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# Women's Lives: Different Yet the Same

## **Keywords**

Feminist Theory, Women's Studies, Gender, Sexuality

## **Women's Lives: Different Yet the Same**

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**W**omen's roles in American society have changed drastically since the establishment of the early colonies. On the frontier, women were expected to care for their homes and families and to work in the fields as well. In the event of a husband's absence, the wife would also assume his responsibilities governing the work of servants and ensuring that crops were harvested and sold in a timely fashion. At harvest time, most women worked in the fields alongside the men. These same women also had to maintain their roles as mothers and homemakers, taking on the tasks of sewing, cooking, cleaning, and caring for the ill.

The development of early capitalism enforced existing gender roles. Because of the painstaking drudgery that accompanied early industrialization, it was assumed that men would enter the work force as physical laborers.

Consequently, a woman's "place" became the home, while men became the wage earners for their families. Additionally, external forces such as family relations, loss of a husband, racism, sexism, and mainstream notions of what constitutes "ideal femininity" have continued to affect women's lives throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Stephen Crane, in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, tells the story of Maggie Johnson, a young girl living in the tenement houses of New York City during the late nineteenth century. Maggie confronts violence both in her home and on the streets. She witnesses constant brutality between her parents and she is physically abused by her mother and by her brother Jimmy. After her father's death, Jimmy advises Maggie to either "go to hell or go to work" (Crane 49). Although Maggie promptly finds work sewing collars in a shirt factory, an infatuation with her brother's friend Pete evokes the romantic inside of Maggie:

As thoughts of Pete came into Maggie's mind, she began to have an intense dislike for all of her dresses.... She began to note, with more interest, the well-dressed women she met on the avenues. She envied elegance and soft palms. She craved those adornments of person which she saw every day on the street, conceiving them to be allies of vast importance to women. (Crane 49)

The dialogue between Jimmy and Pete depicts the two young men as rowdy and mean. They take great pride in exchanging stories of street fights and barroom brawls. Because of her constant exposure to violence and hostility, Maggie perceives this type of behavior as not only acceptable, but admirable:

Here was one who had contempt for brass-clothed power; one whose knuckles could defiantly ring against the granite of law. . .

To her the earth was composed of hardships and insults. She felt instant admiration for a man who openly defied it. (Crane 53)

Maggie's naiveté gives life to idealistic visions about Pete's job as a bartender and to a deepening discontent with her job at the shirt factory:

She reflected upon the collar and cuff factory. It began to appear to her mind as a dreary place of endless grinding. Pete's elegant occupation brought him, no doubt, into contact with people who had money and manners. (Crane 53)

Maggie realizes that her factory wages will never provide her with the expensive clothes or jewelry that Pete finds enticing. Moreover, she begins to fear that she will become as useless and miserable as she perceives her fellow workers to be. "She speculated how long her youth would endure. She began to see the bloom upon her cheeks

as valuable" (Crane 59). Maggie ultimately discovers what many women throughout history have discovered before her: an attractive face and body can be a useful asset. As Pete and Maggie spend more and more time together, her brother and mother become increasingly resentful. When Jimmy learns that Maggie has been "ruined," the situation erupts in one final violent outburst of emotions. She leaves the Johnson home and finds temporary sanctuary with Pete. However, he soon rejects her in favor of a more elegant sort, "a woman of brilliance and audacity" (Crane 78). Having nowhere to turn, Maggie tries to reconcile with her estranged family. But they too are not interested in the broken spirit of the young woman and rather than trying to save her, they take great pleasure in humiliating her and turning her away. Maggie's story finally concludes with her unfortunate yet inevitable demise.

In a related narrative, Fanny Fern's story "Ruth Hall" elucidates the problems of a young woman whose husband has passed away, leaving her with the responsibility of providing for her two young daughters. Ruth's situation is further complicated by her unwillingness to conform to the idealized notion of "true womanhood," which defines a woman as:

gentle and submissive. . .selfless and self-effacing. . .respectful of and deferential toward her male relatives. . .never lacking in female delicacy...[and having] religious piety and respect for religion. (Fern xx)

The death of Ruth's mother and her subsequent placement in boarding school by her father, cause her to fall short of these ideals. Aside from her roommates at school, Ruth has no female role models to learn from. These girls are more interested in teasing Ruth for her naiveté than helping her acquire the traits of a "true" woman.

