



Doublethink

LITERARY THEORIES: FEMINISM

Feminist ways of reading

While there are many different types of feminist criticism, here you will see writers who focus on the struggles women face in society and the ways these struggles are reflected and questioned (or not reflected and not questioned) in literature. Texts are read in a way that critically explores the male-centred nature of civilisation and therefore the phallogentric nature of much literature. Feminist critics consider different gender representations within texts but also question whose voices are heard and whose attitudes and values are assumed within the text. Gender issues are clearly central to those who write about literature through a feminist lens. Texts are often criticised for focusing on male protagonists while women have marginal roles. Feminist critics often reposition the focus and either sympathise with the oppression of women or celebrate the attempts of women to assert themselves. Some feminist critics use ideas from feminist literary criticism to read the text in a way that is counter to the commonly accepted reading.

FEMINISM

TAKEN FROM LITERARY THEORY: THE BASICS, BY H. BERTENS¹:

Most critics now believe that it is impossible to cordon off neatly a given field of interest or study from the rest of the world. For better or for worse, everything seems somehow related to everything else. With regard to the social position of women, and therefore also with regard to the field of female writing, that view is

to a large extent due to the feminist movement that began to gain momentum in the course of the 1960s. Paradoxically, even Marxism, with its wide-ranging historical theorising, had largely ignored the position of women. With hindsight, this oversight is all the more incomprehensible since some of its key concepts – the struggle between social classes, the blinding effects of ideology – might have been employed to analyse the social situation of women.

The feminist movement, then, put socio-historical circumstances as a determining factor in the production of literature firmly on the map. Feminism was involved right from the beginning in literary studies, and for good reasons. Kate Millett's trailblazing *Sexual Politics* of 1970, for instance, devotes long chapters to the attitudes towards women that pervade the work of prominent twentieth-century authors like D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930) and Henry Miller (1891–1980). Both were held in high regard by many critics for their daring and liberating depictions of erotic relations. Millett, however, showed that the attitude of their male characters towards women was not so emancipated at all: most of the male characters that she examined – and especially those of Miller – were denigrating, exploitative, and repressive in their relations with women. Feminism saw very clearly that the widespread negative stereotyping of women in literature and film (we can now add rock videos) constituted a formidable obstacle on the road to true equality. At least as important is that in the work of the male writers she discusses Millett finds a relationship between sex and power in which

¹ BERTENS, H. (2001) LITERARY THEORY: THE BASICS, ABINGDON: ROUTLEDGE, PP 94–95 AND PP 97–99.



the distribution of power over the male and female partners mirrors the distribution of power over males and females in society at large. In other words, in terms of power, acts that we usually think of as completely private turn out to be an extension of the public sphere. The private and the public cannot be seen as wholly separate – on the contrary, they are intimately linked. Since this is the case, Millett argues, the private sphere is, just like the public realm, thoroughly political: it is a political arena where the same power-based relations exist as in the public world. Feminism and feminist criticism are profoundly political in claiming that the personal and the political cannot be separated. They are also political in the more traditional sense of trying to intervene in the social order with a programme that aims to change actually existing social conditions.

The first type of feminist criticism asks questions of the following kind. What sort of roles did female characters play? With what sort of themes were they associated? What are the implicit presuppositions of a given text with regard to its readers? (Upon closer inspection many texts clearly assume that their readers are male – just like those commercials in which fast cars are presented by seductive young women.) Feminist critics showed how often literary representations of women repeated familiar cultural stereotypes. Such stereotypes included the woman – fast car or not – as an immoral and dangerous seductress, the woman as eternally dissatisfied shrew, the woman as cute but essentially helpless, the woman as unworldly, self-sacrificing angel, and so on. Much of the research involved naturally focused on the work of male authors, but female writers, too, came under close scrutiny and were regularly found to have succumbed to the lure of stereotypical representations. Since the way female characters were standardly portrayed had not much in common with the way feminist critics saw and experienced themselves, these characters clearly were constructions, put together – not neces-

sarily by the writers who presented them themselves, but by the culture they belonged to – to serve a not-so-hidden purpose: the continued social and cultural domination of males.

