



Beginning theory

An introduction to literary and cultural theory

Second edition Peter Barry

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series.

Timpanaro, Sebastiano, *The Freudian Slip: Psychoanalysis and textual Criticism* (Verso Paperback, 1985).

I list this fascinating and readable book by a noted Italian Marxist partly because it is illustrative of the traditional antagonism between Marxism and psychoanalysis. Timpanaro 'deconstructs' many of the slips in Freud's *Psychopathology* on the grounds that they are explicable in terms of incidental verbal similarities. See, for instance, his discussion of the 'aliquis' example, pp. 19-28.

Wolheim, Richard, *Freud* (Fontana Press, 2nd edn, 1991).

Still the best introduction. But read some of Freud himself first.

Lacan

Lacan, Jacques, 'Desire and the interpretation of desire in *Hamlet*', reprinted in *Literature and Psychoanalysis - The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 11-52.

Lacan, Jacques, 'The insistence of the letter in the unconscious', reprinted in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (Longman, 1988), pp. 79-106.

Lacan, Jacques, Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter', reprinted in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 28-54, with extensive editorial commentary and annotations.

Lacan, Jacques, *Ecrits* (Routledge, 2001).

A very welcome publication in Routledge's excellent 'Classics' series which reprints key critical texts of the twentieth century.

Mitchell, Juliet and Rose, Jacqueline, eds, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne* (Macmillan, 1982). Key Lacanian texts translated and discussed.

Sarup, Madan, *Jacques Lacan* (Harvester, 1992).

A volume in the Modern Cultural Theorists series by an able explainer of difficult material. Begins with an account of Freudian ideas and ends with a discussion of Lacan and feminism.

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Feminist criticism

Feminism and feminist criticism

The 'women's movement' of the 1960s was not, of course, the start of feminism. Rather, it was a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the

problem of women's inequality in society, and (in some cases) proposed solutions. These books include Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), which discusses male writers like Milton, Pope, and Rousseau; Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour* (1911); Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which vividly portrays the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood; and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), which has an important section on the portrayal of women in the novels of D. H. Lawrence. Male contributions to this tradition of feminist writing include John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Woman* (1869) and *The Origin of the Family* (1884) by Friedrich Engels.

The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the 'women'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 women's movement has always been crucially concerned with books and literature, so that feminist criticism should not be seen as an off-shoot or a 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 in *The Feminist Reader*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore). Other important ideas are explained in the appropriate part of the remainder of this section.

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 effort 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 'andro-texts' (books by men) to

'gynotexts' (books by women). She coined the term 'gynocritics', meaning the study of gynotexts, 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'.

Showalter also detects in the history of women's writing a *feminine phase* (1840-80), in which women writers imitated dominant male artistic norms and aesthetic standards; then a *feminist phase* (1880-1920), in which radical and often separatist positions are maintained; and finally a *female phase* (1920 onwards) which looked particularly at female writing and female experience. The reasons for this liking for 'phasing' are complex: partly, it is the result of the view that feminist criticism required a terminology if it was to attain theoretical respectability. More importantly, there is a great need, in all intellectual disciplines, to establish a sense of progress, enabling early and cruder examples of (in this case) feminist criticism to be given their rightful credit and acknowledgement while at the same time making it clear that the approach they represent is no longer generally regarded as a model for practice.

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. The next three sections will look at each of these in turn.

Feminist criticism and the role of theory

A major division within feminist criticism has concerned disagreements about the amount and type of theory that should feature in it. What is usually called the 'Anglo-American' version of feminism has tended to be more sceptical about recent critical theory, and more cautious in using it, than have the 'French' feminists, who have adopted and adapted a great deal of (mainly) post-structuralist and psychoanalytic criticism as the basis of much of their work. The 'Anglo-Americans' (not all are English or American) maintain a major interest in traditional critical concepts like theme, motif, and characterisation. They seem to accept the conventions of literary realism, and treat literature as a series of representations of women's lives and experience which can be measured and evaluated against reality. They see the close reading and explication of individual literary texts as the major business of feminist criticism. Generally, this kind of feminist criticism has a good deal in common with the procedures and assumptions of the liberal humanist approach to literature, although feminists also place considerable emphasis on the use of historical data and non-literary material (such as diaries, memoirs, social and medical history) in understanding the literary text. The American critic Elaine Showalter is usually taken as the major representative of this approach, but other exemplars would be Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Patricia Stubbs, and Rachel Brownstein.

