Boston is infamous for its valuable and rich history, and its centuries of plentiful contributions to American society. The venerable Boston Common and Public Garden, which lies at the heart of Boston, only further emphasize this fact. The Common and Garden are areas littered with symbols, a homage to Boston’s fascinating and vibrant past. It is an area for Bostonians to reminisce on Boston’s glorious past of advocacy and its achievements towards human equality, to let the general public -- whoever may visit -- know that Boston is a city that has long been at the forefront of U.S. history, to remind Bostonians of their strength to overcome any difficulties that may arise, and, lastly, to let everyone and anyone know that Boston is a welcoming community to all who wander within its borders.

The park and garden are beautiful and inviting, with its many winding paths, its exotic selection of flowers, and the company that it brings. Its attention-grabbing exterior feeds the inquisitive mind with a sense of both adventure and tranquility, and one could not help but to take a stroll through its green expanse. However, upon stepping inside, you are inevitably greeted by statues of all different shapes and sizes; from ones perched upon tall thrones as though to set its gaze upon all of the Common, acting as overseers protecting the area from the spirit of calamity and the throes of injustice, to smaller, more amicable ones that are stationed near to or on the ground, acting as interactive elements that both kids and adults alike could enjoy.

However, the Common isn’t the only place you can encounter such glorious statues. Acting as an extension to the Public Garden, there exists a long strip of grass and pavement on
Commonwealth, made for pedestrians to stroll on. This expansive central promenade is no ordinary strip of land, but is rather an extension of what the Common and Garden hope to achieve -- a further reverence of and lesson on Boston’s history. It is called Commonwealth Avenue Mall, a 32 acre strip designed in 1856 by educator and philanthropist Arthur Gilman, who, alongside his wife, founded the Private Collegiate Instruction for Women, a women’s institution in Cambridge which sought to provide women with equal education to that of what men received. Every part of the strip, which is every so often separated by an intersecting street, bears a monument. Each statue gets its own section, which dignifies the statues even more, as though they are worthy of their own separate piece of land -- like a stage spotlight on a performer. Benches are also scattered across the strip, allowing for passersby who want to sit and relax to do so, but notwithstanding the looming statue which stands before them. These statues, which, like the many in the Common, stand on tall plinths, which physically makes it impossible to see the person that it memorializes without having to tilt your head upward -- a literal way of looking up to someone. These statues are meant for glorification, to show the importance of the person commemorated.

Although this head-tilting style of memorialization is a heavily popular design for statues in this area, only a few memorials are not built this way. The “Boston Women’s Memorial,” which presents three women gathered on a circular platform, is an example of such. On this platform are stationed three women: Abigail Adams, Lucy Stone, and Phillis Wheatley. These three women all share something in common: they were prominent figures of early American feminism, made a particular impact on the Boston community which they at one point in their lives resided in, and all never received a formal education but were intelligent writers, thinkers, and orators of their time. These three women, with their gazes upon the distance, lay across the
perimeter of this pavement, which is easily able to be walked upon -- it’s even ramped, making the memorial all the more accessible for individuals who may not have the means to walk upon it. Once you’ve made your way onto the platform, depending on your height you are either met eye-to-eye or forced to look down upon or up to these women to meet their gaze. Although Adams is seen standing, Wheatley and Stone are in positions as though getting up from rest, with their arms outstretched with writing utensils prepared in hand. All of them share an expression insinuating that they are pondering -- whether it be on their successes, their work, or the future of Boston -- suggesting that they are eternally fixed on their creations and formulating new thoughts to contribute for what they did best: creating change. Positioned next to them are rectangular marble structures, which are inscribed from head to toe on nearly every face of the rectangle with either their own written words or their name with a brief description of who they are.

I appreciate this memorial for many reasons -- for one, it’s location. It is quite fitting that the Boston Women’s Memorial, which commemorates three powerful female figures that had to educate themselves through other means than in institutions, was built on the same strip of land that a person who advocated for quality education for women built. Additionally, the thought behind the memorial’s dedication and what it stands for is not only fitting for the walkway’s history, but is, in general, a testament to Boston’s overall path to equality. In 1992, the first discussions about the under-representation of women memorialized in Boston occurred, and for the following nearly 12 years, collaboration for creating a memorial representative of the women of Boston between the Boston Women’s Commission, the Commonwealth Avenue Mall Committee, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the mayor’s wife Angela Menino was underway, until 2003 the Boston Women’s Memorial was fully developed and made its space on the Commonwealth Avenue Mall. Since its establishment, the memorial is used as one of the
many stops made on the Boston Women’s Heritage Trail -- unlike many of the other memorials, it is not just a statue for gratification, but more importantly for education.

