

Feminist Poetry

Week 1 : The history of feminist poetry

Feminist poetry is poetry that is inspired by, promotes, or elaborated on feminist ideas.

Feminism, by definition, simply means the equality of the sexes. This begun as a white female centred concept, but as time has gone feminism has moved to encompass issues of race, (the struggle of black women in comparison white women, 'intersectional feminism') issues that affect men as well, (such as the abuse of men within domestic relationships not being taken as seriously as the abuse of women) and LGBTQ+ issues (how do we define gender? What really is a 'man' or a 'woman').

For your warm-up, I want you to just think about what this concept means to you: the equality of the sexes. How does this play a part in your life? Has it at all?

You have **5 minutes**.

First Wave Feminism

First wave feminism is the term used to describe the earliest forms of feminism – namely the suffragist movement of 1903 to 1918 when women were fighting for the right to vote, and the right to own property. Before this, women could not do either of these things.

The term refers in particular to members of the British Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), a women-only movement founded in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, which engaged in direct action and civil disobedience.

Pankhurst's ideology was that deeds speak louder than words – ironically, the rise of this movement also gave rise to feminist writings and poetry, something that in itself is a form of activism.

Poetry of the suffragists, which was used as a form of activism, took the form of rallying cries, and centred around the idea of being invited to the table, and the metaphorical idea of being let into the kingdom that was previously only allowed to men.

These poems were meant to not only push for the inclusion of women in things like the vote, but also the inspire other women to join the fight.

‘The Woman's Litany’ by Margaret Widdemer

Let us in through the guarded gate,
Let us in for our pain’s sake!
Lips set smiling and face made fair
Still for you through the pain we bare,
We have hid till our hearts were sore
Blacker things than you ever bore:
Let us in through the guarded gate,
Let us in for our pain’s sake!

Let us in through the guarded gate,
Let us in for our strength’s sake!
Light held high in a strife ne’er through
We have fought for our sons and you,
We have conquered a million years’
Pain and evil and doubt and tears—
Let us in through the guarded gate,
Let us in for our strength’s sake!

Let us in through the guarded gate,
Let us in for your own sake!
We have held you within our hand,
Marred or made as we broke or planned,
We have given you life or killed
King or brute as we taught or willed—
Let us in through the guarded gate,
Let us in for your own sake!

Let us in through the guarded gate,
Let us in for the world’s sake!
We are blind who must guide your eyes,
We are weak who must help you rise,
All untaught who must teach and mold
Souls of men till the world is old—
Let us in through the guarded gate,
Let us in for the world’s sake!

In her book 'The Second Sex', which details the historical subjugation and trials of women, Simone de Beauvoir wrote that the first woman to "take up her pen in defence of her sex" was Christine de Pizan in the 15th century, a Venetian-born woman of the medieval era who strongly challenged misogyny and stereotypes prevalent in the male-dominated realm of the arts.

As a poet, she was well known and highly regarded in her own day, an uncommon feat for a woman. Christine de Pizan was ahead of her time, whose writings were strongly linked to feminism long before the idea even existed.

Some have claimed that her poetry even has sapphic connotations (women loving women) arguably making her work one of the earliest examples of queer poetry.

‘Love To The Lady’ by Christine de Pizan

Your vanity is crazy, sweet and fair girl. Do
you believe that Love will let your youth go by
without your devoting yourself to the pleasures
of love which distribute things in many cases:
sometimes joy, sometimes pain?

This was not your desire, but Love certainly
does not agree. I tell you that your young and
joyful heart must feel the arrow of Love which
will send you thoughts of desire in many

different ways, sometimes in joy, sometimes in
pain.

And if you're forced, whether you like it or
not, to accept a frank, sweet glance, without
waiting too long, what's the use of being
so slow and langorous? I send you sighs,
more than thirty, some in joy, some in pain.

Little sweetheart, who sings so well, do you

think you can escape from the happy times that
are approaching, sometimes joyful, sometimes painful?

Exercise

I want you to go back in time, metaphorically speaking.

Think about what it would be like to exist in the time of the suffragette and the first wave feminist movement, or even further to the time of Christine de Pizan or Mary Wollstonecraft. What would it be like to be a person in this time of gender inequality or gender struggle?

Think about the different perspectives of the time – maybe you want to try and write from the role of someone against the growing feminist movement?

Or you could write from your own perspective – how would you fair in these times? How would your unique voice or identity react to this different world around you?

You have **7 minutes**.

Although first wave feminism is considered the birth of feminism, its roots can be traced much further back than that. Mary Wollstonecraft was a philosopher of enlightenment in the 18th century, and her works can be considered the actual birth of feminism.

The idea of enlightenment in the western world can be traced back philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in his writings spoke of a ideal democratic society where all men are considered equal but still recognised and valued as individuals with differing voices, world views, and opinions. However, Rousseau did not extend this idea to women – In fact part of this ideal society where all men are equal came at the cost of the subjugation of women.

“Women, for their part, are always complaining that we raise them only to be vain and coquettish, that we keep them amused with trifles so that we may more easily remain their masters”

Wollstonecraft challenged this idea. The inherent exclusion of women from this discussion was addressed by Wollstonecraft in her own work that was inspired by Rousseau. Although at first it seems to be contradictory, Wollstonecraft's idea was to expand Rousseau's democratic society but based on gender equality.

Mary Wollstonecraft spoke boldly on the inclusion of women in the public lifestyle; more specifically, narrowing down on the importance of female education. She took the term 'liberal feminism' and devoted her time to breaking through the traditional gender roles.

“I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves.”

Exercise

I want you to think about this idea of ‘enlightenment’, the idea of being able to see a better world and how it should be constructed.

What does enlightenment mean to you? Are there facets of the world you look at and think need to change, what is your idea of the perfect society?

While we’ve talked about the western idea of enlightenment, the term takes on different meanings in different cultures and belief systems – maybe enlightenment means something entirely different to you, and you could write about how it compares or contrasts the western idea of it.

You can also link this back to feminist ideas – how big a part does gender equality play in creating a ‘perfect society’? How far have we come in that regard?

You have **7 minutes**, feel free to go wherever feels natural when writing this piece.

The 1960's saw the rise of what is now known as 'Second Wave Feminism'. This form of feminism expanded on the original principles of voting and property rights, and now included social issues such as sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, de facto inequalities, and official legal inequalities.

It was a movement that was focused on critiquing the patriarchal, or male-dominated, institutions and cultural practices throughout society.

Second-wave feminism also drew attention to the issues of domestic violence and marital rape, created rape-crisis centres and women's shelters, and brought about changes in custody laws and divorce law.

Feminist-owned bookstores, credit unions, and restaurants were among the key meeting spaces and economic engines of the movement.

Next week:

- A further dissection into modern feminism, how social gender issues influenced the writings and poetry of our culture today.
- A look at concepts like intersectional feminism and men's feminism.

To give one last example of a poem that bridges the gap between what feminism has been, what it has become, and what it will be in the future, have a listen to Maya Angelou Recite Her Poem "Phenomenal Woman":

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeFfhH83_RE&ab_channel=OWN