

ENG1101

Instructor: Mr. John Brown

(This essay analyzes articles from *The Presence of Others*)

Still Enduring: Equity Feminism for the Next Generation

by Elizabeth Harper

Webster defines feminism as both "the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes" and "organized activity on the behalf of women's rights and interests" (Webster 418). Equality of the sexes (in terms of rights) and the furthering of women's rights are seemingly positive aspirations; yet people tend to describe feminism using negative terms, and feminism today has acquired a bad reputation. "Radical" and "extremists" are adjectives commonly applied to feminism as a whole, when, in truth, feminists who adopt extreme positions constitute the minority. Moreover, these "gender feminists," or "militant feminists," as many call them, although they receive the most public attention because of their aggressive tactics and high visibility, alienate people in broadcasting their views. Their goal, to create a "sentimental priesthood" that will achieve collective power and retribution as oppressed "victims" of a white-male supremacy, seems unreasonable (Himmelfarb 20). In contrast, "equity feminists," or "academic feminists," embrace the basic principles of feminism. They celebrate women's achievements, work for the individual rights of all women, and, as Christina Hoff Sommers aptly says, "want for women what they want for everyone, equal protection under the law" (Himmelfarb 20). Though not all feminists agree on how to reach this goal, most argue for a reasonable, realistic, and positive method. By contrasting the differing feminist ideas of writers like Adrienne Rich, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Camille Paglia, one defines a winning brand of feminism: a philosophy founded on equity feminist ideology and dedicated to the achievement of social, political, economic, and intellectual reform.

David Thomas and Camille Paglia, two contemporary cultural critics concerned with gender issues, share the belief that men and boys have aggressive tendencies that women must learn to understand and live with. Thomas, in his essay "The Mind of Man," asserts that women should accept boys' nature: "Boys are not on the whole, docile creatures who wish to live in harmony with one another, but are, instead, highly competitive, physically energetic creatures who hunt in packs" (341). Paglia shares this view: "There are some things we cannot change...hunt, pursuit, and capture are biologically programmed into male sexuality. Generation

after generation, men must be educated, refined, and ethically persuaded away from their tendency toward brutishness" (50-51). Because Paglia believes that man's nature is inherently aggressive and poses a danger to women, she maintains that feminism of the academic type gives women a false sense of equality and ease. To her, women are "vulnerable and defenseless" and need not waste time pretending that they live in a world where they can enjoy the same freedoms and opportunities as men (50). She disagrees with militant feminist ideology that favors "consciousness-raising" sessions and bonding together for power, and that treats women as "victims" of a male-dominated society. At the same time, she views academic feminists as naive for believing people are the products of their environment (50).

One can easily argue against the above brand of feminism. In the first place, Paglia cannot assume that men differ so radically from women, especially in a biological sense. One source reports that "[t]here is no research showing any gender differences in IQ," and also "there is very little information on any other inborn characteristics that may be identified as distinctly male or female" (Kelly 150, 146). Of course, biological differences do exist between the sexes; men innately have more strength than do women, and as Thomas points out, "The sexes differ in the types of mental tasks at which they excel" (338). Studies show, for example, that males have an aptitude for rotating three-dimensional objects in their heads, while women have better verbal skills. Nonetheless, many apparent differences between men and women--their contrasting skills, interests, attitudes, and personalities--stem from the family environment they grow up in, the people they associate with in their youth, and the influence of society in general. Research shows that boys and girls receive vastly different treatment beginning almost immediately after birth. Anthropologist Adamson Hoebel notes that "a major factor in the development of the child as a person is the accumulation of innumerable pressures, most of them subtle, others not so subtle, that shape his images and his feel for the surrounding world. He strives to act in accordance with these understandings" (38).

