES

Today feminism is commonly defined in general as “the doctrine advocating social and political rights for women equal to those of men” and “an organized movement for the attainment of such rights for women.” Overall, feminism in the United States has been a response to cultural changes through time resulting from the industrial revolution, beginning in the late 18th century. The first feminist convention did not occur until 1848. Feminism has been almost exclusively an urban phenomenon and the population was predominantly rural until 1919.

### VICTORIAN FEMINISM

Christian and domestic, expressing values of the enlarging middle class, advocating more power to women in the home, churches and schools, especially moral influence on men, which was accomplished primarily through the institution of marriage, as illustrated by Washington Irving’s “The Wife” (1819), Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and William Dean Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). Rip Van Winkle rebels and runs away. Many men ran to the West. Victorian feminism was by far the most popular feminism of the 19th century and represents an adaptation to conditions of life at that time, which were more natural and rural--less industrialized and regulated by government. In *Seven Gables* the rebellious radical Holgrave is turned into a conservative Victorian by Phoebe, Hawthorne’s pet name for his wife. Phoebe is a Victorian redeemer of men like a female Christ.

Victorian Americans did not believe in equality of the genders in the modern sense, they believed that overall women are superior. They believed that the genders are essentially different by nature, and complementary to each other, as ordered by God. On the whole, allowing for individual exceptions such as Margaret Fuller, men are superior in matters of the head and women superior in matters of the heart and soul. Theoretically, most women are inclined by nature to be spiritual, whereas most men are “bestly” and inclined to dissociation from the soul. As in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Men*, males need to be civilized and “saved” by women, who are, ideally, “angels in the house.” Hawthorne was a Victorian male feminist who consistently embodied salvation in women and believed that all ministers should be women. As implied by the term “Victorian,” the cultural model of Victorian values, even for supposedly democratic American women—including Fuller and Emily Dickinson--was Queen Victoria of Britain.

On the whole, the province of men is mainly outside, in the fields, in business, and in the professions--providing for and protecting women and children. The province of women is mainly inside, in the home, though also in the church, in the local community and in the schools, except for professional schools. Even so, many women managed to become professionals anyway, as Charles Brockden Brown notes in *Alcuin* (1797), the first tract advocating women’s rights in the United States. Most farm women worked outside too, and many women worked in factories and ran small businesses. Each gender had power within its own theoretical domain and deferred to the other gender in its domain, increasing tendencies to patriarchy and matriarchy. Throughout most of the United States, women extended their domain from the home to the culture at large through their Victorianism, the political correctness of the 19th century. Victorian feminists opposed “equality” because both genders considered women superior. They opposed “women’s rights” because they believed it would *reduce* their power—in manners and morals, in the home, in the schools, and in the churches. Equal rights for women would mean equal rights for men, and women feared losing their protections and privileges.

In 1835 Alexis de Tocqueville, a French magistrate who visited the United States to study its democracy, observed that “The Americans have applied to the sexes the great principle of political economy which governs the manufactures of our age, by carefully dividing the duties of man from those of woman, in order that the great work of society may be the better carried on. In no country has such constant care been taken as in American to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes, and to make them keep pace one with the other, but in two pathways which are always different. American women never...take part in political life; nor are they, on the other hand ever compelled to perform the rough labor of the fields, or to make any of those laborious exertions which demand the exertion of physical strength.

No families are so poor as to form an exception to this rule. If, on the one hand, an American woman cannot escape from the quiet circle of domestic employments, she is never forced, on the other, to go beyond it. Hence it is, that the women of American, who often exhibit a masculine strength of understanding and a manly energy, generally preserve great delicacy of personal appearance, and always retain the manners of women, although they sometimes show that they have the hearts and minds of men.... Although the women of the United States are confined within the narrow limits of domestic life, and their situation is, in some respects, one of extreme dependence, I have nowhere seen woman occupying a loftier position.” (*Democracy in America*, 1835)

As the objective feminist scholar Ann Douglas documents in *The Feminization of American Culture*, Victorian women created popular or mass culture. Sophia Hawthorne--illustrator, linguist and wife of Nathaniel--is an example of Victorian feminism at its best. Her influence on her husband is evident in his writing and in their many letters. She disagreed with him in admiring Emerson and engaged in lifelong disagreements with her unmarried radical Feminist sister Elizabeth Peabody, in particular on the value of marriage. Sarah Josepha Hale, the strong advocate of women's rights in the home as Editor for 40 years of *Godey's Lady's Book* (1837-1877), the most popular magazine in America for most of that period, is another prominent example of Victorian feminism. *McGuffey's Reader* was a Victorian feminist textbook used throughout the country for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, an anthology of classic literature that included illustrations of women posing to demonstrate the proper body language for expressing various emotions. The Realist movement in fiction that began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century rebelled against the constraints of Victorianism. The culture of the post-WWII 1950s was to some extent a revival of Victorian feminism, but gave women more opportunities in the workplace.

