

Feminist Concerns in Laura Riding's "Eve's Side of It"

Forty-one years after publication of "Eve's Side of It" (1935), Laura Riding added a combined prologue and epilogue, titled "Commentary," to "warn readers against trying to see the story as a feminist interpretation of the Creation followed by a feminist analysis of the historical situation . . ." (548). Despite Riding's anti-feminist views, this paper suggests several ways to view Riding's story as compatible and in context with works of feminist writers and theorists, thereby opening it up to further study and discussion.

♪Riding's Eve expresses thoughts about her identity and her connection to another being (named Lilith) who has no physical body. Eve says of their shared experience, "We have both become a new one who is neither Lilith nor myself, yet no one else." Full of speculation and doubts about which of the two is superior, Eve nevertheless prepares the reader for the rest of the story by stating ". . . I and only I, am capable of telling in so many words how it was before there came to be a new one. For I alone was *there*" (545). This self-empowerment to tell (or write) is a desirable feminist goal promoted in 1975 by ♪Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa." Cixous declares, "Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (1454). Riding's Eve speaks to give her side of historic events concerning early man and woman.

While waiting for man to take physical form, Eve also reports, "I talked a great deal to myself in those early days. . . Men have often wondered what women do with themselves during the time when, presumably, they are doing nothing. They are, of course talking to themselves" (Riding 546-47). Even while alone, Eve, like any person, needs to structure and organize thoughts, needs to have a sense of being in the present.

♪Other writers, including Mark Twain in his “Eve’s Diary”, have commented about women who talk to themselves. His Eve says: “I talk all day, and in my sleep, too, and I am very interesting, but if I had another to talk to I could be twice as interesting, and would never stop, if desired” (23).

Twain’s Eve and Riding’s Eve talk to themselves also out of loneliness, and both wish for company. Having a conversational sounding board helps a woman to affirm her place in the world. One can apply the same idea to writing and the feminist literary perspective by considering ♪Judith Butler’s comment about gaining empowerment from shared thoughts and feelings:

Indeed, the feminist impulse, and I am sure there is more than one, has often emerged in the recognition that my pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not mine alone, and that it delimits me in a shared cultural situation which in turn enables and empowers me in certain unanticipated ways. (405)

Eve talks about her own “dumb anger” while waiting for men to finish evolving. Her anger, arising from fear, pushes her to believe: “The men who were going to be were angry with me: it was my job to be, so to speak, a chopping-block for their anger . . . So I did the dirty work. I was Lilith’s eyes and ears and mouth, and then her whole body” (Riding 547). The reader is not told what the “dirty work” will be or if it will bring even more anger from men if not performed to their satisfaction. Assuming that some of that “dirty work” is about sex and gender roles, a reader may take a line of reasoning from feminist theory. In her “Feminist Manifesto,” composed almost 70 years before publication in 1982, ♪Mina Loy writes, “Men and women are enemies, with the enmity of the exploited for the parasite, the parasite for the exploited—at present they are at the

mercy of the advantage that each can take of the others sexual dependence” (256). Eve, then, is experiencing enmity before men take mortal form and expects it to continue after they materialize.

Stating an additional reason for fear-driven anger, Eve is anxious “to live—to get it all over.” After comparing her sense of anxiety to a traveler who is “not really happy until you are *there*,” she reasons “. . . if you do nothing and know nothing . . . you may easily forget about yourself, and die” (Riding 547). Life without purpose or meaning, without the means to express yourself and interact with others, is a kind of death. Prisoners in solitary confinement feel that way, and so do women who are constrained by male dominance to the point of feeling like prisoners. For modern women writers, escape from prisoner-like feelings in the literary world, according to Gilbert and Gubar, happens

♪ . . . only because their eighteenth and nineteenth-century foremothers struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture. (2028)

One might also describe Eve’s feelings of impatience as an awakening consciousness of things to come. ♪ Adrienne Rich, in her 1971 essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” remarks, “It’s exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting and painful” (983). Rich puts this in the context of breaking free from male writer limitations, a situation Eve has not yet experienced but seems to anticipate in a general way. At one point, Eve states, “I did not want to be hanging around with my work not even started—perhaps to die” (Riding 547). Writing or not, women want a sense of fulfillment and purpose.

Waffling back and forth over the question of dying if she does not “see the whole affair through,” Eve realizes that her suffering “was just extreme tiredness” and pain brought on by repeatedly recuperating “after I have been thoroughly exhausted by men” (Riding 547). Certainly such feeling is common among wives everywhere who are exhausted by work done for the benefit of men, or who are victims of domestic abuse by men. ♪Zora Neale Hurston expresses this in her story “Sweat,” about long-suffering washer-woman Delia Jones. Delia works up enough anger to talk back to her husband, at one point, saying, “Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin’ in washin’ fur fifteen years, Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!” (350). Delia and many other woman who experience this kind of exhausted “death” eventually attempt to escape it.

In the last paragraph of the story, Riding, in Eve’s voice, finally and specifically mentions the Garden of Eden. Not wanting to continue forever in a state of anger, and wanting to “start fresh,” ♪Eve explains the Serpent, the forbidden fruit, and how “Things had to begin *somewhere* to be somewhat as they were going to be.” She wants to give her point of view, saying, “I, for one, never had any illusions. I do not see how anyone can be either blamed or pitied who has never had any illusions.” She ends with “. . . I should not like it thought that I expected men to have my point of view about things.” (548).

Riding writes her 1976 dual-purpose commentary as both a prologue and an epilogue because of “. . . readers reading as they pleased, and not as they were supposed to read (548). When I wrote this story,” Riding comments, “I believed in the reality of stories as description of some of the unknown content of life . . .” She adds “story is the communication of human beings to human beings of beliefs as to what the life of human

beings is ‘really’ like.” (550). She wants readers to understand how closely a story reflects reality or truth.

♪Riding’s effort to sway reader response toward her way of thinking may be fruitless because, as Annette Kolodny explains, “we appropriate meaning from a text according to what we need (or desire), or in other words, according to the critical assumptions or predispositions (conscious or not) that we bring to it” (304).

Gilbert and Gubar included Laura Riding in their anthology of *Literature by Women* in spite of her anti-feminist protestation. They justify their editorial decision on the evidence that Riding addresses “contemporary gender studies,” in her *The Word “Woman”* publication. (542) “Eve’s Side of It” was a part of that publication.

One could ask why we should evaluate a work that the author does not wish us to study through the lens of feminism. I believe the answer lies in acknowledgement of changed feminist trends. The difference between Riding’s 1976 opinion and our current approach to feminism is enough to invite investigation. After hearing this paper, I hope you agree that Riding’s story touches on many of the women’s studies issues we discuss in university classrooms today. ♪