Initially looking at the statue, however, I had a couple surface level criticisms; criticisms which seem to be generally shared by other onlookers. One main concern with the monument was that unlike the other monuments, which their statues are supported on tall, towering plinths, all the women represented in the Boston Women’s Memorial are all set on ground level, their plinths either in front of them or behind them, but none of them perched upon it. If all the other statues shared this same trait, the problem, I believe, would not be so prominent, and probably would not be a problem at all. The problem that arises from this from many critics is the problem of overshadowing, both literally and figuratively. As mentioned before, all the statues perched upon their tall pedestals require your head to look upward to see the person being memorialized -- and that is not just an artistic choice, but moreover a social normative. Whenever you see a presenter, a speaker, a performer, they are usually never on the ground at the same level as the crowd; instead, they are on stages, platforms, or whatever other form of a raised surface, which not only distinguishes them from the crowd, but generally things that are high above us are hard to miss, instinctively causing us to look at the thing or person looming before us, whereas things below us or on the ground are easy to miss or overlook. This idea is applied in the rhetoric of statues, where a person who is placed upon a tall plinth innately makes us believe that they are a person worth knowing -- and thus nearly all the statues around inner city Boston are consequently people worth knowing. So what does that say about a statue placed on the ground?

Similarly, with the build of the monument itself, the statues are physically possible to be overlooked. There are so many tall trees planted about the Mall, and for a person walking on the regular sidewalk, the Boston Women’s Memorial is easy to miss, as the greenery impairs the
visual from being seen from afar. That’s unlike the Great Elm monument, which can be seen nearly at any point in Boston Common even above all the trees crowding around it and from outside the gates of the Common as well. That is not to compare to the Boston Vendome Hotel Fire memorial, which does not even have physical bodies to look at, nor a colossal plinth, but just a short and long curved slab of stone with names, a date and time of the fire, and quotes engraved along the stone, as well as a stone firefighter helmet and coat slunged over the name wall. It is appropriate for what it is memorializing: it is humbly low to the ground, allows passersby to read the names of those firefighters lost and leave flowers or other gifts at the memorial, and commemorates them while simultaneously acting as a headstone laying the nine brave men to rest. However, for the context of the Boston Women’s Memorial, it is meant to celebrate Boston womanship, yet is still physically beneath all the men who are also celebrated, instilling the patriarchal idea that men and women cannot be equal as they are not even on equal platforms.

Lastly, instead of having the women celebrated as individuals, it feels as though by placing them all in one memorial that women cannot exist individually as themselves but as a function for a cause, whether that be on femininity or feminism or equality. That is not to say it is necessarily a bad thing, but yet again by combining these women -- who all merit individual recognition -- into one singular entity, it is as though their personal stories do not matter, but instead what they are made to represent, which is female empowerment. A lot of people criticized this structure, saying that because of this it also felt rushed, a “quick-fix attempt to address the lack of female representation in Boston's public art.”

However, upon thinking and researching about the monument, my perspective changed. Having the women at ground-level and in casual stances is the exact purpose of the function of
this monument. Meredith Bergmann, the woman who made the design for this monument, stated this in a blog post addressing her decisions: “I studied the existing monuments along the Mall and decided that the formal symbols for remembrance, heroism and stature had to be used in a new way, for women… I suddenly realized that I could portray the women as having come down off their pedestals, making a feminist metaphor literal and concrete… They have come down to work, and thoughtfully put their skewed and tumbled pedestals to use.” Unlike the rest of the statues, which are portrayed as seemingly larger-than-life and almost god-like, Bergmann made the thoughtful decision of putting them on the ground to emphasize the fact that they are normal human beings. They are meant to meet eye to eye with the people passing by, because there is a connection that it offers to be made, a connection which the other statues lack -- a sense of humanity, of groundedness, the feeling that anybody can be them. They are figures who are not meant to look perfect and otherworldly, but are meant to communicate an understanding that the power in which these women held and continue to hold, is the same power that any other woman possesses. No longer are we just glorifying the people who are memorialized, but are also glorifying what we can be. Instead of using their platforms for glory, they are using their platforms for us. And the statue is so interactive, it even invites us to sit with them, take pictures with them, and bring them gifts as though they are a friend. With this sudden realization I grew more fond of the monument. It teaches us that we don’t need to be or act larger than life to make a change or be a good person, and that the spirit of humanity is so close to us -- we can reach out, and touch it.