
Voices of Resistance and Reform: Feminist Contributions of American Women Writers in the Romantic Era

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Abstract:

The current paper aims to explore the prominent women writers in the American Romantic era like Margaret Fuller, Emily Dickinson, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman whose contribution to the American literature is immense. The paper focuses on these writers' works and contributions in the American literature, and shed lights only on the crucial events in their lives that have relation or reflection in their works. The paper concludes that each one has an influence whether in literature or in society-in general.

Keywords: *American Romanticism, Feminist Literature, Women Writers, Gender Equality, Social Reform.*

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Introduction:

American Romantic era witnessed great women writers who called for equality between men and women, some of them are both abolitionists and anti-slavery writers. The difficulties and sufferings American women faced in the nineteenth century motivated female authors to project their works as an appeal for women's rights, or as an advice for women to initiate their world on feminine terms defined by their interests and desires, not defined by that of men's. As a patriarchal society dominated by conventions and norms that prevented women to work, to vote, to express themselves.

Female authors always called women to be financially independent, because in its essence, independence or equality between the two genders almost the matter of independence. That is to say, to be equal with men, women should not depend on the male gender to ensure their financial future; for instance, a woman might think to marry only to secure her life economically. Some of the notable women writers are the transcendental Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), and other reformers and abolitionist women who devoted their works directly for the purpose of women's rights. There are also slaves women like Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) whose work stands among the early American feminist works.

Margaret Fuller

Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), in full Sarah Margaret Fuller, is an American critic, journalist, essayist, feminist, and a woman of letters. Fuller was born in Massachusetts, the city that shaped her life and education under strict circumstance because she was raised as a Unitarian. As one of the early contributors of Transcendental movement, Fuller was the editor of *The Dial*, the magazine of the Transcendentalist Club, from 1840-1842. As well, she supported the movement financially, the backing that allowed her to be a female member in the movement. Despite being educated at home, Fuller developed good knowledge in classic literature; her "special passion" was "German romantic literature, especially Goethe" (Vanspankeren, 1994, p. 34).

The notable position of Fuller in the American literature not only stem from her job as an editor for *The Dial* and as a supporter for the Transcendentalism, but also from the fact that she who "boldly defies her masculinized society and advocates for woman's rights" (Assi and Fraq, 2020, p. 75). This feminist tendency is best manifested in Fuller's best known-work *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1843); a work which is considered as "the earliest and most American exploration of women's role in society" (Vanspankeren, 1994, p. 34). Fuller's notable focus on the rights of females in American emerges from her adoption of one of the Transcendental principles which is "self-dependence". In fact, her strict community, New England, was the reason

Part One

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to make her more independent, as in her self-education at home.

In her *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller invents a character who serves as her alter ego, and whom she creates a conversation to dramatize and portray an image of how woman is treated in America. As Fuller talking about herself, she says that her “self-dependence, which was honored in me, is deprecated as a fault in most women” because “They are taught to learn their rule from without, not to unfold it from within” (Part I). Both in her poetry and prose, Fuller calls for women’s “emancipation from the bonds of man” (Assi and Fraq, 2020, p. 75).

Later on, Fuller left *The Dial* to write for *The Tribune*, the reason that she wanted to fulfil her function as a critic wanting; she wanted to fulfil goals that “go far beyond the ‘feminism’ understood by Emerson, Channing, and Clarke, with its narrow focus on the welfare of women” (Kopacz, 1991, p. 130). In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller states:

Let us be wise, and not impede the soul. Let her work as she will. Let us have one creative energy, one incessant revelation. Let it take what form it will, and let us not bind it by the past to man or woman, black or white (Part III).

In this gorgeous speech, Fuller appears to fuse between the function both as a feminist and abolitionist as she prefers equality for both genders, and for all races. This call for women’s rights and liberation makes Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* as “one of the most important statements of feminist method and theory in history” (Welter, 1976, p. 180).

