

# The Feminist View on Maud Watts' Awakening in the Film Suffragette

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**Abstract.** Beginning in the 20th century, the philosophy of the British women's suffrage movement evolved in a manner that encouraged the awakening of more women. From the middle-class women of the 19th century, the group of participants in the movement steadily shifted below, and the action for women's suffrage grew in popularity. *Suffragette* uses the feminist awakening of the fictional protagonist, Maud Watts, to illustrate the immense fight and sacrifice women made for the right to vote at the time. The usual character of Maud Watts is quite valuable for research purposes. The great battle of women suffragists for the right to vote might be better comprehended by examining her transformation from apathy to spontaneous pursuit of women's rights.

## 1 Introduction

Britain was the first country to embark on the path of industrialization and urbanization which divide women into three classes and each with its own task in the service of men. Upper-class women were the least numerous and least affected by the industrial revolution of British women's groups. They did not have to care for the household; all they had to do was dress themselves every day for men to enjoy and play with. Lower middle-class women who needed to earn a living on their own usually worked as governesses for wealthy families, a unique occupation between housewives and servants in British society. However, society required a large number of cheap women from the lower classes as laborers[1]. As a result of the industrial revolution, there were more factories, which required more labor to keep up with demand. Women made up a sizable share of the workforce in factories because, in a patriarchal society, female labor was inexpensive and easy to manipulate. Simultaneously, industrial change precipitated a crisis in class and gender relations. The contradictory and reconciled interests of gender differences in labor division evolved alongside the industrialization process. Women's salaries for the same number of hours are much lower than men's, and the age of entry is younger.

*Suffragette* is based on Maud Watts, a laundrywoman, and WSPU marches. It tells the story of the great battle and sacrifices made by women suffragists for the right to vote in Britain at the beginning of the 20th century. Maud Watts, the 'angel in the house'[2] who saw nothing wrong with patriarchal power, is shaken out of her lethargy. When her numb existence is broken and she is denied her rights, including custody of her child, she speaks up for her rights and the rights of women in society.

The film itself is a microcosm of the living conditions of women factory workers in early 20th-century Britain. Society is overwhelmed by the idea of the superiority of men over women and the most concrete manifestation of which is the legal nullity of the wife in married life. The English common law practice of coverture meant that a woman's possessions and herself passed to her husband at marriage[3]. "Husband and wife are the same person." Maud Watts' awakening path shows how a lower-class woman gains self-awareness and fights an unjust society. Maud Watts, the most symbolic traditional and virtuous female icon from the outset, is constantly given new meanings to help us understand the suffragists' brave campaign for women's right to vote.

## 2 Early twentieth-century research on women's suffrage in the United Kingdom

The history of the women's suffrage movement in Britain was developed almost simultaneously with the movement, largely through propaganda and participant memoirs. Ray Strachey's *The Cause* 1928 and Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Campaign* 1931 are two key historical examinations of the women's suffrage movement.

Andrew Rosen's 1974 book *The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union 1903-1914* praised the Pankhursts' role in the women's movement. In her book on the politics of the women's movement, she used archive information to illustrate the importance of constitutionalism.

Since the 1980s, women's suffrage scholarship has flourished. Both Marion Ramelson and Sheila

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Rowbotham describe the women's movement's class distribution and tensions. Hannah Mitchell's autobiography, *The Hard Way Up*, addresses socialists and middle-class suffragettes' solidarity and collaboration, as well as their internal tensions and the formation of the Women's Freedom League.

### 3 Film Suffragette

The Making of a Feature Film *Suffragette* was commissioned by June Purvis (Editor of *Women's History Review*) and written by the film's director, Sarah Gavron, to address the film's choice of WSPU women's groups, as well as the creative process and creative thinking.

Brain McFarlane compares historical film and television studies on the topic of women's suffrage in *No Surrender*, demonstrating that *Suffragette* was the first film to realistically confront the struggle for women's suffrage, discussing the film's significance in terms of both content and subject matter.

Deeds, Words, and Drama: A Review of the Film *Suffragette* by Gwen Seabourne, published in 2016, discusses the reasons for the film *Suffragette*'s choice to depict working-class women, as well as the reasons and significance of the selection of historical footage from the WSPU, primarily through oral research with director Sarah Gavron.

Ana Stevenson's *Screening Women's History in the Film Suffragette: Between Intersectional Feminist Activism and Historical Memory*, published in 2022, employs Jemima Repo's concept of feminist commodity activism to locate t-shirts in the film's marketing process.

