

Feminist Poetry

Week 2: Modern Feminist Poetry

Warm-Up

“You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.”

- Maya Angelou

What does Angelou mean by this? How does this quote apply not only to our own lives but the lives of others? What thoughts and feelings does this quote inspire? What can we learn from this quote?

Write a short piece inspired by this quote. Remember, this is just a warm-up so we're not aiming for great pieces of literature here, just kicking our brains into creative mode.

You have **5 minutes**.

Last week we took a look at:

The history of feminist poetry, dating back to before the suffragette movement.

Western ideas of enlightenment and how it pertains to feminism.

Poems by Margaret Widdemer, Christine de Pizan & Maya Angelou.

Second wave feminism is the term used to describe the feminist movement of the 60's, 70's and 80's. While first wave feminism (the suffragette movement) focused on securing women's rights to vote and to own property, second wave feminism began to tackle more nuanced social issues surrounding gender disparity.

The close alliance between second wave feminism and feminist poetry reshaped the landscape of poetry in the post-war period.

“In the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, poets, and the poetry they wrote, were integral to the movement's organizing and theorizing.”

- Nancy Berke

Poetry was not only an individual means of expression for the poet, but a “‘tool’ for movement building and resistance.

Held among wars, watching
all of them
all these people
weavers,
Carmagnole
Looking at
all of them
death, the children
patients in waiting-rooms
famine
the street

A woman seeing
the violent, inexorable
movement of nakedness
and the confession of No
the confession of great weakness, war,
all streaming to one son killed, Peter;
even the son left living; repeated,
the father, the mother; the grandson
another Peter killed in another war; firestorm;
dark, light, as two hands,
this pole and that pole as the gates.

What would happen if one woman told
the truth about
her life?
The world would split open

- “Käthe Kollwitz III” by Muirel Rukeyser

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.

There is a ladder.
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
Otherwise
it is a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenelated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armoured body.
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

- “Diving into the Wreck”
by
Adrienne Rich

Poetry of the second wave feminist movement made commentary on society through use of allegory and metaphor.

Arguably, second wave feminism poetry was often born from places of anger or dissatisfaction with an unjust world – If poetry of the first wave feminists were a rallying cry, poetry of the second wave feminists were an attack.

It's not unfair to say that some facets of second wave feminism were, for lack of better words, a little strange. The message of gender and sex equality became skewed amongst groups like S.C.U.M. who believed in female superiority, not gender equality. However these groups were the exception, not the rule.

Poetry slams and meet ups were a staple of the second wave feminist movement. Outside of the protests conducted by the likes of the Women's Liberation Movement, the fight of the second wave feminists' was a war fought with words.

As the world has shifted in response to growing social change (gender equality, race equality, etc) so have the means and messages of equality groups.

We are currently living in the age of 'Third Wave Feminism', the feminism of the millennial generation.

Third wave feminism is an interesting mix. Movements such as 'Me too' target unfair gender-based treatment within specific industries and grapple with issues of sex and sexual consent, and for the first time, gender issues relating to men specifically have been brought to the table.

This wave of feminism's poetry also has a much stronger focus on female sexuality, the female body, & empowerment.

i want to apologize to all the women
i have called pretty.
before i've called them intelligent or brave.
i am sorry i made it sound as though
something as simple as what you're born with
is the most you have to be proud of
when your spirit has crushed mountains
from now on i will say things like, you are resilient
or, you are extraordinary.
not because i don't think you're pretty.
but because you are so much more than that

- From "Milk & Honey" by Rupi Kaur

The truth is hidden in a veil of tears
The scabs of the mourners grow thick with fear
A democracy once proposed
Is slimmed and grimed again
By men with brute design
Who prefer hate to rime
Complexity's a four-letter word
For those who count by nots and haves
Who revile the facts of Darwin
To worship the truth according to Halliburton
The truth is hidden in a veil of tears
The scabs of the mourners grow thick with fear
Thugs from hell have taken freedom's store
The rich get richer, the poor die quicker
& the only god that sanctions that
Is no god at all but rhetorical crap
So be a girly man
& take a gurly stand
Sing a gurly song
& dance with a girly sarong

Poetry will never win the war on terror
But neither will error abetted by error
We girly men are not afraid
Of uncertainly or reason or interdependence
We think before we fight, then think some more
Proclaim our faith in listening, in art, in compromise
So be a girly man
& sing this gurly song
Sissies & proud
That we would never lie our way to war
The girly men killed Christ
So the platinum DVD says
The Jews & blacks & gays
Are still standing in the way
We're sorry we killed your god
A long, long time ago
But each dead solider in Iraq
Kills the god inside, the god that's still not dead.
The truth is hidden in a veil of tears
The scabs of the mourners grow thick with fear

