

Democracy's broken promise in fin-de-siècle British and American women's literature

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Abstract

By analyzing *fin-de-siècle* literature, this essay will focus on a critical examination of *The Awakening*, "The Yellow Wallpaper," "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street," and *Passing*. The emphasis will be on the impact of women's suffrage on women's voices, and the way these voices are perceived by a male-dominated democratic system. The early writings demonstrated the expectation that women's suffrage would translate the ability to vote into a meaningful voice in this system. However, later texts revealed this expectation to be a false promise. This essay uses Virginia Woolf's, *A Room of One's Own*, as one critical lens through which to read these works.

Keywords

fin-de-siècle, women's suffrage, women's voice, male-dominated democratic system, equality, vote

Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century, women's inability to vote was one of the major issues confronting women's rights advocates. After intensive campaigning from various suffrage movements, women in the United States and Great Britain were finally granted the same voting rights as men. While this advancement was incredibly important for women's rights, Virginia Woolf's essay, *A Room of One's Own*, questioned whether this was actually the advance that women most needed. In the essay, published after English women had attained the same voting rights as men, Woolf (1929) related the following story:

My Aunt ... died by a fall from her horse when she was riding out to take the air in Bombay. The news of my legacy reached me one night about the same time that the

act was passed that gave votes to women. A solicitor's letter fell into the post-box and when I opened it I found that she had left me five hundred pounds a year for ever. Of the two—the vote and the money—the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important. (p. 37)

Considering that the essay formed the basis of her lecture about women and fiction writing, it is surprising that Woolf was so dismissive of such a seemingly groundbreaking event in British and American democratic practices. How could someone, that has had an interest in advancing the cause of women's rights, name money as more important than a basic civic right that men had enjoyed for centuries?

Although in theory, voting rights reform was a great victory for the women's rights movement. In her essay, Woolf responded to the reality of the situation and not the

ideology. She began *A Room of One's Own* with the bold statement that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of women and the true nature of fiction unresolved” (p. 4). While suffrage was undoubtedly an impressive milestone for women's rights both in England and in the United States, it did not address the practical problems that women were confronted with at the time—problems that continue to plague women today. Woolf asserted that voting rights for women are far less important than other concerns that oppress them under the economic system. Although women had been “liberated” in this one political aspect, they were still oppressed in numerous other political and domestic ways. When looking at *fin-de-siècle* literature written in England and America, it is clear that the promise of democracy is not fulfilled; gaining the ability to vote did not make women equal partners with men, and more specifically, it did not alleviate the struggles to which women writers of the time responded, namely the fact that men were still the authority on women's health and domestic decisions.

Women may have gained the right to vote, but politically and socially they were still subordinate to their male counterparts, as the literature of the period reflected. Before gaining the right to vote, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and Kate Chopin's, *The Awakening*, addressed the powerlessness of women struggling under a patriarchal system that takes control of their lives away from them. Virginia Woolf's, “Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street,” continued this theme of powerlessness even during the process of attaining the vote and directly after. Finally, Nella Larsen's, *Passing*, highlighted the glaring oversight in the suffrage movement, namely that this voting legisla-

tion did not address discrimination against people of color. As a result, achieving the right to vote ultimately failed to satisfy its promise of equality for all. This reality is not limited to the turn of the century; at present, women continue to strive for the equality they deserve despite the supposed power of the vote. While this analysis focuses on *fin-de-siècle* literature, many of the same themes and struggles can be seen reflected in the current economic and political atmosphere in which women live.

Historical Framework

Because this analysis investigates literary trends surrounding the events of women's suffrage, both in the United States and in Great Britain, it is important to begin with a brief understanding of the major events in the suffrage movement, as well as their dates. I do not intend to give a full history of the women's suffrage movement in either case, but instead to contextualize the discussion that follows. In Great Britain, two acts essentially gave women the right to vote alongside men. The first, the Representation of the People Act of 1918, gave women over the age of thirty the right to vote, provided they met minimum property qualifications. While this was a major step, women still did not have equal rights with men, because male citizens who met the minimum property qualifications could vote beginning at age twenty-one. According to British Parliament's website (2015), the heightened age requirement “was to ensure women did not become the majority of the electorate. If women had been enfranchised based upon the same requirements as men, they would have been in the majority, due to the loss of men in the war.” For the next ten years, women struggled to ensure equal voting rights, and finally succeeded with the Equal Fran-

chise Act of 1928. This act enabled women over the age of twenty-one to vote, which finally gave them the same voting rights as men. Incidentally, with the expanded number of women who were able to partake in the election process, women became the voting majority in Great Britain. In 1920, the suffrage movement in the United States celebrated a major victory between these two pieces of British legislation when Congress passed and ratified the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. The 19th Amendment gave all women the legal backing to support their constitutional right to representation.

