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Feminism

What enrages me is the way women are used as extensions of men, mirrors of men, devices for showing men off, devices for helping men get what they want. They are never there in their own right, or rarely. The world of the Western contains no women.

Sometimes I think the world *contains no women.*

Jane Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow"

INTRODUCTION

In 1972, Judith Viorst, a well-known author of children's literature, published her short, poetic, revised version of the fairy tale "Cinderella." In her version, entitled ". . . And Then the Prince Knelt Down and Tried to Put the Glass Slipper on Cinderella's Foot," Viorst writes:

> I really didn't notice that he had a funny nose.
> And he certainly looked better all dressed up in fancy clothes.
> He's not nearly as attractive as he seemed the other night.
> So I think I'll just pretend that this glass slipper feels too tight.

Viorst's recasting of Cinderella may make us smile, or laugh, or simply wonder what has happened to our childhood version of this story that was read to us countless times by our parents, our teachers, and our friends. Viorst's Cinderella is, after all, certainly not the Cinderella we remember. The Cinderella we have been taught would never think or act the way Viorst's re-creation does. Our Cinderella is beautiful, but poor. Treated cruelly by her ugly stepsisters and her arrogant, scheming, self-assertive stepmother, our Cinderella dutifully cleans the family home while she quietly weeps, lamenting that she will not be able to attend the upcoming ball to be held at the castle. Bearing with great patience her trials, our Cinderella will triumphantly get her wish, for her fairy godmother comes to her rescue. Now clothed in a magnificent gown, the lovely Cinderella is driven to the ball in a coach fit for a princess. At the ball, she meets her handsome prince,

who is immediately overwhelmed by her beauty, grace, and charm. But at the stroke of midnight, the Cinderella we remember must return home, losing her glass slipper in her haste to her carriage.

Dressed in rags, our childhood Cinderella finds herself once again cooking and cleaning for her ugly stepsisters and her wicked stepmother. Bearing her lot in life with unspeakable patience, she is scorned and rebuked time and time again by her older siblings. And then one day, the prince and his attendants come to her home, seeking the owner of the glass slipper accidently left on the steps of the castle. After her ugly stepsisters try unsuccessfully to squeeze their big feet into the small slipper, the Cinderella we remember comes face to face with her handsome prince and successfully puts her petite foot into the magical shoe. Immediately, the prince recognizes her as the woman of his dreams and proposes marriage. And after their marriage, they live happily ever after.

Viorst's version of this fairy tale characterizes Cinderella a bit differently. In this re-creation, Cinderella now has opinions of her own. In the light of day, she observes that the prince does not seem to be as attractive as he was the other night at the ball. Asserting her own independence, she pretends the glass slipper does not fit. Accordingly, there will be no marriage, for Cinderella herself has decided she does not want to marry the prince.

This new Cinderella refuses to be defined as a "nonsignificant Other." Unlike the old Cinderella, she will not allow herself to be shaped by her society. She realizes that her culture has all too often presented her with stereotypes, which she and many others like her have blindly accepted. Beautiful women, her society decrees, are often oppressed and belittled. If, however, these beautiful people will only bear with patience their lot in life, they will be rewarded. Like the traditional Cinderella, society says that they must accept that, in addition to their beauty, they must also be good-natured and meek. After all, ugly women like Cinderella's stepsisters are cruel and heartless. Beautiful women like Cinderella must bear patiently their suffering and accept that they are victims of the circumstances of life. If they accept their lot in life, they will, in time, be rewarded. According to their society's decrees, they will meet some handsome, wealthy prince who will marry them, care for them, and dote over them the rest of their lives.

Viorst's re-created Cinderella wishes to debunk the false standards and beliefs about women, both in their lives and in their portrayal in literature, that have been carefully perpetuated by the traditional Cinderella story. Women, says this new Cinderella, should not mindlessly wait for a handsome prince to come to the rescue. Women need not nor must not be like the traditional Cinderella: dependent creatures who without question or doubt accept the commands of their patriarchal society. Unlike the traditional Cinderella, women must not weep about their lot in life but take an active part in creating and determining their own lives and their own futures. They

must therefore reject many of the cultural stereotypes of women such as "the wicked stepmother" syndrome, which asserts that only ugly women are aggressive and self-motivated. They must also reject the notion that marriage is a woman's ultimate goal, one that can assure her of financial security.

