Diversity of Issues in the
Early 20th Century Women's Movement

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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The movement for women's rights during the years 1900-1940 was a cause rich in diversity. This thesis shows how some literary works, in keeping with literature's function as a window on life, give a glimpse of the diversity of the early twentieth century women's movement in terms of women's issues. By examining Willa Cather's "O Pioneers!" (1913), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Herland" (1915) and "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God" (1937), Agnes Smedley's "Daughter of Earth" (1943), Edith Wharton's "The Age of Innocence" (1920), and Anzia Yezierska's "Bread Givers" (1925), one can see women fighting for the right to personal freedoms, breaking traditional gender role expectations and social constraints, and striving for complete equal rights with men.
As history unfolded from 1900 to 1940 for the American women's movement, one thing remained constant for the feminist cause: diversity. Though it can be seen in a number of aspects, the diversity of the women's movement during the early 20th century is especially evident in the variety of issues the cause encompassed. The matters of issue for the early 1900s feminist movement varied from the right to personal freedoms, to the breaking of traditional gender role expectations and social constraints, to complete equal rights with men.

The years 1900-1920 saw women embracing early the issue of the right to personal freedoms—a person's most basic rights to feel, think, act, and choose as she pleases, with the right to choose extending to include electing to be employed, to vote, to be involved in politics, etc. At the dawn of 1900, women's personal freedoms were in jeopardy. The conventional agrarian society that had existed in America since Colonial times was rapidly being replaced with an industrial system. As a result, marriages that were once economic partnerships, with husbands and wives working together toward the successful production of their household, came to rely solely on the factory work of the husband for economic survival. In small numbers at first, women began to fight against the dependent state that the new industrial system forced them into and for the personal rights they deserved as human beings. Young white women
from middle-class families, taking up the cause of the right to choose employment, began entering the labor market prior to marriage. Poorer women, black and American Indian women, and immigrant women worked as well, though they did so as a matter of survival. Other women, led by Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony, became involved in the struggle for women's right to vote. Their lobby for suffrage met success in 1920, when the 19th Amendment was ratified. Married women chose to involve themselves in political society by joining temperance unions and women's clubs. They also began to lobby for social, economic, and political reforms that pertained to women, children, and family.

Besides fighting for personal freedoms and political rights, during the years 1900-1920, women challenged gender role expectations and social constraints. The traditional expectations for men and women during the early 1900s were that men should marry, work outside the home to support their families, and maintain a dominant position over their wives while women should marry, stay home to do household duties and have children, and remain submissive to their husbands. According to convention, men were to do their civic duty publicly in the community while women were to do their duty by private, charitable acts, but women of the nineteen teens took it upon themselves to defy the roles society destined them. Early members of the women's movement took jobs even though work outside the home for married, white, middle-class women was taboo. Under the
leadership of author Charlotte Perkins Gilman, they also argued for economic equality for women and for the separation of woman's role as wife and mother from the role of housekeeper and child-raiser. By taking hold of diverse issues, women began, slowly but surely, to change their place in American society.

By 1920, women's status was improving, for the most part, politically, economically, and socially. The vote was gained in 1920, more women were obtaining an education and working in factories (at least before they married), wives joined various volunteer organizations, and the Harlem Renaissance gave black women the opportunity to showcase their artistic talents. In spite of their gains, however, the women of the feminist movement continued to battle for a number of different issues during the twenties.

In accordance with their personal right to choose involvement in politics, women continued to fight in the areas of politics and social reform. The National American Woman Suffrage Association, which was instrumental in the ratification of the 19th Amendment, transformed itself into the nonpartisan League of Women Voters and developed procedures for studying local and national political issues, working to get women involved in politics to a greater degree. Other feminists moved to secure legislation reflecting women's concerns, including the establishment of a Women's Bureau to formulate policies concerning wage-earning women and the Sheppard Towner Act, a measure that created federally-appropriated public health centers for
women. Still other members of the women's movement persuaded Congress to rewrite citizenship laws for women in 1922. As a result, wives secured citizenship independently of their husbands.

