

Williams Morris's Feminism in *News from Nowhere*

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Abstract

In the Victorian period, female rights, and the idea of the 'place' of a woman, advanced along with the rapid pace of the Industrial era. The quick expansion of women's rights over the last two centuries developed from this era. William Morris is considered to be both feminist, and anti-feminist, depending on which work we read. Focusing solely on Morris's socialist utopian novel, *News from Nowhere*, I argue that while Morris has his moments of possible anti-feminism, as a whole, this work takes a feminist stance. Recognizing that Morris was an influential figure in the literary world and also supportive of women's rights is vital when understanding gender roles in *News from Nowhere* from a feminist standpoint.

William Morris's socialist utopian novel *News from Nowhere*, takes a fictional look at an idealized world from the perspective of the Narrator, who travels through an altered version of Britain. The novel focuses on the public and private life of this society, from politics, law and order, to romantic and familial relationships. Gender roles in particular are an area of interest and importance in the novel, especially from the Narrator's perspective as he questions and explores this utopian society. The gender differences in terms of sexuality, domesticity, and the rights of women in comparison to the Victorian Britain that the narrator left behind, are more liberal and socialist in form, despite the Narrator's misgivings and suspicions regarding this utopian society. The Narrator interacts with various female characters throughout the novel, such as Ellen and Clara, as well as being exposed to the various differences and advancements that are present in this society

regarding women in comparison to the one he has just left behind. These interactions are important, as the women the Narrator interacts with throughout are given their own voice and personal perspectives; they are not portrayed as simple, passive characters. The novel's treatment of gender is progressive in comparison to the previous society the Narrator derives from, which is present in the Narrator's language and his inability to disconnect from the gendered stereotypes of his old world, which highlights the advancement of this society in comparison. However, despite the Narrator struggling with some gendered issues in *News from Nowhere*, Morris creates an equal balance of women's and men's rights, creating equality through women's sexuality, familial obligation, and work within the novel, taking on a progressive feminist standpoint for the time period in doing so.

Being able to understand the concept of feminism in both *News from Nowhere*, and in connection with Morris's own personal beliefs, is vital when studying his own political views. Morris utilizes women's rights in his work because it is a direct reflection of his socialist beliefs, and his rejection and distaste for capitalism as a whole. Morris believes that work should be completed for pleasure only, not for work's sake, and he held various careers over his life which matched with this socialist belief. E.P Thompson states in his biographical novel of Morris, that "Morris is not concerned with the mechanics of society but with the people-their relationships, their values, their pleasure in the details of life. And how remarkable his insights are, weather dealing with love, or labour, or communal life." (Thompson 697). Morris's main concerns regarding his dislike for capitalism remain evident, surrounding the idea of the 'people', pushing his socialist ideals onto the private life of individuals on a personal level, an aspect that heavily influences *News from Nowhere*. His concern for nature is also paramount, which is reiterated in the character of Clara, who states regarding capitalist society, "...[that it is] always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate - 'nature' as people used to call it – as one thing, and mankind as another...that they should try to make nature their slave..." (Morris 219). Nature and women's rights in the *News from Nowhere* society are closely interlinked, as both were disrespected and abused by capitalism, unable to be treated equally or fairly, seen as the 'other' and as something to be controlled. Morris believed that socialism was the only possible society in which humans could thrive alongside nature, in comparison to what he viewed as an unbalanced and unequal Victorian capitalist system, which

highlights the basis of Morris's feminist viewpoint. Morris's focus on the individual, equalizing gender roles, and empowering women in this respect, is the cause for his pro-feminist viewpoint within the novel.

Morris liberates women in terms of sexuality and marriage within the novel, giving them the ability of choice regarding romantic love, and marriage in general. Old Hammond explains this concept, he is the guide that the Narrator interacts with and follows throughout this unfamiliar utopia, and Hammond's opinion on close to every matter in this society is touched upon, balancing the Narrator's conflicting viewpoints. Hammond informs the Narrator that in this utopian society, "there were no law courts to enforce contracts of sentiment or passion..." (Morris 106). Women and men remain together out of mutual affection and love, and if they found that love no longer remained, they could separate and leave one another without any legal or social repercussions. This concept is explored through Clara and Dick's relationship, which illustrates this idea, with Clara leaving the relationship for a year long affair, only to return to Dick when she realizes she loves him once again. Hammond states "He has been married to her once already, and now I should say it is pretty clear he will be married to her again" (Morris 103). Women have just as much agency as the men to leave any relationship, whether it is short or long term in this society, a positive step for women in terms of equality with men.

