

# Feminism and early women writers essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



The modern feminist movement is highly complex, multi-faceted, and broad in scope. Although initially a singular endeavor, rooted in social and political considerations aimed at establishing gender equality, feminism is now a series of separate disciplines with a myriad of definitions and connotations; indeed, it has transformed into a powerful cultural movement that has spawned so many ideological branches the plural form of “feminisms” is now appropriate. Without a doubt, the feminist movement has fundamentally shifted the direction of American society in virtually every way imaginable.

To be sure, the changes we see from the feminist movement in 2012 are a direct result of the thankless work performed by women of the “first wave.”

One of the most notable group of skilled individuals, using their artistry in this early campaign, was the feminist authors. Through their powerful and relevant critical literature, these women reached tens of thousands of Americans, waking them up to the experience of the oppressed and triggering a call to action. This writing is a documentation of that call to action, as it was exemplified by some of the most notable figures in feminist literature, and how the world of today benefits because of them.

American feminist authors have had a major impact on every woman in contemporary society. This writing will cover some of the most essential authors- namely Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Zora Neale Hurston, Tillie Olsen, Susan Glaspell, and Alice Walker- and how their works influenced the world of today. Outside of these authors specific contributions, however, there must be addressed the most general and obvious of observations, which stands as the premier example of their influence: that we are reading and writing about them today. These women have been published countless

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times in as many forms, and are widely believed to be some of the best American writers of all time. Indeed, the anthology that is associated with this research has sold tens of millions of copies. Thus, the readings and writing from this book alone have, and continue to, affect generations of female students in a myriad of deeply personal ways. Coupled with the independent publishing from these authors, which is even more prolific, this material has become forever entrenched in the intellectual experience of most educated Americans.

Ultimately, the overall contribution of these feminist authors lies in their message of social justice and activism- both in terms of initiating critical thought, and offering hope that change can be accomplished through the application of this mindset. The writings of early feminist authors are just as relevant today as they ever were, containing messages that inform upon the hierarchical power dynamics of contemporary society; because while much has changed, much has stayed the same. From a contemporary standpoint, it is easy to see that these women wouldn't have gotten their message across without hope and perseverance. Indeed, they became monolithic instruments of change due to a shared hope that change can be ascertained, even against seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Most of the early feminist writers weren't even recognized in their time, only achieving success posthumously or toward the end of their lives. Because of male domination in the literary field (critics, publishing, distribution), most female authors were simply dismissed, and had their work heavily criticized. For example, Kate Chopin's masterful work "The Awakening" was "widely condemned,"

with critics calling it, “ morbid, vulgar, and disagreeable,” and it was pulled from shelves of the public library in Evanston, Illinois (“ Kate Chopin”).

Tillie Olsen’s popular work, “ I Stand Here Ironing,” was initially thrown away by a judge in a literary contest after HE castigated it for being pointless (Coiner). Zora Neale Hurston would have been shocked at the reversal of opinion regarding her groundbreaking work, “ Their Eyes Were Watching God,” which came thirty years after it was, “ out of print, largely unknown and unread, and dismissed by the male literary establishment” (Washington 9). One cannot help but be amazed that these women not only endured such a toxic literary environment, but persevered while burdened with the full knowledge of the endeavors futility. Eventually, however, recognition did come, inspiring generations of eager readers to think independently, deconstruct the politics of oppression that bind them, and continue the fight even in the face of overwhelming odds.

The remainder of this argument is dedicated to these women’s individual battles within their personal “ social locations,” and how their influence on particular spheres of society can still be seen today. Zora Neale Hurston was a prominent writer who was integral to the Harlem Renaissance. Although widely criticized at the time due to her colloquial writing style and depiction of the black South, her work spoke to African American women like no other before her. Ironically, then, it was this focus of criticism that triggered, “ the direct and personal reaction of women...who found themselves so powerfully represented in a literary text” (Washington 11). In sum, “ a combination of narrative, ethnographic, epistolary, critical, and biographical discourses has

produced Hurston as a literary historical figure with whom her audience feels an intimacy as familiar as the vernacular with which she has been so strongly identified” (Frydman 99). Hurston, being one of the first black writers to celebrate her own race, became a stepping stone of expression for other writers such as Alice Walker, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison (Boyd).

The impact Hurston had on the women of today is undeniable; she embodied a movement which transformed the world of black literature, and for that we owe her thanks. Another amazing author who challenged traditional women’s sexuality and gender roles was Kate Chopin. Known for her depictions of Southern Women, Chopin gained notoriety for her bold writing style, controversial topics and, “ a narrative aptitude that bordered on genius” (Pattee 364). Elaine Showalter concluded in her writings that, “ Chopin went boldly beyond the work of her precursors in writing about women’s longing for sexual and personal emancipation” (170). Interestingly, Chopin did not consider herself an activist for women’s rights, although she was a brave and outspoken feminist writer, even by today’s standards.

In a time when women’s roles were static and highly conventional, Chopin almost seemed to purposefully violate every 19th century code of behavior. For instance, she developed female characters that weren’t married, questioned their sexuality, had affairs, and weren’t motherly. Ironically, it was due to this progressive writing that Chopin fell out of favor. So, what makes Chopin so important (and relevant) to modern day women is her bravery to do as her characters did and, “ follow their own path rather than

that of society” (Killeen 423). Without a doubt, Kate Chopin was ahead of her time.

