WHAT IS FEMINIST CRITICISM?

Feminist criticism comes in many forms, and feminist critics have a variety of goals. Some are interested in rediscovering the works of women writers overlooked by a masculine-dominated culture. Others have revisited books by male authors and reviewed them from a woman’s point of view to understand how they both reflect and shape the attitudes that have held women back.

Since the early 1970s three strains of feminist criticism have emerged, strains that can be categorized as French, American, and British. These categories should not be allowed to obscure either the global implications of the women’s movement or the fact that interests and ideas have been shared by feminists from France, Great Britain, and the United States. British and American feminists have examined similar problems while writing about many of the same writers and works, and American feminists have recently become more receptive to French theories about femininity and writing. Historically speaking, however, French, American, and British feminists have examined similar problems from somewhat different perspectives.

French feminists have tended to focus their attention on language, analyzing the ways in which meaning is produced. They have concluded that language as we commonly think of it is a decidedly male realm. Drawing on the ideas of the psychoanalytic philosopher Jacques Lacan, French feminists remind us that language is a realm of public discourse. A child enters the linguistic realm just as it comes to grasp its separateness from its mother, just about the time that boys identify with their father, the family representative of culture. The language learned reflects a binary logic that opposes such terms as active/passive, masculine/feminine, sun/moon, father/mother, head/heart, son/daughter, intelligent/sensitive, brother/sister, form/matter, phallus/vagina, reason/emotion. Because this logic tends to group masculinity such qualities as light, thought, and activity, French feminists have said that the structure of language is phallocentric: it privileges the phallus and, more generally, masculinity by associating them with things and values more appreciated by the (masculine-dominated) culture. Moreover, French feminists believe “masculine desire dominates speech and posits woman as an idealized fantasy-fulfillment for the incurable emotional lack caused by separation from the mother” (Jones 83).

In the view of French feminists, language is associated with separation from the mother. Its distinctions represent the world from the male point of view, and it systematically forces women to choose: either they can imagine and represent themselves as men imagine and represent them (in which case they may speak, but will speak as men) or they can choose “silence,” becoming in the process “the invisible and unheard sex” (Jones 83).

But some influential French feminists have argued that language only seems to give women such a narrow range of choices. There is another possibility, namely that women can develop a feminine language. In various ways, early French feminists such as Annie Leclerc, Xaviere Gauthier, and Marguerite Duras have suggested that there is something that may be called l’écriture feminine: women’s writing. Recently, Julia Kristeva has said that feminine language is “semiotic,” not “symbolic.” Rather than rigidly opposing and ranking elements of reality, rather than symbolizing one thing but not another in terms of a third, feminine language is rhythmic and unifying. If from the male perspective it seems fluid to the point of being chaotic, that is a fault of the male perspective.

According to Kristeva, feminine language is derived from the pre-oedipal period of fusion between mother and child. Associated with the maternal, feminine language is not only threatening to culture, which is patriarchal, but also a medium through which women may be creative in new ways. But Kristeva has paired her central, liberating claim — that truly feminist innovation in all fields requires an understanding of the
American feminism criticizes the concept of combining women's and men's interests in a continuous and unbroken fashion. The concept of combining women's and men's interests is often criticized because it fails to recognize the distinct experiences and constraints of women and men. Feminists argue that the concept of combining women's and men's interests is a form of essentialism, which assumes that all men and women are fundamentally the same. Feminists believe that this concept fails to acknowledge the ways in which gender, race, class, and other factors shape the experiences of women and men.

American feminism also criticizes the concept of combining women's and men's interests because it fails to recognize the ways in which patriarchy and sexism have historically oppressed women. Feminists argue that the concept of combining women's and men's interests is a form of co-optation, which means that it is used to silence women's voices and perspectives. Feminists believe that this concept fails to recognize the ways in which women's voices and perspectives have been marginalized and silenced in the past.

American feminism also criticizes the concept of combining women's and men's interests because it fails to recognize the ways in which women's and men's interests are often in conflict. Feminists argue that the concept of combining women's and men's interests is a form of assimilation, which means that it is used to assimilate women's and men's interests into a single, unified concept. Feminists believe that this concept fails to recognize the ways in which women's and men's interests are often in conflict, and that this conflict is a key aspect of women's oppression.

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pose, providing a remarkably comprehensive overview of women’s writing through three of its phases. She defines these as the “Feminine, Feminist, and Female” phases, phases during which women first imitated a masculine tradition (1840–80), then protested against its standards and values (1880–1920), and finally advocated their own autonomous, female perspective (1920 to the present).

With the recovery of a body of women’s texts, attention has returned to a question raised a decade ago by Lillian Robinson: Doesn’t American feminist criticism need to formulate a theory of its own practice? Won’t reliance on theoretical assumptions, categories, and strategies developed by men and associated with nonfeminist schools of thought prevent feminism from being accepted as equivalent to these other critical discourses? Not all American feminist believe that a special or unifying theory of feminist practice is urgently needed; Showalter’s historical approach to women’s culture allows a feminist critic to use theories based on nonfeminist disciplines. Kolodny has advocated a “playful pluralism” that encompasses a variety of critical schools and methods. But Jane Marcus and others have responded that if feminists adopt too wide a range of approaches, they may relax the tensions between feminists and the educational establishment necessary for political activism.

The question of whether feminism weakens or fortifies itself by emphasizing its separateness — and by developing unity through separateness — is one of several areas of debate within American feminist. Another area of disagreement touched on earlier, between feminists who stress universal feminine attributes (the feminine imagination, feminine writing) and those who focus on the political conditions experienced by certain groups of women at certain times in history, parallels a larger distinction between American feminist critics and their British counterparts.

While it has been customary to refer to an Anglo-American tradition of feminist criticism, British feminists tend to distinguish themselves from what they see as an American overemphasis on texts linking women across boundaries and decades and a underemphasis on popular art and culture. They regard their own critical practice as more political than that of American feminists, whom they have often faulted for being uninterested in historical detail. They would join such American critics as Myra Jehlen to suggest that a continuing preoccupation with women writers might create the danger of placing women’s texts outside the history that conditions them.

In the view of British feminists, the American opposition to male stereotypes that denigrate women has often led to counterstereotypes of feminine virtue that ignore real differences of race, class, and culture among women. In addition, they argue that American celebrations of individual heroines falsely suggest that powerful individuals may be immune to repressive conditions and may even imply that any individual can go through life unconditioned by the culture and ideology in which she or he lives.

Similarly, the American endeavor to recover women’s history — for example, by emphasizing that women developed their own strategies to gain power within their sphere — is seen by British feminists like Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt as an endeavor that “mystifies” male oppression, disguising it as something that has created for women a special world of opportunities. More important from the British standpoint, the universalizing and “essentializing” tendencies in both American practice and French theory disguise women’s oppression by highlighting sexual difference, suggesting that a dominant system is impervious to political change. By contrast, British feminist theory emphasizes an engagement with historical process in order to promote social change.

In the essay that follows, Elaine Showalter focuses on the character of Ophelia, all but neglected by prefeminist criticism. Whereas those few earlier critics who did discuss Ophelia tended to see her as being “chiefly interesting . . . in what she says about Hamlet,” Showalter proposes that Ophelia has a “story of her own,” one that feminist criticism is now prepared to tell. In telling that story she sets out to combine French feminist thought about the “feminine” with a more American empirical and historical approach, thus “yok[ing],” in her own words, “French theory and Yankee know-how.” In the process, she blends not only two versions of feminism but also feminism and cultural criticism — a contemporary critical approach that looks at, among other things, the way in which literature changes and is changed by popular culture over time.

Showalter argues that Ophelia’s true story is the story of her representation, that is to say, the story of the changing way in which she has been interpreted by various kinds of artists (theatrical and nontheatrical), audiences, and critics. Showalter then begins to tell that story by disclosing what a contemporary Elizabethan would have thought of Ophelia. “Clinically speaking,” Showalter writes, “Ophelia’s behavior and appearance are characteristic of the malady the Elizabethans would have diagnosed as female love melancholy, or erotomania.” Through-
EBOOK BIBLIOGRAPHY

EMANCIPATION CRITICISM


British and American Feminist Theories


Incomparably brilliant were the writings of Margaret Mead, one of the most influential anthropologists of the twentieth century. Her work on kinship and culture has had a profound impact on our understanding of gender roles and societal structures.

Emancipation

The term "emancipation" refers to the process of freeing oneself from oppression or control. In the context of feminist theory, it often involves challenging patriarchal structures and advocating for equality and autonomy for women.

Emancipation

This concept is closely related to empowerment, which refers to the process of gaining power and control over one's life and decision-making. Emancipation is often seen as a necessary step towards achieving empowerment.

Emancipation

In addition to individual empowerment, collective emancipation is also a critical aspect of feminist work. This involves working towards the liberation of all oppressed groups, including women, and creating a more just and equitable society for all.

Emancipation

The struggle for emancipation continues today, as women and other marginalized groups continue to fight for equality and justice.

Emancipation

In conclusion, the concept of emancipation is a central theme in feminist theory and activism. It represents the ongoing struggle for freedom and equality, and serves as a motivating force for those working towards a more just and equitable world.
A Feminist’s View of “Cinderella”

MADONNA KOLBENSCHLAG

Madonna Kolbenshlag approaches “Cinderella” from a feminist’s point of view. Feminist criticism, as it is applied across the curriculum, attempts to clarify the relations of women and men in a broad array of human activities: for instance, in literary works, the structure of family life, and economic and political affairs. The object of analysis in the case of “Cinderella” is a story, and Kolbenshlag brings a unique set of questions to bear. In the world of “Cinderella,” what is the relationship between men and women? Among

women themselves? How is power divided in this world? How is a woman’s achievement defined as opposed to a man’s? What would children reading this story learn about gender identity? Feminists themselves might disagree in answering these questions: but the fact that these and not Bettelheim’s questions are guiding the analysis ensures that Kolbenshlag’s treatment of “Cinderella” and what we can learn from it will differ significantly from Bettelheim’s.

Note that the essay begins with epigraphs, or brief statements, from other writers meant to suggest something of the content of what follows. Authors place epigraphs to set a context for you, and the author who places two or more before a piece is implicitly suggesting that you make comparisons among them.

You’ll encounter two particularly difficult sentences: the last sentence of the essay, in which the author equates the behavior of women in “Cinderella” to the behavior of women in an own society, where power is largely held by men. And there’s another difficult sentence in paragraph 5: “The personality of the heroine is one that, above all, accepts abasement as a prelude to and precondition of affiliation.” Read these sentences in the context of the entire essay. Try getting the gist of Kolbenshlag’s main points and then try seeing how these sentences fit in.

Madonna Kolbenshlag is the author of Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-Bye: Breaking the Spell of Feminine Myths and Models (1979), in which the following selection appears.

Overtly the story helps the child to accept sibling rivalry as a rather common fact of life and promises that he need not fear being destroyed by it; on the contrary, if these siblings were not so nasty to him, he could never triumph to the same degree at the end. . . . There are also obvious moral lessons: that surface appearances tell nothing about the inner worth of a person; that if one is true to oneself, one wins over those who pretend to be what they are not; and that virtue will be rewarded, evil punished.

Openly stated, but not as readily recognized, are the lessons that to develop one’s personality to the fullest, one must be able to do hard work and be able to separate good from evil, as in the sorting of the lentils. Even out of lowly matter like ashes things of great value can be gained, if one knows how to do it.

—Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment

The literature on female socialization reminds one of the familiar image of Cinderella’s stepsisters industriously lopping off their toes and heels so as to fit into the glass slipper (key to the somewhat enig-
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Fairy Tales: A Closer Look at Cinderella

"Tis that little gift called grace,  
Weaves a spell round form and face . . .  
And if you would learn the way  
How to get that gift today—

How to point the golden dart  
That shall pierce the Prince’s heart—  
Ladies, you have but to be  
Just as kind and sweet as she!

Cinderella’s place by the hearth and her identification with ashes suggests several associations. At the most obvious level, her place by the chimney is an emblem of her degradation. But it is also symbolic of her affinity with the virtues of the hearth: innocence, purity, nurturance, empathy, docility. Cinderella has a vestal quality that relieves her of any obligation to struggle and strive to better her world. She must apprentice herself to this time of preparation for her “real” life with the expected One.

Like most fairy tales, Cinderella dramatizes the passage to maturity. Her sojourn among the ashes is a period of grieving, a transition to a new self. On the explicit level of the story, Cinderella is literally grieving for her dead mother. Grimm’s version of the tale preserves the sense of process, of growth that is symbolized in the narrative. Instead of a fairy godmother—deus ex machina—Cinderella receives a branch of a hazel bush from her father. She plants the twig over her mother’s grave and cultivates it with her prayers and tears. This is her contact with her past, her roots, her essential self. Before one can be transformed one must grieve for the lost as well as the possible selves, as yet unfulfilled—Kierkegaard’s existential anguish.

The mother is also identified in several variants with helpful animals, a calf, a cow, or a goat—all milk-giving creatures. In Grimm’s version the magic helpers are birds that live in the magic tree. The animals assist her in the performance of the cruel and meaningless tasks her stepmother assigns. The magic trees and helpful animals are emblems of the faith and trust that is demanded of Cinderella, the belief that something good can be gained from whatever one does. There is a subliminal value implied here, that work is seldom to be enjoyed for its own sake, but only to be endured for some greater end. It is essentially a “predestined” view of work as incapable of redemption. Service at the hearth is not intrinsically worthwhile, but acquires its value through the virtue it extracts from the heroine. Significantly, when the heroine is released from her servitude, the structure of belief—the myth—collapses. Cinderella’s father destroys the pear tree and the pigeon house.

The Perrault version places great emphasis on the “Midnight” prohibition given to Cinderella. A traditional connotation would, of course, associate it with the paternal mandate of obedience, and a threat: if the heroine does not return to domesticity and docility at regular intervals she may lose her “virtue” and no longer merit her expected one. Like the old conduct manuals for ladies, the moral of the tale warns against feminine excursions as well as ambition. Too much time spent “abroad” may result in indelicate sex or unseemly hubris, or both. “No excelling” and “no excess.”

