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INTRODUCTION

FEMINISM IN AMERICA

This chapter introduces the primary historical and theoretical contexts for the detailed discussions that follow in subsequent chapters. Here I set out the major historical periods of the American women's movement, with brief analysis of the key texts produced by the theorists of those times. It is important to underline the fact that feminism in America has a long history and is not the invention of the twentieth century. Without this fundamental historical understanding, debates that continue today cannot be fully appreciated in all their intellectual complexity. It is essential that American feminism is seen not only on its own terms but fully in those terms. Thus, I begin with the pre-National and Revolutionary periods, focused upon the revolutionary decade of the 1770s, when women equated domestic tyranny with monarchical tyranny and demanded that the inalienable rights of women as well as men be addressed and inscribed in the foundational documents of the new Republic. I then move to the first wave of American feminism – the period leading up to and following from the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Key thinkers and texts of this period include Margaret Fuller's Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1845), the essays and speeches by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution (1898), which are discussed in chapter one. The second wave of American feminism dates from the 1960s, and marks the establishment of the modern Women's Movement. Key texts of second wave feminism include: Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963), discussed in chapter one, Shulamith Firestone's The Dialectic of Sex (1970), discussed in chapter five, Kate Millett's Sexual Politics (1971) and Gloria Steinem's Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions (1983). Developments within American feminism since the 1970s have been characterised first by the critique of mainstream 'white' feminism most notably by Angela Davis in Women, Race and Class (1981) and bell hooks's Ain't I a Woman? (1981), which are both discussed in chapter seven. This same feminist mainstream has been criticised by lesbian feminists, such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde whose work is discussed at length in chapter five, for failing to confront the politics of 'compulsory heterosexuality' that is one of the major linchpins of the patriarchal power structure. Then the impact of French feminist theory in the 1980s considerably diversified the feminist agenda in America, perhaps exemplified by the cultural or postmodern feminism represented by Judith Butler's Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990); and in the 1990s the emergence of so-called 'post-feminist' debates were taken up in very different ways by such women as Susan Faludi in Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women (1992) and Camille Paglia in Vamps and Tramps (1994). It is this historical and intellectual terrain that I want to map out in this introductory chapter.

The Historical Contexts of American Feminism

The position of women in colonial America was determined by the hierarchical worldview of the Puritan colonists. As men deferred to God and His ministers, so women should defer to men. Puritans believed that the inferiority of women was a mark of original sin, manifest in physical weakness, smaller stature, intellectual limitations and a tendency to depend upon emotions rather than the intellect. Women should be confined to the domestic sphere, nurturing children, maintaining the household and serving their husbands. John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony, held that 'A true wife accounts her subjection [as] her honor and freedom,' finding contentment only 'in subjection to her husband's authority.' Though the position of women was marginally better in the New World than the Old, due to more liberal property laws, the availability of divorce and legal protection from physical abuse, the principle of female subordination was the foundation of women's position in America as the nation developed. Calls for political equality during the Revolutionary era went largely unheard; the notion of women's rights was ignored by the Constitutional Convention. This, despite the condemnation in 1775 by Thomas Paine, theoretician of the Revolution, of the position of women 'even in countries where they may be esteemed the most happy, constrained in their desires in the disposal of their goods, robbed of freedom and will by the laws, the slaves of opinion ...' (quoted by Friedan, 1963, p. 84). So, in the nineteenth century a woman in America was unable to vote, after marriage she had no control of her property (in some states the law compelled employers to pay a woman's wages directly to her husband) or her children; she could not make a will, sign a contract or instigate legal proceedings without her husband's consent. Her status was akin to that of a minor or a slave. It was in connection with slavery that the organised movement for women's rights had its origin, when the American abolitionist movement split over women's right to participate. A group of women then determined to fight for their own freedom. It should be noted in passing that this also marks the beginning of the problematical relationship between women's rights and civil rights movements, because the two groups often found themselves in competition, debating the priority to be accorded racial versus gender oppression. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton both opposed the 15th Amendment, which gave the vote to black men, because it denied the vote to women. This issue is discussed in more detail in chapter seven.

First Wave of American Feminism

The so-called 'first wave' of American feminism began in the 1840s and is commonly marked by the first Women's Rights Convention, held in Seneca Falls in 1848, organised by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other women who had been denied a place at the international anti-slavery convention in London in 1840. In important respects, the tone of the Seneca Falls Convention had been set by the efforts of Margaret Fuller, who is described by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony as having 'possessed more influence upon the thought of American women than any woman previous to her time' (quoted by Dickenson, 1994, p. ix). Perhaps most influential of Fuller's work was Woman in the Nineteenth Century, a plea for the abolition of all intellectual and economic restrictions imposed for reasons of gender which, when it was published in

