

# Eric Berne, “The ‘Woman’ Question,” and Its Evolution in the TA World

*Pam Levin*

## **Abstract**

**Many times Eric Berne posed but never answered Freud’s question, “What do women want?”—nor did he actually ask it of the women in his professional seminar. Had he lived, where would he be today on this subject? Would he be able to answer it, and if so, how? To answer this question now, Eric would be able to draw on the work of feminist scholars that was only beginning to emerge at the time of his death. Drawing on that scholarship, this article fleshes out a possible route he might have taken to arrive at some answers and suggests what some of his answers might be. The author also details the experiences and difficulties she and other women faced in the 1960s as the international transactional analysis movement grew in its earliest days.**

---

## **Then**

When Eric Berne was presiding over his San Francisco Social Psychiatry Seminars in 1966, the year I first met him, there were two basic roles allowed for women. You could be “smart” and contribute to case studies and theory, or you could be a “dancing girl” and contribute looks, sex appeal, and fun. Not both. Nor were you to choose your own role yourself. This annoyed me, a situation I challenged constantly by making choices that included blurring the lines between these two roles, mixing thoughtful serious contributions with fun and playfulness and making sure I did both.

Eric always insisted that each seminar presenter begin with a question to provide focus for later comments from the audience. Occasionally during presentations, Eric posed Freud’s question, “What do women want?” (Freud, 1926/1955). But he never made this a genuine question that could serve as a focus for serious responses, especially from women themselves.

Rather, it was put forth as inferring that we were simply an incomprehensible half of the human species (after all, even Freud couldn’t understand us!)—and, therefore, a lesser half, as well. Neither he, nor anyone else in the room, actually turned to any of the many women present—among us were Pat Crossman, Muriel James, Dorothy Jongeward, the late Maggie Northcott, and Vi Callahan—and asked us what we wanted.

Although a few works of women scholars were just beginning to emerge in the late 1960s, the only one we have evidence that he knew was Betty Friedan’s (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*. Where Eric himself was with this “woman question” at the time is revealed in many TA stories, including mine. For example, I wanted to train in TA and become a Clinical Member. When I shared that with Eric, he responded by suggesting I talk with Claude Steiner about meeting the requirement to lead two TA groups for a year. I felt Eric’s response not so much as support but as being managed, referred to someone else to be his problem. I knew I was still on probation in Eric’s mind and would have to prove myself. Fair enough.

In the seminar at that time, there was considerable pressure on women to choose one of the two roles: to be attractive to men and fun or to be thoughtful and a contributor to the development of TA theory. The fact that Eric supported women in roles involving either thinking and being independent or being fun lends credence to the idea that he might have been able to accept any one woman in both roles, as a full human being who could think and be independent as well as fun and creative. For example, during the seminars, he seriously considered all appropriate contributions, whether from men or women. Too, he seemed to reject those he considered to be off the wall with equal vehemence, regardless of gender. He supported the professional development of some of the early

female seminar attendees. For example, he convinced Barbara Rosenberg to go to medical school, and she became a New York psychiatrist. And he recommended Margaret Frings Keys for a National Institute of Mental Health grant so she was able to study at the University of Chicago. She is now a Fromm Institute professor at the University of San Francisco and a Jungian analyst.

At this same time, in the second half of the 1960s, two major developments were taking place in the larger social context, both of which were playing out in my life along with everyone else's. One was the Vietnam War. While I attended Eric's seminars in San Francisco, my husband was serving as a draftee in Vietnam—a flight surgeon for a U.S. Marine helicopter squadron. Awaiting his return in the San Francisco Bay Area, I had begun attending the seminars the month after he was deployed, so no one at the seminars had met him.

The second piece of history was then (1966) being written via the hippie movement, the San Francisco summer of love, massive war protests, and the beginnings of what is now known as the second wave of feminism in the United States (the first being when women fought for and finally won the right to vote). This second wave had been ignited 3 years earlier by the publication of Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*, which set off the feminist movement in the United States. How these two forces dovetailed in my own life revealed a great deal about Eric and the "woman question."

By the time Eric was completing his manuscript for what would become *Sex in Human Loving* (Berne, 1970), I had jumped through a number of hoops. Actually, I am tempted to say that I crawled through, scratched and bleeding, for it had been a rough road. First, no one would give me a place to do my two groups for a year. Undeterred, I continued to attend the seminars and search for an opportunity. When it became clear that I was not going to drop out, somehow a rumor went around the seminar that I had made up this alleged flight surgeon husband in Vietnam and that I was really psychotic and paranoid. Now people treated me with polite but formal reserve, and my efforts for training hit an invisible wall.