In the same way, society and culture subtly enforce stereotypes of how boys, men, girls, and women *should* act and think. Observes Gary Kelly, author of *Sexuality Today*, "The media play a major role in how women and men are portrayed in our culture. On television...the images of both men and women tend to be stereotypical and traditional. It is clear that some cultural messages emphasizing inequalities between men and women are still being given to children as they grow up" (156). Thus, by the time a person reaches adulthood, family and community together have

had a large part in shaping his/her identity and perception of the world. And if people's biases, stereotypes, and attitudes result from their environment, then contrary to the beliefs of Thomas and Paglia, society has the power to change the type of men and women it produces. Women should never accept less freedom and security than men demand. Admittedly, the world will always contain men who use their advantage of strength to harm women, but women should not let this knowledge limit them. Instead, they should view the world realistically and use common sense in potentially dangerous situations. Like men, women can and should pursue formidable goals and overcome the challenges involved. A brand of feminism like Paglia's, that supports the idea that women are in *constant* danger and restricts their opportunities, is self-defeating. It breeds mistrust and fear of men and consequently promotes a feeling of inferiority among women.

Similarly, gender feminist thought is unrealistic and misguided. According to Sommers, in her *Figuring Out Feminism*, "Equity feminists point with pride to the gains women have made toward achieving parity in the workplace," whereas gender feminists disparage these gains and talk about "backlash" (334). This gender feminist attitude seems contradictory in a time when people should recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of women. Of course, gender feminists describe society as "a patriarchy, a 'male hegemony'...in which the dominant gender works to keep women cowering and submissive" (Sommers 331). However, part of their belief about women's low position depends on misquoted "facts" and other faulty evidence. They argue that women's eating disorders "are an inevitable consequence of a misogynistic society that demeans women...by objectifying their bodies" (328). Many times, however, the movie and fashion industry's portrayal of women isn't the cause of eating disorders. Anorexia, for example, stems from a chemical imbalance that translates into a negative mind-set and an unrealistic drive to please others at one's own expense. Psychologist and author of *Secret Language of Eating Disorders*, Peggy Claude-Pierre asserts that "With this mind-set in place, the slide toward eating disorders can easily be triggered by family problems, sexual abuse, a breakup, or typical teenage angst. Anorexics turn away from food unconsciously because food is life and their negative minds tell them that they don't deserve to live" (222).

Moreover, gender feminists constantly look for ways to convince others that society is male-dominated and rigged against women, and that they have a right to retribution. Says Gertrude Himmelfarb in her article, "A Sentimental Priesthood," gender feminists believe that "[i]f women are victims generically, by the same token men are culprits generically...Each man is inherently and potentially

guilty...by virtue of being a man" (20). Equality feminists, by contrast, declare that women will get nowhere by the gaining of power, or by relying on the past for guidance as Adrienne Rich champions in her essay, "What Does a Woman Need to Know?" Women should not seek to overpower men and "punish" them for generations of oppression. They must instead understand that they cannot rightfully blame *today's* men for biases, attitudes, and traditions that people have passed down since the first established societies, or for the sexist sins of their ancestors. Gender feminists might respond that all men share the accumulated guilt that they inherited from their forefathers. But this argument relies on a distorted interpretation of the past. Instead of taking the "dimmiest view of the past" as the gender feminists do, John Ellis takes a sensible approach to reform. He asserts, "successful reform requires that the past be viewed in a sober and accurate way" (65). The past should serve solely to illuminate the achievements and mistakes of previous reformers. Feminists must realize that they can only change the current trend by acknowledging the past *and* focusing on the future. Women as individuals should continue to challenge social and political structures in reaching their full potential, but they must look ahead to educate the next generation and instill in them new ideas in order for *intellectual* reform to occur. Intellectual reform establishes a basis for progress, and only when it prevails can bigotry and social and political injustice cease to exist, not just for women, but for all people.

As the twenty-first century looms closer, equity feminists, the same breed that began the "women's movement" over one-hundred years ago, emerge as the best choice to lead modern feminism into its next stage. The coming years represent a critical time for equity feminists. Though they feel confident and encouraged about the progress already made on women's behalf, they realize that they need more support to accomplish equal partnership with men and a realization of men's opportunities and rights. Gender feminists and similar feminist groups make these aspirations more difficult. They mask sensible goals of feminism by "constantly raising the stakes," and seeking "not mere reform or revision...but revolution" (Himmelfarb 20). In this way, they isolate themselves and lose support among both men and women for the entire feminist cause. John Ellis concludes that gender feminism "poisons relations between the sexes, and catapults into leadership roles in the women's movement angry, alienated women who divert that movement from the necessary task of exploring feasible changes" (74). People need to know that feminism, based on its essential ideals and goals, has broad appeal, and that they should not dismiss it because of a specific sector. They must look beyond the extremists to find a branch of feminism that welcomes all people

and focuses on a positive and reasonable goal: a society that affords everyone the opportunity and right under the law to reach his or her potential.

