Feminist Criticism for Students: Interrogating Gender Issues
By Tim Gillespie

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women far more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.
—Adrienne Rich

The work itself, and its depiction of the general human palette in a particular time or place, is the measure of value, not the sex of the writer.
—Annie Proulx

An Overview

Feminism in general examines the roles of women in society and advocates for women’s rights and opportunities. Over the past four decades, this movement has had a significant effect on many fields, including literary criticism. The main practice of feminist criticism has been to study how literary texts present or ignore women, reinforcing biases or challenging them. The goal is to promote equality by ensuring the fair representation and treatment of women in texts and classrooms. As Judith Fetterley puts it in her book *The Resisting Reader*, “Feminist criticism is a political act whose aim is not simply to interpret the world but to change it, by changing the consciousness of those who read and their relation to what they read” (1978, viii).

This overt agenda—the wish to change the world for the better—is a difference between feminist criticism and many other forms of literary criticism. Feminism in general has been not only a theoretical pursuit but also a high-profile public practice in our society. Feminist activists have worked tirelessly on behalf of women’s rights and interests—knocking down barriers, changing laws, entering halls of power, and pointing out the ways women have been and continue to be oppressed, excluded, exploited, marginalized, and silenced.

Feminist literary criticism has likewise had a real-world effect. Books have been challenged for unfair gender representations. The absence of women from the literary canon has been questioned. School booklists have been expanded to include more works by female authors. And feminist theory has challenged some of the assumptions of past forms of literary criticism.
It’s hard to separate feminist literary criticism from history. Since humans invented writing, literature has reflected the historical fact that most people have lived in male-dominated societies where the primary means of literary education, publication, and interpretation have been largely controlled by and often exclusively reserved for males. Thus, much of our literary record consists of texts written by males with male protagonists and what have often been considered traditional male concerns: quests, adventures, wars, and explorations. Men have defined “literature” and established the lists of masterpieces. Female writers, constrained in most historical times and places by multiple social and economic bindings, including obstacles to education, have been largely unrecognized, discounted, or discarded from the literary canon—that somehow authoritatively determined and commonly accepted collection of masterpieces (as demonstrated by their inclusion in textbooks and anthologies, classrooms and curricula) that we have inherited. And female characters as represented by male authors have frequently been rendered along a narrow band of stereotypes—temptresses, virgins, and victims. Thus, a male point of view has dominated the history of literature.

Certainly, there have been notable exceptions to these generalizations. The first recorded poet in human history whose name we know was a woman, En-hedu-ana, lived around 2285 BCE in the ancient Akkadian society in Mesopotamia. The ancient Greek poet Sappho, who lived in the sixth century BCE, is venerated as one of the greatest lyric poets of all time. The Tale of Genji, a classic of Japanese literature, and what some scholars argue is the world’s earliest novel, was written around the year 1000 AD by the noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu. A handful of medieval European women writers, mostly nuns, participated in the literary and scholarly cultures of their times—Hildegard of Bingen in Germany, Julian of Norwich in England, and the Spanish Teresa of Ávila. Notwithstanding these notable exceptions, the historic opportunities for women writers have been severely limited.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, expanding middle-class literacy and prosperity in England and America led to an explosion of bookmaking, buying, and reading. Middle-class female readers with education, resources, and time became a significant part of the literary market, which led to the emergence of female writers, including Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and Charlotte and Emily Brontë, whose novels are still widely read today, though most of these writers initially published anonymously or under male names. The continuing prejudice against women writers was expressed by Nathanial Hawthorne’s nasty comment about his books being outsold by a “damned mob of scribbling women.” Female writers were often relegated to writing romance novels or domestic dramas, which were then criticized as too lightweight and trashy to be considered great literature.

Over a century later, starting in the 1960s, the modern era of feminist criticism flowered alongside a reenergized women’s movement in general. (This is sometimes labeled the second wave of feminism, the first being the suffrage movement of the early
twentieth century.) Feminist scholarship proliferated, feminist journals and magazines flourished, and women’s studies courses and majors multiplied. At the same time, feminist scholars began to reexamine the teaching of literature. This literary rethinking occurred along two avenues of approach, one addressing women as writers and one addressing women as subjects of writing.

