Throughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity. . . . Nor will you have escaped worrying over this problem—those of you who are men; to those of you who are women this will not apply—you are yourselves the problem.

Sigmund Freud, Lecture 33, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis and Other Works

If a woman has her Ph.D. in physics, has mastered quantum theory, plays flawless Chopin, was once a cheerleader, and is now married to a man who plays baseball, she will forever be "former cheerleader married to star athlete."

Maryanne Ellison Simmons, wife of Milwaukee Brewers' catcher Ted Simmons

When a school of literary criticism is still evolving, trying to make a definitive explanation of it can be a perilous undertaking. Feminist criticism, for example, is difficult to define because it has not yet been codified into a single critical perspective. Instead, its several shapes and directions vary from one country to another, even from one critic to another. The premise that unites those who call themselves feminist critics is the assumption that Western culture is fundamentally patriarchal, creating an imbalance of power that marginalizes women and their work. That social structure, they agree, is reflected in religion, philosophy, economics, education—all aspects of the culture, including literature. The feminist critic works to expose such ideology and, in the end, to change it so that the creativity of women can be fully realized and appreciated.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although the feminist movement stretches back into the nineteenth century, the modern attempt to look at literature through a feminist lens began to develop in the early
1960s. It was a long time coming. For centuries Western culture had operated on the assumption that women were inferior creatures. Leading thinkers from Aristotle to Darwin reiterated that women were lesser beings, and one does not have to look hard to find comments from writers, theologians, and other public figures that disparage and degrade women. The Greek ecclesiast Chrysostom (345–407 A.D.) called women "a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil," and Ecclesiasticus (a book of the Apocrypha) states, "All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman." The Roman theologian Tertullian (c. 160–230 A.D.) lectured women: "The judgment of God upon your sex endures even today; and with it inevitably endures your position of criminal at the bar of justice. You are the gateway to the devil." Even the Book of Genesis blames Eve for the loss of paradise. Revered writers of later ages have been equally ungenerous in their descriptions of the nature of women. Alexander Pope (1688–1744) asserted, "Most women have no character at all," and John Keats (1795–1821) explained, "The opinion I have of the generality of women—who appear to me as children to whom I would rather give a sugar plum than my time, forms a barrier against maternity which I rejoice in."

It is not surprising, given widespread acknowledgment of the inferiority of the female, that women too accepted their lesser status. Even the French writer Madame de Staël is said to have commented, "I am glad that I am not a man, as I should be obliged to marry a woman." When women did recognize their talents, they sometimes worked to conceal them. Jane Austen, for example, advised, "A woman, especially, if she has the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can." Or as Mae West put it, "Brains are an asset, if you hide them." Women are the staple of jokes, too. James Thurber, an often quoted misogynist, once commented, for example, "Woman's place is in the wrong."

In the late eighteenth century, however, Mary Wollstonecraft took issue with the assumptions that have allowed people to make jokes and caused women to hide their creativity. In 1792 she published A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, in which she depicted women as an oppressed class regardless of social hierarchy. Having experienced as a child the imbalance of power between her own mother and father, and having observed as an adult the indignities suffered by women of all classes, she recognized that they are born into powerless roles. As a result, they are forced to use manipulative methods to get what they want. She argued for women to be "duly prepared by education to be the companions of men" and called for the members of her sex to take charge of their lives by recognizing that their abilities were equal to those of men, to define their identities for themselves, and to carve out their own roles in society. She wrote,

I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists—I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt. ... I wish to shew that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex.

Her stand was not welcomed by all. Horace Walpole, for example, called her a "hyena in petticoats," but the words were out, and they were impossible to ignore ever again.

In 1929 another eloquent analysis of the position of women was published by Virginia Woolf, best known as a writer of lyrical and somewhat experimental novels. Called A Room of One's Own, it questioned why women appear so seldom in history. Woolf pointed out that poems and stories are full of their depictions, but in real life they hardly seem to have existed. They are absent. In the chapter entitled "Shakespeare's Sister," she pondered what would have happened to a gifted female writer in the Renaissance. Without an adequate education or a room of her own, "whatever she had written," Woolf concluded, "would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination." Woolf went on to argue that "if we [women] have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky too, ... when she [Shakespeare's sister] is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry."

Individuals like Wollstonecraft and Woolf stand out as eloquent spokespersons for women. Along with them are many others whose names are less well known but whose efforts have been important to the development of women's history, both social and literary. Some of that history has been traced by Elaine Showalter, who divided it into three phases, which she called the feminine phase (1840–1880), the feminist phase (1880–1920), and the female phase (1920–present). In the first, female writers imitated the literary tradition established by men, taking additional care to avoid offensive language or subject matter. Novelists such as Charlotte Brontë and Mary Ann Evans wrote in the forms and styles of recognized writers, all of whom were male. Sometimes female writers even used men's names (Currer Bell and George Eliot, for example) to hide their female authorship. In the second phase, according to Showalter, women protested their lack of rights and worked to secure them. In the political realm, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others pushed to secure equality under the law, and some of the more radical feminists envisioned separate female utopias. In the literary world they decried the unjust depictions of women by male writers. The third phase, at its beginnings, concentrated on exploring the female experience in art and literature. For female writers this meant turning to their own lives for subjects. It also meant that the delicacy of expression that had typified women's writing began to crumble as a new frankness regarding sexuality emerged. For feminist critics it meant looking at the depiction of women in male texts in an effort to reveal the misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) lurking there. More recently they have turned their attention to an examination of works by female writers. These latest efforts Showalter refers to as gynocriticism, a movement that examines the distinctive characteristics of the female experience, in contrast to earlier methods that explained the female by using male models.