Women's Voices Before Suffrage

Turning to the literature of the period, Chopin's, *The Awakening* (1899), and Gilman's, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), highlighted several trends that if democracy's promise held true would be solved once women achieved voting equality. Instead, the ability to vote failed to extend to equality in other areas of life. *The Awakening*, tells the story of Edna Pontellier who marries into a wealthy Creole family in New Orleans. Edna finds great pleasure in painting, but only dabbles in it because she is expected to be more engaged with her family. She has two children with her husband, but she does not feel the same protective affection for them as the other women in her social circle. She begins to rebel against the oppressive wishes of her husband and falls in love with her single friend Robert. When she finds that she cannot be with him and that she will constantly be a possession of her husband and children, she drowns herself. "The Yellow Wallpaper" tells of a similarly oppressive marriage. The narrator, (who some critics assert is named Jane), her husband John, and their child have retired to the countryside in response to Jane's depres-

sion. She repeatedly tells her husband that she would feel better if she could engage in her writing and visit her cousins, but as a physician he insists upon the rest cure which requires Jane to engage in as little physical and mental activity as possible. Eventually, she begins to see a woman moving behind the yellow wallpaper in her bedroom, peels the paper off the walls, and descends into madness by embodying the wallpaper woman, and creeping in circles around the room. Primarily, these two stories reveal that women were expected to defer to the wishes of their husbands, both in their home life and also their health. Also, both texts highlight that not all women flourish in the role of mother and doting wife that society expects of them. Instead, these women would rather engage in artistic pursuits, but are discouraged in their efforts. The two protagonists of these stories are ultimately destroyed by society's inability to accept them as they are.

Both Edna and Jane attempt to assert control over their lives, but they are ultimately under the control of their husbands. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Jane is aware that the rest cure is not making her any better and attempts to convince her husband of this fact. She laments that John "does not believe I am sick! And what can one do? If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do" (p. 2345)? She insists throughout the text that she is not getting better, but her husband dismisses her feelings as trivial. She begs her husband to leave, but their lodging is his decision as well. Although Jane knows that the rest cure and the house is not benefitting her mental health, she is not mentally or physically strong enough to resist him. She is part

of a society that believes because her husband is a physician, he knows what is best for her and her body.

Edna has a similar relationship with her husband, although she is more active in resisting him. Although at the beginning of the text, Edna mainly follows her husband's wishes; she begins to disregard him openly when his desires conflict with her own. Early in the story, Edna subordinates her own wellbeing, "not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us" (p. 41-42). Later, after she realizes that she is not suited for his ideal lifestyle, she begins to associate with men outside of her husband's company, as well as, withdraw more and more from her children. One could argue that Edna's friendship with Robert, and other young men, allows her a certain amount of freedom, but Lawrence Thornton (1980) rightly dismissed this idea as "a veneer covering a solidly conventional society that titillated itself with flourishes of libertinism" (p. 51). This conventionality manifests itself in the attitudes of the other women towards Edna. While Edna is allowed to associate with Robert, the other women in the community treat their potential relationship as something of a joke, and are themselves completely absorbed by their own families. Additionally, while Mr. Pontellier does not initially object to Edna's relationship with Robert, he is the ultimate decision maker in their lives and regards Edna as "a valuable piece of personal property" (p.3). He does not view his wife as a person with needs and desires, but rather as support for the life that he has constructed for himself.

Another feature that the two women share is that both would rather be engaged in artistic pursuits than involved with the