Women of the 1920s also battled for and won some gains in issues of employment and education, two other extensions of the personal right to choose. Two million, one hundred-fifty thousand women were added to the work force during the twenties. Professional women became more numerous, high school curriculums were broadened, and women increased their enrollment into colleges. Sadly, the improvements in education and employment were enjoyed (for the most part) only by white, middle-class women. Poor women, black and American Indian women, and immigrant women worked because they had to, and they received little educational opportunity. However, leaders such as Mary Talbert and Mary McLeod Bethune utilized the work and education opportunities that were available to them. They provided an example and a hope for other minority women by becoming active participants in the National Association of Colored Women and the National Council of Negro Women.

Some feminists, led by Alice Paul, turned to the issue of complete equality with men. Paul and her followers believed in the need to transform the attitude of society toward women. They objected to social reforms such as protective labor legislation and the Sheppard-Towner Act, which gave special treatment to women, and advocated instead absolute equality for women in areas of employment,
education, and politics. Whether they were working in the area of complete equal rights with men or for the personal freedom to choose involvement in politics, employment, and/or education, the members of the women's movement continued their fight for improvement during the 1920s by turning to a variety of issues.

The 1930s opened as a period of uncertainty and disillusionment, both for the women's movement on a small scale and the United States as a whole. America had just suffered a devastating stock-market crash and was facing the Great Depression. As a result, women found themselves again struggling with the issue of breaking traditional gender role expectations and social constraints. Tragically, the women's movement appeared to take a giant step backward in the thirties in relation to the supposed role of a woman in society. The national economy had failed, and, as a result, it could not afford work to all men. Thus, women found themselves battling with society over the propriety of their competing for scarce jobs. Many states adopted laws and regulations to exclude married women from employment. To most Americans in the 1930s a job taken by a woman was seen as a job stolen from a man. Soon, women found their expected "place" to be once more in the home. They even had to fight against magazines, movies, and advertisements, all media that repeatedly reaffirmed "traditional" views of woman's role as wife and mother.

Besides battling against traditional gender role expectations, women again fought in the area of personal
freedoms for the right to choose education, employment, and political participation. Economic necessity gave women a reason to work; the proportion of females in the labor force rose 3.12 percentage points between 1930 and 1940. Minority women also worked, though they were excluded from white-collar "woman's" jobs. Educational opportunities for white, middle-class girls and women also improved in the thirties. High school and college enrollments increased, and the number of female college graduates increased by 57 percent in ten years. Black and foreign-born women had fewer educational opportunities than whites, but they still made gains in the area of learning. (A black branch of the American Association of University women, founded in 1924 and eight chapters and three hundred members strong by 1932, is proof of minority women's educational progress.) In the political arena, the New Deal gave visibility to white, middle-class women as well as black and immigrant women. The 1930s closed with women gaining improvements for their sex, but still struggling with a diversity of issues.

From the right to personal freedoms, to the breaking of traditional gender role expectations and social constraints, to complete equal rights with men, the women of the early 20th century women's movement grappled with a variety of issues. As American history unfolded from 1900-1940, the feminist movement made progress in spite of and because of its diversity of causes.

* Sources for this historical background include Nancy F.
Whether or not they were actively involved in a political movement for women's rights, many women living during the 1900s–1940s faced obstacles in their lives due to their gender. Three particular obstacles for early 20th century women that were also issues of the early women's movement were: a lack of personal freedoms, the burden of traditional gender role expectations and social constraints, and an absence of complete equality with men. Characters in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Agnes Semdley's *Daughter of Earth* (1943), Edith Wharton's, *The Age of Innocence* (1920), and Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925) struggle with the three gender barriers noted above.

