

Feminist Approaches to Literary Texts

Feminism is a social movement that protests the oppression of women. Thus, feminist literary critics examine such oppression in (or through) texts. “Feminist criticism is always political and always revisionist¹, no matter what the emphasis (Guerin, et al, 185).

“I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is. I only know that other people call me a feminist when I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute.”

– Rebecca West, Author and Critic

Feminists believe that we live in a patriarchal society, dominated by the voices of men. Literary critics who prescribe to the feminist school of thought contend that the “engendered power imbalances in a given culture are reflected, supported, or challenged by literary texts”² (Guerin, et al, 182). Feminist literary critics comment on the oppression of women by examining the beliefs of authors, of texts, and society as a whole.

Although there is a great diversity within the approaches to feminist literary criticism, there are some general principles that guide these critics’ thinking and writing: “Feminist critics largely agree on a threefold purpose—to expose patriarchal premises³ and resulting prejudices, to promote discovery and reevaluation of literature by women, and to examine social cultural, and psychosexual contexts of literature and criticism. As feminists critics reread male texts, they describe how women in those texts are constrained in culture and society” (Guerin, et al, 184). For feminist literary critics, society and culture not only reflect gender, but also, in part, construct and define gender.⁴

Another Definition of Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism is concerned with the impact of gender on writing and reading. It usually begins with a critique of patriarchal culture. It is concerned with the place of female writers in the cannon [look up that word!]

Finally, it includes a search for a feminine theory or approach to texts. Feminist criticism is political and often revisionist. Feminists often argue that male fears are portrayed through female characters.

They may argue that gender determines everything, or just the opposite: that all gender differences are imposed by society, and gender determines nothing. (<http://www.literatureclassics.com/ancientpaths/litcrit.html#feminist>)

Elaine Showalter’s Theory

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter argued that literary subcultures all go through three major phases of development. For literature by or about women, she labels these stages the Feminine, Feminist, and Female:

- (1) **Feminine Stage** – involves “*imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition” and “*internalization* of its standards.”
- (2) **Feminist Stage** – involves “*protest* against these standards and values and *advocacy* of minority rights...”
- (3) **Female Stage** – this is the “phase of self-discovery, a turning inwards freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity.”

¹ Look the word up – like so much that you will be reading during this unit on Literary Criticism – you are going to need a dictionary close by – or you will not be able to understand ANYTHING!

² Do you understand this? If you don’t take it apart, talk about it with someone, until you do – It is imperative with these readings that you don’t move on until you understand – or you will get more lost (and/or bored).

³ Understand? (just checking...)

⁴ A VERY big idea – you won’t get footnotes on any more of your readings – make sure you test yourself and make sure you are responsible for your own level of understanding.