

Women's Voices, Women's Lives

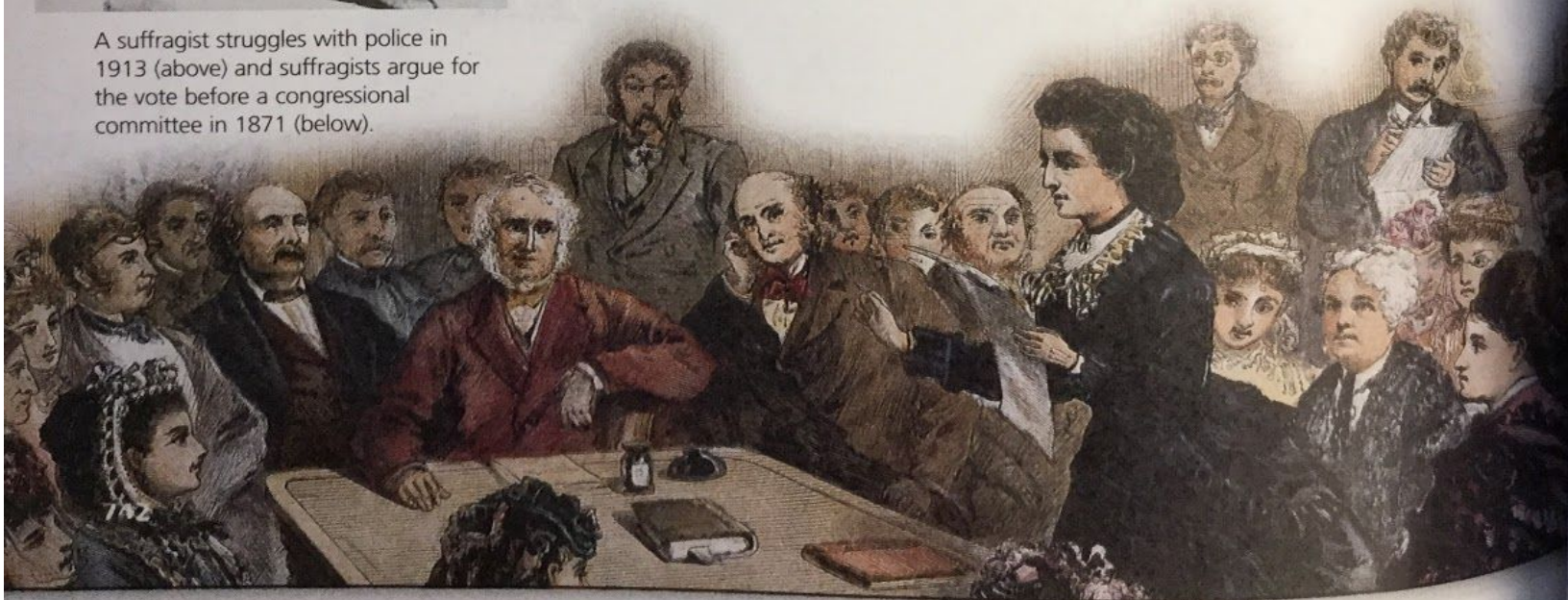
A New Literature

"The power of a woman is in her refinement, gentleness and elegance; it is she who makes etiquette, and it is she who preserves the order and decency of society. Without women, men soon resume the savage state, and the comfort and the graces of the home are exchanged for the misery of the mining camp." So said a popular book of etiquette in 1880, voicing a widely held notion about women's place in society. At the same time, however, the movement to give women the right to vote was reemerging after a period of inactivity in the years following the Civil War. Both before and after the war, however, the woman's suffrage movement was only the most public aspect of a growing force for women to have a voice in both politics and literature. Sojourner Truth's eloquent speech articulating the realities of women's lives, delivered at one women's rights convention (see *Voices from the Times*), resonated in the hearts of many 19th-century women.

One important factor in the growth of the women's movement was the spread of university education among women of the era, although popular newspapers of the time trumpeted the dangers: "Are We Destroying Woman's Beauty? The Startling Warning of a Great English Physician Against Higher Education of Women. How Intellectual Work Destroys Beauty" proclaimed a *New York Journal* headline in 1896.



A suffragist struggles with police in 1913 (above) and suffragists argue for the vote before a congressional committee in 1871 (below).