In sum, they must reject the idea that women (like the traditional Cinderella) are mindless, weepy, passive, helpless creatures who must wait for a man to come and make their lives meaningful. Success in life, these new Cinderellas assert, is not dependent on physical beauty, as it is for the traditional Cinderella. Above all, then, they must realize that they are not limited by their sex; like any man, they too can shape their personhood and assert their resourcefulness, their wit, and their personal drive to become what they desire to be. For the re-created Cinderella knows something the old Cinderella never knew: Whereas sex is biologically determined, gender is culturally determined. Like the revised Cinderella, all women must therefore reject the patriarchal standards of society and become persons in their own right. What they must become is a "Significant Person, " not the Other. In essence, this new version of the Cinderella fairy tale crystallizes the central issues of feminism, namely:

- That men, either unconsciously or consciously, have oppressed women, allowing them little or no voice in the political, social, or economic issues of their society;
- That by not giving voice and value to women's opinions, responses, and writings, men have therefore suppressed the female, defined what it means to be feminine, and thereby de-voiced, devalued, and trivialized what it means to be a woman; and
- That, in effect, men have made women the "nonsignificant Other."

Feminism's goal is to change this degrading view of women so that all women will realize that they are not a nonsignificant Other, but that each woman is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man. Women, feminists declare, must define themselves and assert their own voices in the arenas of politics, society, education, and the arts. By personally committing themselves to fostering such change, feminists hope to create a society in which not only the male but also the female voice is equally valued.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

According to feminist criticism, the roots of prejudice against women have long been embedded in Western culture. Such gender discrimination may have begun, say some feminists, with the biblical narrative that places the

blame for the fall of humanity on Eve, not Adam. In similar fashion, the ancient Greeks abetted such gender discrimination when Aristotle, a leading philosopher and teacher, asserted, "The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled." Following Aristotle, religious leaders and philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine declared that women are really "imperfect men." These imperfect and spiritually weak creatures, they maintained, possess a sensual nature that lures men away from spiritual truths, thereby preventing males from attaining their spiritual potential. In the centuries that follow, other theologians, philosophers, and scientists continue such gender discrimination. For example, in *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin announces that women are of a "characteristic of [. . .] a past and lower state of civilization." Such beings, he noted, are inferior to men, who are physically, intellectually, and artistically superior.

Century after century, men's voices continued to articulate and determine the social role and cultural and personal significance of women. In the late 1700s, a faint voice crying in the wilderness in opposition to such patriarchal and defaming opinions against women arose and began to be heard. Believing that women along with men should have a voice in the public arena, Mary Wollstonecraft authored *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Women, she maintained, must stand up for their rights and not allow their male-dominated society to define what it means to be a woman. Women themselves must take the lead and articulate who they are and what role they will play in society. More importantly, they must reject the patriarchal assumption that women are inferior to men.

It was not until the Progressive Era of the early 1900s, however, that the major roots of feminist criticism began to grow. During this time, women gained the right to vote and became prominent activists in the social issues of the day, such as health care, education, politics, and literature, but equality with men in these arenas remained outside their grasp.

Virginia Woolf

In 1919, the British scholar and teacher Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) laid the foundation for present-day feminist criticism in her seminal work *A Room of One's Own*. In this text, Woolf declares that men have and continue to treat women as inferiors. It is the male, she asserts, who defines what it means to be female and who controls the political, economic, social, and literary structures. Agreeing with Samuel T. Coleridge, one of the foremost nineteenth-century literary critics, that great minds possess both male and female characteristics, she hypothesizes in her text the existence of Shakespeare's sister, one who is equally as gifted as a writer as Shakespeare himself. Her gender, however, prevents her from having "a room of her

own." Because she is a woman, she cannot obtain an education or find profitable employment. Her innate artistic talents will therefore never flourish, for she cannot afford her own room, Woolf's symbol of the solitude and autonomy needed to seclude one's self from the world and its social constraints in order to find time to think and write. Ultimately, Shakespeare's sister dies alone without any acknowledgment of her personal genius. Even her grave bears not her name, for she is buried in a unmarked grave simply because she is female.

This kind of loss of artistic talent and personal worthiness, says Woolf, is the direct result of society's opinion of women: to wit, that they are intellectually inferior to men. Women, Woolf argues, must reject this social construct and establish their own identity. Women must challenge the prevailing, false cultural notions about their gender identity and develop a female discourse that will accurately portray their relationship "to the world of reality and not to the world of men." If women accept this challenge, Woolf believes that Shakespeare's sister can be resurrected in and through women living today, even those who may be "washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed" right now. Regrettably, the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II in the 1940s focused humankind's attention on other matters and delayed the development of such feminist ideals.