During the third period, a host of important spokespersons have raised public awareness of issues surrounding women's rights. Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex (1949) argued that French culture, and Western societies in general, are patriarchal. In them it is the males who define what it means to be human. Lacking her own
literature-critics and writers—try to expand the canon to include female writers and to correct inaccurate depictions of them in the works of male writers. Interest in such topics has led to increased notice of works written by females who have been ignored or forgotten but whose texts deserve examination. The Awakening, by Kate Chopin, is a case in point. It was rediscovered in the 1960s, becoming a popular and critical success more than sixty years after its initial publication. The growing strength of the women's movement has also led to the establishment of women's studies programs, further fueling the interest in gender studies, which question the qualities of femininity and masculinity, and in feminist literary criticism. Such programs ask questions about the nature of the female imagination and female literary history. What, after all, is a female aesthetic? Do women use language in ways that are different from those of men? Do women have a different pattern of reasoning? Do they see the world in a different way?

Several significant studies have tried to answer such questions. They do not all agree, but in general they have challenged assumptions about how males and females use language, view reality, solve problems, and make judgments. They suggest that women and men have different conceptions of self and different modes of interaction with others. Some of the findings call for a recognition of the differences, because ignoring them inevitably leads to a suppression of women's ways of understanding and acting.

Nancy Chodorow, for example, argues in The Reproduction of Mothering that girls and boys develop a different concept of self because of different relationships with the mother, the primary parent in the home. Girls maintain an ongoing gender role identification with the mother from the beginning, but boys, in addition to dealing with an oedipal attachment, give up their primary identification with her. The result is that men tend to deny relationships, whereas women remain relational.

In another study, Carol Gilligan focuses on differences in the ways in which males and females talk about moral problems. Men, she points out, are more likely to see morality as a matter of rights and rules to be dealt with by formal reasoning. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to deal with moral issues contextually. That is, instead of applying "blind justice" provided by abstract laws and universal principles, they recognize that moral choice must be determined from the particular experiences of the participants. Conflicting responsibilities are to be resolved in a narrative, consensual manner. Gilligan's In a Different Voice uses the metaphors of a web, with its suggestion of connections (and entrapment as well), and a ladder, with its implications of upward movement, achievement, and hierarchies. By doing so, she counters the argument of Lawrence Kohlberg (based on a study using only male subjects) that moral development is derived from an understanding of human rights. More recently she has worked with Nora Lyons to examine the implications of self-definition, finding that many more women than men define themselves in terms of their relationships and connections to others.

Another feminist writer, Robin Lakoff, argues that women's language is inferior to that of men. She points out its patterns of weakness, uncertainty, and triviality. She goes on to assert that women should adopt the stronger male utterance if they wish to achieve equality.
A fourth study of significance comes from Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule. Entitled *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, it is concerned with the intellectual development of women. Recognizing that male experience has served as the model in defining the processes of intellectual maturation, they argue that the ways of knowing that women value “have been neglected and denigrated by the dominant intellectual ethos of our time.” That is, “thinking” has traditionally been defined as the mental processes attributed primarily to men, processes such as abstract reasoning, the scientific method, and impersonal judgments. Belenky et al. argue that this kind of thinking does not come naturally to many women who instead are more comfortable with personal and interpersonal ways of knowing. They are more likely to value “connection over separation, understanding and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate.” Based on interviews with 135 women from a variety of backgrounds and ages, the study found that women develop intellectually as they find their voice, as they move from silence (in which they take their identification from external authorities) to subjective knowledge (when they turn away from others but still lack a public voice) and then to constructed knowledge (when they integrate their own intuitive knowledge with what they have learned from others).

Despite (or perhaps because of) such studies, today members of the feminist movement and the critics, male and female, who make its principles and methods the basis of their critical approach to literature are not yet in complete agreement about what those principles and methods are. In fact, there are currently many different forms of feminism and many different kinds of feminist critics, partly because of their tendency to borrow from other social and literary movements, a practice that has both enriched and complicated their work. As a result, they now find themselves the inheritors of several decades of evolution that have led to significant differences, and even some disagreements, among them.

Minority feminists—women of color and lesbians, for example—do not always align themselves with what they see as a primarily white, middle-class movement that has historically marginalized them. Their exclusion is ironic, given that their victimization has been greater than that of their white counterparts. Not only has history taken less notice of them than it has of white women, but literature too has generally overlooked them, at least until recently. Compounding their grievances is the fact that they have more than a single battle to fight. The African-American feminist critic, for example, finds herself pressured by two forces of oppression: racism and sexism. They are bound together in her experience, but she does not find that circumstance becomes even more complex, because the roles and power of women in different countries vary widely. A feminist living and working in Los Angeles is likely to have a very different life from that of a mother of five in Iraq, so how can there be “sisterhood”?

The political edge found among minority feminist critics, the Marxist feminists, and others has not been welcomed by everyone. Some complain that radical positions regarding social policy ultimately cause a reader to ignore the literary text. They object that a radical position diverts the critic from the main task at hand—to pay attention to the aesthetics of literature, not to impose a political stance on it. Such comments are formalist in nature, for they urge the reader to see the work as an autonomous entity with its own rules of being. It is an approach that lies at a great distance from the methods of those who would use literature as a tool of social protest and reform.

The definition of feminist criticism was also destabilized by the introduction of deconstruction, which since the middle 1970s has been a disruptive and transformative way of thinking about what it means to be male or female (see chapter 8). When the definition plays with the reversal of those categories, it also overturns all the other binary oppositions that are related to them: rational/emotional, active/passive, objective/subjective. The result is that it complicates what we mean when we refer to sexual identity. What do we mean when we describe someone as masculine or feminine?

Practitioners of queer theory (lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and indeed anyone who by self-definition is not “straight”) make interesting use of deconstruction’s blurring and reversals of categories. Interested in questions regarding sexual identity, they view individuals not simply as male or female but as a collection of many possible sexualities that may include heterosexual, homosexuality, or bisexuality. In other words, sexuality is neither stable nor static. It is dynamic and changing, affected by the experience of race and class and subject to shifting desire. It is a force of its own that is not just biologically conferred. Thus, heterosexuality cannot be viewed as the norm against which other sexual identities are measured.

