

Feminist criticism

What is feminism?

Feminism is a range of socio-political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes. Feminism incorporates the position that societies prioritize the male point of view, and that women are treated unjustly within those societies. Efforts to change that include fighting against gender stereotypes and establishing educational, professional, and interpersonal opportunities and outcomes for women that are equal to those for men.

Feminist Movements

Feminist movements have campaigned and continue to campaign for women's rights, including the right to: vote, hold public office, work, earn equal pay, own property, receive education, enter contracts, have equal rights within marriage, and maternity leave. Feminists have also worked to ensure access to contraception, legal abortions and social integration, and to protect women and girls from rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. Changes in female dress standards and acceptable physical activities for females have often been part of feminist movements.

Some scholars consider feminist campaigns to be a main force behind major historical societal changes for women's rights, particularly in the West, where they are near-universally credited with achieving women's suffrage, gender-neutral language, reproductive rights for women (including access to contraceptives and abortion), and the right to enter into contracts and own property. Although feminist advocacy is, and has been, mainly focused on women's rights, some feminists argue for the inclusion of men's liberation within its aims, because they believe that men are also harmed by traditional gender roles. Feminist theory, which emerged from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience; feminist theorists have developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues concerning gender.

Numerous feminist movements and ideologies have developed over the years and represent different viewpoints and aims. Traditionally, since the 19th century, first-wave liberal feminism that sought political and legal equality through reforms within a liberal democratic framework was contrasted with labor-based proletarian women's movements that over time developed into socialist and Marxist feminism based on class struggle theory. Since the 1960s, both of these traditions are also contrasted with radical feminism that arose from the radical wing of second-wave feminism and that calls for a radical reordering of society to eliminate male supremacy; together liberal, socialist and radical feminism are sometimes called the "Big Three" schools of feminist thought.

Since the late 20th century, many newer forms of feminisms have emerged. Some forms of feminism have been criticized for taking into account only white, middle class, college-educated,

heterosexual, or cisgender perspectives. These criticisms have led to the creation of ethnically specific or multicultural forms of feminism, such as black feminism and intersectional feminism.

Feminist literary criticism- An Introduction

Feminist literary criticism is literary criticism informed by feminist theory, or more broadly, by the politics of feminism. It uses the principles and ideology of feminism to critique the language of literature. This school of thought seeks to analyze and describe the ways in which literature portrays the narrative of male domination by exploring the economic, social, political, and psychological forces embedded within literature. This way of thinking and criticizing works can be said to have changed the way literary texts are viewed and studied, as well as changing and expanding the canon of what is commonly taught. It is used a lot in Greek myths.

Traditionally, feminist literary criticism has sought to examine old texts within literary canon through a new lens. Specific goals of feminist criticism include both the development and discovery of female tradition of writing, and rediscovering of old texts, while also interpreting symbolism of women's writing so that it will not be lost or ignored by the male point of view and resisting sexism inherent in the majority of mainstream literature. These goals, along with the intent to analyze women writers and their writings from a female perspective, and increase awareness of the sexual politics of language and style were developed by Lisa Tuttle in the 1980s, and have since been adopted by a majority of feminist critics.

Brief History

The history of feminist literary criticism is extensive, from classic works of nineteenth-century female authors such as George Eliot and Margaret Fuller to cutting-edge theoretical work in women's studies and gender studies by "third-wave" authors. Before the 1970s, in the first and second waves of feminism, feminist literary criticism was concerned with women's authorship and the representation of women's condition within the literature; in particular the depiction of fictional female characters. In addition, feminist literary criticism is concerned with the exclusion of women from the literary canon, with theorists such as Lois Tyson suggesting that this is because the views of women authors are often not considered to be universal.

Additionally, feminist criticism has been closely associated with the birth and growth of queer studies.

Modern Feminist Literary Theory

Modern feminist literary theory seeks to understand both the literary portrayals and representation of both women and people in the queer community, expanding the role of a variety of identities and analysis within feminist literary criticism.

Actual Definition

Feminist criticism is concerned with "the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women".

This school of theory looks at how aspects of our culture are inherently patriarchal (male ruled) and aims to expose misogyny in writing about women, which can take explicit and implicit forms. This misogyny, Tyson reminds us, can extend into diverse areas of our culture: "Perhaps the most chilling example is found in the world of modern medicine, where drugs prescribed for both sexes often have been tested on male subjects only".

Feminist criticism is also concerned with less obvious forms of marginalization such as the exclusion of women writers from the traditional literary canon as stated by Tyson that unless the critical or historical point of view is feminist, there is a tendency to underrepresent the contribution of women writers.

COMMON SPACE IN FEMINIST THEORIES

Though a number of different approaches exist in feminist criticism, there exist some areas of commonality. This list is excerpted from Tyson (92):

1. Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which women are oppressed.
2. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: she is marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values.
3. All of Western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, for example, in the Biblical portrayal of Eve as the origin of sin and death in the world.
4. While biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender (scales of masculine and feminine).
5. All feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal to change the world by prompting gender equality.
6. Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not.

Three Waves of Feminism

Feminist criticism has, in many ways, followed what some theorists call the three waves of feminism:

First Wave Feminism

In the late 1700s to early 1900's, writers like Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792) highlight the inequalities between the sexes. Activists like Susan B. Anthony and Victoria Woodhull contribute to the women's suffrage movement, which leads to National Universal Suffrage in 1920 with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Second Wave Feminism

In the early 1960s to late 1970s, building on more equal working conditions necessary in America during World War II, movements such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), formed in 1966, cohere feminist political activism. Writers like Simone de Beauvoir (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949) and Elaine Showalter established the groundwork for the dissemination of feminist theories dove-tailed with the American Civil Rights movement.

Third Wave Feminism

In the early 1990s to present, resisting the perceived essentialist (over generalized, over simplified) ideologies and a white, heterosexual, middle class focus of second wave feminism, third wave feminism borrows from post-structural and contemporary gender and race theories (see below) to expand on marginalized populations' experiences. Writers like Alice Walker work to "...reconcile it [feminism] with the concerns of the black community...[and] the survival and wholeness of her people, men and women both, and for the promotion of dialog and community as well as for the valorization of women and of all the varieties of work women perform" (Tyson 107).