

TEACHING CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST RHETORIC: AN ILLUSTRATIVE SYLLABUS

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An awareness has developed that the study of rhetoric must include the study of how rhetoric resolves differences; promotes mutual understanding; and in short, facilitates communication across barriers, whether these barriers are sexual, racial, philosophical, social, or economic. With this increased awareness, new courses in communication studies are being developed that deal with the operation of communication in a variety of settings and for a variety of purposes.

One type of course that meets the need to deal with rhetoric aimed at understanding is the Rhetoric of Contemporary Feminism. I developed and taught an undergraduate seminar dealing with this topic at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, during the spring quarter of 1976 under the title of the Rhetoric of Women's Rights. The syllabus that follows provides guidelines for such a course.

Wil A. Linkugel has developed a syllabus for a similar course which he calls the Rhetoric of American Feminism.¹ The focus of his course is historical, however, and he devotes the major portion of it to the rhetoric of the women's suffrage movement. The syllabus presented here is designed to supplement that offered by Linkugel by focusing on the discourse of the con-

temporary feminist movement. It is centered around the topics of contemporary feminism that currently are being debated by both feminists and the general public.

The objectives of this course are two-fold: (1) to acquaint students with the rhetoric of feminism and with information and resources on women's rhetoric which ordinarily may be bypassed in communication courses; and (2) to help students learn how to think rhetorically—to approach concepts, events, experiences, and discourse from a rhetorical perspective. In the course, students not only study what a speaker said, but major lines of argument; techniques of persuasion; assumptions about the rhetor's self-concept, values, world view, and audience revealed in the rhetoric; and possible reasons as to why the speaker made the rhetorical choices he or she did. After examining and analyzing the discourse of the contemporary feminist movement, students should be more critical of the discourse they encounter and better equipped with the tools necessary to evaluate that discourse.

FORMAT

The format of the course includes both lectures by the instructor and student-centered discussions. Because many students are not well acquainted with the issues and discourse of contemporary feminism, the lecture sessions provide a means by which students can gain familiarity with the topic. The discussions,

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¹Wil A. Linkugel, "The Rhetoric of American Feminism: A Social Movement Course," *Speech Teacher* 23 (1974), 121-30.

on the other hand, enable the students to gain practice in approaching discourse, events, and experiences rhetorically while at the same time discovering and airing their reactions to feminist rhetoric. Each unit discussed below, then, with the exception of the introductory unit, includes two class periods each approximately two hours in length—one lecture session and one discussion session. In the lecture, one particular topic—such as religion—is covered; the discussion at the following session deals with the same topic.

To prevent the discussion from becoming merely a consciousness-raising exercise and to provide direction for the students, the discussions are organized around study questions. Each student with a question to answer not only comes prepared to answer the question orally for the class at the next meeting, but he or she also submits to the instructor a two-to-three page written response to the question. Suggestions for discussion questions for each unit are included in the syllabus.

SOURCES

The following books are recommended as texts in the course, with readings for each unit taken from these as well as supplementary materials.

- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell, 1963.
- Kraditor, Aileen S., ed., *Up From the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970.
- Morgan, Robin, ed. *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*. New York: Vintage Books, 1970.
- O'Neill, William. *Everyone Was Brave: A History of Feminism in America*. New York: Quadrangle/New York Times, 1969.

Each of the units discussed in the syllabus below includes suggested references for use by the instructor and the

students. Reading assignments may be varied by the instructor according to the length and level of difficulty of the course. References to the suggested textbooks will be designated by title and author only.

THE COURSE UNITS

1. *Operation of Rhetoric in Social Movements*

Content: The purpose of this unit is to give students an understanding of the nature and scope of rhetoric as it relates to the study of social movements. The need for rhetorical—rather than historical or sociological—definitions of social movements is the focus of the unit. Various efforts to define movements rhetorically, such as those by Griffin, Cathcart, and Hahn and Gonchar, are discussed. This unit includes only the lecture component of the lecture/discussion format of the course; students will have the opportunity to apply the concepts discussed here throughout the other units.

Sources:

- Cathcart, Robert S. "New Approaches to the Study of Movements: Defining Movements Rhetorically." *Western Speech* 36 (Spring 1972), 82-88.
- Griffin, Leland M. "A Dramatistic Theory of the Rhetoric of Movements." *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke*. Ed. William M. Reuckert. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969, pp. 456-78.
- Griffin, Leland M. "The Rhetoric of Historical Movements." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 38 (April 1952), 184-88.
- Hahn, Dan F., and Ruth M. Gonchar, "Studying Social Movements: A Rhetorical Methodology." *Speech Teacher* 20 (January 1971), 44-52.

