

LITERARY THEORY

GENDER STUDIES AND FEMINIST CRITICISM

Definition and Description:

The purpose of looking at a text through a feminist or gender studies lens is to learn and understand the development of women. As a feminist critic there are several ways to approaching a work: through an American feminist lens, through a French feminist lens, or through a British feminist lens. All three groups agree on one mannerism: A woman is not born but constructed. The way they disagree is how that woman is constructed. That is where they turn to literature. The different types of critics will look at different aspects of literature in order to gain the knowledge they seek. Some will look into letters and journals. Some will look at the power and authority held by women authors in the past. Some will study the female experience, both in and out of the text. However, the ultimate goal of all feminist and gender study critics is to increase our understanding of women's experience, both in past and present, and promote our appreciation of women's value in the world.

Key People:

- Annette Kolodny
- Elaine Showalter
- Hélène Cixous
- Judith Fetterley
- Julia Kristeva
- Kate Millett
- Luce Irigaray
- Mary Wollstonecraft
- Sandra Gilbert
- Simone de Beauvoir
- Susan Gubar
- Toril Moi
- Virginia Woolf

Websites:

- www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/lit.html
- <http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/femtheory.html>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/feminist_literary_criticism
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/feminist_theory
- <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/enin.html>

Key Terms

- **Amazon Feminism:** Dedicated to female images in literature and art that emphasizes the physiques of female athletes and physical equality of both males and females
- **Androcentric:** A term used to describe the attitudes, practices, or social organizations that are based on the assumption that men are the model of being
- **Biological model:** Text mirrors the body; relates the intimacies of the female experience of the female body
- **Constructivist feminism:** asks women (and men) to consider what it means to be a woman, to consider how much of what society has often deemed to be inherently female traits are in fact culturally and socially constructed
- **Cultural Feminism:** Personality and biological differences exist between men and women
- **Cultural model:** places feminist concerns in social contexts, acknowledging class, racial, national, and historical differences and detriments among women

- **Ecofeminism:** assumes that patriarchal societies are relatively new and that society's original condition was matriarchal
- **Female phase:** (1920-Present) Female writers reject both the feminine social constructs prominent during the feminine phase and the secondary or minor position of female characters that dominated the feminist phase
- **Feminine Phase:** (1840-1880) women writers imitated the dominant male traditions of literature
- **Feminist Phase:** (1880-1920) Women advocated for their rights
- **Gender:** cultural programming as feminine or masculine
- **Gynocentric:** woman centered
- **Gynocriticism:** a movement that examines the distinctive characteristics of the female experience using four modes about the nature of women's writing: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural
- **Gynocritics:** the process of creating a female framework for the analysis of women's literature
- **Imaginary Order:** preverbal state that contains our wishes, our fantasies, and our physical images; in this state we are genderless because we are not yet capable of differentiating ourselves from our mothers
- **L'écriture féminine:** A term used by French critics to designate women's writing that has as its source Lacan's Imaginary Order
- **Linguistic model:** addresses the need for a female discourse, investigating the differences between how women and men use language
- **Material Feminism:** aims to improve the material condition of women by unburdening them of the "traditional" female tasks (i.e. housework, cooking, ironing, clothes, and other domestic responsibilities)
- **Misogyny:** negative attitudes towards women
- **Models of difference:** Biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural
- **Modern woman's literary development:** Three phases of the literary development introduced by Elaine Showalter: Feminine, Feminist, and Female phases
- **Other:** what a woman is in a patriarchal society, an object whose existence is defined and interpreted by the dominant male
- **Patriarchal culture:** A culture organized in the favor of men.
- **Phallocentrism:** the belief that identifies the phallus as the source of power in male-centered and male-dominated patriarchal assumptions
- **Psychoanalytic model:** gender difference in the psyche and also in the artistic process
- **Separatist Feminism:** advocates separation from men, either total or partial
- **Symbolic Order:** the psychic stage in which an individual learns language which shapes identity; the boy becoming dominant with language and a girl becoming socialized into using subordinate language.
- **Womanist:** a feminist that does not turn her back on the men of the community

