

Glossary of Literary Theory

by Greig E. Henderson and Christopher Brown

Feminist criticism:

A criticism advocating equal rights for women in a political, economic, social, psychological, personal, and aesthetic sense. On the thematic level, the feminist reader should identify with female characters and their concerns. The object is to provide a critique of phallogocentric assumptions and an analysis of patriarchal visions or ideologies inscribed in a literature that is male-centered and male-dominated. Such a reader denounces the outrageously phallic visions of writers such as D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer, refusing to accept the cult of masculine virility and superiority that reduces woman to a sex object, a second sex, a submissive other. As Judith Fetterley puts it, "Feminist criticism is a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read. . . [The first act of a feminist critic is] to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us." On the thematic level, then, the reader rejects stereotypes and examines woman as a theme in literary works.

On the ideological level, the reader seeks to learn not to accept the hegemonic perspective of the male and refuses to be coopted by a gender-biased criticism. Gender is largely a cultural construct, as are the stereotypes that go along with it: that the male is active, dominating, and rational, whereas the female is passive, submissive, and emotional. Gynocritics strive to define a particularly feminine content and to extend the canon so that it might include works by lesbians, feminists, and women writers in general. According to Elaine Showalter, gynocriticism is concerned with "woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and, of course, studies of particular writers and works."

On the deconstructionist level, the aim is to dismantle and subvert the logocentric assumptions of male discourse -- its valorization of being, meaning, truth, reason, and logic, its metaphysics of presence. Logocentrism is phallogocentric (hence the neologism "phallogocentrism"); it systematically privileges paternal over maternal power, the intelligible over the sensible. Patriarchal authority demands unity of meaning and is obsessed with certainty of origin. The French feminists in particular construe "woman" as any radical force that subverts the concepts, assumptions, and structures of traditional male discourse -- the realism, rationality, mastery, and explanation that undergird it. By contrast, the American and British feminists mainly engage in empirical and thematic studies of writings by and about women.