

Nancy Armstrong: On the Politics of Domesticity

Unit 3 2nd Semester

Some Call it Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity

Summary: Armstrong's "Some Call it Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity"

Beginning in the late 1980s, Nancy Armstrong started writing a new kind of feminism which sought to identify the way that gender is not only socially constructed, but used to create the modern liberal state. While more traditional feminist approaches look to subjugation of the feminine and seek to invert that subjugation, Armstrong's approach relies upon the notion that the feminine, while subjugated and separate, was given power in a specific political realm that was then renamed as apolitical. In her 1990 essay, "Some Call it Fiction: On the Politics of Domesticity," Armstrong looks to the formation of the novel, the history of sexuality, and the politics of history as commingled forces which resulted in our current conception of literature.

Armstrong begins by explaining that her work is "in opposition to models of history that confine political practices to activities directly concerned with the marketplace, the official institutions of the state or else resistance to these" (567). Instead, Armstrong explains, the model under which her essay unfolds, incorporates that which is generally thought of as social, personal, or cultural. This inclusion ensures the place for women. Armstrong next looks at traditional historicist approaches to domestic fiction and the problems these approaches have encountered. She claims that some scholars place "historical events...in the official institutions of state" where "power [is] exercised primarily through men" (568). By broadening the category of what is historical to include seemingly unofficial institutions such as intellectual labor and specifically female labor, Armstrong claims we will find "that the rise of the novel was related to the emergence of women's writing as well [as the rise of the new middle classes]" (568).

Armstrong next analyzes Foucault's conception of power or discourse in order to underscore the link between writing and political history. She summarizes *Discipline and Punish* as showing "that the truth of the modern individual existed first as writing, before she or he was transformed successively into speech, thought and unconscious desire" and credits Foucault with enabling "us to see the European Enlightenment as a revolution in words" (570). Reading thus became the mode of engagement between individuals and the world, giving written word incredible

power (Armstrong 570). Armstrong then notes that Foucault isolates the household as a unit of power first during the plague arguing that this is the beginning of a political separation of personal life from political life (which further makes personal life political). She further argues that Foucault's model, although it broadens what can be thought of as political, does so along the lines of where men draw power, ignoring the presence of women as leaders of the household. She argues that if one were to look closely at this model one would find that "it remains extremely powerful to this day as both metaphor and metonymy, the unacknowledged model and source of middle-class power" (572).

Armstrong goes on to explain that she must now evoke the feminist argument but in a modified way. She explains, "by this I mean we must be willing to accept the idea that, as middle-class women, we are empowered, although we are not empowered in traditionally masculine ways" (573). She goes on to claim that middle-class women are intrinsically involved in the creation of the world in which political institutions depend (573). She claims that this occurs because "domestic fiction actively disentangled the language of sexual relations from that of political economy" (573). Armstrong explains that this occurred through the development of Victorian-era institutionalized education. Novels began to be used as teaching implements "so long as [they were] governed by principles that made conformity seem desirable" (574). Armstrong explains that this theory comes from earlier puritan models of gendered domestic roles. These roles "represented the household as the opposition of complementary genders" and as such, "the authors of countless puritan tracts asked readers to imagine the household as a self-enclosed social unit" (575). Later models preferenced a given woman based on her unique femaleness instead of other status symbols as the middle-class expanded (576). In doing so, the middle-class began to absorb the earlier model of gendered domestic roles centered around a woman-run household.

Armstrong finally claims that (some) domestic fiction highlights these relations. Armstrong looks to Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* to point out the degree to which Armstrong believes Brontë was aware of this power structure. In *Shirley*, the female lead encourages her fiancé to read Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* in order to make himself more English. This action hinges on the ability of the act of reading to have a transformative effect on the reader's psyche. Armstrong claims that the emergence of the novel, and the domestic novel in particular, are inextricably linked to politics and gender because of this understanding of reading as a transformative act.

In looking at Susan Glaspell's 1916 play, *Trifles*, one can immediately see some of the possible effects of presenting gendered domesticity as separate from historical politics of state institutions. The play's action is centered the domestic crime scene of the Wright family's kitchen. Mrs. Wright, an acquaintance of Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale's, has been arrested as the suspected murderer of her husband, John. Mrs. Peters' husband, Henry, is the sheriff in charge of investigating the crime along with

George Henderson, the county attorney. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters have been brought to the house to pick up a few of Mrs. Wright's personal affects; the men did not think it was appropriate or possible for them to select the correct items. Immediately, one notes the divisions between the genders. The women lack first names and occupations. The men however have full names and occupations which place them firmly in the realm of the accepted political sphere. Further, they are arbiters of "truth" and "justice," yet as the play progresses it becomes clear that the many cannot "read" the scene of the crime to find the evidence they need to prosecute Mrs. Wright. The women, on the other hand, as arbiters of domesticity, can read the scene and do find evidence suggesting that Mrs. Wright killed her husband. They find this evidence by "reading" the scene of the kitchen. The men, however, enter the kitchen proclaim it a mess, full of women's things and trifles, and proceed to examine the rest of the house looking for motive. As heads of households themselves, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are well positioned to see from the domestic position of Mrs. Wright in a way the men are not. The male characters in *Trifles* see the scene from a perspective which separates gendered domesticity from political history and public institutions. This perspective prohibits the men from reading the crime scene. A reading of the scene that reintroduces gendered domesticity into politics and public institutions, such as occurs when Mrs. Peters is brought to the scene because of her gendered domestic status in relation to her husband's political status in the public institution of criminal justice, that the crime can be accurately read.