Works Cited

Claude-Pierre, Peggy. "The Miracle Worker." *Cosmopolitan* October 1997: 221-223.

Ellis, John M. *Literature Lost*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

Himmelfarb, Gertrude. "A Sentimental Priesthood: The Aggressive Tactics of `Gender Feminists.'" *TLS* 11 November 1994, 20.

Hoebel, E. Adamson. *Anthropology: The Study of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972.

Kelly, Gary F. *Sexuality Today: The Human Perspective*. Guilford, Conn.: The Dushkin Publishing Group, 1992.

Paglia, Camille. *Sex, Art, and American Culture*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

Rich, Adrienne. "What Does a Woman Need to Know?" *The Presence of Others: Voices that Call for Response*. Eds. Andrea Lunsford and John J. Ruszkiewicz. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. 44-50.

Sommers, Christine Hoff. "Figuring Out Feminism." *The Presence of Others: Voices that Call for Response*. Eds. Andrea Lunsford and John J. Ruszkiewicz. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. 328-335.

Thomas, David. "The Mind of Man." *The Presence of Others: Voices that Call for Response*. Eds. Andrea Lunsford and John J. Ruszkiewicz. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. 337-342.

Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, Mass: G. & C. Merriam Co, 1981

(This essay analyzes Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson".)

Sylvia and The Struggle Against Class Consciousness in Toni Cade Bambara's
"The Lesson"

by Sarah Wiktorski

"The Lesson" by Toni Cade Bambara is not just a spirited story about a poor girl out of place in an expensive toy store; it is a social commentary. "The Lesson" is a story about one African-American girl's struggle with her growing awareness of class inequality. The character Miss Moore introduces the facts of social inequality to a distracted group of city kids, of whom Sylvia, the main character, is the most cynical. Flyboy, Fat Butt, Junebug, Sugar, Rosie, Sylvia and the rest think of Miss Moore as an unsolicited educator, and Sylvia would rather be doing anything else than listening to her. The conflict between Sylvia and Miss Moore, "This nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree" (307), represents more than the everyday dislike of authority by a young adolescent. Sylvia has her own perception of the way things work, her own "world" that she does not like to have invaded by the prying questions of Miss Moore. Sylvia knows in the back of her mind that she is poor, but it never bothers her until she sees her disadvantages in blinding contrast with the luxuries of the wealthy. As Miss Moore introduces her to the world of the rich, Sylvia begins to attribute shame to poverty, and this sparks her to question the "lesson" of the story, how "money ain't divided up right in this country" (308).

Sylvia uses her daydreams as an alternative to situations she doesn't want to deal with, making a sharp distinction between reality as it is and reality as she wants to perceive it. For instance, as they ride in a cab to the toy store, Miss Moore puts Sylvia in charge of the fare and tells her to give the driver ten percent. Instead of figuring out the tip, she becomes sidetracked by Sugar, Junebug, and Flyboy, who are putting lipstick on each other and hanging out the window; Sylvia considers what she would rather do with the money: "So I'm stuck. Don't nobody want to go for my plan, which is to jump out at the next light and run off to the first bar-b-que we can find" (308). When it's time for her to pay the driver, Sugar has to tell Sylvia how much to give. Sylvia's thoughts are divided between childish play and adult responsibility: her daydreaming conflicts with her desire to respond to real situations. On the way to the F.A.O. Schwarz store, Sylvia devises a plan to escape from Miss Moore's educational trip: "I say we oughta get to the subway cause it's

cooler and besides we might meet some cute boys" (308). By occupying her mind with what she would rather be doing, Sylvia creates a refuge in her mind where she is protected from uncomfortable situations. As soon as she doesn't like her circumstance, in this case a taxi ride, she counters it with an impulsive whim: "I'm tired of this and say so. And would much rather snatch Sugar and go to the Sunset and terrorize the West Indian kids" (308). She is frustrated when her circumstances don't line up with her "plans." In a similar way, Sylvia resists acknowledging the foreign world of wealth that Miss Moore and the toy store will soon introduce to her.