As a dynamic metaphor of the feminine condition, it illuminates the double life that many women experience: the attraction of work and achievement, perhaps “celebrity” outside the home, and the emotional pull of the relationships and security within the home. For most women diurnal life is not a seamless robe. There are sharp divisions between creative work and compulsive activity, between assertiveness and passivity, between social life and domestic drudgery, between public routines and private joys. Women are, in the contemporary world, acutely aware of the need for integration. “Midnight” strikes with a terrible insistence, a cruel regularity in their lives.

Cinderella’s threefold escape from the ball (Perrault’s version) is of course designed to make her more desirable to the Prince. Or is it a reflection of her own ambivalence? (In Grimm’s version, she is under no prohibition, she leaves of her own accord.) Bettelheim offers two interesting interpretations:

1. She wants to be “chosen” for herself, in her natural state, rather than because of a splendid appearance wrought by magic.
2. Her withdrawals show that, in contrast to her sisters, she is not “aggressive” in her sexuality but waits patiently “to be chosen.”

The latter interpretation is underscored by the “perfect fit” of Cinderella’s foot in the slipper, and by the sisters’ frantic efforts to mutilate their own feet in order to diminish their size (symbolic of their aggressive, masculine traits). Here we see the two sides of the “formula female.” On the surface, perfectly conforming to the feminine stereotype; within, massive lacerations of the spirit. The slipper is indeed the ultimate symbol of “that which is most desirable in a woman,” with all of its stereotypical seductiveness and destructiveness.

The slipper, the central icon in the story, is a symbol of sexual bondage and imprisonment in a stereotype. Historically, the virulence of its significance is born out in the twisted horrors of Chinese foot-binding.
What do you think?

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An monologue. Kaibasudar's request. Review Questions or Discuss.

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woman—neve heard of again.

ever after. She changes her name. No doubt. And—like so many

the Cinderella disappears into the newer region known as the "Partly"

Torrance style. (She is the daughter of King and Princess.) But in most

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We know little of Cinderella's subsequent fate. In literature's version

found. He makes his kingdom here.

the Prince after Cinderella the lost slipper (critically a gift of the magic

prince). In the accompaniment of fictions and demands of comfort. Where the

practice. On another level. The slipper is a symbol of power—

Fairy Tales: A closer look at Cinderella
Critical Approaches to Literature

Literary criticism is not an abstract, intellectual exercise; it is a natural human response to literature. If a friend informs you she is reading a book you have just finished, it would be odd indeed if you did not begin swapping opinions. Literary criticism is nothing more than discourse—spoken or written—about literature. A student who sits quietly in a morning English class, intimidated by the notion of literary criticism, will spend an hour that evening talking animatedly about the meaning of R.E.M.'s lyrics or comparing the relative merits of the three Star Trek TV series. It is inevitable that people will ponder, discuss, and analyze the works of art that interest them.

The informal criticism of friends talking about literature tends to be casual, unorganized, and subjective. Since Aristotle, however, philosophers, scholars, and writers have tried to create more precise and disciplined ways of discussing literature. Literary critics have borrowed concepts from other disciplines, such as linguistics, psychology, and anthropology, to analyze imaginative literature more perpectively. Some critics have found it useful to work in the abstract area of literary theory, criticism that tries to formulate general principles rather than discuss specific texts. Mass media critics, such as newspaper reviewers, usually spend their time evaluating works—telling us which books are worth reading, which plays not to bother seeing. But most serious literary criticism is not primarily evaluative; it assumes we know that Othello or The Metamorphosis are worth reading. Instead, it is analytical; it tries to help us better understand a literary work.

In the following pages you will find overviews of ten critical approaches to literature. While these ten methods do not exhaust the total possibilities of literary criticism, they represent the most widely used contemporary approaches. Although presented separately, the approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive; many critics mix methods to suit their needs and interests. For example, a historical critic may use formalist techniques to analyze a poem; a biographical critic will frequently use psychological theories to analyze an author. The summaries neither try to provide a history of each approach, nor do they try to present the latest trends in each school. Their purpose is to give you a practical introduction to each critical method and then provide representative examples of it. If one of these critical methods interests you, why not try to write a class paper using the approach?
Gender criticism examines how sexual identity influences the creation and reception of literary works. Gender studies began with the feminist movement and were influenced by such works as Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1949) and Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics (1970) as well as sociology, psychology, and anthropology. Feminist critics believe that culture has been so completely dominated by men that literature is full of unexamined “male-produced” assumptions. They see their criticism correcting this imbalance by analyzing and combatting patriarchal attitudes. Feminist criticism has explored how an author’s gender influences—consciously or unconsciously—his or her writing. While a formalist critic like Allen Tate emphasized the universality of Emily Dickinson’s poetry by demonstrating how powerfully the language, imagery, and myth making of her poems combine to affect a generalized reader, Sandra M. Gilbert, a leading feminist critic, has identified attitudes and assumptions in Dickinson’s poetry that she believes are essentially female. Another important theme in feminist criticism is analyzing how sexual identity influences the reader of a text. If Tate’s hypothetical reader was deliberately sexless, Gilbert’s reader sees a text through the eyes of his or her sex. Finally, feminist critics carefully examine how the images of men and women in imaginative literature reflect or reject the social forces that have historically kept the sexes from achieving total equality.

Recently, gender criticism has expanded beyond its original feminist perspective. Critics have explored the impact of different sexual orientations on literary creation...
and reception. A men's movement has also emerged in response to feminism. The men's movement does not seek to reject feminism but to rediscover masculine identity in an authentic, contemporary way. Led by poet Robert Bly, the men's movement has paid special attention to interpreting poetry and fables as myths of psychic growth and sexual identity.

Elaine Showalter (b. 1941)

Toward a Feminist Poetics

Feminist criticism can be divided into two distinct varieties. The first type is concerned with woman as reader—with woman as the consumer of male-produced literature, and with the way in which the hypothesis of a female reader changes our apprehension of a given text, awakening us to the significance of its sexual codes. I shall call this kind of analysis the feminist critique, and like other kinds of critique it is a historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena. Its subjects include the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions of and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male-constructed literary history. It is also concerned with the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience, especially in popular culture and film; and with the analysis of woman-as-sign in semiotic systems. The second type of feminist criticism is concerned with woman as writer—with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and, of course, studies of particular writers and works. No term exists in English for such a specialized discourse, and so I have adapted the French term la gynocritique: "gynocritics" (although the significance of the male pseudonym in the history of women's writing also suggested the term "georgics").

The feminist critique is essentially political and polemical, with theoretical affiliations to Marxist sociology and aesthetics; gynocritics is more self-contained and experimental, with connections to other modes of new feminist research. In a dialogue between these two positions, Carolyn Heilbrun, the writer, and Catharine Stimpson, editor of the journal Signs: Women in Culture and Society, compare the feminist critique to the Old Testament, "looking for the sins and errors of the past," and gynocritics to the New Testament, seeking "the grace of imagination." Both kinds are necessary, they explain, for only the Jeremiahs of the feminist critique can lead us out of the "Egypt of female servitude" to the promised land of the feminist vision. That the discussion makes use of these Biblical metaphors points to the connections between feminist consciousness and conversion narratives which often appear in women's literature; Carolyn Heilbrun comments on her own text, "When I talk about feminist criticism, I am amazed at how high a moral tone I take."

"Toward a Feminist Poetics"
Since 1969 there has been an explosion of feminist writings without parallel in previous critical innovations, in a movement that, as Elaine Showalter has remarked, displays the urgency and excitement of a religious awakening. This current criticism, in America, England, France, and other countries, is not a unitary theory or procedure. It manifests, among those who practice it, a great variety of critical vantage points and procedures, including adaptations of psychoanalytic, Marxist, and diverse poststructuralist theories, and its vitality is signaled by the vigor (sometimes even rancor) of the debates within the ranks of professed feminists themselves. The various feminisms, however, share certain assumptions and concepts that underlie the diverse ways that individual critics explore the factors of sexual difference and privilege in the production, the form and content, the reception, and the critical analysis and evaluation of works of literature:

(1) The basic view is that Western civilization is pervasively patriarchal (ruled by the father)—that is, it is male-centered and controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic. From the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophic writings to the present, the female tends to be defined by negative reference to the male as the human norm, hence as an Other, or kind of non-man, by her lack of the identifying male organ, of male powers, and of the male character traits that are presumed, in the patriarchal view, to have achieved the most important scientific and technical inventions and the major works of civilization and culture. Women themselves are taught, in the process of being socialized, to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology (that is, the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority), and so are conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination.

(2) It is widely held that while one's sex is determined by anatomy, the prevailing concepts of gender—of the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in identity and behavior—are largely, if not entirely, cultural constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine.” By this cultural process, the masculine in our culture has come to be widely identified as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, creative; the feminine, by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, and conventional.

(3) The further claim is that this patriarchal (or “masculinist,” or “androcentric”) ideology pervades those writings which have been traditionally considered great literature, and which until recently have been written mainly by men for men. Typically, the most

Feminist Criticism. As a distinctive and concerted approach to literature, feminist criticism was not inaugurated until late in the 1960s. Behind it, however, lie two centuries of struggle for the recognition of women’s cultural roles and achievements, and for women’s social and political rights, marked by such books as Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), John Stuart Mill’s The Subjection of Women (1869), and the American Margaret Fuller’s Woman in the Nineteenth Century (1845). Much of feminist literary criticism continues in our time to be interrelated with the movement by political feminists for social, legal, and cultural freedom and equality.

An important precursor in feminist criticism was Virginia Woolf, who, in addition to her fiction, wrote A Room of One’s Own (1929) and numerous other essays on women authors and on the cultural, economic, and educational disabilities within what she called a “patriarchal” society that have hindered or prevented women from realizing their productive and creative possibilities. (See the collection of her essays, Women and Writing, ed. M. Barrett, 1979.) A much more radical critical mode was launched in France by Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1949), a wide-ranging critique of the cultural identification of women as merely the negative object, or “Other,” to man as the dominating “Subject” who is assumed to represent humanity in general; the book dealt also with “the great collective myths” of women in the works of many male writers. In America, modern feminist criticism was inaugurated by Mary Ellman’s death and witty discussion, in Thinking about Women (1968), about the derogatory stereotypes of women in literature written by men, and also about alternative and subversive points of view in some writings by women. Even more influential was Kate Millett’s hard-hitting Sexual Politics, published the following year. By “politics” Millett signifies the mechanisms that express and enforce the relations of power in society; she analyzes Western social arrangements and institutions as covert ways of manipulating power so as to establish and perpetuate the dominance of men and the subordination of women. In her book she attacks the male bias in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and also analyzes selected passages by D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet as revealing the ways in which the authors, in their fictional fantasies, aggrandize their aggressive phallic selves and degrade women as submissive sexual objects.
literary works focus on male protagonists—Oedipus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Tom Jones, Faust, the Three Musketeers, Captain Ahab, Huck Finn, Léopold Bloom—who embody masculine traits and ways of feeling and pursue masculine interests in masculine fields of action. To these males, the female characters, when they play a role, are marginal and subordinate, and are represented either as complementary to or in opposition to masculine desires and enterprises. Such works, lacking autonomous female role models, and implicitly addressed to male readers, either leave the woman reader an alien outsider or else solicit her to identify against herself by taking up the position of the male subject and so assuming male values and ways of perceiving, feeling, and acting. It is often held, in addition, that the traditional aesthetic categories and criteria for analyzing and appraising literary works, although represented in standard critical theory as objective, disinterested, and universal, are in fact infused with masculine assumptions, interests, and ways of reasoning, so that the standard selection and rankings, and also the critical treatments, of literary works have in fact been tacitly but thoroughly gender-biased.

A major interest of feminist critics in English-speaking countries has been to reconstitute the ways we deal with literature in order to do justice to female points of view, concerns, and values. One emphasis has been to alter the way a woman reads the literature of the past so as to make her not an acquisitively, but (in the title of Judith Fetterley’s book published in 1978) The Resisting Reader; that is, one who resists the author’s intentions and design in order, by a “revisionary rereading,” to bring to light and to counter the covert sexual biases written into a literary work. Another prominent procedure has been to identify recurrent and distorting “images of women,” especially in novels and poems written by men. These images are often represented as tending to fall into two antithetic patterns. On the one side we find idealized projections of men’s desires (the Madonna, the Muses of the arts, Dante’s Beatrice, the pure and innocent virgin, the “Angel in the House” that was represented in the writings of the Victorian poet Coventry Patmore). On the other side are demonic projections of men’s sexual retentions and terrors (Eve and Pandora as the sources of all evil, destructive sensual temptresses such as Delilah and Circe, the malign witch, the castrating mother). While many feminist critics have decried the literature written by men for its depiction of women as marginal, docile, and subservient to men’s interests and emotional needs and fears, some of them have also identified male writers who, in their view, have managed to rise above the sexual prejudices of their time sufficiently to understand and represent the cultural pressures that have shaped the characters of women and forced upon them their negative or subsidiary social roles; the latter class is said to include, in selected works, such authors as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Samuel Richardson, Henrik Ibsen, and George Bernard Shaw.

A number of feminists have concentrated, not on the woman as reader, but on what Elaine Showalter calls gynocriticism—that is, a criticism which concerns itself with developing a specifically female framework for dealing with works written by women, in all aspects of their production, motivation, analysis, and interpretation, and in all literary forms, including journals and letters. Notable books in this mode include Patricia Meyer Spacks’ The Female Imagination (1975), on English and American novels of the past three hundred years; Ellen Moers’ Literary Women (1976), on major women novelists and poets in England, America, and France; Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Brontë to Lessing (1977); and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’ The Madwoman in the Attic (1979). This last book stresses especially the psychodynamics of women writers in the nineteenth century. Its authors propose that the “anxiety of authorship,” resulting from the stereotype that literary creativity is an exclusively male prerogative, effected in women writers a psychological duplicity that projected a monstrous counterfigure to the idealized heroine, typified by Bertha Rochester, the madwoman in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre; such a figure is “usually in some sense the author’s double, an image of her own anxiety and rage.” (Refer to influence and the anxiety of influence.)

