

Feminist Literary Criticism



General Thoughts About Feminist Criticism

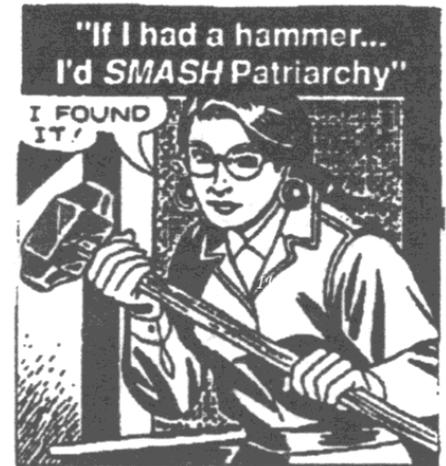
- Lisa Tuttle defines feminist literary criticism as asking "new questions of old texts." She cites the goals of feminist criticism as: (1) To develop and uncover a female tradition of writing, (2) to interpret symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view, (3) to rediscover old texts, (4) to analyze women writers and their writings from a female perspective, (5) to resist sexism in literature, and (6) to increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style.
- Adrienne Rich: "Feminism means finally that we renounce our obedience to the fathers and recognize that the world they have described is not the whole world re-vision--the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes of entering an old text from a new critical direction--is for us more than a chapter in cultural history, it is an act of survival."

General Approaches to Feminist Literary Criticism

- While there are diverse approaches, feminist critics largely agree on a threefold purpose: to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices, to promote discovery and reevaluation of literature by womyn, and to examine social, cultural, and psychosexual contexts of literature and criticism.
- Most basically, feminist criticism is concerned with "the womyn as reader" and the "womyn as writer"
- Feminist criticism is always political, though some worry that it is too separated from the real fight for political rights for womyn.

The Critique of Patriarchy

- **Patriarchy** is the systematic social, political, cultural and economic domination of womyn by men. While not all men are actively responsible for this domination, feminist critics argue that it suffuses all parts of Western culture, affecting people in ways both obvious and subtle.
- Rebecca West writes: "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is; I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute."
- Feminist criticism seeks to expose this patriarchy in literature, in terms of choices made by characters in stories, as well as choices (perhaps unintentionally made) by authors, including womyn.
- In particular, this analysis focuses on exposing cultural biases that suggest a diminished role for womyn.
- The positive roles for womyn are limited to: caretakers, wives, mothers, passive observers, submissives. Negative Roles for Womyn include being leaders, childless, sexually independent, unmarried, vocal.
- Womyn who transgress against this accepted social order are often dismissed as mentally ill or sexually promiscuous.
- Hans Bertrens writes, "Literary representations of women repeat cultural stereotypes. Such stereotypes include the woman as an immoral and dangerous seductress, the woman as the eternally dissatisfied shrew, the woman as cute but essentially helpless, the woman as unwordly, the woman as a self-sacrificing angel, and so on...these characters were clearly constructions, put together...by the culture the authors belonged to—to serve a not-so hidden purpose—the continued social and cultural domination of males.
- The criticism addresses language use, roles, actions, and more.



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Critique of Male Privilege

- Feminist critics are also concerned about the treatment of womyn authors by the literary establishment in the **canon**. The canon is the list of literary works that are considered to be the most valuable. The list, especially until the 20th century, tended to be dominated by white men.
- Virginia Woolf addressed this concern in her work *A Room of One's Own*. She imagines the existence of Shakespeare's sister, and argues that even if her gifts had been the equal of Shakespeare, she have been afforded a space to write, to express her abilities.
- An example of this failure to include womyn is the exclusion of authors like Susan Warner, E.D.N. Southworth, and Mary Wilkins Freeman, who were among the most popular authors in the late 19th century, and who are all but ignored today.



Critique of Gender Roles

- Feminist critics emphasize the idea that there is a difference between sex and gender. Sex is a biological characteristic; gender is a societal construct. This should have a profound impact on the way that we think about “appropriate” gender roles.
 - Men and Womyn should both be able to act in accordance with their desires, not limited to societal definitions of what it means to be a man or woman.
 - Womyn in particular will be freed to explore more options if we abandon this notion of gender.
- Feminist critics are also concerned with sex-related writing strategies, including matters of subject, vocabulary, syntax, style, imagery, narrative structure, characterization, and genre preference.
 - As an example, male writers are more often concerned with closure, while female authors often embrace openness of outcomes. Female logic in writing is often associational; male logic is more often sequential.
 - What is considered a female genre?

Critique of the Non-Significant Other

- Men, either unconsciously or consciously, have oppressed women, allowing them little or no voice in the political, social, or economic issues of their society;
- That by not giving voice and value to women's opinions, responses, and writings, men have therefore suppressed the the female, defined what it means to be feminine, and thereby de-voiced, devalued, and trivialized what it means to be a woman; and
- That, in effect, men have made women the “nonsignificant Other.” –Charles Bressler, Literary Criticism