When they arrive at the toy store, Sylvia struggles with the "new" class consciousness that is surfacing in her by attacking the values of high-end consumerism. While Sugar, Rosie, and Big Butt are having fun and asking questions, Sylvia is disturbed by what she sees in the toy store. As the kids press close to the windows from outside on the street, each one points out something that interests him or her in the toys. Sylvia can't figure out why the toys cost so much. When she looks at a glass paperweight, she doesn't understand what it is, much less why it costs hundreds of dollars: "My eyes tell me it's a chunk of glass cracked with something heavy, and different-colored inks dripped into the splits, then the whole thing put in an oven or something. But for \$480 it don't make sense" (309). In her opinion, the toys she sees in the store cost too much, and for reasons she can't explain, this experience makes her mad. Sylvia looks at a sailboat that costs \$1,195 and can't believe how expensive it is. The exorbitant prices are more than she can make sense out of: "Who'd pay all that when you can buy a sailboat set for a quarter at Pop's, a tube of glue for a dime, and a ball of string for eight cents?" (309). Sylvia begins to compare these expensive toys to what she has, and the comparison furthers her anger. She criticizes the rationale behind paying that much for a toy sailboat that she could make herself for under fifty cents. By finding fault in the decadence of the rich lifestyle, Sylvia contrasts it with her own, thereby alienating herself from it.

Sylvia begins to comprehend how she is alienated from the wealth she sees by comparing her own poverty with uninhibited consumerism. When she imagines herself asking her mother for one of the toys in F.A.O. Schwarz, she contrasts wealth with her personal experience and can see the dissimilarity more clearly. Sylvia knows that if she went to her mom asking for a thirty-five dollar birthday clown, her mother wouldn't even take her seriously: "'You wanna who that costs what?' she'd say, cocking her head to the side to get a better view of the hole in my head" (311). In Sylvia's family, that much money pays for necessities like beds

and bills or trips for the whole family, not one birthday gift. The idea that someone else actually has enough money to spend so liberally makes Sylvia consider uncomfortable questions: "Who are these people that spend that much for performing clowns and \$1,000 for toy sailboats? What kinda work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it?" (311). Sylvia confronts her poverty because she is faced with tangible evidence of wealth to which she is not privileged. The toy store has shaken her from the denial of "the part about we all poor and live in the slums, which I don't feature" (308). Miss Moore's lesson on social inequality is alarming: "Imagine for a minute what kind of society it is in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family" (312). Yet, Sylvia doesn't want to contemplate it. "Don't none of us know what kind of pie she talking about in the first damn place" (311). Before Sylvia sees the toys in F.A.O. Schwarz, she doesn't consider "the lesson" because she has never seen and acknowledged the luxury afforded by wealth, thus never facing her own poverty.

As Sylvia encounters the material wealth represented by the toys, her anger becomes a cover-up for increasing feelings of envy. Initially reacting to Miss Moore's teachings, Sylvia denies the importance and truth of her words: "And then she gets to the part about how we all poor and live in the slums, which I don't feature" (308). But once she compares her world with the excess she sees at the toy store, she becomes angry and resentful. Sylvia takes her anger out on others indiscriminately to guard herself from her new thoughts and feelings: "Then Sugar run a finger over the whole boat. And I'm jealous and want to hit her. Maybe not her, but I sure want to punch somebody in the mouth" (311). Sylvia is hiding her envy of wealth with anger. She doesn't want to admit to herself that she is jealous of the kind of people who can afford these toys. It is too traumatic for Sylvia to know and feel the helplessness of being born into poverty.