However, most of these are in fact American rather than 'Anglo', and this should make us question the usefulness of this widely accepted category. English feminist criticism is, after all, often distinctly different from American: it tends to be 'socialist feminist' in orientation, aligned with cultural materialism or Marxism, so that it is obviously unsatisfactory to try to assimilate it into a 'non-theoretical' category. The existence of this kind of feminism has been rather obscured by the fact that certain popular books summarising feminist criticism (like K. K. Ruthven's *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* and Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics*) do not discuss it as a distinct category. Examples of this kind of work are: Terry Lovell's *Consuming*

Fiction (1987), Julia Swindells's *Victorian Writing and Working Women* (1985), and *Sea Changes*:

Culture and Feminism (1986) by Cora Kaplan, an American who worked in Britain for many years. Kaplan was a member of the Marxist Feminist Literature Collective, an important group whose very existence indicates the strong political and theoretical interests of this kind of feminist criticism. A similarly important group was the Literature Teaching Politics Collective, which was also a series of conferences and an associated journal. An important figure associated with this group is Catherine Belsey, whose books, (such as *The Subject of Tragedy* (1985), and *John Milton: Language, Gender, Power* (1988)), are part of this same socialist feminist British tradition. While the definitive works in the so-called 'Anglo-American' tradition appeared in the late 1970s, the British 'socialist feminist' tradition produced its key works in the mid-1980s and remains active and influential.

In contrast to the Americans (if not, as we have just argued, to the British) the work of 'French' feminism is more overtly theoretical, taking as its starting-point the insights of major post-structuralists, especially Lacan, Foucault and Derrida. For these feminist critics, the literary text is never primarily a representation of reality, or a reproduction of a personal voice expressing the minutiae of personal experience. Indeed, the French theorists often deal with concerns other than literature: they write about language, representation, and psychology as such and often travel through detailed treatments of major philosophical issues of this kind before coming to the literary text itself. The major figures on this 'French' side of the divide are Julia Kristeva (actually Bulgarian, though regarded abroad - as she has ruefully said - as a kind of embodiment of French intellectualism), Helene Cixous (Algerian-born), and Luce Irigaray.

All three are best encountered initially in the various feminist readers now available. For instance, Kristeva's 1974 interview 'Woman can never be defined' is in *New French Feminisms* (Marks and De Courtivron), as are sections from 'Sorties' and 'The Laugh of the Medusa' by Cixous, and sections from Irigaray's *The Sex Which is not One*. Extracts from the same Cixous and Irigaray pieces are also in *Feminisms: A Reader* (Maggie Humm).

A sustained discussion of the differences between 'Anglo-American' and 'French' feminisms (though one which is much on the side of the latter) is Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics*. For a more recent account see the chapter 'Imaginary Gardens with Real Frogs in them: feminist euphoria and the Franco-American divide, 1976-1988' by Ann Rosalind Jones in *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Greene and Kahn). These French feminists are particularly concerned with language and psychology, which are considered in the two following sections.

Feminist criticism and language

Another fundamental issue, on which opinion is just as polarised, is the question of whether or not there exists a form of language which is inherently feminine. There is a long-standing tradition of debate on this issue within feminism. For instance, Virginia Woolf, (in sections four and five of her extended polemical essay *A Room Of One's Own*) suggests that language use is gendered, so that when a woman turns to novel writing she finds that there is 'no common sentence ready for her use'. The great male novelists have written 'a natural prose, swift but not slovenly, expressive but not precious, taking their own tint without ceasing to be common property'. She quotes an example and says 'That is a man's sentence'. She doesn't make its qualities explicit, but the example seems to be characterised by carefully balanced and patterned rhetorical sequences. But 'it was a sentence unsuited for a woman's use', and women writers trying to use it (Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot) fared badly. Jane Austen rejected it and instead 'devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use', but this is not described or exemplified. Presumably, though, the characteristics of a 'woman's sentence' are that the clauses are linked in looser sequences, rather than carefully balanced and patterned as in male prose.