#### TRANSCENDENTAL FEMINISM

Humanistic, affirming men and women as spiritual equals. It was first articulated by Charles Brockden Brown in *Alcuin* (1797) and then in the 1830s and 40s by Margaret Fuller, a leader with Ralph Waldo Emerson of the Transcendentalist movement in New England, as in her book *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). Humanistic or transcendental feminists transcend their own puritanisms (belief systems), respect a diversity of views and do not necessarily agree with all of Fuller's views. Fuller believed that although most men are indeed dominated by the head and most women dominated by the heart, the genders are more alike than the Victorian feminists allowed. See “The Genius of Margaret Fuller” by Elizabeth Hardwick. Transcendental feminism is the closest women have come to belief in equality.

Like Virginia Woolf later, Fuller believed that each person is both masculine and feminine, and that because of this, each person should be capable of transcending gender. She argued that many women are equal or superior to men in the province assigned to them by Victorianism, and that therefore, women should have rights equal to those of men. She thought that about 30% of men should stay home and that about 30% of women should have careers outside the home. In contrast to the radical feminists of her time, who emphasized the need for more political power, like the Victorian feminists Fuller emphasized the inherent spiritual power of women. Like Emerson, she was a radical individualist, not inclined to collective political activism. Her transcendental attitude is expressed in her famous remark, “I accept the universe!”

Despite Fuller's stature as “the mother of American feminism,” today Transcendental feminism is rare. Poe's “Ligeia” (1838) and Melville's “The Tartarus of Maids” and *Pierre* (1852) advocate equal rights for women and are examples of Transcendental feminism, as are the works of Chopin, Cather and many Modernist writers who emerged during the 1920s-30s, notably Stein, Woolf, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Porter. O'Connor, John Irving and Louise Erdrich are later examples. Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) satirizes Romantic popular feminism from a Transcendental perspective. Cather portrays a number of transcendent women in her novels. As Irving shows in *The World According to Garp* (1978), in the 1970s the Feminist movement got taken over by radicals who hate men and today any man who tries to be a Transcendental feminist is a pigeon. The best fictions about the liberation and maturation of a young woman individuating in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are the Miranda stories by Porter, in particular “The Grave” (1934), *Old Mortality* and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939).

## POPULAR FEMINISM

The contemporary belief, virtually unanimous by the 1980s, that women should have equal rights and social justice. What exactly “equal” and “justice” mean is problematic, but has been defined by leaders of the “Women’s Movement,” many of whom have become radical Feminists who often do not represent the views of a majority of American women. Gloria Steinem, for example, in her Utopian vision of a Feminist future, “What It Would Be Like If Women Win” (1970), betrays in her title that her attitude is actually not egalitarian, but intensely competitive and adversarial. She is interested in victory, status and power--the same priorities Feminists criticize in men.

By the 1990s popular feminism had become a politically correct stock response, one aspect of a “liberal” puritanism comparable to Victorianism in its power to induce conformity. Typically it means agreement with the most currently influential Feminists on their issues, most emphatically on abortion, affirmative action for women, equal opportunity, and equal pay for equal work, without regard to facts or to the immense diversity of what Feminists of all kinds have advocated. In general, popular feminists want to retain what they like of Victorian feminism--such as making themselves attractive, courtship, deferential male attitudes, love and romance--while at the same time gaining all they believe is meant by “equality.” They want to “have it all”—the best of both worlds: a massive shift of social paradigms without costs. They read romance novels, the radical Feminists hate them.