February 1845 sold out an edition of one thousand copies within a week. Woman in the Nineteenth Century was based upon Fuller's essay 'The Great Lawsuit - Man versus Men; Woman versus Women' which she published in the Transcendentalist magazine The Dial in July 1843. In the preface, Fuller explains that she altered the title of the book-length version because of complaints that the significance of her original title was obscure. Fuller's preference for the original lies in the effort of understanding it requires on the part of the reader: that 'while it is the destiny of Man, in the course of the ages, to ascertain and fulfil the law of his being ... the action of prejudices and passions which attend, in the day, the growth of the individual, is continually obstructing the holy work that is to make the earth a part of heaven' (Fuller, 1845, p. 3). In this description of her subject, Fuller reveals the Transcendentalist basis of her thought, especially the emphasis upon self-realisation and self-fulfilment as the object of human life. Her indebtedness to Emerson is revealed by assumptions such as that America offers superior opportunities for self-fulfilment and self-reliance; so American women, who are free from the conventions and traditions that constrain the women of other nations, should be able to discover 'the secrets of nature' and the 'revelations of the spirit' (p. 71). Fuller explicitly includes both men and women in her category of 'Man' and shows how the 'action of prejudices' upon individual lives effects differently men and women. She first illustrates through historical, mythical and literary example, the imperative that man achieve self-knowledge but the subject subtly changes as she observes that 'the idea of Man, however imperfectly brought out, has been far more so than that of Woman' (p. 11). At this point, Fuller suggests that the improvement of women's condition will better prepare them for their task of moral guardianship of men. In this way, women can fulfil their part in the grand national destiny which awaits the Republic. Fuller does not allow the subject to rest, however, with the endorsement of the then popular justification of women's education. She roundly rejects the idea that women should accept the external regulation of their minds and lives rather than pursuing their own needs and suggests that this is the tenor of contemporary women's thought: '[m]any women are considering within themselves, what they need that they have not, and what they can have, if they find they need it' (p. 15). But Fuller goes on to catalogue the obstacles to this self-fulfilment. The limited rights of married women over their own property, the automatic custody of children by the father in the event of divorce or separation, the symbolic association of women with children and slaves in habits of thought and expression, the enforced frivolity which Fuller sees as a continuum with prostitution at one extreme, the life of drudgery that afflicts all women, rich and poor, who are limited in their exercise of will and in their capacity for self-reliance, a quality that Fuller values highly, all of these obstacles are examined in turn. These are the obstructions preventing the further development of humanity, in Fuller's description of men and women as two parts of the same thought: 'What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home' (p. 20). Women need to fulfil their personal and national destinies but they also need to fulfil the spiritual destiny of humanity and it is men who have historically placed the obstacles in their way: from the Christian religion that blames a woman for the Fall and thus condemns her to eternal serfdom, and the Roman conviction that while the human body is inherited from the

mother the more valuable, eternal part, the soul comes from the father, to the contemporary injustices outlined above.

The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention marked the beginning of the political struggle for women's rights; the Declaration of Sentiments, modelled ironically on Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, was drafted primarily by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal ... The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her ... He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the effective franchise ... He has made her, if married, in the eyes of the law, civilly dead.

Together with Susan B. Anthony, Stanton founded the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869, and Lucy Stone established the American Woman's Suffrage Association, to promote a suffrage amendment to the Constitution (this became the 19th Amendment only in 1920). Additional demands such as the reform of divorce laws and improved working conditions for women were added by both organisations to the suffrage platform. The two organisations merged in 1890 to become the National American Woman's Suffrage Association, which later became the League of Women Voters. A number of pro-suffrage groups sprang up in the pre-war years: Elizabeth Cady Stanton's daughter, Harriet Stanton Blatch, founded the Equality League in 1907 and Alice Paul who had been active in the British suffrage struggle founded the more militant Congressional Union, which later became the Woman's Party. It was the Woman's Party that first proposed the Equal Rights Amendment to Congress in 1923 - 'Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction' (quoted in Humm, 1992, p. 3) - and although this move was unsuccessful, it did lay some of the intellectual groundwork for the second wave of American feminism in the 1960s when the proposed amendment to the Constitution that would ensure federal equality for women became the focus of renewed efforts on behalf of women's rights.

Women's suffrage was viewed as a matter for state action rather than constitutional change and some states did adopt universal suffrage. Though the female vote provided a point of focus for the women's rights campaign, women did not pursue this as their only political objective: for instance, the women's clubs movement, in the latter part of the century, involved women in organised charity and reform activities and in 1903 the National Women's Trade Union League was founded to protect women workers. In 1923 the Woman's Party introduced in Congress an Equal Rights Amendment, designed to remove all legal distinctions between the sexes. But legislative change was slow: there was some progress in the reform of property laws and gradually educational opportunities became available, though job opportunities were restricted to teaching and nursing - extensions of traditionally feminine domestic and nurturing roles. The Equal Rights Amendment was finally adopted by Congress in 1972 but it fell short of ratification. Civil Rights, Affirmative Action and abortion rights were not introduced until the 1960s and 1970s; successes of the so-called 'second wave' of feminism.

Second Wave of American Feminism: 1960s

The second wave of American feminism emerged in the early 1960s and focused upon an indictment of male sexism and the domestic oppression of women. Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963) called for women to renew the struggle of the first wave which had culminated in female suffrage in 1920, but now feminist attention was focused on the exclusion of women from the public sphere and sex-based discrimination in the workplace. State and federal provision of childcare and the legalisation of abortion also formed part of the agenda of NOW (the National Organisation for Women founded by Friedan in 1966). 1972 was a watershed year: the Educational Amendments Act of 1972 made it mandatory that all colleges instigate affirmative action programs in relation to admissions, hiring and athletics; Congress approved the Equal Rights Amendment and the landmark decision by the Supreme Court in *Roe v Wade* overruled state laws forbidding abortions during the first three months of pregnancy. By the end of the decade, however, the Equal Rights Amendment expired (in 1982), having failed to gain ratification; feminism was under attack for its failure to extend its sphere of interest beyond those of the middle-class, and divisions between moderate and radical feminists also undermined the unity of the movement and its ability to force change. Political change has always been fundamental to feminism but the concept of 'change' articulated by the Women's Movement varies from cultural revolution to radical separation of the sexes to liberal reforms of the existing socio-economic order.

Early calls were for equal rights, reproductive rights and economic justice, drawing on the relationship between the early Women's Movement, the New Left and the Civil Rights Movement. This relationship is described by Sara Evans in Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (1979). She counts the rise of Third World nationalism, the beatnik challenge to middle-class values, and growing racial unrest as elements that contributed to the weakening of the feminine mystique. The election of the Kennedy administration in 1960 helped to shift attitudes towards change from negative to positive and the formation of the National Organization for Women instituted a new civil rights group capable of lobbying government to enact and enforce anti-sexual discrimination legislation. But, as Evans points out, important though these civil rights efforts were, the professional women who created NOW tended to accept the existing division between domestic and public spheres, and their activism was directed towards achieving equality in the public world rather than challenging the network of gender roles that supported such a division.