The author believes that examining the journey of the heroine Maud Watts' awakening will enrich the understanding of the film and related historical facts, as well as better appreciate the struggles and great sacrifices of the suffragists.

### 4 Maud Watts, a suffragette pushed by the times

The story of the film *Suffragette* takes place in 1913 England. The dominant British norms of women's roles and responsibilities in the mid to late nineteenth century were primarily characterized by traditional customs and traditional gender perceptions of men's superiority over women, men as the lords and rulers of women, and women as subordinate to men, with no separate identity or status. In social connections, women are often submissive to males, and in economic ties, married women have no property rights and may solely rely on men[3]. Women have no spiritual autonomy, and their dads or husbands govern their marriage, job, and education. It was a situation in which the male was in command and the woman was in charge of the allocation of responsibilities.

Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill influenced 19th-century British women's ideas. She critiques mainstream culture, focusing on the oppression of women by a patriarchal society. Male dominance and

restraints have left women dumb and foolish, compelling them to use masculine speech. Men and women have equal rationality, according to Mill. Second, the 19th-century division of labor and gender injustice resulted from men maximizing their own interests. At the beginning of patriarchal society, physical distinctions were viewed as the rule of men's dominance over women, therefore the legal system was based on their relationships[4]. Mary and Mill's principles empowered weak women and inspired the women's suffrage movement in 19th-century Britain.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the women's suffrage movement in Britain transitioned from being led by middle-class women to a more popular group, and its motto changed from 'Women's Suffrage' to 'Votes for Women.'[5]. It brought more women into the voting rights fight. Maud's development and progress during this time period are influenced by three factors: the direction of the women around her, those with a vested stake in male dominance, and her self-reflection and internal analysis.

#### 4.1 Women's Guidance

Without aroused women around her, the heroine couldn't become a suffragette. Maud helps Miller who was late to work because of involving in sabotage the day before when the boss censure her, so Miller informs her about suffragist meetings. When Miller convinced Maud to join, she responded, "That's unethical." "Morality strangles," Miller said. "Do you want me to obey the law? Then make the law honorable and respectable." Miller invites Maud to hearings on the campaign for women's right to vote. Miller couldn't speak since her husband beat her the day before so Maud had to represent Miller. "I began at 7. I started working at 12. 17-year-old washer, 20-year-old foreman, now 24." When a politician commended her early success, she responded, "Women don't get to be laundresses for long. You suffer chest pains and coughing, crushed fingers, ulcers, burns, and migraine-inducing exhaust fumes. A girl couldn't work last year due to poisoned lungs." Capitalism and patriarchy influence the social gendering of the division of labor, where men and women are unequal in the type of labor they perform, the level of treatment they receive, and their participation in labor-related activities, positioning women as a lower paid, less skilled, and less skilled labor force. This prompts Maud to reflect, and as her testimony demonstrates, she is progressively becoming conscious of societal injustice, as opposed to initially defending the pro-male bosses. Miller is the mentor who gradually leads Maud to the road of the women's suffrage movement.

Edith Ellyn, a female doctor at the clinic where Women's Suffrage campaigners met for weekly discussions and gatherings, was the one who organized many of the groups Maud eventually joined. She explained to Maud that her husband had never studied chemistry and that his father wanted him to be a pharmacist, but she was highly interested in medicine. The unfairness against women is seen throughout soci-

ety, where dads and spouses have the power of speech, and education for women is considered a luxury. Edith told Maud that women would not be able to attain equal rights if they did not fight at every arrest and jail. She is a doctor with a caring spouse, yet she still strives for equal rights for women across society.

Emmeline Pankhurst, the WSPU's founder, retains a special place in the hearts of all women's suffrage supporters. The film performs the most crucial role in its three-minute presence. Mrs. Pankhurst's words reach home in the film, and Maud's eyes light up as she listens to her as if for the first time, as if she had embraced hope. As she states later in the game with the Inspector, "If males have the right to fight for freedom, why not women?" She is working hard to become a legislator.

#### **4.2 Oppression from the patriarchy**

The term 'patriarchy' stems from the ancient notion and has two meanings: first, the rule of women by men in a social system; second, the domination of the family by husbands and fathers provides the political system its character. The political significance of patriarchy evolved in the 17th century, and the family questioned the monarchy's authority, which Parliament had entrusted to the patriarchal line. Society believed men and fathers had God-given power over wives, children, and servants[6].

