

SUMMARY

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GOOD AND MAD

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Summary of Good and Mad by Rebecca Traister

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Why feminists are angry-- and why that's a good
thing!

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Introduction

Fill in the blank: “feminism is...” Many people would fill in that blank with different answers. Members of far-right groups have often finished that sentence by arguing that “feminism is a cancer,” or “feminism is hating men.” But the people who would fill in the blank with these answers have the wrong idea! Over the course of this summary, you’ll learn a little more about the history of feminism, about the oppression women still face today, and why modern feminists have every right to be angry about it.



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A Brief History of Female Anger

“Why do we even need feminism? I mean, women can vote now and everything.”

This is a common complaint that you hear in the modern age and it typically comes from white men who feel that advancements in equality are somehow trampling on their own rights. It also highlights a troubling perspective: the belief that sexism is no longer prevalent in our society. But when you think about the history of women’s rights, it becomes glaringly obvious that equality isn’t quite as universal as we might think-- and it hasn’t been around for very long. To put this into perspective, let’s start with a question: how long do you think it has been since women gained the right to vote? Would it surprise you to learn that, in the United Kingdom, women were only allowed to vote in 1918? In America, women were not given this right until 1920.

It might be easy to think, “But that was a hundred years ago! That’s a really long time!” But if you compare this timeline to the timeline of men’s rights, you might find yourself feeling physically ill. Because women have had the right to vote for only a hundred years. But men have cherished voting rights since... always. So, when we think about this timeline-- and the brutal opposition women’s rights activists have encountered-- our society doesn’t seem so progressive after all. And if you want to expand this idea a little farther, to look at more than just voting rights... you might need to prepare yourself to get really, really angry. Because there’s no doubt about it: human history has a long and disgusting history of discrimination against women.

But because society has advanced in so many ways, it’s easy to think that the best is long behind us, that women no longer face oppression, and that everything is just great. But the author argues that nothing could be further from the truth. So, instead of asking, “Why are women so angry nowadays?” the author asserts that we should be asking, “Why aren’t more women angrier?!” But before we can ask that question, we need to unpack a bit of feminist history to learn about the origins of the anger that consumes the modern feminist today. And although we could delve back into the recent

past-- to the underground reproductive rights organization known as The Jane Collective in the 1960s, to the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s-- for the purposes of this chapter, we're going to go all the way back to the 19th century and the origins of the hysteria diagnosis.

Professor and literary critic Terry Kapsalis explains it best in her essay, "Hysteria, Witches, and The Wandering Uterus: A Brief History. Or, Why I Teach 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" In this essay, Kapsalis explores an overview of hysteria and female anger, making connections between the nineteenth century and the 2016 presidential election. In her own words, she writes that: "a number of 19th-century practitioners gained fame as hysteria doctors. S. Weir Mitchell, a prominent Philadelphia physician, was one of them. He championed what he called 'the rest cure.' Sick women were put to bed, ordered not to move a muscle and instructed to eschew intellectual or creative work of any kind, fed four ounces of milk every two hours, and oftentimes required to defecate and urinate into a bed-pan while prone. Mitchell was so renowned he had his own Christmas calendar.

Mitchell was Charlotte Perkins Gilman's physician. His rest cure was prescribed to some of the great minds of the time, including Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf. Scores of white women artists and writers were diagnosed as hysterics in a period when rebelliousness, shamelessness, ambition, and "over education" were considered to be likely causes. Too much energy going up to the brain instead of staying in the reproductive organs and helping the female body do what it was supposed to do. As Mitchell wrote, "The woman's desire to be on a level of competition with man and to assume his duties is, I am sure, making mischief, for it is my belief that no length of generations of change in her education and modes of activity will ever really alter her characteristics."

Transgressing prescribed roles would make women sick. British suffragettes, for instance, were "treated" as hysterics in prison. Outspoken proponents for women's rights were often characterized as the "shrieking sisterhood." In our seminar discussion, we made the comparison to the numbers of African American men diagnosed as schizophrenics at a State Hospital for the

Criminally Insane in Ionia, Michigan in the 1960s and 70s as documented in psychiatrist Jonathan Metzl's powerful book *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease*. A diagnosis can be a weapon used as a way to control and discipline the rebellion of an entire demographic.