2. *Origins of Contemporary Feminism*

Content: In this unit, the origins of the women's rights movement are located in the effects of the industrial

revolution on American life and in the injustices accorded women through law and social custom. Students are introduced to some of the early women rhetors who began their speaking careers in reform movements such as abolition and temperance. The major portion of the lecture is devoted to a discussion of the women's suffrage movement—the history of the movement, the tactics used, and the major arguments offered by the suffragists and anti-suffragists. The focus is on the strategies used by the early women speakers to overcome traditional ideas about the proper role for women.

Sources:

- Flexner, Eleanor. *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*. New York: Atheneum, 1974.
- Kraditor, Aileen S. *Up From the Pedestal*, pp. 183-287, 122-36.
- O'Connor, Lillian. *Pioneer Women Orators: Rhetoric in the Ante-Bellum Reform Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1954.
- O'Neill, William. *Everyone Was Brave*, chpts. 2 and 4.

Sample Discussion Questions:

1. What does the rhetoric of the women's suffrage movement reveal about the value structure of 19th century America? Point to specific examples in the rhetoric of the suffrage movement to support your view.
2. If Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had asked you to do so, how might you have revised the Declaration of Sentiments so as to strengthen the case which it argues?
3. How might the anti-suffragists have improved their case?
4. In an era in which women were not supposed to speak in public, suffragists began doing so. What tactics and strategies did the suffrage speakers use to overcome the bias against women speakers?

3. *Contemporary Feminism: An Overview*

Content: This unit begins with an examination of why feminist activity declined after women gained the right to vote. Catalysts for the revival of the feminist movement are discussed, including Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, the treatment of women by their male counterparts in the radical left movements of the 1960s, and the demonstration at the 1968 Miss America pageant that brought the movement to the attention of the media. Two organizations that represent the conservative and the moderate factions of the feminist movement are examined in detail: the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL) and the National Organization for Women (NOW). (A radical feminist group is examined in detail in unit four). The origins, self images, goals, conceptions of the enemy, and tactics as revealed in the rhetoric of these groups are discussed and compared. A discussion of recent developments in the feminist movement follows: the International Women's Year Conferences in 1975 and 1977, the difficulties in passing the Equal Rights Amendment, and dissension within NOW and other feminist groups.

Sources:

- Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs. "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (February 1973), 74-86.
- Foss, Karen A. "Ideological Manifestations in the Discourse of Contemporary Feminism." Diss. University of Iowa, 1976.
- Friedan, Betty. *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women's Movement*. New York: Random House, 1976.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*, chpts. 1, 2, and 3.
- KNOW, Inc., P. O. Box 86031, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15221 (A feminist publishing company from which books, pamphlets, articles, and speeches on a great variety of topics are available).

O'Neill, William. *Everyone Was Brave*, chpts. 8, 9, and 10.

Sample Discussion Questions:

1. What are the major differences between the rhetoric of the women's suffrage movement and the contemporary feminist movement?
2. Does contemporary feminism represent a typical social movement?
3. What is the effect of internal dissension on a movement's image and rhetoric (as in the case of splits in the suffrage movement and within NOW)?
4. What assumptions do contemporary feminist speeches and writings reveal about feminists' views of rhetoric?

4. *Radical Feminism*

Content: This unit completes the examination of a conservative, a moderate, and a radical feminist organization begun in unit three. With WEAL representing a conservative position and NOW assuming a moderate stance, this unit focuses on The Feminists, a radical feminist group based in New York City and formed by a group of dissenters who objected to the hierarchical structure of NOW. An entire unit is devoted to the group because it offers an opportunity to study a feminist group that does more than lobby for equal rights; its members attempt to apply their rhetoric to their own group situation. The organization's ideology, small-group structure, requirements for membership, and tactics are analyzed in terms of their rhetorical effects on the organization. A brief look at other radical feminist groups such as the Redstockings and the New York Radical Feminists completes this unit.

Sources:

- Atkinson, Ti-Grace. *Amazon-Odyssey*. New York: Links Books, 1974.
- Foss, Sonja K. "The Feminists: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Radical Feminist Movement."

University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies 2 (no. 2), 79-95.

Koedt, Anne, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone, eds. *Radical Feminism*. New York: Quadrangle, 1973.

Morgan, Robin. *Sisterhood is Powerful*, pp. 533-53.

Sample Discussion Questions:

1. What characteristics, if any, mark radical feminism as a distinct rhetorical movement?
2. What rhetorical tactics might make radical feminism more palatable to the general American audience?
3. Using rhetorical criteria, what do you predict will be the outcome of radical feminism? Will it achieve its goals?
4. Radical feminism is characterized by the use of acts for rhetorical purposes. How effective are these "zap" actions? What rhetorical functions do they perform?

