

HOW FEMINISM IS PORTRAYED IN 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY LITERATURE. THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN: FROM PASSIVE TO INDEPENDENT FIGURES

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Key Takeaways

- **Evolution of Female Characters:** Transition from passive to independent figures in literature.
- **Influence of Feminist Movements:** Shifts in women's representation closely tied to feminist activism and societal changes.
- **Diverse Literary Themes:** 19th-century literature focused on gender roles and marriage, while 20th-century works expanded to include independence, sexuality, and identity.

Introduction

The portrayal of women in literature has undergone significant transformations from the 19th to the 20th century, mirroring the evolving societal roles and perceptions of women. This period marked a profound shift from depicting women as passive, secondary characters to portraying them as independent and assertive individuals. These changes reflect the broader feminist movements and the ongoing struggle for gender equality, which have influenced literary themes, character development, and narrative structures.

19th Century Literature

Challenging Traditional Gender Roles

In the 19th century, literature began to reflect the burgeoning feminist movement. Early feminist literature challenged traditional gender roles and advocated for women's rights and equality. Authors like Jane Austen and George Eliot explored the limitations and frustrations of marriage for women, depicting protagonists who struggled against societal constraints and sought greater autonomy. These narratives critically examined the limited opportunities available to women, highlighting their desires for personal and intellectual fulfillment (Encyclopedia.com, n.d.; Routledge Historical Resources, n.d.).

Emerging Feminist Voices

By the late 19th century, women writers began producing more explicitly feminist literature, including suffragette propaganda and novels that directly challenged existing social structures. Works such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) feature heroines who engage in self-discovery and defy traditional norms, embodying the shift towards feminist ideals. These characters sought

independence and equality, symbolizing a move away from the portrayal of women as mere moral compasses or figures needing protection (Showalter, 1977; Showalter, 1991).

Literary Themes and Characterization

Literature of the 19th century often depicted women as delicate and morally superior yet ultimately subordinate to male authority. The narratives frequently centered on women's internal conflicts between duty and personal desire, reflecting broader societal ambivalence about changing gender roles. Despite the subtle critiques of gender inequities, the predominant narrative maintained women in roles that complemented patriarchal views, though the seeds of change were being sown through these literary works (Moi, 1985; Showalter, 1991).

20th Century Literature

Transformation of Female Representation

The 20th century witnessed significant transformations in the portrayal of women in literature, driven by the various waves of feminist movements. The industrial revolution, increased access to higher education for women, and political activism surrounding women's suffrage contributed to a newfound awareness of gender inequality and a desire for self-definition. Female protagonists began to exhibit traits of independence—intellectual, emotional, and sometimes economic—marking a departure from their 19th-century counterparts (Usselman, 1995).

Influential Authors and Works

Authors such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir significantly contributed to feminist discourse through their literature. Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) emphasized the importance of women's independence and intellectual freedom, while de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) provided a foundational philosophical framework for feminist thought, arguing that women are not inherently inferior but are made so by societal constructs. These works, along with others by Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, advocated for women's rights and challenged patriarchal norms, further shaping the literary landscape (Beauvoir, 1949; Friedan, 1963; Steinem, 1970).

Diverse and Complex Characters

20th-century literature began to portray women as complex, independent individuals rather than passive objects. Characters were developed with greater depth, exploring themes of sexuality, identity, and personal agency. This shift was evident in novels like Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and later in postmodern and feminist writings that critiqued traditional gender binaries and integrated themes of identity and intersectionality. The redefinition of gender roles in literature stressed that women could be autonomous agents with their own ambitions, desires, and intellectual contributions (Woolf, 1925; Butler, 1990).

Literary Criticism and Feminist Theory

The evolution of female representation in literature paralleled the development of feminist literary theory. Scholars such as Elaine Showalter argued that early literary criticism marginalized women's voices by interpreting texts through a patriarchal lens.

Later feminist critics proposed alternative readings that highlighted the subversive potential of female subjectivity. Concepts like Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine* called for a reimagining of literary language to emphasize the creative and non-linear nature of female expression, challenging the structured male literary tradition (Cixous, 1975; Showalter, 1991).

Comparative Analysis

Table 1: Representation of Women in 19th vs. 20th Century Literature

Century	Key Themes	Notable Authors	Representative Works
19th Century	Gender Inequality, Marriage	Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë,	<i>Jane Eyre</i> , <i>The Awakening</i>
20th Century	Independence, Sexuality, Identity, Agency	Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem	<i>A Room of One's Own</i> , <i>The Second Sex</i>

Implications and Continuing Debates

The transformation from passive to independent representations of women in literature is not merely a historical development but reflects enduring debates about gender, power, and cultural identity. While 20th-century literature made significant strides in providing a richer and more varied portrayal of womanhood, discussions continue regarding the extent to which contemporary literary trends fully escape traditional gender roles. Ongoing scholarly debates address whether literary innovations genuinely empower female voices or simply repurpose old stereotypes in new forms. Additionally, modern feminist literature increasingly incorporates intersectionality, exploring how race, class, and other social categories intersect with gender to shape women's experiences (Butler, 1990; Moi, 1985).

Conclusion

The representation of women in literature from the 19th to the 20th century illustrates a profound evolution influenced by the broader feminist movements and societal changes. Initially, women were portrayed as passive, morally superior figures confined by strict social roles. Over time, literature began to challenge these traditional norms, depicting women as independent, complex individuals with their own ambitions and desires. This transformation not only reflects the advancements in women's rights and gender equality but also underscores the critical role of literature as a medium for social critique and change. The ongoing evolution of feminist literary criticism continues to enrich our understanding of gender dynamics and the multifaceted nature of female identity in literature.

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