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Ellen Key and literature as feminist theory

Abstract

Before theoretical feminism emerged in the form of works as de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, feminist discussions took place in fiction. From Aphra Behn in the 17th century, the conditions of marriage were discussed in literature. Already Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) outlines a marriage based on mutual respect and equality, with women's participation in civil rights as a key condition. In other words, women should have the right to vote and inherit property, be legally competent, control their own finances and have the right to an education on the same terms as men. By the end of the 18th century, views on marriage and love were undergoing radical transformation (Luhmann, 1982). Within the emergent bourgeoisie, love now became an prerequisite for matrimony.

Concealed in stories of love, marriage, virtue and deceit, one finds criticism of the restrictive role of women, marriage as a means of support for women, and the dream of a freer woman and a truer man. While novels such as Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice (1813) and Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847) may end with wedding bells ringing, the relationship between men and women has undergone a significant change before that. A radical shift from conventional marriage to a love based on equality, if not in the eyes of the law then at least in sentiment.

In 19th-century literature, stories about marriage became a battleground for women's emancipation. In this paper, I demonstrate how Ellen Key built upon this literary feminist tradition of marriage critique. Key developed her feminist thinking and her understanding of love as a transformative power through her dialogue with writers such as Wollstonecraft, George Eliot, and George Sand, as well as her Swedish female writer colleagues.