So be a girly man
& sing a gurly song
Take a gurly stand
& dance with a girly sarong
Thugs from hell have taken freedom's store
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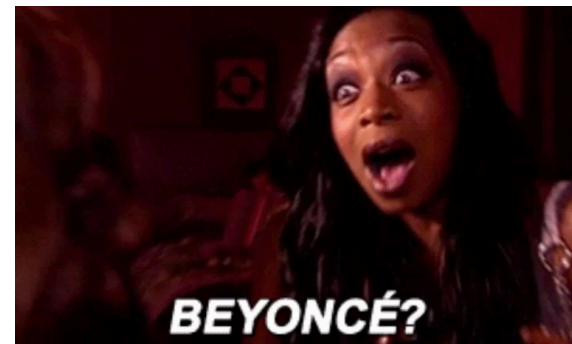
- "The Ballad of the Girly Man" by Charles Bernstein

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tg4I40CIZYY&ab_channel=MeganFalley

- "On Being One of the Skinny Girls at Fat Camp" by Megan Falley

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_QowjjiXLU&list=PLt7ArYazrQ9zyoc54i37i9i2MbJJ99vP&index=3&ab_channel=moonstruck

- "Denial" by Warsan Shire (read by Beyonce)



Intersectional Feminism & White Feminism

Another important component of third wave feminism is the idea of intersectionality.

Intersectionality broadens the lens of the first and second waves of feminism, which largely focused on the experiences of women who were both white and middle-class, to include the different experiences of women of colour, women who working class, immigrant women, transgender women, and other groups.

A criticism of the feminist movement is lack of attention, discussion, and representation given to and retaining to these marginalised groups. This has lead to the coining of the term; 'White Feminism'.

White feminism is a form of feminism that focuses on the struggles of white women while failing to address distinct forms of oppression faced by ethnic minority women and women lacking other privileges.

Think about the landscape of feminist poetry. Many of it's most prominent figures & most of the feminist poets we've looked at today have been white women.

Intersectional feminism is a third wave feminist ideology, but its roots can be traced back to black feminists of the second wave feminism generation who addressed the disparity within their own community.

There are so many roots to the tree of anger
that sometimes the branches shatter
before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks
the women rally before they march
discussing the problematic girls
they hire to make them free.
An almost white counterman passes
a waiting brother to serve them first
and the ladies neither notice nor reject
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.
But I who am bound by my mirror
as well as my bed
see causes in colour
as well as sex

and sit here wondering
which me will survive
all these liberations.

- “Who Said It Was Simple” by Audre Lorde

Intersectional feminist poetry aims to not only draw attention to the disparity between white women and women of colour, but to give women of colour their own voice, not having to have white women serve as their mouthpieces.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3qtcyuDkg8&ab_channel=ButtonPoetry

- “Suggestions from a White Feminist Poet” by Tova Charles

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSolTsaSs0M&ab_channel=PoetrySlamInc

- "Angry Black Woman" by Porsha O.

Discussion

We've now looked at several examples of feminist poetry from both the second & third waves. We've also dissected what these poems mean, both to a general audience and to us specifically.

What do we think? What stood out to us?

What key differences have we observed in second to third wave feminist poetry?

What differences in style and practice are there?

What different emotional responses have we had to the different poems?

Exercise

It's time to try our own hand at writing a feminist piece of poetry.

There are several ways to approach this exercise:

- 1) Write from the heart. Whatever our gender identity, we have probably all faced situations in our lives where we feel we were treated unfairly or assumptions were made about us based on who we are. You can write a piece inspired by / based on these experiences.
- 2) Address the world! A key aspect of feminist poetry, as we saw especially in the second wave of feminism, was observing and making commentary on society's treatment of people based on their gender. What are your observations? What commentary would you like to make?
- 3) A historical piece. Take a look back at feminist history, where the feminism movement came from, where it's at, and where it's going. Write a piece based on / inspired by these events. You could even write from the perspective of a character who lived through these events.

These are just suggestions! If you have an idea that doesn't fit into any of these categories go ahead and write it! This is your own poem after all.

Think about all of the ideas and concepts we've touched upon today. How have the poems we've looked at / things we've discussed influence your own writing?

You have **10 minutes** to do this exercise. (Depending on time, we can allocate more minutes to do this exercises if the group wishes)