In line with the idea of gender equality within marriage, Mona Caird, an influential Scottish feminist author, states in her work regarding women and marriage during Morris's time that, "If women had shared with men the privilege of making the laws, it is clear that marriage would not have bound the two sexes unequally; and it seems very unlikely...that they would have made it so inflexible and so irrationally harsh in its demands" (Caird 290). Caird presents the reality of society's viewpoint and execution of the process of marriage during this time period, Morris agrees with this viewpoint, and creates the utopian society where women possess as much control as men in the romantic relationships. This is meant to alter the societal and political values that reside in marriage itself, elevating women's status and roles. Through Morris's treatment of his female characters in the novel, it is clear that he understands Caird's perspective, women do not equally share the same privilege as men, and marriage, as an institution, reflects this imbalance in favor of men. Catarina Novak, a literary critic, states in her work regarding Morris's portrayal of gender in *News from Nowhere*, "The

episode between Dick and Clara goes to show that Nowherean society is not only astonishingly liberal in regards to divorce and remarriage, but also accepts that both men and women possess sexual appetites and a need for emotionally fulfilling relationships... Morris implies that sexuality is not a distinguishing factor between the genders, giving his Nowherean women the freedom of choice” (Novak 75). Morris’s feminist beliefs become apparent in his choice to shape this society in this way, recognizing the inequality that women experience in marriage, and solving this by allowing his utopia to have equality for both genders, giving women their own freedom regarding their sexuality. Morris does not place a great emphasis on ‘sexuality as a distinguishing factor’, he takes this concept and uses it as an equalizer for gender equality, instead of using it against women, or allowing them to be passive in comparison to men.

Expanding on the freedom and equality of marriage in this utopia, the idea of familial life and domesticity from the women’s perspective is, while not completely equalized, improved from the female perspective. In general, this society is more lax in terms of the previous restraints regarding families, allowing women to take on a more active role outside of family life in comparison to the Narrator’s previous society. Hammond delves into the subject, stating “...families are held together by no bond of coercion, legal or social, but by mutual liking and affection, and everybody is free to come and go as they pleases.” (Morris 127). There is a freedom amongst families within the novel, and in connection to this; there is a freedom in domesticity and motherhood, though not the total and complete freedom that Morris was necessarily aiming for. The Narrator questions housekeeping from the women’s perspective, and why the women should be the primary caretakers of the home in comparison to men in what he views as a more ‘progressive’ society. Hammond replies that housekeeping and motherhood are aspects of life that are deserving of respect, and further states, “How could it possible be but that maternity should be highly honored amongst us? For the rest, remember that all the artificial burdens of motherhood are now don away with. A mother has no longer any more sordid anxieties for the future of her children” (Morris 109). Morris’s beliefs that women should still be the main focus in the domestic sphere in comparison to men remains questionable, as that does appear to be a restraint that continues over from the previous, capitalist, society that the narrator so despises. Morris implementing the concept that families are held together, not through political or societal means, but of ‘mutual liking’, gives

both women and men the freedom of choice to either stay or leave the family sphere depending on if the mutual liking fades or grows stronger. Women have the agency to leave their families if they are emotionally unhappy, an agency that was not socially accepted in the Narrator's world as opposed to *News from Nowhere*.

This utopian society allows women to have more agency in this familial sphere, which leads women to be better mothers due to the general calmness this society produces as a result. Ruth Levitas examines this idea closely when connecting Morris's use of domesticity in regards to possible claims of anti-feminism on his part. She states, "The implication of Morris's position is that the negative aspects of domestic labor like those of other work derive from the social relations under which it is carried out; and that it is skilled, valuable, important work, rather than something nasty and demeaning which should be abolished.... [I]t is clear that Morris's argument cannot be assimilated to such an anti-feminist stance." (Levitas 80). Morris alters the societal perspective regarding domestic work, alleviating it from being an "unimportant occupation" to one that is regarded as seriously as any other occupation by equalizing it to laborious work (Morris 107). Morris is able to take the delicate subject of domesticity and femininity and create an equal balance between both ideas, allowing domesticity, and maternity in general, to be freeing and positive, not restrictive and lesser than, as Levitas states.

