

MODERNISM AND FEMINISM

Representations of Women in Modernist Art and Literature

Abstract

This article demonstrates the place and role of the image of women in modernist art and literature, mainly focusing on Impressionism and Post-impressionism. It discusses the unique works of modernist painters and writers (Marie Cassatt, Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet, Pablo Picasso and Virginia Woolf) to explore how modernist art and literature both defined, reflected and shaped gender roles. The article discusses on the representations of feminist views and gender inequality in the works of some modernist artists.

Key words: modernism, feminism, gender, art, artists, painters, Marie Cassatt, Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet, Virginia Woolf, Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, degradation, isolation, boredom.

Each masterpiece of art and literature is the offspring of a specific time. As the famous painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) has pointed out, modern art brought a spiritual revolution by letting artists express their inner lives, emotions and feelings in abstract forms. Every era produces its own art which can be replicated but never repeated. Attempts to give new life to the already existing artistic principles can only create an artwork that resembles it. (Kandinsky, 1977) The soul of a human being is an unexamined source of emotions and feelings that are experienced based on different factors. Through capturing the moment or time in their works artists try to decode their soul and identity. Creating various works of literature and art, artists either depict their own inner world, or their attitude towards things happening in the world. The themes, issues and feelings that each author chooses to build on are influenced by many subjective, social, national and other features. Throughout each time period people are concerned about

specific and different issues. Artists are not only reflecting their own perceptions, but the public's as well. As Kandinsky claims, all of the representations are unique and can never be repeated, due to the authenticity of artists and time periods.

Literature and art works have their unique characteristics of a specific time and issue. Art cannot be repeated, but it is always alive and it conveys messages to generations. In different time periods the same issues were presented differently by artists. In this paper I would like to discuss the unique works of modernist painters and writers (Marie Cassatt, Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet, Pablo Picasso and Virginia Woolf) that reflect upon a serious issue of all times – feminism and gender roles, in order to identify the inner feelings and attitudes that each author had towards this issue. In other words, to explore how modernist art and literature defined, reflected and/or shaped gender roles.

Gender inequality and women's struggle for their rights has always been a serious issue for the humanity. Women have been sexualized, objectified, mistreated historically, as well as slightly nowadays in other ways. The role of women in workforce has been undermined for so many years that even now in the 21st century we face the offspring of this ideology. Women were regarded as mothers and family people only. The female body has always been used to please the senses of male representatives. Even the advent of advertising did not stay away from using females to sell products and send out messages to gain consumer attention. Throughout different times people had slight different approaches to this issue. Sexuality and gender were significant cultural topics during the modernist time period.

With the development of Modernism and its rise as prevailing art of that time, it was also the first wave of woman's rights and feminist movement. Modernism is a product of the emerging industrial society with all of its advantages like the unprecedented dimension of mass production and fantastic technological progress as well as disadvantages and disasters like the World War I, political brain washing, pop art, etc. Yet many theorists see the rise of modernism already in Edouard Manet's tremendous success at the first Impressionist *Salon des Refuses* in 1863 or at least at the end of the 19th century Impressionism (Berman 1994). And almost in the same decades one can observe the first wave of feminist movement struggling for equal rights in education and women's suffrage – equal rights to vote (Dicker 2008). Starting from these days there emerged a vast literature on the theory (Code

2004, *Hooks 2000*) and practice (*Messer-Davidow 2002*, Lingard & Douglas 1999) of feminist struggle, of its achievements (Brownmiller 1999) and mistakes (Rowe-Finkbeiner 2004, Kassian, M. 2005).

It is worth going back to Kandinsky, who declared that each artwork is a child of the epoch in which it was produced. (Kandinsky, 1977) Understanding and analyzing the history of modernism, one can notice that it is gendered as well. The experimental, difficult and progressive style of modernism often can be viewed as characteristically male-authored and masculine. So, women were traditionally left out or disregarded in discussions of modernism with exception of Virginia Woolf due to her masculine high literature. However, Modernism had not only fathers but mothers as well.

Women in Impressionist paintings were covered within a wide range of social pertinence – from elite to working class depictions. Impressionists portrayed women in historical and conceptual shifts by highlighting visual and traditional schemes with encoded and added new meanings. (Strauber, 2007) Marianne Dekoven, an author and writer, discusses the concept of “New Woman” in her *Modernism and Gender* chapter of her work (Dekoven 1999). According to her the protagonist of the modernist movement the “new woman” was relatively educated, independent, sexually liberated, engaged in more productive life (Dekoven, 1999).

