

Feminist Criticism for Students: Interrogating Gender Issues

By Tim Gillespie

An Overview and Benefits

The main goal of feminist criticism is to promote equality by ensuring the fair representation and treatment of women in texts and classrooms.

Ever since humans invented writing, literature has reflected the historical fact that most people have lived in societies where the primary means of education, publication, and interpretation have been largely controlled by and often exclusively reserved for males. Thus, much of our literary record consists of texts written by males with male protagonists and concerns. Men have defined “literature” and established the lists of masterpieces. Female writers, constrained by social and economic limitations, including obstacles to education, have been largely unrecognized, discounted, or discarded from the *literary canon*—that commonly accepted collection of what are somehow considered to be the greatest works of literature. And female characters as represented by male authors have frequently been rendered along a narrow band of stereotypes—mostly as temptresses, virgins, or victims. Thus, a male point of view has dominated the history of literature.

Although there certainly have been exceptions to these generalizations—from the revered ancient Greek poet Sappho to Murasaki Shikibu, the Japanese noblewoman who wrote around the year 1000 AD the classic *Tale of Genji*—overall opportunities for women writers have been severely limited through most of history. Even when the expanding literacy of middle-class female readers opened the doors for early nineteenth-century English writers, such as Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and Charlotte and Emily Brontë, they all initially published their fictions anonymously or under male names, concerned about the sort of prejudice expressed by Nathaniel Hawthorne’s nasty comment that his books were being outsold by a “damned mob of scribbling women.” Thus, when the modern feminist era began in the 1960s with its questioning of many social practices, one area of feminist inquiry was literature. This examination included two particularly significant projects, one addressing women as writers and one addressing women as subjects of writing.

The first project included a rigorous reconsideration of the established literary canon. Arguing that any set of masterworks of literature must include a broad range of diverse voices to be truly representative, feminist scholars found and rescued many lost and neglected texts written by women in prior generations. Works from authors such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Zora Neale Hurston have been successfully resurrected and reconsidered. Looking at books taught in schools, feminist scholars also found women

writers largely excluded from school curricula and textbooks. Thus, young readers were limited. In the books they were reading in English class, girls weren't seeing many successful female writers as role models or female protagonists exhibiting a female point of view, and boys weren't learning from female writers and characters. Pointing out these effects, feminist thinkers supported teachers in rectifying the low visibility of women in school literature. Today, textbooks and school courses generally are more inclusive, and a wider range of reading material is available. Women's voices have become more regularly a part of the chorus, and the result has been a richer song.

As the first big project of feminist criticism was to consider whether women were represented in the literary canon or school curriculum at all, the second big project was to consider how they have been represented, especially in texts commonly used in classrooms. Many analyses found women and girls more often depicted as subservient, acquiescent, weak, or dependent. They are passive observers and fantasizers, mostly preoccupied with domestic and romantic concerns, seldom autonomous. Men and boys, however, are far more often depicted as active, competent, in leadership positions, assertive, adept in problem solving, strong, independent, powerful, adventuresome, and engaged in interesting and challenging tasks. Men in literature tend to act on the world, while women are recipients of others' actions; men focus on self-realization, while women focus on serving and caring for others. Men are the adventurous force, chasing white whales or going to war, while women are the civilizing force, staying home to keep things together.

Stereotyping of behavior can negatively affect the attitudes, self-concepts, and aspirations of young readers, both male and female. Therefore, a dominant activity of feminist criticism has been to encourage readers to be on the lookout for any sexist ideology, even if unconsciously, in both old and new texts, exposing and questioning the assumptions and myths about women revealed in literary works, unmasking any gender-based biases.

As more examples of writing by women have entered the curriculum, a wider range of representations of women has been available to students. The goal is that all young readers can find in their schoolbooks portrayals of women as rich, varied, unstereotyped, and colorful as the portrayals of men.

Limitations and Critiques of Feminist Criticism

A common slam on feminist criticism is that it's too narrow, considering only feminist themes in its interpretations. Another is that it's literary political correctness run amok, and that the only criterion for admittance to the canon of great works should be literary merit, regardless of the author's sex. Replacing tried-and-true classics with works by women simply for diversity's sake is substituting ideological standards for literary ones.

Some women writers themselves resist what they regard as a kind of ghettoization into the category of “woman writer,” resisting the idea that the reception of their work, positive or negative, should be affected by their biological sex. This is marginalization, they argue.

To Sum Up

In its concern with the way women are treated in literature, feminist literary criticism has broadened our reading and our culture. It has brought a female sensibility to the previously male-dominated literary establishment and canon, helping rediscover lost writers and works as well as raising interesting possibilities for new literary traditions. It has led to more opportunities for female writers and has had an impact on the school English curriculum. It has offered new possibilities for our classroom explorations of literature.

The ultimate goal of feminist criticism, as Lois Tyson has written, is “to increase our understanding of women’s experience, both in the past and present, and promote our appreciation of women’s value in the world” (1999, 100–101).