

Final Paper

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Feminism. What is it? Why did it become so necessary? How did it become what we know and see today as a Feminist movement? Feminism is defined as “the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes.” by Dictionary.com and this definition follows amongst almost any resource you choose to look it up. Feminist did not start in the 20th century due to some new outrage seen by women, on the contrary, Feminism has been around for centuries. Women fought using all sorts of means to make their voices and their battles heard by the masses, from words on paper to oil on canvas, women have been putting their voices out there and fighting against “The Man” in their own unique way.

Looking back at the Renaissance, one of the strongest female voices of the time was Artemisia Gentileschi. Art was taking the world by storm and a lot of it was history pieces, of mythos and legend, filled with naked men. Of course in this time period it was simply not proper for a woman to have a working knowledge of a man's body, as this would make her unclean and likely get her removed from the town, so women had a hard time breaking into the art world when the main form of art was something they, by society's standards, could not do. This did not stop Artemisia, she portrayed something rather different. Known for her paintings, Artemisia portrayed women being taken advantage of by their male superiors. She herself having been taken advantage of and raped by her own tutor, Artemisia took to the canvas. She portrayed women being stalked by older men and killing their rapists as I am sure she wished she could. She underwent a grueling trial and her name and reputation were sullied, but this did not stop her. This grew her tenacity, and she went on fighting harder. Her paintings stood against everything the men of her world wanted to see and caught the eye of so many. She is renowned for her artwork and her fight.

Another very notable feminist is Phillis Wheatley, a slave given an opportunity by the family who owned her. Her owners saw potential in her and chose to go against the norm of their time and give Wheatley an education. She became a poet, and told her story and the story of others living the same life as she so beautifully in ink. Wheatley romanticized a world she knew to be cruel and added some beauty to it in a way only a woman could. Though she was taken from her home and sold to slavery, she found her emancipation after her first book of poems was published, she would go on to marry another freed slave, though her life was short and full of many hardships, her poetry will live on forever to remind us that even in the hardest of circumstances, any woman can find her voice and make it heard.

These two women and so many more were born to be housewives and raise children, yet they broke those bonds society gave them and chose to fight with not only their voices but their creativity. Taking on a field previously owned by men and forcing the art world to accept that women could also create exquisite works of art that could rival anything a man could put out. There were still battles to fight, women being unable by society's standards to study the male body would prove a large challenge for early artists as sculptures and paintings required a working knowledge of anatomy both male and female, it was a fine line for any female artist to walk. But they did so marvelously and some very brazenly. All this fighting and art making has brought us to the feminism we see today. Women fighting for equality even harder than ever before, with less rules and less stringent requirements. The art world is still heavily dominated by men but female artists are popping up all over the place.

Take for instance, Yoko Ono, one of the most recognizable names of the 20th century art world. Married to the one and only John Lennon, Ono made a huge impact of feminism and art today. Born and raised in Japan, she brought a new weapon to the table. Where before female

artists were required to be modest or risk being outcast and left to beg to survive, women today don't quite have that same fear. Sure, we may face some social awkwardness and our own family members may not approve, but this hardly leaves the same impact it would in the earlier centuries. Ono is most notably known for her work which left her audience awed and humbled, the "Cut Piece", a performance piece in which Ono sat on the floor and allowed her audience to come and cut pieces of her clothing off until she sat before them completely nude. This was a huge moment in art history and has since been recreated by many many feminist artists. Ono used this piece fight against female oppression and society's standards. Many say it was also to highlight the abuse and vulnerability to women in today's society.

Looking at these three women we can see a drastic change in the female timeline. In the case of Gentileschi women were defined as mothers, wives, house makers ect. Their place was in the home and only in the home. If a woman were to seek work outside the home, especially in a way that brought attention to her or showed that she understood a man's anatomy, this would bring shame and dishonor, she would be disowned. Yet, women like her chose to fight this by simply doing it, they did exactly what the world and society was telling them not to do. This of course made things drastically harder on them, as their work was not as valued as a man's was, because women simply couldn't get the same amount of training. Women were also deemed less artistically inclined by nature, having less of a vision for the fine arts such as sculpture and paint it was said that women should stick to crafts such as paper cutting or needlepoint. Some women even chose to use these crafts as a fine art and create masterpieces that their male counterparts could only marvel at.

In the case of Wheatley, the female role had not changed much. Though she was a slave, free women of her time period did not seek jobs outside of the home either, not often anyway.

Though this was becoming increasingly more normal, it was not at all considered the social norm. Women were still seen as the motherly, housekeeping role. Men deemed women were weaker and men were to be the maker of money and ruler of the household, a woman was to know her place and raise the family, they had no time or talent for art in this world. Yet, women followed in the footsteps of their ancestors and fought against the men in a way that was not quite a battle cry but just enough to say “yes we can, and we will” and so they did. Women still had to fight a very uphill battle as schooling, especially in the arts, was for the very few and the very rich, but those who managed to be born with enough luck and skill to make it happen soared and opened the door for the likes of those in the later centuries.

For instance miss Ono. Here we see a woman who knows the world is hers and nobody can stop her from taking it. Ono had far less social rules to follow. While many people still see women as innately parenting and nurturing we have now come to understand that women can be so much more than that and that following a path outside of the home does not take away from the ability to raise a family. As a society, it also became more socially acceptable for women to either not have families or for men to raise the children. While there are still some very outweighed believes that women are better at this than men are and that men should be the primary breadwinners and women the primary caregivers, this does not necessarily stop women from developing and putting forward work. Ono has capitalized on the oppression that women saw in the past and on the way men still treat women today.

Different times, different ways of life and yet one thing stays the same between these three women, the need to fight for equality through art. While our voices as women may be seen as ultimately softer by men out there, art speaks for itself and the more striking it is, the more eyes it catches, the more rules it breaks, the bigger impact it makes. Women have used art to

make their voices heard for eternities and just examining these three we see the rules changing every century thanks to the work these women put in. Thanks to the risk these women took and the battles they faced. We see how they fought against society's standards and did what they knew had to be done to make their voices heard.

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