Applied to literary criticism, queer theory raises questions about how a text represents sexual categories. Does it depict human sexuality as more complex than the essentialist terms *male* and *female* suggest? Does it show how sexual identities are indeterminate, overlapping, changing? Does it complicate what it means to be homosexual or heterosexual? Such approaches can be found in the work of gay and lesbian critics, who, although they do not necessarily share the same goals or methods, come together under the more inclusive term of *queer criticism*.

**READING AS A FEMINIST**

To understand the discussion that follows, you should read the letters of Abigail Adams written on March 31 and April 5, 1776, and the one from her husband, John, written on April 14, 1776, which begin on page 249.
Although feminist criticism has many strands, most critics hold some general approaches in common. More specifically, they look at literary history to rediscover forgotten texts by women, to reevaluate other texts, and to examine the cultural contexts in which works were produced. They analyze the male/female power structure that makes women the other (the inferior), and they reject it. They work to abolish limiting stereotypes of women. They seek to expose patriarchal premises and the prejudices they create. In short, by changing the literature that people read and the ways that they read it, feminist critics hope to change the world so that everyone is valued as a creative, rational being. That makes them, as a group, highly ideological, even visionary.

Despite the sprawling nature of feminist studies, it is possible to group some of the different perspectives into several overlapping approaches. Three major groups of feminist critics are those who study difference, those who study power relationships, and those who study the female experience.

STUDIES OF DIFFERENCE

Feminist critics who are interested in determining the differences in male and female writing work from the assumption that gender determines everything, including value systems and language. Not all feminist critics agree, for they recognize that historically the concept of female difference has resulted in an assumption of female inferiority, leading them to argue that difference should no longer be an issue. Nevertheless, studies like those of Belenky and Gilligan have led critics to look for distinctive elements in texts by men and women. They compare and contrast what men and women write and how they write it. They examine not only their subjects but also their voice, syntax, and diction. And although such matters remain largely unresolved, the concern with male and female writing characteristics has resulted in increased attention to gay and lesbian texts and eventually has been influential in the establishment of gay studies programs.

One way this approach has influenced current criticism is evident in an expanded concept of which genres are to be accepted as literature. If works by female writers are to be deemed worthy of study, then the forms they have traditionally turned to, such as journals and letters, have to be included in the canon. The correspondence between Abigail Adams and her husband, John, who was away from home because of the American Revolution, is an example of the sorts of texts that interest feminist critics. For one thing, the letters allow the voice of Abigail, a woman who had much to say, to be heard. She was not likely to write a political treatise or poems exhorting the troops to battle, but she did write to her husband, and through those letters her concerns are still articulated. They are also typical of the kind of writing women have always done. Do they constitute literature? A feminist critic would argue that they do.

The Adams correspondence is interesting because of the contrast of content as well as the style of the two writers. Abigail begins both of her letters included here with a plea for more communication from John. She complains that he writes infrequently and that his letters are too brief. In answer, he does not apologize but explains that the "critical state of things" necessitates the brevity of his writing. He is involved in matters of importance that make it impossible for him to write at greater length. Of course, he also alludes, without excuse or apparent irony, to a "multiplicity of avocations" that presumably take up his time. Abigail also opens by inquiring about John's work—asking about the state of the revolution and even devoting a short paragraph to patriotic statement that is sure to please him—before she turns to news of their home, the town, and finally her own state of mind. She ends with an overt feminist statement, calling men tyrants and asking her husband to recognize the rights of women to have voice and representation in the new government. John, on the other hand, after explaining that he has been too busy to write much, turns quickly to recounting the progress of the revolt and its effect on the colonies. It is an impersonal account, with no reference to his direct involvement with it. When he does address more personal issues, in answer to her description of the state of their Boston home, he assumes a patriarchal tone and discourses on issues of morality. Finally, in a response to her requests for his attention to the rights of women, he turns lighthearted, referring to her gaieté de coeur and describing her as "saucy." He treats her comments playfully, declaring that because men are already masters in name only, they cannot even think to repeal the system in which they seem to hold control lest they become completely subjected to "the despotism of the petticoat." He gives her appeals no serious thought.

The style of the two letters also has contrasts. Abigail's is full of personal references, the use of the pronoun I, whereas John's makes little reference to himself. John speaks primarily in the third person, narrating at much greater distance than does his wife. Abigail also describes her sentiments, explicitly stating her feelings. She says, for instance, "I wish you would ever write me a letter half as long as I write you," "I am fearful of the small-pox," and "I feel very differently at the approach of spring from what I did a month ago." John, in contrast, makes little reference to his own feelings. He says that he pities the children of the Solicitor General, but instead of indulging the sentiment, he uses it to make stern comments about morality. Later he speaks of being charmed by Abigail's gaiety, the sign of innocent femininity, and at the end expresses amusement, even laughter, at her silliness that asks for equality. The final mood is implicit in the ironic treatment he gives her concerns. The two not only choose to discuss different topics but also approach them from quite different perspectives: the personal and the impersonal, the subjective and the objective, the explicit and the implicit.

STUDIES OF POWER

The sociological aspects of feminism broached so delicately by Virginia Woolf become overt and explicit with today's outspoken feminists who complain of the imbalance of power between the sexes. Assuming that the economic system is at the root of the inequitable relationship, they attack both the economic and the social exploitation of women. They charge that women are oppressed by a group that consciously works to hold them down through its ideology. Michèle Barrett, who writes from a
Marxist point of view, argues that the way households and families are organized is related to the division of labor in a society, the systems of education, and the roles men and women play in the culture. Building on Virginia Woolf's belief that the conditions under which men and women produce literature affect how they write and what they write about, she argues that gender stereotyping is tied to material conditions.