One concern of gynocritics is to identify what are taken to be the distinctively feminine subject matters in literature written by women—the world of domesticity, for example, or the special experiences of gestation, giving birth, and nurturing, or mother-daughter and woman-woman relations—in which personal and affectional issues, and not external activism, are the primary interest. Another concern is to uncover in literary history a female tradition, incorporated in subcommunities of women writers who were aware of, emulated, and found support in earlier women writers, and who in turn provide models and emotional support to their own readers and successors. A third undertaking is to show that there is a distinctive feminine mode of experience, or “subjectivity,” in thinking, feeling, valuing, and perceiving oneself and the outer world. Related to this is the attempt (thus far, without much agreement about details) to specify the traits of a “woman’s language,” or distinctively feminine style of speech and writing, in sentence structure, types of relations between the elements of a discourse, and characteristic figures and imagery. Some feminists have turned their critical attention to the great number of women’s domestic and “sentimental” novels, which are noted perfunctorily and in derogatory fashion in standard literary histories, yet which dominated the market for fiction in the nineteenth century and produced most of the best-sellers of the time; instances of this last critical enterprise are Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own (1977) on British writers, and Nina Baym’s Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–1870 (1978). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have described the later history of women’s writings in No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century (2 vols.; 1988–89).

The often-asserted goal of feminist critics has been to enlarge and reorder, or in radical instances entirely to displace, the literary canon—that is, the set of works which, by a cumulative consensus, have come to be considered “major” and to serve as the chief subjects of literary history, criticism,
scholarship, and teaching (see canon of literature). Feminist studies have served to raise the status of many female authors hitherto more or less scanty by scholars and critics (including Anne Finch, George Sand, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Elizabeth Gaskell, Christina Rossetti, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette) and to bring into purview other authors who have been largely or entirely overlooked as subjects for serious consideration (among them Margaret Cavendish, Aphra Behn, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Joanna Baillie, Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and a number of African-American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston). Some feminists have devoted their critical attention especially to the literature written by lesbian writers, or that deals with lesbian relationships in a heteronormative culture. (See queer theory.)

American and English critics have for the most part engaged in empirical and thematic studies of writings by and about women. The most prominent feminist critics in France, however, have been occupied with the "theory" of the role of gender in writing, conceptualized within various poststructural frames of reference, and above all Jacques Lacan's reworkings of Freudian psychoanalysis in terms of Saussurian's linguistic theory. English-speaking feminists, for example, have drawn attention to demonstrable and specific evidences that a male bias is encoded in our linguistic conventions; instances include the use of "man" or "mankind" for human beings in general, of "chairman" and "spokesman" for people of either sex, and of the pronouns "he" and "his" to refer back to ostensibly gender-neutral nouns such as "God," "human being," "child," "inventor," "author," "poet" (see Sally McColloch-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman, eds., Women and Language in Literature and Society, 1980). The radical claim of some French theorists, on the other hand, whatever their differences, is that all Western languages, in all their features, are utterly and irredeemably male-engendered, male-constituted, and male-dominated. Discourse, it is asserted, is a term proposed by Lacan, is phallogocentric; that is, it is centered and organized throughout by implicit recourse to the phallus (used in a symbolic rather than a literal sense) both as its supposed "logos," or ground, and as its prime signifier and power source. Phallogocentrism, it is claimed, manifests itself in Western discourse not only in its vocabulary and syntax, but also in its rigorous rules of logic, its proclivity for fixed classifications and oppositions, and its criteria for what is traditionally considered to be valid evidence and objective knowledge. A basic problem for the French theorists is to establish the very possibility of a woman's language that will not, when a woman writes, automatically be appropriated into this phallogocentric language, since such appropriation is said to force her into complicity with linguistic features that impose on females a condition of marginality and subservience, or even of linguistic nonentity.

To evade this dilemma, Hélène Cixous posits the existence of an incipient "feminine writing" (écriture féminine) which has its source in the mother, in the stage of the mother-child relation before the child acquires the male-centered verbal language. Thereafter, in her view, this prelinguistic and unconscious potentiality manifests itself in those written texts which, abolishing all repressions, undermine and subvert the fixed signification, the logic, and the "closure" of our phallogocentric language, and open out into a joyful freeplay of meanings. Alternatively, Luce Irigaray posits a "woman's writing" which evades the male monopoly and the risk of appropriation into the existing system by establishing as its generative principle, in place of the monolithic phallic, the diversity, fluidity, and multiple possibilities inherent in the structure and erotic functioning of the female sexual organs and in the distinctive nature of female sexual experiences. Julia Kristeva posits a "chora," or prelinguistic, pre-Oedipal, and unsystematized signifying process, centered on the mother, that she labels "semiotic." This process is repressed as we acquire the father-controlled, syntactically ordered, and logical language that she calls "symbolic." The semiotic process, however, can break out in a revolutionary way—her prime example is avant-garde poetry, whether written by women or by men—as a "heterogeneous destructive causality" that disrupts and disperses the authoritarian "subject" and strikes free of the oppressive order and rationality of our standard discourse which, as the product of the "law of the Father," consigns women to a negative and marginal status.

In recent years a number of feminist critics have used poststructuralist positions and techniques to challenge the category of "woman" and other founding concepts of feminism itself. They point out the existence of differences and adversarial strands within the supposedly monolithic history of patriarchal discourse, and emphasize the inherent linguistic instability in the basic conceptions of "woman" or "the feminine," as well as the diversities within these supposedly universal and uniform female identities that result from differences in race, class, nationality, and historical situation. See Barbara Johnson, A World of Difference (1987); Rita Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change (1989); and the essays in Feminism/Postmodernism, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (1990). Judith Butler, in two influential books, has opposed the notion that the feminist movement requires the concept of a feminine identity; that is, that there exist essential factors that define a woman as a woman. Instead, she elaborates the view that the fundamental features which define gender are social and cultural productions that produce the illusionary effect of being natural. Butler proposes instead that we consider gender as a "performativity"—that to be masculine or feminine or homosexual is not something that one is, but a pre-established condition that one repeatedly enact. (For the concept of "the performative," refer to speech-act theory.) See Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990), and Bodies that Matter (1993).

Feminist theoretical and critical writings, although recent in origin, expand yearly in volume and range. There exist a number of specialized feminist journals and publishing houses, almost all colleges and universities now have programs in women's studies and courses in women's literature and feminist criticism, and ever-increasing place is given to writings by and about women in anthologies, periodicals, and conferences. Of the many critical and theoretical innovations of the past several decades (see criticism, current theories of), the concern with the effects of sexual differences in the writing, interpretation,
analysis, and assessment of literature seems destined to have the most prominent and enduring effects on literary history, criticism, and academic instruction, when conducted by men as well as by women.

A Feminist Perspective on Frankenstein

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edited by Johanna M. Smith

Feminist Criticism of Frankenstein

From the novel’s women we may infer that Mary Shelley approved the separate-spheres doctrine; Elizabeth, for example, fully embodies the ideologically correct feminine qualities Victor — and the author — attribute to her. Yet it is equally clear that Elizabeth and the domestic sphere she represents fail signally in their raison d’être, which is to prepare young men like Victor to resist the temptations of the public sphere. *Frankenstein* shows that the private virtues inculcated through domestic affection cannot arm men against the public world unless men emulate these feminine and domestic qualities. Although Victor waxes eloquent on the domestic “lesson of patience, of charity, and of self-control” taught him as a child (40), his quest for scientific glory shows that none of this lesson took; and while he often reiterates his favorite “warmest admiration” (129) for Elizabeth’s qualities, he perceives them not as a model but as a “reward” and “consolation” for his trials (131). Through these contradictions the novel may be suggesting that domestic affection can achieve its educational aim only if it is “hardy enough to survive in the world outside the home” (Ellis, “Monsters” 140); but *Frankenstein* also dramatizes how all but impossible is that aim.

The problem is that the domestic ideology is bifurcated: the home is to provide not only a moral education for involvement in the public world but also a shelter against this world. Instead of a nursery of virtue, then, the home could become, as one of domesticity’s stoutest ideologues put it, a “relief from the severer duties of life” (Ellis, *Women* 12); a man could thus “pursue the necessary avocation of the day” but also “keep as it were a separate soul for his family, his social duty, and his God” (Ellis, *Women* 20). Although written some twenty years after *Frankenstein*, this picture of a man with two separate souls perfectly represents a contradictory domestic ideology and its product, a Victor divided between his masculine “necessary avocation” of scientific glory and his admiration of Elizabeth’s feminine domesticity.

Feminist criticism of *Frankenstein* has addressed the similar conflict between public and private that troubled Victor’s creator. Mary Shelley’s 1831 introduction states her desire for the public fame both her parents had achieved by writing, but she adds that her private, domestic role — “the care of a family” — kept her from pursuing this goal (20). Even when she went public with *Frankenstein* in 1818, she remained to some extent private by publishing it anonymously. Several possible explanations of this desire for privacy suggest themselves. While Mary claimed that she withheld her name out of respect for those “from whom I bear it” (*Letters* 1.71), she may also have feared a repetition of the public contumely directed at both of her parents as well as their
writings. The experience of her husband Percy and their friend Byron, two published poets whose work and unconventional lives had been vilified by critics, must have intensified these fears. And, although by 1818 she was legally married, her experience of publicity after eloping—she knew the rumors that her father had sold her to Percy (Letters 1.4)—may have made her especially wary of inviting public attention. Finally, Mary’s caution could well have been gender-specific: she may have wanted to prevent critics from dismissing her as a woman writer.

Several elements of this last possibility—the terms of such a critical judgment, Mary Shelley’s own view of women’s writing, the difficulty of writing her way out of the woman’s private into the man’s public sphere—are well illustrated by the periphrasings of a letter she wrote to Percy. On September 30, 1817, the letter’s date, Frankenstein was at the publisher, halfway between a private and a public state; Percy Shelley, not Mary, was in London editing the proofs. In her letter Mary animadverted at some length on the politics of a pamphlet by the radical William Cobbett. Percy apparently showed these private comments on public affairs to their mutual friend Leigh Hunt, editor of the Examiner. Without informing Mary, Hunt published her comments in the October 15 Examiner; he did not name her but did note her gender, describing her as “a lady of what is called a masculine understanding, that is to say, of great natural abilities not obstructed by a bad education” (Letters 1.54, fn. 2). Mary’s letter reads somewhat breathlessly—like much of the manuscript Frankenstein, for instance, it is punctuated only by dashes—and she felt it “cut a very foolish figure” in print (Letters 1.53).

Had she known Hunt planned to make her comments public, she told Percy, she would have written with “more print-worthy dignity”; instead, the letter was “so femininely [sic] expressed that all men of letters will on reading it acquit me of having a masculine understanding.”

The incident of the letter and its author’s response illuminate some of her difficulties as a woman writer. To begin with, she would come up against one element of the separation of spheres, namely a strict ideological distinction of “masculine” from “feminine” qualities. In Hunt’s editorial note, for instance, “great natural abilities” are gendered: that is, they are equated with a “masculine understanding.” If obstructed by the “bad” education most women could expect to receive, these abilities would be feminized—that is, obscured and weakened. For Mary Shelley to name herself as Frankenstein’s author, then, would be to endanger her status as honorary man, to risk having her “masculine understanding” impugned as “femininely expressed.”

Writing a novel of “print-worthy dignity” had already presented its author with similar problems. As I have noted (see p. 11), her domestic duties interfered with the time available for writing, and as editor her husband may have been a further impediment. Mary Poovey has cogently argued that Mary Shelley’s own editing of the 1831 Frankenstein was meant to bring her younger, unorthodox self into line with the conventional image of a proper lady, and it seems to me that a similar image-making motivated Percy’s revisions of his wife’s manuscript. In some ways, of course, his idea of a proper lady diverged wildly from contemporary ideology; after he and Mary eloped, for instance, he suggested to his wife Harriet that she join them. Nonetheless, Percy Shelley shared his culture’s desire to mold women according to a masculine idea of femininity, a narcissistic complement to masculine traits. Such narcissism colored his view of his relationship with Mary: they were so “united,” he wrote, that in describing her “excellencies” he seemed to himself “an egoist expatiating upon his own perfections” (qtd. in Spark 21). His editing displays the same self-satisfied desire to “unite” Mary’s work to his, to see his perfections mirrored in her manuscript.

While some of Percy Shelley’s changes are clarifications and others are grammatical, even these minimal alterations show his desire to control the text and shape it in his own image. As he consistently changes Mary’s dashes to colons and semicolons, for instance, or her coordinating “that” to the subordinating “which,” he is imposing his order on her ideas. More striking are his revisions of her language. Anne K. Mellor has exhaustively documented the extent to which Percy altered Mary’s straightforward and colloquial diction into a more ponderous and latinate prose,¹ and my own examination of the rough-draft and fair-copy manuscripts confirms that he is largely responsible for what George Levine calls the novel’s “inflexibly public and oratorical” style (3). This “public” style is masculine—the product of a public-school and university education, available only to men, which taught writing by using Latin prose as a model—and so it confers “print-worthy dignity” on what might otherwise seem “femininely expressed.”

Where Percy Shelley’s changes extended beyond clarification, grammar, and diction, Mellor charges that they “actually distorted the meaning of the text” (62). I will return to this questionable notion that any text has a single meaning, but certainly Percy’s heavy editorial hand marks the novel throughout. He rewrote some sections extensively; his fair copy of the conclusion (from Victor’s death on) significantly revises

the rough draft; and his wife gave him "carte blanche to make what alterations you please" while he was editing certain sections of the proofs (Letters 1.42).