The pressures on most women were building up not on the level of public discrimination but at the juncture of public and private, of job and home, where older structures and identities no longer sufficed but could not simply be discarded either. The growing emotional strains of providing nurture for others with nowhere to escape to oneself, of rising expectations and low self-esteem, of public activity and an increasingly private, even submerged, identity required radical - in the literal sense - response (p. 21).

This radical response came, in Evans's account, from young women who had gained valuable experience within the civil rights movement and the new left of self-respect, of

their own capacity to organise especially at a grass roots level; within these movements they had learned an egalitarian ideology that stressed the connection between political commitment and personal experience within the context of community action and co-operative structures. Despite the valuable lessons learned, these women felt compelled to break away from these political movements which replicated the same gender roles as the mainstream and thrust women into subservient, 'feminine' roles. Activism on their own behalf and on behalf of all women was the new freedom struggle.

The raising of women's consciousness of gender oppression and raising as a political issue the personal experience of that oppression were central to the efforts of early second-wave feminism. Characteristic of these early efforts is Gloria Steinem's Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions (1983) which collects various of her journalistic pieces written throughout the decade from the early 1970s to the early 1980s. What emerges from these stories is a powerful sense of women occupying a distinct social and cultural class. What defines this class is the shared experience of oppression based upon the stereotypical definition of feminine sexuality. For example, in the now famous expose of Hugh Hefner's Playboy empire, 'I Was a Playboy Bunny' Steinem uncovers the commonality of female sexual exploitation. Contrary to the advertised profile of a Playboy Bunny as college educated, middle class, highly paid, glamorous and sophisticated and also in contradiction to the reality of the characterless young women who are recruited - 'We just want you to fit the Bunny image' Steinem is repeatedly told (Steinem, 1983, p. 35) - what she finds is that women of all kinds are recruited as Bunnies only to be moulded, quite literally by the punitively close-fitting costumes they must wear, into a clearly defined sexual stereotype. White women and women of colour, young and older women, married and single women, women with children and those without, all are treated as the objectified images of the Playboy 'brand.' Any doubt as to the sexual categorisation of these women is dispelled when Steinem is told about the prohibition against dating customers because a clear distinction must be maintained between the Bunnies' legal employment and prostitution. Steinem quotes a memo from Hugh Hefner which states, 'We naturally do not tolerate any merchandising of the Bunnies' (p. 41), yet 'merchandising' is precisely the process upon which Hefner's organisation is based. The women are all required to pose repeatedly for photographs, which remain the property of the Playboy organisation; Steinem also discovers that while the Bunnies are prohibited from dating customers, there are some privileged patrons, 'Number One keyholders,' who are exceptions and promotional parties which girls fail to attend at the risk of losing their jobs. Sexual coercion and exploitation are the reality of a Bunny's life as Steinem discovers during her own few weeks as a Playboy Bunny and in the years following. She tells how for the next twenty years she would receive occasional telephone calls from Bunnies, 'with revelations about their working conditions and the sexual demands on them. ... One said she had been threatened with "acid thrown in my face" when she complained about the sexual use of the Bunnies. Another quoted the same alleged threat as a response to trying to help Bunnies unionize' (p. 69). But Steinem describes as perhaps the most powerful realisation to come out of this experience was the awareness that all women are Bunnies, all women are coerced and exploited and objectified through their sexuality.

It is the material, bodily basis of female sexual oppression that contributes a unifying theme to Steinem's writing. She analyses the way women talk, in terms of the

low volume and high pitch of their speech as well as the willingness to allow a man to interrupt their speech or to dominate discussion, which reflects feminine passivity and weakness. She points to the way that cultures manipulate women's access to food, remarking that '[f]or much of the female half of the world, food is the first signal of our inferiority. It lets us know that our own families may consider female bodies to be less deserving, less needy, less valuable' (p. 191). Steinem exposes the myth that patriarchy expresses no consistent attitude towards females by showing that women function consistently as the symbol of masculine power and privilege. So in a poor and deprived culture, powerful men will fatten their wives to represent their superior wealth; in a wealthier society where poor women become fat on a diet of starch and sugar, powerful men will favour lean and delicate women. Steinem remarks, 'Nonetheless, the common denominators are weakness, passivity, and lack of strength. Rich or poor, feminine beauty is equated with subservience to men' (p. 195). Pornography is the cultural production that focuses Steinem's arguments about the connection between feminine sexuality, masculine dominance and violence as a strategy of control. In the piece entitled 'Erotica vs. Pornography' she makes a distinction between images of free, mutual sexuality and the violence or unequal power relationship that is an essential ingredient of pornography; yet she remarks that in our patriarchal society erotica and pornography are categorised indistinguishably as 'obscenity': 'because sex and violence are so dangerously intertwined and confused. After all, it takes violence or the threat of it to maintain the unearned dominance of any group of human beings over another' (pp. 219-220). All women are subject to the influence of pornography, all women are surrounded by pornographic images of women's bodies on display, violated, tortured, even murdered, and appearing to enjoy the sexual thrill of it all. In 'The Real Linda Lovelace' Steinem describes as the most disturbing aspect of this woman's experience of sexual enslavement, forced prostitution, rape and beatings, the fact that her story is not believed and that she is blamed, despite several unsuccessful attempts at escape for which she was severely punished, for failing to escape earlier. This story 'attacks the myth of female masochism that insists women enjoy sexual domination and even pain, but prostitution and pornography are big businesses built on that myth.

When challenged about her inability to escape earlier, Linda wrote: 'I can understand why some people have such difficulty accepting the truth. When I was younger, when I heard about a woman being raped, my secret feeling was that could never happen to me. I would never permit it to happen. Now I realize that can be about as meaningful as saying I won't permit an avalanche (original emphasis, p. 248).

Steinem's point is that all women are subject to the threat represented by her degradation and the sexual violence she suffered both in private and also in the prostitution and pornography industries.

