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The Three Waves of Feminist Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Feminism, a belief in the pursuit of women's political, cultural, and economic equality, is one of history's most complex and essential movements. From Ancient Greece to the fight for women's suffrage to the #MeToo movement, feminism has formed a fascinating history. To better understand this movement, historians have divided them into three "waves." In this research paper, I will discuss how first-wave feminism dealt with property rights and suffrage; second-wave feminism focused on equality and anti-discrimination, and third-wave feminism was a response or backlash against the second-wave, which they believed, privileged white women. By selecting examples from several important feminist poets, this review paper discusses how they contributed to these waves and how they affected the movements that followed.

1. INTRODUCTION

For generations, feminist writers have forged ahead advocating for women's rights. Scholars and activists have categorized three distinct "waves" of feminist writers throughout history. The term "waves" represented the surge of feminism in 1968 when journalist Martha Weinman Lear published an article called "The Second Feminist Wave," connecting the 19th-century women's suffrage movement with the movements that occurred in the 1960s. This new terminology spread and became a common way to define feminism. Each historical era and each new wave of feminism was inspired by a long tradition of activism that transcended generational lines. Throughout the long history of feminism, female poets and artists have created works to support women of different races and identities within different eras. This paper addresses several of the most influential and essential female poets working past and present who have written works to inspire and focus on the systematic healing necessary to rebuild communities and restore women's rights.

2. THE FIRST WAVE

The first wave of feminism usually refers to the Western world's 19th and early 20th centuries. This first phase generally revolved around women receiving basic legal rights equal to those of men. Politics and businesses were completely dominated and controlled by powerful men who considered women minor threats to their position.

2.1 *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

One of the most prominent female poets during the first wave of feminism was Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a well-known and prolific poet of the Victorian Period with a career that lasted for four decades. Elizabeth Barrett Browning established herself as a woman who was never afraid to express her perspectives on contemporary politics and societal issues. In that era, while most conservative female poets wrote on the topic of nature, pious religion, or the domestic space in which they worked, Browning wrote of slavery, industrialization, problems of political leadership, religious controversy, discrimination against women, and life within modern society. Browning was braver than her other female contemporary writers and wasn't concerned whether what she said in her work offended her readers; she continued to question and judge conventional views that, at the time, "defined" how the world worked.

Due to inspiration from famous figures such as William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and her lover George Gordon (Lord Bryon), Browning believed that poetry had the power to influence social and political thinking, especially female oppression in the Victorian era. Many of her works express the inner turmoil Browning had to face in

deciding between maintaining her femininity or becoming a poet

. This conflict is apparent in *Aurora Leigh* (1856), where Browning offers a strong defense against women's rights for a proper education, meaningful labor, and physical and psychological freedom. She writes of being sent to England at her aunt's, where she strived to lead the life of a proper lady—however, Browning describes this lifestyle as being "caged," writing, "I, alas, A wild bird scarcely fledged, was brought to her cage, And she was there to meet me." The term "cages" was often used throughout literature to symbolize oppression, control, and manipulation. Browning suggests that the oppressed life of a woman in the Victorian era is no different from being herded like cattle.

Through another one of her poems, *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point*, Browning also expresses her theme of inner conflict as a dramatic monologue spoken from the perspective of an enslaved Black woman who has been torn away from her lover and raped by a group of white slave owners. The black woman subsequently gives birth to a boy but can not help but see her master when looking at her child's white face; Browning writes: "My own, own child! I could not bear to look in his face, it was so white…." The enslaved Black woman eventually kills her white child by suffocating him with a "kerchief" and buries the body. Through *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point*, Browning exposes another aspect of the ill-treatment of Victorian-era women, slavery. As a strong opposer to slavery, Browning focused many of her poems on the oppression and slavery of women and, thus, glorified the choices made by the narrator of *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point*, demonstrating her hatred for slavery. However, she takes a step further and explains her desire to escape the "slavery" of her gender. With her act of writing poetry, Browning effectively displays the relation of Victorian-era slavery to the treatment of women.

2.2 *Christina Rossetti*

Another well-known poet from the first wave of feminism is Christina Rossetti, one of the Victorian age's finest poets. Rosetti argued for female representation in Parliament and spoke out against the sexual exploitation of women in prostitution. While her views weren't exactly "radical," they were far from conservative and often questioning, challenging, and at times subversive. As the writer of numerous books of poetry, including *From the Antique*, *No, Thank You, John* and others, Rossetti wrote many works that strongly demonstrated the oppression and alienation that many Victorian women would have had to experience from the exclusion of key systems of power, as well as women's position in society concerning consideration of the institution of marriage.

