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'The Ideal Menstruating Girl'

Normalisation and the menstrual taboo.

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Introduction

"Period!" Rebecca says. "Period! Period!"

(Houppert, 1999, 86)

Yelling the word 'period' as loud as she can across the summer-camp lawn seems to ten-year-old Rebecca to be breaking the biggest rule of all – talking about your period. In this case she has been given license to yell 'the word' by being part of a discussion on menstruation with journalist Karen Houppert: in other cases she admits she might hesitate to yell 'it' out loud. Rebecca's awareness of the 'taboo' associated with speaking about periods indicates the common assumption that menstruation is not part of an everyday discourse. It can be argued that biologically menstruation seems to be a straightforward process that most women experience regularly: two cycles of ovulation and menstruation, which result in either pregnancy or the shedding of the uterine lining and four to five days of menstrual bleeding from the vagina (Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 33–36).

Instead of this single biological process, menstruation is understood by a series of cultural practices and ideologies, traditions and taboos. Menstruation is understood through institutions such as medicine and education and through the filters of multinational companies, and is also used as a signifier of sexual difference by those wishing to alienate and oppress women as a class in society. These are all cultural influences on how a woman experiences, or expects to experience, menstruation.

The 'traditional' taboo of menstruation, where women and their blood were seen as dangerous and poisonous, is perpetuated in contemporary society, and there seem to

be very few challenges to this. According to Mary Jane Lupton, 'taboo is precisely what demarcates the difference between 'nature' and 'culture'. As the ground and condition of their very differentiation, the menstrual taboo thus infolds both' (7).

This thesis will examine a number of Western cultural influences on the creation of the 'ideal' menstruating girl. The 'ideal' girl, constructed by numerous cultural and institutional practices attached to the taboo of menstruation, can be seen as influential in the identity-formation specific to girls, especially with regard to ideas about gender. It is important at this stage to recognise that menstrual blood is gendered and linked to the construction of a gendered identity. In this sense it is possible to argue that the absence of menarche creates in girls a sense of being 'not-quite-women' and that bleeding monthly (or close enough to monthly) indicates attributes of 'being-woman'.

The menstrual experience is not confined to biological functions of the reproductive system. There are numerous social and cultural influences on the experience of menstruation, and I wish to argue in this thesis that these influences are especially prevalent during a girls' teenage years. Joan Jacobs Brumberg suggests that

even though menarche appears to be one of those inevitable, natural and developmental progressions that is 'hard-wired' into the female organism, its meaning, and even its pattern, is derived from the particular culture that surrounds the body of the sexually maturing girl. (Brumberg, 102)

Certain parameters have determined the texts that I have chosen to explore in this thesis, and the issues I am raising with regard to these texts. I have specifically chosen to focus on the menstrual experience of young women (who I generally refer to as 'girls') for certain reasons. Menarche and the subsequent 'settling down' years of menstruation play a vital role in the conception of sexual difference and gender, and in a feminist framework a discussion of these issues is imperative. From this

resolution, I then chose to examine texts which contemporary girls were exposed to every day: guidance manuals, menstrual product literature, teen novels and magazines and the World Wide Web. This choice to examine the everyday consumables of girl culture was directed by the huge impact that these have on girls, and the role that they play in identity production for these girls.

I have structured this thesis in two parts. Part One examines the intimate relationship between menstruation and knowledge and the role that both education and medical discourses have in the construction of menstrual knowledge. I suggest that institutionalised learning about menstruation (through guidance manuals and medicalised literature) can limit a girl's experience of menstruation. To support this suggestion I examine a number of different texts that I see as falling into the medical and/or educational menstrual discourses, and then present resistances to these institutions. Underlying this analysis is an understanding of Foucault's notions of the connections between power and knowledge, and the role they play in normalisation and individualisation.

Part Two considers menstrual concealment and confession, and the role that the menstrual taboo plays in this process. This part describes the taboo of menstruation, and then goes on to examine how euphemisms are used to speak around menstruation. Following this, I consider the role of concealment of menstruation in girls' identity-production, and the role that confession plays in the creation of a subject. I argue that currently there is a move towards concealing menstruation through peripheries associated with it, such as the packaging of menstrual products, rather than former traditions of concealing menstrual blood. This process plays a part in the confession of menstruation, whilst not speaking directly about the experience.

Finally, I wish to note that I have chosen to use a number of different terms linked to menstruation that can be claimed to perpetuate the taboo of menstruation. This includes terms such as 'sanitary', which is used in many references to menstruation (~ pads, ~ products, ~ protection). I acknowledge that using words like sanitary to describe menstrual related products is problematic, as it suggests that there is a certain uncleanness or pollution which needs sanitising. But I have chosen to retain the term as it has become a common term used in reference to menstruation.