The fact that Fuller worked as a journal is seen in her nonfiction work, *Summer on the Lakes*, in 1843, a work that is based on her experiences of travels to Great Lakes region. In travelling to places like New York, Chicago, Buffalo, and Niagara Falls, Fuller also met some of the Indian tribes whom she “presented as people in need of sympathy” (Matteson, 2012, p. 243). Another notable work by Fuller is *Papers on Literature and Art* (1846), a work that “enhanced Fuller’s reputation as one of the principal intellectuals of her era—male or female” (Ferguson, 1980, p. 17).

Not only in her prose Fuller calls for women’s rights, but in her poetry as well; that is “Fuller’s early poems present a nascent feminist thought” which “pave the way for a contribution in feminism” (Assi and Fraq, 2020, p. 75). Then, Fuller’s contribution is a massive one, a real step

in putting one of the early cornerstones that later would help in the formation of American feminism movement.

Part Two

Emily Dickinson and Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is one of the most important American poets in the nineteenth century, and in American literature in general, who is known for her lyric poetry. Dickinson lived in a seclusion, this seclusion gave her much time to write about 1800 poems about different themes such flowers, nature, and death. Lived in seclusion, she found “deep inspiration in the birds, animals, plant, and changing seasons of the New England countryside” (Vanspanckeren, 1994, p. 35); a transcendental tendency that makes us to put her alongside with the other notable transcendental poets like Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau. In other words, her seclusion shaped her life and pushed her to find nature as something inspirational. Until the 20s of her age, Dickinson’s writings are mostly in the form of letters (Habegger). Her nonconformity with her society is like that of Thoreau or Emerson, such tendencies make critics to classify Dickinson as a transcendental poet.

Dickinson developed a self-education circumstance due to her seclusion; she was almost in contact only with her family members, while her contact with friends to much extent shaped in the form of letters. Because she is “one of the most solitary literary figures of her time” Dickinson’s true teachers are “the Bible, the works of William Shakespeare, and works of classical mythology in great depth” (Vanspanckren, 1994, p. 35).

Different themes can be traced in Dickinson’s poetry; in one of her poems “My Nosegays are for Captives”, Dickinson speaks about “nosegays” (flowers), and the afterlife; depicting the sorrow of human beings on earth, and describing them as “captives”. She links flowers with humility, or youth, or prudence. In her “I’m Nobody! Who are you?”, “I was the slightest in the House”, and “My Holiday, stall be”, there is an existential question and question of “what is the essence of life” (Zawadzka, 2019, p. 223). In other poems talking about birds, Dickinson links the birds with hope as in “Hope Is the Thing with Feathers” and “My Friend Must be a Bird”. In the former mentioned poem, Dickinson uses the bird as a symbol of hope and the soul of human being “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers—/ That perches in the soul—” which “sings the tune without the words—/And never stops—”.

The theme of death is a notable one in Dickinson's poetry; in her "If this is „Fading", Dickinson expresses how all creatures are destined to die; the "gentle Fellow men!" die, and the "peacock" -which is a symbol of eternity and pride- also "presumes to die!". Life to Dickinson is vain, but the immortality and eternity can be found only in afterlife. There is allude to the Greek mythology in her poems, such allusion, actually, emerges from her reading of classical books. For example, in her "Sleeps Supposed to Be" there is allusion to Aurora, "That shall Aurora be -/ East of Eternity -". To Dickinson "death and faith waged a constant battle" in her "mind" (Mcnaughton, 1949, p. 203); some cases Dickinson's faith wins the battle, while other cases her faith waves. In her "Faith, the Experiment of our Lord!", she talks about faith religiously, but sometimes she sees death as defeated, in her "Triumph", she says that "There's triumph in the room/ When that old imperator, Death, / By faith is overcome" (Triumph); yet death remained for Emily "the great dictator, the ever-present imperator, a force to be reckoned with and treated with respect" (Mcnaughton, 1949, p. 203).

