

Feminist Approaches to Literature

This essay offers a very basic introduction to feminist literary theory, and a compendium of Great Writers Inspire resources that can be approached from a feminist perspective. It provides suggestions for how material on the Great Writers Inspire site can be used as a starting point for exploration of or classroom discussion about feminist approaches to literature. Questions for reflection or discussion are highlighted in the text. Links in the text point to resources in the Great Writers Inspire site. The resources can also be found via the 'Feminist Approaches to Literature' start page [1]. Further material can be found via [our library](#) [2] and via the various authors and theme pages.

The Traditions of Feminist Criticism

According to Yale Professor Paul Fry in his lecture [The Classical Feminist Tradition](#) [3] from 25:07, there have been several prominent schools of thought in modern feminist literary criticism:

- **First Wave Feminism: Men's Treatment of Women**

In this early stage of feminist criticism, critics consider male novelists' demeaning treatment or marginalisation of female characters. First wave feminist criticism includes books like Marry Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (1968) Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969), and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). An example of first wave feminist literary analysis would be a critique of William Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* for Petruchio's abuse of Katherina.

- **Second Wave Feminism: Gynocriticism**

Elaine Showalter pioneered gynocriticism with her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977). Gynocriticism involves three major aspects. The first is the examination of female writers and their place in literary history. The second is the consideration of the treatment of female characters in books by both male and female writers. The third and most important aspect of gynocriticism is the discovery and exploration of a canon of literature written by women; gynocriticism seeks to appropriate a female literary tradition. In Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*, she proposes the following three phases of women's writing:

1. The 'Feminine' Phase - in the feminine phase, female writers tried to adhere to male values, writing as men, and usually did not enter into debate regarding women's place in society. Female writers often employed male pseudonyms during this period.
2. The 'Feminist' Phase - in the feminist phase, the central theme of works by female writers was the criticism of the role of women in society and the oppression of women.
3. The 'Female' Phase - during the 'female' phase, women writers were no longer trying to prove the legitimacy of a woman's perspective. Rather, it was assumed that the works of a women writer were authentic and valid. The female phase lacked the anger and combative consciousness of the feminist phase.

- *Do you agree with Showalter's 'phases'? How does your favourite female writer fit into these phases?*

- **The Madwoman Thesis**

Made famous by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), the eponymous madwoman is Bertha Jenkins of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* [4], Rochester's mad wife hidden away in the attic of Thornfield Hall. Gilbert and Gubar's thesis suggests that because society forbade women from expressing themselves through creative outlets, their creative powers were channelled into psychologically self-destructive behaviour and subversive actions. A great example of the madwoman thesis in action is in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* [5].

*Read *Jane Eyre* [4] with the madwoman thesis in mind. Are there connections between Jane's subversive thoughts and Bertha's appearances in the text? How does it change your view of the novel to consider Bertha as an alter ego for Jane, unencumbered by societal norms? Look closely at Rochester's explanation of the early symptoms of Bertha's madness. How do they differ from his licentious behaviour?*

- **French Feminism**

French Feminism, led by critics such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, relies heavily on Freudian psychology and the theory of penis envy (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penis_envy [6]). French feminists postulate the existence of a separate language belonging to women that consists of loose, digressive sentences written without use of the ego.

How does Jane Austen fit into French Feminism? She uses very concise language, yet speaks from a woman's perspective with confidence. Can she be placed in Showalter's phases of women's writing?

Dr. Simon Swift of the University of Leeds gives a podcast titled 'How Words, Form, and Structure Create Meaning: Women and Writing' that uses the works of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath to analyse the form and structural aspects of texts to ask whether or not women writers have a voice inherently different from that of men (podcast [part 1](#) [7] and [part 2](#) [8]).

In [Professor Deborah Cameron's podcast English and Gender](#) [9], Cameron discusses the differences and similarities in use of the English language between men and women.

In another of [Professor Paul Fry's podcasts, Queer Theory and Gender Performativity](#) [10], Fry discusses sexuality, the nature of performing gender (14:53), and gendered reading (46:20).

How do more modern A-level set texts, like those of Margaret Atwood, Zora Neale Hurston, or Maya Angelou, fit into any of these traditions of criticism?

Depictions of Women by Men

Students could begin approaching Great Writers Inspire by considering the range of women depicted in early English literature: from Chaucer's bawdy 'Wife of Bath' in *The Canterbury Tales* [11] to Spenser's interminably pure Una in *The Faerie Queene* [12].

How might the reign of Queen Elizabeth I have dictated the way Elizabethan writers were permitted to present women? How did each male poet handle the challenge of depicting women?