The feminist critics who are interested in examining and protesting power relationships of men and women in literature have expanded their focus to include a number of subgroups that have also been marginalized in society. They frequently look at writers from cultures as varied and different as the black (African-American and other people of color), Hispanic, Asian-American, native American, Jewish, and lesbian ones. Some members of the black group, the most outspoken of the minorities, describe critics as racists and misogynists, object to the amount of attention paid to black male writers (instead of black female ones), and even charge white feminist critics with being interested only in white, upper-middle-class women. Their efforts have not all been directed to protest, however. They have also produced some valuable scholarship by compiling bibliographies of ignored black writers and their works, studying black female folk artists, and publishing slave narratives. They have traced the growing power and authority of black females, whose history in this country began in slavery, and they have celebrated the family and community nurtured by those women. Like the Marxists, these critics have highly political purposes.

The common thread uniting these disparate groups is the belief that the social organization has denied equal treatment to all its segments and that literature is a means of revealing and resisting that social order. To them, art and life are fused entities, making it the duty of the critic to work against stereotyping in literature, media, and public awareness; to raise the consciousness of those who are oppressed; and to bring about radical change in the power balance between the oppressors and the oppressed.

Whereas feminist critics in general have sometimes been criticized for having too little to say about the quality of literary texts, those concerned with issues of power and economics have been especially chided for their lack of attention to questions of aesthetic value. More interested in the sociological aspects of texts than in making a close reading of them, these readers have an especially political intent. Many of the English feminist critics who work from a Marxist perspective would belong to this group.

Critics who take this approach would be interested in the letters of Abigail and John Adams, because they show contrasting views of labor and economics. Her expression concern for the state of their personal property. She comments that their house, left empty by a doctor who has now moved on, is like a new asset, because it was worthless to them while it was occupied. She has asked a friend to take stock of what is left, as part of the process of evaluating their holdings. The house has been left dirty, obviously an objectionable state, but one that is less distressing than its destruction would have been. She also mentions the fate of others whose homes have been used by the enemy, noting that in some cases the inhabitants have left rent for their use or for damage done to furniture. She even mentions the state of the president's “mansion-house.” Abigail's is a practical inventory of households—her own, those of her neighbors, and those of their leaders.

John, too, makes observations about the economy, but they are less personal than those of his wife. Attracted to an analysis of the broader situation, he is more philosophical than she. Speaking of the defense of Virginia, he comments, “The gentry are very rich, and the common people very poor. This inequality of property gives an aristocratic turn to all their proceedings.” He recognizes the value of a less hierarchical society, one in which the classes are less distinctly defined. When he mentions their personal holdings, he maintains his impersonal tone, referring to “a certain house in Queen Street” rather than naming it as their own. He assumes the same attitude he held toward the “aristocratical turn” of the Virginians and applies it to his own family, warning, “Whenever vanity and gayety, a love of pomp and dress, furniture, equipage, buildings, great company, expensive diversions, and elegant entertainments get the better of the principles and judgments of men or women, there is no knowing where they will stop, nor into what evils, natural, moral, or political, they will lead us.” His call for less attention to material acquisition and his desire for a less hierarchical society foreshadow the ideas to be later espoused by the Marxists.

The division of labor between man and woman, husband and wife, is also clear in these letters. It is John's duty to be away directing the affairs of the colonies, but Abigail is expected to remain at home with the family. Such a situation is not surprising in the eighteenth century. More interesting is the nature of the work they are expected to do. Whereas John's may involve physical courage but probably has more to do with using his authority to plan operations and direct groups of people, Abigail's responsibility for maintaining the family is considerably more lowly. In answer to his inquiry as to whether she has yet made saltpeter, she replies that she will try to do so after she makes soap and remarks that making clothes for the family takes much of her time. In addition, she is concerned about planting and sowing, about finding and providing food for all.

Finally, despite the candor with which Abigail presents her case to John regarding her desire for the equality of women, the terms she uses and the spirit in which she receives them indicate the reality of their relationship. She charges men with being “naturally tyrannical,” acknowledges that they hold “the harsh title of master,” and implores him to “put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity.” Despite his comments elsewhere about the desirability of equality among people, he fails to take her seriously. As he says, “As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh.”

Obviously Abigail and John Adams do not belong to any of the minority groups named here. They were white, Anglo-Saxon founders of the United States, members of what in retrospect is definitely deemed to have been the “inner circle.” They lived in Boston, a cultural city, had access to education, and through John wielded power and made policy. What would the minority feminist critics make of their correspondence?

Although there would seem to be less here for the minority critics to address than there is for the other groups of feminists, the final paragraph in John's letter is
significant where their interests are concerned. In it he mentions, in a lighthearted manner, a number of minority groups: apprentices, students, Indians, "negroes," and "another tribe," women. Later he refers to "Tories, land-jobbers, trimmers, bigots, Canadians, Indians, negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholics, Scotch renegades," too. Clearly his intent is to treat the matter with humor, but by linking Abigail's "foolish" request with the unruly conduct of what he considers to be groups under the control and domination of their betters, he reveals his own prejudices. He betrays his own sense of superiority, his acceptance of the right to oppress and repress, despite his protestations against aristocracy. It could be charged, and certainly would be by minority feminists, that such attitudes are at the root of the racial and ethnic divisions that have marked the entire course of American history.

STUDIES OF THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE

The interest of some feminists in probing the unique nature of the female personality and experience has led the critics and writers among them to try to identify a specifically female tradition of literature. Such explorations have been particularly interesting to French feminists, who have found in Jacques Lacan's extensions of Freudian theory a basis for resisting the idea of a stable "masculine" authority or truth. Rejecting the idea of a male norm, against which women are seen as secondary and derivative, they call for a recognition of women's abilities that goes beyond the traditional binary oppositions such as male/female, and the parallel oppositions of active/passive, intellectual/emotional. Searching for the essence of feminine style in literature, they examine female images in the works of female writers and the elements thought to be typical of l'écriture feminine—such as blanks, unfinished sentences, silences, and exclamations. Early female images and goddesses become important as symbols of the power of women to resist and overcome male oppression. Images of motherhood are significant too, for childbearing and rearing involve power and creation. Of course, this approach runs the risk of creating female chauvinists who argue for a special, superior gender. It also risks creating a ghetto in which women's writing stands separate from the male tradition and is thereby weakened.