If we look at the four examples I have given we see immediately that female independence (in the seductress and the shrew) gets a strongly negative connotation, while helplessness and renouncing all ambition and desire are presented as endearing and admirable. The message is that dependence leads to indulgence and reverence while independence leads to dislike and rejection. The desired effect – of which the writer clearly need not be aware – is a perpetuation of the unequal power relations between men and women.

FEMINISM AND FEMINIST CRITICISM

TAKEN FROM BEGINNING THEORY, BY P. BARRY²:

The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the ‘woman’s movement’ of the 1960s. This movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realised the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence. In this sense the woman’s movement has always been crucially concerned with books and literature, so that feminist criticism should not be seen as an offshoot or spin-off from feminism which is remote from the ultimate aims of the movement, but as one of its most practical ways of influencing everyday conduct and attitudes.

The concern with ‘conditioning’ and ‘socialisation’ underpins a crucial set of distinctions, that between the terms ‘feminist’, ‘female’, and ‘feminine’. As Toril Moi explains, the first is ‘a political position’, the second ‘a matter of biology’, and the third ‘a set of culturally defined characteristics’. Particularly in the distinction between the second and third of these lies much of the force of feminism (see Moi’s essay

² BARRY, P. (2002) BEGINNING THEORY, 2ND ED., MANCHESTER: MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS, PP 121–123.



in *The Feminist Reader*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore). The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of 'socialisation', since it provided the role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. Feminists pointed out, for example, that in nineteenth-century fiction very few women work for a living, unless they are driven to it by dire necessity. Instead, the focus of interest is on the heroine's choice of marriage partner, which will decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfilment in life, or her lack of these.

Thus, in feminist criticism in the 1970s the major effect went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality. Critical attention was given to books by male writers in which influential or typical images of women were constructed. Necessarily, the criticism which undertook this work was combative and polemical. Then, in the 1980s, in feminism as in other critical approaches, the mood changed. Firstly, feminist criticism became much more eclectic, meaning that it began to draw upon the findings and approaches of other kinds of criticism – Marxism, structuralism, linguistics, and so on. Secondly, it switched its focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience. Thirdly, attention was switched to the need to construct a new canon of women's writing by rewriting the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence.

Such distinct phases of interest and activity seem characteristic of feminist criticism. Elaine Showalter, for instance, described the change in the late 1970s as a shift of attention from 'androtexs' (books by men) to 'gynotexs' (books by women). She coined the

term 'gynocritics', meaning the study of gynotexs, but gynocriticism is a broad and varied field, and any generalisations about it should be treated with caution. The subjects of gynocriticism are, she says, 'the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition'. But feminist criticism since the 1970s has been remarkable for the wide range of positions that exist within it. Debates and disagreements have centred on three particular areas, these being:

1. the role of theory;
2. the nature of language;
- and 3. the value or otherwise of psychoanalysis.



WHAT FEMINIST CRITICS DO

TAKEN FROM BEGINNING THEORY, BY P. BARRY³:

1. Rethink the canon, aiming at the rediscovery of texts written by women.
2. Revalue women's experience.
3. Examine representations of women in literature by men and women.
4. Challenge representations of women as 'Other', as 'lack', as part of 'nature'.
5. Examine power relations which obtain in texts and in life, with a view to breaking them down, seeing reading as a political act, and showing the extent of patriarchy.
6. Recognise the role of language in making what is social and constructed seem transparent and 'natural'.
7. Raise the question of whether men and women are 'essentially' different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different.
8. Explore the question of whether there is a female language, an *écriture féminine*, and whether this is also available to men.
9. 'Re-read' psychoanalysis to further explore the issue of female and male identity.
10. Question the popular notion of the death of the author, asking whether there are only 'subject positions ... constructed in discourse', or whether, on the contrary, the experience (e.g. of a black or lesbian writer) is central.
11. Make clear the ideological base of supposedly 'neutral' or 'mainstream' literary interpretations.

³ BARRY, P. (2002) BEGINNING THEORY, 2ND ED., MANCHESTER: MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS, P134.