Generally, then, the female writer is seen as suffering the handicap of having to use a medium (prose writing) which is essentially a male instrument fashioned for male purposes. This thesis that the language is 'masculine' in this sense is developed by Dale

Spender in the early 1980s in her book *Man Made Language* (1981) which also argues that language is not a neutral medium but one which contains many features which reflect its role as the instrument through which patriarchy finds expression. (This view that the language is man-made is challenged from within feminism by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the essay 'Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality', reprinted in *The Feminist Reader* ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (Macmillan, 1989). If normative language can be seen as in some way male-oriented, the question arises of whether there might be a form of language which is free from this bias, or even in some way oriented towards the female. French theorists, therefore, have posited the existence of an *écriture féminine*, (the term is that of the French theorist Helene Cixous, from her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa'), associated with the feminine, and facilitating the free play of meanings within the framework of loosened grammatical structures. The heightened prose of the Cixous essay both demonstrates and explains it:

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility which will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded ... it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric [male-dominated] system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philo-sophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (Marks & de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms* Harvester, 1981)

Here the user of *écriture féminine* seems to exist in a realm beyond logic ('this practice can never be theorized ... and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination'.) The user of such language is seen as a kind of perennial freedom-fighter in an anarchic realm of perpetual opposition ('peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate') sniping at the centres of power. For Cixous (though not for other theorists) this kind of writing is somehow uniquely the product of female physiology, which women must celebrate in their writing:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence' ... Such is the strength of women that, sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous thread (just a tiny little thread, they say) which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord.

(Marks & Courtivron, p. 256)

Écriture féminine, then, is by its nature transgressive, rule-transcending, intoxicated, but it is clear that the notion as put forward by Cixous raises many problems. The realm of the body, for instance, is seen as somehow immune ('impregnable') to social and gender conditioning ('rhetorics, regulations, codes') and able to issue forth a pure essence of the feminine. Such 'essentialism' is difficult to square with a feminism which emphasises femininity as a social construct, not a given entity which is somehow just mysteriously 'there'. And if femininity is socially constructed then it must follow that it differs from one culture to another, so that such overarching generalisations about it are impossible. Who, we might ask, are these women who 'must' write through their bodies? Who imposes this coercive 'must' upon them, and (above all) why?

Further expression of the notion of the *écriture féminine* is found in the writing of Julia Kristeva. Kristeva

uses the terms the *symbolic* and the *semiotic* to designate two different aspects of language. In her essay 'The System and the Speaking Subject' the symbolic aspect is associated with authority, order, fathers, repression and control ('the family, normalcy, normative classico-psychological-tending discourse, all of which are just so many characteristics of fascist ideology'). This symbolic facet of language maintains the fiction that the self is fixed and unified (what she describes as 'a language with a foreclosed subject or with a transcendental subject-ego'). By contrast, the semiotic aspect of discourse is characterised not by logic and order, but by 'displacement, slippage, condensation', which suggests, again, a much looser, more randomised way of making connections, one which

increases the available range of possibilities. She quotes Plato in the *Timaeus* invoking 'a state of language anterior to the Word ... Plato calls this the *chora*', and, again, it is linked with the maternal rather than the paternal. All this is presented at a fairly generalised level, but Kristeva sees the semiotic as the language of poetry as opposed to prose, and examines its operation in the work of specific poets. Though it is linked conceptually with the feminine, the poets who use it are not all female, and in fact Kristeva's major exemplars are male writers.

It should be stressed, though, that the symbolic and the semi-otic are not two different *kinds* of language, but two different *aspects* of language, both of which are always present in any given sample. The model, again, is that of the unconscious and the conscious, and the Lacanian re-use of these notions. The symbolic is the orderly surface realm of strict distinctions and laid-down structures through which language works: this aspect of language is the side stressed by the structuralists, the Saussurean 'network of differences'. But ever-present is the linguistic 'unconscious', a realm of floating signifiers, random connections, improvisations, approximations, accidents, and 'slippage' - everything, that is, entailed in the post-structuralist view of language. Indeed, one way of characterising the process of deconstruction (whereby contradictory cross-currents of meaning are discovered in texts) is to see it as the 'unconscious' of the text emerging into and disrupting the 'conscious' or 'surface' meaning. These disruptive incursions into rational, previously stable structures are seen, for instance, in dreams, in poetry, and in modernist, experimental writing which distorts the surface of language (for example, the poetry of e. e. cummings). This 'random' element can never be escaped by even the most meticulous and painfully deliberate composer of prose. Clearly, since language is by definition an inventive and improvisatory practice, if cut off from Kristeva's realm of the semiotic it would instantly perish.