One such critic who has been influenced by Lacan is Hélène Cixous, who in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) explores the nature of the female unconscious and issues a call for women to put their bodies into their writing. Connecting female writing with Lacan's Imaginary Order, a prelinguistic phase characterized by oneness between the child and the mother, she sees women's writing as coming from a primal space that is free of the elements of Lacan's Symbolic Order, such as the Law of the Father. In it the Voice of the Mother becomes the source of feminine power and writing. Cixous's visionary perspective, which calls upon women to invent their own language, possibly heads toward the terminal marginalization of women's writing, despite the passion with which it is put forth.

Whereas feminists have often reacted negatively (even angrily) to some of Freud's idea about women—for example, that women suffer from an inevitable penis envy that makes them see themselves as hommes manqués, since Lacan, some of these feminists have been able to accept the "phallus" as a symbolic concept, using it as it once was used in ancient fertility cults. From him they take the position that males and females alike lack the wholeness of sexuality of full presence, leaving both with a yearning that can never be filled.

Abigail Adams would not have been able to think of herself in such terms, but throughout her letters it is clear that she looks at life around her and at her own responsibilities in a way that John does not. She is the nurturing caretaker of the family, fulfilling the expected, stereotypical female role. She offers, for example, to copy and send the instructions for the "proportions of the various sorts of powder fit for cannon, small-arms, and pistols" if it would be useful to John.

However, Abigail is more than just a helpmate or facilitator. She is a thinking individual, one who reverses the rational/irrational binary. John engages in a serious conversation with her about "Dunmore," and it is clear that he values her intellectual grasp of the situation. Her accounts of the work she does to maintain the household—making clothes, soap, and perhaps saltpeter—are evidence of the reversal of the active/passive binary often invoked in regard to male/female. She is a hardworking, involved, industrious woman, without whose efforts and energies the family, and by extension the society, could not survive.

Rhetorically, as noted in the discussion of studies of power, Abigail is careful to write what is likely to be pleasing to John. She inquires about his work, reiterates the rightness of the cause for which he is fighting, speaks at length about personal matters, and reveals her own feelings. Her voice is not that of her husband, even when she agrees with his sentiments. It is a distinctly female voice full of concern for others that comes from a particularly personal perspective.

WRITING FEMINIST CRITICISM

For those readers who are interested in examining issues concerning women and literature but who do not have a defined agenda to follow or promote, making a feminist reading of a male author's text (which includes most of the canon) involves realizing from the outset that it is androcentric and resisting that point of view. It means not necessarily reading from a traditionally male perspective. How does that resistance take place? For a female reader, it involves consciously refusing to reverse her role (that is, take on a male one) in order to identify with a male writer. A female reader finds herself in a double bind. She is expected to identify with the female reader finds herself in a double bind. She is expected to identify with the male perspective while being reminded that to be male is not feminine. For a male feminist reader, it means adopting a new and possibly surprising perspective, that of trying to experience the narrative through the lens of the opposite gender. Of course, of resisting, the reader will try to connect, try to find commonality and community.
A feminist reader will also look out for new female writers as well as help revive interest in forgotten or ignored ones. A study by Nina Baym showed that as late as 1977 the American canon of major writers did not include a single female novelist, even though female novelists have been a significant force in the field since the mid-nineteenth century. Androcentric canon generates androcentric interpretation, which leads to canonization of androcentric texts and the exclusion of gynocentric ones. The feminist reader will try to reverse that process by asserting the quality of texts produced by particular female writers, finding and promoting undervalued writers from the past, questioning the values that underlie literary acceptance, and defining a female tradition of letters. She will also make alternative readings of traditional works.

Prewriting

If you have the opportunity to choose the text you will examine for your feminist critique, you may want to select something by a female writer, especially if the work has not already received a good bit of notice from feminist critics. Regardless of the selection you are working on, you will initially find it helpful to focus on the characters in the text. They are an easily accessible indication of the author’s attitudes and ideology. Some of the questions you can ask include the following:

• What stereotypes of women do you find? Are they oversimplified, demeaning, untrue? For example, are all blondes understood to be dumb?
• Examine the roles women play in a work. Are they minor, supportive, powerless, obsequious ones? Or are they independent and influential ones?
• Is the narrator a character in the narrative? If so, how does the male or female point of view affect the reader’s perceptions?
• How do the male characters talk about the female characters?
• How do the male characters treat the female characters?
• How do the female characters act toward the male characters?
• Who are the socially and politically powerful characters?
• What attitudes toward women are suggested by the answers to these questions?
• Do the answers to these questions indicate that the work lends itself more naturally to a study of differences between the male and female characters, a study of power imbalances between the sexes (or perhaps other groups), or a study of unique female experience?

Drafting and Revising

Once you have determined which of the three approaches you want to follow, or how they work together to form the text, you can begin drafting your analysis.

The Introduction

One interesting way to open your discussion is to point out why a feminist critique is particularly appropriate for the text you are analyzing. For example, many established works have acquired traditional readings that can be challenged from a new point of view. You can easily explain that you intend to show why the accepted understanding is not the only possibility. In the case of the letters exchanged by John and Abigail Adams, for example, such an explanation would point out that it is his writings that are ordinarily examined by historians, not hers. Because she presents a different perspective on some of the same incidents and experiences he observed, her writings also deserve attention. Other rationales for a feminist analysis may lie in the characters, the situation, the cultural context in which a text was produced, or the author. Whatever your reason for making a feminist reading, explaining why it is a fitting one will help your reader follow the analysis more easily.