I was saved from this symbolic social death when my husband returned from the war, accepted a research position at the University of California Medical Center in San Francisco, and attended a few seminars with me. Now, suddenly, I was respected. After all, I was the wife of someone Eric referred to as a "real scientist." In fact, Eric began courting my husband to do the research he thought would legitimize TA. In short, I was now "in"—set up to do my two groups for a year at Oakland Naval Hospital, not because of my own merits, but because I was a Navy wife. (How's that for the quickest cure from paranoia and psychosis?)

What had I done that was different? Nothing, really. It was all about how women were seen and treated during that time (and still are, in too many places!). Was I happy about it? Not really. I wanted to be recognized on my own terms, for my own merit and contributions. What I had been granted was recognition by association, a result of the derivative status to which women were subject at the time (and still are in many areas around the world).

When Eric was ready to begin receiving comments on his *Sex in Human Loving* manuscript, he asked me to read it and I accepted. He wanted my husband to read it too, but he did not. Nonetheless, Eric credited both of us in the acknowledgments.

I was incensed when I examined the section he had titled "Female Power." I remember that it was full of "blame the woman," along with accusations and put downs: the castrating bitch; the withholding, frigid woman; and so on. I filled the margins with searing comments and returned it holding my breath. I knew I had crossed a line that all my female role training had instructed me was dangerous and not to be tolerated, one that, in fact, usually resulted in being called a castrating bitch and being ostracized. What I had done was let him have my full-out, no-holds-barred opinion as a woman.

Several weeks later, much to my amazement, he took me aside and expressed gratitude for "saving him." When I looked puzzled, he elaborated, "What if Betty Friedan had gotten a hold of me in the press?" Since he was under deadline with the publisher, he handled my comments, along with those he then collected from

other women, by running a dialogue in the footnotes between "E. W." (Emancipated Woman) and "E. B." (Eric Berne).

Then, since the annual August Summer Conference for 1970 was coming up in Monterey, he asked if I would present a paper there about this whole "woman question" and he would be the discussant. I agreed. But that was not to be. As we all know, Eric died in July of that year. All of us were terribly shocked and grieving, but we agreed that the show must go on, and so I prepared my paper. But when the formal conference program came out, I discovered that quite unbeknownst to me, and without any input on my part, my paper had been turned into a panel with three men presenting on women!

I voiced my displeasure to anyone who would listen, and happily, one of those people was Claude Steiner, who had been getting a "feminist earful" across the bay in Berkeley from the women in the Radical Psychiatry Collective. He put me in touch with Hogie Wyckoff, a brilliant and seasoned political activist and feminist. (In fact, she later contributed the first work on women's scripting to the TA literature; see Wyckoff, 1971.) When I was unable to get the program changed through my own efforts, Hogie and friends arrived at the Monterey Conference, complete with a lot of passion for the cause, knowledge about political strategy, and materials to make banners. We needed to undercut what we saw as a cultural game called "Let's Oppress the Women and Obliterate their Voices"—otherwise known as "Business as Usual."

It had always been part of the Summer Conference culture at that time that on Friday night, the first night of the conference, the women would be in the bar, all dressed up and looking good, and the men would come up and flirt and buy drinks and make moves on the women. But that night the men had a big surprise, for we women were now off in a room by ourselves having a meeting with no men allowed (the first ITAA Women's Caucus). While we were deciding not to collect resentment stamps but instead to channel our feelings into effective action, men were making attempts to crash the door with various excuses. The women shut the door in their faces, politely but firmly.

Finally, the men sent the "official" TA photo-

grapher, also a man, to take pictures of this "historic" occasion, but what he actually took was forever: He spent more time fiddling with his camera than taking pictures. We knew he was a spy, and we threw him out, behavior that was simply unheard of on the part of women at that time. As women setting our own boundaries and sticking to them, we were beginning to break out of our secondary, ancillary role.

During the meeting we gave voice to our experiences as women in this ITAA world. Clearly, there was growing recognition that we women were not being treated fairly; we were given a harder time than men on clinical exams, there were greater obstacles to our attainment of goals within the organization, and there were no women in positions of power in the association.

After much discussion, we concluded that we wanted to ask the men to step down and for several women who volunteered to present something to do so on the panel with me. The wives of some of the men who had been named to the panel assured us they would talk to their husbands, and their husbands would step down. They were in for a shock.

