

"Women's freedom is
the sign of social freedom."

Rosa Luxemburg

Hanya Holm



Woman Rising
By Shiloh Sophia McCloud

Shiloh's artwork is dedicated to providing healing images of women.

The Rise of Female Power

If we look to history to show the rise of women's power throughout the 19th century, we can see how women have adjusted, acclimated, and fought for equality and respect. In the early 1800s, there existed the "Cult of True Womanhood," where the "**True Woman**" was the keeper of morality and decency within the home, being regarded as innately superior to men when it came to virtue (Cruea 188). The True Woman was portrayed as delicate and weak, prone to fainting spells and dizziness, and therefore needed a male protector. The "Cult of True Womanhood" laid the groundwork for the later development of feminism by crediting women with a moral authority which implicitly empowered them to extend their moral influence outside the home" (190).

From the extensive death of military men in the Civil War, the rise of "**Real Womanhood**" took hold. These women had to fill positions left vacant by men and grew to be self-sufficient versus weak and dependent. "Real Womanhood offered women a vision of themselves as biologically equal [to men] (rationally and emotionally) and in many cases markedly superior" (191). These women encourage one another in strenuous exercise, in education and began seeking a male spouse by looking at their moral character, as opposed to the social expectations to be married at all costs.

After "Real Women" came the "**Public Women**." "Public Womanhood" sought to protect their communities, have a more impactful presence in predominantly male worlds, and "gain legal visibility in order to protect their interests materially" (193). The woman of this era began entering the workforce as teachers, nurses, secretaries, and writers.

These women raised young daughters that then became the "**New Womanhood**," and their fierceness for equality compounded their mothers' efforts. Their movement "focused primarily on entirely emancipating women from the social expectations and conventions forced upon them by tradition" (198). They began going to college and not just women's colleges. They began to infiltrate the male colleges against much resistance. The New Woman entered the political ring and pursued careers that fulfilled her personal interests.

In the early 20th Century, the role of woman had come a very far way from its conservative and domestic beginnings. By 1920, after much fighting and protests, women finally got the right to vote. "In 1935, Mary McLeod Bethune, the daughter of former enslaved people, founded the National Council of Negro Women to advocate for more equal opportunities for Black women in housing, education, employment, and healthcare" (Michals). In 1972, it became illegal for schools to discriminate based on gender.

Much of Hanya Holm's choreography was based on freedom – freedom in the body, freedom in space, and freedom in life. Like the other trailblazers of her time, she sought to create movement in a new way and to break free from balletic constraints. She wanted to

see her dancers perform with passion and raw emotion. Improvisation was significant in her work and allowed for freedom of expression and play. Hanya Holm's teaching style was to "liberate each individual to define a technical style of his or her own that should express their inner personality and give freedom to explore" (Cristofori, 1993).

In the image on the left, one is left with the question, "Is she falling, or is she rising?" Other questions spring to mind "How is she rising/falling?" "What oppressive force is she fighting and conquering?" or "Is she losing the battle, and gravity is taking hold?" I choose to believe, with all the aforementioned research on women's ascension, that she is indeed rising, like the image on the right. I see her as pushing through the glass ceiling and creating more empowerment for women by encouraging females to dance with and about freedom. How can we, charged with arming our next generation of women with a sense of power, continue the great fight of our ancestors and female trailblazers? What new feats must we conquer? How can we continue to protect our rights and maintain our freedom?

Discussion: As a class, reflect on the questions above and share your insights, feelings, thoughts about the topic. Follow up with a journal entry going deeper on how these images affect you personally.

*Why this assignment is important: My creative research demonstrates how we can continue to use the developments and creative strategies of the infamous dancers who went before us and build upon them in innovative ways. I find this integral to my teaching practice to diversify how we examine the archives, engage students in a hands-on approach, and help dancers hone their creative compositions in impactful ways. By looking to our past, at the women who paved the way for future artists, our next generation can carry the torch passed on to them. It is my passion to ignite creativity in the dancers, and through this research, they can honor those trailblazers whilst carving out a niche of their own and illuminating the world with their art.