Sylvia's response to her new awareness of social inequality is retaliation. For Sylvia, anything that elevates her awareness of her relative poverty is a threat. She resists consciousness of the "new world" by mocking and ridiculing other characters in the story who are dabbling with it. The other kids' interaction with Miss Moore makes her especially derisive. It is as though Miss Moore herself represents social consciousness, and the other kids who make observations in agreement with her are equally threatening. When Sugar finally sums up Miss Moore's lesson, "This is not much of a democracy if you ask me" (312), Sylvia responds, "I am disgusted with Sugar's treachery" (312). Moreover, when Mercedes tells Miss Moore about her stationery with "a big rose on each sheet" and "envelopes [that] smell like roses," Rosie, like Sylvia, joins in mocking traitors:

"Who wants to know about your smelly-ass stationery?" (309). Mercedes's identification with Miss Moore's ideals is punished. Condemning those who side with Miss Moore is a means of discrediting her lesson.

As Sylvia leaves the toy store, she battles with an array of emotions--confusion, anger, denial, and envy. The complex response she has to visiting F.A.O. Schwarz awakens in Sylvia an internal struggle she has never felt, and through criticizing Miss Moore, Sylvia distances herself from realizing her poverty. In her responses to the toys, their prices, and the unseen people who buy them, it is evident that Sylvia is confronting the truth of Miss Moore's lesson. As Sylvia begins to understand social inequality, the realization of her own disadvantage makes her angry. For Sylvia, achieving class consciousness is a painful enlightenment. For her to accept that she is underprivileged is shameful for her, and Sylvia would rather deny it than admit a wound to her pride: "ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin" (312).

Works Cited

Bambara, Toni Cade. "The Lesson." Eds. Hans P. Guth and Gabriele L. Rico. *Discovering Literature: Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997. 307-12.

ENG1030 **Instructor: Ms. Lisa Boyd**
(This essay analyzes Arturo Islas's Migrant Souls.)

The Lonely Effects of Assimilation

by Lauren Murphy

The Europeans who claimed what was to become America chose to integrate the land's present inhabitants and future immigrants in order to become the dominating race and, consequently, made other cultures feel inferior to their own. The Angel family, Mexican-Indian immigrants and the subject of Arturo Islas's *Migrant Souls*, becomes victim to the Americans' forceful demands for conformity. While Sancho, the father, never complains about assimilation, yet never becomes fully "assimilated," his wife, Eduvigis, strives to be a part of the American culture. These conflicting reactions and the existing prejudice in the community leave their

daughter, Josie, uncertain of her true identity.

In the early 1830's, Mexican-Indians, seeking a better life in the "land of opportunity," crossed the border into America only to find themselves and all who followed forced to assimilate to a new culture. The white Americans pushed their food, their beliefs, their clothing style, and the English language upon these immigrants. Some of the seemingly brainwashed Mexican-Indians saw the American actions as signs of kindness and acceptance. Yet, fearful others considered being caught by the strict American border patrol a "fate worse than death" (490). Immigration officers warned "foreign-looking" people to carry citizenship identification at all times, and they "sneaked up on innocent dark-skinned people, and deported them," possibly also "mak[ing them] suffer unspeakable mortifications" (484, 486). Those legally able to reach America became subjected to American ideals and customs. The whites relocated those unwilling to live the "accepted American lifestyle" to specified areas. Aware of this law, Sancho cynically warns his daughters, "Don't wear [the Native American Thanksgiving costume] outside the house or they'll pick you up and send you to a reservation" (484). Sancho disagrees with actions such as these, finding them foolish, but he withholds his feelings of anger.

Although Sancho respects Americans and abides by their rules, he recognizes prejudices against Mexicans, and he remains faithful to his true heritage. He remains a Mexican-Indian "at heart"; he considers himself an "American citizen of Mexican heritage" (487). As Sancho is a "slower, more patient driver," he is a patient person, able not to show frustration caused by constant law enforcement and suspicion of his race (485). Once, as his family carefully drives across the border, he makes a strong effort to avoid trouble. "Just say 'American' when the time comes," he tells his daughters, as if they are all programmed to do so (487). But away from officials, Sancho leads a Mexican life. At dinners, he enjoys "eat[ing] the beans," not the duck, symbolizing his preference for his Mexican heritage over the American culture (483). Offended by those who do not accept his culture, Sancho labels them "ignorant" for labeling him as an "alien" (488). Obviously sensitive to stereotype of Mexican-Indians, Sancho, rarely a serious person, intimately discusses his pride in his culture with Josie. He tells her that although some unknowledgeable whites think Mexicans are not human beings, she should be proud of her race which was actually in America before those who now consider themselves "American."