By 1610 Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* [13] presented at The Fortune a play based on the life of Mary Firth. The heroine was a man playing a woman dressed as a man. In [Dr. Emma Smith's podcast on *The Roaring Girl*](#) [14], Smith breaks down both the gender issues of the play and of the

real life accusations against Mary Frith.

In Dr. Emma Smith's podcast on John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* [15], a frequent A-level set text, Smith discusses Webster's treatment of female autonomy. Placing Middleton or Webster's female characters against those of Shakespeare could be brought to bear on A-level Paper 4 on Drama or Paper 5 on Shakespeare and other pre-20th Century Texts.

Smith's podcast on *The Comedy of Errors* [16] from 11:21 alludes to the valuation of Elizabethan comedy as a commentary on gender and sexuality, and how *The Comedy of Errors* at first seems to defy this tradition.

What are the differences between depictions of women written by male and female novelists?

Students can compare the works of Charlotte and Emily Brontë or Jane Austen with, for example, Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* [17] or D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* [18] or *Women in Love* [19].

How do Lawrence's sexually charged novels compare with what Emma Smith said about Webster's treatment of women's sexuality in The Duchess of Malfi?

Dr. Abigail Williams' podcast on Jonathan Swift's *The Lady's Dressing-Room* [20] discusses the ways in which Swift uses and complicates contemporary stereotypes about the vanity of women.

Rise of the Woman Writer

With the movement from Renaissance to Restoration theatre, the depiction of women on stage changed dramatically, in no small part because women could portray women for the first time. Dr. Abigail Williams' adapted lecture, *Behn and the Restoration Theatre* [21], discusses Behn's use and abuse of the woman on stage.

What were the feminist advantages and disadvantages to women's introduction to the stage?

The essay *Who is Aphra Behn?* [22] addresses the transformation of Behn into a feminist icon by later writers, especially Bloomsbury Group member Virginia Woolf in her novella/essay *A Room of One's Own* [23].

How might Woolf's description and analysis of Behn indicate her own feminist agenda?

Behn created an obstacle for later women writers in that her scandalous life did little to undermine the perception that women writing for money were little better than whores.

In what position did that place chaste female novelists like Frances Burney [24] or Jane Austen [25]?

To what extent was the perception of women and the literary vogue for female heroines impacted by Samuel Richardson's Pamela [26]? Students could examine a passage from Pamela and evaluate Richardson's success and failures, and look for his influence in novels with which they are more familiar, like those of Austen or the Brontë sisters.

In Dr. Catherine's Brown's podcast on *Eliot's Reception History* [27], Dr. Brown discusses feminist criticism of Eliot's novels. In the podcast *Genre and Justice* [28], she discusses Eliot's use of women as scapegoats to illustrate the injustice of the distribution of happiness in Victorian England.

Professor Sir Richard Evans' Gresham College lecture *The Victorians: Gender and Sexuality* [29] can provide crucial background for any study of women in Victorian literature.

Women Writers and Class

Can women's financial and social plights be separated? How do Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë bring to bear financial concerns regarding literature depicting women in the 18th and 19th century?

How did class barriers affect the work of 18th century kitchen maid and poet Mary Leapor [30]?

Listen to the podcast by Yale's Professor Paul Fry titled "The Classical Feminist Tradition" [3]. At 9:20, Fry questions whether or not any novel can be evaluated without consideration of financial and class concerns, and to what extent Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own [23] suggests a female novelist can only create successful work if she is of independent means.

What are the different problems faced by a wealthy character like Austen's Emma [31], as opposed to a poor character like Brontë's Jane Eyre [4]?

Also see sections on the following writers:

- Jane Austen [25]
- Aphra Behn [32]
- Charlotte Brontë [33]
- George Eliot [34]
- Thomas Hardy [35]
- D.H. Lawrence [36]
- Mary Leapor [30]
- Thomas Middleton [37]
- Katherine Mansfield [38]
- Olive Schreiner [39]
- William Shakespeare [40]
- John Webster [41]
- Virginina Woolf [42]

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Links

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- [4] <http://writersinspire.org/content/jane-eyre>
- [5] <http://writersinspire.org/content/yellow-wallpaper>
- [6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penis_envy
- [7] <http://writersinspire.org/content/how-words-form-structure-create-meaning-women-writing-pt1>
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- [27] <http://writersinspire.org/content/george-eliot-3-reception-history>
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- [33] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/charlotte-bront%C3%AB>
- [34] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/george-eliot>
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- [42] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/virginia-woolf>