

SCUM Manifesto:
The Argument for a “Male Misogyny”

Angela Acampora
Furman University

By examining Valerie Solanas’s use of visual imagery, an abrasive ethos, and the ironic deployment of the symbolic SCUM (the Society for Cutting Up Men) in her 1960s’ *SCUM Manifesto*, this essay seeks to provide an understanding of an important radical feminist text of the women’s rights era.

“Males, like rats following the Pied Piper, will be lured by Pussy to their doom, will be overcome and submerged by and will eventually drown in the passive flesh that they are” (Solanas 44). Comparing men to rats, a subhuman species, is not the only derogatory analogy Solanas makes in her *SCUM Manifesto*. The *Manifesto*, written in the late 1960s during the second-wave feminist movement, characterizes male patriarchal society as evil and calls for women to refashion civilization. The intentions of Valerie Solanas and the revolution she advocates are proclaimed in the first line of *SCUM Manifesto*:

Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money work system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex. (3)

In this radical feminist statement, Solanas goes beyond women’s rights and calls for an overhaul of the patriarchal system. Yet, the implications of destroying the government, the capitalist system, and the male sex are laced with much significance in the *Manifesto*.

Although feminist and nonfeminist critics alike dub *SCUM Manifesto* the work of a “man-hating, crazed lesbian,” it is actually an important radical feminist text of the women’s rights era (Third 106). As journalist Suzanne Moore emphasizes, “The thing is, you either happen to think this [*SCUM Manifesto*] is a work of unadulterated genius, or you dismiss it as the ravings of a loony psycho-bitch, not understanding that this is exactly what makes it so compelling and so charged with insight” (48–49). Scholarly discourse available on *SCUM Manifesto* is limited in scope, primarily concerned with the juxtaposition of Solanas’s radicalism with that of other feminists of the time, the classification of her work as one of violence and satire, and the argument surrounding the question of her sanity. Much of this discourse ignores the fundamental themes and strategies the *Manifesto* employs, overlooking her insightful remarks and intuitive claims.

For example, a majority of scholars discuss how Valerie Solanas’s work captures an extreme form of “terrorist feminism” as she employs humor and satire to invoke a reaction from her audience. Amanda Third relates that the *Manifesto* “deploys violence to political ends,” conspires to “destroy the institutions of governance,” and “aims to dismantle the (patriarchal) state” while denouncing widespread societal norms regarding the male and female (110–12). Third also

explains how Solanas embeds a “millenarian” tone, whereby much of her work communicates an apocalyptic theme (114). Differing from the more cultural, liberal feminist movement, Solanas calls for “violence as a way of forcing an apocalyptic end to ‘patriarchy’” rather than espousing “women’s equality within the system” (Third 115–16). Although Third formulates valid points, and establishes violence as *SCUM Manifesto*’s rhetorical vision, she neglects to address the logic in Solanas’s argument. Furthermore, Third does not offer insight into how Solanas creates her utopian vision for humankind nor into the logic she employs to get there.

Mavis Haut, on the other hand, writes that Valerie Solanas’s work comes in the “form of a male stand-up comedy” in which she uses colloquial language and “satire” to develop her arguments thoroughly (27–28). Haut insists that the “aim of satire is the same: to expose folly, posturing, lies and moral or political corruption,” all of which Solanas clearly targets in her *Manifesto* (29). She explains that Solanas’s “stand-up comedy” style was unprecedented and singular: her unabashed attempts to ridicule the male sex were completely unheard of for women of that era (32). In Haut’s opinion, Solanas “elicits reactions ranging from ribald laughter to revulsion or anger” from her audience (29). Although Haut presents a very interesting interpretation of *SCUM Manifesto*, she fails to recognize how Solanas urges her readership to grasp the conflicting personas of both men and women. Haut also claims that *SCUM Manifesto* is an “irrational discourse,” completely ignoring the significance of the work’s fundamental concepts and intriguing rationale (37).