businesses of parenting. Edna enjoys sketching and she describes the feeling as "satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her" (p. 15). She also emphasizes that she had never felt the protective mothering urges as the other Creole women in her social circle. She believes that motherhood is a responsibility "for which Fate had not fitted her" (p. 25), and she declares that "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself" (p. 64). In an interesting departure into Mr. Pontellier's mind, it is revealed that he also believes Edna does not have strong maternal instincts: "It would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define to his own satisfaction or anyone else's wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children. It was something which he felt rather than perceived" (p. 10). Edna's inability to fully commit to her children cannot be quantified, but instead is only something that both husband and wife can feel to be true. In the tangible sense, Edna's care for her children is satisfactory; however, both Edna and her husband know that her emotions are not fully invested in the endeavor. Despite his understanding that she is not suited for motherhood, Mr. Pontellier still expects Edna to fulfill the role.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," it is clear that Jane is similarly disinterested in her child. She only mentions her child once in the text, and the baby is always in the care of servants. Carole Stone (1986) commented specifically on *The Awakening*, but her observation can be applied to both texts. She asserted that the entire text "questions the assumptions that childbirth and child care are a woman's principle vocation, and that motherhood gives pleasure to all women" (p. 23). Much like Edna, Jane exhibits the outward signs of caring for her child, but there are clearly oth-

er pursuits in which she would rather be engaged. Throughout the narrative, the reader can see that Jane's true passion is writing; the short story is even framed as the journal that she must hide because John "hates to have me write a word" (p. 2346). This oppression perfectly exemplifies Woolf's comment about women's voting rights in *A Room of One's Own*. The inability to vote is not the most pressing concern Edna faces. Instead, she lacks the ability to support herself and so must depend on her husband; she is part of a society that gives her husband complete control over her health and her body, and ignores her own feelings in regards to her health, a problem that still manifests itself in the reproductive rights debate in today's politics; and she is forced to hide her writing from her husband, lest she be reprimanded for her creativity. As Woolf addresses in her essay more than thirty years later, the inability to participate in the political process is not the largest obstacle women face.

For both Jane and Edna, this oppressive existence has tragic consequences. When Edna realizes that she will not be able to live how she desires, she drowns herself. Similarly, Jane plunges deeper and deeper into her depression until she totally loses her sanity. This madness not only shows that the rest cure is incredibly detrimental, but also that this diagnosis is a symptom of patriarchal power in medicine. Denise D. Knight (1992) noted that Jane's "regression to an infantile state at the end of the story not only suggests the effects of sensory deprivation on intelligent women, but the crawling on one's hands and knees is emblematic of the crudest form of servility" (p. 290). Jane's confinement ensures that she loses not only her mind but also her autonomy. However, these forms of discrimination, much more pressing than unequal voting practices, were not solved by women's suffrage. Arguably,

the domestic injustices would be solved by the empowerment of women in politics. However, oppression practiced on women in the private sphere contributes to the systemic oppression of women, and therefore becomes public and political. In her essay, "The Personal Is Political," Carol Hanisch (1969) wrote that "personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution." Although Hanisch was writing about the "political" in very broad terms, not limited to elections and voting practices, the "personal as political" was a central concept of Second Wave Feminism. Indeed, the "personal as political" highlights the inextricable link between individual issues of persecution, and the politicized struggle that continues today.

'Mrs. Dalloway' and the Internalized Misogyny of Politics

After women were granted suffrage, the ideals of democracy tell us that "we the people" will be able to enact change. However, even though political options were now open to the majority of women, they were still repressed in their private lives by similar barriers to those highlighted by Chopin and Gilman, as well as marginalized in public politics. Woolf's short story, "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street," was published in 1922, after the Representation of the People Act, which gave British women over thirty the right to vote, but before they gained voting rights equal to men. The story, (which would later evolve into Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*), chronicles an afternoon in the life of the upper middle class society woman, Clarissa Dalloway, as she goes to Bond Street to buy gloves for a party that evening. Woolf's, stream of consciousness, narration allows the reader access to Clarissa's mind as

she thinks of her husband Dick, as well as the people she passes on the street. Through Clarissa's musing, the reader can see how the society in which she is entrenched has shaped her worldview to the point where she cannot actually take advantage of the supposed political freedom suffragettes have achieved. She is wary of politically active women, (or women who have agency in any way), her husband makes her decisions for her, and she only expresses authority in her home life.

As Clarissa walks through London, the reader begins to see that Clarissa is made uncomfortable by women who have exercised their newfound right to participate in politics. She encounters Lady Bexborough in her travel, and is conflicted by the lifestyle the other woman leads. Upon first seeing her, Clarissa thinks of Bexborough as "an astonishing friend; no one can pick a hole in her after all these years" (p. 2548). Clarissa also admits to herself that she envies the other woman's assertiveness, and wishes to embody those same traits: "Clarissa would have given anything to be like that, the mistress of Clarefield, talking politics, like a man" (p. 2548). The reader is given only a brief paragraph in which Woolf described Lady Bexborough, and one of the key attributes that comes through is her involvement in politics. Bringing the specific attribute of political activity to the forefront of the discussion highlights how rarely women are actively involved in politics in Clarissa's social circle. Initially, Clarissa responds positively to this aspect of Lady Bexborough's personality; however, this admiration is quickly followed by scorn. The passage concludes, "she never goes anywhere ... she had nothing to live for and the old man is failing and they say she is sick of it all, thought Clarissa and the tears actually rose to her eyes as she entered the shop" (p. 2548). Although Clarissa's first response was to admire Bexborough

