

Using Menarche to Control Women

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Thesis statements:

1. When Janet Lee argued that menarche “is a biological act fraught with cultural implications,” she was referring to the fact that menarche is simply biology, but our culture has used it as a means to control and twist women’s bodies to men’s purposes.
2. Gloria Steinam illustrates the power structure associated with menarche beautifully when she writes about how menstruation would be a boast worthy and powerful event if the roles were reversed and men menstruated.
3. Men don’t menstruate, however, and menarche instead reflects the cultural perceptions of women’s point, place, and role in society.
4. One of the cultural implications of menarche is that around the time of their menarche, women experience a heterosexualization where society begins to perceive them not as full and complete humans that also have a beautiful sexuality, but perceives them as sexual objects.
5. We see this view that women exist to fulfill men’s desires is reflected even before society had recognized the sexuality of women and saw them as only having a motherhood instinct.
6. Seeing that women are valued after menarche, if in a twisted way, one might expect that menarche is then considered a wonderful event, but it is actually considered gross, unclean, shameful, and something to only be whispered about.
7. Women are considered also to be prisoners to this shameful menstruation cycle, not active owners of their body.
8. Furthermore, menstruation is not only considered gross but at a woman’s menarche she suddenly begins to experience the unspoken agreement that she is illogical, highly sensitive, and slightly crazy due to her menstrual cycle.
9. Unfortunately taking advantage of women was and is a driving force behind this idea that menarche makes women illogical.
10. Menarche marks the time when girls become women, marking the time when she begins being viewed primarily as a heterosexual male’s object, gross for ¼ of her life, and illogical and driven by her changing hormones.

When Janet Lee argued that menarche “is a biological act fraught with cultural implications¹,” she was referring to the fact that menarche is simply biology, but our culture has used it as a means to control and twist women’s bodies to men’s purposes. Menarche marks the moment when girls become more different from boys as she turns into a woman with a vastly different social role justified through biology. However, biology does not inherently lead to one sex being more powerful than the other, but it is the powerful that read into biology to explain and support the hierarchy.

Gloria Steinem illustrates the power structure associated with menarche beautifully when she writes about how menstruation would be a boast worthy and powerful event if the roles were reversed and men menstruated.² As it is now, menstruation is viewed negatively in many ways and is either ignored or looked upon with disgust by society and government. Steinem explores how if men were the ones who menstruated, the government would provide free menstrual supplies, society would glorify monthly bleeding and consider women lesser for not bleeding, and menarche would be a moment longed for and celebrated.³

Men don’t menstruate, however, and menarche instead reflects the cultural perceptions of women’s point, place, and role in society. Among other things, after menarche, society sexualizes women while simultaneously labeling their menstruation as disgusting and shameful, and claiming that menstruation causes women to be illogical and emotional. Each of these points has historical and current implications and driving forces, all wrapped up in using menarche to explain and establish the power structure between men and women in our society.

¹ Janet Lee, “Menarche and the (Hetro)Sexualization of the Female Body,” in WW, 4th ed., 343-62.

² Gloria Steinem, “If Men Could Menstruate—A Political Fantasy,” WW 5th ed., 202

³ Ibid.

One of the cultural implications of menarche is that around the time of their menarche, women experience a heterosexualization where society begins to perceive them not as full and complete humans that also have a beautiful sexuality, but perceives them as sexual objects. Lee explains that “women are taught to live and discipline their bodies in accordance with the prescriptions of heterosexuality, experiencing themselves as sexual objects for heterosexual male viewing” and pleasure.⁴ However, while they are perceived as sexual objects for heterosexual men, women sexual autonomy is largely ignored. For example, Whatley points out that during puberty, we talk of androgen’s changes on boys, which includes sex drive, but we don’t talk about the fact that girls are experiencing those same changes due to androgen. This rejection of females owning their sexuality is further illustrated by the orgasm gap, which defines sex around male pleasure and enjoyment, not females.⁵ This idea that women don’t have the same sex drive is maintained because it explains why they aren’t orgasming, enjoying sex as much as their male counterpart, and other situations that benefit men.⁶ This all starts to happen around menarche, when a girl enters womanhood. As a woman now, girls must start viewing and treating their own bodies with the understanding that culture sees them as sexual objects for men.

We see this view that women exist to fulfill men’s desires is reflected even before society had recognized the sexuality of women and saw them as only having a motherhood instinct. Clark explains this in regards to education. In a time where blood was believed to be someone’s life force, he argued that women shouldn’t have much education; it took up too much blood in the brain, leaving the uterus without it’s necessary blood.⁷ Clark played upon this understanding to create a fear for the human race’s survival if women were allowed to continue thinking.

⁴ Lee, "Menarche And The (Hetero)Sexualization Of The Female Body," 344.

⁵ Marcia Douglass and Lisa Douglass, “The Orgasm Gap,” WW, 1997, 468.

⁶ Ibid, 471.