As I later recorded those moments in a "her-storical note" (Levin, 1977b):

Women worked together, talking to ITAA members personally, writing, printing, and passing out leaflets, wearing "Sisterhood Is Powerful" buttons, confronting disparaging remarks, and refusing to be divided among themselves. Within a day's time, it became clear that the "woman question" was serious business. Women began to feel that people were at least listening. However, the three male members remained on the panel. (p. 87)

When the time for the panel discussion arrived, the room was jammed with an active, seething crowd, anxious to be informed of the latest turn of events. In front sat the "officially designated" panel on women, including the three men. Tension mounted and there was shouting between panel members and the audience. Some insisted, "Don't give your paper! Insist that the men step down or refuse to speak!" Others said, "Don't let them silence you! This is a chance to be heard, and we need to hear this paper!"

I asked the men to step down, and when this did not happen, it became clear to me that I could not in clear conscience speak. A second later a woman from the audience (Valerie Lankford, bless her!) took the microphone away from the panel. “I always wondered what women were so angry about and now I know. We are tired of having men tell us about ourselves. Let the women speak!” A roar of approval ran through the crowd. New women members approached the panel, and the men yielded their places. After a brief and tumultuous celebration, women spoke: eloquently, emotionally, personally, and powerfully, for themselves” (Levin, 1977b, p. 87).

That event was a major turning point for the nature of sexual politics in the ITAA and in TA. Perhaps the victory with the most impact was that ITAA was now required to include one woman on every examining board, and if a qualified woman was not present, the board was illegally constituted and its results would not be accepted. Although it took some time and some board of trustees resolutions over about 12-18 months, this opened the doors for many qualified women to step through into positions of full “citizenship” in the ITAA, with all the attendant rights and privileges. We won the right to have our own special issue of the *Transactional Analysis Journal*. Our demands also gave birth to the ITAA social action committee, which was charged with addressing issues of gender, race, and so on. And we were no longer willing to tolerate our existence being inferred from the male pronoun; we succeeded in instituting the “no sexist language” policy of the *Transactional Analysis Journal*, perhaps one of the first professional journals to do so, and a policy that continues today.

### **The Awakening Process: Potentialities and Possibilities**

Had Eric Berne lived, he also would no doubt have been affected by and very likely would have learned from this emerging consciousness. What might have been some of the hallmarks of this process? While I did not experience Eric as a misogynist at heart, still, he would have had to realize that many of those

*Sex in Human Loving* manuscript statements had been misogynist—meaning “woman hating.” And he would have found that much of his training as a psychiatrist was gynophobic—meaning “based on fear of anything related to females”—especially the fear of traits considered to be part of the female sex role.

Just before his death, Eric was already starting to demonstrate the likelihood that he would be among the men willing to wake up and “get it” about the position of women in modern, patriarchal culture, if for no other reason than he would have been constantly exposed to women who were shifting out of patriarchal roles. Then, too, his positive response to those *Sex in Human Loving* manuscript notes was a big indicator that he would continue to expand this consciousness. He had already begun to deal with the increasing political activity and feminist writings; for example, he already knew about Friedan’s book and what she had to say. Then, too, many of his clients were women starting to become vocal about their own oppression, and this new awareness about the “woman question” would have contributed to his commitment to be as effective a therapist as possible in the shortest time possible. And certainly the fact that he was father to his daughter and step-daughter and that he had been married provided him with a personal, vested interest.

His ongoing study of cultures around the world likely would have supported his process by providing him with the intellectual understanding and open-mindedness he needed to become aware and make changes accordingly, a process that can be uncomfortable as one re-integrates one’s own history in terms of the new information.

From a cultural perspective, he would have been able to study and benefit from the work of various feminist scholars, one of whom would have been Marija Gimbutas (1974). She studied cultures of the past, especially those from what was then called “prehistory,” which now are called prepatriarchal societies. Her work was given a major boost in 1987 by the publication of Riane Eisler’s (1987) *The Chalice and the Blade*, in which Eisler analyzed all cultures that ever existed, from antiquity through the present. She concluded that there have been

only two types of social organization in human history: One is "dominator mode," symbolized by the blade, which is top-down, hierarchical, and androcentric, while the other is a "partnership model," represented by the chalice, which is egalitarian, cooperative, and gynocentric.

I think it would have delighted Eric to be able to realize that all the cultures he had visited were actually dominator-mode variations of patriarchy. He would have awakened to the fact that current cultures are all part of a planetary sexual caste system with birth-ascribed, hierarchically ordered groups whose members have unequal access to goods, services, and prestige and to physical and mental well-being. It may have even pleased him to consider patriarchy as the prevailing religion of the entire planet Earth, using masculine images to define a male god.

