

The *Human Question*: Does That *Thing* Know Enough To Vote?

It is quite amusing how humans base much of their hate off of difference, yet are taken by terror at the idea of sameness. We enjoy creating a hierarchy, where stratification keeps the white, able-bodied, wealthy, heterosexual male steadily at the top, while the “other” remains subordinate. Yet, within our strata we fear nothing more than feeling identical. In Marietta Holley’s novel, *Samantha on the Woman Question*, this aspect of humanity is explored through her main character, Samantha Allen. Holley, as a feminist humorist, creates notions of collectivity by having Samantha combat the injustices of society caused by our unstable relationship with difference.

In the ninth chapter of Holley’s work, “The Women’s Parade”, Samantha, along with her husband Josiah are seated at a window, overlooking the suffragist parade below. Together they observe the different individuals whom walk past, commenting on their fashion choices and the personal *character* that this then lends them. When a woman, donning a cinched-bottom skirt and a rather large and ostentatious quail feather in her hat, strides by, Josiah turns to Samantha, asking, “does that *thing* know enough to vote?” (Holley 161). By replacing the obvious pronoun of “she” with “that thing”, Josiah strips the woman of her female identity, reducing her to an object unworthy of a sex, a gender, and clearly, of the right to vote.

While this reduction is important, it is Samantha’s response over the course of the scene and chapter, which plays the more crucial role. Soon after Josiah’s initial comment,

a “foolishly” dressed male figure walks past the window they are observing from, and Samantha, turning Josiah’s words back upon him, asks if “*that* thing know[s] enough to vote?” (Holley 164). By reversing the sexed subject of the question, Holley illuminates the fact that “difference” from the supposed and accepted *norm* cannot be a means for judgment overall, as it crosses all boundaries. Both the male and female race contain individuals whom are deemed unacceptable by the larger society; Holley argues that this debunks the patriarchal argument that women should be prohibited from voting for reasons of being senseless, unintelligent creatures, proven by their actions and outfits.

Samantha echoes Holley’s ideals, arguing with Josiah that, “good intelligent men orn’t to lose the right to suffrage for the vice and ignorance of some of their sect, and that argument is jest as strong for the other sect” (Holley 165). She effectively makes the point that “the whole” cannot be judged by “the few” as it will never produce an accurate representation in the end. Any and all sects are arbitrated as a larger entity by the acts of the stereotyped minority. Men are strong and emotionless; women are talkative and needy; blondes are unintelligent and oblivious. In Samantha’s case, and thus the case of the collective of women in the 19th Century, arguments made against women’s suffrage pertaining to the “ability of the female” are all based solely off the stereotyped, general opinion accepted as fact. In reality, it is impossible to surmise the “ability of women” as the variations within the sex are endless. Thus, women have just as much of a natural “right” to vote as men, as both sexes contain those who are “foolish” and deemed “different” by the majority.

Josiah, however, and the entire male cast of the work, is unable to see such truths within the hierarchy of difference. Within his own masculine class, he can easily separate the intelligent, wealthy, and sensible; Josiah has no rebuttal to Samantha's judgment of the man as "foolish" due to his choice of adornments. However, he also believes his sex to be superior, belittling the efforts of the suffragettes. Here lies the juxtaposition of difference. Because women are the "other" in the eyes of men, they are lesser, thus the pyramid of worth is created. However, within each sect, and specifically in this novel, each sex, there is a second, miniature hierarchy, created once again by difference. The white man lies above the colored male, and the wealthy white man lies above the middle class male.

These sub-hierarchies dismantle the initial, macro-hierarchies: if the male race contains individuals who are "different" then they too are flawed, unintelligent at times; this meaning that they are truthfully no better, nor worse, than their female counterparts which they hold themselves above. "Men and wimmen want equal legal rights to represent themselves and their own sex which are different, and always must be, and both sexes don't want to be hampered and sot down on by the other one" (Holley 134).

Holley promoted her belief that women and men could work concurrently, while still remaining distinctive yet equivalent so that neither race would deem their "difference" as a right to rule over the other. "Some wimmen are frivolous and some men foolish...God made women to match the men, but these few hadn't ort to disfranchise the hull race of men and wimmen" (Holley 101).

