

An Introduction to Literary Lenses

Literary theories were developed as a means to understand the various ways people read texts and the world around them. Some lenses will be more appropriate for particular works than others at times and it is your job to discern when to use a particular lens. The following theories are just that, *theories*. Approach them as you would a scientist, without any emotional attachment to any particular one. You do not have to believe or agree with a theory to understand and correctly apply it. Your goal is to understand the literary theories below.

Feminist Literary Theory

✓ Feminist Literary Theory Explained

➤ Lisa Tuttle defines feminist literary criticism as asking "new questions of old texts." She cites the goals of feminist criticism as:



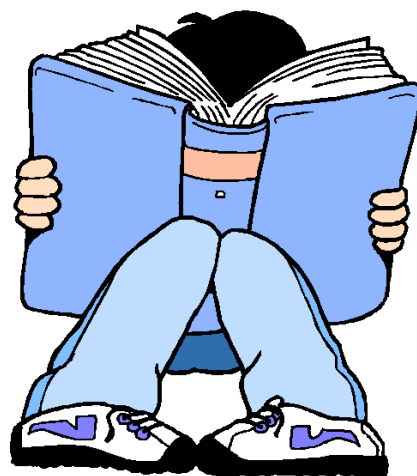
1. To develop and uncover a female tradition of writing
2. To interpret symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view
3. To rediscover old texts
4. To analyze women writers and their writings from a female perspective
5. To resist sexism in literature
6. 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."

✓ Approaches to Feminist 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 women, and to examine social, cultural, and psychosexual contexts of literature and criticism.



- The work is not objective. Any reading of it is influenced by the reader's own status, which includes gender, or attitudes towards gender.
- Historically the production and reception of literature has been controlled largely by men; it is important now to insert a feminist viewpoint in order to bring our attention to neglected works as well as new approaches to old works.
- Most basically, feminist criticism is concerned with "the women as reader" and the "women as writer"
- Feminist criticism is always political, though some worry that it is too separated from the real fight for political rights for women.

✓ **The Critique of Patriarchy**

- Patriarchy is the systematic social, political, cultural and economic domination of women 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 women.
- In particular, this analysis focuses on exposing cultural biases that suggest a diminished role for women.
- The positive roles for women are limited to: caretakers, wives, mothers, passive observers, or submissives. Negative Roles for Women include being leaders, childless, sexually independent, unmarried, or vocal.
- Women 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 unworldly, 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.

✓ **Critique of Male Privilege**

- Feminist critics are also concerned about the treatment of women 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 women 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.

1. Men and Women 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.

2. Women 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.

1. 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.

2. 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 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 "non-significant"

✓ **Example of Feminist Criticism**

➤ "In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, the foreman, Curly, is married to the only woman on the ranch. Through the course of the book, Curly's wife is referred to as just that, 'Curly's wife'. The result is a two dimensional woman whose only real purpose is to act as a catalyst for Lenny's eventual demise - her role parallel that of a fluffy mouse and a cute puppy - with the added factor of female temptation. The question remains, why couldn't Steinbeck have portrayed a three dimensional character? Why couldn't Curly's wife be dignified with a name rather than just the fulfillment of a static role? Looking through the feminist lens, the reader might find the stereotypical portrayal of the woman as the temptress an unfair representation of women, and may see this as perpetuating stereotypes."

✓ **Strategies for Feminist Criticism**

➤ Consider the gender of the author, the characters: what role does gender play in this work?

➤ Explore how gender stereotypes might be reinforced or undermined.

➤ Determine if the way the work portrays women (and men) reinforces or distorts their place in society.

➤ Imagine yourself as a woman reading the work.