Accustomed as we are to regarding authorship as independent creation we may wonder why Mary Shelley allowed her husband to rewrite her novel in these fairly substantial ways. Every writer knows how dispiriting it is to have one's deathless prose altered, no matter how kindly — especially when, as in Mary's case, the alterations come from a more experienced and thus (presumably) authoritative writer. Yet most writers have also felt the benefits of what might be called a collaborative editing, one that does not "distort" a text's single meaning but rather teases out its several inchoate or chaotic possibilities. It is at least arguable, then, that Mary acceded to her husband's changes not simply out of "deference to his superior mind" (Mellor 69) but also because she viewed him as a collaborator. Moreover, if Percy's revisions were in some ways protective coloration, they were also empowering: his attentions must have encouraged her to believe that she "possessed the promise of better things hereafter" (Introduction 20) and to produce a substantial body of "better things" after his death.

But the issue of a man's influence on a woman writer remains complicated. Mary Shelley felt unable "to put [her]self forward unless led, cherished & supported," and she perceived this need for support as feminine, "the woman's love of looking up and being guided" (Journal 555). It might be, then, that this ideology of dependent femininity rendered her unable to write her own text without her husband's help. Moreover, collaboration forced by a more dominant writer on a less powerful and perhaps unwilling "partner" is a kind of rape; if Frankenstein is the product of such a union, then it evinces a debilitating femininity. But to perceive writing as noncollaborative, as a necessarily independent act, betokens a concept of masculinity that raises another set of problems. One has only to think of Victor as self-sufficient "author" — of the monster (91), "unalterable evils" (84), and "his own speedy ruin" (92) — to see such authorship as a monstrous, masculine version of creativity. If Mary Shelley rejected this view of creation as autochthonous, of a work as wholly self-engendered, Frankenstein becomes "an incipient critique of the individualistic notion of originary creativity" (Carson 436). By welcoming help, then, she challenged a destructive version of "masculine understanding." But even if her collaboration was willing, it could be seen as self-suppression, an acceptance of "feminine" weakness: as the journal entry cited above shows, a woman of her time was conditioned to think she needed a man's help. From this perspective, her willingness to accept her husband's revisions is analogous to the novel's oppressively feminine women: all are efforts to straddle the line between public and private, to ensure that a masculine understanding is expressed without feminine obstructions but with feminine propriety.

This "but"-laden formulation leaves the question of Percy Shelley's influence open, and I have done so deliberately — partly because editing this book showed me the difficulty of distinguishing between encouragement and coercion, partly because we cannot ascertain Mary Shelley's motives with any certainty, but mainly because the problem of influence shows that the relations between prescribed femininity and women's actual experience are so convoluted as to resist single-answer formulations.

If we now turn from the author to her novel, we can see how domestic relationships in Frankenstein embody this complex and uneasy negotiation between ideology and experience.

The Frankenstein home seems a model of ideologically correct relationships. Not only are Alphonse and Caroline happily married, as parents they are "possessed by the very spirit of kindness and indulgence" (43). Together, we are told, they guide Victor with "a silken cord" (40); they are joint "agents and creators" of his childhood joys (43); and he derives as much pleasure from his father's "smile of benevolent pleasure" (40) as from his mother's "tender caresses." This shared parental shows that men as well as women have an important domestic role; indeed, insofar as Alphonse is a Good Father, he is feminine. His nurturant qualities were commonly associated with femininity, and it is significant that he has "relinquished all his public functions," withdrawn from the man's sphere of government into the woman's domestic sphere. Yet he also fulfills the traditional masculine role of protector toward his wife, by rescuing her from want and "shelter[ing] her, as a fair exotic is sheltered by the gardener, from every rougher wind." In these ways Alphonse becomes a sort of feminine patriarch, and his gentle rule by "silken cord" is the reverse of paternal tyranny.

Also ideologically sound is the harmony produced among the household's children by their opposite yet complementary traits.
Where the original manuscript focused on diversity, the final version was revised to focus on harmony. In the rough draft, for instance, an electrical storm produced "a very different effect" on each child: Victor wanted "to analyze its causes," Henry "said that the fairies and giants were at war," and Elizabeth attempted a picture of it (Abinger Dep. c. 477/1, p. 45). Although the 1831 Frankenstein retains such differences between Elizabeth and Victor, the focus shifts to how "diversity and contrast... drew us nearer together" (42). Elizabeth accepts "with a serious and satisfied spirit the appearance of things" while Victor "delight[s] in investigating their causes," but no "disunion or dispute" mars this gender difference between feminine passivity and masculine activity. Here as throughout the novel, gender opposites are represented as complements. The young Victor Frankenstein and his friend Henry Clerval actively prepare for public futures while Elizabeth simply exists as a domestic icon, but what might seem an opposition between separate spheres is rewritten as complementary difference. In other words, while Elizabeth is little more than "the living spirit of love" (43), as such she has feminine functions. Her "sympathy," "smile, etc. are "ever there to bless and animate" Henry and Victor; she teaches Henry "the real loveliness of beneficence" (43), and she keeps Victor from becoming "sullen" and "rough" by "subdue[ing him] to a semblance of her own gentleness" (43).

In Henry, moreover, Victor has a paradigm for the successful complementarity of masculine and feminine traits within himself. While Henry wants to be one of "the gallant and adventurous benefactors of our species" (43), he is also a domestic benefactor: as Victor's "kind and attentive nurse" (61) at Ingolstadt, he fulfills the role Elizabeth wished for herself (63). In addition, he tempers his masculine "passion for adventurous exploit" (43) with Elizabeth's feminine desire that he make "doing good the end and aim of his soaring ambition." Unlike Victor's "mad enthusiasm" (154), Henry's "wild and enthusiastic imagination was chastened by the sensibility of his heart" (133). Clearly, Victor's "eager desire" to learn "the physical secrets of the world" should have been balanced by Henry's preoccupation with "the moral relations of things" (43; emphasis added).

Why, then, does this domestic enclave of virtue not protect Victor? Why does he not remain within the boundaries marked off by the "silken cord" of domestic affection? Why does he not profit from the "lesson of patience, of charity, of self-control" taught by his parents and embodied in his friends, Elizabeth and Henry? The answers lie in Victor's complicated relations to nature, feminized domesticity, and masculine science.

For Victor, nature is "maternal" (87), and its life-giving and "kindly influence" has a domestic equivalent in Elizabeth's feminine fostering. Just as Elizabeth "subdued Victor to a semblance of her own gentleness," so a "cloudless blue sky" can bestow "a tranquility to which [he] had long been a stranger" (132); just as Elizabeth can "inspire [him] with human feelings" (159), so a "divine spring" can "revive" in him "sentiments of joy and affection" (62). In these moods of openness to nature, Victor is feminized into passive tranquility and domestic affection. In other moods, however, he thrills to a more masculine nature; when he experiences a storm in the Alps, for instance, "This noble war in the sky elevated my spirits" (72). It is this idea of war, of attempted conquest or domination, that most frequently informs Victor's masculine attitude toward nature. It is no accident, then, that he chooses the masculine realm of science as a means of discovering and thereby mastering the secrets of feminine nature. From childhood Victor had regarded the world as "a secret which I desired to divine"; repeatedly he tells us of his obsessive curiosity about "the hidden laws of nature" (42), his "eager desire" to learn "the secrets of heaven and earth" (43), his "fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature" (44). Because "her immortal lineaments were still a wonder and a mystery" to him (45), this unknown nature offers a field for the masculine mastery promised by scientific knowledge. At Ingolstadt M. Waldman assures him that modern scientists can "penetrate into the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding-places" (51), and so Victor determines to "pursue nature to her hiding-places" (56).

Now, this language describing masculine penetration of feminine nature may be scientific, but it also sounds insistently sexual; to post-Freudian ears, it may suggest a woman writer's uneasiness with masculine sexuality. But another explanation may lie in Mary Shelley's conflicted desire both to achieve public fame by writing and to escape the consequent publicity by remaining in the private sphere. If Percy Shel-
ley's "incitement" (23) reinforced her "persistent association of writing with an aggressive quest for public notice" (Poovey 121), then writing *Frankenstein* must have seemed to *invite* the consequent invasions by publicity. The novel's language of penetration, that is, may have less to do with sexuality per se than with a woman writer's fear that walled-off domesticity cannot guarantee the privacy it promises. More troubling would be the possibility that, if writing masculinizes, then it might make a woman Victor-like, aggressive, a scientific violator of domesticity's secrets.

But if domesticity can be penetrated, especially from within, does this not suggest that it was never inviolable, that its apparent strengths were in fact its weaknesses or even its immanent destruction? This question moves back toward the problem of feminized domesticity, and here we need to look again at Alphonse's role as feminine patriarch. While Victor says that Waldman's promises of scientific prowess were "enounced to destroy me" (51), he blames not Waldman but his father. Instead of offhandedly dismissing Cornelius Agrippa as "sad trash" (44), Victor complains, Alphonse should have explained that modern science "possessed much greater powers" than Agrippa's outmoded alchemical methods; Victor would then have bowed to the authority of paternal knowledge and "possib[y] escaped the fatal impulse that led to my ruin" (44). Well, maybe. But if the revelation of modern science's "new and almost unlimited powers" (51) is an "evil influence" when it comes from M. Waldman (49), it would be no less evil coming from the elder Frankenstein. Significant here are the author's revisions rendering Alphonse "not scientific" (45). She omitted from the rough draft both his scientific experiments and his wish that Victor attend lectures in natural philosophy, and she altered the decision to send Victor to university, originally made by "my father," to the wish of "my parents" (Abinger Dep. c.477/1, pp. 6, 47). All these changes suggest that the author intended to reduce Alphonse's culpability for Victor's skewed science.

Yet Alphonse *does* contribute to Victor's ruin, not because he is a bad scientist but because he is a good father. What I am suggesting is a destructive domesticity enforced by the feminized patriarch. Despite Victor's insistence on his perfect childhood, his relation to his "remarkably secluded and domestic" upbringing (48) is in fact conflicted. On the one hand, he is "reluctant" to leave home for Ingolstadt, where he must become "[his] own protector"; on the other, he has "longed to enter the world," to no longer be "cooped up" by domesticity and its protections. In a novel ostensibly written to exhibit "the amiableness of domestic affection" (Preface 25), Victor's admission jars: can it be that his home is too domestic, his feminized father too protective?

Although Victor insists on his "gratitude" for his parents' care (43), we may speculate that this very gratitude has made him feel "cooped up." Gratitude, no matter how heartfelt, implies obligation, which in turn implies the power of the person to whom one is grateful or obligated. The insistence on gratitude and obligation induces a bookkeeping mentality that permeates all the relations in this novel. Victor acknowledges Henry Clerval's nursing by asking "How shall I ever repay you?" (62); Felix De Lacey views Safe as "a treasure which would fully reward his toil and hazard" in rescuing her father (108); when shot by the peasant, the monster fumes that "the reward of [his] benevolence" is "ingratitude" (122). This emotional quid pro quo is most evident, however, in the novel's domestic relations. In these terms the Frankenstein family is "a paradigm of the social contract based on economic terms" (Dussinger 52), for kinship and domestic affection are "secondary to the indebtedness incurred by promises exchanged for gifts." That is, in this family what seems freely given in fact requires something in exchange, so that the relation between parents and children is one of "unpayable debt."

Rather than Victor's picture of a gentle patriarch guiding by "silken cord," what then emerges is a cord or bond of constraining domestic relations. Among the Frankenstein's, a gift requires gratitude and so produces a sense of obligation that can be discharged only by endless repetition of this pattern. Victor's parents had "a deep consciousness of what they owed towards the being to which they had given life" (40). To them the child was the innocent and helpless creature bestowed on them by Heaven, . . . whose future lot it was in their hands to direct to happiness or misery, according to as they fulfilled their duties towards me. (40; emphases added)

Caroline and Alphonse pay off their debt of gratitude to "heaven" by fulfilling the duties they owe their child. Victor in turn owes gratitude for the life "given" him and for his parents' care, but their power and . . .

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1In her 1831 introduction Mary Shelley claims that Percy Shelley wrote this Preface, but an 1817 journal entry suggests otherwise. On May 14 she writes "S. [i.e., Percy] reads History of F[rench] Rev[olution] and corrects [Frankenstein]. write Preface. — Finis" (Journal 169). The verb "write" indicates that the omitted subject of this sentence is not Percy but "I"; this may be a slip of the pen, but if not it is interesting to speculate why Mary remembered Percy and not herself as the author of the Preface.
his consequent obligations form the cord that, no matter how silken, confines and encloses him within the family. Hence he repeats this domestic pattern when he contemplates creating a new species, and his view of the parent-child relation revealingly focuses on himself as patriarch. The members of his new species “would owe their being to me,” he gloats, and so “[n]o father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs” (55; emphases added). Alphonse may have seemed a gentle patriarch, but Victor’s words suggest there was an iron hand in this velvet glove: a father can claim gratitude from the child who owes existence to him.

Judged simply from this paternal point of view, there is a certain logic in Victor’s abandonment of the “child” he created: if the sheer bestowal of existence is a sufficient claim to gratitude, why be an Alphonse-like Good Father? Of course, in abandoning the monster Victor forgets the distinction he had earlier made between merely claiming gratitude and really deserving it. To deserve gratitude, parents must “fulfill their duties” toward their child; because Victor does not do so, he is a Bad Father and his child is not embodied filial gratitude but “my own vampire, my own spirit . . . forced to destroy all that was dear to me” (73). But if a bad father produces a bad child, and Victor like the monster is a bad child, does this not suggest that Alphonse too was a bad father, that he somehow failed to fulfill his duties toward his child? Or was it fulfilling those duties that made him a bad father? In other words, can the ideologically correct Good Father be so nurturant that he becomes a Bad Father? If so, then Alphonse’s paternal protection is as damaging to his child as Victor’s paternal indifference is to his. In other words, while the monster becomes monstrous in part because he has been denied parental care, Victor becomes monstrous in part because he has been given this care and made subject to the attendant obligations. In this reading, the “spirit” that Victor relays through the monster is the masculinity so “cooped up” by Alphonse’s feminized domesticity that it breaks out as “the male principle in its extreme, monstrous form” (Veecher 190). Hence Victor can enter the masculine sphere of science only by destroying the feminine sphere, and that includes his feminized father. Victor’s kinship to the monster reveals the dark side of the Frankenstein family’s oppressive domesticity and too-nurturant patriarch.