The use of sexual violence by men as a strategy by which patriarchal control of women can be sustained rose to prominence as a major feminist issue in the 1970s and was the subject of Susan Brownmiller's ground-breaking analysis of rape in Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape (1975). Brownmiller shares the radical position that all women constitute a single class that shares the same experience of oppression. All

women are victimised by rape because the threat of rape is directed towards all women in patriarchal culture and therefore benefits all men in that culture. The rapist is not defined in western legal culture as a specific criminal type and thus rape is regarded as a general masculine characteristic. 'Once we accept as basic truth that rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear, we must look toward those elements in our culture that promote and propagandize these attitudes which offer men, and in particular, impressionable, adolescent males, who form the potential raping population, the ideology and psychologic [sic] encouragement to commit their acts of aggression without awareness, for the most part, that they have committed a punishable crime, let alone a moral wrong' (Brownmiller's emphasis, in Humm, 1992, p. 72). It is this status of rape as a masculine characteristic that leads Brownmiller to investigate historical, anthropological, military and criminal cases of rape as instances where patriarchy is linked directly to male aggression, an aggression that is biologically based but culturally defined. Pornography, prostitution, male aggression, militarism and rape are connected, in Brownmiller's critique, in a network of meanings and practices that support the exercise of male power in both private and political terms. Brownmiller argues that this masculine aggression is twinned with feminine passivity and lack of will that is the result of the deliberate and powerful conditioning of women in the meaning of 'femininity' under patriarchy. Susan Brownmiller drew attention to rape specifically and sexual violence in general as feminist issues that escape the reformist energies of liberal feminist organisations such as NOW. In a series of books published after Brownmiller's groundbreaking study Susan Griffin set out her view of the cultural nature of male aggression and hatred of women and relates the use of violence as a mechanism of social and psychological control to the differential gender development of men and women. In Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her (1978), Rape: and the Power of Consciousness (1979), and Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Women (1981) Griffin explores the representation of sexual violence in western culture and traces a connection between the domination of 'feminine' nature by a dominating and aggressive 'masculine' science. The reproductive capacity of women and the emphasis upon connectivity and nurturing in feminine gender development lends women a greater understanding of nature but also leaves 'feminised' nature vulnerable to the exploitative power of men under patriarchy. In this way, Griffin opens up an area of feminist analysis that is developed by ecofeminist theorists, such as Ynestra King and Carol Adams, whose work is discussed in chapter four. Perhaps the most prominent feminist activist against institutionalised male sexual violence and pornography in particular is Andrea Dworkin who, with the feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon, created a landmark when they sought legal means to have pornography designated a civil offence, in the Minneapolis Anti-Pornography Ordinance. Dworkin argues, in works like Pornography: Men Possessing Women (1981), that pornography victimises all women who are objectified and their meaning fixed within a network of violent sexual imagery. In this way, pornography serves to legitimate and to perpetuate the structures of male power. 'The major theme of pornography as a genre is male power, its nature, its magnitude, its use, its meaning. Male power as expressed in and through pornography, is discernible in discrete but interwoven, reinforcing strains: the power of self, physical power over and against others, the power of terror, the power

of naming, the power of owning, the power of money, and the power of sex. ... The valuation of women in pornography is a secondary theme in that the degradation of women exists in order to postulate, exercise, and celebrate male power. Male power, in degrading women, is first concerned with itself, its perpetuation, expansion, intensification, and elevation' (in Humm, 1992, pp. 83-84).

The Rise of American Feminist Literary Theory

At this time, feminist activism saw the rise of feminist theory in the areas of literary study, political theory, philosophy and history. This development culminated in the emergence of Women's Studies programs in the United States and globally. The first full Women's Studies program was set up at San Diego State College in 1970 (Leitch, 1989, p. 325). The preferred method of organisation has been interdepartmental and the preferred methodology interdisciplinary with a strong emphasis upon the historical. Feminist literary theory had three main aims: to expose the workings of the ubiquitous patriarchal power structure; to promote the rediscovery of women's historical achievements (including literary history); and to establish a feminine perspective on critical, literary, political, scientific, philosophical (and other) theories of the cultural forces that shape our lives. The intended aim was to change the sexist bias of traditional educational and social practices.

In literary critical circles, pre-feminist or 'traditional' criticism came under attack for its blindness to gender. Traditional approaches to the text assume that texts are not gendered, 'great' works of literature express timeless and immutable truths that are not affected by such worldly issues as sex. Feminists charge that this kind of approach institutionalises male prejudice by refusing to acknowledge that 'great' works of literature often endorse masculine values and interests. Early feminist theory, which developed from the Women's Liberation and Civil Rights movements, focused upon points of continuity between the reading experience and personal experience (including family, society, networks of relationships, power structures, systems of value learned and lived and perpetuated in 'private' life).

One of the pioneering literary studies was Kate Millett's Sexual Politics (1971) which offered an analysis of authoritative male writers and revealed a pattern of masculine dominance and feminine submission that Millett identified as misogyny). Sexual Politics exposed the patriarchal prejudice and sexual violence celebrated in classic modern texts. Millett's basic insight was that all writing is marked by gender; this fact is suppressed by traditional non-feminist theory which claims for literature immunity from such worldly experiences as the experience of one's sexuality. The aim of feminist literary critics such as Millett was to promote a positive image of women in art and therefore in life, and also to raise the consciousness of women to their own oppression. The method pursued by Millett is to look at how female characters are portrayed and in what positions/situations they are placed in 'great' literary works. From this, she builds up a picture of the attitudes towards women that characterise the work of a particular author or genre or period. The purpose is to show how women are placed culturally (not naturally) within a scheme of male values. At the same time, she draws attention to the complexity of female characters, a complexity that is obscured by the overwhelming stress on the 'hero' and other male characters. By dividing characters into categories of

male and female, and proceeding from there to criticise the exclusion of women from an active part in the male-dominated reading process, this kind of feminist criticism raises questions of how gender is defined in terms of 'maleness' and 'femaleness.' The concept of a cultural process of exclusion, through representation, suggests that women's inferior social status is a cultural phenomenon not a biological condition. If this is so, reading is a culturally conditioned activity, so women will not necessarily read in a 'female' way just because they are biologically female. Women who are taught to read as men will read as men, according to masculine standards and values. Women are taught to identify against their own interests, in the reading of literary works as in the rest of culture, and this is what produces the contradictions of the female condition and the anxieties that were identified by second wave feminists. Gender is not a biological given but a theoretical position. Before feminism offered an alternative, we all read as men and that style of reading was our theory. Literary feminism tried to awaken a sense of the value of the feminine by promoting a revaluation of the image of women in literature.