Lastly, Avital Ronell describes *SCUM Manifesto* as “indefensible” and “psychotic,” nothing more than what she identifies as a “disruptive laugh” (30). She discusses how Solanas portrays her convictions through both “aggravated logic” and “delusional frenzy” (30–31). Most importantly, Ronell regards Solanas as nothing more than “butch-dykey angry” and “poor” (31). Unfortunately, Ronell’s reading of Solanas’s character inhibits her from delving into a deep reading of *SCUM Manifesto*. However, Ronell does analyze the “two enemies” in *SCUM*, which helps readers comprehend the different types of men and women Solanas classifies. These enemies are either two types of women—Daddy’s Girls or *SCUM* (members of Solanas’s hypothetical Society for Cutting Up Men)—or two types of men: “straight-incomplete male-females [or] the queers” (Ronell 31, 33).

Although these scholars offer criticism and interpretation of the *Manifesto*, much is neglected. Whether the lack of scholarship is due to how many regard Solanas as insane, the *Manifesto* as meritless, or a combination of both, *SCUM Manifesto* is still a mistreated piece of radical feminist literature. Amanda Third writes, “Indeed, the implications of the *Manifesto* constitute a threat to feminism; a threat that has inevitably meant that feminists have overlooked Solanas as worthy of critique and failed to include her in histories of the U.S. second-wave” (123). The *Manifesto* should be regarded as more than a radical “threat to feminism,” for the work is one of considerable literary merit. The purpose of my paper is to examine how Valerie Solanas uses visual imagery, an abrasive ethos, and the ironic deployment of the symbolic *SCUM* to depict a theme of animalism in both sexes, to destroy the quintessential sexist stereotype, and to emphasize women as society’s scapegoats.

Textual Criticism

A close reading of *SCUM Manifesto* will shed light on what I view as the prominent rhetori-

cal strategies employed by Solanas. In order to comprehend the significance of these strategies, an understanding of Solanas's rhetorical vision is necessary.

Solanas's Rhetorical Vision

SCUM Manifesto portrays a corrupt, male-dominated society, while calling for a "true community" of women (Solanas 18). Rather than seek to unify all women under common personal experiences and "sisterhood," Solanas criticizes women for their failure to address society's problems. Although Solanas attributes society's afflictions to the male, she presupposes that the underlying conflict lies between two distinct types of females: "SCUM" and "Daddy's Girls." Solanas calls for SCUM women to act, and in her *Manifesto* she plans that course of action; "Daddy's Girls," those opposed to social change, she belittles (41–42). This distinction offers an understanding of how Solanas reveres a certain type of woman: a woman of SCUM, a woman who will tenaciously instigate social revolution in light of society's ills.

Solanas also separates into various categories how men contribute in society and how these contributions adversely affect humankind. Because the male is "an incomplete female, a walking abortion," and a "worthless piece of shit," he oppresses women and "[projects] onto women all male traits" (Solanas 3–7). Why does the male do this? According to Solanas, "men have pussy envy" (6). In other words, men secretly want to be female, but they demean women to keep up the façade of male superiority. While doing this, "He [the male] has done a brilliant job of convincing millions of women that men are women and women are men," and this "convincing" begins with fatherhood (6, 13). Solanas states, "[T]he effect of fatherhood on females is to make them male." And "Daddy's Girl, always tense and fearful, uncool, unanalytical, lacking objectivity, appraises Daddy, and thereafter, other men, against a backdrop of fear ('respect')" (13). In other words, a Daddy's Girl is both "trained" and "brainwashed" by the male to be a fearful and obedient "doormat" (24–26, 50). In Solanas's view, a Daddy's Girl perceives the debilitating nature of her oppression yet turns a blind eye, causing her to be worse off than the male. In all, Solanas bases her *Manifesto* on the premise that "women are improvable; men are not, although their behavior is" (45). In determining this, Solanas announces that SCUM women must annihilate the government, the American capitalist system, and the male gender (3).

Visual Imagery and Animalism in SCUM

As Lisa Tuttle reveals, feminism encourages women to target their "oppression" and overcome their inferiority stereotype (107). In *SCUM Manifesto*, Solanas attempts to overcome an inferior stereotype, depicts a theme of animalism through visual imagery in both sexes, and redefines that animalism to construct social change. According to Lydia Sargent, "Early attempts to speak about sexism at [New Left] meetings or demonstrations were turned into circuses by men catcalling, whistling, and shouting for women to get off the stage and 'have a good fuck'" (qtd. in Pearce 309). Thus, many radical feminist groups and manifestos blossomed from the New Left Movement's "lack of female representation" in the 1960s (Pearce 309). In response to this treatment of women, Solanas utilizes the visual imagery of animalism to portray men, Daddy's Girls, and the women of SCUM.

