Women, Sex, And Gender

Social theory assignment plan.

How have Victorian discourses in sex and gender affected the lives of women?

First, talk about misconceptions and ground your assignment in history, what are these discourses, where do they come from, who are the great minds of the time and what are the criticisms. Highlight what this essay will focus on and who it will talk about. Also highlight that although it seems that there were many problematic ways in which people talked of sex and gender, it was also a time of reform, new discourses on sex and gender, new ways to look at sexualized being, most of it is bad, but there are some female artists, writers, and thinkers who brought about a new way of thinking, a revolutionary call to arms, for women not to sit still and let men tell them who and what they were. Encompassing the variety of social and cultural changes across the Victorian landscape, therefore, necessitates an awareness of the periods both before 1837 and after 1901. Yet it is between these two dates that the richness and diversity of modern understandings of gender and sexuality took shape. While 'new' sexualities and gender positions were not entirely novel in themselves, the amount of attention devoted to questions of gendered and sexed selfhood and subjectivity grew exponentially during the years of Victoria's reign. This is an incredibly complex time in social discourse on sex and gender, and reductionism will not serve well in this (or indeed any) context

Talk about women's roles in equalitarian societies, and where this idea of men being superior may have come from, referring to Leacock and her ideas, inequality comes from communism? Males in power? The widely held assumption that female subordination is a universal of human society derives from, and in turn supports, the assumption that primitive communal society was ultimately ordered by the same constraints and compulsions that order class society (Leacock P266). It should not be presumed that this idea of gender inequality is applicable to all cultures worldwide, and as Leacock points out many times in her detailed ethnographies sex, gender and their relationships to one another are different around the world. Overing also points out that the concepts of power and the relationship between culture and nature will also differ, meaning that it is not possible to state that gender inequality exists or means anything across all cultures.

Issues will inevitably arise when the discourse of the time centers around the notion that the differences between males and females are natural, and not a product of a particular culture, politics, or power structure. "Where institutionalized hostility between the sexes exists, it is interpreted as a variant of a universal battle between the sexes, rather than as evidence of emerging status differentiation among men and among women, as well as between men and women" (Leacock p268) Labelling in this manner is dismissive not only of the complexities and history of that lead to this dynamic but also of the idea that other perhaps nonwestern cultures would not and do not see it this way.;

The 'ideal' form of 'women', in both her disposition and her body, in Western culture, has been represented in art and poetry for centuries. It is here that perhaps some issues have come into being. Firstly that 'woman' is most usually represented as pure, angelic, dutiful, and shy.

Always the perfect domestic being as in “Ruskin’s ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’ (1865) presented the dutiful (middle-class) woman determinedly serving her husband as part of a harmonious division of labor and love”(Heilmann and Llewellyn 2016 P2) This cultural portrayal does not allow room for women to be viewed as harboring any sexual tendencies, as it does not fit within the ‘dutiful and pure’ wife stereotype. Women were therefore separated from their own sexuality and physicality, the ‘problem’ lay in their own bodies, that if they were to have any sexual thoughts or desires not pertaining to reproductive purposes, they were not fulfilling their role in society as the dutiful wife and mother. “Female desire was displaced into reproductive impulses”

William Acton’s The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs (1875) pathologized female sexuality; his commentary on masturbation asserts that ‘the majority of women (happily for society) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind. What men are habitual, women are only exceptionally’ (Acton 1875) The effect of this was that women would repress and be ashamed of their natural sexual urges, as well as not being made aware by the society of the reality of sexual relations within marriage. They were forced by culture and expectation to be at least to others, unaware of what it meant to be in a sexual relationship, as well as having any of their own sexual desires. It could have been that “The physicality and reproductive function of the female body and any desires it might harbor were causes of deep male anxieties” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2016 P3) as the very idea of this went against the common image of femininity and was seen as vulgar or uncouth. Female sexuality was therefore seen as a dutiful action toward her husband to reproduce and even after marriage and within the marital relationship, female sexual desire was seen as unnatural.

Sigmund Freud also contributed to this problematic discourse with his treatment of the ‘hysteria’ of women. Initially, Freud suggested that the causes of hysteria were rooted in childhood sexual abuse, but later abandoned this theory and instead emphasized the role of sexual fantasies in the development of a variety of neuroses and illnesses. Freud’s understanding of women was notoriously inadequate, he believed that women’s lives were dominated by their sexual reproductive functions. Freud’s concept of ‘penis’ envy was distorted and condescending, he stated “girls hold their mothers responsible for their lack of a penis and do not forgive her for their being put at a disadvantage” (Freud 1933). This problematic theory contributes to the common myth of the time, that women were naturally ‘disadvantaged’. His views on women stirred controversy throughout his lifetime and continue to evoke debate. As a leading voice in psychosocial discourse in sex and gender, his opinion of women was made clear when he said “ women oppose change, receive passively and add nothing of their own” (Freud 1925)