Simone de Beauvoir

With the 1949 publication of *The Second Sex* by the French writer Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), however, feminist interests were once again surfacing. Heralded as the foundational work of twentieth-century feminism, Beauvoir's text declares that French society (and Western societies in general) are **patriarchal**, controlled by males. Like Woolf before her, Beauvoir believed that the male in these societies defines what it means to be human, including, therefore, what it means to be female. Since the female is not male, Beauvoir asserted, she becomes the Other, an object whose existence is defined and interpreted by the male, the dominant being in society. Always subordinate to the male, the female finds herself a secondary or nonexistent player in the major social institutions of her culture, such as the church, government, and educational systems. Beauvoir asserts that a woman must break the bonds of her patriarchal society and define herself if she wishes to become a significant human being in her own right and defy male classification as the Other. She must ask herself, "What is a woman?" Beauvoir insists that a woman's answer must not be "mankind," for such a term once again allows men to define women. This generic label must be rejected, for it assumes that "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him."

Beauvoir insists that women see themselves as autonomous beings. Women, she maintains, must reject the societal construct that men are the subject or the absolute and that women are the Other. Embedded in this false assumption is the supposition that males have power and define cultural terms and roles. Accordingly, women must define themselves outside the present social construct and reject being labeled as the Other.

Kate Millett

With the advent of the 1960s and its political activism and social concerns, feminist issues found new voices, and prominent among them is Kate Millett. With her publication of *Sexual Politics* in 1969, a new wave of feminism begins. Millett is one of the first feminists to challenge the social ideological characteristics of both the male and the female. Millett argues that a female is born and a woman is created. In other words, one's sex, be that male or female, is determined at birth. One's gender, however, is a social construct created by cultural ideals and norms. Consciously or unconsciously, women and men conform to the cultural ideas established for them by society. Little boys, for example, must be aggressive, self-assertive, and domineering, whereas little girls must be passive, meek, and humble. These cultural norms and expectations are transmitted through media: television, movies, songs, and literature. Conforming to these prescribed sex roles dictated by society is what Millett calls **sexual politics**. Women, Millett maintains, must revolt against the power center of their culture: male dominance. In order to do so, women must establish female social conventions for themselves by establishing and articulating female discourse, literary studies, and feminist theory.

Feminism in the 1960s and 1970s

Moving from the political to the literary arena throughout the 1960s and 1970s, feminist critics began to examine the traditional literary canon and discovered example after example of male dominance and prejudice that supported Beauvoir's and Millett's assertion that males considered the female "the Other," an unnatural or deviant being. First, stereotypes of women abounded in the canon: Women were sex maniacs, goddesses of beauty, mindless entities, or old spinsters. Second, while Dickens, Wordsworth, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Twain, and a host of other male authors found their way into the established literary canon, few female authors achieved such status. Third, for the most part, the roles of female, fictionalized characters were limited to secondary positions, more frequently than not occupying minor parts within the stories or simply reverting to the male's

stereotypical images of women. Fourth, female scholars such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir were ignored, their writings seldom, if ever, referred to by the male crafters of the literary canon.

Feminist critics of this era asserted that these males and their male counterparts who created and enjoyed a place of prominence within the canon assumed that all readers were males. Women reading such works could unconsciously, then, be duped into reading as a male. In addition, since most of the university professors were males, more frequently than not female students were trained to read literature as if they were males. The feminists of the 1960s and 1970s now postulated the existence of a female reader who was affronted by the male prejudices abounding in the canon. Questions concerning the male or female qualities of literary form, style, voice, and theme became the rallying points for feminist criticism, and throughout the late 1970s books that defined women's writings in feminine terms flourished.

Having highlighted the importance of gender, feminist critics then began to uncover and rediscover a body of literary works authored by females that their male counterparts had decreed inferior and therefore unworthy to be part of the canon. In America, for example, Kate Chopin's late nineteenth-century novel *The Awakening* (1899) served as the archetypal, rediscovered feminist text of this period, whereas in England Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and in France Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* (1969) fulfilled these roles. Throughout the universities and in the reading populace, readers turned their attention to historical and current works authored by women. Simultaneously, works that attempted to define the feminine imagination, to categorize and explain female literary history, and to attempt to define the female aesthetic or concept of beauty became the focus of feminist critics.

The ongoing debate over definitive answers to these key feminist interests continued throughout the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, as it does today.