Because of the industrial revolution in early twentieth century America, a development that changed woman's role in the economy from active participant to submissive dependent, one of the diverse issues of the feminist movement was that of the woman's right to personal freedoms. In "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) the protagonists both fight for personal independence at its most basic levels and in *Bread Givers* (1925) and *Daughter of Earth* (1913) the main characters struggle for the freedom to choose.

In the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the main character struggles to obtain the
most basic right: the freedom to feel, think, and act as she chooses. Like many living women at the dawn of 1900, the narrator is in a state of forced dependency on her husband John, a doctor. John takes the narrator's reliance on him so far that he treats her like a helpless child. The narrator is sick with depression, but her husband discredits her feelings of sickness:

"I don't weigh a bit more," said I "nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening when you are here but it is worse in the morning when you are away!"

"Bless her dear little heart!" said he [narrator's husband] with a big hug. "She shall be as sick as she pleases!" (763)

The narrator knows the seriousness of her condition, but her husband believes her illness to be all in her mind. Also, as a grown woman, the narrator knows what is best for herself, but her husband won't allow for her opinions:

I sometimes fancy that in my condition, if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus--but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition... (758)

The narrator's husband will not even let her go visiting:

I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wished he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia.

But he said I wasn't able to go... (762)
The protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper," therefore, must strive for the basic freedom she deserves as a human being, freedom denied to her because of the dependent state her husband has forced her into. She finally does gain her independence, though her means of doing so, insanity, is definitely less that preferrable. The narrator, because her husband suppresses her to such an extent that he won't allow her to leave her room, begins, late in the story, to "see" a woman trapped in the patterns of her wallpaper. The narrator finally goes mad and sets out to free the imaginary woman. As she liberates the woman she liberates herself:

I pulled and she [woman in the wallpaper] shook..., and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.

"I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you [John] and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (766, 768)

Tragically, it is only through madness that the narrator can gain the freedom she requires and deserves as a human being.

Like "The Yellow Wallpaper," Zora Neale Hurston's novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, also shows a woman struggling for basic personal freedoms. In Hurston's work, the main character fights for the freedom to do as she wishes and the right to be respected as a human being. Their Eyes Were Watching God is the story of Janie, a black woman from Florida, and her relationships with each of her
three husbands--Logan, Joe, and Teacake. With all three husbands Janie experiences the dependence on and subsequent domination of men that women faced during the early 1900s. She, upon advice from her grandmother, marries her first husband for his "protection" and financial stability, but, being unhappy, she leaves him for a second husband who provides equal security and wealth. Janie's second husband, Joe, takes her dependence on him so far that he orders her around and won't even let her make public appearances:

"How come I can't go long wid you tu de draggin'-out?"

Joe was struck speechless for a minute. "Why Janie! You wouldn't be seen at uh draggin'-out, wouldja?..."

"You would be dere wid me, wouldn't yuh?

"Dat's right, but Ah'm uh man even if Ah is de mayor. But de mayor's wife is somethin' different again...you ain't goin'... (94)

Because of her dependent position, Janie must struggle with her husbands for the freedom to do as she pleases. She must also fight for the basic right to be respected, since both her second and third husbands (Joe and Teacake, respectively) beat her:

Joe Starks didn't know the words for all this, but he knew the feeling. So he struck Janie with all his might... (124)

Before the week was over he [Teacake] had whipped
Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. (218)

Like the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Janie is forced to depend on her husbands and, thus, must struggle to overcome their tyranny and obtain some of the most basic personal freedoms. Unlike the protagonist in "The Yellow Wallpaper," however, Janie eventually gains her independence through desirable means: she breaks the bonds her husbands have her in. Janie leaves Logan and severely rebukes Joe on his death bed:

"...you goin tuh listen tuh me one time befo' you die. Have yo' way all yo' life,...you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Muh own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me." (133)

She also, after searching long and fighting hard, finds a loving relationship with her third husband Teacake (in spite of the fact that he beats her):

- He (Teacake) drifted off into sleep and Janie looked down on him with a self-crushing love.
- So her soul crawled out from its hiding place. (192)

Thus, Their Eyes Were Watching God is a novel of triumph when it concerns Janie's acquirement of basic personal freedoms.