That first approach, concerning women as writers, included a rigorous reconsideration of the established canon of honored masterpieces of serious literature. Examining all the markers of the canon before the 1960s—lists of “great books,” literary anthologies and textbooks, school curricula and academic studies—feminists found women writers largely excluded and asked why. One response has been the rescue of many lost or neglected texts written by women in prior generations. Works from authors ranging from Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Zora Neale Hurston have been successfully resurrected and have become a part of the canon and school curriculum because of the efforts of feminist scholars.

Besides this project of restoration and reconsideration of forgotten authors, feminist scholars have questioned the whole enterprise of canon making, challenging old assumptions about what constitutes universal literary excellence. Aren’t there multiple measures of quality that require a broad, diverse canon to express? Don’t we partly read to find ourselves and help construct our identities as well as to learn about the psychologies of people unlike us? If this is so, don’t we need a more wide-embracing canon so all students, male and female, can both find themselves and learn about others? Thus, as some feminist scholars have worked to show how past women writers met the traditional standards of excellence, others have worked to challenge those very standards themselves.

One challenge has focused on genre. When women were confined to writing in letters, diaries, and journals, those forms of writing weren’t considered “literature,” but feminist scholarship recognized the potential value in such genres such that today we can find widely published and highly regarded examples of these kinds of writing rediscovered from the past and valued in the present (as well as reinvigorated by their contemporary descendants, the popular genres of memoir and creative nonfiction).

When women finally found publishing outlets and success in the nineteenth century, their work was still largely limited, and a set of stereotypes was quickly put into play. People came to regard the male plot as the quest story, rich with heroism and adventure, while the female plot was the domestic drama in the form of soap opera, drawing room fiction, or Gothic romance, rich with subtle relationships, nuances of behavior, and emotions. Men wrote about the public sphere (politics, war), women about the private sphere (home, relationships). Men wrote on a large canvas, women on a small one. The pressures of marketplace expectations narrowed the possibilities for women writers. Then, to add insult to injury, this narrow range of writing was further demeaned as being by its very nature merely sentimental. Feminist scholars, however, began to deconstruct these old dismissals,
writing convincingly of the value and power of “women’s novels,” showing how a set of limitations could also be an opportunity for expression and subversion.

Perhaps the best case study of such a reconsideration is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the first American book to sell a million copies and the best-selling novel in America in the entire nineteenth century. With its wide readership, sympathetic portrayal of blacks, and heart-wrenching plot about the horrors of slavery, Uncle Tom’s Cabin had a profound effect on America’s ongoing slavery debate. However, from Stowe’s time to ours, the critical reception of the novel has been mixed, the “common wisdom” being that even with its powerful antislavery message, Uncle Tom’s Cabin is unduly sentimental and melodramatic as a literary text. As Duke University scholar Jane Tompkins has noted, such criticism has taught generations of students to equate popularity with low quality, emotions with ineffectiveness, domesticity with triviality; in other words, the settings and concerns of women writers were taught as inherently inferior. Tompkins made a forceful argument that Uncle Tom’s Cabin should be part of the literary canon.

As the first big project of feminist criticism was to consider whether women were represented in the literary canon at all, the second big project has been to consider how they have been represented, especially in texts commonly used in classrooms with young readers. Many analyses have found women and girls in canonical literature often depicted as subservient, acquiescent, weak, or dependent. They are passive observers and fantasizers, mostly preoccupied with domestic and romantic concerns, seldom autonomous. Men and boys, on the other hand, are more often depicted as active, competent, in leadership positions, assertive, adept in problem solving, strong, independent, powerful, adventuresome, and engaged in interesting and challenging tasks. Men in literature tend to act on the world, while women are recipients of others’ actions; men focus on self-realization, while women focus on serving and caring for others. Men are the adventurous force, chasing white whales or going to war, while women are the civilizing force, staying home to keep things together.

This stereotyping of behavior can negatively affect the attitudes, self-concepts, and aspirations of young readers, both male and female. Writers such as Kate Millett in her 1970 bestseller Sexual Politics went even further in their criticism of male representations of female characters in literature, cataloging texts that legitimized male sexual domination and violence, thus promoting the subjugation and exploitation of women.