Elaine Showalter

The dominating voice of feminist criticism throughout the 1980s is that of Elaine Showalter. In her text *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Showalter chronicles what she believes to be the three historical phases of evolution in female writing. The "feminine" phase (1840–1880), the "feminist" phase (1880–1920), and the "female" phase (1970–present). During the "feminine" phase, writers such as Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and George Sand accepted the prevailing social constructs of their day on the role and therefore the definition of women. Accordingly, these female authors wrote under male pseudonyms, hoping to equal the intellectual and artistic achievements of their male counterparts. During the "feminist" phase, female authors dramatized the plight of the "slighted" woman. More often than not, these authors depicted the harsh and often cruel treatment of female characters at the hands of their more powerful male creations. At present, in the "female" phase, women reject the imitation prominent during the "feminine" phase and the protest that dominated the "feminist" phase. Showalter points out that feminist critics now concern themselves with developing a peculiarly female understanding of the female experience in art, including a feminine analysis of literary forms and techniques. Such a task necessarily includes the uncovering of **misogyny** in male texts, a term Showalter uses to describe the male hatred of women.

Showalter asserts that female authors were consciously and therefore deliberately excluded from the literary canon by those male professors who first established the canon itself. Authors like Susan Warner, E. D. N. Southworth, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, by far the most popular authors of the second half of the nineteenth century in American fiction, were not deemed worthy to be included in the canon. Showalter urges that such exclusion of the female voice must stop. She thus coins the term **gynocritics** to refer to the process of "construct[ing] a female framework for analysis of women's literature to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt to male models and theories." Through gynocritics, Showalter hopes to expose the false cultural assumptions of women as depicted in literature. By exposing inaccurate pictures of women, she hopes to establish women as both readers and writers in their own right.

Showalter's term **gynocriticism** has now become synonymous with the study of women as writers and provides critics with four models that address the nature of women's writing and help answer some of the chief concerns of feminist criticism: the biological, the linguistic, the psychoanalytic, and the cultural. Each of Showalter's models are sequential, subsuming and developing the preceding model(s). The *biological model* emphasizes how the female body marks itself upon a text by providing a host of literary images and a personal, intimate tone. The *linguistic model* concerns itself with the need for a female discourse. This model investigates the differences between how women and men use language. It asserts that women can and do create a language peculiar to their gender and addresses the way in which this language can be utilized in their writings. The *psychoanalytic model*, based on an analysis of the female psyche and how such an analysis affects the writing process, emphasizes the flux and fluidity of female writing as opposed to male rigidity and structure. The *cultural model* investigates how the society in which female authors work and function shapes women's goals, responses, and points of view.

Geographical Strains of Feminism

Since no one critical theory of writing dominates feminist criticism, and few theorists agree upon a unifying feminist approach to textual analysis, physical geography plays a great part in determining the major interests of various voices of feminist criticism. Three somewhat distinct, geographical strains of feminism have emerged: American, British, and French. According to Elaine Showalter, American feminism is essentially textual, stressing repression; British feminism is essentially Marxist, stressing oppression; and French feminism is essentially psychoanalytic, stressing repression. All groups, however, attempt to rescue women from being considered "the Other."

American Feminism The American feminist critic Annette Kolodny helps set the major concern of American feminism: the restoration of the writings of female authors to the literary canon. Believing that literary history is itself a fiction, Kolodny wishes to restore the history of women so that they themselves can tell "herstory." In order to tell and write "herstory," however, women must first find a means to gain their voice in the midst of numerous voices—particularly male voices—clamoring for attention in society.

Like Kolodny, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), assert that the male voice has for too long been dominant. Because males have also had the power of the pen and therefore the press, they have been able to define and create images of women as they so choose in their male texts. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the coercion of this male power has caused "anxiety of authorship" in women, causing them to fear the act of literary creation itself and the act of writing. Literary creation, they believe, will isolate them from society and may even destroy them. Gilbert and Gubar's solution is that women develop a "woman's sentence" that would encourage literary autonomy. By inventing such a sentence, a woman can sentence a man to isolation, to fear, and to literary banishment from the canon, just as for centuries men have been sentencing women. In effect, by formulating a woman's sentence, women writers can finally free themselves from being defined by men.

A woman's sentence, argue Gilbert and Gubar, could also free women from being reduced to the stereotypical images that all too often appear in literature. They identify the two principal stereotyped images as "the angel in the house" and the "madwoman in the attic." If a woman is depicted as the angel in the house, she supposedly realizes that her physical and material comforts are gifts from her husband. Knowing this fact, her goal in life is to please her husband, to attend to his every comfort, and to obey him.

Through these selfless acts, she finds the utmost contentment by serving both her husband and her children. If, perchance, a female character should reject this role, the male critics quickly dub her a "monster," a freakish anomaly who is obviously sexually fallen.

Gilbert and Gubar assert that either of these images—the angel or the madwoman—are unrealistic representations of woman in society. One canonizes and places the woman above the world, while the other denigrates and places her below the world. Further, the message is clear to all women: If you are not an angel, then you are a monster. Such stereotypical, male-created images of women in literature must be uncovered, examined, and transcended if women are to achieve literary autonomy.