One of Rossetti's poems that contribute to this purpose is *Goblin Market*, a long narrative poem of 568 lines. The *Goblin Market* tells the story of two maids, Laura and Lizzie, who are tempted by fruit by evil merchant goblins. Laura exchanges a lock of her hair for a taste of the goblins' enchanted "fruit forbidden." Her health starts deteriorating until she is "knocking at Death's door." Her sister Lizzie offers the goblins "a silver penny" for more of their wares to cure Laura—she is violently attacked and has fruit squeezed over her. Lizzie returns home, and Laura kisses the juices from her face, eventually being restored.

The language and diction used in Rossetti's poem are rather sensuous and graphic, vividly describing the fruit: "Plump unpeck'd cherries, … Bloom-down-cheek'd peaches, … swart-headed mulberries…." The goblins in the poem symbolize men who seduce women with such "beautiful" words— once they gratify their needs, they abandon them. The central theme of *Goblin Market* is temptation and redemption, while the poem's title alludes to the prostitution trade in the Victorian era. The opportunities for lower-class women at the time were minimal, either working in factories with

poor work environments and a smaller salary than men or resorting to prostitution. Ironically, the hero in this poem is not a man but a woman, while men are instead portrayed as the bearer of fear, seduction, and annihilation. By presenting a female as the rescuer of the "damsel in distress," Rossetti brings out the independent and powerful traits that every woman has, demonstrating that a female can exist without the help of a male figure.

Another work from Rossetti that highlights the value of women and the inequality they faced in society is "From the Antique." Rossetti states, in the first stanza: "It's a weary life, it is, she said: Doubly blank in a woman's lot: I wish and I wish I were a man: Or, better than being, were not…." With this, Rossetti expresses the meaningless life she'd have unless women were seen just as equally as men were, embodying the burden that females wore in a time when they were accepted simply as a mother or a wife. While embracing this classification, Rossetti also challenges these female and social expectations, describing a harsh reality yet learning to accept her fate. Even though Rossetti was a very religious woman, several of her works were critical of the then gender-discriminatory society. Despite only including feminist viewpoints in her poems to a certain extent, Rossetti had much interest in women and their social status within the Victorian era.

2.3 *Emily Dickinson*

Emily Dickinson, another feminist poet from the Victorian era, is considered one of the most famous in American literature. Although she was socially reclusive, she wasn't afraid to be outspoken and emotional in her lyric poetry, defying the 19th-century expectations and norms that women were demure and obedient to men. Even while maintaining a submissive superficial appearance, Dickinson's works made her an early feminist voice that began the literary force that people of today know. It is noted that Dickinson's mother was often represented as the passive wife of a domineering husband—this left young Dickinson with a convoluted idea of what women should do to conform to society's norms.

Surprisingly, the representation of feminism is paired with death in Dickinson's work, referred to today as "death feminism," which was quite common. Death was represented as losing an aspect of womanhood. This is the case in her poem *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*. The poem's first stanza reads: "Because I could not stop for Death — // He kindly stopped for me — // The Carriage held but just Ourselves — // And Immortality." Dickinson capitalizes the "he" she refers to in the poem. As the "he" would be a proper noun, it is speculated that "Death" with a capitalized "D" would also have a gender-based characterization. In this work, "Death" is seen as a masculine embodiment of what death is and can also be seen as a symbol of marriage that is to last an eternity or living in a world of patriarchy. The word "carriage" is referred to as the fairytale romance that Dickinson never got to experience—therefore, by writing *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, she displays her desire not to want to be married and immortalized forever but instead without any romantical ties. This view is one of the reasons why Dickinson is considered an early feminist.