Early deconstructive work, such as Millett's, was followed by the effort to discover and define a tradition of women's writing. This involved finding and publishing the work of neglected writers as well as the theoretical effort to define the nature of feminine lives, creativity, styles, genres, themes, images, genius or sensibility, and the like. Prominent literary critics working in this area include: Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, Patricia Meyer Spacks, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Nina Baym, among others. Gender identity is assumed to be the determinant of women's lives and therefore their writing - society shapes women's language, consciousness, education and careers - through powerful social-historical conditioning ('socialisation'). With the development of a cultural understanding of gender came the effort to promote a 'resisting' style of reading, described most influentially by Judith Fetterly in The Resisting Reader (1976). The resistance her title referred to focuses upon how women are led to identify and sympathise with those forces represented within the text that conspire to oppress women by obscuring their complexity and neutralising any attempt to question the text's sex-bias. From this basis, feminists began to analyse the political and literary assumptions involved in reading. They questioned how 'universal' values are defined, how 'truth' is distorted in directions that serve male interests. The aim of this kind of analysis was to create a genuinely female reader who would practice a female style of interpretation: someone who would have rid herself of the 'male reader' role that was created for her. This female reader is a woman who refuses to co-operate in her own oppression, who refuses to accept her conditioning into patriarchal society, who refuses collude with the male power structure.

Cultural analysis and criticism, then, took on equal stature with the formal analysis of the literary qualities of individual texts. The perceived danger of this style of analysis is the risk of treating woman as a universal category and thereby re-establishing restrictive stereotypes based on gender 'essence.' The issue of essence of great importance to the question: can men be feminists? Many women argued No! Men are the 'carriers of patriarchy.' As authority figures and role models intellectual men cannot but intimidate and repress women. Other women argue that whilst men cannot share feminine experience they can study, analyse and come to understand women's experience as different to their own. The desire to keep feminism exclusively for women reinforces the biological identification of gender but also sustains the esprit de corps so important to the

continued motivation of the women's movement; the generalization of feminist insight broadens the scope of feminism and increases the number of people liable to be influenced by feminist analysis but threatens to dissipate the political activism that is at the heart of the feminist enterprise. The concept of female solidarity that propelled the Women's Movement is now seen as controversial: perhaps it embodies a false universalism that denies the diversity of women's experience in favor of an oppressive gender category that reproduces the effects of masculine gender stereotypes; alternatively, female solidarity can provide the basis for activism and for pro-women legislation, a numerical basis (if nothing else) that is undermined by attacks on the meaning of 'woman' as a political category. Some point to the coincidence of such attacks at a time when pro-female legislation is beginning to have perceptible effects on Western society and suggest that the attack on female commonality itself serves male interests.

The main difference between American feminism and Continental (specifically French) feminism also depends upon this debate over gender 'essence.' American feminist approaches tend to be grounded in cultural and historical analysis; French feminism of the kind that became increasingly influential throughout the 1980s is grounded in Freudian psychoanalysis. There are enormous differences between these kinds of feminism but an American 'compromise,' a psychoanalytically informed feminism, did emerge in the work of Nancy Chodorow. Crudely, where American feminism is concerned with feminine history, French feminism is concerned with the 'feminine' as a category of discourse, a definition constructed in language, philosophy, psychoanalysis and elsewhere. Psychoanalysis helps in the effort to understand how it is that a woman can be taught to think and read like a man, with a man's view of the world, and why it is that this male view is so powerful. Psychoanalysis attempts to discover in the subconscious, and in the linguistic determinants of consciousness, the reasons for female oppression. Theorists ask how specific cultural values are tied to male interests: such as the oppositions between rational (male) and emotional (female), nature (female) and civilization (male) - which position woman as the defining opposite or 'Other' of man. Women are defined as 'other' or they are ignored, rendered invisible and silent, if they do not fit the patriarchal scheme. Outside the dominant definitions of male-dominated culture women exist only as insane, inarticulate or irrelevant.

Influential French feminists like Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray separate 'the feminine' from 'women as people' and are concerned to analyse how a specific kind of writing, designated feminine (*écriture féminine*), subverts the linguistic and metaphysical conventions of Western discourse. The repressions of a patriarchal society create silences, things that cannot be said, and these silences are disrupted by the avant-garde feminine practice of writing - which is produced equally by men and women (Mallarmé, Joyce, Artaud, Duras, Lispector). It is this insistence that feminine writing is entirely independent of gender, that men can create *écriture féminine*, that poses French feminism's most radical challenge to gender 'essence.' Gender is treated as a style, a kind of expression, that has little to do with political activism and the daily experience of oppression. The 'feminine' then becomes not the sex of individual women but instead the symbol of otherness, alterity, the unconscious, the unspoken, the 'Imaginary' of Jacques Lacan's revision of orthodox Freudian thought. The opposition between male and female is characterised by Cixous and Kristeva as a symptom of the hierarchical and binary

patriarchal thought that *écriture féminine* subverts. To escape these repressive binaries, one must escape the masculine metaphysics, the logic of essences, that binds the feminine to a particular biological identity. So French feminists have attacked male systems and values that support misogyny but they also have left intact the traditional canons of male literature.

