

Week 11

Feminist Theory



Key Questions

- What are the key concepts of feminist theory?
- How do these concepts apply to literature?
- How does feminist theory see literature?
- What do feminist literary critics do?
- How does feminist theory differ from other theories?
- Why is feminism important?

Key Texts

- Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1969)
- Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure & Narrative Cinema" (1975)
- Audre Lorde, "Women Redefining Difference" (1980)

Defining Feminist Theory

- ❖ Early key texts: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)
- ❖ Term 'feminist' first used in 1851, and multiple definitions of 'feminism' have existed ever since, reflecting different understandings of what the term means:
 1. "Feminism: a doctrine or movement that advocates equal rights for women."
'feminism, n.', *Collins English Dictionary*
 2. "A phase of protest against [the] standards and values [of the dominant tradition], and advocacy of minority right and values."
Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1978), p.13
 3. "The Feminist reader is enlisted in the process of changing the gender relations which prevail in our society, and she regards the practice of reading as one of the sites in the struggle for change."
Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, *The Feminist Reader*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p.1
- ❖ Common ground for these definitions: women do not possess equal rights (legally, socially, or else) to men, and feminism recognises, challenges and aims to change the gendered (i.e. male-created and male-centred) dominant traditions that enforce this inequality

History of Feminism & Feminist Theory

- ❖ Until later decades of the nineteenth century, women became literally "self-less" upon marriage:
 4. "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything."
William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-9)
- ❖ Matrimonial Causes Act (1878): wives can separate from abusive husbands
- ❖ Married Women's Property Act (1893): wives gain full rights to ownership of property acquired by them before and during marriage
- ❖ Women's Suffrage (1866 – 1928): campaign for women's right to vote
 - 1918: vote granted to female householders aged 30+
 - 1928: vote granted to all women aged 21+

- ❖ Sex Discrimination Act (1975): prevented employers from paying men and women different salaries for doing the same job; but pay gap remains central issue to feminists to this day (in 2009, employed women in Britain earned on average 22.6% less than employed men)
- ❖ Legislative change on its own is not the solution: must be matched by shift in social attitudes (such as those reflected in popular culture and, importantly, literature)
- ❖ Feminism – as a social and political movement – frequently classified in ‘waves’
 - First Wave (ca.1900–1928): concerned with legislative and social reform, incl. women’s suffrage campaign and women’s access to education
 - Second wave (ca.1960s–1980s): characterised by politics of sisterhood and collectivity; women’s rights over their sexual and reproductive bodies (contraception and abortion); equal opportunities; emergence of women’s publishing houses; Women’s Studies degree courses; inclusion of more women writers in university syllabuses
 - Third wave (1990s–present): emphasis on women as individuals rather unified group, especially due to complex combinations of gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, etc.; engagement with paradoxes of contemporary women’s lives, incl. simultaneous participation in and critique of Western consumer and beauty cultures which objectify and exploit women; continues focus on violence against women and equal opportunities (cf. anti-rape campaigns and “victim blaming”, for example, as well as lack of women in high-powered jobs)
- ❖ Important: notion of feminist waves is a popular one, but also a very problematic one (implies that, like waves, feminism comes and goes rather than being a stable presence in society; also divides feminists into ‘camps’, potentially making them enemies rather than allies)

Feminism and Sexual Politics

- ❖ Demand for change underpinned by acknowledgment that women’s inequality is not natural but constructed, serving patriarchal (male-dominated and male-centred) societies and cultures
- ❖ Equally, identity not something singular and stable, but something that has multiple aspects – gender, sexual orientation, age, class, race, ethnicity – and is constantly under reconstruction, shaped by both environment and genetic imprinting (i.e. mix of nature and nurture)
- ❖ Note Queen Victoria’s view on social gender differences as biological and natural, and, over three quarters of a century earlier, Mary Wollstonecraft’s observation that women’s identities are fundamentally shaped by their (inadequate) education:

5. “The Queen is most anxious to enlist every one who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of “Women’s Rights” [...] It is a subject which makes the Queen so furious that she cannot contain herself. God created men and women different – then let them remain each in their own position.”
Queen Victoria (March 1870)