Dickinson's style is full of punctuation marks like exclamation marks, dashes, commas, and others. These can serve as technical tools reflecting strong emotional senses, or to stress specific words in the poem. Concerning Dickinson's development of her poetic style, in his *The Development of Dickinson's Style*, Timothy Morris states two achievements which make Dickinson as a difficult and prominent poet, firstly she "revised the hymn quatrain and made of it a more purely literary genre than it had ever been before"; secondly by commenting "on her own texts, producing poems that were adaptations of earlier texts in her growing collection of manuscript fascicles" (27). As an intelligent poet and highly precise, Dickinson "never uses two words when one will do, and combines concrete things with abstract ideas in an almost proverbial, compressed style" (Vanspankeren, 1994, p. 35). Thus, her poetic style and the development she made is one of her contributions into poetry writing, and this contribution is on the technical level.

Despite she was little known during her life, Dickinson's legacy became notable when her sister Lavinia decided to include certain poems to be published publically. The poems were welcomed in the late of nineteenth century and witnessed a wide praise as characterized with an original American sensibility.

The other great woman in nineteenth century who was influenced by the Romantic trend of the nineteenth century is Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), in full Charlotte Anna Perkins Stetson Gilman. She is a poet, novelist, short story writer, humanist, and publisher who was "a leading theorist of the in the United States" (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Gilman suffered from a harsh life which spent it in poverty; as well she suffered from psychological illness and many depressions. She believes that the reasons behind her suffering "lay not in the personal or political conflicts of her life, but in idiosyncratic weaknesses within herself" (Hill, 1980, p. 510). Yet, her writings stand to be a powerful call for women's rights, and her "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) is "a feminist-oriented autobiographical portrayal of insanity" (Hill, 1980, p. 511). That is to say her weakness-as she thought of- was not a barrier in front of her path to call for women's rights; this trend makes critics to consider her as one of the cornerstones in feminism.

Gilman's works "can be read as an extended meditation on female authority and the fate of socially-conscious writing in the turn-of-the-century print marketplace" (Edelstien, 2014, p. 88). Gilman's psychological troubles can be seen in her "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), it is a portrayal of a young woman whom her wife imprisons in a dark room because of her insanity and psychological illness. This short story reflects Gilman's psychological disturbances, she presents her point of view and her feminist message by projecting the protagonist, Jane, to be her voice by using the first point of view-a technique that gives Gilman more flexibility to touch the most important issues concerning women. By this short story, Gilman hoped "to create an awareness of the erroneous medical conventions imposed on women and to underscore the social injustices that many American women were subjected to during the late nineteenth century" (Alfadel IV).

For Gilman, women should not be dependent on men in order not to be a commodity in the hands of men. So, she called for economic independence, and called women to establish respect for themselves built on their own terms, not terms of the patriarchal society. In 1898, Gilman published *Women and Economics*, which is a call for women to build an economic independence; Bercovitch considers *Women and Economics* as Gilman's "scientific romance" in which "Gilman extracted from science a tone of fearless and authoritative speech [...] and used it to critically undo what she perceived to

be harmful fictions” (167); in fact, She wanted to change the conventions of the nineteenth century that did not give women the enough space to be fully financially independent. This Gilman’s work in the twentieth century should be published for it stresses issues similar to that of Simone de Beauvoir’s “The Second Sex” 1951(Tuttel and Kessler, 2010, p. 3).

Both Dickinson and Gilman are considered great writers due to their contributions to the American literature. Despite the troubles the American women faced in nineteenth-century, yet Gilman’s “feminist messages” can be considered “a strong resistance to the prevailing notions of women’s ‘nature’ that were deeply embedded in her society” (Alfadel, 2010, p. 43). Dickinson and Gilman proved themselves as great women writers with a high quality and intellectuality.