This escape has been described by some critics as an escape into androgyny or bisexuality. The Imaginary - opposed to the Symbolic realm of rationality and masculine discourse - is the pre-Oedipal period before the child becomes aware of separation from its mother and consequent assimilation into the society dominated by the father. Entrance into the Symbolic Order is entry into language, society and the unconscious as well as alienation, loss and desire for a return to undifferentiated identity. The primeval realm of the Mother is, then, identified with undifferentiated sexuality (androgyny or bisexuality), limitless creativity and imagination but it is also psychotic when viewed from the Symbolic. The space of the Imaginary offers a refuge from oppressive patriarchy but it is a recourse to madness; the special discourse available there is '*écriture féminine*.' Chodorow does not use Lacan but instead she adopts a Marxist-Freudian approach to the Oedipal experience. Chodorow argues that boys and girls experience this separation differently; boys are encouraged to seek autonomy and independence whilst girls remain in a more dependent relationship with their mothers until adulthood. Consequently, men and women approach adult relationships quite differently; the path to sexual equality which Chodorow recommends is equal parenting, where both fathers and mothers mother their children, thus avoiding the creation of overly-independent sons and overly-dependent daughters - precisely the gender stereotypes that best suit the organisation of labour in an industrial capitalist society. The separation of the sexes described by French feminism appears to Chodorow to serve conservative political and economic ends. Resistance to the feminist separation that is the conclusion of French feminism, with the *écriture féminine* that is its subject, has been found both in France and in the work of influential American feminists.

Among the most influential of these American feminists is Judith Butler, whose 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* set out an approach that has since become known as 'cultural' or 'postmodern' feminism. Butler begins by explaining the significance of the term 'trouble' in her title. For men, as the subject of desire, 'trouble' is represented by the female 'object' of desire who unexpectedly returns and answers the masculine gaze, who refuses the passive position of the feminine object and thereby 'contests the place and authority of the masculine position' (Butler, 1990, p. vii). In this situation, the dependence of male authority upon the acceptance by the female of the passive subject position (the Other) in relation to a position of male dominance exposes the lack of the very autonomy that men assume under patriarchy. Taking this relation as a starting point, Butler asks, 'what configuration of power constructs the subject and the Other, that binary relation between "men" and "women," and the internal stability of those terms?' (p. viii). That the relation is based upon the presumption of heterosexuality - a male subject desiring a female object - and that knowing this relation as an instance of heterosexuality causes us to assume that the 'beings' involved 'are' male and female prompts Butler to ask what happens when the female position is occupied by a female impersonator? This upsetting of the opposition between the natural and the artificial divorces women's 'natural' reproductive capacity from the cultural

gestures that are the markers of, that carry the meanings of, gender and in this way 'implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real' (p. viii). She goes on to observe that the performance of the female impersonator

destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates. Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established? Does being female constitute a 'natural fact' or a cultural performance, or is 'naturalness' constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex? ... What other foundational categories of identity - the binary of sex, gender, and the body - can be shown as productions that create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable? (p. viii).

It is in this concept of gender identity as a cultural performance, a matrix of signifiers that enables members of a cultural group to 'read' the signs of gender and to be read as a gendered subject, that the basic principle of cultural feminism resides. Butler takes as one of her key assumptions the idea that the vocabulary of gender should be seen as a series of relational terms, having little meaning outside a network of social relationships - outside 'the gaze.' Thus, Butler suggests that feminism should refuse 'to search for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view' (p. viii). This timeless, universal, gender 'essence' shared by all women of all times and places is an illusion, and a distracting one. What it distracts feminist inquiry from investigating 'the political stakes in designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin' (Butler's emphasis, p. ix). What Butler does in this work is to investigate these institutions that define the terms of gender identity: compulsory heterosexuality, mentioned above, and phallogocentrism - that discourse of power that designates the phallus as the defining centre of all systems of value and knowledge. Thus, all that is designated masculine is highly valued both in itself and as an object of knowledge - ultimately, it is what enables knowledge by dictating the cultural terms upon which understanding takes place - and all that is designated feminine, lacking the value of the phallus, is rendered invisible, unknowable, mysterious outside the terms of masculine knowing. In three chapters dealing with the status of 'woman' as the subject of feminism; the incest taboo as represented in structuralist, psychoanalytic and feminist accounts; and the maternal body represented by Julia Kristeva in relation to Foucault's critique and Monique Wittig's theory of bodily disintegration, Butler draws heavily upon Continental theories of deconstruction and sexual difference. It is this emphasis upon difference that makes cultural or postmodern feminism controversial. The postmodern challenge to the idea that there is a single and coherent feminine experience to which feminism can appeal is grounded in the perception that to seek such a unitary viewpoint is to adopt the patriarchal preference for singularity, coherence and unity. Such a viewpoint would deny the class, race, cultural and ethnic distinctions that divide women; it would also confine women to one of a range of possible gender identities or ways to be women and to experience their femininity. But

too great an emphasis upon difference and diversity can shatter the grounding of feminist activism against forms of oppression that affect women as a class. Thus, the challenge is to reconcile the awareness of difference with the need for rigorous grounding of feminism in women's common experience.

Contemporary Feminism and the Post-Feminism Debate

Feminism at the present time is, then, characterized by a diversity of practice, though that very diversity makes feminism vulnerable to the conservative backlash mounted by the New Right, the anti-abortion and pro-life campaign, and the whole notion that we have entered a 'post-feminist' era, when the aims of the Women's Movement have been realised and further efforts to extend women's rights are needless. This is the subject of Susan Faludi's study, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (1992). Other recent critics, such as Camille Paglia in Vamps and Tramps (1994), take the feminist movement itself as the subject of their critique and the object of their condemnation.

