The Legacy of the “First Wave” of American Women’s Rights Activism (1848-1920) for Women’s and Gender Studies

The Yellow Wallpaper as a “bridging text” between 1st and 2nd Waves of American women’s rights activism

a. Critiquing the “Lenses of Gender”—(Sandra Bem)
   1. Biological Essentialism-The notion of gendered roles/hierarchy and male domination as rooted intrinsically in biology
   2. Androcentrism (male-centeredness)- defines males and male experience as the norm and females and female experience as a deviation from that norm.
   3. Gender polarization- assumes male and females are opposite in nature; This lens may be superimposed on many aspects of dress, behavior, work and sexuality.

b. Articulating a critique of the gender system as one of performance and power; Describing a model of a system in which the parts (social/cultural, legal/economic) work together to maintain a gendered hierarchy

c. Identifying contradictions within the political, economic and familial system to promote change

d. Establishing a model of social change that involved diverse methods, participants and goals: prefigurative and pragmatic approaches

e. Questions of the meaning of equality: sameness or difference?

f. Creating connections and affirming differences among various subgroups of women; questions of theorizing race/gender/ethnicity

Background to the Emergence of the Second Wave of American Women’s Rights Activism: 1940s-1960s

1. The Years Between the Waves of Women’s Rights Activism: 1920-40- “Unobtrusive Mobilization” or “Lull Between the Waves”? Role of Mass Media in Defining Social Movements

2. Gender Role Change and the Complex Legacy of World War II-The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter (Connie Field, 1981) – documentary film