In this regard, Marie Cassatt – an American famous painter, representative of Impressionism – creates a series of her most distinguished pieces of art.



In this painting *In the Loge* (1878) Cassatt depicted the modern or the “new woman” who is presented in a theater context. The painting highlights the importance of educated women engaged in social life. However, in case of better analysis one can notice a man in the back watching her through his glasses. The protagonist – the

“new woman” is observing the stage while she has become an object of gaze herself, by a male. Though the initial step towards fighting for women rights was made the stereotype of females being just a source of pleasure for man was still prevailing.



Another painting *Lydia Reading the Morning Paper* (1878-79) by Cassatt presents her older sister. With the help of typical Impressionist colors the painting evokes light-hearted mood. While in fact it alludes the significance of growing literacy among women. The involvement of

women in society beyond home was increasing, as the fights for voting rights had already began. Going back to Kandinsky, one can acknowledge how each and every painting has something about the particular time, the issues, morals and feelings of people.



The last painting from Cassatt, *The Child's Bath* (1893) portrays a woman in her household and one and only responsibility of raising children. In case of other time period when feminism was not a topical issue, one might view this painting as a beautiful representation of maternity, which partially is the case. But it still is an effective depiction of a woman who's isolated from the society carrying her "every day responsibilities."

Along with the portrayal of the "new woman" modernist artists used the concept of bore-

dom to shape the understanding of feminism's and women's struggle to be defined as individuals, as well as to highlight the male obsession of female sexuality. (Pease, 2012) French impressionist Édouard Manet's painting *The Balcony* (1868) depicts two women, one of them with a really bored manner and in the middle a man with his superior posture. Women had struggles not only with their rights and roles, but self-realization and identity search as well. The painting perfectly depicts the authenticity of the time and topical issues.



Edgar Degas's painting *L'Absinthe* (1876) is a scene of two individuals in a café. The painting discourses a sense of degradation, isolation and boredom. Degas communicates the emotional and intense boredom of two people. The painting exemplifies the obsession of Impressionists from the portrayal of light and motifs of modern life. Even though the woman is engaged in the society and so called social life, still her face conveys her inner state of boredom and struggle for self-realization.

The painting "The Young Ladies of Avignon" ("Les Femmes d'Alger"; 1907) by Pablo Picasso is totally different from the previous paintings with its style and forms. This painting through geometric forms and African art ele-

ments inspired or constructed a base for the coming of abstract art and cubism. Picasso's painting destroys the expectations of an idealized representation of women and female nudity. His painting is more focused on the forms of art, the painting's quality as a work of art rather than as an accurate depiction of reality. The subjects of the painting are prostitutes. This painting itself intentionally or unintentionally objectifies women presenting them as a subject of gaze and satisfaction for men. The ways that painters create are different from each other and present diverse styles and approaches of modernist art. The ways are different, yet many of the paintings are gendered and tell us a lot about the ideologies of that time.



Women started to have access to higher education during the 19th century. The skills that they developed were in use to advance their art.

The growth of cities, market economies and life changed the ideologies of how in Europe and in the United States women were supposed to obey

the new societal burdens and pressures. This in its turn made many women way more aware and conscious of the legal, social and political inequality imposed to them. Even the most gifted women from the old times to the modern day, faced obstacles on account of their sex, yet each produced works of stunning originality (Gittins 2014).

Virginia Woolf reflected on the tense situation of women in many of her works and novels. For instance, in *The Voyage Out*, she writes about the society showing it to be governed by patriarchal and traditional values, where women are excluded from political life and are perceived to be incapable of any kind of intellectual activity. Woolf used her extraordinary style and tone to convey the exact emotions and meanings.

Each art work is product of its time and ideology. Different artists have their own unique ways of portraying and conveying messages. Modernism was a period of radical changes and coming of drastic changes. Feminism and fight for women's rights is as well connected to this time period. Thus, it had its huge influence on the artists and writers accordingly on the art works created during that time. Feminist movement eventually brought about the most far-reaching transformations in artmaking (Heartney et al. 2013). And it seems not accidental that women became the most active writers in declaring the coming age of the posthuman art (Hayles 1999).

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