A look at Bread Givers, by Anzia Yezierska, gives a
glimpse of a desire for personal freedom that goes beyond the struggles for basic independence manifested in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Their Eyes Were Watching God. Yezierska's novel shows the importance of the right to choose for early twentieth century women through its protagonist's emphasis on and battle for education. Bread Givers is the story of a young Russian Jewish immigrant girl living in a two-room apartment with her mother, father, and three older sisters. The girl, Sara, lives in extreme poverty and must peddle herring in the streets in order to put food on her family's table. She also lives under the tyranny of her father who, like the men in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Their Eyes Were Watching God, forces her to be submissive to and dependent upon him: "Woman! Stay in your place!"..."I'm the head of this family" (13). For Sara, the only way out of her misery is through education:

And then it flashed to me. The story from the Sunday paper. A girl--slaving away in the shop. ...nothing had ever happened to her. Then suddenly she began to study in night school, then college. And worked and studied, on and on till she became a teacher in the schools. (155)

As many immigrant women during the 1920s did, Sara goes after her education, but meets with a number of adversities. Her father and, in fact, her entire family discourage her endeavors, warning her that she will become a "dried-up old maid" if she does not quit school and get married (205). She struggles to learn geometry, only to
fail the subject in both high school and college. Worst of all, she must work ten hours a day, live in filthy conditions, and practically starve herself in order to earn and save money for her education expenses:

My fussing...made it too late for me to start cooking my coffee for breakfast. I grabbed a slice of black bread and ate as I hurried to the car.... Ten hours I must work in the laundry. Two hours in night school. Two hours more to study my lessons. When can I take time to be clean? If I'm to have strenth and courage to go on with what I set out to do, I must shut my eyes to the dirt. (163)

Sara asserts her personal right to choose through her desire for and struggle to obtain an education. She seizes her freedom to choose to be educated in spite of her family's scorn and the difficult conditions she encounters. The result of Sara's efforts in an outcome that was familiar to many white, middle-class women of the early twentieth century, but not so many poor and/or minority women. In Bread Givers, Sara earns her college degree and becomes a successful teacher:

If only I could have taken out my diploma and held it over my head for all to see! I was a college graduate! I was about to become a teacher of the schools! (237)

Like the novel Bread Givers, Agnes Smedley's Daughter of Earth shows an urge for the freedom to choose: Smedley's
characters want to vote, to be educated, and to be employed. *Daughter of Earth* is a novel about Marie, a poor working-class girl from the southwestern United States. Marie is very conscious of her gender, and the right to personal freedoms is an issue she holds close to her heart. As many actual members of the early twentieth century feminist movement saw it, Marie sees the right to vote as an instiller of pride in women and a tool for gaining equality with men. Her mother, in particular, proves suffrage to be a weapon for gaining equality when she rightfully keeps her vote a secret from her husband:

That year women were given the vote in our State. My mother's chin raised itself just a bit, but she held her peace. She was not a talking woman.

"Howrye goin' to vote?" my father asked her. She did not reply.... At last a weapon had been put into her hands.... On election day he threatened her, but still she would not answer. ...she walked out of the house as if he did not exist. (78-79)

Along with suffrage, Marie (like Sara, of *Bread Givers*) values education as a means for escaping poverty: "...I would study never-endingly until I could make enough money..." (185). Marie treasures employment as well, seeing it as a way for women to gain the respect of men:

When Helen began to draw weekly wages she took an equal place with my father in our home. She
was as valuable and she was as respected as he. (44)

Thus, Marie holds dear her entitlement to the personal freedom to choose such things as education, and work. She does more than value the freedom to choose, however; she takes it for herself. As women did during the late thirties, she goes beyond the vote by becoming active in politics, in her case with the Socialist Party. She also obtains a superb education and travels all across the country to do so, moving from grade school, to correspondence courses, to college at Berkley and New York. Marie even meets success in employment: she becomes "the only woman on The Call," the leading New York Socialist daily (329).