But Victor is not the only victim of this pattern of domestic indebtedness: it is the novel’s women who are literally destroyed by it. In the relations of Caroline, Elizabeth, and Justine to the Frankenstein family, we can again see something excessive, something too enveloping in Frankensteinian domesticity. Certainly the image of Caroline as Alphonse’s “fair exotic” (39) suggests a hot-house atmosphere, and when she transplants the “garden rose” Elizabeth (41) to the Frankenstein home as Victor’s “more than sister” (42), “the amiableness of domestic affection” comes precariously close to incest. Of course Elizabeth is not literally Victor’s sister, and he later assures his father that he loves her not as a brother but as a husband (129). But pursuing the hint of incest will clarify how blood kinship among the Frankensteinians is secondary to familial indebtedness; we can then see how the resulting insistent domesticity kills off the novel’s women.

Class selection determines which women are worthy to enter the upper class Frankenstein family; as Anca Vlasopolos suggests, this criterion is “a form of aristocratic protectionism that encourages, in fact, incest” (126) by closing the family off from otherness or difference. Although plunged into straw-plaiting poverty by her father’s business failure, Caroline’s lineage and beauty mark her as still deserving the “rank and magnificence” he once enjoyed (38); by marrying her, then, Alphonse is restoring the status quo, rescuing Caroline from the otherness of a working-class milieu and returning her to her proper place. This pattern is even more overt in the adoption of Elizabeth. Because Elizabeth is “of a different stock” from her rude guardians (40), Caroline rescues this nobleman’s daughter from the lower orders and then uses the “powerful protection” (41) of the Frankenstein family to restore Elizabeth to her proper status. Difference is further excluded as Elizabeth takes on all the family’s feminine roles; Victor’s “more than sister” and destined to be his wife, she also becomes Caroline by “[supply[ing her] place” as mother after her death (47). Although Justine is brought less fully into the family, she is perhaps the most Frankensteinized: when Caroline rescues her from a Bad Mother, Justine so “imitate[s] her phraseology and manners” (64) as to become her clone. The Frankenstein family’s incestuous pattern of reproducing itself by excluding difference could hardly be clearer. And although none of these women is a born Frankenstein, they all — unlike Victor — fully internalize the family pattern of gratitude that enforces obligation.

This insistent replication of the grateful icon of domesticity shows how completely the pattern of indebtedness permeates the Frankenstein definition of femininity. Caroline is an especially rich example of this definition. We first see her as a daughter; even though her father’s culpably “proud and unbridling disposition” (38) forces her into his (masculine) role of breadwinner, the daughterly “tenderness” that dis-
charges obligations to even a bad father (39) ensures her elevation to Frankenstein status. After Alphonse becomes her “protecting spirit,” Caroline almost literally owes all she has to this marriage, and his oppressive benevolence constitutes another silken cord of enjoined gratitude. When she tries to discharge her obligations by “act[ing] in her turn the guardian angel to the afflicted” (40) — that is, by becoming a Frankenstein — her benevolence takes the usual form of enforced gratitude and obligation. When she gives Justine an education, for instance, “this benefit was fully repaid” (64) when Justine becomes “the most grateful little creature in the world.” And when Caroline tries to discharge her debt to Alphonse by rescuing Elizabeth as she herself was rescued, she eventually pays with her life when she catches scarlet fever while nursing her protegée; unlike Victor, she has learned her own lesson “of patience, of charity” only too well.

A similar sacrifice is Elizabeth. Indebted to Caroline for rescue from peasant life, she must discharge this debt by taking Caroline’s place as the Frankenstein ideal of femininity. As “a shrine-dedicated lamp in our peaceful home” (43) and “the tie of our domestic comfort and the stay of [Alphonse’s] declining years,” she is embodied domesticity. She is also Victor’s “possession” (41), as he puts it: “my pride and my delight, mine to protect, love, and cherish.” But just as Alphonse’s “protecting spirit” is ultimately responsible for Caroline’s death, so Victor fails signally to “protect and cherish” his wife. His dream, that his kiss kills Elizabeth and turns her into his dead mother, is proleptic of the price she must pay for being Caroline’s “pretty present” to him (41): in the form of the monster, Victor’s aggressive masculinity murders the domestic femininity that had tried to “subdue [him] to a semblance of her own gentleness.”

Justine is perhaps the most pathetic victim of this pattern of replicated femininity. Exhausted by her Caroline-like maternal care in searching for William, she falls asleep and so becomes the monster’s prey. Her likeness to Caroline reminds him that he is “forever robbed” of any woman’s “joy-imparting smiles” (123), so he determines that “she shall atone” for all women’s indifference. While Justine suffers here from being Caroline’s stand-in, more generally her crime is being seductive; according to this masculine logic, women are “to blame for having been desired” (Jacobs 133). To the townspeople, however, the crime for which Justine must “atone” is “blackest ingratitude” toward her benefactors (79). Once again the portrait of Caroline seals Justine’s fate: planted on her by the monster, it becomes circumstantial evidence of this ingratitude. Elizabeth’s statement of her own and Caroline’s kind-

ness to their servant backfires; Justine, like Caroline and Elizabeth, must pay her obligations to the Frankensteins with her life, and furthermore dies all but convinced “that I was the monster” of ingratitude she is accused of being (80). These dramatic ironies, one victimized woman convicting another and that second victim convicting herself, in fact convict the Frankenstein family of omnivorous benevolence. Victor is right to call himself Justine’s murderer (149), for it is the masculinity he represents that destroys its own creation of perfect femininity.

Victor’s creation and destruction of the female monster is a kind of parody of these three women’s fates. From watching the De Lacey and Safie, the monster learns to value the delights of domesticity they represent but also learns that he is “shut out” from such intercourse (106); hence he asks Victor for a mate with whom to “interchange [the] sympathies necessary for my being” (124). Given the failure of his exchange of sympathies with the De Laceys, it is more than a little ironic that the monster should make this request. And his desire for a female complement, a woman “as hideous as myself” (125), parodies not only Victor’s insistence on Elizabeth’s complementary relationship to himself, but also Victor’s bride-to-be as both the creation and the gift of his parents. This traffic in women via Frankensteinian quid pro quo is at its most overt in the murders of the monstrette and Elizabeth: deprived of a bride by Victor, the monster retaliates by killing Victor’s bride. Victor, of course, assumes that he and not Elizabeth will be the monster’s target, and in one sense he is correct: like the monstrette’s, Elizabeth’s creation and murder show that women function not in their own right but rather as signals of and conduits for men’s relations with other men.

Against this dreary crop of dead women we may place Safie. Her mother was rescued from slavery just as Caroline was rescued from poverty (Ellis, “Monsters” 141), but there the resemblance ends. From her mother Safie learns “to aspire to higher powers of intellect and an independence of spirit” (108); hence she flouts her father’s “tyrannical mandate” (110) against marrying Felix and travels across Europe to rejoin him. Both her maternal inspiration and her active adventurousness contrast with Caroline’s influence on her passive “daughters” Elizabeth and Justine. Unlike their iconic femininity, Safie is “subtly androgynous” (Rubinstein 189); we might see her as a female Henry, combining the standard feminine “angelic beauty” (103) with a masculine energy and enterprise lacking in the novel’s other women. But the challenge she might represent to conventional ideas of femininity is in effect “absorbed” by various cultural norms (Vlasopolos 132). In the
first place, her desire to marry Felix has a class bias, for she is "enchant[ed]" (109) by the prospect of "tak[ing] a place in society." In addition, unlike Henry or Walton she seeks adventure not for its own sake or to benefit humankind but to get a man. This is not to say that Walton's quest is unambiguously benevolent: like Victor's desire to "pioneer a new way" (51) and thus achieve "more, far more" than his predecessors, Walton's urge to "confer on all mankind" (26) an "inestimable benefit" is motivated at least as much by a self-absorbed itch for glory as by humanitarianism. It is nonetheless true that Safie, albeit much less drastically than the Frankenstein women, represents the view that women are "relative creatures" whose value derives from "promoting the happiness of others" (Ellis, Women 48, 16). It is thus apt that she joins the De Lacey family, for while their interactive domestic style stands in stark contrast to the rigid gift/debt structure of the Franksteins, still it is a conventionally separate-spheres arrangement: Felix is "constantly employed out of doors" (98), for instance, while his sister Agatha's work consists of "arranging the cottage" (97). Moreover, just as Victor's family attempts to make a select few women into Franksteins, so the De Lacey family circle opens only to admit the beautiful Safie. That Felix, like Victor, excludes the ugly monster indicates again how strictly men control where "the ambleness of domestic affection" is allowed to operate.

By using several feminist methodologies — studying one woman writer's experience of domestic and public roles, analyzing the cultural formation and literary representation of these gender roles — I have been reading Frankenstein as a woman's text concerned with women's issues. While Victor's story shows that the constraints of domesticity bear down hard on men, it is clear that the novel's women — who must not only create the familial sanctuary and sacrifice themselves to maintain it but also be punished for its failures — take the heavier share of the burden. If Frankenstein is about Victor, it is also about what his monstrous masculinity does to women, and even though none of these women speaks directly, Mary Shelley's novel speaks to us for them.

WORKS CITED


Chapter 8  "Feminism"

LITERARY CRITICISM

An Introduction to Theory and Practice

Second Edition

For Darlene, my best friend and loving wife,
and For Heidi, my beloved daughter

Charles E. Bressler
Houghton College
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 “...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 condescending, scheming, selfish 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 queen. 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 return to her carriage.

Dressed once again 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 accidentally 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 the 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 that she and many others like her have so 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. For 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.

This re-created Cinderella debunks the false standards and ideas concerning women and their portrayal in both life and literature that have been carefully perpetuated by the traditional Cinderella and her society. Women, says this new Cinderella, should not mindlessly wait around for a handsome prince to come to their rescue. Women must not be like the traditional Cinderella: dependent creatures who blindly accept the commandments 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 their culture's stereotypes of women such as "the wicked stepmother" syndrome that 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. And 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. And above all, they must realize that they are not limited by their sex; like any man, they 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 of the old Cinderella never knew: Whereas sex is biologically determined, gender is culturally determined. And 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:

- Men, either unconsciously or consciously, have oppressed women, allowing them little or no voice in the political, social, or economic issues of society.
- 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 devoiced, devalued, and trivialized what it means to be a woman.
- 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 where the male and female voices are 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, one of their leading philosophers and teachers, asserted that "the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled."

Following Aristotle's lead, 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 achieving their spiritual potential. And in the centuries to follow, other theologians, philosophers, and scientists continued such gender discrimination. For example, in The Descent of Man, 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.

For 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 against such patriarchal opinions 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. Most 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 healthcare, education, politics, and literature. But equality with men in these arenas remained outside their grasp.

Virginia Woolf

Then in 1919, British scholar, teacher, and early feminist Virginia Woolf 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 as gifted a writer as Shakespeare. 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 solitude and autonomy needed to seclude one's self from the world and its accompanying 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 does not bear her name, for she is buried in a unmarked grave simply because she is female.
Such loss of artistic talent and personal worthiness, says Woolf, is the direct result of society’s opinion of women: 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 concerning 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. But 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 French writer Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, however, feminist interests once again surfaced. Heralded as the foundational work of twentieth-century feminism, Beauvoir’s text declares that both French and Western societies 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. Because the female is not male, Beauvoir asserted, she becomes “the Other,” an object whose existence is defined and interpreted by the male, who is 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. According to Beauvoir, 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 therefore 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. One such voice was Kate Millett. With her *Replication of Sexual Politics* in 1969, a new wave of feminism began. Millett was one of the first feminists to challenge the ideological social characteristics of both the male and the female. According to Millett, 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, being 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 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 female discourse, literary studies, and feminist criticism.

**Feminism in the 1960s and 1970s**

Moving from the political to the literary arena throughout the 1960s and 1970s, feminist critics began examining the traditional literary canon and discovered an array of male dominance and prejudice that supported Beauvoir 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, whereas Dickens, Wordsworth, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Twain, and a host of other male authors were “canonized,” few female writers achieved such status. Third, for the most part, the roles of female, fictionalized characters were limited to secondary positions, usually occupying minor parts within the stories or simply reverting to the male’s stereotypical images of women. And fourth, female scholars such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir were ignored, their writings seldom if ever referred to by the male creators of the literary canon.

Feminist critics of this era asserted that males who created and enjoyed a place of prominence within the canon assumed that all readers were males. Women reading such works could unconsciously be duped into reading as a male. In addition, because most university professors were males, female students were usually trained to read literature as if they were males. But 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 abounded.

Having highlighted the importance of gender, feminist critics then discovered a body of literary works authored by females that their male counterparts decreed inferior and therefore unworthy to be part of the...
In America, for example, Kate Chopin's late nineteenth-century novel *The Awakening* 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 Guerillères* (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 concerning definitive answers to these key feminist interests continued throughout the 1980s, as it does today.

**Elaine Showalter**

The predominant voice of feminist criticism throughout the 1980s is that of Elaine Showalter. In her text *A Literature of Their Own*, 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 Bronté, George Eliot, and George Sand accepted the prevailing social constructs of their day concerning 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. These authors depicted the harsh and often cruel treatment of female characters at the hands of their more powerful male creations. In the female phase of today, women reject the imitation prominent during the feminine phase and the protest that dominated the feminist phase. According to Showalter, 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 the male professors who first established the canon itself. Authors such as 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 be stopped. She coins the term *gynocritics* to “construct 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 these 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 concerning the nature of women's writing that help answer some of the chief concerns of feminist criticism: the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. Each of Showalter's models is sequential, subsuming and developing the preceding model. The biological 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 how this language can be used 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. And the cultural model investigates how the society in which female authors work and function shape women's goals, responses, and points of view.