Arguably one of the most forward-looking feminist writers and social critics of her time was Charlotte Perkins Gilman. What sets Gilman apart, and identifies her as having an immense impact on the lives of American women, is the scope and vision of her ideas. Although best known for her work “The Yellow Wallpaper,” in which she criticizes the patriarchal mental health system in America, Gilman also brilliantly informed many areas of concentrated power and control- most notably oppression in economics, sexuality, and gendered domestic roles. Gilman was a woman ahead of her time, both in terms of the range of issues she took on, and her perspectives regarding them. Not surprisingly, like many progressive thinkers her radical ideas failed to take root at the time, although they are now highly regarded. In fact, Gilman’s radical ideology closely parallels that of modern “third-wave” feminism- the influential contemporary movement that, “seeks to transform society rather than simply just incorporate women’s voices within it” (Littlejohn & Foss 323). Because of Gilman’s, “understanding of the underlying structures of society,” her ideas have been incorporated into current curriculums throughout the critical social sciences, “offering critiques of society that still ring true” in today’s structure (Beekman).

There is no doubt Charlotte Perkins Gilman contributed greatly to the changes in the gender paradigm we see today, and will continue to, “intrigue feminists in the social sciences,” for the foreseeable future (Beekman). Another talented and tireless feminist writer that continues to

impact women in America is Tillie Olsen. Much like her peers, Olsen inspires women of today to challenge the status quo and stand true to their convictions, while offering a voice to the oppressed and marginalized. Olsen has contributed in many different ways- both intellectually and practically- to the lives of the exploited and abused, regardless of gender, race, or socio-economic status. Not simply satisfied with the somewhat passive activism of writing, “ Tillie became a familiar and passionate presence in community meetings, on picket lines, and at demonstrations throughout the Bay Area - for labor, against apartheid and racism, as part of anti-war movements, on behalf of women’s rights, to create a strong public education and public library system, and for the protection of the earth” (Olsen).

Olsen, then, by virtue of her grass roots activism, exemplified total dedication to causes related to feminism. Tillie Olson effected concrete change that is still felt by the women of today- specifically in California- in that she, “ organized in her neighborhoods for parks and playgrounds, was a founder of the city’s first Parent Cooperative Nursery School, [and] fought for quality child care programs” (Olsen). Through her dedication, Tillie Olsen’s works will continue to improve the lives of American women, philosophically and pragmatically, for years to come. Susan Glaspell, a successful playwright and author who also addressed the inequality of the sexes, put the gendered American justice system on trial when she wrote her most popular work “ Trifles,” and its companion short story, “ A Jury of Her Peers” (Crocker). Because of first-wave feminist writings, such as was written by Glaspell, the American Justice system isn’t as patriarchal as it once was- a fact that certainly benefits women of today.

It's important to keep in mind that when Glaspell was composing these works, women weren't allowed to vote or sit on juries. Therefore women were subjected to unjust treatment by a court system ruled over by men. Because the play and short story were so successful, they stirred up a lot of controversy, which effectively opened a dialogue regarding the gendered treatment of women and the law. Indeed, "A jury of her peers subverts the American justice system and redefines justice as neither wholly rational or objective, but as requiring emotion and empathy as an ability to read and value figurative interpretations over literal ones" (Carpentier). Susan Glaspell, in addition to the long line of feminist activists that came after, effectively shifted the balance of power regarding civil rights and individual liberties for all because female disenfranchisement was brought to court. Simply by, "picking up a pen," she forced recognition of one of the central spheres of female powerlessness, and, "the need for laws to address it" (qtd, in Crocker).

One of the best know, widely read, and socially aware feminist writers informing women today is Alice Walker. At 68, Walker is still hugely active in political, economic, racial, and gender causes, while still managing to write, give interviews, and speak publicly. The Pulitzer Prize winning author of such works as "The Color Purple" and "Everyday Use" had, and is continuing to have, a significant impact on women today. Walker's work has inspired generations of women with her depictions of strong women overcoming oppression and adversity, oftentimes highlighting the "twin afflictions of sexism and racism" (Muellero). There is arguably no other feminist author who has reached, and personally affected, so many Americans using so



many mediums. She has directly affected the modern political and social landscape by speaking out on topics such as female genital mutilation, civil rights, apartheid, nuclear proliferation, women's rights, environmental protection, and economic hegemony. To ask if Alice Walker has impacted the lives of women in 2012 is a rhetorical exercise.

And if one has been exposed to her work, they have most likely been moved by it. Walker is amazing in that she shares an intimacy with the reader, making her work part biography and part social commentary. Since the dawn of society and culture, there have arisen contentious internal debates surrounding issues of power and control. In advanced societies, written language has been used by talented scholars as both a tool to maintain this control, and in efforts to destroy it. The early feminist writers of America became tired of societal structures that allowed for their coercion, manipulation, confinement, and domination by the hierarchical systems of power. In launching a campaign of liberation, these brilliant authors set in motion a series of societal shifts that directly impacts the women of today. In virtually every corner of American culture, the accomplishments brought about by generations of feminist thought can be seen and evoke admiration. Students studying the philosophies and contributions of these resilient women will perhaps themselves be motivated to speak out against what they perceive as the innate disorder of our institutions. From medicine to mental health, courtroom to bedroom, and politics to learning, the progress we have made as a nation of free individuals is a reality because of the sacrifices of these literary soldiers.

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