

Lecture Series on Contemporary Theories Feminist Criticism: Lecture 2

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Feminist Criticism

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” (Tyson 83).

This school of theory looks at how aspects of our culture are inherently patriarchal (male dominated) and aims to expose misogyny in writing about women, which can take explicit and implicit forms.

Feminist Criticism

This misogyny, Lois 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” (85).

Feminist criticism is also concerned with less obvious forms of marginalization such as the exclusion of women writers from the traditional literary canon: “...unless the critical or historical point of view is feminist, there is a tendency to underrepresent the contribution of women writers” (Tyson 84).

Feminist Criticism

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

Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which women are oppressed.

In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: she is marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values.

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.

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While biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender (scales of masculine and feminine).

All feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal to change the world by prompting gender equality.

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.

Feminist Criticism

Typical questions:

- How is the relationship between men and women portrayed?
- What are the power relationships between men and women (or characters assuming male/female roles)?
- How are male and female roles defined?
- What constitutes masculinity and femininity?
- How do characters embody these traits?

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Typical questions:

- Do characters take on traits from opposite genders? How so? How does this change others' reactions to them?
- What does the work reveal about the operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy?
- What does the work imply about the possibilities of sisterhood as a mode of resisting patriarchy?
- What does the work say about women's creativity?

Feminist Criticism

Typical questions:

- What does the history of the work's reception by the public and by the critics tell us about the operation of patriarchy?
- What role does the work play in terms of women's literary history and literary tradition? (Tyson)

(Some of the content has been taken from open sources on Internet)