**Geographical Strains of Feminism**

Because no one critical theory of writing dominates feminist criticism and few theorists agree on 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 distinct geographical strains of feminism have thus 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 attempt to rescue women from being considered The Other.

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—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 the dominant one in society. 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. According to Gilbert and
Gubar, such male power has caused "anxiety of authorship" in women, causing them to fear the act of literary creation itself and the act of writing. Such creation, they fear, 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 thus sentence a man just as for centuries men have been sentencing women to isolation, anxiety, and literary banishment. In effect, by formulating a woman's sentence, women writers can finally free themselves from being defined by men.

Such a sentence could also free women from being reduced to the stereotypical images that all too often appear in literature. According to Gilbert and Gubar these two major images are "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. Her goal in life, therefore, 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 her husband and 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 both of these images—the angel and the madwoman—are unrealistic images of women in society. One canonizes and places the woman above the world and the other denigrates and places her below the world. And the message, say Gilbert and Gubar, 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.

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, British feminists view reading, writing, and publishing as facets of material reality. Being 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 is then 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.

Believing that women are oppressed both in life and art, French feminism, the third geographical division of present-day 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 the father of psychoanalysis is Sigmund Freud. Believing that the penis is power, Freud viewed women as incomplete males. All males, 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. The French psychoanalytic critic Jacques Lacan, however, rescues psychoanalysis from some of Freud's misogynistic theories. (For a detailed explanation of Lacan's theories, see "Jacques Lacan," Chapter 7.) According to Lacan, language, not the phallus, ultimately shapes and structures our conscious and unconscious minds and thus shapes our self-identity. And 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 6 months or so, we function primarily in the Imaginary Order, a preverbal state that contains our wishes, fantasies, and 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 depart from a biological language into a socialized language into the second of the Lacanian orders: the Symbolic Order. Unfortunately, in this Order the male is socialized into the dominant discourse whereas the female is socialized into a subordinated language. Upon entering this Order, the father becomes the dominant image, or the law. In this stage of our psychic development, both the male and the female fear castration at the hands of the father. For the male, 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 to 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 means subservience to the male. Being socialized into a subordinated language, the female becomes a second-class citizen. Because language, for Lacan, is a psychological, not 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. Upon 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, whereby an unconscious thought breaks through the
conscious mind, the chora can break through into the Real Order and disturb the male-dominant discourse. On the other hand, Hélène Cixous explores an entirely different mode of discourse that arises from the Imaginary, not the Symbolic, 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, when fully explored, transforms the social and cultural structures within literature.

In addition to the three geographical strains of feminism, other significant feminist strains such as black and lesbian feminism transcend geographical boundaries. For example, 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, French lesbian feminist Monique Wittig rejects the label woman, asserting that this term does not include lesbians. 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. And 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 appear to be a diffuse, loosely connected body of criticism that is more divided than unified, housing more internal disagreements than unity among its adherents than are found in perhaps any other approach to literary analysis. Because it claims no ultimate spokesperson but many different voices, there is 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 rather than 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 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 figure in the male/female relationship and the woman is subordinate.

Such female insignificance did not first appear in the twentieth century, declare feminists such as Jane Tompkins. Long before the existence of our present-day, male-dominated world, most societies have been governed 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 support St. Thomas Aquinas’ conviction that all women are simply imperfect men. And some still believe that Freud is correct when he argues that female sexuality is based on a lack of a penis, the male sexual organ.

According to feminist critics, by defining the female in relation to the male while simultaneously degrading 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 its society, females became the oppressed people, inferiors who must be suppressed lest humankind fail to reach its potential.

Feminist critics want to show humankind the errors of such a way of thinking. Women, they declare, are people in their own right; they are not incomplete or inferior men. Despite how often literature and society fictionalize and stereotype women as angels, barmmaids, bitches, whores, brainless housewives, or old maids, women must break free from such oppression and define themselves. No longer, assert these critics, can they allow their male-dominated society to define and articulate their roles, values, and opinions.

To free themselves from such oppression, say feminist critics, women must analyze and challenge the established literary canon that has helped shape the images of female inferiority and oppression ingrained in our culture. Women must create an atmosphere that is less oppressive by contesting the long-held patriarchal assumptions concerning their sex. Because no female Aristotle has articulated a philosophy or coined a battle cry for women’s equality, all women must muster a variety of resources to clarify, assert, and implement their beliefs. By re-examining the established literary canon, validating what it means to be a woman, and involving themselves in literary theory and its multiple approaches to a text, women can legitimize their responses to texts written by both males and females,
their own writings, and their political, economic, and social positions in their culture.

**METHODOLOGY**

Just 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 therefore are better thinkers, more rational, more serious, and more reflective than women, feminist critics may begin their debunking of male superiority by exposing stereotypes of women found throughout the literary canon. 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 throughout the canon, and such abuse of women by male authors must be acknowledged as ways men have consciously or unconsciously demeaned, devalued, and demoralized women.

Having identified the antifeminist characterization that occurs in many texts, the feminist critic may then turn to either the American, English, or a non-Western literary canon, seeking to discover works written by women. This is usually a difficult task because males have authored the majority of texts. The American literary canon, 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. Southwick, 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 complete, this rediscovery will reveal 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 the traditional male theories of reading, writing, and critiquing. Known as gynocriticism, this female model of literary analysis offers four areas of investigation:

- 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.
- Female language. Such a concern centers on the differences between male and female language. Because we live in patriarchal societies, would it be 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 in the answers to these questions, critics interested in this kind of investigation analyze grammatical constructions, recurring themes, and other linguistic elements.
- 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 evidence itself in the writing process through penis envy, the Oedipus complex, and other psychological stages.
- 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.

- 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, 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 from 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 asking any or all of these questions of a text, we can begin our journey in feminist criticism while helping ourselves to understand better the world in which we live.

**SAMPLE ESSAYS**

In the student essay that follows, note how the author uses the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan to highlight feminist issues. Be able to explain Lacan’s feminist theories and to show how the author uses these ideas to arrive at her interpretation of Margaret Atwood’s poem “Spelling.” After reading the essay, ask yourself whether this interpretation has brought to
your attention any feminist issues with which you were previously unaware. If so, what are they?
In the professional essay that follows, note how Elizabeth A. Meese uses the assumptions, terminology, and methodology of feminist criticism to arrive at her interpretation of Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. Be able to explain her theoretical assumptions and her methodology. In particular, be able to explain Meese's conclusions. As you did in the student essay, ask yourself whether Meese's interpretation has brought to your attention any feminist issues with which you were unaware. If so, be able to state these concerns.

FURTHER READING

Viorst, Judith. "And Then the Prince Knelt Down and Tried to Put the Glass Slipper on Cinderella's Foot."

WEB SITES FOR EXPLORATION

http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/h.../landow/SSPCluster/FemTheory.html
Provides a variety of links to feminist theory and criticism

www.igc.apc.org/women/feminist.html
Provides more links to feminist issues and resources

Student Essay

A Feminist Critique of Margaret Atwood's "Spelling"

Written in 1981, Margaret Atwood's poem "Spelling" echoes the cries of all women who have been, are, and will be repressed by the dominance of male discourse. The poem provides the reader with strong images of women who are attempting to break out of what Jacques Lacan calls the Symbolic Order and return to the Imaginary Order. The women Atwood pictures in this poem must wrestle from society its symbol of power: the pen. In this process, they must reject the image of the female as constructed by males using a male-dominated discourse and re-define themselves according to their biologically determined sex, not their gender, for gender is a social construct defined by the dominant male discourse.

According to Lacan, in our infancy to about six months of age, we all pass through the Imaginary Order, a stage of psychic development characterized by flux and fluidity. This stage is closely related to a woman's body, especially the vagina. During this stage we are able to communicate in a language not governed by laws or gender or power. All too quickly, however, Lacan asserts that the next stage of psychic development approaches, the Symbolic Order. Juxtaposed to the fluidity and flux of the Imaginary Order, the Symbolic order is characterized by structure and rigidity. During this stage male discourse becomes dominant, suppressing the kind of discourse learned during the Imaginary Order. In order to break out of the Symbolic Order and return to the Imaginary Order dominated by fluidity and motion, the women Atwood pictures in "Spelling" must take from society the symbol of power, the pen, and write in their own female-dominated discourse.

In the first stanza Atwood describes the persona's daughter playing with "plastic letters" and "learning how to spell." The language she is spelling is androgynous, one unaffected by social and cultural influences. She thus spells boldly with colors of "red, blue & hard yellow" (line 3). Hers is a semiotic language possessing an innocence that has not been confronted by castration anxiety. She therefore plays contentedly on the floor with no one telling her how to spell.
The persona then compares her daughter’s bold use of semiotic language to those women who “[deny] themselves daughters” by conforming to the Symbolic language by which men maintain power not only in literature but also in society (line 8). In conforming to the Symbolic Order, these women close themselves up in rooms; they conceal their true discourse, the fluid female chora, in order to “mainline words” (line 11). To be heard and accepted by society, such women must mimic the Symbolic language of male-dominated discourse, or they must sacrifice not being heard at all, thereby repressing the language of their Imaginary Order.

In the next stanza the persona alludes to the necessity of developing a new androgynous language in order to solve the dilemma faced by these women. By stating that “a child is not a poem, / a poem is not a child,” the persona asserts that the Imaginary Order is not acceptable to the poem any more than the Symbolic Order is acceptable to a child (lines 12–13). She therefore suggests that there need not be any distinction between female and male discourse, but rather that both should be revolutionized into a new language that embodies both male and female properties. Both male and female should harmonize together in language with equal distribution of power. In effect, there should be no “either/or” (line 14).

But the power of language remains unequal, and the persona returns to reality by replaying the story of a woman “caught in the war” between society and herself (lines 15–17). In this story, the woman is laboring to give birth to her true self—that is, a language unaffected by male discourse—but the enemy, the male, binds her legs to prevent her intended revolution. And simultaneously an ancestress is also kept from spreading her language as leather is placed over her mouth to “strangle” the words that will give her power (line 23). After all, “a word after a word/ after a word is power,” a power that society struggles to repress and destroy (lines 24–25). This male-dominated society cannot allow these “radical” women to give birth to a new language that would make women and men equals, for then men would be forced to relinquish power and to share it with women whom they believe are merely deformed men. Males, therefore, symbolically close the womb, forcing women to use male discourse if they wish to “mainline words.”

As language “falls away/ from the hot bones,” the rock-hard conventions of patriarchy break open and melt away (lines 25–26). Only under the kind of pressure that will break rock and melt granite is the hollowness of Symbolic language exposed. The word that was strangled to deny power to women, “splits & doubles & speaks/ the truth & the body/ itself becomes a mouth” (lines 33–35). Symbolically, the persona paints a picture of an embryo splitting inside a woman’s womb, slowly giving shape to a new language. Simultaneously, the metaphorical womb contends with the metaphorical penis. When the words of the womb become words, each word leading to the production of more words, and the body becomes a mouth: then the female can rise above the rigidity and structure of the Symbolic Order, embrace the Imaginary Order, and communicate in a new language without hesitation or restriction. Through revolutionizing and creating language, the metaphorical womb can then triumph over the metaphorical penis, taking the penis’s pen.

In the final stanza, the persona challenges us, the readers, to consider how we learn to spell. Do we learn inside of gendered constructs, or do we learn by our biological nature? Do we allow society to name us as a man or a woman, or do we learn to spell by our first word learned in the Imaginary Order, a language that ultimately fails to distinguish between genders?

The reader, and in particular the female, is left to seek and to regain the innocence of the pre-Oedipal infant who is untouched by the Symbolic Order. The persona exhorts the reader to challenge socialized conventions of language and to relate to one’s biological sex rather than to gender. As women spell their language according to their sex, then and only then will they be able to define themselves and their world views rather than accepting the definitions that the male-dominated society has already constructed for them.

KARA ROGGE

~ Professional Essay ~

Orality and Textuality in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God

Through her novel Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston presents a forceful resistance to black women’s oppression in a sexist and racist society. She does so by means of her own artistic accomplishment, which she shares with her character Janie Crawford. The work has attracted varied attention since it was first published in 1937. June Jordan called it the greatest novel of Blacklove ever written. Alice Walker has explored its place in Hurston’s presentation of herself as a role model for black women artists. A host of critics have discussed the significance of Janie as a black woman who creates herself in her own image. Not all of the commentary, however, has been positive. Ignoring her critique of sexual politics, some writers have criticized Hurston’s political views, comparing her unfavorably with Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison and describing her as an opportunist and a reactionary. While we have finally developed a fuller understanding of
Hurston's work, critics still feel obliged to begin their discussions by reconstructing the author's life and works, continually reestablishing their right to undertake the more specialized literary analysis this black feminist writer deserves. Few critics have talked at any length about the literary value and construction of meaning in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, one of the century's finest works of fiction.

Hurston remains something of an enigma. She incited jealousy, dedication, love, and anger in her friends and associates; later writers have shared these responses in varying degrees. Certainly no one is immune to them because Hurston's position, like Freeman's, refuses a one-dimensional reduction. Her defiant individualism frequently displays itself in the bias, equivocation and obliquity of her critics' commentaries. In her exceptional essay, "On Refusing to Be Humbled by Second Place in a Contest You Did Not Design: A Tradition by Now," which serves as the Dedication to the Feminist Press edition of Hurston's selected writings, Alice Walker summarizes the puzzle surrounding the author and her work:

Is *Mules and Men* racist? Or does it reflect the flawed but nonetheless beautiful creative insights of an oppressed people's collective mythology? Is "Gilded Six-Bits" so sexist it makes us cringe to think Zora Neale Hurston wrote it? Or does it make a true statement about deep love functioning in the only pattern that at the time of its action seemed correct? Did Zora Neale Hurston never question "America" or the status quo, as some have accused, or was she questioning it profoundly when she wrote phrases like "the arsenal of Democracy"? Is Janie Crawford, the main character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, light-skinned and silken-haired because Hurston was a colorist, as a black male critic has claimed, or because Hurston was not blind and therefore saw that black men (and black women) have been, and are, colorist to an embarrassing degree?