for her independence and political acumen, ultimately, Clarissa focuses on the negative aspects of the other woman's life. The quick succession of political activism and unhappiness links the two qualities in Clarissa's mind; Bexborough talks politics "like a man," but as a result she has "nothing to live for." Clarissa, perhaps unable to accept that she cannot be like Lady Bexborough, cries when interpreting the value of the other woman's life. As an older woman, Clarissa has the right to vote, but this interaction shows the reader that the practice is still not considered socially acceptable.

Clarissa also directly addresses the idea of women moving beyond social activism to actually participating in Parliament, and she is critical of this notion as well. When she encounters Hugh Whitbread on the street, she reinforces the inferiority of women in her mind by taking his wife, Milly, as proof. Hugh implies in their conversation that Milly is suffering from health issues related to menopause, and Clarissa continues to muse on this idea long after she leaves Hugh. Clarissa wonders, "How then could women sit in Parliament? How could they do things with men? For there is this extra-ordinarily deep instinct, something inside one; you can't get over it; it's no use trying" (p. 2546). Menopause and menstruation, in Clarissa's mind, confirm that her sex should avoid politics. According to Judith P. Saunders (1978), this idea becomes central to Clarissa's understanding of women's inferiority to men. Saunders (1978) argued that, for Clarissa, her "monthly period is far more than an embarrassing interruption: it is the source and sign of women's inferiority ... one preventing rational, adult activity and placing women on a plane of aspiration distinctly below that of men" (p. 141). Clarissa's concept that menstruation acts as "an effectual barrier between her and any kind of higher striving"

(p. 142) leads her to the conclusion that women are fundamentally inferior to men. Woolf, who argued in her political writings that women are systemically oppressed by the patriarchal system, presented a character who is oblivious to this oppression, and ultimately, upholds the rhetoric that allows that oppression to continue. Clarissa then becomes a representation of the kind of attitude that makes suffrage, ultimately, a hollow victory for the women's rights movement. Women like Clarissa do not take advantage of the vote, and continue to uphold the society that restricts their own mobility and freedom.

In addition, Clarissa has internalized the attitudes of her husband, who she thinks about while inside the glove shop. Clarissa notices that the shop girl is tired and harried, and contemplates sending her on a holiday. However, she decides against this action, thinking, "then she remembered how on their honeymoon Dick had shown her the folly of giving impulsively. It was much more important, he said, to get trade with China. Of course he was right" (p. 2549). This incident serves two purposes. First, it highlights that she has adopted her husband's opinions, and that she acts on them even when he is not present. She suppresses her instinct because she knows that Dick will not approve of her idea. Also importantly, the added "of course" signals that her husband is always viewed as correct in these situations. The second point that this incident illustrates is that Dick's logic is, at least in this case, fallacious. Dick never makes an appearance in the story; so, Clarissa's understanding of him is all we have to judge his character. The reader knows relatively little about Dick, and what we do know for certain is that he links the unrelated concepts of charity towards the poor and trading with China, resulting in a conclusion that makes little sense. Clarissa's

charity, whether towards the shop girl or any other individual, has no bearing on whether or not the government of England will trade with China.

Apart from showing Dick's faulty reasoning skills, his argument also serves to effectively remove his wife from the conversation and suppress her voice in their discussions. By turning the question of charity into a political matter, Dick signals to Clarissa that he is now speaking on a subject about which he deems her unfit to converse. With this scene, Woolf questions whether or not Dick is actually more innately capable of participating in politics, as Clarissa believes.