First, she defines men as "non-human" and "half dead," without the capacity to grow out of their animalism (8, 34). Solanas remarks, "He [the male] is trapped in a twilight zone halfway between humans and apes, and is far worse off than the apes because, unlike the apes, he is capa-

ble of a large array of negative feelings—hate, jealousy, contempt, disgust, guilt, shame, doubt—and moreover he is aware of what he is and isn't" (4). Solanas also paints pictures of men engaged in lowly, brutish activities: "The male is . . . obsessed with screwing; he'll swim a river of snot, wade nostril-deep through a mile of vomit, if he thinks there'll be a friendly pussy awaiting him" (5). She regards men as "totally sexually" beings, "emotional cripples" who rely entirely on "visceral" responses (Solanas 4, 29). Lastly, Solanas compares males to dogs when she commands females to dominate civilization. She argues, "Just as humans have a prior existence over dogs by virtue of being more highly evolved and having a superior consciousness, so women have a prior right to existence over men" (36). Solanas also indicates, "In a sane society, the male would trot along obediently after the female" (40). In following Solanas's logic, women must view men in terms of low animalistic qualities to distinguish themselves.

In relation to women, Solanas details how "Daddy" plays a major role in causing females to feel inferior and lowly. She ingenuously suggests, "No, Virginia, women don't just adore being brood mares, despite what the mass of robot brainwashed women will say" (38). She adds, "The reduction to animals of the women where Daddy reigns supreme, has been so thorough that they try to groove on labor pains and lie around in the most advanced nation in the world in the middle of the twentieth century with babies chomping away at their tits" (15). Here, Solanas challenges the female's role in the home, remarking on how women have become defined by that role. Not that Solanas believes that employment outside the home would be any more fulfilling for women. She proclaims,

Many females would, even assuming complete economic equality between the sexes, prefer living with males or peddling their asses on the street, thus having most of the time to themselves, to spending many hours of their days doing boring, stultifying, non-creative work for somebody else, functioning as less than animals, as machines, or, at best—if able to get a "good" job—co-managing the shitpile. (9–10)

This statement articulates Solanas's notion that even if granted "equal pay for equal work," women will still remain in their familiar roles. Accustomed to the household, women will continue to indulge in what Solanas regards as trivial pursuits—raising children and catering to a man's every whim. Thus women exist in an almost subhuman state where they work tirelessly for the male cause: following Solanas's logic, if men are animals, women are even worse off due to their oppression. These women are "Daddy's Girls who can't cope with the unknown, who want to continue to wallow in the sewer that is, at least, familiar, who want to hang back with the apes" (41).

To correct this problem in society, Solanas calls for the eradication of the entire family unit. She believes that "a true community consists of individuals" rather than of a collective group of people working together to better themselves and others (18). Thus, a man "like a scared rabbit scurries off, dragging Daddy's little asshole along with him to the wilderness, the suburbs, or, in the case of the 'hippie'—he's way out, Man!—all the way out to the cow pasture where he can fuck and breed undisturbed and mess around with his beads and flute" (18). Here, Solanas describes both the traditional community and the new community of the hippie generation as corrupt and worthless through animalistic depictions. The connotation of the word "breed" serves to portray the "hippie" as some sort of farm animal who, like the male "rabbit," runs off with "Daddy's little asshole." Thus, the conventional lifestyle of getting married, moving to the sub-

urbs, and having children is depicted as animalistic in *SCUM Manifesto*, evidencing how Solanas calls for women to be autonomous and independent.

