Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist criticism is not one unified field of study, and it does not have one or two foundational theorists, as Marxist theories have Karl Marx and Psychoanalytic theories have Freud and Jung. “Feminist criticism” therefore refers to a number of different theoretical and/or political approaches which have, at their core, a concern with the political, economic, and symbolic subordination of women within patriarchal power structures.

In particular, feminist literary criticism takes up these concerns by focusing on (perhaps underappreciated or ignored) female authors and the marginalization of female authors from the literary “canon,” the representation of female characters in works of fiction and poetry, and the development, through literature, of a counter-patriarchal discourse.

Typical questions¹:

- 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?
- 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 role the work play in terms of women’s literary history and literary tradition?
- To what extent does the representation of women (and men) in the work reflect the place and time in which the work was written?
- How are the relations between men and women, or those between members of the same sex, presented in the work? What roles do men and women assume and perform and with what consequences?
- Does the author present the work from within a predominantly male or female sensibility? Why might this have been done, and with what effects?
- How do the facts of the author’s life relate to the presentation of men and women in the work? To their relative degrees of power?


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• How do other works by the author correspond to this one in their depiction of the power relationships between men and women?

For a more advanced understanding of this critical approach, see some of the following sources:

• Mary Wollstonecraft - *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792

• Simone de Beauvoir - *Le deuxième sexe*, 1972

• Julia Kristeva - *About Chinese Women*, 1977

• Elaine Showalter - "Toward a Feminist Poetics," 1979
  o [http://historiacultural.mpbnet.com.br/feminismo/Toward_a_Feminist_Poetics.htm](http://historiacultural.mpbnet.com.br/feminismo/Toward_a_Feminist_Poetics.htm)

• Deborah E. McDowell - "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," 1980

• Alice Walker - *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 1983

• Lillian S. Robinson - "Treason out Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon," 1983


• Camile Paglia - *Sexual Personae: The Androgyne in Literature and Art*, 1990

**Additional online resources:**

Writing in Literature from Purdue OWL:
[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/index.html)