An alternative beginning is to connect the characters or events of the situation with one that has actually occurred. Because many feminist critics see literature as a way to understand and reform society, making such a connection can be powerful.

The Body

Because feminist studies serve so many different interests, your discussion can take a wide variety of approaches. To simplify your decision making, you can try working within one of the three categories discussed earlier: studies of difference, studies of power, or studies of the female experience. Of course, these are overlapping areas of attention, but you will probably want to center your analysis in one of them.

If the issue of gender differences attracts your attention, you will almost certainly want to select a work by a female writer for your study since you will be looking for what makes a female text different from one written by a male. You can ask questions such as the following:

• Is the genre one that is traditionally associated with male or female writers?
• Is the subject one that is of particular interest to women, perhaps one that is of importance in women’s lives?
• What one-word label would accurately capture the voice of the narrator? Why is it appropriate?
• Is the work sympathetic to female characters?
• Are the female characters and the situations in which they are placed presented with complexity and in detail?
• How does the language differ from what you would expect from a writer of the opposite gender?
• How does the way the female characters talk influence the reader’s perception of them?
• What are the predominant images? Why (or why are they not) associated with women’s lives?
• Does the implied audience of the work include or exclude women? In the case of a male writer, is the work addressed to a mixed audience, or does it sound more like one man telling a story to another man?
• How do the answers to these questions support a case for this work’s having been written in a particularly masculine or feminine style?
If you are interested in the relationships of the characters or in how things get done in the world of the text, you will probably investigate the balance (or imbalance) of power depicted in it. The following questions can help you arrive at some conclusions. Some of them are similar to those you asked while you were prewriting.

- Who is primarily responsible for making decisions in the world depicted: men or women?
- Do the female characters play an overt part in decision making? Or do they work behind the scenes?
- Who holds positions of authority and influence?
- Who controls the finances?
- Do the female characters play traditional female roles? Or do they assume some unusual ones?
- Are there any instances in which women are unfairly treated or ill treated?
- What kind of accomplishments do the female characters achieve?
- Are they honored for their accomplishments?
- Do the male characters consult the female characters before taking action, or merely inform them of it?
- Does the story approve or disapprove, condemn or glorify, the power structure as revealed by your answers to these questions?
- How is the female reader co-opted into accepting or rejecting the images of women presented in the work?

You may be interested in examining how the unique female experience is captured in the work you are to analyze. If so, you will want to consider questions like the following:

- Does the text reject the idea of a male norm of thinking and behavior that is stable and unchanging? If so, where?
- Is the writer's style characterized by blanks, gaps, silences, circularity?
- Are images of the female body important in the text?
- Are there references to female diseases or bodily functions?
- Do motherhood or those attitudes and behaviors characteristic of motherhood figure significantly in the text?
- Can you find instances in which the traditional binaries of male/female, intellectual/emotional, objective/subjective, and active/passive are reversed?
- What new circumstances do the reversals suggest?
- Can you find instances in which wholeness rather than otherness is associated with the female characters?
- What generalizations about the uniqueness of the female experience can you make based on the answers to these questions?

The Conclusion

The end of your paper is an appropriate place to state the generalizations and conclusions drawn from your questions. It should pull all of your references to the text into a single statement about what is particularly female (or male) about the way the work was written, about the power relationships depicted in it, or about its presentation of the nature of the female experience.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS USEFUL IN FEMINIST CRITICISM

Androcentric A term used to describe attitudes, practices, or social organizations that are based on the assumption that men are the model of being.

Gynocriticism A movement that examines the distinctive characteristics of the female experience, in contrast to earlier methods that explained the female by using male models. As applied to literature, gynocriticism is concerned with developing new ways to study the writing of women. Elaine Showalter designates four such perspectives: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural.

Imaginary Order A term used by Jacques Lacan to refer to the psychic stage during which the infant begins to recognize its separateness from other objects and to develop a sense of self.

L’Ecriture feminine A term used by French critics to designate women’s writing that has as its source the wholeness of Lacan’s Imaginary Order.

Misogyny The hatred of women.

Oedipal attachment Sigmund Freud’s theory that around the age of five a boy perceives his father to be a rival for the love of his mother.

Patriarchy A social system that is headed and directed by a male.

Symbolic Order A term used by Jacques Lacan to refer to the psychic stage in which an individual learns language and it shapes his identity.

RECOMMENDED WEB SITES

http://www/uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/englisch/datenbank/e_index.htm
Gender Inn, a searchable database providing access to more than 6,000 records pertaining to feminist theory, feminist literary criticism, and gender studies focusing on English and American literature. It also provides bibliographies on some areas of women’s and gender studies. It is available in both English and German.

http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/enin.html
A feminist theory Web site that includes more political theory than literary theory.

http://www.york.ac.uk/services/library/subjects/women/bibliographies/research_methods.htm
An annotated bibliography.

http://www.feminist.org/research/chronicles/biblio.html
A bibliography of American feminist issues.

http://www.york.ac.uk/services/library/subjects/women/bibliographies/literary_criticism.htm
CHAPTER 6 FEMINIST CRITICISM

http://www.york.ac.uk/services/library/subj ec ts/women/bibliographies/
feminist_methods.htm

Feminism, science, logic of inquiry, and methodology, with emphasis on social sciences, teaching, and research bibliography.
http://www.igc.apc.org/women/feminist.html
Links to feminist resources and concerns.
http://www.igc.apc.org/women/bookstores/widenets.html
Feminist bookstores worldwide.
http://www.ecoethics.net/bib/1997/clca_015.htm
A bibliography on ecofeminism.