Daughter of Earth, as well as Bread Givers, Their Eyes Were Watching God, and "The Yellow Wallpaper," all show women working for their rights to personal freedoms. In Daughter of Earth, and Bread Givers, the main characters fight for their right to choose such things as suffrage, employment, and education. The protagonists of Their Eyes Were Watching God and "The Yellow Wallpaper" struggle for the basic freedom to feel, think, and act as one pleases. Like real women of the early 1900s did, the protagonists of the four works listed above gain some measure of personal independence despite the obstacles they encounter.

Another of the numerous and differing issues of the early 1900s women's movement was the breaking of traditional gender role expectations and social constraints. During the
early twentieth century, males were expected to work outside the home and maintain a dominant position over women while females were supposed to exist only as housewives and mothers and remain submissive to men. Also, society had many rules that governed the conduct of both men and women. Members of the feminist movement took it upon themselves to break gender role expectations and social constraints, and so did the characters in *O Pioneers!* (1913), *Herland* (1915), *Bread Givers*, and *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

In *O Pioneers!*, by Willa Cather, the main character breaks down traditional gender role expectations. *O Pioneers!* is the story of Alexandra, a woman of Swedish heritage who struggles to maintain a successful farm in the rural midwest. Alexandra is no "ordinary" woman, at least by the standards of the early 1900s. While most real men and women of the early twentieth century thought of women as homemakers and men as wage-earners, in *O Pioneers* Alexandra's father looks to her as a help with his farm, rather than his two sons:

> Before Alexandra was twelve years old she had begun to be a help to him [Alexandra's father], and as she grew older he had come to depend more and more on her resourcefulness and good judgement.... It was Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors. (22-23)

In fact, Alexandra's father entrusts the responsibility of running his farm to her, not her brothers, when he dies.
Alexandra is intelligent, and she sustains the farm well, though she must take a position of authority over her brothers and deal with their claims that "the property of a family belongs to the men of the family" (169). She realizes that her brothers and others feel she is stepping out of her place, but she refuses to compromise her self-reliance or deny her proficiency:

They have their own way of doing things, and they do not altogether like my way, I am afraid. Perhaps they think me too independent. But I have had to think for myself a good many years and am not likely to change. (118)

Thus Alexandra breaks traditional gender roles by being in charge of her farm, by overruling her brothers, and by insisting on her independence and capability. The end result of her breach of convention is success, plain and simple.

In spite of and because of the fact that she is a woman, Alexandra thrives as a farmer and businessperson:

...it was because she had so much personality to put into her enterprises and succeeded in putting it into them so completely, that her affairs prospered... (203)

Like Alexandra in O Pioneers!, the women of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland shatter traditional gender role expectations. Herland is the story of a female utopia called Herland and the three men who discover it. The male characters in the novel subscribe to the traditional early twentieth century belief that women are inferior to men:
"They would fight among themselves," Terry insisted. "Women always do. We mustn't look to find any sort of order and organization."

"No sir, they'll scrap," agreed Terry. "Also we musn't look for inventions and progress; it'll be awfully primitive." (8)

The women of Herland, however, prove every negative idea that their male "discoverers" have about women to be wrong. They live in complete harmony with one another, they are intelligent and educated, and their country has "...clean, well-built roads, ...attractive architecture,..." and "...ordered beauty..." (11). Herland's women have even developed the ability to reproduce sans men:

...and then the miracle happened--one of these young women bore a child. Of course they all thought there must be a man somewhere, but none was found. ...as the years passed, this wonder-woman bore child after child, five of them--all girls.

