

Deconstructing Female Friends

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Abstract

One of Fay Weldon's early novels, *Female Friends* (1975), published at the peak of her feminist 'phase', deconstructs female and feminine stereotypes in order to present the writer's own views on feminism. It speaks for a generation of women, who struggle to find their place in a male-dominated world, through three protagonists, who are neither happy, nor perfect. Narrated by the character Chloe, the novel revolves around her and her friends, Grace and Marjorie, with an aim at depicting the falsehood and hypocrisy that surround female friendship. It is precisely where Weldon's specificity as a feminist writer lies: in her rendering the imperfections of women's characters and relationships. This paper attempts to trace such elements of 'fayminism' in *Female Friends* by resorting to the tools of the feminist critic.

Keywords: feminism, *Female Friends*, Fay Weldon, deconstruction

Fay Weldon is a prolific author, having written more than 35 novels, most of which deal with subjects related to feminine identity. One of Weldon's first books, *Female Friends*, was published at the beginning of the feminist phase, making Weldon a precursor, in a way, as well as an advocate, for the women's liberation movement. Nora Stovel (2003) states that "[...] Fay Weldon's [...] novel *Female Friends* (1975) expressed the rising feminist consciousness of the seventies. In the year Margaret Thatcher became the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the first female head of government in Europe, Weldon gave the 1979 series a feminist tone".

Weldon has raised many concerns in her novels, becoming a feminist in the true sense of the word by attempting to deconstruct gender stereotypes in some unusual ways. However, Fay Weldon does not write simply to promote feminism, she does not make her female protagonists become moral compasses for her readers. On the contrary, Weldon acknowledges the feminist movement, but is reluctant to receive a label. As she suggests, in an interview given, "I like to think I influenced it! I started writing in England at the same time as the

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women's movement there got going, so we were more or less contemporary phenomena. The writer and the movement [began] to feed into each other." (Kumar 1995: 16) In other words, Weldon sees herself as having influenced the feminist movement in the same way in which the feminist movement has influenced her views and writings, the latter becoming compatible with the notorious philosophy. Andrew Foley has observed this relationship and explains that Weldon's connexion with feminism is more of a symbiotic one, rather than a one-way experience (2007: 30). Foley advocates for Weldon's indubitable influence on women's movement, insisting that Weldon has reshaped the way in which women were regarded in society. In the England of the 1960s and 1970s, Weldon finds herself a woman among many who choose to take advantage of the new world order and work opportunities, fighting the social oppression which tied them to the household and to the condition of stay-at-home moms. Regarding the subject of domesticity and motherhood, Weldon explains one of the drawbacks of feminist ideology: "The downside of feminism is that women are now expected to go out to work, which some women would rather do than looking after the children anyway." (Black 2009) Weldon thus recognizes the fact that the feminist movement sometimes works against some women, forcing all women to find jobs as a political statement, rather than be allowed to make their own choices and be in charge of their own destiny. This is one of the reasons why Weldon does not idolize her female protagonists, does not make them appear as female heroes, but as ordinary women who live ordinary lives.

Reluctant to being associated with the feminist movement, Weldon portrays Woman as refusing to fit stereotype, and as deciding to adopt views and aspirations which go against the mainstream. While many women have benefited from this movement by being allowed a job and independence from men, Weldon seems to think that not everybody is happy with feminism. In an interview, she has stated that "If you're an intelligent, competent and healthy person it's the most wonderful thing. If you have no aspirations and don't want to do anything except exist, than perhaps the pre-feminist world was better. There's never a perfect solution. There's just the least worst" (Black 2009). Weldon suggests that she thinks more in terms of individuals, regardless of their gender; as such, people are free to choose their own paths in life, considering that women have felt compelled to choose a career. As such in Weldon's opinion, the empowered woman was not a choice anymore, it was a duty to be performed by every woman.

Some of Weldon's protagonists do not follow the trend of becoming empowered women; they have mundane lives, which they deal with on their own. The writer does not create perfect role models, but rather she brings to life everyday characters, making it easier to empathize with their problems. Along these lines, Weldon's protagonists in *Female Friends*, Chloe, Marjorie and Grace, have an imperfect friendship, showing the darker side of friendship and relationships in general. It has been suggested that Weldon attempts to present a real life friendship, rather than a fairy tale one: "I have deliberately chosen to call attention to less familiar works that reveal the psychological underpinnings of female friendship rather than to works that display a primarily ironic attitude toward friendship, such as Fay Weldon's *Female Friends* [...]" (Abel 1981: 414). Weldon does not set out to teach women how to behave, but rather to provide an insight into a mundane friendship, as her characters are modeled in such a way as to allow the reader to empathize.