As we discussed "The Yellow Wallpaper" and its historical context, I could see that Allie was becoming more and more outraged. She looked as if she might bolt from her classroom seat. Her hand shot up, "Would you believe that my high school English teacher told us, 'If this woman had followed her husband's instructions, she wouldn't have gone crazy?!'" If I'd had a mouth full of something, I would have done a spit take. In all my years of teaching the story, I cannot remember ever hearing this jaw-dropping explanation. But Allie opened the floodgates. Bec raised her hand, "We read it in eighth grade. We were all concerned and confused, especially the girls. And disturbed by the ending. No one understood what was wrong with the woman. The story didn't seem to make any sense."

Max added, "In my A.P. Psychology class, our teacher asked us to use the DSM 4 to diagnose the woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper." I remember a number of student guesses, like Major Depressive Disorder, General Anxiety Disorder, as well as OCD, Schizophrenia, and Bipolar with Schizotypal tendencies." Noëlle said she remembered a fellow high school student describing the narrator as "animalistic" and the teacher writing it on the board. There was no discussion of what "hysteria" actually meant.

Keeta encountered the story in a college literature seminar titled "Going Mad." Class discussion focused on the insane and unreliable narrator. "A missed opportunity for me to learn about something very real and current, and in some ways I feel wronged by that," Keeta said. They explained that they had a similar feeling when watching the film *Beloved* in middle school. "Here's your heritage, and it's dumped in your lap, and you have no idea why this enslaved woman killed her child. If you had more information about the history of slavery and reproductive resistance, then you would be able to make better sense of what you were seeing." Cristina hadn't read "The Yellow Wallpaper" before but said, "In the fourth grade in my all-girls Catholic

school in Bogotá, my religion teacher told the class that we should only show our bodies to our husbands and doctors. Meaning they are the only ones that can touch our bodies. I think there is some connection here, no?”

I am always moved by the associations students make between the history of hysteria and their own lives and circumstances. We discussed how it is startling to learn about nearly four millennia of this female double bind, of medical writings opining cold, deprived, frail, wanting, evil, sexually excessive, irrational, and deceptive women while asserting the necessity of disciplining their misbehaviors with various “treatments.” “What about Hillary?” Bec chimed in. This wasn’t just any fall semester. There couldn’t have been a more appropriate time to consider the history of hysteria than September 2016, the week following Hillary Clinton’s collapse from pneumonia at the 9/11 ceremonies, an event that tipped #HillarysHealth into a national obsession. Rudolph Giuliani said that she looked sick and encouraged people to google “Hillary Clinton illness.” Trump focused on her coughing or “hacking” as if the uterus were still making its perambulations up to the throat.

For many months, Hillary had been pathologized as the shrill shrew who was too loud and outspoken, on the one hand, and the weak sick one who didn’t have the strength or stamina to be president on the other. We discussed journalist Gail Collins’ assessment of the various levels of sexism afoot in the campaign. On the topic of Hillary’s health, Collins wrote, “this is nuts, but not necessarily sexist.” We, in the Wandering Uterus, wholeheartedly disagreed. But, back in September, we did not understand how deeply entrenched these sinister mythologies had already become.

In class, we continued to discuss the construction of she-devil, foul-mouthed Crooked Hillary who extremists berated with hashtags like #Hillabeast and #Godhilla and #Witch Hillary. How could we not compare the campaign season to the witch-hunts when folks at rallies started chanting “hang her in the streets” in addition to the by-then familiar “lock her up.” In short order, we witnessed a shift from the maligned diagnosis of a single individual to an all-out mass hysterical witch-hunt against a woman who dared to run for

presidential office. We discussed the brilliant literary critic Elaine Showalter whose book *Hystories*, written in the 1990s, focuses on end-of-the-millennium mass hysterias. Prior to the existence of social media, Showalter presciently wrote, “hysterical epidemics. . . continue to do damage: in distracting us from the real problems and crises of modern society, in undermining a respect for evidence and truth, and in helping support an atmosphere of conspiracy and suspicion.”

Upon closer investigation, this form of political slander was not limited to the current election season or the US. In Poland, women who marched against a recent abortion ban were called feminazis, prostitutes, whores, witches, and crazy women. While in 2013, Russian news reports suggested that members of the band Pussy Riot were “witches in a global satanic conspiracy in cahoots with the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.” That should have been a clue to what would follow. During the weeks running up to the election we veered from the topic of hysteria and discussed the history of gynecology and enslaved women as experimental subjects, sexual anatomy and disorders of sexual development, and queer and trans health care, but we still began each class by sharing recent developments from the campaign trail: Muslim registries, pussy grabbing/sexual assault, and bullying. We discussed Trump’s remarks that soldiers living with PTSD are not “strong enough,” echoing medical and military attitudes from the previous century that associated male hysteria with WWI and “shell shock.”

