

The Many Waves of Feminism

By Katie Baskerville, Portland Stage *PlayNotes* – reprinted with permission

Both Zoe and Janine are products of the times in which they grew up, and understanding the trajectory of the American feminist movement can offer clues to help contextualize their opinions and perspectives. The American feminist movement can be divided into four distinct waves.

First Wave

The first wave of feminism took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In its early stages, the first wave feminist movement was closely aligned with the abolitionist and temperance movements. The goal of this wave was the suffrage of women, or the right for women to vote, and included such well-known activists as Susan B. Anthony and Alice Paul. Unfortunately, the suffrage movement frequently excluded women of color, who saw the work as unresponsive to their needs. Others within the first wave, like Margaret Sanger (the founder of Planned Parenthood), were fighting less for suffrage and more for women's access to contraception and comprehensive sex education.

Second Wave

Janine developed her political perspective during the second wave of feminism, which lasted from the 1960s to the 1990s, and had its roots in the anti-war and the Civil Rights movements. Feminists reacted to being silenced by men within the Black Power and Vietnam War protest movements by creating women-only spaces and organizations. This movement was largely focused on the passage of an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, which would guarantee social equality regardless of sex. Women often organized and spread their ideology through "consciousness raising" groups that gave women space to voice their concerns about their male-dominated situations. Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique* – and its use of the phrase "the personal is political" – was extremely influential to this group of women. Following the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, second-wave feminists shifted their focus to a more personal approach, and began fighting for the ability of women to exist within predominantly male spaces.

While this movement was more diverse than the first wave, the mainstream feminist movement was still accused of focusing on the concerns of white, straight, middle-class women. As a result, many other branches of the movement began to work in isolation. Queer women, for example, formed female-only communes, and women of color formed the womanist movement. The landmark Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade*, protected a woman's right to privacy and made it legal for doctors to perform abortions. This ruling was considered a significant victory by many feminists.

Third Wave

The third wave began in the mid-1990s and fought back against the previous wave's notion of "universal womanhood." Third wave feminists embraced a refusal to identify with a single, united platform and a rejection of easy labels. The third wave of feminists are frequently identified with musical groups as particularly visible iterations of this type of feminism, including bands like Bikini Kill and The Spice Girls, both of which were considered strong examples of female empowerment.

Fourth Wave

Zoe began to form her political, ideological identity during the fourth wave of feminism. The fourth wave defines feminism not as equality for women, but equality for all genders. It is intersectional and appreciates that different individuals have unique experiences of oppression regarding a number of immutable characteristics. This wave is transgender and non-binary inclusive, and it seeks to dismantle the patriarchal norms which oppress people of all genders. This new consciousness includes the complexities brought to the table regarding classism, racism, ableism, ageism, and homophobia. Fourth-wave feminists are especially critical of white feminism, which is a term used to describe feminists who ignore and/or diminish the experiences of women of color, and women from a variety of social and economic classes, when discussing the impact of feminism. Some recent examples of the fourth wave of feminism are the #metoo and #TimesUp movements, and their fight against such infractions as sexual assault, and harassment in the workplace.