Most popular feminists advocate or acquiesce to double standards, as in sexist humor, one-gender schools, gender studies programs, legislation helping one gender in math but not the other in English, no due process for males accused of rape under Title IX, sportswriters in locker rooms of the opposite gender, prison guards strip-searching the opposite gender, selective service registration, haircuts in military schools, and performance standards in the military. Hemingway depicts the conflict between Victorian and popular feminist desires in “Cat in the Rain” (1924). In *Surfacing* (1972) Margaret Atwood honestly analyzes the psychology of a representative modern feminist who has developed the masculine side of herself so much that she has now become what she hates. However, nearly all other popular feminist fiction is not self-critical, except in being cautionary, it is popular because it blames men and inspires revenge.

## RADICAL FEMINISM

Though a small minority of women, Radical Feminists won the culture war in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and imposed the totalitarianism called “Political Correctness” in education and on the entire American society and all its institutions including the military. Radical Feminism is radical in the sense that it goes to the root of human nature and polarizes women from men, discouraging heterosexual relationships, denying our common humanity and our capacity to transcend gender. One effect of this polarization has been extreme hostility to writing by the “Other”—to the classics by both non-Feminist women and men, to aesthetic standards and to literary history. In trying to polarize all women against men and in advocating the abolition of marriage, to Hawthorne a sacred institution, the radical Elizabeth Peabody promoted separating the head from the heart, like Hawthorne’s villains Rappaccini and Chillingworth.

Radical Feminism defined itself in antithesis to Victorian feminism, replacing the ideals of family and love with the ideals of individualism, careerism and power. Feminism replaces belief in a male God with belief in the State. In coalition with other groups, radical Feminists have been able to establish their Atheism as a State religion, contrary to the U.S. Constitution. At the same time, many radical Feminists are neo-Victorian in their belief that women are superior to men, their censorious views of male sexuality and their efforts to dictate male behavior. The radical Feminists who participated in voting for the Resolutions of 1848 were not as radical nor as puritanical as those of the late 20th century on issues such as children, abortion, language, homosexuality and relations with men.

The radical Feminists of the late 20th century were like the old Calvinist Puritans in a number of ways: They saw themselves as persecuted victims and believed in total depravity--but only of men. Women are saints and martyrs. Throughout American history, most women have wanted to avoid being seen as feminists of any kind. During the 1960s, to the contrary, radical Feminism gained support from the popular

egalitarian sentiment inspired by the civil rights movements for racial minorities, even though most feminists were white women, a prosperous and powerful racial and gender majority.

Many men are members of racial minority groups that have competed with feminists for status in the hierarchy of American victims. Radical Feminists have a vested interest in hostility to men because they derive power, and in many cases jobs, from polarization of the sexes, as well as from legitimate grievances and from competition with men in the workplace. The worse relations are between the sexes, the more radical Feminism prospers. The more it cracks its puritanical whip, the greater the backlash--and the more Feminism contributes, along with men, to the causes of domestic abuse, divorce, abandonment, harassment, rape and male criminality in general. By demonizing males, radical Feminists have made higher education hostile to heterosexuals. Their priorities and Political Correctness have been a primary cause of the national trend to downsize or eliminate the liberal arts. Half of all universities and colleges are expected to go bankrupt within 10 years due to declining enrollments.

Radical Feminists have promoted hostility to the heritage of classic American literature--by both men and women--by misreading texts with prejudice and falsifying anything by men as "patriarchal." During the Feminist Period (1970-present) the radicals succeeded in banishing most of the great American literary classics from education. As academics, agents and editors they also censored much contemporary literature: According to Diane Ravitch (a Democrat), when Feminists took over the literary publishing industry in the 1980s, "Literary quality became secondary to representational issues.... By the end of the 1980s, every publisher had complied with the demands of the [Feminist] critics.... The goal of the language police is not just to stop us from using objectionable words but to stop us from having objectionable thoughts.... For twenty-five years, give or take a few, we have lived with this system of silent censorship." (*The Language Police*, 2003: 158, 87, 96)