A

B

C

Emily Dickinson



The 1890s also saw the emergence of the poetry of Emily Dickinson—the first major American woman poet—although emergence may not be the right word to apply to a body of work that has become widely known only in the last 40 years. A near contemporary of Walt Whitman, and just as important in the development of a uniquely American literary voice, Dickinson was virtually unknown during her lifetime. Her anonymity was due in large part to the difficulties she would have experienced in trying to overcome prevailing attitudes about a woman's proper place. When Dickinson's sister published a collection of her poetry in 1890, after Dickinson's death, most critical reviews were negative, objecting especially to what was considered an odd poetic style, with its unusual imagery, untraditional meters, inexact rhymes, and grammatical errors. Nonetheless, a century later, Dickinson looms as one of our most important poets, not only of her time but of any time.

Around the same time, Charlotte Perkins Gilman—related on her father's side to a noted family of writers and social reformers that included Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—became one of the most noted advocates for women. Fleeing her own repressive marriage, she moved from the East Coast to California, where she wrote and spoke out on behalf of women's rights and against male domination.

Kate Chopin's fiction articulates the frustrations of generations of women that were confined to a sort of extended childhood by the men in their lives. Her gentle stories depicting some of the most obvious of women's difficulties were extremely popular in the 1890s. Her 1899 novel *The Awakening*, however, stepped over the line in its portrayal of a woman's hidden passion, arousing a public protest so vigorous that Chopin ceased writing completely.



Harriet Beecher Stowe

Voices from the TIMES

Ain't I a Woman? Sojourner Truth

This speech was given by the ex-slave Sojourner Truth at a women's rights convention at Akron, Ohio, in 1851. Prior to her speech, male speakers had argued in favor of men's superior rights and privileges on the grounds of their superior intellect and the manhood of Christ. As the convention was heating up, the dignified Sojourner Truth—who was in her 60s at the time—rose slowly from her seat in a corner of the room. Amid shouts of "Don't let her speak!" and hissing, she moved to the front, laid her bonnet down, and began this unprepared speech. A profound hush settled over the crowd as she began to speak.

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the Negroes of the South and the women at the North all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me. And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have

borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? ["Intellect," someone whispers.] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or Negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

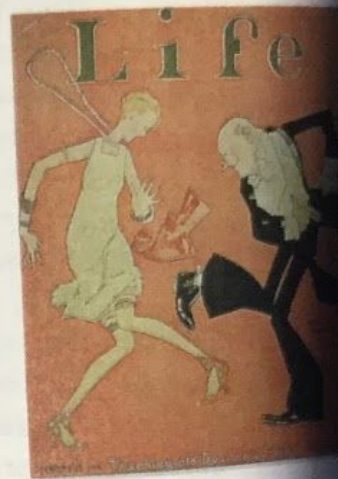
Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner hasn't got nothing more to say.



Sojourner Truth

Traditions Across Time: A Diversity of Voices

In 1920 the 19th Amendment to the Constitution gave women the right to vote, but suffrage heralded no great revolution. Women did not unite at the polls to gain reforms for themselves; instead, many voted like their fathers or husbands or didn't vote at all. This political failure combined with the cultural changes rocking the 1920s—the rise of advertising, Hollywood glamour, and the flapper image of woman—to further inhibit women's intellectual and literary development. The playwright Lillian Hellman, one of the few American women writing successfully in the 1930s and 1940s, summed up her generation this way: "By the time I grew up, the fight for the emancipation of women, their rights under the law, in the office, in bed, was stale stuff. My generation didn't think much about the place or the problems of women."



Only after the eruption of the feminist movement in the late 1960s were large numbers of women again inspired to examine the quality of their lives and find voices of their own. With the renewed confidence of women came a desire to rediscover female writers of the more recent past. Hence Hisaye Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables" and Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing"—both stories about women struggling with oppressive conditions—are more popular today than when they were written.

The legacy of 19th-century women writers lives on in the richness and diversity of contemporary women's writing. Women of all ages and ethnic groups are writing today, giving voice to a multitude of experiences and concerns. Julia Alvarez's poem "Ironing Their Clothes" expresses loving feelings associated with a household chore, while Rita Dove's poem "Adolescence—III" portrays a young girl on the verge of becoming a woman.