Labor and work within the society in *News from Nowhere* also highlights the freedom and equality that Morris gave the women in the novel. While women cannot fully break out of the domestic sphere despite the freedoms they are given within it, they are able to remain equal to men in regards to the difference and importance of their work. Philipa is a vital character in this regard, as she is seen as the society's "best carver", a work in which she excels and partakes in only for the sake of her loving to do it, nothing more, a staple in this socialist society (Morris 214-215). Implementing a woman in a position of power, and stating that she completes the work the best out of anyone, including men, is extremely progressive of Morris. When discussing the state of women the Aveling-Marx's state, "both the oppressed classes, women and the immediate producers, must understand that their emancipation will come from themselves. Women will find allies in the better sort of men, as the laborers are finding allies among the philosophers, artists, and poets" (Aveling-Marx 289). Women not only reflect the working class in this way, but through Morris giving women agency to take on whatever labor they

choose to do, as well as being treated equally while doing it, a vital aspect that plays a major role in terms of women's rights. Martin Delveuex states in his article focusing on these issues, "*News from Nowhere* is in fact remarkably progressive in terms of gender issues, in analogy with the situation of the natural environment under capitalism; it is capitalism which Morris holds responsible for the exploitation of women. In *Nowhere*, however, no women's emancipation movement is needed...(Delveaux 138). From Morris's perspective, he creates a society in which there truly is no 'emancipation movement needed', he believes that by creating a non-capitalist society rooted in a love and respect for nature, women's rights and equality will naturally occur in relation to this societal harmony.

Morris's feminism is connected to his rejection of capitalism, and his beliefs of equality that derive from the opposition of this system. This highlights his progressiveness in the women's rights movement overall, creating equality in some of the most male centric areas of society during this time period, labor and the workforce in general. Morris takes this idea and turns it on its head, in favor for women. Hammond states as he discusses the relationship between men and women and work, "the men have no longer any opportunity of tyrannizing over the women...the women do what they can do best, and what they like best, and the men are neither jealous or injured by it" (Morris 107). Morris is able to heighten gender equality by highlighting the male's reaction to this societal difference, showing male support for female endeavors, removing ego's and implementing understanding. As the Boos's discuss in their article regarding Morris, this is due to, "his view that male egoism and impulses toward revenge, not female disloyalty or maternal irresponsibility, create the greatest threats to domestic social harmony" (Boos 30). Morris believed that equalizing women through opportunity and societal upheaval, and men through the breakdown of egoism, could only create the balance between genders.

It is clear that Morris retains some stereotypical gender roles in *News from Nowhere*, often focusing on a woman's physical appearance and still holding them within the domestic sphere in some regard or another. But Morris's progress and advancement of women's rights give him a feminist standpoint, and by default, makes *News from Nowhere*, a feminist work, no matter how complicated it may be. Boos's states, "His writing have always manifested a sympathetic view of the

constraints on women's lives; a belief that heterosexual eros was basic to morality as well as aesthetics and the affective life..." (Boos 3). Given Morris's socialist beliefs, it makes sense that his feminist outlook and overall treatment of women throughout his works would point towards equality, freeing women from capitalist restraints. Marriage, women's roles in the workforce, and the sexual divide that exists within domestic life, were just as important, if not more so, to Morris than socialism in the political atmosphere of the times. He gives women agency and freedom through their ability to control their sexuality, family life, and the careers they decide to pursue. By viewing outside perspectives that both agree and disagree with the idea of a feminist Morris in *News from Nowhere*, the argument for Morris being an early feminist for his time, whether advertently or not, remains valid. His support for women connects with his strong socialist ties and rejection of capitalism, leading to his ultimate utopia that everyone should remain equal and in tune with nature as a whole. Morris's belief that nature was vital and deserves a necessary respect, unlike the abuse he felt nature received under capitalism, also ties into his desire for feminism. The two aspects have there right abused in capitalist society, and the novel attempts to rectify this mistake through his socialist beliefs. While flawed at times in *News from Nowhere*, Morris's created equality in comparison to our own reality that did not possess this advanced worldview at the time, becoming an influential figure for women's rights in this regard. While *News from Nowhere*, is a novel that can be analyzed and debated in regards to its utopian ideals and the issues that come along with this seemingly 'perfect' society, Morris's treatment of women, while not always correct or equal, was progressive and vital for women's equality.

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