Camille Paglia explains the title of Vamps and Tramps as evoking 'the missing sexual personae of contemporary feminism' (Paglia, 1994, p. ix). The vamp inhabits the world of the night and are excluded from and repressed by 'today's sedate middle-class professionals in their orderly, blazing-bright offices' (p. ix). Paglia continues, '[t]he prostitute, seductress, and high-glamour movie star wield women's ancient vampiric power over men' (p. ix). In order to re-vamp feminism, as Paglia claims to do, the sexual and sensual must be reintroduced. Paglia criticises the advances made by feminist campaigning for equality for taking women out of the home and placing them in the office but never disturbing the quiet bourgeois reality of their lives. The tramp, who complements the 'vamp' is not only a sexually available woman, a whore, but also a displaced person who, in Paglia's use of the term, is displaced from the safety of the nuclear family and let loose in a kind of spiritual homelessness. The tramp is of the same spiritual kin as the beatniks of the 60s, the spiritual questers in search of meaning outside the American mainstream. By excluding vamps and tramps from its ideological constituency, Paglia asserts, contemporary feminism has overregulated sexuality, confused career advancement with true personal liberation, and put at risk fundamental civil liberties.

This issue of civil liberties and of liberty as a social and moral concept is at the heart of Paglia's criticism of contemporary feminism. Paglia chooses the term 'libertarian' to describe her particular stance on this issue. The brand of libertarianism that Paglia represents is based upon a radical individualism that denies the legitimacy of social intervention in any area of life that would constrain the right of the individual to pure self-determination. What this means is that the individual should be granted the freedom to do anything that does not restrict the freedom of any other individual to do anything they wish. To this idea, Paglia adds her own commitment to the pagan tradition in western civilisation. She argues that the history of western civilisation, especially in its art, represents the unconquered power of nature and the sexualised body. This pagan power has been constantly under threat from the rationalising forces of Judeo-Christianity and civilisation represents both this conflict and the powerful residual traces of paganism. Paglia's aim is to reinstate paganism as a substantial force in contemporary culture and

she does this by attacking all attempts to repress the power of nature and sexuality that are represented by the pagan. Contemporary feminism, which she describes stereotypically as a white middle-class movement, Paglia identifies with the reactionary forces of Judeo-Christianity.

This combination of libertarianism and paganism is behind Paglia's scornful rejection of the feminist denunciation of pornography, for example. In her essay on the anti-pornography efforts of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, Paglia claims that 'pornography must continue to play a central role in our cultural life.' She goes on,

Pornography is a pagan arena of beauty, vitality, and brutality, of the archaic vigor of nature. It should break every rule, offend all morality. Pornography represents absolute freedom of imagination, as envisioned by the Romantic poets. In arguing that a hypothetical physical safety on the streets should take precedence over the democratic principle of free speech, MacKinnon aligns herself with the authoritarian Soviet commissars (p. 111).

So pornography represents freedom and democratic free speech while feminism is authoritarian and invasive of individual rights. Unlike the anti-pornography campaigners, such as Gloria Steinem, discussed above, Paglia does not make distinctions among different types of pornography. Steinem carefully distinguished 'erotica' which she described as characterised by mutuality and consent from pornography which is characterised by violence and domination - precisely the kind of sexualised power relationship that feminism seeks to transform. Paglia makes no such distinction - in her account, all pornography is equal in its representation of elemental, untamed lust, 'the dark truth about nature, concealed by the artifices of civilization' (p. 110); and all pornography is equal in its symbolic status of the right of the individual to free self-expression. She does, however, concede that child pornography should be restricted, but only in that the legal sanctions against child labour should be observed and the posing for pornographic photographs and videos constitutes labour. But sketches and paintings of children engaged in pornographic acts, she approves. In the article 'On Censorship' she explains, 'Anything that can be imagined should be depicted' (p. 124).

This is also the foundation of Paglia's criticism of what she calls the 'date-rape hysteria' afflicting contemporary America. In the essay 'No Law in the Arena' she attributes blame for rape and sexual harassment on white middle-class women who send out 'mixed signals'; these are 'young women unable to foresee trouble or to survive sexual misadventure or even raunchy language without crying to authority figures for help' (p. 27). This claim is characteristic of Paglia's thought in several ways: first, there is the dismissal of 'authority figures' as irrelevant and contempt for those who appeal to the authority of others for assistance. Second, the tendency to rely on false authority is nurtured as part of the sexual psycho-drama that is Paglia's description of the middle-class white nuclear family. Paglia holds up as superior specimens those individuals born into the urban working-class, who thereby become 'streetwise' and those born into rural farming communities because they grow up with an intensified awareness of the power of nature. These urban and rural children are better off than suburban middle-class children, according to Paglia, because they are able 'to foresee trouble or to survive sexual misadventure or even raunchy language' and this ability comes from their own individual

self-determination. The sovereignty of the individual, self-reliance and self-fulfilment are the linchpins of Paglia's denunciation of contemporary feminism which she represents as having transformed women into victims who refuse to take responsibility for the quality of their own lives. More than this, feminism is denounced as a powerful reactionary force that works within the Judeo-Christian tradition to repress and destroy the pagan heritage that celebrates nature and resists the forces of civilisation. In Paglia's view, this is the true motivation of contemporary feminism and the reason why feminism has failed to achieve substantial change. By fighting nature, by contesting the power of the irrational, sexual pagan tradition, feminism has taken on too much and must, therefore, condemn itself to failure. In the conclusion to 'The Culture Wars' Paglia claims: 'Women will never know who they are until they let men be men. Let's get rid of Infirmity Feminism, with its bedlam of bellyachers, anorexics, bulimics, depressives, rape victims, and incest survivors. Feminism has become a catch-all vegetable drawer where bunches of clingy sob sisters can store their moldy neuroses' (p. 111). It is to a collection of victims that Paglia reduces second-wave American feminism. The legislative reforms sought so passionately by the National Organization for Women and other lobbying organisations Paglia represents as so many dangerous restrictions upon the freedom of individual liberty. Rather than appeal to such social authorities as the law, Paglia suggests women would better look to themselves for sources of strength, legitimacy and power.

