

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION
Women's History Month 2005

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2004 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2004 or Spring 2005 to be eligible. (Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Jane M. Pederson History Dept. _____

Course Number and Name WMNS 301 Semester completed Fall 2004

Title of Nominated Work : A Feminist Journey

CATEGORY: Sampson:
Undergraduate Research Paper _____ See _____
Undergraduate Project _____ Olson _____
Graduate _____ Kessler _____
Turell x _____
Belter _____

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****WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

Students had the option of writing a paper exploring the meaning of feminist ideas to their own lives. Based upon the class readings and some of her own research in WMNS 301, Lisa Pinney explored the significance of past and present feminist ideas to her own life as a spiritual woman who aspires to a career in the ministry. Her paper is thoughtful, elegantly written, and draws on classic feminist texts.

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

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Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

Submission deadline is February 11, 2005.

A Feminist Journey

by
Lisa Joanne Finney

Lisa J. Pinney
Final Paper
WMNS 301.501
Dr. Jane Pederson
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In her collection entitled *Those Who Ride the Night Winds*, Nikki Giovanni included a poem entitled "A Journey":

"It's a journey ... that I propose ... I am not the guide ... nor technical assistant ... I will be your fellow passenger ... Though the rail has been ridden ... winter clouds cover ... autumn's exuberant quilt ... we much provide our own guideposts ... I have heard ... from previous visitors ... the road washes out sometimes ... and passengers are compelled ... to continue groping ... or turn back ... I am not afraid ... I am not afraid ... of rough spots ... or lonely times ... I don't fear ... the success of this endeavor ... I am Ra ... in a space ... not to be discovered ... but invented ... I promise you nothing ... I accept your promise ... of the same we are simply riding ... a wave ... that may carry ... or crash ... It's a journey ... and I want ... to go ..."

To me, this poem is the feminist journey both throughout the ages and throughout my own life. If you had asked me four months ago whether I was a feminist, I would have said yes, but I would have had no bearing on such a course. Reading women like Mary Wollstonecraft, Sarah Grimke, Margaret Fuller, and Joan Morgan gave me a starting point. This is my journey.

For a long time, I have believed that God is neither male nor female but both. There are many roles that God can play throughout a person's life – roles that are masculine and feminine. It is my personal belief that God assumes whatever gender is appropriate for the situation in which God is called upon. In her book entitled When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: a Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down, Joan Morgan discusses something along this line near the end of her chapter called "lovenote." She talks about making God the "main man" in her life – about the gaps in her life that God fills: "a love unconditional, one that never abandons or

disappoints, one that replaces the imperfect love of a flawed parent or never fails to come through in our time of need That kind of love is best provided by a diving and perfect Spirit” (153). In a way, this is the kind of dichotomous gender identity that I associate with God – an identity that equalizes both sexes instead of elevating the importance of one over the other. The “imperfect love of a flawed parent” could be that of a mother or a father.

Also due to my opinion of God’s gender, the idea that *only* men are made in the image of God is unpractical and insulting. In her Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman, Grimke, speaking of the creation story found in Genesis, says, “In all this sublime description of the creation of man, (which is a generic term including man and woman,) there is not one particle of difference intimated as existing between them. They were both made in the image of God; dominion was given to both over every other creature, but not over each other” (4). Grimke also promoted women’s ability to not only read and interpret the scriptures for themselves but also their ability to preach to the masses. The argument that she uses is the same argument that I make against denominations such as WELS Lutheran, etc. that don’t allow women to hold leadership positions in their congregations: Only a woman knows what is in her own heart and what the true nature of her relationship with God is, so how can anyone else say whether or not God is calling her to preach the Word? Connected to this line of reasoning are the numerous examples of women throughout the entire Bible who were prophetesses and preachers. Grimke cites Old Testament women such as Miriam, Deborah and Huldah (102) as well as New Testament women like Priscilla and Phoebe (107-108). Because I intend to become a Presbyterian minister someday, this is one of the major points in my personal feminist theory.

Similar to the position that women and men are *both* created in the image of God is the notion that men and women truly are equals. This is also a central point to my feminist belief

system. Again, and not surprisingly, Grimke and Morgan have much to say about this thread of discussion. Grimke's highly religious, Quaker background compels her to bring in a religious aspect in two different ways. First, she counteracts the then-popular idea that woman was solely responsible for Original Sin by boldly stating, "[Adam and Eve] both fell from innocence, and consequently from happiness, *but not from equality*" (7). The italicized words in that line are her own emphasis, thus stressing just how important God-given equality was. She also brings in another issue that was near and dear to the hearts of the general masses to which she and her sister were speaking in 1837: morality. Grimke says, "... whatever is *morally* right for a man to do, is *morally* right for a woman to do ..." (98). Again, the italicized emphasis is Grimke's. Even though the letters to her sister were written long ago, I believe that both of these arguments apply today because the issues of declining morality and women being at fault for Original Sin are still be rehashed today by different religious groups.

Morgan uses the current inequality of the sexes to bring up two interesting points: unity and chivalry. In the chapter in her book entitled "one last thing before I go," she states, "As long as inequality and oppression remain constants in our lives, sistahood is critical to our mutual survival" (232). While I realize that Morgan is specifically talking about unity within the African-American race, she has a valid point. There are so many petty differences that women let get in the way – sexual orientation, skin color, ethnicity, class – that we will never truly reach equality with men until we admit that there is equality in our own ranks.