5. *Equal Rights Amendment*

Content: The constitutional amendment that would prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex is discussed in this unit as the issue that has unified feminists to some extent. A brief history of the amendment is presented, followed by a summary of the arguments offered by each side in the debate. The major portion of the unit is devoted to an examination of non-argumentative themes in the discourse that contribute to the development of a particular view of reality for the movement's participants.² These include character themes (how each side views itself and its opponents), setting themes (the scenes in which the action occurs), and action themes (plot lines in the rhetoric). A discussion of the tactics used by the

² Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972), 396-407.

proponents and the opponents to accomplish their goals and the motives of each side as revealed in their rhetoric concludes this unit.

Sources:

Blahna, Loretta J. "The Rhetoric of the Equal Rights Amendment." Diss. University of Kansas, 1973.

Delsman, Mary A. *Everything You Need to Know About ERA*. Riverside, California: Meranza Press, 1975.

Foss, Sonja K. "A Fantasy Theme Analysis of the Debate on the Equal Rights Amendment, 1970-1976: Toward a Theory of the Rhetoric of Movements." Diss. Northwestern University, 1976.

Kraditor, Aileen S. *Up From the Pedestal*, pp. 293-301.

Sample Discussion Questions:

1. What do you predict will happen to the contemporary feminist movement if the ERA is defeated?
2. Which side in the ERA debate wins the crucial argumentative issues?
3. Which side do you predict will win the debate on the ERA? Why?
4. How important are actual arguments presented in a movement such as the campaign for the ERA? Are arguments more or less crucial than other rhetorical factors contributing to the outcome of a movement?

6. *Language*

Content: Two major issues regarding language are discussed in this unit: whether women's speech is different from that of men, and whether the English language reinforces sexism in our society. Differences between men and women in pronunciation, the use of expletives, intonation, the use of hedges such as "y'know" and "kinda," and the use of humor are examined in an investigation of the first issue. A discussion of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis initiates the second topic concerning the way language treats women. Words that oppress

women are discussed, including words that describe women in terms other than human, words that define women by their sexuality alone, words with sex-role connotations, and words that indicate that the male is the standard and the female is a different—if not inferior—variation.

Sources:

Center for a Woman's Own Name, 261 Kimberly, Barrington, Illinois 60010 (center to assist women who wish to retain their own names after marriage; information on the practice is available).

Foss, Karen A., and Michael J. Schneider. "Thought, Sex, and Language: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in the American Women's Movement." *Bulletin: Women's Studies in Communication* (Organization for Research on Women and Communication, Western Speech Association) 1 (Spring 1977), 1-7.

Key, Mary Ritchie. *Male/Female Language*. Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1975.

Lakoff, Robin. *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper Colophon, 1975.

Miller, Casey, and Kate Swift. *Words and Women*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977.

Sample Discussion Questions:

1. What would be the best way to solve the he/she, his/her, and himself/herself problem in language?
2. Many feminists are retaining their own names after marriage. What rhetorical function, if any, does this serve? How effective is this as a rhetorical tactic?
3. If, as some studies have shown, words that are not concerned specifically with the sexes such as "art," "letter," and "death" can be recognized as male or female, will feminists ever be able to root out sexism in language?
4. Are changes in language likely to cause a lessening of the sexist attitude in our society? Why or why not?

7. *Religion*

Content: This unit begins with an

overview of feminist activity in each of the three major religions in the United States: Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. The major portion of the unit deals with the theological view of women basic to many religions, and four theological assumptions that have been challenged by feminists are discussed: (1) God is a male, (2) woman's subordination to man is divinely ordained, (3) woman by nature is either evil (Eve) or pure (Mary), and (4) God's plan for women was revealed through Paul. The unit concludes with a discussion of the ordination of women as priests and ministers in many religious institutions as the focal point of feminist activity within religions.

Sources:

- Boyd, Malcolm. "Who's Afraid of Women Priests?" *Ms.*, December 1974, pp. 47-51.
- Clark, Elizabeth, and Herbert Richardson, eds. *Women and Religion: A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought*. New York: Harper and Row, 1977.
- Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon, 1973.
- Koltun, Elizabeth, ed. *The Jewish Woman*. New York: Schocken Books, 1976.
- Kraditor, Aileen S. *Up From the Pedestal*, pp. 108-21.

Sample Discussion Questions:

1. To what extent does Mary Daly's article, "Women and the Catholic Church," solve the rhetorical dilemma faced by the individual who wants to be both a Catholic and a feminist? (See Morgan, Robin, *Sisterhood is Powerful*, pp. 124-38).
2. In light of contradictions in the Bible about the proper role for women that can be used to support arguments of both religious traditionalists and feminists, what other kinds of proofs and appeals could each side employ in the presentation of its case concerning religion?
3. Are feminists wise to focus their at-

ention and efforts on the ordination of women with regard to change in the treatment of women by religious institutions?

4. What, if anything, does resignation from an organization as a means of protest accomplish? How effective is this as a tactic?