One can assume that the “true community” in Solanas’s utopian society will consist primarily of women, and that the women she wants are SCUM. Solanas asserts that SCUM women are “given to slamming those who unduly irritate them in the teeth, [women] who’d sink a shiv into a man’s chest or ram an icepick up his asshole as soon as look at him, if they knew they could get away with it” (31). Ironically enough, Solanas also depicts SCUM women as being animals as she calls for them to “destroy” and “fuck up” everything (42). Her prediction that “SCUM will coolly, furtively, stalk its prey and quietly move in for the kill,” creates an image of predator and prey, the predator depicted as the “Queen of the Jungle,” or SCUM, ready to slaughter the defenseless male victim as a way of cleansing society (48). In addition, Solanas writes, “If SCUM ever marches, it will be all over LBJ’s stupid, sickening face; if SCUM ever strikes, it will be in the dark with a six-inch blade,” stressing that these women will act like animals with complete disregard for the laws of society (47).

Solanas concludes that society’s problems are derived from male animalism, to which women succumb in fear, and the only way to break this vicious cycle is for SCUM women to attack, acting as animals in retaliation. Many scholars assume that Solanas argues that only men are animals, not women too. But according to Solanas, men have made animals of women, and women must harness this animalism to bring about social change. Although Solanas’s call for women to strike back appears irrational, her writing empowers women to trade their conservative, conventional, and traditional qualities for unorthodox, nonconforming, and uncharacteristic ones. Through the visual imagery of animalism, Solanas encourages women to deviate from the norm and harmonize with the power of revolution.

Abrasive Ethos and the Sexist Stereotype

Valerie Solanas employs biting and caustic language in her *Manifesto* as a way of defying social customs. Solanas states, “The male tries to enforce a ‘social’ code that ensures a perfect blandness, unsullied by the slightest trace of feeling or upsetting opinion” (8). Rather than conform to this “perfect blandness” the male creates, Solanas detaches herself and refuses to comply. Her use of vulgarity, crudity, and discourtesy in *SCUM Manifesto* challenges conventional social standards and grants her the ability to be heard by shocking those who might not otherwise have listened.

There is also a clear connection between the use of improper language in the *Manifesto* and the adverse circumstances of Solanas’s early life. She became pregnant at the age of fifteen, and in college, she supported herself through begging and prostitution. Finally, she dropped out of school, criticizing the higher education system (Gerhard 141; Cubert 48). As Jason Cubert states, Solanas’s actions “seemed in direct contrast to the social climate for women in the 1950’s,” for women were supposed to be obedient, chaste, modest, and respectful (48). Thus, Solanas’s abrasive ethos stems not only from her wish to defy social customs, but also from her unwillingness to abide by the expectations for women at the time. Her bravery exists in her defiance, thus enhancing her work as whole.

Given that Solanas regards the cultural norms of “niceness, politeness and dignity” as the male’s need to hide the “hate and contempt” he feels for anything and everything around him, she fills her *Manifesto* with “upsetting opinion[s]” and zealous emotions (Solanas 7–8). Her fre-

quent use of slang terms considered derogatory and crude—“pussy,” “tits,” “turd,” “faggots,” “screwing,” “tearing off a piece,” “doing a good plumbing job,” “shit,” “asses,” “fuck”—exemplifies her willingness to challenge conventional behavior in speech and in action (3–52).

Although the colloquial nature of her speech shocks at first glance, there is much symbolism in her writing. As Solanas distinguishes herself from the typical American woman, she makes herself known and creates a discourse to which people will listen. Her unconventionality in embracing “Meanness, Impoliteness, and Obscenity” confirms how divergent she is from the average woman, and evidences how far she is willing to go to make her convictions public. As scholar Karlyn Kohrs Campbell reiterates, in every form of rhetoric or protest, a woman must challenge “the fundamental values underlying this culture” (78). Therefore, Solanas’s use of vulgar language is a result of her fervent passions, and although somewhat distracting, it intrigues her audience in a way only rebellion can. Solanas permits women to envision a world of social defiance, in a world where social conformity is all they know. Through her vulgarity, Solanas makes the unattainable attainable and the impossible possible for women of the time, thus rendering her work revolutionary.