SUGGESTED READING


MODEL STUDENT ANALYSIS

The Masculine Sex-Parasite in Edith Wharton's "The Other Two"
Connie Herndon

As her own memoirs and those of others make clear, Wharton was emphatically not a feminist in the ordinary sense of the word. On the contrary, she seems often to have gone out of her way to present herself as an old-fashioned "man's woman" who felt nothing but contempt for New Womanly strivings.

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar

In a chapter entitled "Angel of Devastation: Edith Wharton on the Arts of the Enslaved," Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore the contradictions between Edith Wharton's personal stance toward feminism, indicated above, and the feminist nature of her fiction. They argue that "despite all th[e] evidence that Edith Wharton was neither in theory nor in practice a feminist, her major fictions, taken together, constitute perhaps the most searching—and searing—feminist analysis of the construction of 'femininity' produced by any novelist in this century" (128). Thus, Wharton may be considered a professed nonfeminist who wrote feminist texts. Before reading anything about Edith Wharton herself, I sensed this contradiction regarding feminism when I read her short story "The Other Two." The story left me with mixed feelings and curiosity about Wharton's intentions regarding the interpretation of the female character, Alice Waythorn. With guidance from Gilbert and Gubar, I have better understood my frustrations and arrived at an interpretation of Alice Waythorn as a sacrificial example of Wharton's refusal to "elaborat[e] full-scale fantasies about the liberation and gratification of female desire or about the unleashing of female power" (Gilbert and Gubar, 129). In other words, Alice Waythorn is a typical rendering of Wharton's scathing view of the social system that produced female "sex-parasites" and "sex-phantoms." When Wharton, seemingly largely beyond reform (Gilbert and Gubar, 129),

Barbara A. White says that "The Other Two," which was published in 1904 as one of a collection of short stories entitled The Descent of Man and Other Stories, "depicts a newly married person's disillusionment with an initially admired spouse" (57). Although this is certainly true, I have already indicated that the story is meant to involve the female reader in a type of disillusionment also. To explain this opinion, the specifics of the situation that provides the subject of the story need to be reviewed. The "disillusioned married person" to
whom White refers is Mr. Waythorn, newly married to Alice Waythorn, who has been married twice before her marriage to him. Though Mr. Waythorn, in the beginning, does not think he will have a problem with his wife’s past, he has wrongly “fancied that a woman can shed her past like a man” (Wharton, 99). When he discovers that she cannot, that “Alice was bound to hers both by the circumstances which forced her into continued relation with it, and by the traces it had left on her nature” (Wharton, 99), he is disillusioned with her, thinking of her as, among other things, “a shoe that too many feet had worn” (98). “The circumstances which forced her into continued relation with [her past]” are that she has a child by the first husband and that her second husband has business dealings with Mr. Waythorn’s firm. Thus, Mr. and Mrs. Waythorn find themselves constantly thrown together with one or the other (and, at the end, both) of Alice’s ex-husbands. Mr. Waythorn’s attempts to deal with this situation within proper social confines, as well as with the growing disillusionment he has with his wife as a result of it, make up this story.

The aspect of “The Other Two” that at first led me down a “feminist” path in my interpretation is the stereotypically oppressive character of Mr. Waythorn. As a woman, I am offended by his possessiveness, especially in the following passage when, watching Alice, he thinks, “They were his, those white hands with their flirting motions, his the light haze of hair, the lips and eyes. . . .” (83, Wharton’s ellipsis points). Having been disturbed by recent manifestations of his divorced wife’s past, including the immediate presence of her two ex-husbands in his life, Mr. Waythorn finds relief only in the feeling of ownership toward his wife. He feels comforted only when he objectifies and imaginatively dismembers the parts of her body and calls them his own. As a woman, I am deeply offended by this behavior, which Wharton describes as his “yielding again to the joy of possession” (83). Wharton’s illustration of such behavior is clearly critical and meant to provoke female readers.

And yet, as my sympathies move away from Mr. Waythorn, they don’t find a resting place with Alice Waythorn either. Though she is the object of her husband’s oppressive views toward women, Alice seems never to be touched by his prejudices and, therefore, does not seem victimized by them. Though Mr. Waythorn’s character provokes my anger, Mrs. Waythorn’s character does not provoke my sympathy nor my loyalty. Gilbert and Gubar discuss what some critics have called Wharton’s “limitation of heart”—her apparent lack of sympathy for her characters, her coldness.” (131). To Gilbert and Gubar, this accusation from critics can be explained as a “misperception of the grim delight with which she forced herself, and her readers, to face the social facts that made her women (and their men) what they were” (131). Thus, Wharton’s lack of sympathy for Alice Waythorn has a purpose and is indicative of her attitude toward her characters in general.

But more than a lack of sympathy for Alice is at work in my response to the story. Not only is there a lack of sympathy for her character, but there is also a feeling of disapproval and repulsion toward her. To understand why, the characters of both Mr. and Mrs. Waythorn must be more carefully considered. There are two issues to be discussed. One is the crossing of masculine and feminine stereotypes in the characters (Mr. Waythorn is more feminine and Alice Waythorn more masculine). Second, there is the presence of the “sex-Parasite” in Alice.

Upon finding Mr. Haskett (Alice’s first husband) in his house the first time, Mr. Waythorn handles and thinks of himself thusly: “In his own room he flung himself down with a groan. He hated the womanish sensibility which made him suffer so acutely from the grotesque chances of life” (88, emphasis added). In this and numerous other examples, Mr. Waythorn is portrayed as having stereotypically feminine qualities. He is constantly worried about appearances, as when he is caught on the train with Varick (Alice’s second husband) and sees someone he knows. When he “had a sudden vision of the picture he and Varick must present to an initiated eye, he jumped up with a muttered excuse” (79). Also, he is worried about appearances when Varick must come to visit him at his office to do business. Waythorn demonstrates his “womanish” concerns over propriety when, “waiting in his private room, [he] wondered what the others thought of it. . . . Waythorn could fancy the clerks smiling behind Varick’s back as he was ushered in” (85). And, elsewhere, at the very beginning of the story, Waythorn reflects that “Her [Alice’s] composure was rest­ful to him; it acted as ballast to his somewhat unstable sensibilities” (72). In another instance, Waythorn is described as “always refusing to recognize unpleasant contingencies till he found himself confronted with them, and then he saw them followed by a spectral train of consequences” (95). Waythorn’s tendencies toward “unstable sensibilities,” his oversensitive regard toward keeping up appearances, and his habit of avoiding and then overdramatizing problems are all stereotypes of the foolish and numskull female that are so familiar to us. Wharton’s inversion of them, placing them within the foolish and offensive male character is a clever way to undermine such stereotypes.