In another work from Dickinson, *I Heard a Fly Buzz, When I Died*, she notes that "The Eyes around — had wrung them dry - // And Breaths were gathering firm // For that last Onset — when the king // Be witnessed — in the Room…." It tells the story of one illustrating their deathbed while describing final experiences and sensations felt right before dying. Although this poem initially may not seem relevant to feminism, it can later be analyzed through such a lens. With an emphasis on the "Eyes" with Dickinson's use of capitalization, she portrays a dangerous society where women are constantly under an entity that acts as a magnifying glass. The "death" she experiences in the poem indicates a devastating future of the unknowns. With death contributing to the poem's theme, Dickinson uses her highlight on the "Eyes" and the

addition of the fly to make her point. With flies being insects with multiple eyes, they represent the different "lenses" through which people see the world. Since Dickinson carried a perspective on the oppressive society different from that of most women at the time, the fly in her work can be seen as her desperation for others to see society through different "lenses."

3. THE SECOND WAVE

When the second wave of feminism emerged in the early 1960s, women began focusing on issues such as reproductive rights, self-expression, and pay inequalities. The goals of these women who initiated the second-wave movement stretched over a broad spectrum of topics, encompassing legalizing abortion, promoting more accessible and safer contraception, and eliminating discrimination against women of color and women suppressed due to restrictive natures of their culture or religion.

3.1 *Ntozake Shange*

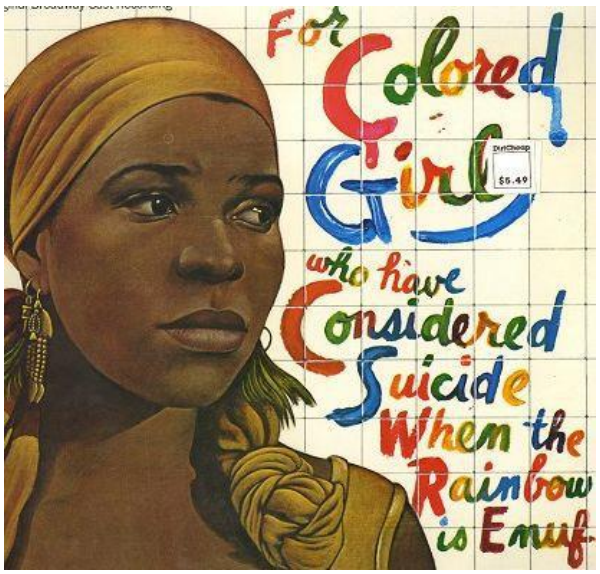
One of the female poets who invigorated the second-wave feminism movement through her literary works is Ntozake Shange, an American playwright and poet. As a black woman, Shange suffered severe racial segregation throughout her childhood in St. Louis. She attempted suicide at age 23 after long years of suffering from depression after concluding that the bitterness and alienation that she had to face as a woman of color was too much for her to bear. As a survivor of a near tragedy, Shange grew up to be a strident black feminist, most of her works touching on the issue of racism and the troubles of having to live in a predominantly white environment. With her plays and poems, she successfully established herself as one of the most distinctive voices that used various forms of literary genre to address women's empowerment, inequality, racial segregation, domestic abuse, and more.

Shange has written many plays related to race and equality as a playwright. Still, one of her most prominent plays is a theatrical debut in the form of poetry, a choreopoem (a unique blend of poetry, music, dance, and drama)—*for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. Shange's first choreopoem was described as a survival manual for black American girls as they mature, as well as guidelines for those who seek a better understanding of the lives and cultures of Black women. Having understood that there is much pain when it comes to self-exploration and discovery, Shange shared the piece as an emotional demand on her audience. Not only did she long to express herself through this choreopoem, but she longed to share the experiences of all Black women and girls. With poems titled *latent rapists*, *abortion cycle #1*, *dark phases*, and more, Shange's choreopoem displays many sets of poetry recited by Black women of different colored clothing, along with song and dance sequences. The prologue of the choreopoem, *dark phrases*, begins with a Lady in Brown describing the "dark phases of womanhood," while all she hears are screams and empty promises. She then proclaims that this piece is for "colored girls who have considered suicide / but moved to the ends of their own rainbows." Another poem in one of the sequences, *latent rapists*, shows a group of women discussing an incident where one woman was raped by their friend. They share thoughts that mention that maybe it was a misunderstanding or that the woman caused it, and they ask the Lady in Blue if she had been drinking that day. They talk about their male friends who take them out for dinners and have nice smiles but, in the end, rape them, and that they should be on the lookout for "the stranger we always thot wd be," stating that "the nature of rape has changed." With 21 poems composing the entire choreopoem, Shange says it opens girls to other kinds of people of color from other worlds and different aspects of life, such as kindness, adventure, and cruelty. Having the women of color in the play actively share their experiences of kindness, adventure, and cruelty through honest and strong language demonstrates to young girls that the cruelty can be dealt with by finding strength from others to go on.