SCUM Women and Society’s Scapegoats

Lastly, Solanas’s utopia, which commands the complete eradication of government, the money-work system, and the male gender, must start somewhere. Solanas desires that females, “still in the gutter of our ‘society,’” act. Therefore, women “unhampered by propriety, niceness, discretion, public opinion, ‘morals,’ [and] the ‘respect’ of assholes” are urged to start the SCUM movement (31–32). As Solanas writes, “The female, whether she likes it or not, will eventually take complete charge, if for no other reason than that she will have to—the male for practical purposes, won’t exist” (37). Throughout her *Manifesto*, Solanas portrays SCUM women as the “violent bitches” who are going to get the job done by embracing their traditional scapegoat role and challenging it (31). According to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “consciousness raising,” “sisterhood,” and “symbolic reversals” are employed by women in rhetoric to illustrate social change, and Solanas employs each of these in her *Manifesto* in relation to the women of SCUM (78–84). *SCUM Manifesto* is thus an important part of sixties’ radical feminist rhetoric.

Through “consciousness raising,” women propose to “make the personal political,” sharing their convictions and passions in small meetings (Campbell 79). By establishing a sense of community in these meetings, women “create awareness” while stressing how their own “personal deficiencies and individual problems are common and shared” (81). It is interesting to note that Solanas utilizes “consciousness raising” in her endorsement of “Turd Sessions,” meetings in which men must acknowledge their imperfections and “fraternize” with the women of SCUM. At the beginning of each meeting, males must repeat, “I am a turd, a lowly, abject turd,” and then express their own individual faults, inadequacies, and weaknesses in front of SCUM women (44). In this setting, Solanas empowers SCUM women by transferring the traditional scapegoat stereotype to the male. As the male expresses his own flaws and deficiencies, he entertains SCUM women and constructs a society in which the female is no longer the scapegoat, nor an “insecure,” “mindless,” “rattle-headed” Daddy’s Girl (14, 26).

In addition, the concept of “sisterhood” and the significance of unity also influence Solanas’s rhetoric in regards to SCUM women. Women grow and bond together in homogeneous communities despite their differences, and thus seek a common goal of equality and an end to society’s

stereotypical female roles (Campbell 84). However, to achieve this goal, Solanas employs the idea of “sisterhood” differently than other feminists of the time. She calls for SCUM women to work together by defying societal norms and behaviors. As Solanas states, “A small handful of SCUM can take over the country within a year by systematically fucking up the system, selectively destroying property, and [through] murder” (42). Clearly, SCUM women must “consider themselves fit to rule” as they disregard their inferiority stereotype (40). Even though Solanas classifies SCUM women as a group of “individuals,” they must come together and confront the scapegoat function as a whole (47). Thus, Solanas defies social custom not only in speech, but also in her call for SCUM women to act in hostile, antagonistic ways. Here, Solanas invites women to question their current role in society and decide for themselves if it is fitting.

“Symbolic reversals” also serve to unite women under common characteristics, characteristics that seemingly appear to represent an array of negative connotations but actually empower women if they embrace them (Campbell 82). Although described as “arrogant,” “the least nice,” “uncivilized,” and “selfish,” SCUM women are the “swinging females” who are going to get the job done, and they must esteem the qualities in themselves that will allow them to do so (26, 31). The word “scum” carries a variety of implications, such as filth, disgust, muck, and repulsion. Therefore, “scum” is used not only to portray how women were viewed in society during Solanas’s time, but also as her way of calling women to transform that meaning and outwit its implications. In the words of Solanas, “SCUM’s been through it all, and they’re now ready for a new show; they want to crawl out from under the dock, move, take off, sink out” (32). This “new show” involves a society where women will no longer conform to the scapegoat label that has defined them for so long. Since Solanas addresses her audience as a member of SCUM, she assumes a lowly, debased status, one of complete “garbage to make her points,” thus encouraging women to join her (Ronell 30). Jason Cubert asserts, “Evident throughout SCUM are the ways in which Valerie recognizes herself as different and unique, set apart from most of society” (75). As described, SCUM women certainly identify themselves as both “different” and “unique,” while Solanas depicts them reforming civilization starting with the destruction of the female stereotype. Although Solanas’s methodology is unrealistic in practice, her argument is one that feminists should admire, for it grants women the ability to experience freedom.