British Feminism Whereas American feminism emphasizes repression, British feminism stresses oppression. Essentially Marxist, British feminism refuses to separate art, literature, and life. Denying the existence of any spiritual reality, some British feminists view reading, writing, and publishing as facets of material reality. As part of material reality, literature, like one's job and one's social activities, is part of a great whole, with each part affecting the other. How women are depicted in life, then, directly affects how they are treated in real life. Particularly in the West, women are exploited not only in literature but also in economic and social conditions. From this perspective, the traditional Western family structure helps to subordinate women, causing them to be economically dependent. Such dependency will then be reflected in literature, and it is the job of feminist critics, British feminism maintains, to change this unfair social status of women economically and socially and also in texts. For these feminist critics, the goal of criticism is to change society, not simply critique it.

French Feminism Believing that women are oppressed both in life and art, French feminism, the third geographical division of feminism, typically stresses the repression of women. As a whole, French feminism is closely associated with the theoretical and practical applications of psychoanalysis. At first, the association with psychoanalysis may be a bit puzzling, for Sigmund Freud and his patriarchal theories seemingly dominate psychoanalysis. Believing that penis is power, Freud viewed women as incomplete males. All women, he thought, were envious of a male's power, as symbolized by the penis. Wanting this power, all women possess **penis envy**, desiring to gain the male **phallus** and thereby obtain power. Fortunately for feminist criticism, the French psychoanalytic critic Jacques Lacan rescues psychoanalysis from some of Freud's mysognistic theories (for a detailed explanation of Lacan's theories, see "Jacques Lacan," Chapter 7). Lacan, argues that language ultimately shapes and structures our conscious and unconscious minds and thus shapes our self identity, not the phallus.

Indeed, he maintains that it is language that ultimately denies women the power of language and therefore the power of literature and writing.

Lacan believes that the human psyche consists of three parts, or what he calls orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Each of these orders interacts with the others. From birth to six months or so, we primarily function in the Imaginary Order, a preverbal state that contains our wishes, our fantasies, and our physical images. In this state, we are basically sexless, for we are not yet capable of differentiating ourselves from our mothers. Once we successfully pass through the Oedipal crisis, we pass from a biological language to a socialized language and thus into the second of the Lacanian orders: the Symbolic Order. Unfortunately for the female, in this order the male is socialized to the dominant position of discourse, whereas the female is socialized to a subordinated language. On entering this order, the father becomes the dominant image (the Law). At this stage of psychic development, both the male and the female fear castration by the father. For the male, fear of castration means obeying and becoming like the father, while simultaneously repressing the Imaginary Order that is most closely associated with the female body. The Imaginary Order with its pre-Oedipal male desires becomes a direct threat for the male in the third Lacanian order, the Real Order, or the actual world as perceived by the individual. Similarly for the female, entrance into the Symbolic Order means submission to law of the father. Such submission unfortunately means subservience to the male. Being socialized to a subordinated language, the female becomes a second-class citizen. Since language, for Lacan, is a psychological, not a biological construct, women can learn the dominant discourse of both the Symbolic and the Real Orders and become tools of social change.

Other French feminists, such as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, further develop and apply Lacan's theories to their own form of feminist criticism. Kristeva, for example, posits that the Imaginary Order is characterized by a continuous flow of fluidity or rhythm, which she calls **chora**. On entering the Symbolic Order, both males and females are separated from the chora and repress the feelings of fluidity and rhythm. Similar to a **Freudian slip** in which an unconscious thought breaks through the conscious mind, the chora can, at times, break through into the Real Order and disturb the male-dominant discourse. On the other hand, Hélène Cixous chooses to explore an entirely different mode of discourse that arises from the Symbolic, not the Imaginary Order. Cixous maintains that there exists a particular kind of female writing that she calls ***l'écriture féminine***. Characterized by fluidity, this particularly feminine discourse will, when fully explored, transform the social and cultural structures within literature.

In addition to the three geographical strains of feminism, other significant feminist strains,—for example, black and lesbian feminists—transcend geographical boundaries. Some of these strains have an individual stamp. Alice Walker, a spokesperson for Black feminism, refuses to be associated with traditional feminist criticism and with the term *feminist* itself. She prefers to be called a "womanist." On the other hand, the French lesbian feminist Monique Wittig rejects the label of "woman," asserting that this term does not include a lesbian. She prefers to be called a lesbian, believing that this nomenclature will allow women "to name and redefine themselves."