- ❖ Toril Moi: feminist is a political position; female is matter of biology; feminine is set of characteristics defined by culture (cf. gender theory)
- ❖ Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) as founding text of second-wave feminism.
- ❖ Examines the family, the labour market, childhood, sexuality, and literature, meaning de Beauvoir combines in her analysis feminist, psychoanalytic and Marxist perspectives on the condition of women in society.
- ❖ Central question: What is a woman? Surprisingly difficult question to answer:

6. “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman; it is civilisation as a whole that produces the creature.”
Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972)
- ❖ Gender is a product of nurture, not nature; culture not biology (cf. next week’s lecture on Gender Theory).
- ❖ Society is invested in a notion of two opposite, stable genders easily defined.
- ❖ Opposites seemingly equal, but patriarchal society defines woman as inferior
- ❖ Binary opposites. Man = subject/ self; woman = object/ other
- ❖ Binary notion of gender apparent in psychoanalysis
- ❖ Oedipal complex predicated on idea that intimacy with the female body must be relinquished in order to enter into the masculine realm of social law and order:
 - ◆ Mother = body (realm before language and rationalism)
 - ◆ Father = culture, law, order, rationalism, individualism
 - ◆ Boy = subject. Possessor of the penis (symbol of masculine authority)
 - ◆ Girl = defined by lack (penis envy)
- ❖ For Freud: Woman = not a man, i.e. defined by lack
- ❖ Culture defines woman in relation to man (binary system)
- ❖ Woman as broad cultural phenomenon: de Beauvoir identifies it in philosophy, psychology, politics, religion, society, but finds it particularly in literature

- ❖ But during 1960s, 70s and 80s, feminism also plays out own culture wars; questions of representation: who does feminism speak for? Is there a universal meaning of the term woman?
- ❖ Many black, lesbian and Marxist feminists, and those operating within a postcolonial context, felt issues of race, class, nationality and sexual orientation were marginalised in favour of normative model of white, middle-class, heterosexual mother
- ❖ Audre Lorde, African-American poet, describes how feminist movement can conceal variety of economic, social and racial differences:

7. “There is a pretence to homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist.”

Audre Lorde, ‘Women Redefining Difference’ (1980)

- ❖ Highlights difficulties of a politics based on identity, and of the need to build consensus while opening up to others, including men, women of colour, and transgender people, who share similar goals
- ❖ Task for feminist movement(s) is to respect differences while acknowledging the discrimination, marginalization and the violence that in differing ways has affected almost all women throughout history

Feminism and Literature: Feminist Literary Theory

- ❖ In realm of literature, feminist theories focuses on acts of reading and writing
- ❖ Critical reading of existing (male- and female-authored) works to highlight gendered politics and power relations of texts
- ❖ Focus on women writers: recovery of women’s literature as well as exploration of gendered authorship, i.e. tracing tradition of women’s writing and examining politics surrounding female authorship
- ❖ For feminist literary critics (as for Marxists), literature is product of socio-political and historical context, but so are all readings
- ❖ ‘Images of Women’ criticism: Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1969) reassesses negative depictions of female characters in works of canonical male authors, arguing that literary quality must not and cannot be considered outside issues of political responsibility
- ❖ Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* highly influential for feminist theorists: links literature to everyday life; highlights link between women’s creativity and social and economic structures that made it difficult for women to emerge as artists; lack of foremothers