Part Three

Harriet Beecher Stowe and Other Reformers

One great proverb by Michael Phelps may serve a parallel to the effort done by female writers in the Romantic era, Phelps says “There will be obstacles. There will be doubters. There will be mistakes. But with hard work, there are no limits.” It is true in the American Romantic era, women suffered from difficulties and barriers that need to be broken by strong and standing women. Moreover, slavery was a dominant fact in America, but great women writers dared to challenge the social injustices and spoke out calling for women’s freedom and rights, and attacking the enslavement of Africans. Such women appeared as a strong net who “demanded fundamental reforms, such as the abolition of slavery and women’s suffrage” (Vanspanckeren, 1994, p. 42). One of the great and most known female writers is Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) is an American novelist, poet, playwright and abolitionist who was brought up in a religious family. Stowe opened her eyes in a religious environment later would be as her abolitionist tendency in writing for the social reformation and anti-slavery. She is best known for her anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*- a wide spread novel which was translated into many languages.

Stowe’s passion behind writing *Uncle Tom Cabin* was “the religious passion to reform life by making it godlier” (Vanspanckeren, 1994, p. 44). Stowe’s sentimental novel depicts slavery in America by presenting Tom, the main character, as a Christian slave who is killed for defending a slave woman. The novel was a spark for the American

Civil War (1861-1865), and Stowe was “endured condemnation, primarily from Southern readers, who challenged her depiction of the brutalities of slavery” (Tuttle and Kessler, 2010, p. 38).

Stowe admired a great abolitionist and one of the early women’s rights writers was Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), a slave in New York and escaped in the age of 30. Truth “perhaps the most colorful of the crusading feminists of the nineteenth century” (Lebedun, 1974, p. 360); for that reason, Stowe and others “found wisdom in this visionary black woman, who could declare, ‘Lord, Lord I can love even de white folk!’” (Vanspanckeren, 1994, p. 44). Her interest in religion lies in her belief that that “she heard messages from God”; adopting this name “Sojourner Truth” means she would be a preacher and traveller delivering the “truth of God” (Glencoe Literature Course, 2010, p. 344). Truth’s *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850), is an autobiographical account

Another abolitionist and women’s rights activist is Lydia Child (1802-1880), whose work had made a massive influence. Child’s interest in abolitionism stems from the abolitionist circumstances of her family, and from meeting the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison in 1831 (The Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Her first anti-slavery tract, “An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans”, in 1833 made her “notorious and ruined her financially” (Vanspanckeren, 1994, p. 43). Child’s most famous work is *The Frugal Housewife: Dedicated to those who are not ashamed of Economy*, a work devoted to the young housewives concerning financial issues.

Child’s friend Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) is another abolitionist and an activist for women’s rights. Most of Stanton’s works devoted to women’s rights like *Declaration of Sentiments* (1848), *History of Woman Suffrage* (1881-1886), and *The Woman’s Bible* (1895). Stanton organized the Seneca Falls Convention for Women’s rights based on her belief of the equality between men and women.

Part Four

Conclusion

Margaret Fuller’s contribution is an immense one in the romantic era for her financial support of *The Dial* as the main platform of the Transcendental movement and for her important works in which she calls for women’s rights. By this Fuller is considered one of the early contributors to feminism in America and for her role as

supporter and as editor in the Transcendental movements.

Emily Dickinson and Charlotte Perkins Gilman differ in their contributions to the American literature. Dickinson was more secluded from the outside world, a fact which helped her to develop a very personal style and by her poems, she reflects different themes like nature, death, immortality, eternity, and faith. While Gilman's personal life was burdened with psychological disturbances which to a large extent presented in her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper".

The abolitionists Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sojourner Truth, Lydia Child and Elizabeth Cady played an important role in both American literature and American feminism. The fact that there were many difficulties in the Romantic era and in the nineteenth century in general, did not demoralize their determination to speak the truth and to call for liberty and equality for American women. The roots of feminism in America has roots in these activists' works, these writers are best described as early examples or the cornerstone in the American feminism. Despite difficulties, poverty, seclusion, obstacles and illness; yet, all these women made a great influence in literature-in specific- and in society-in general.

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