No matter what they emphasize in theory, however, all feminist critics assert that they are on a journey of self-discovery that will lead them to a better understanding of themselves. Once they understand and then define themselves as women, they believe they will be able to change their world.

ASSUMPTIONS

To the onlooker, feminist theory and practice may appear to be a diffuse, loosely connected body of criticism that is more divided than unified, more prone to internal disagreements than to unity among its adherents than perhaps any other approach to literary analysis. Since it claims no ultimate spokesperson but many different voices, there exists not one but a variety of feminist theories. Behind all these seemingly contradictory voices and theories, however, is a set of principles that unites this criticism.

Although feminist critics' ideas concerning the directions of their criticism vary, feminists possess a collective identity: they are women (and some men) who are struggling to discover who they are, how they arrived at their present situation, and where they are going. In their search, they value differing opinions, thereby giving significance to the personal as opposed to a group of people or a codified and authoritative collection of texts. Their search, they assert, is political, for their aim is to change the world in which they live, a world that they maintain needs to and must be changed if all individuals, all cultures, all subcultures, and both sexes are to be valued as creative, rational people who can all contribute to their societies and their world. Such a revisionist, revolutionary, and ideological stance seeks to understand the place of women in society and to analyze all aspects that affect women as writers and their writings in what feminists believe is a male-dominated world. In this masculine world, the feminists declare that it is man who defines what it means to be human, not woman. Because a woman is not a man, she has become the Other, the "not-male." Man is the subject, the one who defines meaning; woman is the object, having her existence defined and determined by the male. The man is therefore the significant (or privileged using Derrida's term) figure in the male/female relationship, while the female is subordinate (or unprivileged).

Female subordination did not make its first appearance in the twentieth century, declare feminists such as Jane Tompkins and others. Long before

the existence of our present-day, male-dominated world, societies have been governed, for the most part, by males. These patriarchal societies, say the feminists, have simply passed down their erroneous beliefs from generation to generation, culminating with the predominant Western assumption that women are less than, not equal to, men. Arbitrarily using the male as the standard, these societies apparently agree with Aristotle's assertion that "The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities." Or they quote and support St. Thomas Aquinas's conviction that all women are simply imperfect men. Indeed, some still believe that Freud is correct when he argues that female sexuality is based upon a lack of the male sexual organ, a penis.

For feminist critics, by defining the female in relation to the male and claiming simultaneously the superiority of the male, Western and other cultures have decreed that the female, by nature, is inferior. Once Western culture consciously or unconsciously assimilated this belief into its social structures and allowed it to permeate all levels of society, females became an oppressed people, inferiors who must be suppressed least humankind fail to reach its maximum potential.

Feminist critics want to show humankind the errors in this way of thinking. Women, they pronounce, are people in their own right; they are not incomplete or inferior men. Despite how frequently literature and society have fictionalized and stereotyped women as angels, bar maids, bitches, whores, brainless housewives, or old maids, women must break free from this oppression and define themselves. No longer, assert these critics, can women permit male-dominated society to define and articulate their roles, their values, and their opinions.

To free themselves from definitional oppression, say feminist critics, women must analyze and challenge the established literary canon that has helped shape the images of female inferiority and subordination ingrained in our culture. Women themselves must create an atmosphere that is less oppressive by contesting the long-held patriarchal assumptions about their sex. Since no Aristotle has articulated a philosophy for women, all women must muster a variety of resources to clarify, assert, and implement their beliefs. Through a re-examination of the established literature in all fields, by validating what it means to be a woman, and by involving themselves in literary theory and its multiapproaches, women can legitimatize their responses to texts written by both males and females, their own writings, and their political, economic, and social positions in their culture.

METHODOLOGY

As there is no single feminist theory but many theories, so there exists not one but a variety of feminist approaches to a text. Wanting to challenge and change Western culture's assumption that males are superior to females and are therefore better thinkers, more rational, more serious, and more reflective than women, some feminist critics begin their debunking of male superiority by exposing stereotypes of women in every literary period. Women, they argue, cannot be simply depicted and classified as either angels or demons, saints or whores, or brainless housewives or eccentric spinsters. Such characterizations must be identified and challenged, and this kind of abuse/diminishment of women by male authors must be acknowledged as a way that men have consciously or unconsciously demeaned, devalued, and demoralized women.

Having identified the antifeminist characterization that occurs in many texts, the feminist critic turns to either the American, English, or a non-Western literary canon, seeking to discover works written by women. This is a difficult task, since males have published the majority of texts. American literature, for example, is decidedly male. With the works of Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, and other male notables filling the pages of the canon, little or no room is allowed for the writings of Susan Warner, E. D. N. Southworth, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, three of the most widely read authors in nineteenth-century America. Feminists assert that these female authors must be rediscovered by having their works republished and re-evaluated. When completed, this rediscovery will necessarily surface a valuable body of female authors who share common themes, histories, and often writing styles.