- ❖ Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* establishes female tradition of writing that stretches from 1800 to the mid-1970s, replacing the 'big five' (Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf) with survey of writing and significance of 204 women writers of the period
- ❖ Showalter identifies three distinct phases of the 'female literary tradition':
 - ◆ Feminine phase (1840-1880): women writers imitate male literary culture and aesthetic criteria; many women publish under male pseudonyms (Mary Ann Evans as George Eliot; Brontës as Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell)
 - ◆ Feminist phase (1880-1920): highly politicised period in which women writers dramatise women's oppression under patriarchy and write literature which openly criticises this oppression
 - ◆ Female phase (1920-): women turn away from imitation and protest to concentrate on representing female experience (cf. Virginia Woolf)
- ❖ Rewriting a literary canon authorised by generations of male writers and critics is central to work of feminist literary critics and theorists, including challenge of aesthetic and conceptual criteria by which women writers and artists were judged
- ❖ Rewriting literary canon questions the silencing of women's voices and experiences in patriarchal culture:
 8. "The first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us."
Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* (1978)
- ❖ For women writers, this means learning to write against and outside of the categories that society has assigned to them:
 9. "[A] woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her. Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must 'kill' the 'angel in the house'. In other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been 'killed' into art."
Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1988)
- ❖ Re-reading of literary history as re-reading of social and political history:
 10. "[Any model of history] that places personal life in a separate sphere and that grants literature a secondary and passive role in political history is unconsciously sexist. [...] We must read fiction not as literature but as the history of gender differences."
Nancy Armstrong, 'Some Call it Fiction' (1990)

- ❖ Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969): relationship between men and women is a deeply-embedded power structure with political implications (i.e. sexual politics)
- ❖ Patriarchal society works to give men supremacy through a variety of hidden means (social and politics systems work to maintain inequality)
- ❖ Literature as tool of patriarchal ideology, recreating sexual inequalities and cementing the patriarchal values of society (cf. also devaluing of female-authored literature)
- ❖ Phallogocentric criticism: focused on exposing patterns of male dominance and concealed repressive attitudes to women in men's writing
- ❖ Millet: male cultural dominance is dependent on the control of female sexuality (legitimacy of the family = power and wealth through inheritance)
- ❖ Literature can do this by instilling moral codes: literature constructs women as virgins or whores to reinforce the values of patriarchal society: good women rewarded (marriage), bad are punished (death, confinement, etc.)
- ❖ Analysing canonical works to expose their latent gender values became important part of feminist criticism
- ❖ Return to idea that there can be hidden and unconscious meanings going on beneath the surface of the text (cf. psychoanalysis)
- ❖ Other important concept of feminist literary criticism is 'the gaze': analysis of whose perspective we are presented with and the power held by those who look, compared to those who are looked upon (who become passive objects):

II. "When a woman 'sees' clearly, her transformation from spectacle (object) into spectator (subject) is highlighted."

Priscilla Walton, "What then on earth was I?: Feminine Subjectivity and *The Turn of the Screw*", *The Turn of the Screw*, ed. by Peter G. Beidler

- ❖ Gaze = sign of power; men = active spectators; women = passive objects, to be consumed by men; female gaze = can threaten male power and subjectivity

The Turn of the Screw

- ❖ Aspects to consider when performing a feminist analysis of James's text:
 - ✦ Binary opposites + dichotomies: into what roles do story's women fall?
 - ✦ The gaze: who tell's the Governess's story? Where can we find instances of the gaze (male or female)? What power relationships do these instances imply?

- ◆ Position of the author: which female figures are punished? Does it reveal James as a misogynist?
 - ◆ Socio-cultural contexts: what does the text tell us about society at the time? Does its portrayal of women reinforce or challenge dominant stereotypes such as the angel/ demon roles?
 - ◆ Role of the reader: Does it interpellate (or “hail”) us into a gendered perspective? On whose side are we?
- ❖ Freud’s theories on hysteria:
- 12.** “Hysterics are peculiarly constituted creatures ... in whom a shrinking from sexuality, which normally plays some part at puberty, is raised to a pathological pitch and permanently retained. The natural sexual passivity of women explains their being more inclined to hysteria.”
Sigmund Freud, “The Aetiology of Hysteria”

Summary: What Do Feminist Literary Critics Do?

- ❖ Rewriting the canon by re-evaluating lost or ignored texts by women
- ❖ Examine conditions which lead to fewer women in the canon (cf. Woolf)
- ❖ Examine textual representations of men and women.
- ❖ Expose the presence of social gender divisions in the text
- ❖ Highlight ways in which texts replicates or challenge gender inequalities of society
- ❖ Challenge problematic and/or stereotypical representations of women (cf. Freud)
- ❖ Highlight the function of the text as a political tool (cf. Marx)
- ❖ Reappraise supposedly ‘neutral’ critical evaluations and notions of literary ‘value’