3.2 *Naomi Shihab Nye*

Another prominent female poet of the second wave of feminism is Naomi Shihab Nye, an Arab American poet who gave voice to her experience as an Arab American through poems about her heritage and peace that overflow with a humanitarian spirit. Born to a Palestine father—who was a Palestine refugee—and an American mother of German and Swiss descent, she wrote numerous poems that bring attention to females

with a sense of her own personal freedom and continue to encourage a



sense of civility and curiosity about one another's lives. Through her works, Nye helps her readers reflect on the way immigrants such as her father are being talked about in our society and instead acknowledge the bravery of those immigrants and the doubled capacity for imagination that an immigrant has to have.

One of her well-known works is *Not Even*, a poem about people's suffering, especially women in the Middle East. Nye, who once described poems as "a window into someone else's experience, loneliness, or difficulty," writes a mournful poem addressing "Yemen crying" as it weeps "for arched windows / crushed for nothing / and the people who dwelled therein." Cleaving the truth about her experience, she displays her work by reflecting on how savagely the Saudis treat Yemen, not to mention the women in their own country, and how some foreign policies abet those Saudi Arabian ways. "It's not new. / It's not even you." Nye writes, effectively ending the poem by directly addressing this issue, highlighting how the harm afflicted to women and people of Yemen is inextricably bound.

Another one of Nye's works, *What She Said*, addresses the damaging effects of war in countries of the Middle East and how they harm the commons in devastating ways. "We wanted girls in schools, yes," she writes, "freedom for women, always, / how can there not be freedom / for the source of life?" Through her poem, Nye represents many voices of the innocent lives within the war who wish for not the destruction and death caused by war but "simpler things, / more schools, / larger hospitals, / food…." She speaks, through her poems, as the voices of young girls unable to receive proper education and the people of Yemen who are incessantly placed within the dangers of war, and demonstrates her point that writers and artists should be brave enough to deal with current political scenes. Nye shows that poetry can act as a tool to survive in hard times or anchor our days, but also to get into a more gracious community with ourselves—and to stress focus on the systemic healing necessary to rebuild communities.

3.3 *Hissa Hilal*

Hissa Hilal, a Saudi Arabian poet, is a woman who cannot be left out when referring to the second wave of feminism. Born in northwest Saudi Arabia, Hilal began writing her poems at the age of 12 but had to keep them hidden due to her family's disapproval. Later, however, she was able to publish her poems in Saudi Newspapers and magazines while working in a clerical position in a hospital and eventually began working as an editor and correspondent for many newspapers in her country. Once she married another poet, it gave her more freedom regarding writing, and her children became a source of stability for her. Once receiving written permission from her husband for a Saudi woman to be able to travel abroad, Hilal competed in the fourth season of *Million's Poet*, an Abu Dhabi-based reality television show. With her poems published not only within the boundaries of her country but now worldwide, Hilal strived to express herself and give voice to Arab women silenced by those who have hijacked their culture and religion.

One of the most famous poems she competed with on *Million's Poet* is *The Chaos of Fatwas.* A *fatwa*

is generally understood as a legal opinion on a matter raised by a constituent to a Mufti (a Muslim legal authority) in Islamic law. In her poem, Hilal compares such *fatwas* to "a monster that emerged from its hiding place" whenever "the veil is lifted from the face of truth." She denounces those who issue hard-line religious decrees aiming at the segregation of sexes maintained by religious preachers who "prey like a wolf" on women seeking peace and progress. Through this work, Hilal fights against the corruption of her religion by lashing out at self-proclaimed religious clerics for "terrorizing people and preying on everyone seeking peace." *Chaos of Fatwas* brought out mixed reactions: some applauded her for her bravery, while others gave her death threats (primarily those who are part of the most radical and conservative segments of Saudi society). Since Hilal is a Muslim woman, she speaks from behind an abaya that covers everything but her eyes—by pointing this out and taking this courageous stance, Hilal effectively proves that not what is on a woman's head determines her sense of liberation and commitment to social justice, but rather what is in it. The same goes for the Western obsession with veils on women's heads: she states that it enacts precisely that oppression of women, which in some nations becomes the justification for attempts to ban such dress. Overall, Hilal states that "[she] wants peace for everyone, Muslims and others." By emphasizing our coexistence within a global village, she maintains that it is essential for us to unite against religious oppressions that segregate those in need of voices and force upon them inhumane edicts that violate modern rights of women.