In the interest of being fair to the character of Clarissa, she does exert agency in her own home and in the domestic sphere. In contrast to the figure from "The Yellow Wallpaper," who is consumed by the domestic to which she is confined, Clarissa shows control over her environment. The story opens with the assertive phrase, "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the gloves herself" (p. 2545). She takes complete control of her domestic affairs, and she takes pleasure in them. She also notes that "[t]o ride; to dance; she had adored all that. Or going on long walks in the country, talking, about books" (p. 2547). However, by the end of the story the reader learns that Clarissa is totally insulated inside this domestic atmosphere and lives in a small, inconsequential world. Saunders (1978) remarks of the story, "[s]uperficial attempts at brisk cheerfulness notwithstanding, the predominant mood of 'Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street' is one of futility and resignation" (p. 144). The ending of the texts affirms this reading. While in the shop, struggling to remember the name of a fellow patron, a bomb drops outside. Clarissa does not react at all: "There was a violent explosion in the street outside. The shop-women cowered behind the counters.

But Clarissa, sitting very upright, smiled at the other lady. 'Miss Anstruther!' she exclaimed" (p. 2550). Clarissa is so caught up in the task of engaging with fellow members of her social circle that she is oblivious to the effects of World War I happening just outside.

'Equal' Suffrage: African-American Literature and the Vote

As evidenced by Woolf's writing, women of the period have not benefitted immensely from the ability to vote. They are still confined by societal conventions, they are still subservient to their husbands, and they are still trapped in the private sphere. Critics of this view might argue that, at the very least, women are equal in the eyes of the law, and can participate in the political process if they are able to break free of convention. However, there is a flaw in this ideological stronghold: when women first received the right to vote, women of color were almost totally excluded from the suffrage movement. Although African-American men were technically given the right to vote in the United States, in 1870, as a result of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, discriminatory voting practices were rampant. With the use of literacy tests and similar tactics, people of color were effectively unable to vote until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. So, at the time women were given the right to vote in 1920, this equality under the law was only extended to white women. Oppressive exclusion is the central focus of Nella Larsen's *Passing*. *Passing* tells the story of Irene Redfield and Clare Bellew who are both women of color capable of "passing" as white. Although Irene chooses to stay in the black community, she often ends up "passing" without acknowledging this to herself; Clare marries a wealthy white

man and "passes" in the general public, as white, on a daily basis. When Clare tries to re-associate with the African American community of Harlem, she finds that she does not belong with either group. The novel concludes with Clare falling from a building—whether she throws herself from the window or is pushed by a jealous Irene is unclear.

Mainly, the text highlights the oppressive burden of race, and the constant fear of being "found out" if individuals attempt to "pass." As Irene sits in an upscale restaurant for tea, she becomes aware of a woman watching her. Irene becomes nervous, thinking that "the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, ... disturbed her" (p. 121). Even though Irene lives in black Harlem, there are still instances when she passes as white. However, she does not admit to herself that she is trying to pass, and the reader sees the immense stress that this causes her. In the text, people of every race constantly try to discover the identity of individuals around them. A wealthy white man tells Irene, "what I'm trying to figure out is the name, status, and race of the blonde beauty out of the fairy tale" (p. 166). Clare, the object of his gaze, has been passing as white for years, but when seen in a setting with other African Americans, it becomes imperative for those around her to understand to what race she belongs.

While men of color are subject to this racial interrogation, women of color have the unique experience of sexist oppression as well. The oppression highlighted in the previous texts are relevant in *Passing* as well. For example, Irene and her husband Brian disagree about their children's schooling, but it is clear that Brian will get his way. After Brian disagrees with her, Irene notes that "many arguments in the past had taught her

the futility of attempting to combat Brian on ground where he was more nearly at home than she" (p. 151). Additionally, when she originally approaches the topic with Brian, she does so in an obsequious, (and manipulative), tone: "you know more about these things than I do. You're better able to judge" (p. 153). Irene herself does not believe this, but she knows that an argument with her husband will not end in her favor. Similar to the political situation in the previously discussed texts, Irene knows that she cannot win an argument with her husband because he is, ultimately, the person in the household who makes decisions. However, unlike some of the previous texts, Irene is certain in her decisions, and she "always had complete confidence in her own good judgment and tact" (p. 155). Irene's interactions with her husband highlight that suffrage has not given her freedom in any meaningful sense. In addition to the ever present oppression imposed on Irene, by society, for her skin color, and as a woman she also must defer to her husband even though she believes so strongly in her own opinions.