...Each of them, like her mother, bore five daughters.... [In] time there were left one hundred and fifty-five parthenogenic women, founding a new race. (56-57)

Thus, in Herland, the female characters completely tear down the traditional gender role expectations held by the male characters. Eventually, the men are forced to recant
their traditional bias' against women and admit the successes of Herland's female inhabitants:

"Do you really think it's to our credit that we have muddled along with all our poverty and disease and the like? They [the women of Herland] have peace and plenty, wealth and beauty, goodness and intellect." (80)

When Herland's male "discoverers" truly look at their male-dominated country and the problems it has compared with the clean, harmonious, prosperous female utopia they have found, they have to admit that they have been wrong about the primitive nature of women.

Along with O Pioneers! and Herland, Anzia Yezierska's Bread Givers exhibits a breach of gender role expectations. In a similar manner to Alexandra and the women who live in Herland, Sara, of Bread Givers, defies customary gender role beliefs, in her case the beliefs held by her father. Sara and her father are Jews: she is a Jew simply because she was born into the faith; he is a Jew not only because he was born as such, but because the faith is his life, the basis for everything he says and does. As a result of their different attitudes about their religion, Sara and her father do not see eye to eye. Sara tries to break the traditional Jewish role expectations she is subjected to, first telling her father "I'm smart enough to look out for myself... In America, women don't need men to boss them" and then moving out of his house (137). However, her father only enforces his traditional Jewish role expectations for
women, expectations that have much in common with those of early twentieth century thought:

"No girl can live without a father or a husband to look after her. It says in the Torah, only through a man has a woman an existence." (137)

When Sara moves out of the house to live on her own despite her father's warnings, she breaks traditional gender role expectations. In the end, she becomes the independent woman of her views even as her father continues to hold on to his traditional beliefs. Sara breaks away from her family and its negative views about women, obtains an education, and becomes a "teacher of the schools" (237). Sara's father, although aware of his daughter's accomplishments, refuses to recant his traditional, Jewish-based view of women:

"...the words of our Holy Torah are the only words of life. These words were true ages and ages ago and will yet be true for ages and ages to come. Our forefathers have said, 'A woman without a man is less than nothing....'"

The old pride flamed up in his [Sara's father's] face. (294)

During the course of Bread Givers, Sara is never relieved of hearing the conventional prattle of her father; however, like the real heroines of the 1900-1940s feminist movement, she eventually triumphs over the expectations of tradition.

In Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence, the main character breaches social constraints. The Age of Innocence is a story of old, monied, upper-class New Yorkers living
during the late 1800s. The characters in the novel have strict societal rules pertaining to men and women, as the following code of etiquette illustrates:

It was not the custom in New York drawing rooms for a lady to get up and walk away from one gentlemen in order to seek the company of another. Etiquette required that she wait,... while men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other at her side. (60-61)

Most of the characters in The Age of Innocence adhere faithfully to the upper-class New York social code. The character Ellen Olenska, however, who lived in Europe for many years before coming to America, is different. She wears an evening dress to the theatre that is low cut and off-the-shoulder, a grave social faux pas, and she insists on trying to obtain a divorce from her unfaithful husband, a moral and financial error in the eyes of her rich, high society peers. Ellen breaks the law that women can't mingle freely with men at parties, the rule that women aren't to be seen on public streets with men, and just about every other constraint upper-class New York has invented to restrict the sexes. In fact, another character in The Age of Innocence says that Ellen "...doesn't care a hang about...any of our little social signposts..." (121). Thus, Ellen breaks social constraints by disregarding the etiquette codes of her rich New York City peers. In the end, however, society triumphs as Ellen flees the country to escape her rich peers' wrath:
There was nothing on earth that the Wellands and Mingotts [old, monied New York families] would not have done to proclaim their unalterable affection for the Countess Olenska now that her passage to Europe was engaged (emphasis added).

Like many living early 1900s women did, Ellen battles hard aginst convention. Unfortunately, tradition is the victor over her in *The Age of Innocence*.