4. THE THIRD WAVE

The third wave of feminism is traditionally seen as a response to mainstream second-wave feminism. It started around the 1990s with women's rights activists striving for a movement that continued the work of their predecessors while addressing the current struggles they faced. They also wanted to create a mainstream movement that included the various challenges women from different races, classes, and gender identities faced. Here again, women fought for equal treatment and civil rights, and female poets created structures to support one another while profoundly changing poetry itself.

4.1 *Carol Ann Duffy*

Carol Ann Duffy is an award-winning Scottish poet, a prominent poet of third-wave feminism. She is best known for writing love poems that often take the form of monologues. From 2009 to 2019, Duffy served as the first woman poet laureate of Great Britain. When she was first considered for the position in 1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair feared that her homosexuality would not be well-received by the British public; as a result, another male poet was chosen instead. However, Duffy was able to accept the position after the previous laureate's term and stated that she took it since no woman had previously held the post, and many of her works have been recognized and praised afterward.

One of her works, *Little Red-Cap*, depicts Duffy's view on male dominance, sexual empowerment, and the importance of self-expression. Referencing the famous fairy tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*, the poem makes its speaker autonomous in contrast to the quintessential innocent girl figure of the fairy tale that we expect. The wolf with a "paperback in his hairy paw" represents a microcosm of male domination of literature—his power comes not from his physique or ferocity but merely from his "male" gender. The last stanza kills the wolf, which can be inferred from "I took an axe to the wolf / As he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat, and saw / The glistening, virgin white of my grandmother's bones / I filled his old belly with stones." This ending is a form of protest and representative of taking back control and ownership of the female voice from the "dominant, male" wolf, while the uncovering of her grandmother's bones from the wolf's stomach is uncovering the systematic repression of female poets, artists, and writers who need more representation. The protagonist finally, with an internal rhyme and a run on the lines, mentions that

she is now "all alone," now free and walking away from male domination and the dirges of male control. The poem features a female main character who, although not always admirable, is unfailingly strong, effectively putting an emphasis on Duffy's purpose of celebrating the strength of women.

Another one of Duffy's works is *Mrs. Quasimodo*, written based on the tale *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The poem's speaker marries Quasimodo, the hunchback bellringer, but the relationship starts turning toxic: "Soon enough / he started to find fault." Quasimodo begins to find faults in the speaker, and she is not right, not beautiful enough for him—a heartbreaking monologue to women who know the potency of the meaning of the word "beautiful" and those who have suffered from it as a result. Duffy forms an abyss of self-hatred in the speaker: "your thighs of lard / your mottled upper arms; / thumping your belly— / look at it— / your wobbling gut." Throughout the poem, however, Duffy harnesses this self-hatred into the inner strength of women. The hatred the speaker feels for herself is now anger toward Quasimodo and anger toward men and toward the absurd ideals of society that tell her that she is not good enough. With her self-hatred fueling her inner strength, she silences the bells that Quasimodo loves so much by "[ripping] out its brazen tongue" and "made them mute." Quasimodo and the bells defined the speaker's life as a woman, so she removes his stability as revenge for the way she has been treated—just as he desecrated her, he decides to desecrate his sacred place, his sanctuary, thus taking her "silence back" as well as her control.

5. CONCLUSION

For a long time, poetry has existed as one of the most personal forms of art to allow artists the freedom to express their ideals and perspectives and has been a favorite means of social activists looking to speak out and inspire change. Feminist movements have been no exception, with artists such as Christina Rossetti and Ntozake Shange using their pens to self-reflect on female experience and thought-provoking questions to the readers of their works. Verses, both written and performed, are considered uniquely powerful vessels to express the multifaceted experiences of not simply feminist movements but also racial discrimination and gender identity. This paper explores the figures that lived from the Victorian Era to today who actively argued for reforms in women's rights and how women should be treated in society. The ideals of weaving together the concepts of different feminist poets have advanced far beyond this paper, encompassing the greater work that strives toward women's liberation. As someone deeply interested in the workings and growth of feminism, I found that writing can be developed and has developed as a form of liberation that—through sharing stories of other women from different eras, particularly those who have come before us—aims to set all of us free.

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