When our class met two days following the election, we talked about deportations, anti-Muslim hate crimes, LGBTQ vulnerabilities, and climate change. A number of us confessed that we were physically ill as we watched the returns come in. I mentioned one friend who wrote me that he felt as though he were drinking poison. Two other friends were struck down by bouts of diarrhea and dry heaves on election night. When they went to their doctor, she said that she had seen an inordinate number of sick people. Something was going around. I recall one student from a few years ago. She raised her hand and said that the diagnosis of hysteria was like being called a “crazy girl.” “I am called that all the time,” she said. I was confused. Crazy girl? But as she continued on about that label, many of her classmates

nodded emphatically. “If I get upset about something said in conversation or on social media,” she said, “I’m dismissed as ‘crazy girl.’”

...Class projects are piled on the floor of my office. There is Max’s poem about the horrifying beating he experienced as a teenager, a hate crime at a mall witnessed by his boyfriend and dismissed by the police. There is Virginia’s small book that she made for her teenage nieces, advice for being a young Latinx person in this country. There is Sylvie’s project, an artist’s book collaboration with her dead mother’s journal writing. Noëlle’s educational coloring book for kids with diabetes that she made with her eight-year-old brother as adviser. I imagine that most, if not all, of these amazing young people would have qualified at one time or another as hysterics because of gender presentation and/or sexuality, and their artistic, scholarly, or activist pursuits. Me too. We are all part of a long history, members of tribes that have been, at times, misinterpreted, misunderstood, or worse.”



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Why Are Women So Angry Nowadays?

As you can see from the examples in the previous chapter, misogyny did not die in the nineteenth century. And it certainly didn't die out in the 1960s when first-wave feminists became more vocal. Just as nineteenth century women were conveniently diagnosed with "hysteria" to prevent them from pursuing equality and ambition, so modern women are stigmatized, ridiculed, and-- yet again-- branded "hysterical." It doesn't take a lot of imagination to understand that this cycle is exhausting-- and women are tired of it! Women are tired of the double standards-- tired of being called a prude if you dress modestly and being called a slut if you wear a short skirt. Tired of being called crazy, bossy, or rude for being assertive, expressing your opinion, or pursuing your career.

And the 2016 presidential election only brought those frustrations to the forefront. Because when you elect a president like Donald Trump-- a man who openly brags about sexual assault, who actively attacks reproductive rights, and who is blatantly misogynistic-- it can only feel like one thing: an attack on women's rights. Because that's exactly what it is. So, as a result, it's unsurprising that we are seeing a resurgence in Women's Marches, in protests that play heavily on *Handmaid's Tale* references, and in the collective anguish of the #MeToo movement.

When every woman knows a woman who has been sexually assaulted, but no man knows a rapist... it feels like an attack on women's rights. And when women speak out about these injustices and are told to smile, to shut up, or to stop being a "crazy girl," it feels like an attack on women's rights. And the same is true for daily restrictions on abortion, as states all across America find new and horrific ways to control female bodies. The same is true for the digital vitriol lobbed at every woman who shares her story of sexual assault. Each time a woman speaks up about her experience with catcalling, assault, or rape, dozens-- if not hundreds-- of trolls pop up online to invalidate her story, to insist that she was "asking for it," or to assert that sexual assault statistics can't possibly be as prevalent as they are. So, when you think about

all of these social issues that women face every day-- and the long history of oppression against women-- it's no wonder that modern feminists are angry!

Thankfully, however, most modern feminists aren't wasting their anger. They aren't content to sit around and be mad about something without making an effort to change it. Today, women are using their anger in a constructive manner by raising awareness, sharing their voices, and advocating for change. And as a result, we're seeing new advances on social media, in the legal system, and around the world as women fight for change. So, thank goodness for those angry feminists! Thank goodness for the people who have had enough and who are fighting to make the world a safer and more inclusive place for women everywhere.



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Final Summary

Feminists are often dismissed as “the shrieking sisterhood.” Given the advances in women’s rights today, many people make the mistake of assuming that women have already achieved equality and that there is nothing to be angry about. But as the author’s research shows, a simple look back through history will show a number of alarming parallels with the nineteenth century and the present day.

Just as Victorian feminists were labeled “hysterical” for seeking change, the same is true today. And the conservatives of America are relentless in their quest to restrict women’s rights. This can be seen in the onslaught of conservative support for blatantly misogynistic presidents such as Donald Trump. So, when we consider the repeated and egregious attacks on women’s rights today, it’s no wonder that feminists are angry! But a better understanding of feminism and social issues can help us learn more about this anger and why it’s constructive rather than divisive.



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