Therefore, a dominant activity of 1970s feminist criticism was to be on the lookout for the sexist ideology promoted, even if unconsciously, in both old and new texts. In her important 1978 book The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction, English professor Judith Fetterley proposed that readers read with an eye to exposing and questioning the assumptions and myths about women revealed in literary works, resisting a book’s assumptions or viewpoints, always ready to unmask its biases.
Benefits of Feminist Criticism

These two major focal points of feminist criticism—considering first how women have written and second how they have been written about—have had particular benefits for classrooms. The first has brought old texts to our attention, the second, new questions.

That first early concern of feminist thinking, the invisibility of women writers, proved particularly so on U.S. high school reading lists, which were notably lopsided in favoring male authors and characters. Large-scale studies of secondary curriculum by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature found remarkable consistency in the books read in American high school classrooms. For many decades, the most frequently assigned titles remained consistent: The Odyssey, Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Huckleberry Finn, The Scarlet Letter, Of Mice and Men, The Great Gatsby, Lord of the Flies, and To Kill a Mockingbird. Only one of these was written by a woman.

Given this data, feminist critics asked questions: Shouldn’t we diversify the curriculum to include more women writers? How have we determined what should be on a list of assigned literary masterworks, anyway? What standards of evaluation have we been using? Who has been making these decisions? What are the costs of this absence of female authors and characters from school-sponsored reading?

The answer to the last question is clear: A school curriculum that offers limited examples of books written by and about women has negative effects on all readers but particularly on girls, for a number of reasons.

The horizons of girls may be limited when they don’t see by example that women have been successful professional writers.

Young readers may be less motivated to prize reading if they can’t find literary characters to identify with who are like them, so we need to worry about negatively affecting female students’ attitudes toward reading. Shouldn’t girls as a matter of course encounter many different kinds of female protagonists in the books they read in school—as role models, cautionary figures, heroes and leads, villains and jesters—just as boys do? (And shouldn’t boys have the opportunity to encounter and learn about more female characters? A reading curriculum lacking female protagonists limits boys as well as girls. As Liz Whaley and Liz Dodge put the matter in their excellent resource Weaving in the Women: Transforming the High School English Curriculum, “If we do not read and study about the many peoples and cultures, including the women, of the world, past and present, how can we ever hope to get along with each other?” [1993, 24]).

One final reason for redressing the gender imbalance is a subtle psychological one. An important function of literature is to take a particular experience or story and, by the artistry of the author, make it seem universal—representative of the experience of all readers. Because most of the literature read in school has been written by men and about men, male readers have had their experiences affirmed as universal ones. Women readers, however, have not as often seen their experiences articulated, clarified, and

legitimized in art. In most of what they have read in school, women have had to submit to or adopt a male point of view. They have had to learn to understand and accept male ways of looking at things, often including adopting a male perspective about female characters, while the opposite has not been required. The traditionally unidimensional literary curriculum has thus allowed men to avoid working to understand female sensibilities or to deal with a feminine side. But to succeed in school, females have had to experience male attributes and sympathies. Ultimately, a sense of powerlessness derives from this. The message is that to be universal is to be not female. In postmodern terms, the dominant discourse has been masculine, and women have been trapped in someone else's narrative.

To address all these potential negative effects, one of the main projects of feminist criticism has been to rectify the low visibility of women in literature, especially literature assigned and taught in school. The traditional canon has been enlarged to include more works by women. School textbooks reflect a more inclusive literary tradition. Because of all this activity, a wider range of reading material is available to students today. Women's voices have become more regularly a part of the chorus, and the result has been a richer song.

Another benefit has been that with more examples of women's writing in the curriculum, a wider range of representations of women is available to students. All readers can thus find portrayals of women as rich, varied, and colorful as the portrayals of men.

**Limitations and Critiques of Feminist Criticism**

A common slam on feminist criticism is that it's too narrow, considering only feminist themes in its interpretations. This is a criticism that can be made of any literary lens. When we focus closely on one particular aspect of a text, other aspects will naturally fade into the background.