Weldon's protagonists are very different types of women. Chloe, for example, is an indecisive woman, dreading her existence but not wanting to change. She feels empowered, having escaped her husband's sexual advances by pushing him into the arms of another woman. Sarah Blackburn explains:

Shy Chloe, married to tortured, pretentious scriptwriter Oliver, presides over a household of children some her own and others the various discards of her friends, dead and alive. Most of them have the same father, who is not Oliver. Chloe is long bored with Oliver, who treats her contemptuously, yet she is terribly dependent on him. When she half-manoeuvres the French "maid", a young psychologist, to replace her in his dreaded physical affections, her friends are horrified. Chloe prides herself--sometimes--on her orderly, martyred existence. The rest of the time she is searching for a way out of it. (1974)

Chloe struggles to survive in a male-dominated world, where she is in touch with her nurturing, motherly side, and raising children. She feels oppressed by her husband, Oliver, but manages to have a strong voice, with the help of her friends. Chloe struggles with the newly found freedom of the women in the seventies, when feminism had liberated them from social oppression, in a way, although they were still expected to act submissively towards their husbands. Weldon allows the reader an insight into Chloe's psyche, wondering "How can Chloe leave? How

can she carve thought the patterns of dependency and hope, in the interests of something so impractical as love and personal happiness?" (1974: 198). Chloe's inability to be happy by herself is not necessarily her own fault, but sooner the result of centuries of social oppression, which have taught women that men are responsible for making them happy, and that no woman can feel accomplished by herself.

Fay Weldon does not focus only on the husband-wife relationship; she also goes on to analyse the mother-daughter connexion. Marjorie's relationship with her mother is central to the narrative, and it explains Marjorie's reluctance to have children. Having been abandoned by her mother, Marjorie goes through an identity crisis which culminates with her guilt over her mother's health. Marjorie is an example of a woman trapped between two worlds; in a way, she is happy with the freedom feminism has brought her; however, she still suffers from her mother's rejection, a rejection made possible by the exact movement which has allowed Marjorie to become a B.B.C. director. Marjorie's decision to get a hysterectomy may be regarded either as her surrender to the thought that she will never become a good mother, because of the example Helen has given her, or as an acceptance of the fact that she chose to renounce all feelings of neglect.

Grace, on the other hand, represents the type of woman who chooses to live her life, regardless of what others believe about her, and neglecting her child in the process. She does not want to feel responsible for a child's life and to be trapped in a marriage in which she is constantly persecuted.

Grace, who stamped her foot and wished that Hitler would win the war if that would avoid having an evacuated child take shelter in her Grace-centered suburban home, lives today with a super-cool young filmmaker after a hideous marriage to an icy, now-dead millionaire whose death she feels responsible for. She has abandoned her son -- to Chloe -- and devotes herself to pleasure, remembering her own self-sacrificing mother with a shudder. (Blackburn 1974)

Weldon places emphasis on family and, in particular, on the mother-daughter relationship. In this way, Grace finally accepts motherhood, as a sign that she has overcome her mother's death, while Grace's relationship with children in general is, again, an example of her feelings towards her own very unhappy childhood. Even the friendship between the three female protagonists is portrayed in the shadow of motherhood.

Fay Weldon's novel, *Female Friends*, presents the intermingled lives of three women who are struggling with husbands, careers, mothers and children. She does not attempt to present an idealized version of female friendship; she simply illustrates the lives of three women as they are, with the joyous and the sombre moments, their fight against social oppression or their inner turmoil as they come to terms with the decisions they have made. The story is all the more important, as it was written in a time when the feminist movement was the centre of attention, confirming some of the stereotypes associated with women. A stereotype represents a thought or idea about a certain group of people, based on some shared characteristics of the people in the group. In the case of women, the stereotypes are centred on females being the weaker sex; people who agree with stereotypes which present women as weak, consider gender roles to be the *status quo*. In her way, Weldon does not criticize gender roles by presenting extremely powerful women; rather she tries to construct characters with which readers will empathize and create a connexion. The novel follows the three protagonists through various stages of their lives. Weldon employs deconstruction by allowing her characters to interact in normal ways, not just by creating a female protagonist who breaks all the patterns, but by presenting ordinary characters, who make their own choices, proving that they are fighting for their rights. Weldon's "third-person surrogates" do not provide any comment or instruction regarding their dreams, their ideals, or their actions, leaving the readers understand what they will (Wilde 1988: 409). As such, adhering to the aesthetic philosophy by considering that art should serve no higher moral purpose, Fay Weldon does not try to teach a lesson via the story she tells, choosing to present true life instead, through the imperfect relationships which get established between women, in her own 'fayminist' way. Weldon's ideas of feminism are also found in her novel, *Female Friends*. In her own way, Fay Weldon presents realistic characters which seem to be the embodiment of real women, women with problems, women who do not wish to have a successful career, rather they would choose to focus on motherhood, women who do not want to repeat their mothers' mistakes. This is Weldon's representation of 'fayminism', and it is to be found in the story of Chloe and her friends.

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