For her notion of the basic opposition between the semiotic and the symbolic Kristeva is indebted to Jacques Lacan and his distinction between two realms, the *Imaginary* and the *Symbolic*. The Imaginary realm is that of the young child at the pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal stage. The self is not yet distinguished from

what is other than the self, and the body's sense of being separate from the rest of the world is not yet established. The child lives in an Eden-like realm, free of both desire and deprivation. The semiotic is seen as inherently subversive politically, and always threatens the closed symbolic order embodied in such conventions as governments, received cultural values, and the grammar of standard language.

For some feminists this visionary 'semiotic' female world and language evoked by Cixous and Kristeva is a vital theatre of possibilities, the value of which is to entertain the imagining of alternatives to the world which we now have, and which women in particular now have. For others, it fatally hands over the world of the rational to men and reserves for women a traditionally emotive, intuitive, trans-rational and 'privatised' arena. Not surprisingly, therefore, the language question is one of the most contentious areas of feminist criticism.

Feminist criticism and psychoanalysis

The story so far of feminism's relationship with psychoanalysis is simple in outline but complex in nuance. The story can be said to begin, like so much else, with Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* in 1969 which condemns Freud as a prime source of the patriarchal attitudes against which feminists must fight. The influence of this view within feminism is still very strong, but Freud was defended in a series of important books in subsequent years, notably Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* in 1974. This book defends Freud against Millett by, in effect, using Millett's own terms and concepts, especially the distinction, so crucial to feminism, between sex and gender, the former being a matter of biology, the latter a construct, something learned or acquired, rather than 'natural'. This distinction is what Simone de Beauvoir invokes in the famous first sentence in Part Two of *The Second Sex* (1949) when she writes 'One is not born a woman; rather, one *becomes* a woman'. The project of de Beauvoir's book is one which *Sexual Politics* sees itself as continuing. Mitchell's defence of Freud, then, is to argue that Freud doesn't present the feminine as something simply 'given and natural'. Female sexuality

(indeed, heterosexuality in general) isn't just there 'naturally' from the start, but is formed by early experiences and adjustments, and Freud shows the process of its being produced and constructed, particularly in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (in volume seven of the Penguin Freud, entitled *On Sexuality*). It follows that gender roles must be malleable and changeable, not inevitable and unchangeable givens.

Thus, the argument runs, the notion of penis envy need not be taken as simply concerning the male physical organ itself (whatever might have been Freud's intentions), but as concerning that organ as an emblem of social power and the advantages which go with it. (I am reminded of an advertisement - which was banned - showing a photograph of a nude woman with the caption 'What women need to succeed in a man's world'. The woman shown had male sexual organs crudely drawn in over her own.) In the reading discussed in the next section, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar use the idea of 'social castration', which amounts to the same thing, for this term signifies women's lack of social power, this lack being represented, by means of the word 'castration', as a male possession, though not as in any sense a male attribute.

Jane Gallop's 1982 book *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* continues the rehabilitation of psychoanalysis, but by switching from the Freudian to the Lacanian variety, partly on the grounds that what is often implicit in Freud is explicit in Lacan's system, namely that the phallus is not the physical biological object but a symbol of the power which goes with it. While men, of course, come out of Lacan's writings better advantaged than women, none the less Lacan shows men too as powerless, since the fullness of signification, which the phallus also represents in Lacan's work, is not attainable by either men or women. Also, Lacan's way of writing - notoriously abstruse, playful, punning, and 'paralogical' (meaning beyond or above logic) seems to embody the 'feminine' or 'semiotic' aspect of language, rather than the 'masculine' or 'symbolic' aspect.

Another significant name in the rehabilitation of Freud is the British critic Jacqueline Rose whose book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* is an example of an applied feminist-psychoanalytic approach. Rose's project is to combine the insights of feminism,

psychoanalysis and politics. She is joint editor, with Juliet Mitchell, of *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freu-dienne* (1982). The argument in favour of Lacan, and of Freud, is, again, that it shows sexual identity to be a 'cultural construct', gives a detailed series of 'insider' accounts of how the construction takes place, and shows examples of this conditioning being resisted.