As the doors of the formerly male-exclusive club of the traditional canon have been pushed open to admit women, another form of opposition has been to dismiss the effort as a kind of literary political correctness run amok. According to this argument, pure merit should be the criterion for admittance to the club, regardless of the author's sex. Replacing tried-and-true classics with works by women simply for diversity's sake is substituting political or ideological standards for literary ones. Minor works may have to be added to the canon to meet such literary affirmative action quotas.

Some women writers themselves—for example, check out the Annie Proulx quote at the start of this chapter again—resist what they regard as a kind of ghettoization into the category of “woman writer,” resisting the idea that the reception of their work, positive or negative, should be affected by their sex. This is marginalization, they argue. Others worry that they may be pigeonholed by the vague findings that men and women
write in different but predictable ways, asserting that such stereotypes intrude on their imaginative freedom and power as writers. In a letter to *Harper's Magazine*, the American writer Cynthia Ozick worried that liberation for female writers has become a subtle form of regression: “In the name of feminism, ‘women’s writing’ has turned from writerly freedom to circumscription, and sometimes to authoritarian prescriptiveness: I recall being berated in print for an insufficient show, in fiction, of ‘mother-daughter bonding’” (1998, 6). Are female writers thus to be read only within the confines of some defined female tradition and limited to a list of specific themes and situations determined primarily by their sex? No writer, Ozick says, should feel limited in this way. No writer ultimately thinks of herself or himself as a female or a male writer. For an artist, the unique human imagination always trumps categorization. Ideological thinking runs the risk of squashing creativity and squeezing out diversity.

Feminist criticism has been charged with these and other limitations.

**To Sum Up**

In its concern with the way women are treated in literature, feminist literary criticism has enriched our reading and our culture. It has brought a female sensibility to the previously male-dominated literary establishment and canon, helping us rediscover lost writers and works, as well as raising interesting possibilities for new literary traditions. It has led to more opportunities for female writers and has had an impact on the school English curriculum. It has offered new possibilities for our classroom explorations of literature. And in a contemporary world informed by decades of feminist thinking and activism, opportunities for our female students have never been more abundant.

Questions feminist critics ask include these: Are women represented fairly and fully (or represented at all) in this literary work? Does any gender stereotyping or silencing affect the overall effectiveness of the text? How does the text’s treatment of sexual roles and relationships and ideas of masculinity and femininity perpetrate or subvert past and present notions?

The ultimate goal of feminist criticism, as Lois Tyson has written, is “to increase our understanding of women’s experience, both in the past and present, and promote our appreciation of women’s value in the world” (1999, 100–101). By those measures, although there is still plenty of road to be traveled, we have come a long way.
The Issue of Gender Versus Sex

In her influential 1949 book *The Second Sex*, French writer Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) began making a distinction between the ideas of sex and gender that has come to be widely accepted. It is a useful distinction to make in the classroom.

In general, these days, sex is used to refer to the biological characteristics that distinguish females from males. Gender, by contrast, refers to the cultural constructs of femininity and masculinity. Sex is more about anatomical differences, gender about socially learned behavioral differences. (Or, as a teacher of my acquaintance once explained it, “In terms of immutable, nontransferable biological abilities, females can gestate, lactate, and menstruate, while males cannot. And males can impregnate, while females cannot. That’s it. All other differences are learned.”)

The implications are vast. While biology determines sex, society assigns gender and transmits our ideas about it. And since societies differ from one another and evolve over time, ideas about gender vary from culture to culture and change from generation to generation. In fact, our culture’s sense of gender roles has been in flux for the past few decades, altering because of changing circumstances, environments, economies, discoveries, educational inputs, and political activism, including the work of feminists.

Because gender is a cultural construct, we have to be mindful not to assume that what we see as differences between men and women are natural or normal. They may in fact be simply the way our society has defined gender roles. Feminists see these cultural definitions as historically putting women at a disadvantage in terms of power, status, and respect. As gender roles have trapped women—and men, ultimately, too—the notion that they are cultural constructs also means that they can be deconstructed and redefined in more positive and favorable ways for everyone. Thus, keeping in mind the difference between gender and sex can be helpful and hopeful for students.