This shift of emphasis away from corporate or social change towards individual responsibility is characteristic of the trend in contemporary Anglo-American society that Susan Faludi has termed 'the backlash.' In her 1992 book, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women, Faludi situates the current reactionary trend within the context of a history of anti-female activity that has followed close upon the achievement of limited rights for women. What Faludi observes is that similar strategies are used in the 1980s to frighten women out of the public arena and back into the home as were used in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: warnings of a man shortage and inevitable spinsterhood for educated women; an infertility epidemic; the loss of femininity and 'career burn-out' or 'exhaustion of the feminine nervous system' among women who worked (Faludi, 1993, p. 69). Then, as now, a number of cultural myths concerning the ill-effects of equality upon the female population were propagated with the aim of discrediting the efforts of feminist reformer movements. Faludi's introduction is sub-titled, 'Blame it on Feminism' and in a series of chapters she shows how false images of unhappy liberated women have been attributed to the feminist movement. She notes that '[b]y the end of the 1980s many women had absorbed the teachings of the media and were bitterly familiar with various "statistical" developments, most notably a "man shortage"; a "devastating" plunge in economic status for women divorcing under new "no-fault" laws; an "infertility epidemic"; and a "great emotional depression" and "burn-out" attacking, respectively, single and career women' (p. 21). Faludi documents the promotion of these myths in the media, the movies, on TV, in fashion and standards of feminine beauty and the effects of these myths on women's minds, in terms of popular psychology, on women's jobs, and on women's bodies, in terms of reproductive rights, at the same time as she reveals a more likely source of gender discontent. Faludi suggests that it is not women who are suffering as a consequences of the gains made by the women's movement, rather men are suffering; she show that various cultural indicators point to the incomplete success of the struggle for women's rights as the true source of

feminine discontent. It is men, as a class, who resent the Women's Movement and the myths of the suffering that afflicts professional and single women serve the interests of that male resentment. Faludi suggests that the myths which comprise the cultural component of the backlash in important ways project male discontent and resentment on to women and on to the feminist movement specifically. Citing the 1988 American Male Opinion Index, Faludi observes: 'By the eighties, as the poll results made evident, men were interpreting small advances in women's rights as big, and complete, ones; they believed women had made major progress toward equality - while women believed the struggle was just beginning' (p. 81).

In Faludi's terms, the contemporary 'backlash' she describes is what others have termed 'post-feminism.' Post-feminism is a term that has been used in diverse ways to mean a whole range of things: to Faludi, post-feminism is the backlash against the gains made by the Women's Movement; others use the term to describe 'feminism without women,' a brand of feminism that responds to the separatist challenge of radical feminism by attempting to assimilate men and their needs into a feminist framework, there is also the feminism espoused by H  l  ne Cixous which, she claims, does not belong solely to women; for still others post-feminism describes a political climate in which feminism has yet to recognise the gains that have been made and so the Women's Movement continues to campaign for women's rights but in a political vacuum. What all of these 'post-feminisms' share, however, is a common transference of responsibility to individual women and away from social, legislative, gender-based reforms. Thus, a few favoured issues keep appearing in post-feminist discussions: date-rape and sexual violence generally, sexual harassment, pornography - all the subject of Camille Paglia's post-feminist attention - recur throughout the discourse of post-feminism. One of the more controversial of these post-feminist works is Katie Roiphe's 1993 book, The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism. Roiphe compares the feminism experienced by her mother in the early 1960s with her own encounter with feminism as dogma, first as an undergraduate at Harvard and later as a graduate student at Princeton. What emerges from this comparison is Roiphe's view of contemporary feminism as promoting an image of woman as a passive victim of male domination - the very image that feminists of her mother's generation tried to destroy:

The image that emerges from feminist preoccupations with rape and sexual harassment is that of women as victims, offended by a professor's dirty joke, verbally pressured into sex by peers. This image of a delicate woman bears a striking resemblance to that fifties ideal my mother and the other women of her generation fought so hard to get away from. They didn't like her passivity, her wide-eyed innocence. They didn't like the fact that she was perpetually offended by sexual innuendo. They didn't like her excessive need for protection. She represented personal, social, and psychological possibilities collapsed, and they worked and marched, shouted and wrote, to make her irrelevant to their daughters (Roiphe, 1993, p. 6).

Here are repeated the same characteristics that Camille Paglia attributes to the contemporary feminist: the passivity and delicacy of the perpetual victim. The opposing qualities of agency, streetwise maturity andchutzpah are the characteristics that Paglia

recommends for her liberated, self-reliant, individuals of both sexes. Both Paglia and Roiphe hold up an image of the 1960s in America not as a period of radical women's activism but as an idealistic time of free love, psychedelic experience and carefree self-fulfilment. It is against this image of the 1960s that they measure the condition of women in the 1980s and 1990s. Complaining about the culture of fear and disease that is promoted by on-campus warnings about the dangers of rape and AIDS, Roiphe compares this to 'stories from older brothers, sisters, cousins, and aunts about sleeping around and not caring, and feeling free and pretending to feel free' (p. 14). Like Paglia, Roiphe casts her discussion in individualistic terms. Rather than analyse the political structures that support and legitimate a culture of feminine fear, Roiphe blames the women who expose the strategies by which that fear is created and sustained. In a series of chapters on date-rape, sexual harassment, the 'Take Back the Night' campaign, the profeminist man, pornography Roiphe condemns the legal remedies for which women have fought as the makers of feminine victims. She reveals her sympathies when she compares Catherine MacKinnon with Camille Paglia and wonders why Paglia, 'with her dramatic views and her courageous articulation of the unpopular, is always portrayed as crazy, hysterical, while MacKinnon is not' (p. 155). Like Paglia, Roiphe revels in the unpopularity of her libertarian views. But from the perspective of Susan Faludi and others like her who perceive in the current political climate a powerful backlash against women's civil rights the 'unpopularity' of libertarians like Paglia and Roiphe is more apparent than real. To blame the victim without asking questions about the process of victimisation and the socialisation of domination is to serve the interests of reaction and conservatism rather than the history of feminism in America.