*The Age of Innocence*, as well as *Bread Givers*, *Herland*, and *O Pioneers!* are all novels about women who break with convention. Ellen, in *The Age of Innocence*, breaches the rules of New York society; Sara, in *Bread Givers*, defies the Jewish-based beliefs of her father; the women of *Herland* and Alexandra, of *O Pioneers!* prove themselves to be competent human beings despite the doubts of men around them. Just as many living women did, the protagonists of the above-cited novels break traditional gender role expectations and social constraints, one of the goals of the early 1900s feminist movement.

A third of the variety of issues of the early twentieth century women's movement was that of complete equality with men. Beginning in the 1920's, some members of the feminist movement, led by Alice Paul, objected to legislation and reforms that gave special treatment to women and advocated instead absolute equality for women in all aspects of society. The "equality feminists" believed that women are homologous to men, an idea that shows up in the novels
Their Eyes Were Watching God, The Age of Innocence, Daughter of Earth, and O Pioneers!.

In Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Janie seeks complete equality with men. As many women living in the early 1900s did, Janie lives in a state of dependence on her husbands. She wonders, however, that she, as a woman, is considered unequal to men. When at one point Janie's second husband, Joe, slaps her for belittling him in front of his friends, Janie questions: "Why must Joe be so mad with her making him look small when he did it to her all the time?" (125). Janie does not just think about her inequality, either; she acts on her thoughts. Another time, she stands up to Joe, saying:

"Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks his inside business. He told me how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do. (117)

When she is told by Joe that she is not as good as he is because she is a woman, Janie does not agree meekly:

...he [Joe] rejoined hotly...

"...somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves."

"Ah knows uh few things, and womenfolks thinks sometimes too!" (110-111)

Janie, therefore, thinks about and speaks with her husband Joe concerning women's equivalence with men. As Their Eyes
Were Watching God unfolds, she finally asserts her equality, getting in the last word at the side of Joe's death-bed:

"...you got tuh die tuh find out dat you got to pacify somebody besides yo'self if you wants any love and any sympathy in dis world. You ain't tried to pacify nobody but yo'self. Too busy listening tuh yo' own big voice."

"All dis bowin' down, all dis obedience under yo' voice--dat ain't what I rushed down de road tuh find out about you." (133-134)

As in Their Eyes Were Watching God, the idea of women's equality with men is touched upon in The Age of Innocence. Instead, however, of having a woman thinking and commenting on female parity, as Hurston's novel does, Wharton's work shows a man talking about and reflecting on the subject. Newland Archer is a member of old, monied, upper-class New York society. For the most part, Archer adheres to the strict rules of conduct that the wealthy families of New York City have devised for themselves. However, he has some problems with the unequal treatment between men and women that his upper-class society promotes. Archer declares that "Women ought to be free--as free as we are..." (39). He specifies his declaration in the case of Ellen Olenska, his cousin and eventual sister-in-law. Ellen comes to New York to escape her failing marriage, and, although his wealthy peers are shocked and disapproving that Ellen has left her
husband, Archer defends her:

"Why should she slink about as if it were she who had disgraced herself? ...she had the bad luck to make a wretched marriage; but I don't see that that's a reason for hiding her head as if she were the culprit."

"I'm sick of hypocrisy that would bury alive a woman of her age if her husband prefers to live with harlots." (37-39)

Hence, Newland Archer's thoughts on women, especially Ellen Olenska, manifest to some degree the early twentieth century feminist issue of equality with men. Sadly, as The Age of Innocence progresses, Archer compromises his early assertions of female equality. Although he marries with the notion that his wife should be allowed "the same freedom of experience as himself," Archer admits to himself that, when his spouse voices her own opinions, the results are "destructive to his enjoyment of the [the things of life]" (44, 297). In spite of his good intentions,:

Newland Archer was a quiet and self-controlled young man. Conformity to the discipline of a small society had become almost his second nature. (324-325)

Thus, in The Age of Innocence, Archer is no more independent than the women he declares should be free. He is merely a product of the strict codes enforced on him by upper-class New York society.
Like Their Eyes Were Watching God and The Age of Innocence, Agnes Smedley's Daughter of Earth has a character who believes in women's parity with men. Marie, the protagonist of Daughter of Earth, pursues the idea of males and females as equals as a reality. Marie declares early in the novel that "I don't need no protection from any man! I can take care of myself!" (107). She proves her statement later when she turns on her father, showing her equality with him by dealing with him on a level he is familiar with---brute force:

...I hurled myself upon him, striking with my clenched fists...