The resulting position is (as Isobel Armstrong remarks in a article about Rose in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* 16 July 1993, p. 15) a very complicated one. In general the defence of Freud and Lacan has been more favourably received by French and British feminists than by Americans (another interesting transgression of the usual Anglo-American versus French dichotomy). Elaine Showalter, for instance, in her essay about Ophelia (reprinted in Newton's *Theory into Practice* - see under General Readers in the Further reading section) is dismissive of Lacan's evident disregard of Ophelia - he promises to discuss her in his seminar on *Hamlet*, but somehow never gets round to it. Likewise, Jerry Aline Flieger, an American contributor to *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Greene and Kahn), sounds a note of scepticism when she writes:

I was fascinated and troubled by Lacan's characterisation of the phallus as the Signifier of Signifiers, as well as by his infamous statements 'There is no sexual relation', and 'Woman does not exist'. Thus I was relieved and grateful when feminists such as Jacqueline Rose and Jane Gallop, in the late seventies and early eighties, performed ingenious and persuasive readings of Lacan as critic of phallogocry, rather than advocate.

(p. 267)

The effect of this comment is partly to draw attention to the ingenuity *needed* to mount such a defence.

Stephen Heath, in an essay in *Feminist Literary Criticism* (ed. Mary Eagleton) quotes Roland Barthes to the effect that 'The monument of psychoanalysis must be traversed - not bypassed' (p. 214). We might say that feminism began by trying to do the latter, then changed course and did the former. The tendency of American feminists to be unconvinced by the rehabilitation of

psychoanalysis can perhaps be explained by the fact that psychoanalysis has been more an accepted part of middle-class life in the USA than it ever became in Europe. Hence, it is more difficult for Americans to see it as still possessed of radical potential, least of all for women. Further, there was a new emphasis in the 1990s on the culturally-specific nature of psychoanalysis, and hence a reluctance to claim any kind of universal validity for it. In Rose's own work, as elsewhere, there is a strong and growing interest in listening to the voices of the hitherto excluded 'Other', particularly those of the cultures and races which had no place in the work of Freud or Lacan.

STOP and THINK

General: Within feminism there is a strong emphasis on the 'constructedness' of femininity, that is, on such matters as conditioning and socialisation, and the influence of images and representations of femininity in literature and culture. All these formulations are ways of avoiding 'essentialism', which is the contrary view that there is some natural, given essence of the feminine, that is universal and unchangeable.

Anti-essentialism has for some years now been a dominant concept in critical theory, but there is some awareness, too, that it is a notion which leaves us with certain difficulties. For instance, does anti-essentialism, by making it hard to make *any* generalisations about women, also make it difficult to politicise women as a group? Does it tend to reduce identity to the sum of circumstances, perhaps in spite of our 'instinctive' feelings that identity may be deeper than that? Is the fact that we have such feelings admissible as evidence - on either side? And in any case, what would constitute evidence on *either* side of this question?

Specific: In the example discussed below, what are some of the ways in which the critical assumptions and procedures differ from those made in non-feminist approaches to the same work? Compare it with the two essays mentioned at the start

of the example, or with the pieces in the Macmillan *Casebook on Wuthering Heights* (ed. Miriam Allott, 1970).

What feminist critics do

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.

Feminist criticism: an example

As an example of feminist criticism I will take the account of *Wuthering Heights* by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, from their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*. The piece is reprinted in

the widely-used *Debating Texts* (ed. Rick Rylance). Rylance reprints two other accounts of the same novel, one by Q. D. Leavis, which might be considered as liberal humanist, and one by Frank Kermode which might be seen as post-structuralist. Comparisons can also be made with Eagleton's Marxist account

of the same novel in his book *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontes*, to which Gilbert and Gubar refer.

Gilbert and Gubar's strategy with Bronte's novel is to see it as a female version of the male form known as the *Bildungsroman* (this German term means the 'formation' or 'education' novel) in which the hero's growth to manhood is traced, as a process of 'triumphant self-discovery', whereby an identity is discovered and a mission in life conceived and embarked upon - a classic example would be James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. For the heroine, however, things are different, and an equivalent novel (like *Wuthering Heights*) about the growth to womanhood records a process of 'anxious self-denial', this being the 'ultimate product of a female education'. Gilbert and Gubar say that 'What Catherine, or any girl, must learn is that she does not know her own name, and therefore cannot know either who she is or whom she is destined to be'. The process of denial involved they describe as 'social castration'. Effectively, Catherine has to leave behind all her instinctive preferences, signified by the Heights, and take on an alien attitude, signified by Thrushcross Grange. The point of the word 'castration' here is that in order to achieve acceptability and femininity Catherine has to lose the power which men take for granted, namely power over their own destiny. This is symbolised by the phallic guard-dog, 'purple tongue hanging half a foot out of its mouth' which bites Catherine's foot as she enters the Grange, a symbolic castration, they say. She then undergoes the initiation ritual of imprisonment at the Grange, similar to that undergone by traditional heroines like Persephone and Snow White.