While Holley wants the reader to garner that men and women similarly both contain “others” and that neither can be *better*, it is pertinent that one does not mistakenly read this as men and women becoming the same. Holley was a fascinating feminist who remained piously religious and quite content with her “womanly role”, while still actively participating in the suffrage and temperance movements of her time. Throughout *Samantha on the Woman Question*, multiple statements are made, on Holley’s part, about how women are to be diligent about housework and are empathetic and nurturing creatures: “And every true woman loves to serve. Home is my supreme happiness and delight, and my best happiness is found in servin’ them I love” (Holley 108). Today, many feminists would reject such statements, finding them limiting, insulting even. However, Holley was a strong participant in the notion that men and women *must* remain distinctive; that each of the sexes had their own defining characteristics and separate spheres in which they functioned, and that it was crucial to have this disconnection remain. For Holley, part of that which made a woman included such traits as being caring.

While believing females to be kind and industrious overall, Holley does *not* hold her sex in a position of supremacy. Her work is diligent in displaying the flaws of the female race as well. “Samantha believes that women are intrinsically no better or worse than men and does not overlook the faults of her own gender” (Templin). One could easily write a feminist piece from the stanchion that females are morally superior, however, this claim begins to slide back into the patriarchal argument in which women

are seen as the frail, amiable sex, incapable of over-exertion and true intellect. Holley, instead, sought to show that females were dynamic, containing both positive and negative qualities, while still remaining separate from males. Whenever a male antagonist references generalizations about women in the novel, referring to the female sex in images of angels and so forth, Samantha quickly retorts with a negative picture for her sex. “Wimmen are the loveliest, most angelic creatures that ever walked the earth; they are perfect, flawless, like snow and roses,” claims one of the numerous Senators Samantha speaks with in Washington D.C.. “They hain’t no such thing; they are disagreeable creeters a good deal of the time,” responds Samantha, “They hain’t no better than men, but they ort to have their rights all the same” (Holley 85). By depicting the female race as flawed, Holley is acknowledging the outlying individuals on which the stereotypes have been formed, as well as equating women to their male counterparts by depicting them in a light contrary to that, which is deemed “feminine”.

Holley holds both males and females as equidistant from the poles of “good” and “bad”. “They’re not all dishonest. There are good men among ‘em as well as bad” (Holley 153). Samantha’s character, although combating with the male characters present in *Samantha on the Woman Question*, remains neutral between the sexes, allowing Holley’s message to permeate multiple spheres of society. Because Samantha is not a “man-hater”, nor one to hold the female race in the realms of divinity, her message is one taken with reverence and applicable across numerous boundary lines. “I never wanted women to get more praise or justice than men, I simply want ‘em to get as much – just an

even amount” (Holley 172). This is an implication, which the majority will back, feminists, skeptics, men, and women alike. Much of Holley’s success came from the way in which Samantha was written to appeal to all. Never extremist. Never radical.

Marietta Holley’s humor also played an extremely important part in dispersing her feminist ideals to the public. Samantha’s character, along with being impartial to either sex, is written as an approachable individual for those wary of or just entering the world of women’s rights. By engaging a heavy use of dialect and dialogue riddled with smart quips, Holley creates Samantha as the every day woman of the 19th Century. The concepts she speaks to and legal debates she enters, are translated into the common vernacular; in replacing such jargon with colloquialisms, Samantha became the “voice of the people”. Feminist theory became low theory for the common individual once Josiah Allen’s Wife talked the topics through. Beyond creating a sense of accessibility, Holley’s humor also gave way to a *crucial* form of collectivity. Once simplified, the messages of the suffrage movement were easily applied to multiple other social issues occurring at the time. “An astute analyst of power relations, Samantha connects women's issues to larger issues of power. She sees that both men and women may be victimized by the abuse of power” (Templin).