Sancho's wife, Eduvigis, oppositely affected by assimilation, tries so desperately to

conform to the American way of life that she loses a true sense of her identity. She tries to influence and to force her children to act as the whites do, and if, by their own instinct, they disobey, she refers to them as "your darlings" to Sancho, appearing to temporarily disown them (483). She carefully watches society and, in turn, reads "glossy American magazines" and shops at an American-identified grocery store, Safeway (484). She even finds the Native-American race more acceptable than her own because she wrongly believes they speak English (485). Eduviges overly concerns herself with being American, and so she becomes bitter towards her race and desensitized to the troubles of poor Mexican immigrants. Attempting to disassociate herself from this group, she ironically refers to them as "wetbacks" and "imbecile cretins" (485). She makes apparent the fact that she would "have a fit" if her family were to help poor Indian women (489). The Angel children recognize the reason for their mother's feelings: "Mexican Indians [are] too close to home and the truth" (485). She tries helplessly and selfishly to forget the troubles which led her to America, but she constantly returns to painful memories when she sees Mexican immigrants in need. Eduviges's lack of concern and respect for her own race dramatically differs from her husband's feelings.

Eduviges's and Sancho's conflicting views on assimilation affect their entire family by causing disagreements between the parents and confusing the children, leaving them uncertain of whom they should believe. On Thanksgiving, the commemoration of the day whites "overtook" America, the Angel family risks losing citizenship by participating in an Anglo tradition. The descriptions of the turkey, a symbol of Thanksgiving and the object the family sets out to buy, as "stupid" and "dumb" exemplify the fact that the parents' disagreements can impact such a small and relatively meaningless situation as purchasing a turkey (487, 491). Although Sancho would like to eat enchiladas during Thanksgiving, "a ritual that mean[s] nothing to him," his wife claims in a "fit of guilt [for acting un-American]" that she must cook a traditional turkey (484). Ironically, the family drives to Mexico to buy and return with their turkey. As they illegally cross the border with a live animal, the complications with which they are met symbolize the constant complications in the argumentative family. The abundant conflicts resulting from Sancho's and Eduviges's differences leave Josie despairingly confused.

Surrounded, trapped, and influenced by her parents' dissimilar beliefs, Josie struggles to discover her own true views on her race. She does not understand how her parents can have such contrasting opinions concerning their culture. Ofelia, Josie's sister, best describes the feeling which most likely plagues Josie-- "suspended in midair while the sky revolve[s] around [her]" (486). The

contradictions among the family leave her feeling as if she lives in "the middle of nowhere," as if the middle of nowhere exists in her heart (486). She is "tossed around" by statements that she is an alien and statements that she should be proud of her Mexican heritage. Striving to place herself in a definitive category, Josie searches her heart for answers, but finds only emptiness, proving that she recognizes that her lonely feelings result from being trapped between two cultures. In the selection from *Migrant Souls*, the use of both the Spanish and English languages and the description of a meal of menudos, gorditas, and Coca-Cola symbolize Josie's two identities--Mexican and American.

In the Angel family, as well as in the families of other immigrants, the power of assimilation results in feelings of despair, uncertainty, and inferiority. Eduvige's and Sancho's opposing thoughts on the American culture impact their family's events every day. Constantly in the presence of completely different opinions, young Josie wanders farther from the realization of her identity. And so, forcing families to conform to foreign societies may cause conflicts and destroy the child's sense of self.

Works Cited

Islas, Arturo. From *Migrant Souls*. *American Mosaic: Multicultural Readings in Context*. Eds. Gabriele Rico, Barbara Roche and Sandra Mano. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1995. 483-491.