Is Hurston the messenger who brings the bad news, or is she the bad news herself? Is Hurston a reflection of ourselves? And if so, is that not, perhaps, part of our "problem" with her?¹

Through the use of countervailing questions, Walker defends the writer against her critics and provides us with badly needed corrective in her remembering of Hurston. Walker concludes her litany of questions by cautioning us to restrict our comments to Hurston's artistry.

Obviously, this is an injunction that is difficult for Walker to heed. She cites a Wellesley College student's comment: "What does it matter what white folks must have thought about her?"² Aside from Hurston's association with and patronage by liberal whites, and the influence they exerted on the shape of her art and career, we must ask an equally pressing question with respect to the development of her reputation as an artist: What does it matter what black men thought about Hurston? Sharing her oppression as a black American, black male critics read Hurston the way most men read women. The need to construct a defense against those male critics has preoccupied black women writing on her. Langston Hughes's comment in *The Big Sea* exemplifies the problem. Rivaling Hemenway's remarks on Stein, Hughes writes his sense of jealous competition with Hurston between the lines: "In her youth she was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in such a racy fashion. . . . To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect 'darkie,' in the nice meaning they give the term—that is a naive, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly colored Negro."³ Hurston, along with her character Janie, transcends the boundaries of gender roles. In "Zora Neale Hurston: A Woman Half in Shadows," Mary Helen Washington criticizes Darwin Turner and Nathan Huggins for confusing the personal with the artistic as a means of dismissing Hurston's contribution to literature.⁴ Larry Neal's remarks have escaped much qualification. Discussing Hurston's view of the South, he describes her as "an inveterate romantic" who managed to avoid the oppressive forces that characterized the region for political radicals such as Wright. He supports this assertion with the observation: "Perhaps it was because she was a black woman, and therefore not considered a threat to anyone's system of social values." Black women who have written about Hurston adopt a very different position, reflecting the awareness they share with her of the effects of male power.

Hurston, as a black woman, poses a double threat. In her article, "This Infinity of Conscious Pain: Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition," Lorraine Bethel assesses Hurston's place within literature in terms of a confluence of oppressive forces: "The codification of Blackness and feminaleness by whites and males is contained in the terms 'thinking like a woman' and 'acting like a nigger,' both based on the premise that there are typically negative Black and female ways of acting and thinking. Therefore, the most pejorative concept in the white male world view would be thinking and acting like a 'nigger woman.' This is useful for understanding literary criticism of Hurston's works, which often attacks her personally for simply conducting herself as what she was: Black woman." By insisting on her

¹Walker, "On Refusing to Be Humbled," 2.
³See Robert Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston*, 104-35, for a discussion of the effects of Mrs. Charlotte Mason's patronage on Hurston's life and works.

⁴Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 239.
⁶Neal, "Zora Neale Hurston," 161. In the final chapters of *Zora Neale Hurston*, Hemenway provides a useful assessment of Hurston's political views. The critiques presented by black intellectuals are both accurately and narrowly construed; their obvious silences obscure the question of what Hurston does see as well as the black community's singular role in character assassination surrounding the false moral charge against Hurston.
⁷Bethel, "This Infinity of Conscious Pain," 178-79.
right to be a “Black woman,” free from prescribed roles, Hurston was perhaps as immediately intimidating to black men as to white. Because she was a black woman without independent resources, her white patrons undoubtedly experienced a more secure relationship based on dominance. Hurston necessarily tolerated the situation, although it did little to earn public praise for her literary accomplishments when she struggled to tell her own story rather than the one whites constructed for her to tell. Within this arena of sexual and racial conflict, Hurston’s literary reputation suffered.

Over the years, critics have commented variously on the central theme of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Washington argues that the novel’s most powerful theme is “Janie’s search for identity, an identity which finally begins to take shape as she throws off the false images which have been thrust upon her because she is both black and woman in a society where neither is allowed to exist naturally and freely.” Hurston expresses this theme, Washington maintains, through the images of the horizon and the pear tree, the former symbolizing Janie’s personal, individual quest, the latter, her search for fulfillment through union with another. Ann Rayson argues similarly that Hurston chooses “becoming” rather than “being” as the principal focus of her fiction, suggesting a parallel with Ellison’s protagonist, who says, “the end is the beginning.” While Rayson’s comment reveals her sensitivity to Hurston’s choice of narrative strategy, she does not examine that sense of circularity or the reasons underlying Hurston’s choice. This question of creating form through narrative technique, which serves as the basis for Janie’s deconstruction of the effects of power, provides the focus for my discussion of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and offers one way of relating this work to those of other feminist writers.

The puzzle of the novel’s structure is inseparable from considerations of its theme. Despite Larry Neal’s contention that “Zora Neale Hurston was not an especially philosophical person,” Hurston employs a narrative strategy that is culturally, philosophically, and aesthetically complex. This complexity reveals itself through Hurston’s decision to re-tell the story rather than to tell it. Barbara Christian makes an important observation about this choice, which the scope of her book does not permit her to develop: “*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a story within a story. Janie Stark tells the story of her childhood, her life, and her loves to her best friend, Phoebe [sic], and to the community to which she has just returned. This aspect of the novel is critical to its substance, for Janie Stark is not an individual in a vacuum; she is an intrinsic part of a community, and she brings her life and its richness, joys, and sorrows back to it. As it has helped to form her, so she also helps to form it.” Lillie Howard, however, finds fault with Hurston’s method and maintains that “the story is rather awkwardly told by both the heroine, Janie Crawford, and an omniscient narrator, and is revealed, for the most part, in a flashback to Janie’s best friend, Phoeby Watson. The narrative is awkward in some places because much of what Janie tells Phoeby, Phoeby must already know, partly because she is Janie’s best friend, and partly because Phoeby was a part of Eatonville just as Janie was.” It is neither through accident nor uncalled device that Janie’s story is re-told rather than told. Phoeby—the audience for the fiction within the fiction—surely knows much of the story she is being told? The value of the approach as strategy exists in what Hurston accomplishes through its use; here as well rests much of the novel’s significance for feminist readers today.

Hurston’s artistic method displays a keen awareness of the performative quality of fiction as it emerges from the tradition of oral narrative, as well as a clever consciousness of the storyteller/writer’s role in constructing the history of a people through language. Her brilliant use of dialect, specifying pride and ownership, lends credibility to the novel’s claim as a work for the black community. It is a testament to the power and beauty of blackness. Hurston is culturally and artistically at ease with the narrative convention of re-telling the tale, just as her character Janie has grown used to an audience: “Phoeby’s hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story.” On this point, Bethel comments that “In presenting Janie’s story as a narrative related by herself to her best Black woman friend, Phoebe, Hurston is able to draw upon the rich oral legacy of Black female storytelling and mythmaking that has its roots in Afro-American culture.” But this is not an end in itself. Hurston’s aim is textuality—the process of producing a text through the transformation of other texts—and through this textuality, a form of feminist self-definition. By transforming Janie’s orality—Hurston’s intertexts—into textuality, the writer creates both herself as a writer and her own story, while Janie creates her life through language. Creator and character fuse in Hurston’s description of Janie’s motivation for relating the story that follows: “that oldest human longing—self revelation” (p. 18). All the events of the novel’s one long evening find their center in the act of telling the tale.

To understand the effects of the novel’s frame, the embodiment of Hurston’s narrative strategy, it is useful to suspend consideration of that device for the moment in order first to examine the story Janie tells. The frame comprises only of the first chapter and the final three pages of the novel’s twentieth and last chapter. Since the story within the story comprises

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1Ibid.
3Neal, “Zora Neale Hurston,” 164.
4Christian, Black Women Novists, 57.
5Howard, Zora Neale Hurston, 94.
6Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 23. Further references are cited in the text.
7Bethel, “This Infinity of Conscious Pain,” 180.
much of the novel, it always commands the greatest critical attention. Here Hurston offers the tale of Janie Crawford's development from puberty to womanhood as a model of black female development. The story begins in the home of her grandmother, moves to the homes of her two husbands, Logan Killicks and then Joe Starks, and concludes with the death of her third husband and lover Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods. Janie orders the story in such a way that she chronicles her progress from dependence to independence, while Hurston gives us the story of Janie's development from silent "object" to speaking "subject."

At the beginning of the story within the story, Janie receives her sense of definition from others. She is woman as object under the control of a racist, patriarchal culture. Failing to recognize herself as the one black child in a photograph, she begins her story without name or color: "Dey all useter call me Alphabet 'cause so many people had done named me different names" (p. 21). Initially she reconciles herself to the received wisdom, the history of black women's place in the prevailing power structure as imparted by Nanny, her grandmother: "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as far as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womanfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayan' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, lawd, lawd" (p. 29). Nanny projects a stereotypical identity (wife) and a secure future (house and land) for Janie based upon what she knows, which is limited by the historical constraints of what she has seen of the white man's power over blacks and the black man's relationship to the black woman. Thus, she explains to Janie: "'Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of what a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one de hold-backs of slavery"' (p. 31).

Nanny arranges Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks and his sixty acres of land, thereby "desecrating" Janie's vision from the pear tree of idyllic union. Bethel explains Nanny's behavior as a protective measure: "She is attempting to adjust Janie to the prevailing sexual and racial milieu, and her protective ness emerges as violence directed against Janie. Nanny attempts to explain to Janie the historical and social forces that make her innocent actions so serious."

Bethel sees in this cross-generational relationship the pattern of black women's victimization by oppressive racial and sexual forces. "In this sense," she concludes, "Janie and her grandmother illustrate the tragic continuity of Black female oppression in white/male America." While it is true that the oppression continues, it is also evident that Hurston makes Janie differ from nanny in some important ways. Part of what the character learns is to place her grandmother's words in perspective—to understand how Nanny's recounting of experience shaped what Janie was later able to see. In this respect, Hurston stages a break with the oppressor's culture and points to the sexual and racial liberation of women.

The grandmother's gift of a life different from her own permits Janie to pursue dreams and visions beyond those that Nanny, "a cracked plate" (p. 37) damaged by slavery, could have projected. Janie creates her own future, the way to her individual happiness, at the same time that Hurston constructs a new legacy through the tale Janie tells. The story Janie tells Phoebe and the narrative the reader receives are vastly different from the shaping and socializing story Nanny tells Janie. In a sense, Nanny is the unreconstructed past, and Janie her fulfillment through a newly constructed present. Although the grandmother's narrative power has been repressed into further silence, Nanny still envisions the story she longed to tell: "'Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me"' (pp. 31-32); but silence distorts this story to the point where the horizon of women's potential is constricted to the private sphere of domestic life. Through Janie, Hurston exposes the crack in the plate and preaches the liberating and defiant sermon that Nanny was never able to deliver and that black women, indeed all women, have been waiting to hear. Janie's story can be read as a new (history constructed out of love and passed from one black woman to another.

The process of Janie's freedom from oppressive roles entails several steps and engenders predictable male opposition. Logan Killicks expresses his complaint about Janie's independence in racial terms: "You think youes white folks by de way you act"' (p. 51). Joe Starks brings Janie closer to racial/cultural autonomy by escaping the control of white hegemony. His desire to be a "big voice" in a place beyond the authority of white men suggests change, chance, and the far horizon to Janie, although from the outset she realizes that Starks does not completely embody her vision: "He did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees" (p. 50). From the day she rides off with him in a hired rig, sitting in a seat "like some high, ruling chair" (p. 54), Janie confronts the delimiting structures of language: "Her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them" (pp. 54-55). Hers is a new life beyond the limits of the imagined, demanding the creation of a new story for its expression.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a novel about orality—of speakers and modes of speech: Joe's "big voice" wields power modeled on white culture; the grandmother speaks the language of slavery time; the story porch hosts "mule-talkers" and "big picture talkers"; and each town has its complement of gossips. Here, as everywhere, language produces power and knowledge as well as constraint; it is the ability to interpret and to transform experience. The townspeople perceive the equation of word and law, how Joe's big voice

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"Ibid., 181.
"Ibid., 182.
commands obedience; "You kin feel a switch in his hand when he's talkin' to yuh" (p. 78); "He's de wind and we'se de grass. We bend which ever way he blows" (p. 78). Commenting on this effect, Howard makes the clever observation that "It is no mistake that he [Joe] often prefaces his remarks with 'I, god.'" Just as the town chorus is alienated by Joe's power of speech, they also note Janie's silence. In this world of lively speakers, Janie lives a speechless existence. At the town's dedication ceremony, Joe speaks when Janie is asked to say a few words. Although he robs her of this opportunity, she sees and reflects upon her loss: "She had never thought of making a speech, and didn't know if she cared to make one at all. It must have been the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off things" (pp. 69-70). Janie discovers the emptiness of class status, and especially of status by affiliation—the territory of women. In particular, she grows to understand the loneliness of silence, how orality is required for community. She loves the mule stories people tell on the store porch and creates her own tales in silence, but Joe restricts Janie's personal autonomy by prohibiting her participation in discourse. She can neither tell stories nor serve as a member of an audience—the folk community required for the telling.

Through the novel, Hurston also exposes phallocentrism and instructs her readers in the terms of discourse. By means of their oral skills, the porch speakers demonstrate the powerful effects of logocentrism: "They are the center of the world." As in white patriarchal culture, language serves as a locus for social control through its centrality within an order of meaning. Robert Hemenway and Roger Abrahams both comment on the importance of "negotiating respect" through verbal skill in the black community. In "Are You a Flying Lark or a Setting Dove?" Hemenway remarks that "negotiating for respect is not a static process dependent upon the institutions or instrumentalities offered to a woman by society—marriage, the home, the church—but a dynamic response to events growing out of a woman's capacity for self-expression." Phallocentrism is so fundamentally pervasive that it is difficult to conceive of one's self, actions, and meaning outside of its system of control. To attempt to escape its constraints, Janie must use power in order to have power. By transforming her characteristic silence into speech, she stands a chance of establishing a different relationship with Joe, that is, a relationship based on acknowledging difference and accommodating change. Eventually she tires of his endless verbal disputes designed to bring about submission. Her silence in the external world reflects her internal repression until the hollow image of Joe Starks crashes from the shelf in her mind, and she discovers her emotional silence: "She had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen" (p. 112).