Holley always remained faithful to the idea that women and men should act as separate entities, although, she wished that they would come together, using their differences collectively for the greater good: “Good men and good women, each fillin’

their different spears in life, but banded together for the over-throw of evil, the uplift of the race” (Holley 175). A decent portion of *Samantha on the Woman Question* is spent with Samantha arguing for both Women’s suffrage and the cruciality of the temperance movement. Continually, we see her backing male characters into corners, singling out the weaknesses and loopholes in their arguments to reject Samantha’s ideals. However, not once does Samantha use her victories as proof that women are superior to the men in positions of power. “In my opinion the male bee has just as good a right to be monarch as his female pardner has, if he is as good and knows as much” (Holley 106). She holds the two sexes identically parallel. Equal... yet different.

While the separation is present between groups and sexes alike, Samantha clearly illustrates that, at the end of the day, our differences do not have to hinder the power we would have should we work as one. “The great march of life tromples on ‘em all alike; they fall from one common sky, and are trodden down in one common ground” (Holley 90). Samantha’s character brings together the males and females under the commonality of exploitation. While we are *not* all the same, we are all met with the same hindrances and injustices, which must be fought.

“Holley drew comparisons between the condition of blacks and women when she likened race slavery to wife slavery” (Curry 52). While advocating for her friends back home, Samantha comes to realize, and simultaneously brings the males she debates with to this realization, that multiple, differing groups are fighting identical battles. Just as a

woman is a slave to her husband, combating issues such as alcoholism, loss of autonomy, and the threat of losing her children, so are blacks slaves to whites, and women slaves to men in the religious realms as well. Exploitation connects us all. “Like women who can find no refuge of justice in the law, blacks are not patronizingly protected but rather are powerless before the laws that discriminate against them” (Curry 53). Every section of society is ranked, with each level above the cause of discriminations and manipulation. While we are all different, these differences do not have to be that which define the division of power.

We must learn to respect our differences, instead of garnering them as a means of societal ranking. While focusing on who is lesser due to their “otherness”, it is easy to miss the larger powers that remain at the zenith of the ultimate pyramid hierarchy. There can be no hierarchy of the oppressed should there be any hope for change, for the ultimate powers of injustice, “encourage members of oppressed groups to act against each other, and so long as we are divided because of our particular identities we cannot join together in effective political action” (Lorde). Looking out of the window, this is what Samantha recognizes in those “things” worthy of voting. Some women are foolish. Some men are foolish as well. Both sexes deserve the right to vote. For men and women alike are trampled on by those higher-up still. Just as Josiah and she look down upon the street, so do the powers on top gaze down, passing judgment, always. Anyone viewed from above will seem an “other”, one must speak face to face in order to garner a true view. But Holley believes there is hope still:

“That sperit is I spoze inherited from the days when our ancestor, the Cave man, would knock down the woman he fancied, with a club, and carry her off into his cave and keep her there shet up. But little by little men are forgettin’ their ancestral traits, and men and wimen are gradually comin’ out of their dark caverns into the sunshine (for women too have inherited queer traits and disagreeable ones, but that is another story)” (Holley 67).

It is through communication that we reach beyond the boundaries of class, gender, sex, and race. We must depart from this ordered system we’ve been learned to use, understand our differences, and use them to combat vulnerabilities instead of as a mean of stratification. Here lies Holley’s true message: the fight goes far beyond that for women’s suffrage; it’s not the woman question, but rather, the human question. Can we cease our obsession with differences in order to join together against the larger abusers? Can we shift our fear and anger from such differences to the highest exploiters?

Marietta Holley was akin to Mark Twain. She was one of the most successful women writers of the 19th Century and has gone but mostly extinct in the literary world today. Her humor rivaled that of her male counterparts, yet her legacy remains the farthest from impressive. Holley was not simply a woman fighting for equality and the right to vote. She had moved beyond. She had crossed the boundaries.

With *Samantha on the Woman Question*, Holley concluded her Samantha series with the challenge to question the hierarchy. She dove into the human obsession with

difference, asking why we, as a society, are so quick to rank ourselves above those we have deemed an “other” yet shrivel at the notion of being the same.

“Oppression and intolerance of difference comes in all shapes and sizes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression” (Lorde).

Diversity is a wonderful concept, but it must be working towards goals of collectivity instead of singularity.

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