He would likely have become aware that all of these cultures are "phallogocentric," in other words, centered around the male image, including phallogocentric language and myth. Use of the pronoun "he" to represent both sexes is one such example. He may have discovered that pre-patriarchal cultures were gynocentric. English novelist Virginia Woolf (1929) described one of the ways this phallogocentricity affected the female sex. "Women," she said "have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (p. 37).

Berne would have discovered that this was not just a nineteenth-century novelist's opinion but, rather, reflective of the derivative status of women in patriarchal systems in which women's access to opportunities, benefits, power, and physical safety are obtained through connections to men. And he may have further realized that this position made women vulnerable to exploitation—the stealing and utilization of their energy in the service of men.

He likely would have discovered the indisputable evidence of this in the events of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and early seventeenth centuries if he had contended with the different name feminist historians used to refer to this time. Historians had called this period the Renaissance (rebirth), but now women historians

were renaming it the "Burning Times," because hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of women were burned at the stake for being "witches" (i.e., for exercising their healing knowledge and powers). He would have even had to come to grips with the fact that the very medical fraternity of which he and his father were members was birthed in the ashes of this massive, institutionalized power play, the point of which was to rid societies of women midwives and herbalists. This allowed men to take over these roles, and the male-controlled medical industrial complex was born (Erenreich & English, 1973).

No doubt he would have wanted to understand how such a system obtained the consent of the victims and also the dominant sex. This would have led him to study sex-role socialization, which bestows false identities on both women and men (Levin, 1977a). He would have seen that the sexual caste system is both hidden and maintained through these roles, which are enforced by patriarchal religions that name them as divinely ordained (Daly, 1978).

He likely would have enjoyed a laugh of recognition reading novelist Molly Dwyer's (2008) portrayal of the nineteenth-century masculine ideal of perfect femininity in patriarchally-programmed women. She described women thus scripted as being

sweet, endearing, ever-giving and soothing, empty-headed and childish, unquestioningly cooperative, pathologically passive, fundamentally victimized, and thoroughly domesticated. In fact, they are completely unrealized, destroyed by the culture they so ignorantly and hopefully embrace, victims of the imbalances brought about by unchallenged masculine ascendancy. (p. 568)

Berne could easily have awakened to the fact that the occurrence of rape was not just trauma to an individual woman but part of a random, systemic reinforcement that operates to keep women in these roles. Then he would have realized that this most underreported, fastest-growing, and least-convicted crime in the world is used by men of all classes along with other forms of violence and coercion to "keep women in their place." Once he understood that

women all over the world live under this threat—a type of mass terrorism—even in their own homes, he might have developed a deep compassion for their plight. And he would have objected to viewing women as the property of men, an outlook that makes rape a crime not against a person, but only against property, and therefore far less serious under the law.

Along the way he would have had to completely rethink all the misogynistic aspects of his psychiatric training, especially those of the Oedipus complex. He would have discovered this dynamic to be the envy girls feel, not for the genital equipment of boys, but for the power accorded them under patriarchal systems and the concomitant fear in boys that they might lose this power.

He may have found it sobering to realize that the domination of the female sex by the male sex was accomplished through the institutions of psychiatry as well as the military, technology, churches, science, universities, politics, finance, media, language, and so on, and through behavioral, sexual, and relationship myths and norms that are internalized.

Finally, he may have seen that his own seminar as it was in 1966 reflected this system, and this, too, might have motivated some massive changes in his own thinking and ways of operating in the world. These changes would likely have been most reflected in new thinking about the different psychology of women and men as it relates to oppressor/oppressed rather than with transactional analysis theory itself.

### Now

Had Eric Berne undergone this process of removing patriarchal mind-bindings, he might have been able to give definite answers to Freud's question, "What do women want?" He could have discovered that women want freedom from their patriarchal "place" under the male boot heel; that they no longer wish to serve at the beck and call of men; that they want personal sovereignty to find their own place in the world. He would have been able to answer that women want economic freedom to support themselves and their families so they become free from the economic dependence that leaves them exposed, vulnerable, and sub-

ject to emotional, physical, and sexual abuse under the laws and allowances of a patriarchal structure. He likely would have had no quarrel with the fact that they want to be recognized as fully human, with equal rights under the law: the right to vote, to inherit, to own property, to keep earned wages rather than turning them over to the control of a husband, to choose their own mate in life, to decide for themselves when to have a child—in other words, the same rights accorded to adult men. And most likely he would have granted women's desire for respect and support for the contributions they make, whether in the public sphere or the private one.