The three places in the text where Janie speaks publicly are marked in the novel. When Joe implements Janie's idea by freeing a persecuted mule—the analogue of black slaves, and especially of black women ("de mule uh de world")—Janie praises him. She gives a speech in which she compares Joe with Abraham Lincoln. The townspeople note her skill: "Yo' wife is uh burn orator, Starks. Us never knew dat befo'. She put jus' de right words tuh our thoughts;" (p. 92). In the second instance, Hurston herself, through the omniscient narrative voice, underscores Janie's incursion into orality: "Janie did what she had never done before, that is, thrust herself into the conversation" (pp. 116-17). This time, instead of presenting an oblique defense of women through the suffering mule, Janie, like Freeman's Sarah Penn and Alice Walker's Celie, gets "too moopy" and preaches her sermon on women (the one Nanny never could deliver) to the men on the porch: "Sometimes God gits surprised He was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do. It's so easy to make yo'self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens" (p. 117). The final instance of Janie's mastery that ultimately establishes her power occurs when, in retaliation for Joe's verbal abuse, she humiliates him in front of his male friends (pp. 122-23). She seizes his authority—language—and leaves him speechless.

No unquestioning user of language, Hurston creates her character as a critic of phallocentrism who speaks her defiance. As such, Janie positions herself in a different relation to discourse, moving beyond the exercise of language as a means of establishing power over others or of fixing absolute meaning, to "a practice of language" that Stephen Heath describes as "wild, on the body, unauthorised." Out of pity when Joe is on his death bed, Janie contemplates "what had happened in the making of a voice out of a man" (p. 134). Hélène Cixous's analysis of the politics of language clarifies what Hurston is doing through her character: "No political reflection can dispense with reflection on language, with work on language. For as soon as we exist, we are born into language and language speaks (to) us, dictates its law, a law of death: it lays down its familial model, lays down its conjugal model, and even at the moment of uttering a sentence, admitting a notion of 'being,' a question of desire, the desire that mobilizes philosophical discourse." Constructing another course for black women, Hurston directs Janie's language toward the discovery of a discourse of emotion, a language she

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1Howard, Zora Neale Hurston, 100.
2Hemenway, "Are You a Flying Lark or a Setting Dove?," 145. See also Abrahams' "Negotiating Respect."
3Heath, "Difference," 82.
4Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?," 45.
learns through her relationship with Tea Cake who fulfills the bee and blossom imagery of the novel’s opening. He demands a union of speech and feeling, and she asks that he speak “with no false pretense” (p. 165). He is the master linguist of “otherness”; as Janie tells Phoeby in the story within the story, “So in the beginnin’ new thoughts had tuh be thought and new words said. After Ah got used tuh dat, we gets ‘long jus’ fine. He done taught me de maiden language all over” (p. 173). This “maiden” language defies the social construction of difference and permits new perspectives to emerge from narrative action. For example, Janie rejects being “classes off” (p. 169), separated from other black people through her imprisonment in Joe’s house and store as “his showpiece, his property.”

To a degree, she frees herself from his story, another constriction of her horizon, and shares her perception with Phoeby: “An Ah’d sit dere wid de walls creepin’ up on me and squeezin’ all de life outa me” (p. 169). Janie rejects the “race after property and titles” in favor of “uh love game” (p. 171). Recognizing that the exclusion of others is the repression of differences within one’s self, she merges her life with the life of the black community, telling bog stories, listening to them, working along with the other women, and rejecting Mrs. Turner’s politics of color—a pecking order that privileges white features over black.

By freeing herself from the oppressor’s language and by learning a new integration of words and feeling, Janie develops her critique of color, class, and sex. The narrator, Janie of the re-telling, speaks of the repression inherent in Nanny’s “mis-love”: “Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love” (p. 138). But this recognition becomes Janie’s own and is modified by her interpretation of Nanny’s circumstance—one can only dream the next dream, and until it is reached, its true value is unknown. Janie explains:

“She was born in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn’t sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin’ on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat’s whut she wanted for me—don’t keer whut it cost. Git up on uh high chair and sit dere. She didn’t have time tuh think whut tuh do after you got up on de stool uh do nothin’. De objekt wuz tuh git dere. So Ah got up on de high stool lak she told me, but Phoeby, Ah done greatly languardish tuh death up dere. Ah felt like de world wuz cryin’ extra and Ah ain’t read de common news yet.” (p. 172)

To a degree Hurston validates Nanny’s dream for Janie through Phoeby who, less affluent than her friend, lends sympathy to the grandmother’s way of thinking. At the same time, Hurston demonstrates how Nanny’s values are the effects produced by the oppressed having internalized the oppressor’s consciousness.

Robert Hemenway, commenting on Janie’s effort to come to terms with Nanny’s vision, maintains that “the vertical metaphor in this speech represents Hurston’s entire system of thought, her social and racial philosophy. People erred because they wanted to be above others, an impulse which eventually led to denying the humanity of those below. Whites had institutionalized such thinking, and black people were vulnerable to the philosophy because being on high like white folks seemed to represent security and power.” In other words, if you haven’t had it, power and status look good; so goes the hierarchical dream of the phallocentric economy. Reflecting her commitment to an essential relationship between experience and knowledge, Janie mitigates Tea Cake’s regret over his decision not to stay when the hurricane was imminent: “When yuh don’t know, yuh just don’t know!” (p. 240). She prefers not to trust the projections that, like Nanny’s dream for Janie, reproduce the oppressor’s logic. In a remarkable way, Hurston wages an early battle on behalf of oppressed people and anticipates black feminist writers such as Audre Lorde. Citing Paulo Freire’s The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Lorde proclaims: “The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressor’s tactics, the oppressors’ relationships.” Hurston’s effort to supplant the language and logic of this consciousness relates her to radical feminist writers today.

According to Hurston’s defiant (deviant) narrative logic, only the Janie of the narrative frame, the one who returns to Eatonville, is capable of telling the story. The voiceless existence of the less experienced Janie prevented narration, except as the story might be presented through a third-person limited or omniscient narrator. This strategy, however, would have diminished the power of Janie’s having come to speak, one of the highest forms of achievement and artistry in the folk community. Thus, Janie’s story cannot be told and can only be re-told. Surely it is more than my illusion as a white feminist critic that Hurston presents us with a novel of the black woman’s struggle to construct a language that destroys the conditions of her historic silence and creates the stories that articulate and make memorable a new (hi)story. Janie can return with an understanding she and Hurston share of the liberating force of language within the black community.

One of Janie’s greatest lessons about language centers on its power to deconstruct and to construct, to kill or to give life. When she is on trial for Tea Cake’s murder, she recognizes this potential in the black members of the audience: “They were there with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real

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38Christian, Black Women Novels, 56.

40Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, 237.
41Lorde, Sister Outsider, 123.
weapon left to weak folks. The only killing tool they are allowed to use in the presence of white folks.” (p. 275). This passage recalls the frame’s opening segment in which Hurston describes the townspeople sitting on their porches at night: “They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment.” (p. 10). Adopting the traditional means of defense against gossip, Janie selects Phoeby, a trusted member of the community network, to whom she can provide an account of her behavior. In addition to this pragmatic motive for narration, Janie uses language to give life and memory to feeling. Following the death of the mule, for example, it is memorialized in story by the porch talkers, just as the life of the black woman in slavery is fixed in Nanny’s discourse when contrasted with Janie. Thus, according to the conventions of their discursive fields, Janie’s story enters oral tradition while Hurston’s novel passes into literary tradition. Through her character’s discovery, the writer gives us a story of how language outwits time and exclusivity patriarchal determinations of meaning, and the reader finds new significance in the frame’s opening commentary comparing men, “whose dreams are mocked to death by Time,” and women: “Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.” (p. 9).

Although the novel’s work is conducted primarily through Janie’s story, much of its significance rests in and in relationship to the narrative frame. The importance of the frame is that it permits Hurston to tell her story through a reconstituted subject. Hurston holds to this even at the expense of creating anomalies in Janie’s story—the places where Phoeby is mentioned in the third person, dialogues between Phoeby and Janie in which Phoeby is presumably a participant in the telling, since Janie addresses her remarks to her friend. The story we receive is not constituted until Janie returns, changed. She arrives as the witness to a new epistemology: “you got tuh know there” (p. 285). Through Janie’s story, Hurston presents an alternative conception of power as it operates in black female discourse. Rather than replicating verbal power as oppression, its form among whites and black imitating whites, Hurston espouses a form of narrative authority indigenous to black tribal tradition. As Ruth Borker notes of the Buhaya of Tanzania, “The key cultural concept for thinking about speech is that of ‘knowing.’” Janie operates according to a system whereby you don’t know, and you can’t know something until you experience it; or, as Jacques Derrida puts it, “the logocentric or logocentric impulse is rocked by historical events, rocked by things that happen.” Having gone there, you are changed, and the story you have to tell is a different story. The interpretations of the phallocentric hegemony are called into question rather than assumed. This move wrests the control of meaning from a sexist, racist culture and locates the potential for change within the individual.

Besides the significance of how the story is changed by the fact that Janie has gone and returned, it is additionally important that Janie returns as a “speaking subject” to bring her story to the people. At this point, the changed Janie, the storyteller, fuses with the author. Hurston designates the end of Janie’s story with the novel’s only authentic silence—one that is elected rather than imposed, and is as natural as the sounds that mark the ending: “There was a finished silence after that so that for the first time they could hear the wind picking at the pine trees” (p. 285). With the full resonance of the parallel, Their Eyes Were Watching God might well be understood as a “Portrait of the Artist as a Black Woman.”

Through the overarching and elusive meaning of her title, Hurston confronts the dilemma of the phallocentric ground of determinate meaning. At the most critical moments in the novel, Janie and others scrutinize the heavens for a sign of God’s intention. Like their African ancestors (and the Puritan interpreters), they are seeking a way through nature to unlock and interpret the meaning of events. They act out the reader’s effort to interpret the text. In the novel’s opening frame, we encounter the Watcher, an Everyman waiting for the ship of dreams to come in and trying to outwit Death who was “there before there was a where or a when or a then” (p. 129). Following Janie’s sensual awakening, she desires validation for their dreams: “She was seeking confirmation of the voice and vision, and everywhere she found and acknowledged answers. A personal answer for all other creations except herself. She felt an answer seeking her, but where? When? How?” (p. 24). Only once does there seem to be a sign—the arrival of Tea Cake, which Janie invests with referential power taking us back to the blossoming pear tree and the bee: “He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God” (p. 161).

While Janie accepts Tea Cake as a sign, his presence cannot resolve the problem of interpretation—the signification of events. When the hurricane is imminent, people consider God’s purpose: “They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God” (p. 236). The only answer given is the storm itself, suggesting that the people’s question, as related by the narrator, contained its answer, that this was indeed a contest of force. The hurricane and Tea Cake’s love for Janie ultimately contribute to his death, so that on a symbolic level, it would seem that what
was once responsible for his presence in the end responsible for his absence. Through the compelling imagery of the frame, Hurston refuses this simple dichotomy by rejecting the bipolar logic of absence: “Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn’t dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fishnet. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its mesh! She called in her soul to come and see” (p. 286). The effect Derrida describes in approaching Sollers’ Numbers expands our sense of Hurston’s accomplishment here: “The text is out of sight when it compels the horizon itself to enter the frame of its own scene, so as to ‘learn to embrace with increased grandeur the horizon of the present time.’”^39 Through Janie’s exemplary insistence on a different (black and female) determination of meaning and value, and through her own narrative art as the teller within the tale, Hurston resists the binary opposition of phallocentrism as it inhabits Western metaphysics, just as she seeks to revise its attendant notion of interpretation. The present, as an unexperienced future, cannot unlock the meaning of what is to come. It has no predictive or determinative value.

In place of this practice, Hurston offers a particular concept of presence—the presence of a present—through Janie’s re-telling. The only present is its illusion in narration, occasioned by and filling in for absence. Bringing the past into the present, Hurston gives both dimensions a particular reconstructed value, and propels the past, itself a former present, toward a future that exists only as an anticipated possibility for black women.39 Thus, these elements of time remain fluid, each containing traces of the other. As storytellers, as speaking subjects, Janie and Hurston don’t escape phallocentrism. Rather, they stage a critique from what Derrida calls “a certain inside of logocentrism. But it is an inside that is divided enough and tormented enough and obsessed enough by the other, by contradictions, by heterogeneity, for us to be able to say things about it without being simply ‘outside of it.’ And we say them within the grammar, within the language of logocentrism while allowing the alterity or the difference which obsesses this inside to show through.”^40 By extricating herself from cultural control, Janie/Hurston creates culture. Through the re-telling of Janie’s story, orality becomes textuality. Textuality is produced by Janie’s learned orality, her participation in the oral tradition of the culture. She learns to be one of the people; thus, this is a story of her acculturation into black womanhood and her artistic entitlement to language. By chronicling Janie’s development,

Hurston transforms the status of narrative from the temporality characteristic of oral tradition to the more enduring textuality required to outwit time’s effect on memory. In doing so, she presents feminist readers with a map of a woman’s personal resistance to patriarchy, and feminist writers—in particular Alice Walker—with the intertext for later feminist works.

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^39Derrida, Dissemination, 334.

^40Alice Walker achieves a similar effect through Nettie’s letters in The Color Purple. While Walker’s means are different, she accomplishes a similar goal by integrating the African presence (though some would argue that she subordinates it) into relationship with the lives of black American women today.