8. *The Family, Housework, and Child Care*

Content: Feminist analyses of the family, housework, and child care are examined in this unit, with particular attention paid to feminists' objections to the nuclear family structure and the confinement of women to the homemaker role. Strategies proposed by feminists to liberate the woman from excessive burdens of family responsibility are examined, including marriage contracts, life in large groups or organic families, media portrayal of sex roles with regard to household responsibilities, and child-care centers.

Sources:

- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*, chpt. 10.
- Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. "Communes for all Reasons." *Ms.*, August 1974, pp. 62-67.
- Kraditor, Aileen S. *Up From the Pedestal*, pp. 148-59, 175-78.
- Morgan, Robin. *Sisterhood is Powerful*, pp. 447-54.
- Oakley, Ann. *The Sociology of Housework*. New York: Pantheon, 1974.
- Peck, Ellen. *The Baby Trap*. New York: Pinnacle, 1976.

Sample Discussion Questions:

1. Some feminists argue against the woman's role as a homemaker using Marx's theory of alienation. Is this an effective argument?
2. Many feminists believe that America's basic residential pattern, in which individual families live in isolated homes, is in part responsible for the

oppression of women in terms of housework and child care. Given the apparent stability and acceptability of this pattern, is there any way in which feminists can argue for liberation by opposing the continuation of this pattern?

3. Feminists often are accused of being willing to sacrifice the welfare of their children to attain their own liberation. Discuss the constraints placed on representatives of a movement. Is it more important to adhere to an image the public may want to see or to remain true to the values espoused in the ideology of the movement?
4. Discuss the possible use of the media as a strategy for furthering the liberation of women. Would the depiction of men doing housework and caring for children have any effect on the public?

9. *Abortion*

Contents: This unit begins with a discussion of the history of abortion laws in the United States and the development of the movement to repeal laws against abortion. Counter movements to reinstate anti-abortion laws are reviewed, and two major events in the abortion battle are examined in detail: the U. S. Supreme Court ruling on abortion in 1973 and the trial of Dr. Kenneth Edelin of Boston in 1975 for performing a legal abortion. The arguments presented in favor of and against abortion are discussed, and the strategies of the proponents and opponents are presented.

Sources:

- Feminists for Life, Inc., P. O. Box 5631, Columbus, Ohio 43221 (an anti-abortion feminist group).
- Gardner, R. F. R. *Abortion: The Personal Dilemma*. New York: Pyramid, 1974.
- Hardin, Garrett. *Mandatory Motherhood*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1974.

Kraditor, Aileen S. *Up From the Pedestal*, pp. 167-75.

Steinem, Gloria. "Questions No One Asked Dr. Kenneth Edelin on the Witness Stand." *Ms.*, August 1975, pp. 76-79, 104.

Sample Discussion Questions:

1. What effects might the feminists' use of the terms "free" and "abortion on demand" have on their case for the continuation of legalized abortion? Are these good phrases to use?
2. Given the fact that the abortion issue is an emotional one, what types of rhetorical tactics and arguments are likely to be most effective in arguing for legalized abortion?
3. Suppose you had to try to convince an audience of Catholics to support legalized abortion. How would you go about it?
4. Describe the rhetorical "world" of the opponents of abortion. What scenes, actions, and characters are revealed in their rhetoric?

10. *Counter Movements and the Men's Liberation Movement*

Contents: Because feminism challenges not only the status quo, but the fundamental values of masculinity and femininity, resistance to feminist rhetoric is inevitable. The various forms this resistance has taken are discussed, ranging from techniques such as ridicule and accusations of deviance to the formation of anti-feminist groups such as Total Woman. The unit concludes with a look at the men's liberation movement initiated by Warren Farrell with his *The Liberated Man*.

Sources:

- Farrell, Warren. *The Liberated Man*. New York: Random House, 1974.
- Kraditor, Aileen S. *Up From the Pedestal*, pp. 45-52.
- Morgan, Marabel. *The Total Woman*. New York: Pocket Books, 1975.

Pleck, Joseph H., and Jack Sawyer, eds. *Man and Masculinity*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974.

Sample Discussion Questions:

1. Is a men's liberation movement apart from the feminist movement necessary? If so, what rhetorical function does it serve?
2. How do the rhetorical appeals of the men's liberation movement differ from those of the feminist movement?
3. Are there dominant rhetorical characteristics of the rhetoric of opposition, such as in the opposition's case against

feminism or the ERA?

4. How could feminists best respond to movements such as Total Woman?

A course such as the Rhetoric of Contemporary Feminism is an important part of the curriculum of a communications department in that it provides for an examination of a segment of American rhetoric that often is neglected or treated as an afterthought. Hopefully, this syllabus will provide a basic framework within which to deal with feminism from a rhetorical perspective.