⁷ Dr. Edward Clarke, Sex in Education (1875), excerpt, in *Root of Bitterness*, 2nd ed., 331.

Whether this was malicious or not, Clark's argument illustrates how even before women were perceived to have a sexual urge, they were still defined by how men could use them sexually, to procreate. Once a girl hits menarche, her body needs blood to be focused on the uterus. All of her is now governed by the uterus and she must not do anything that might negatively affect it, such as getting higher education.⁸ While this understanding has changed some today, we still see women as defined by their ability to make children. Now, we do consider women to have sexuality, though it is defined through bringing men pleasure. At menarche, the girl leaves childhood and becomes a woman, being told that her body exists to fulfill the needs of men.

Seeing that women are valued after menarche, if in a twisted way, one might expect that menarche is then considered a wonderful event, but it is actually considered gross, unclean, and shameful. Lee explains that "cultural contexts provide mythologies and images of disgust for women's bleeding that are deeply internalized into the psyche, encouraging women to hate their bodies."⁹ Stienem, in her short piece "If Men Could Menstruate," she explores how this would be different if it was instead the men who menstruated. Her piece highlights how the cultural opinions surrounding menstruation are so negative and purported to be based in biology while they're not.¹⁰ Women learn that their menstruation is looked down upon and perceived as shameful. After menarche, women then are told that they are gross periodically and menstruation is something they should be ashamed of.

Women are considered also to be prisoners to this shameful menstruation cycle, not active owners of their body. They have and still are considered to be "weaker in body, confined by

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lee, "Menarche And The (Hetero)Sexualization Of The Female Body," 346.

¹⁰ Steinem, "If Men Could Menstruate," 202.

menstruation and pregnancy” as opposed to the strong man on whom she depends.¹¹ People have fought this understanding and have pushed women to embrace and take charge of their menstruation. An article originally published in *Teen Voices* does just this, encouraging teens to fight for menstrual products that are safe and healthy for their bodies as well as good for the environment.¹² Positive pushes like this aim to change the discussion around menstruation, in part by creating one. Still, menarche is unfortunately the time when many women begin to feel this pressure and cultural shame and recognize that there is not sufficient support for women’s menstruation.

Furthermore, menstruation is not only considered gross but at a woman’s menarche she suddenly begins to experience the unspoken agreement that she is illogical, highly sensitive, and slightly crazy due to her menstrual cycle. Despite its lack of scientific support, PMS and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) are promoted in advertisements and by a general culture telling women that their natural emotional fluctuations are abnormal.¹³ Many researchers are worried that this promotion is “causing too many otherwise healthy people to see themselves as ill and opt for drug therapies that may cause them more harm than good.”¹⁴ Women are being taught that their natural emotional fluctuations are an illness and something that needs to get fixed. Furthermore, our culture has perceived women’s “nervous system and emotions prevailed over her conscious and rational faculties,” while men, of course, are driven by their brain, intellect, and logic.¹⁵ This distinction is due to the uterus and the menstrual cycle, which, as we saw earlier, women are imprisoned by. At menarche, women suddenly begin to hear “are you on

¹¹ Carol Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, “The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Women and Health in America*, 1st ed., Judith Walker Leavitt, ed. (1984), 338.

¹² Teen Voices, “Don’t Just Go with the Flow,” WW 5th ed., 270-274.

¹³ Roy Moynihan and Alan Cassels, “Advertising Disease: Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder,” WW 5th ed., 231-233.

¹⁴ Ibid, 232.

¹⁵ Rosenberg, “The Female Animal,” 334.

your period?” And they’re passed off as impossible of logical thought in many ways evident throughout our culture today. Menarche marks the time when a woman ceases to be as logical as men as she suddenly becomes governed by her uterus and fluctuating hormones.

Unfortunately taking advantage of women was and is a driving force behind this idea that menarche makes women illogical. PMDD was pushed into the DSM without sufficient scientific backing by a company looking to create a market for their drug, Prozac.¹⁶ People’s desire to make a profit latched onto the existing idea of PMS and made it an official disorder. Many also promoted PMS to profit as well, pushing progesterone on women to regulate PMS despite evidence that taking progesterone was harmful to women.¹⁷ In making PMDD and PMS medical issues, men profited, ignored the societal issues that were causing women to be depressed, and gave a medical backing to the idea that women are just more emotional and less logical than men due to their menstruation. Then, menarche becomes a time from when women are told both they are emotional and illogical and their menstruation is an illness which needs to be fixed.

Menarche marks the time when girls become women, marking the time when she begins being viewed primarily as a heterosexual male’s object, gross for ¼ of her life, and illogical and driven by her changing hormones. Menarche will never be solely a biological event, and it shouldn’t be, but the social script surrounding it does need to change.

¹⁶ Moynihan and Cassels, “Advertising Disease,” 234.

¹⁷ Andrea Eagan, “The Selling of Premenstrual Syndrome,” WW 5th ed., 274-277.