The Grange is the home of 'concealment and doubleness'. Here she learns, as Bronte says, 'to adopt a double character without exactly intending to deceive anyone', that is, say Gilbert and Gubar, she must learn 'to repress her own impulses, must girdle her own energies with the iron stays of "reason"'. This 'educa-

tion in doubleness' involves 'an actual doubling or fragmentation of her personality', as Heathcliff, 'her rebellious alter-ego' is forcibly excluded from her life. In this spirit of self-denial she agrees to marry Edgar, even though she says of Heathcliff that he is 'more myself than I am'. In this process Heathcliff too is degraded and powerless, and so 'Catherine has learned, correctly, that if it is degrading to be a woman it is even more degrading to be *like* a woman'. Hence, Gilbert and Gubar argue, against the run of *Wuthering Heights* criticism, that Edgar does not represent an image of effeminacy in contrast to the manliness of Heathcliff; on the contrary, in his ruthless employment of his social and sexual power, he is an embodiment of the patriarchal principle. The marriage 'inexorably locks her into a social system which denies her autonomy', so that Heathcliff's return, the 'return of the repressed', as we might call it in Freudian terms, 'represents the return of her true self's desires without the rebirth of her former powers', hence the inevitable descent into self-rejection (Catherine fails to recognise her own face in the mirror), self-starvation, madness, and death, 'a complex of psycho-neurotic symptoms that is almost classically associated with female feelings of powerlessness and rage'. Thus, the events of the novel are 'strongly' read as emblems of the construction of gender identity.

Selected reading

Readers

Belsey, Catherine and Moore, Jane, eds, *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (2nd edn. Palgrave, 1997). Excellent introduction. Manageable size. Important essays on the crucial issues.

Eagleton, Mary, ed. *Feminist Literary Criticism* (Longman, 1991).

Interesting collection, with essays paired to represent opposing views on key issues. Very good editorial commentary.

Eagleton, Mary, ed. *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* (2nd edn, Blackwell, 1995). Includes material on black feminism and the impact of postmodernism on feminism. Short extracts from a wide range of critical material.

Humm, Maggie, ed. *Feminisms: A Reader* (Longman, 1992).

An excellent book, wide-ranging and accessible, on feminisms from Woolf to the present day, including black and lesbian feminisms. Sub-sectioned by category, with a separate introduction for each one.

Marks, Elaine and de Courtivron, Isabelle, eds, *New French Feminisms* (Harvester, 1981).

The pioneering book in introducing much of this material to English-speaking readers.

Moi, Toril, *French Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Blackwell, 1987).

General

Brownstein, Rachel, *Becoming a Heroine* (Penguin, 1982; rpt. Columbia University Press, 1994).

A readable and thoughtful account of what it takes to become a heroine in a 'classic' novel.

Gilbert, Sandra and Gubar, Susan, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (Yale University Press, 1988). Much of interest. See chapter seven, 'Women, literature and the Great War', and compare with the example of gay criticism in the next chapter.

Gilbert, Sandra and Gubar, Susan, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, 2nd edn, 2000). A famous book with chapters on Austen, Brontes, George Eliot, etc.

Greene, Gayle and Kahn, Coppelia, eds, *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (Routledge, 1985).

Greene, Gayle and Kahn, Coppelia, eds, *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Routledge, 1993). An interesting collection of essays in intellectual autobiography by leading figures in the field.

Jacobus, Mary, ed. *Women Writing and Writing about Women* (Croom Helm, 1979). Chapters on *Villette*, George Eliot, Woolf, Ibsen, etc.

Jacobus, Mary, *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (Methuen, 1986).

Chapters on *Villette*, *The Mill on the Floss*, Freud's case studies (see 'Dora and the Pregnant Madonna', etc.).

Mills, Sara, et al., *Feminist Readings: An Introduction to Feminist Literature* (Prentice Hall, 1996).

Discussions of major varieties of feminism and their application to a range of canonical literary texts.