Conclusion and Response

Claire Dederer writes, “The *SCUM Manifesto* is a document of profound vulnerability, written in a voice of profound empowerment. It is a brutal call to arms, written by a woman in a world of hurt. This tension between powerlessness and power makes it an enduring piece of writing” (56). In my reading of *SCUM Manifesto*, Solanas ingenuously embraces revolution and unconformity in her attempt to change the status quo. Through her use of visual imagery to depict a theme of animalism in both sexes, her use of an abrasive ethos to destroy the quintessential sexist stereotype, and her deployment of the symbolic SCUM to emphasize women as society’s scapegoats, Solanas creates a feminist discourse that truly parallels no other.

Although the vision Solanas creates leaves her readership shocked, one is left admiring her train of thought and the fluidity of the utopia she fashions. Rather than dismiss her as a crack pot, I regard Solanas as a radical feminist genius who influenced one of the essential aims of feminism—the attainment of freedom for women—and articulated how far some women are willing to go to achieve that freedom. Her influence on feminism “resonates today with a new generation

of women who encounter it for the first time,” and elements of her ideas are prevalent in feminist speech and action (Deem 521). According to Melissa Deem, “women have finally caught up to SCUM,” and examples of these women include the “Riot Grrrls, the Lesbian Avengers, Thelma and Louise, and Lorena Bobbitt (the woman who cut off her husband’s penis)” (521). Furthermore, feminist Robin Morgan included *SCUM Manifesto* in her *Sisterhood Is Powerful* anthology, evidencing how the *Manifesto* stimulates feminist thought (Dederer 55). Most importantly, however, is that the *Manifesto* teaches women, whether traditional or radical, young or old, to have a voice. The illustration of SCUM women relinquishing their fears and harnessing their inner aggressions and frustrations provides an example for women to act powerfully, and to distance themselves from passivity and dispassion. In that way, Solanas captures the entirety of the feminist movement and what it means to be a “self-confident,” “imaginative” woman (Solanas 40–41).

Works Cited

- Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs. “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59.1 (1973): 74–86. Print.
- Cubert, Jason. “Media and the Construction of Identity: A Case Study of *SCUM Manifesto*, Riot Grrrl Zines, and gURL.com.” MS thesis. U of Washington, 2007. Print.
- Dederer, Claire. “Cutting Remarks.” Rev. of *Scum Manifesto*, by Valerie Solanas. *Nation* 14 Jun. 2004: 55–56. Print.
- Deem, Melissa. “From Bobbitt to SCUM: Re-memberment, Scatological Rhetorics, and Feminist Strategies in the Contemporary United States.” *Public Culture* 8 (1996): 511–37. Print.
- Gerhard, Jane. “Solanas, Valerie.” *The Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History in America*. Vol. 3. Ed. Marc Stein. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons/Thomson/Gale, 2004. 141–43. Print.
- Haut, Mavis. “A Salty Tongue: At the Margins of Satire, Comedy and Polemic in the Writing of Valerie Solanas.” *Feminist Theory* 8.1 (Apr. 2007): 27–41. Print.
- Moore, Suzanne. “The Bag Lady of Feminism.” Rev. of *Scum Manifesto*, by Valerie Solanas. *New Statesman* 28 Jun. 2004: 48–49. Print.
- Pearce, Kimber Charles. “The Radical Feminist Manifesto as Generic Appropriation: Gender, Genre, and Second Wave Resistance.” *Southern Communication Journal* 64.4 (1999): 307–15. EBSCOHost EJS Content Distribution. Web. 13 Oct. 2010.
- Ronell, Avital. “Cutting Remarks: Avital Ronell on Valerie Solanas’s *Scum Manifesto*.” *Bookforum: The Book Review for Art and Culture* 11.1 (Spring 2004): 30–33. Print.
- Solanas, Valerie. *SCUM Manifesto*. New York: Olympia Press, 1970. Print.
- Third, Amanda. “‘Shooting From the Hip’: Valerie Solanas, SCUM and the Apocalyptic Politics of Radical Feminism.” *Hecate* 32.2 (2006): 104–32. Print.
- Tuttle, Lisa. “Feminism.” *The Encyclopedia of Feminism*. New York: Rainbird, 1986. 107–8. Print.