The oppression of race, singular to people of color, combined with the oppression of gender, universal to women of all races, creates an environment from which no one can escape unharmed. Highlighting this relationship between sexual and racial oppression, Lori Harrison-Kahan (2002) draws a parallel between the male gaze on female objects, and the white gaze on black objects. She explains that the dominant gaze, (the white/male gaze), often reacts violently when the minority gaze, (the black/female gaze) becomes more than the subject. Using this comparison, Harrison-Kahan (2002) argues that Irene and Clare struggle, especially, because they function as the "the black female spectator who dares to look back at the white gaze" (p. 122). Irene herself is aware of

this distinction when she laments that "she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account" (p. 182). The dual burden of race and gender, along with the combined suffering it causes, is unbearable, and ultimately ends in the death of the other main character Clare—whether she herself feels this suffering and ends her life, or whether Irene cannot compete with her ability to "pass" and murders her is unclear. However, even passing as white does not alleviate these complications as Irene notes, "I'm beginning to believe ... that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe" (p. 160). This is definitely true of the characters in the text. Even when they are not actively objectified as women of color, they live in fear of the white male gaze seeking them out despite their attempts to pass within the white population.

Something notable in *Passing*, and indeed what is notable in many of the texts studied, is the fierce loyalty of the characters to the political and national system that oppresses them. In Irene's case, she overtly states her patriotism: "She belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted" (p. 189). Even though she is constantly derided as the target of racial slurs throughout the text, she still shows a fierce loyalty to her country. The novel was written just after World War I, so it is surprising that Irene would have this attitude, especially considering that African American regiments fought and died in the war, yet were still unable to drink from the same fountain as white citizens upon their return.

Conclusion

While *Passing* illustrates a very specific

moment in time for African American women, this racist, sexist oppression continues to subjugate women of color into the present day; equal voting rights have been unable to give women of color the equality that they have been striving for since Larsen's time and far before. Echoing Woolf's sentiments in *A Room of One's Own*, Audre Lorde (1984) argued that relying on the tools of the established patriarchy—tools like voting rights—will never bring equality for women of color and other marginalized groups. Lorde wrote, "those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women ... those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill" (p. 112). She identifies this as a major problem of modern day feminism because the movement does not include these marginalized groups. She continues, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (p. 112). Applying this idea to women's voting rights, using a tool of capitalism, (voting), to reform a system of oppression that it created and continues to uphold, cannot yield a positive result. Although this essay was published nearly thirty years ago, Lorde highlighted a problem that continues to plague the feminist movement today.

While society has undoubtedly made some progress in regard to these problems of control over women's independence and healthcare rights, women today still struggle with these same issues. Gilman attempted to highlight the harm of the "rest cure" and allowing husbands to make decisions about their wives' health without their approval;

we can see today this struggle for control continuing in the debate over women's reproductive rights and the fight for Planned Parenthood. Woolf's, *Clarissa Dalloway*, showed her readers how easily women can internalize restricting rhetoric when they are surrounded by a society that discourages them from participating in politics; today, women still struggle to gain basic rights, like equal pay, even though the number of women participating in the electoral process has exceeded the number of men since 1980¹. *Passing* drew attention to the plight of women of color following World War I; today's feminist movement struggles to incorporate marginalized groups, not only women of color, but also lesbian and transgender women.

Towards the conclusion of her essay, Woolf (1929) wrote that a "very interesting and obscure masculine complex" encourages men to belittle women because of "that deep-seated desire, not so much that SHE shall be inferior as that HE shall be superior, which plants him wherever one looks, not only in front of the arts, but barring the way to politics too" (p. 55). Woolf goes on to say that "it is the masculine values that prevail" (p. 73-74). While the position of women may have improved following the vote, Woolf showed with this observation that women's entrance into politics and fiction continues to be met with harsh resistance. Sally Alexander (2000) pointed out that "A Room [sic] had been written at a moment when British feminists knew what they wanted and believed that the vote, an independent income and birth control might eventually deliver it" (p. 280). The keyword in this statement is *eventually*; women of the period did not achieve the results that they hoped for immediately, and we do not see

¹According to recent Rutgers data, 63% of eligible women (71.4 million) reported voting in the 2012 presidential election as opposed to 59.8% of eligible men (61.6 million). Center for American women and politics. (2015). Gender differences in voter turnout. New Brunswick: Rutgers. Retrieved from <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/genderdiff.pdf>

them in completion today. Woolf concluded her essay with the hope that with “another hundred years ... a room of her own and five hundred a year ... [the female, fiction writer] will write a better book one of these days” (p. 94). At the end of her essay, Woolf seemed optimistic that the progress promised by equal voting rights might continue. However, with the close of Woolf’s time frame fast approaching, it seems unlikely that society will fulfill her expectations. ■

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