Of course, the ego state model that Eric created—that every grown-up has a Parent, an Adult, and a Child—would have served him perfectly in analyzing this, transaction by transaction. He may then have seen clearly when transactions supported free choice and the use of all three ego states in all areas of adult life.

And then, there is that love of language he had, which would have served as a great ally in bringing him through the often uncomfortable process of growing beyond patriarchal programming. (The memory of his Child glee using words like "euhemerus" and "satrap" remains etched in my mind—especially the big grin on his face the night he called us seminar attendees "satraps" and watched our confusion as we struggled to decide whether we had been insulted or affirmed.)

Along the way to this new consciousness, he would likely have discovered the danger of becoming a "pseudofeminist"—one who espouses feminist ideals and rhetoric in the service of patriarchy.

Still, his likely enjoyment of all these new words and concepts would have helped him welcome the additions to the language brought about as women began to speak for themselves and to invent new, nonpatriarchal terms to describe their own experience. I believe it would have brought him to the other side of that pseudofeminist trap so that he would have completed this consciousness-raising process and succeeded in removing his patriarchal mind-bindings.

Happily, this is a process many TA people have already undergone or are now undergoing.

Transactional analysis theory and writings have largely moved beyond the sexist language, blame-the-woman, derivative status that characterized some of its early thinking. Much has also been cleaned up in international TA organizations, and most have become far more egalitarian. Although this has not been studied to my knowledge, it is much to the credit of these organizations when women hold positions of power and are published authors and Eric Berne Memorial (Scientific) Award Winners. This is in the best interests of the health of the international transactional analysis community, because failure to recognize, hear, support, and respect 51% of the population of the Earth would be the downfall of the global TA movement and its organizations. The expertise of women—whose relationship skills as the predominant caregivers in the world are finely honed—is crucial not only to the survival of every human being but also to this community and every one of its organizations.

Still, evidence of patriarchal dominance appears, especially if one follows the dictum, "Do the math." Anyone who can count can scan any *Transactional Analysis Journal* to see how many women are authors of articles or look at a conference program and count how many are featured doing pre- or postconference institutes, how many are in keynote speaker positions, how many are highlighted in feature interviews against the backdrop of our TA organizations—in other words, in positions of stature instead of only the usual support roles. The next step is to compare these numbers to the actual power base, which may be behind the scenes. Doing so not only helps each of us remove our own patriarchal mind-bindings, it also helps our global transactional analysis movement thrive.

I expect that, were he here today, Eric would be delighted to have the TA world he founded serve as a vehicle for spreading that liberation around the world.

*Pamela Levin has been a member of ITAA since 1966, when she met and studied with Eric Berne. The first nurse, the first woman, and the first person to earn Clinical Membership and Teaching Membership, she is past president of the Eric Berne Seminars of San Francisco, served on the ITAA Board of Trustees, co-founded the ITAA's Women's Caucus, is past editor of The Script, and received the Eric Berne Memorial Award for her work on the cycle of development. She is currently editor of The Script column, "After He Said Hello." She is author of numerous books, articles, and a DVD on transactional analysis, culture, and emotional development. For 40 years she has maintained a private TA practice offering physical and emotional health improvement services. She offers a number of online TA services and training opportunities. Pam can be reached at 224 N. Oak #1429, Ukiah, CA U.S.A., e-mail: info@nourishingcompany.com .*

#### REFERENCES

- Berne, E. (1970). *Sex in human loving*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Daly, M. (1978). *Gyn-ecology: The meta ethics of radical feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Dwyer, M. (2008). *Requiem for the author of Frankenstein*. Ft. Bragg, CA: Lost Coast Press.
- Eisler, R. (1987). *The chalice and the blade: Our history, our future*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Erenreich, B., & English, D. (1973). *Witches, midwives and nurses: A history of women healers*. New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York.
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The feminine mystique*. New York: Norton.
- Freud, S. (1955). Letter to Marie Bonaparte. In E. Jones, *The life and work of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 2, Part 3, Ch. 16). London: Hogarth Press. (Original work written 1926)
- Gimbutas, M. (1974). *The goddesses and gods of old Europe*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Levin, P. (1977a). Sex roles: An added dimension to script theory. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 7, 121-125.
- Levin, P. (1977b). Women's oppression. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 7(1), 87-91.
- Woolf, V. (1929). *A room of one's own*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Wyckoff, H. (1971). The stroke economy in women's scripts. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 1, 16-20.