Other feminist critics suggest that we reread the canonized works of male authors from a woman's point of view. Such an analysis is possible, they maintain, by developing a uniquely female consciousness based on female experience rather than relying on the traditional male theories of reading, writing, and critiquing. Known as gynocriticism (see Historical Development section of this chapter and the Glossary for additional information), this female model of literary analysis offers four areas of investigation:

1. Images of the female body as presented in a text: Such an anatomical study, for example, would highlight how various parts of the female body such as the uterus and breasts often become significant images in works authored by women.
2. Female language: Such a concern centers on the differences between male and female language. Since we live in patriarchal societies, is it not fair to assume, wonder feminists, that our language is also male-dominated? Do women speak or write differently from men? Although there is little consensus to the answers to these questions, critics interested in this kind of investigation analyze grammatical constructions, recurring themes, and other linguistic elements.
3. The female psyche and its relationship to the writing process: Such an analysis applies the psychological works of Freud and Lacan to a text and shows how the physical and psychological development of the female evidences itself in

the writing process through penis envy, the Oedipus complex, and other psychological stages.

4. Culture: By analyzing cultural forces (such as the importance and value of women's roles in a given society), critics who emphasize this area of study investigate how society shapes a woman's understanding of herself, her society, and her world.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

Whatever method of feminist criticism we choose to apply to a text, we can begin textual analysis by asking some general questions, such as these:

- Is the author male or female?
- Is the text narrated by a male or female?
- What types of roles do women have in the text?
- Are the female characters the protagonists or secondary and minor characters?
- Do any stereotypical characterizations of women appear?
- What are the attitudes toward women held by the male characters?
- What is the author's attitude toward women in society?
- How does the author's culture influence her or his attitude?
- Is feminine imagery used? If so, what is the significance of such imagery?
- Do the female characters speak differently than do the male characters? In your investigation, compare the frequency of speech for the male characters to the frequency of speech for the female characters.

By applying any or all of these questions to a text, we can begin our journey in feminist criticism and simultaneously help ourselves to understand better the world in which we live.

SAMPLE ESSAY

In Lori Huth's student essay, "Throwing Off the Yoke: 'Rip Van Winkle' and Women," what principles of feminist literary theory does the author utilize in her interpretation? What feminist issues does she highlight? What feminist issues does she ignore? Is the author's use of quotations from the short story accurate and fair; that is, are any quotations taken out of context to help the author prove her point? Finally, what is the overall tone of the essay? How is this tone established?

FURTHER READING

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Warhol, Robin, and Diane Price Herndl, eds. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997.

WEB SITES FOR EXPLORATION

http://eserver.org/feminism/discourse/discourse.html
Offers a variety of topics from feminisms to literary theory

www.ualberta.ca/~cguertin/gesture.htm
An excellent essay discussing feminist theory and the visual arts

http://eserver.org/cultronix.smith
Discusses "Men in Feminism"

www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/lit.html
A solid discussion of feminist literary criticism and theory

www.sou.edu/English/IDTC/Issues/Gender/Resources/femtax1.htm
Provides an excellent review in chart form of the various kinds of feminism

www.drizzle.com/~tmercer/Fem/psyan.html
Provides a bibliography of feminist theory and psychoanalysis

Student Essay

Throwing Off the Yoke: "Rip Van Winkle" and Women

As the author of the first American short story, and as an intentional creator of an early American archetype, what kind of images of American men and women did Washington Irving develop and perpetuate in the American psyche? As the "first Ambassador whom the New World of Letters sent to the Old," what kind of messages did Irving send across the ocean with his stories? Long ago escorted into the canon of so-called great American literature, and still found in anthologies such as *The World's 50 Best Short Stories*, Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" blatantly promotes negative stereotypes of women. Revolving around the antics of its male protagonist, Rip, the story uses sexist, demeaning diction to describe women and presents static female characters whose identity is defined in relationship to men. Additionally, as a parable for America's revolt and subsequent freedom from England, Dame Van Winkle represents an overbearing mother country from which Rip, the hero and archetypal American man, is happy to be free.