.................................

...He turned and picked up the whip from the floor.... He looked at the whip, then turned and slowly passed out of the door... (133)

Marie's belief in her equality with men is exhibited in other ways throughout Daughter of Earth: she pays half of the bill for her marriage license so that her husband won't feel that she belongs to him, she keeps her maiden name after she is married, she has two abortions so that she won't be tied down to a home and children, etc. Thus, Marie denies any notion of her inferiority to males through her words and actions. As Daughter of Earth unfolds, she gains equality with men but, unfortunately, has to pay consequences for her equality. Marie often works as the sole female in environments dominated by men and, as a result, must deal with sexual harrassment and the tragedy of
being raped. She succeeds in life in spite of the men who take advantage of her, obtaining university degrees and the coveted position as the only woman reporter on the Socialist newspaper The Call, but life leaves her weary, unhappy, and disillusioned:

I was tired, weary of conflict.... There was my public life--a good life. There were Americans who respected me.... Why should those two not be enough--why should my body be so tortured, my spirit so heavily burdened?

Much as Hurston's Janie, Wharton's Newland Archer, and Smedley's Marie do, Willa Cather's Alexandra, of O Pioneers!, believes in and strives for women's complete equality with men. Alexandra is a Swedish farmwoman in the midwestern United States who has put herself on an equal level with the men around her. She dresses as a man, wearing "... a man's long ulster (not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her... )...," and looks upon men as workfellows (6). She is a female in the "male" occupations of farming and livestock raising:

It was Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors. It was Alexandra who could always tell about what it had cost to fatten each steer, and who could guess the weight of a hog before it went on the scales closer than John Bergson himself. (22-23)
Hence, Alexandra demonstrates her equality with men in the way she conducts herself as a capable equivalent to them. Because of the homologous way she behaves in relation to men, Alexandra meets success. She uses all of her intelligence, common-sense, and business-sense and, as a result, comes to own and operate the largest farm in her area. When people see her plantation, greater and more profitable those of all her male neighbors, they marvel: "...the farmer was a woman, Alexandra Bergson" (83).

_O Pioneers!, as well as Daughter of Earth, The Age of Innocence, and Their Eyes Were Watching God, all exhibit characters fighting for women's complete equality with men. In all four works, protagonists reflect on, speak about, and/or act upon the idea that women and men are equivalent to one another. They, like 1920s equal rights advocate Alice Paul and her followers did, fight for and earn some success in parity for women, despite the barriers they encounter.

Certainly, _O Pioneers!, by Willa Cather; Herland and "The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman; Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston; Daughter of Earth, by Agnes Smedley; The Age of Innocence, by Edith Wharton; and Bread Givers, by Anzia Yezierska are all windows on some of the diverse issues of the early twentieth century women's movement. Each piece of literature successfully gives a glimpse of the many obstacles women faced during the 1900s-1940s because of their gender. The works go beyond the stoic, straightforward presentation of
women and their struggles that a history book might provide, however. Stories of *individuals* are told, and the anonymous "women of the early 1900s" are given names—Marie, Sara, Janie. *Personal* conflicts are recounted, and obscure fights to win personal freedom, break with convention, and attain equality become *one woman's* battle to get an education or another's breach of Jewish tradition, or still another's revolt against her dominating husbands. The above-cited literature of Cather, Gilman, Hurston, Smedley, Wharton, and Yezierska makes the women of the early twentieth century, with all of their struggles, fears, and dreams, come alive for the women of today.
Works Cited