On the other hand, Alice Waythorn is nearly the opposite of her husband, having “perfectly balanced nerves” as perceived by him (Wharton, 72). Furthermore, he characterizes her as having “a way of surmounting obstacles without seeming to be aware of them” (75). When he is still worrying about the upcoming visit of Mr. Haskett to their home, he looks at Mrs. Waythorn and notes that “she had obeyed his injunction and forgotten” about it (77). Of course it is her emotional control and ability to adapt to changing situations that eventually comes to burden Waythorn: “The fact that Alice took her change of husbands like a change of weather reduced the situation to mediocrity. He could have forgiven her for blunders, for excesses; for resisting Haskett, for yielding to Varick; for anything but her acquiescence and her tact” (99, emphasis added). Thus, Alice Waythorn is given all the stereotypically “masculine” characteristics that have been traditionally associated with the “strong male.” The question to be addressed now is how to regard Alice’s masculine qualities.
In thinking about the masculine qualities described in Alice Waythorn, it is important to consider another aspect of her character—an aspect that Gilbert and Gubar attribute to what they call the "sex-parasite." Quoting from Olive Schreiner in An Olive Schreiner Reader, Gilbert and Gubar (63) define the sex-parasite as "the effete wife, concubine or prostitute, clad in fine raiment, the work of others' fingers; fed on luxurious viands, the result of others' toil; waited on and tended by the labour of others" (Gilbert and Gubar, 143). This clearly describes Alice Waythorn, who has gradually climbed the social ladder through her succession of husbands. Alice's movement up in the social structure is evident in Mr. Waythorn's shock at the social station that he observes in Alice's first husband, Mr. Haskett. Waythorn spends a good deal of time trying to imagine his wife in "a phase of existence so different from anything with which he had connected her" (Wharton, 89). Furthermore, though "Varick . . . was a gentleman" (89) and "[h]e and Varick had the same social habits, spoke the same language, understood the same allusions" (90), Varick is clearly not as "well off" as Waythorn is. This is seen in Waythorn's surprise when he learns of the nature of Mr. Varick's business with his firm: "Waythorn wondered vaguely since when Varick had been dealing in 'important things.' Hitherto he had dabbled only in the shallow pools of speculation, with which Waythorn's office did not usually concern itself" (91). Clearly, then, Alice Waythorn has been on the move up since her first divorce. Alice's long history as a "wife-prostitute" is further obvious in Waythorn's concession that it might be "better to own a third of a wife who knew how to make a man happy than a whole one who had lacked opportunity to acquire the art" (100). Alice Haskett, with all her training, is definitely a master of the "art" of making a man happy. And what she has gotten in return is an increasing, more prestigious and luxurious position in the social structure.

We cannot like Alice Waythorn, because she is a sex-parasite. And her masculine, independent ways ironically do not help us to like her. Wharton's presentation of the sex-parasite in Alice Waythorn is representative of the kind of woman she despised (Gilbert). And yet Wharton was fully aware of "the process by which women are socialized as prisoners of sex, and more specifically the horror (to the 'lady' herself and others) of the cultural techniques of feminization that created the female 'sex' parasite" (Gilbert and Gubar, 129). In other words, though she despised this type of woman, she fully understood her and might even have considered herself one, for becoming a sex-parasite was virtually inescapable in her given social structure. Alice, as sex-parasite, represents the contemporary unreformed woman of Wharton's time. While feminists around Wharton were looking for ways to escape such a destiny, "Wharton mostly saw signs that said NO EXIT" (Gilbert and Gubar, 129). I think Wharton's pessimistic views regarding the potential for reform are clear in "The Other Two." Alice's masculinity is, in some ways, a warning that reform will lead only to a different, yet equally disturbing role for women. In this case, the warning is that women may become more like men, who, after all, are the ones we as women least want to resemble. Mr. Waythorn, with all his feminine characteristics, is portrayed as being silly and, eventually, rather inconsequential. Certainly, this is what we, as women, are trying to move away from. And yet, at the end of the story, when Alice Waythorn clearly has the upper hand, we are not satisfied because she is too manlike—she is not the type of woman we want to be, even if that means we would have the greater measure of power.

Wharton's pessimistic views about the possibility of a better social situation for women often manifests itself in female characters who disillusion female readers acquainted with more conventional, more romantic, and optimistic feminist ideas. This is certainly the case in "The Other Two." And yet Wharton's nonfeminist feminism, in the end, is a potent form of social criticism. In her refusal to grant women "full-scale fantasies about the liberation and gratification of female desire or about the unleashing of female power," (Gilbert and Gubar, 129), Wharton exercises what we today call tough love. Unwilling to scratch only at the surface of the social dynamics that create us, she makes us look deeper and longer at the female beasts that we are. For, as is evident in Alice Waythorn, if women are to be the enlightened ministers of a more humane world, we must do more than become equal to men in the same social structures in which we live lives of oppression. Equality within corruption will not reform us. A new and better world will require new social structures and better human beings, both male and female in kind.

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T H E O R Y I N T O  
P R A C T I C E

An Introduction to Literary Criticism

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Australia  Canada  Mexico  Singapore  Spain  United Kingdom  United States