Irving uses blatantly sexist and insulting language to describe Dame Van Winkle. She is a "shrew" and a "termagant"; she is a henpecking wife with "a tart temper [. . .] and a sharp tongue" that only grows sharper with use. *Shrew* and *termagant* are words meaning "an ill-tempered or nagging woman," having no equivalent terms for men. By using words that are inherently sexist, Irving singles women out as objects of negative biases. By highlighting Dame Van Winkle's shrill tongue, which is "incessantly going," as her primary characteristic, Irving relegates her and all women to a negative stereotype. With her "shrill voice" she disrupts the "tranquility" of the village's old boys' club. With the comment "what courage can withstand the ever-during and all-besetting terror of a woman's tongue," the narrator extrapolates the Dame's characteristic and applies it to all women. The story implicitly says not only that Rip is afraid of the Dame's tongue, but also that everyone is afraid of "a woman's tongue" (all of which can be assumed to be shrill like the Dame's). Irving also stereotypes Dame Van Winkle as a witch, saying she gives Rip's dog the "evil eye."

Rip Van Winkle, on the other hand, is a "simple good-natured fellow." Using positive language and diction to describe Rip, Irving contrasts Rip to the Dame. Although Rip has an "aversion to [. . .] profitable labour," the root causes of this supposed "great error" are positive rather than negative. They are not due to "the want of assiduity or perseverance," but rather to

his fear of his witchy, shrewish wife and to his love of activities such as fishing and philosophizing with his buddies.

Always willing to help a neighbor in need or sit patiently for hours waiting for a fish to bite, Rip is obviously favored and forgiven (by Irving and by the narrator) for his minor shortcomings. Despite the Dame's "dinning" and "terror," Rip remains obedient, developing a meek spirit and becoming universally popular in his village. His "great error" is thus nullified and almost made to seem a virtue or, at least, a logical and reasonable reaction to the terrors of his wife. Whereas children shout for joy to see him and dogs refrain from barking at him, not even the other village women support or defend Dame Van Winkle. All the "good wives" favor Rip and take his side in family squabbles. Gossiping among themselves, they place all the blame on Dame Van Winkle and exemplify yet another negative stereotype of women: women as cat-fighters who compete with each other for men's favor and attention.

As this stereotype suggests, the story relegates women to minor, limited roles compared to men and defines women only according to their relationships to men. Significantly, no woman in the story is named besides Rip's daughter, Judith Gardiner, who cares for him in his old age. The only named woman, then, is the "comely and fresh" one who nurtures a man and keeps a "snug, well-furnished house" for him. Because the story names Dame Van Winkle as such, it may seem that she is named, but the essence of this name is that it identifies her as Rip's wife. Like the HandMaid's "Ofrred" and "Ofwarren" in Margaret Atwood's *The HandMaid's Tale*, she is the dame *of* Van Winkle, but she has no name or identity of her own.

In contrast to women's namelessness, the story names a great number of men, including minor characters who are mentioned only once. These names include Nicholas Vedder, the village patriarch and innkeeper, Derrick van Bummel, a schoolmaster and a "dapper learned man," Peter Vanderdonk, a "well-versed writer," and Brom Dutcher, an old friend of Rip's. The descriptions of these men and others also reveal the variety and dignity of roles that the men in this story hold. They are philosophers and "sage[s]" who conduct "profound" and "solemn" discussions about politics and news. They are congressmen, soldiers, and generals. They are writers, philosophers, teachers, landlords, leaders, and kings. Women's roles, on the other hand, include "gossipers," housekeepers, "good wives" and termagant wives. They care for babies, old men, and their husbands. Like their names, women's roles are limited to their relationship to men. Dame Van Winkle's one good quality, although the narrator is reluctant to admit even this, is that she always keeps her house in order.

If we view Rip as an early example of the archetypal American who has recently freed himself from England, the story serves as a parable with Dame Van Winkle representing the overbearing British government, and

Rip representing the hero who has happily freed himself from that government. Irving found value in the past and the traditions of the Old World and did not share the hopeful vision of America as New Eden. His construction of what it means to be an American, however, as seen in the person of Rip Van Winkle, privileges a man's escape from society and government, both of which Dame Van Winkle embodies. The archetypal American woman, ruling at home through "petticoat government," gossips, cares for babies, fights with other women, and nags her husband incessantly.

Irving's archetypal American would be a bachelor, who, with a dog by his side, escapes the offensive behavior of his wife by sitting around with his buddies by the village tavern, pontificating on his freedom. His overbearing wife drives him to adopt mildly negative qualities as a defense mechanism against domination by an oppressive force. During his twenty years of sleep, Rip threw of the "yoke of matrimony" just as his country "[threw] off the yoke of Old England." Perhaps it is time we throw off the yoke of negative stereotypes and biases against women with which canonical stories such as "Rip Van Winkle" have falsely defined what it means to be a woman.

LORI HUTH