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Questions

- Is the author male or female?
- Is the text narrated by a male or a female?
- What types of roles do women have in the text?
- Are the female characters the protagonists or secondary and minor characters?
- Do any stereotypical characterizations of women appear?
- What are the attitudes toward women held by the male characters?
- How does the author's culture influence her or his attitude?
- Is feminine imagery used? What is the significance of such imagery?
- Do the female characters speak differently than the male characters?
- Are the roles women play in the literature minor, supportive, powerless or independent, influential ones?
- How do the male characters treat the female characters?
- How do the male characters talk about the female characters?
- How do the female characters act toward the male characters?
- Who are the socially and politically powerful characters?
- Is the genre one that is traditionally associated with male or female writers?
- Is the subject one that is of particular interest to women, perhaps one that is of importance in women's lives?
- Is the work sympathetic to female characters?
- Are the female characters and the situations in which they are placed presented with complexity and in detail?
- How does the language differ from what you would expect from a writer of the opposite gender?
- How does the way the female characters talk influence the reader's perception of them?
- What are the predominant images? Why (or why are they not) associated with women's lives?
- Does the implied audience of the work include or exclude women?
- Who is primarily responsible for making decisions in the world depicted: men or women?
- Do the female characters play an overt part in decision making? Or do they work behind the scenes?
- Who holds positions of authority and influence?
- Who controls the finances?
- Do the female characters play traditional female roles? Or do they assume some unusual ones?
- Are there any instances in which women are unfairly treated or ill treated?
- Do the male characters consult the female characters before taking action, or merely inform them of it?
- How is the female reader co-opted into accepting or rejecting the images of women presented in the work?
- Are images of the female body important in the text?
- Are there references to female diseases or bodily functions?
- Does the text reject the idea of a male norm of thinking and behavior that is stable and unchanging? Where?
- Do motherhood or those attitudes and behaviors characteristic of motherhood figure significantly in the text?
- Can you find instances in which wholeness rather than otherness is associated with the female characters?
- Are the women characters honored for their accomplishments?
- Can you find instances in which the traditional binaries of male/female, intellectual/emotional, objective/subjective, and active/passive are reversed?
- Does the work reinforce or undermine patriarchal ideology?
- What does the work imply about the possibilities of sisterhood as a mode of resisting patriarchy and/or about the ways in which women's situations in the world—economic, political, social, or psychological—might be improved?
- What does the work suggest about the ways in which race, class, and/or other cultural factors intersect with gender in producing women's experience?
- What does the work suggest about women's creativity?
- What might an examination of the author's style contribute to the ongoing efforts to delineate a specifically feminine form of writing?
- What does the history of the work's reception by the public and by the critics tell us about the operations of patriarchy? Has the literary work been ignored or neglected in the past? Why? Or, if recognized in the past, is the work ignored or neglected now? Why?
- What role does the work play in terms of women's literary history and literary tradition?
- What capacities in women have been deemed "unnatural" and therefore punished if demonstrated?
- What manifestations of discontent and self doubt have resulted from a constant experience of oppression?
- How have women, at times, internalized oppression and used patriarchal criteria in valuing and evaluating themselves and other women?
- How did women respond to restrictions? Were there any explicit voices of rebellion?
- How did women find fulfillment in what may seem today to be very narrow existences? How did they exercise power at home, in the marketplace, and within their social circles or restricted fields of employment? Where and how did they find companionship and support within groups of other women?
- If women become integrated into the prevailing political and economic system, what positive qualities would they lose?
- How do women, when they are apart from the company of men, demonstrate important values that seem practically unknown to most men?
- How do many of the values and roles associated with men, both historically and in the pages of a text, lead to profound social injustices?
- Where in the text can one isolate glimmers of hope that alternate systems are possible, ones built not on hierarchy and competition but instead on mutual caring and concern?
- What class tensions exist in the text under scrutiny?
- How do economic worries and the effects of specific material deprivations (such as access to housing, education, and employment) exacerbate gender-related tensions?
- What forms of labor do the women of the text perform, and how is that labor valued or ignored?
- How might a modification or thorough overhaul of the economic system portrayed in the text change the lives of its women characters and help alleviate their experience of gender-related oppression?