This was in part one of the catalysts for the idea that all women can and should aspire to is the role of a wife and mother. Henry Maudsley, a prominent physician of the time, stated that education for women would induce “life long-suffering by incapacitating them for the adequate performance of the natural functions of their sex, by reason of the development of their reproductive functions, they will be the more easily and the more seriously deranged” (Maudsley 1874 P41). A husband could not allow a woman to be educated or have any level of respectable occupation, as it was socially unacceptable for women to desire to be anything other than a mother, therefore female potential was not recognized or acknowledged, and discourse on sex and gender had a distinct lack of female voices.

This idea also gave birth to the notion that if a female were to feel sexual desire outside of the

‘need to reproduce’ if she were married or otherwise this was ‘the major and almost defining symptom of insanity in women’(Showalter 1985 P75). Women were to be manageable and obedient, and signs of not only so-called ‘sexual transgression’ but ‘disobedience’ and ‘assertiveness’ were looked upon as an illness that needed to be ‘cured’. “Madness is a female malady”. (Showalter 1985) because of the many numbers of so-called ‘mental illnesses that were only applicable to women of the time as well as “the statistical overrepresentation of women among the mentally ill” (Showalter 1985) This rendered the image of the ‘female’ as one of irrationality and ‘hysteria’.

Contemporary feminist philosophers, literary critics, and social theorists have been the first to call attention to the existence of a fundamental alliance between 'woman, and 'madness.' They have shown how women, within our dualistic systems of language and representation, are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind” (Showalter 1985 P4).

Pinel Freeing the Insane,' by Tony Robert-Fleury, “The representatives of sanity in the painting are all men, and this division between feminine madness and masculine rationality is further emphasized by the three figures at the center. In the foreground is a lovely, passive, and disheveled young woman, her eyes modestly cast down, upon whose exposed bosom an erect and dignified Pinel gazes with ambiguous interest”(Showalter 1985 P2)) reflecting discourse in art and culture, this is how the general public would view woman, as more likely to be insane, “and male more likely to be rational and put together, the saviors of the weak and fragile woman, and women only to be something viewed and fragile and desirable. Why? And how has this affected the lives of women? Women then stand for irrationality in general in both academic and cultural/artistic representations, “Men on the other hand, appear not only as of the possessors but also as the dispensers of reason, which they can meter out to-or take away from others” (Showalter 1985 P4). This creates a disturbing power balance in which men are the only voices of reason but the label of insanity can be applied by them to any situation in which women may voice any discontent. “Madness has been the historical label applied to female protests and revolution” (Showalter 1985 P5) this was the response to the women’s suffrage movement, that those who expressed a desire for change were not in their right minds, irrational and needed to be contained and controlled. Women’s reform was not going to get anywhere under this label, their thoughts, frustrations, and aspirations for something more than marriage or motherhood, constantly put under the banner of ‘insanity.

This gave rise to a perplexing paradoxical situation, wherein women were told from youth that their soul and natural purpose for living, their only choice to fulfill their true place in society, is to marry and bear children, however, once she is married, she no longer exists in the eyes of society, she has no rights to property or even to her own children. “By the common law of England, a married woman has no legal existence, so far as property is concerned, independently of her husband. The husband and wife are assumed to be one person, and that person is the husband” (Cobbe 1868 P110), this inequality sparked much social and political debate, including the case of Caroline Norton. Nortan was an author who had married and had three children, when she filed for divorce with allegations of abuse within the marriage, her claim was not only denied but she was also told she had no right to her own earnings or to the custody of her 3 sons. After the death of her youngest son due to apparent neglect on the part of the husband, Nortan fought hard against the double standard that was present in males seeking divorce vs females seeking a divorce. Also in order for the government to recognize the right for women to have custody of their children. Norman's contribution to this discourse helped

found the Matrimonial cause Act 1857, Married Woman’s Property Act 1870, and the Custody of Infants act 1839. Although full equal parenting rights did not come into force until 1925, the recognition of Nortan and therefore other women’s rights sparked recognition of the injustice between the sexes, this began to dominate the social and cultural discourse on equality.

Men were unable to see that because women were in some ways different from them, or reacted differently in some situations, that they were not strange or irrational, insane or over-emotional. They believed their own gender to be superior, and as it was mostly males in power, it was an inescapable situation. Females were defined in the context of the ‘male norm together these have insisted that the cut- rural connections between 'women' and 'madness' must be dismantled, that 'femininity' must not be defined in terms of a male norm, and that we can expect no progress when a male-dominated profession determines the concepts of normality and deviance that women perforce must accept. (Showalter 1985 P20)