Ruth has also suffered an unhappy childhood. During a retrospective moment she recalls that her mother "always looked uneasy about the time her father was expected home; and when his step was heard in the hall, she would say in a whisper... 'Hush! hush! you father is coming...'" (Fern 14). Ruth's brother Hyacinth is also cruel, constantly remarking that she is "very plain" and "awkward" (Fern 13). As a child she spends most of her time alone. However, as she matures Ruth is shocked to find that she is developing into an attractive young woman. Not surprisingly, Ruth believes if she is beautiful she will finally find the love she has never received from her father and brother:

. . . she was "plain, awkward Ruth" no longer. Eureka! She had arrived in the first epoch of a young girl's life,—she had found out her power! Her manners became assured and self-possessed. *She*, Ruth, could inspire love! Life became dear to her. There was something worth striving for...she should *some* day make somebody's heart glad. . . . (Fern 16)

Ruth's concern involves her aesthetic qualities and her education as well. This is another example of her unconventional mentality:

Ruth's schoolmates wonder[ed] the while why she took so much pains to bother her head with those stupid books, when she was every day growing prettier, and all the world knew that it was quite unnecessary for a pretty woman to be clever. (Fern 16)

The death of her husband, the maltreatment inflicted upon Ruth by her in-laws, and her own family's indifference towards her, ultimately cause Ruth to realize the true value of her intellect. She begins writing and eventually her talents save Ruth and her daughters from absolute poverty.

Finally, the story of Helga Crane in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* explicates the turmoil of a young mulatto woman who cannot find happiness. Helga is trapped in a downward spiral triggered by self-loathing and contemptuous jealousy of the world that her black skin forbids her to share with her white step-brothers and step-sisters:

Of that white world, so distant, so near, she asked only indifference. No, not at all did she crave, from those pale and powerful people, awareness. Sinister folk, she considered them, who had stolen her birth-right. Their past contribution to her life...had been but shame and grief. . . . (Larsen 45)

Helga spends every day fighting a violent inner-conflict regarding her mixed ethnic background. She moves from place to place in search of a happiness that she cannot find within herself. Although each new home brings initial joy and peace, Helga's feelings of jubilation quickly disappear. For example, when she first arrives in Harlem:

In the actuality of the pleasant present and the delightful vision of an agreeable future she was contented and happy...she knew it sprang from a sense of freedom, a release from the feeling of smallness which had hedged her in, first during her sorry unchildlike childhood among hostile white folk in Chicago, and later during her uncomfortable sojourn among snobbish black folk in Naxos. (Larsen 46)

However, once the novelty of her new surroundings recedes, Helga begins

to draw away from those contacts which had so delighted her. More and more she made lonely excursions to places outside of Harlem. A sensation of estrangement and isolation encompassed her...Not only did the crowds of nameless folk on the street annoy her, she began also actually to dislike her friends. (Larsen 47-8)

This pattern of emotional highs and lows continues throughout the story. When Helga decides that she is

going to live with her white aunt in Denmark, she describes the city as a place devoid of racial injustices and prejudice, a place where she can truly be happy. But after two years in Copenhagen, Helga longs to return to Harlem:

These were her people...strange that she had never truly valued this kinship until distance had shown her its worth. How absurd she had been to think that another country, other people could liberate her from the ties which bound her forever to these mysterious, these terrible, these fascinating, these lovable, dark hordes. (Larsen 95)

Helga's struggle with her racial identity, her desperate need to belong, and her unending yearning for happiness ultimately force her to make a decision that she will forever regret. This final move is not to some new city or the faraway shores of another country, but into the arms of a man she will later grow to despise.

In the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green Helga finds both "God and man" (Larsen 117). Her felicity is soon interrupted, however, when she realizes the roles of mother and caretaker are repugnant to her. Helga does not possess the physical nor the emotional endurance to keep up with her husband and three children:

Always she felt extraordinarily and annoyingly ill, having forever to be sinking into chairs. Or, if she was out, to be pausing by

the roadside, clinging desperately to some convenient fence or tree, waiting for the horrible nausea and hateful faintness to pass. (Larsen 123)

The final blow to Helga's health comes with the death of her fourth child and her own subsequent illness, from which she needs considerable time to recover. As she regains her strength, Helga develops a true loathing for life with the Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green and for religion as well. She is determined to leave him, to abandon him in search of her lost happiness. But Helga soon realizes that her husband has no intentions of letting her go, "...hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain...when she began to have her fifth child" (Larsen 135). It is at this moment that Helga's search for happiness, whether successful or not, is finally over.

The stories of Maggie Johnson, Ruth Hall, and Helga Crane illustrate only a few of the problems that women have endured for generations under the patriarchal guidelines of mainstream western culture. Maggie suffered the disadvantages of being born into poverty and she never acquired an education. She ultimately resorted to capitalizing on her most valuable asset: her body. Although Ruth had the benefit of an education, she violated the conventional notions of "true womanhood." Furthermore, while Ruth became financially independent through her talents as a writer, it is important to remember that the harsh scrutiny given to women authors during

the nineteenth century often prohibited them from obtaining publication. Therefore, Ruth was forced to write under an anonymous pen name that did not reveal her sex. Finally, although Helga was also educated, her confusion surrounding racial identity prevented her from achieving lasting happiness.

The stories of these women represent only a fraction of the obstacles that many women encounter in everyday life. Their stories are to be remembered because they are in the eyes and hearts of every woman we pass on the street. Regardless of race, socioeconomic status, education, or gender, no person is ever fully protected in a world that devalues those who are not "ideal" and creates an image of the "marginalized other."

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