For some rebuttals to radical Feminist attacks and more information, see the General Index: (1) Feminist Period: 1970-present; (2) *Sexual Politics* (1970) by Kate Millet; (3) "What It Would Be Like If Women Win" (1970) by Gloria Steinem; (4) Gender war in *The Lathe of Heaven* (1970) by Ursula LeGuin; (5) Political Correctness and the Backlash; (6) *The Language Police* (2003) by Diana Ravitch; (7) Feminist censorship laws; (8) 419 words censored by Feminist editors; (9) 52 ideas censored by Feminist editors; (10) 10 ideas considered "dangerous" by the Feminist AAUW; (11) "Decline of the English Department" (2009); (12) "What Killed American Literature" (2011); (13) American Women's Fiction before the Civil War; (14) review of *Hawthorne: Calvin's Ironic Stepchild*; (15) Feminists assault *The Blithedale Romance*; (16) how radical Feminists revised *Little Women*; (17) Feminists assault *Huckleberry Finn*; (18) Feminists assault Willa Cather; (19) "Hemingwarp"; (20) Feminists censor Hemingway's last novel *The Garden of Eden*; (21) Atheist and Feminist critics: conclusion to the analysis of "Flowering Judas"; (22) Feminist misreading of *White Noise* debunked. In response to their bigotry and demonization of men, there is a long tradition in American literature of criticizing radical Feminists:

Benjamin Franklin: "Silence Dogood Papers" (1722): "When you have once reformed the Women, you will find it a much easier task to reform the Men."

Nathaniel Hawthorne: *The Scarlet Letter* (1850): Hester passes through a radical Feminist phase of speculation that leads her to the verge of murdering her daughter and killing herself; the radical Feminist Zenobia does commit suicide in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) because she loses support.

Henry James: Olive Chancellor is a dour Feminist agitator in *The Bostonians* (1886) who loses her young protégé to a conservative Southerner she despises, illustrating the power of Nature over nurture.

Kate Chopin: *The Awakening* (1899), XXIII: "'Has she,' asked the Doctor, with a smile, 'has she been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women--super-spiritual beings?'"

Ernest Hemingway: Miss Van Campen the head nurse in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) is a vindictive tyrant and Margot Macomber in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (1936) shoots her husband in the back with a *Man-licher* rifle.

Katherine Anne Porter: Cousin Eva the radical Feminist in *Old Mortality* (1939) is rejected by young Miranda and Lizzi Spockenkieker the liberated woman with

a Nazi mentality is the most ridiculed character in *Ship of Fools* (1962).  
 Sinclair Lewis: Big Bertha (the name of the biggest cannon used by the Nazis) is a super-bitch in "Virga Vay & Allan Cedar" (1945).  
 J. D. Salinger: Eloise is a man-hater in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" (1948).  
 Flannery O'Connor: Hulga the arrogant Ph.D. in "Good Country People" (1955) feels superior but gets conned, seduced and robbed of her artificial leg by a fake Bible salesman who leaves her without a leg to stand on.  
 Ken Kesey: Big Nurse Ratched is a monster in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962).  
 Thomas Pynchon: Oedipa Mass dominates her husband Mucho (not macho) and replaces her lover the patriarchal capitalist in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966).  
 Philip Roth: Intolerant Feminist destroys herself in *When She Was Good* (1967).  
 Tim O'Brien: Feminist radical enjoys vacation in Europe in *Going After Cacciato* (1976) while young men are dying in Vietnam.  
 John Irving: Feminists are ridiculous and deadly in *The World According to Garp* (1978), the most extended satire of radical Feminism.  
 Toni Morrison: *Tar Baby* (1981), last chapter: "Straight ahead they marched, shamelessly single-minded, for soldier ants have no time for dreaming. Almost all of them are women..."  
 John Updike: Feminists are witches in *The Witches of Eastwick* (1983).  
 Don DeLillo: Ex-wives of Jack Gladney are crazy in *White Noise* (1985).  
 David Mamet: Carol the Feminist student is a cruel fanatic in *Oleanna* (1992).  
 George Drew: Feminist Head is PC in "Apparently Someone in the Department" (2004).  
 Cormac McCarthy: Wife and mother abandons her family in *The Road* (2006).  
 Michael Hollister: Feminist professors rule in chapters 24-27 of *Hollyworld* (2006).  
 Mead Embry (English professor pseudonym): on narcissistic "Me Studies" (2013)

Hester, Zenobia, Miss Van Campen, Big Nurse and Jenny Fields are or act as nurses. In the political allegory *Mantissa* (1982), the British novelist John Fowles portrays a staff of Feminazi nurses torturing a male writer in a concentration camp hospital. More recently, David Foster Wallace, who hanged himself in 2008, rendered the destructive effects of radical Feminism on men and their relationships with women in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999).

Michael Hollister (2017)