Taylor, Maud Watts' boss, is a typical guy with a vested interest in society. He sneers at Miller who wants to fight for women's voting rights and molests Miller's 12-year-old daughter Madge. He sits on a pedestal of male power and mocks the women. Taylor tells her that Madge reminds him of herself when she was younger. 12-year-old female workers are sexually abused by their bosses with little recourse, and it makes her realize how accustomed and numb she was to it all before. When Maud's employer ambiguously touches her waist again after her release from prison, she finally fights back, stops repressing it, takes an iron to her boss's hand, and quits her job.

Maud's husband is Sonny Watts. "He rejects his wife's activity and is outwardly cruel but inwardly tortured by the repercussions," director Gavron says[7]. He's stuck in his era's customs and afraid of societal consequences. Sonny Watts is also victimized, but he oppresses women. After his wife was imprisoned, he worried for himself and agreed with the stories that drove Maud Watts out of the house. Maud, anxious about her husband and neighbors' weird looks, removed her medals as soon as the WSPU presented them. Maud couldn't care for her son when she left but her husband couldn't even change his pajamas for school, so he sold him to an affluent family. Maud began WSPU activism after selling his son. Maud understood she had to break the law since women had no custody rights and children were considered husbands' property in early 20th-century England.

Even the women mock at the suffragists. On Maud's release night, neighbors shut their doors and windows. A woman approaches her with the newspaper and says,

"Shame on you." According to John Stuart Mill, men's privilege has made women weak and subservient at home and in society by limiting their ability to dispose of property, raise children, choose a job, etc[8]. Women have absorbed this as their moral code, therefore they don't protest it because laws don't support them. As a result, this group of women feels embarrassed of Maud.

Whether they come from the working class or the aristocracy, men dominate society. Regardless of whether they experience oppression in class society, men hold the most authority in matters of gender. Women were also expected to educate them-selves on how to be good moms and wives in addition to listening to what males had to say. Maud is a brand-new person who is struggling to come to. She is brave even though she transitions from numbness to resistance. She decides to oppose the vested interests of a patriarchal society in response to the unfairness and lack of women's rights. Such an image is also profoundly instructive for the reflection of modern women.

#### **4.3 Maud's Internal examination in a patriarchal culture**

Maud evolves from opposition to hesitancy to suffragist passion. Initially, she thought Miller's and others' actions were unlawful and unethical so she was hostile to WSPU activities. When her husband asked her whether she was sure to enter the activity, she answered, "Only to look." Maud denied being a suffragist when arrested and jailed. After witnessing abuses, she began to contemplate her own situation and the predicament of women. Maud asked her husband early one morning about how their daughter's life would be if they had one. "Same as you," her spouse replied. This made her realize that the situation of women's affairs affects millions of women's destinies. The next generation of women will suffer if they don't resist.

Maud was arrested and imprisoned for an act of activity after becoming a determined suffragette, and while imprisoned, she went on a hunger strike, as had her predecessors, and was force-fed by the jail officials. Many women were brutalized during the history of force-feeding: "Whether given from a cup, via the nostrils with a tube (the most popular way) or down the throat into the stomach (the most excruciating method), suffragists toiled alone and often with dread of mental or bodily injury"[9]. Maud overcame such harsh experiences, and her inner will experience a full transformation.

### **5 Conclusion**

As one of the main sources of labor in a divided domain without active status, women are submissive to the "angel in the house" who sacrifices her status and rights for the family and country. In patriarchal societies, women have been crowned 'angels of the house,' so much so that we cannot deny their presence. However, in British culture and law, women were 'non-existent' beings with no rank or place. The husband was the lone

'owner' of his wife and children as the head of a flourishing household[10]. Maud Watts ponders what is happening to women, spurred by the women around her who are also suffering. She is furious by the unrelenting pressure imposed on women by people with a vested interest in male authority. As she thought, she became more eager to join the suffragettes.

Maud Watts, a fictional suffragette, epitomizes early 20th-century Britain's femininity. Maud Watts' walk to enlightenment shows the sacrifices suffragists took to win the vote. Although women ultimately got the vote, we still have a long way to go in terms of economic inequality and societal perspectives, things Maud Watts of today must fight for.

## 6 Author's contribution

A better understanding of the film and the great struggle and sacrifice made by suffragists for the right to vote by examining the awakening of feminist consciousness of Maud Watts, the virtual protagonist in the film *Suffragette*.

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