The other point that Morgan raises – that of chivalry – seems to be a sticky point between feminists. It's one that I have struggled with myself. While I love it when I go out with my boyfriend and he insists on paying for dinner or buying my groceries or, God forbid, buying me things "because he can," it also makes me uncomfortable. Maybe it's the rural Midwestern girl

in me. Maybe it's the stubborn German and Scottish mixture that runs through my veins. Who knows? Morgan brings up the dilemma imposed on feminism by chivalry many times throughout Chickenheads. Unfortunately, like me, she doesn't really come up with any answers. Instead, she keeps repeating the same idea: "Pretending to be totally self-sufficient is a helluva lot easier than handing you vulnerability over to a man who might drop the ball" (146), but "... letting a man spend a little dough expresses the 'feminine' desire to let somebody else take care of *me* for a change" (216).

A bone of contention that seemed to irritate nearly all of the feminist writers off of whom I am branching my own theory is that of women and education. In her book entitled A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Structures on Political and Moral Subjects, Mary Wollstonecraft expresses her disgust at the undereducation of women in her time: "If all the faculties of women's minds are only to be cultivated as they respect her dependence on man, ... let her grovel contentedly, scarcely raised by her employments above the animal kingdom" (115). On page 63 of her book, Grimke describes how allowing women full access to education would be beneficial to the men of the future as well by saying, "... if the wealth of latent intellect among women was fully evolved and improved, they would rejoice to communicate to their sons all their own knowledge, and inspire them with desires to drink from the fountain of literature." Margaret Fuller seems to almost plead for women's freedom to be educated when she says, "What Woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home" (Schneir 68). I can understand the frustration expressed by Wollstonecraft and the reasoning behind Grimke's statement. Educated women will do everything they can to produce educated children, thus, as a society, we will become generally

better educated. However, it is Fuller's statement that I feel as though I best identify with. As I said, it seems almost as though she is pleading for education. She attempts to pacify the men that read her work and worry about women one day taking their jobs when she says, "What Woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule." Basically, Fuller is saying that education is a "safe" way for women to receive their freedom. Even though college doesn't always seem like the most freeing experience (especially around finals time!), I don't even dare to think about the number of doors that are currently open to me because of the education that I'm receiving here – doors that easily could have slammed shut had I decided against, or worse yet had been forbidden college attendance.

This leads to the point of work. I remember the first time I heard about the "glass ceiling" – it was my junior high Social Studies class, and I was appalled. Being the naïve 13-year-old that I was, I thought women had already achieved equality with men in every field of life. I still strongly believe that they *should* achieve equality as far as the salary for identical positions is concerned. This problem of unequal pay for equal work was an issue that Grimke talks about. "A man who is engaged in teaching can always, I believe, command a higher price for tuition than a woman – even when he teaches the same branches, and is not in any respect superior to the woman" (50). There are many problems with this inequality in pay. Morgan voices her concerns over these problems: "Thanks to sexism, there is considerably less pressure on us to be financially and professionally successful" (211). Morgan is basically saying that, because women are not expected to be as competent as men and know they won't be receiving equal pay as the men they work side-by-side with, they turn to focusing on other ways to make the money they need. She's talking about the growing prominence of the chickenhead.

The hindrance that is the chickenhead is discussed by nearly all of the feminists that I read as well. It is also a huge problem that I see even here on campus. There are always girls walking around that look like fashion plates – bedecked in low-cut shirts, short short skirts, and tight jeans. There is a fierce competition for men out there, and the more “perfect” you look, the better your chances are. Grimke says, “Fashionable women regard themselves, and are regarded by men, as pretty toys or as mere instruments of pleasure” (47). Wollstonecraft poses an important question: “How then can the great art of pleasing be such a necessary study? it is only useful to a mistress” (62). As the title of her book indicates, Morgan has quite a bit to say about this topic. She defines the problem on page 202: “At its essence, trickin’ is a woman’s ability to use her looks, femininity, and flirtation to gain advantage in an inarguably sexist world.” Later, she discusses one of the many other problems that stem from the overemphasis of external appearance and the power it carries. She says, “Women who value their erotic power over everything else stand to do some serious damage to their self-esteem” (224).

The following is my own, very personal Feminist Creed. It may seem redundant, but because I feel so strongly about every single point in it, it seems to require restating.

Because I believe God has a dichotomous gender identity, I believe that God created men and women in God’s image. Because of this, I believe that men and women are completely equal; there is nothing that men can do that women cannot do (barring biology, of course). I believe that women have every right to interpret and preach the word of God. I believe women should have equal access to education as well as salary once they have completed their chosen level of education. I believe that there is too much emphasis placed on women’s appearance, and that this overemphasis is detrimental to women’s positions in society as well as their self-image. Finally, I believe that though women have the right to “fend for themselves,” I also believe they have the right to accept the advantages of any chivalrous acts that may come their way without feeling guilty.

I guess my “feminist streak” came from my mother ... my grandmothers ... the other women that surrounded me as I was growing up. For many women, this is how their value/belief system is established. History seems to reflect this as well. The third wave feminists couldn’t have done it without the second wave feminists couldn’t have done it without the first wave feminists couldn’t have done it without women like Abigail Adams. Nikki Giovanni expresses this as well as her own feminist sentiments in a poem entitled “Hands: For Mother’s Day” (also found in *Those Who Ride the Night Winds*):

“Some of us are lucky ... we learn to like ourselves ... to forgive ourselves ... to care about others ... Some of us ... on special occasions ... watch the ladies in the purple velvet house slippers with the long black dresses come in from Sunday worship and we realize **man** never stood up to catch and kill prey ... **man** never reared up on his hind legs to free his front paws to hold weapons ... **WOMAN** stood to free her hands ... to hold her young ... to embrace her sons and lovers ... **WOMAN** stood to applaud and cheer a delicate mate who needed her approval ... **WOMAN** stood to wipe the tears and sweat ... to touch the eyes and lips ... that woman stood to free the arms which hold the hands ... which hold.”

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