

contrary view that there is some natural, given essence of the feminine, that is universal and unchangeable.

Anti-essentialism has for some years now been a dominant concept in critical theory, but there is some awareness, too, that it is a notion which leaves us with certain difficulties. For instance, does anti-essentialism, by making it hard to make any generalisations about women, also make it difficult to politicise women as a group? Does it tend to reduce identity to the sum of circumstances, perhaps in spite of our 'instinctive' feelings that identity may be deeper than that? Is the fact that we have such feelings admissible as evidence – on either side? And in any case, what would constitute evidence on *either* side of this question?

Specific: In the example discussed below, what are some of the ways in which the critical assumptions and procedures differ from those made in non-feminist approaches to the same work? Compare it with the two essays mentioned at the start of the example, or with the pieces in the Macmillan *Casebook on Wuthering Heights* (ed. Miriam Allott, 1970).

What feminist critics do

1. Rethink the canon, aiming at the rediscovery of texts written by women.
2. Revalue women's experience.
3. Examine representations of women in literature by men and women.
4. Challenge representations of women as 'Other', as 'lack', as part of 'nature'.
5. Examine power relations which obtain in texts and in life, with a view to breaking them down, seeing reading as a political act, and showing the extent of patriarchy.
6. Recognise the role of language in making what is social and constructed seem transparent and 'natural'.
7. Raise the question of whether men and women are 'essentially' different because of biology, or are socially constructed as different.

8. Explore the question of whether there is a female language, an *écriture féminine*, and whether this is also available to men.
9. 'Re-read' psychoanalysis to further explore the issue of female and male identity.
10. Question the popular notion of the death of the author, asking whether there are only 'subject positions ... constructed in discourse', or whether, on the contrary, the experience (e.g. of a black or lesbian writer) is central.
11. Make clear the ideological base of supposedly 'neutral' or 'mainstream' literary interpretations.

Feminist criticism: an example

As an example of feminist criticism I will take the account of *Wuthering Heights* by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, from their book *The Madwoman in the Attic*. The piece is reprinted in the widely-used *Debating Texts* (ed. Rick Rylance). Rylance reprints two other accounts of the same novel, one by Q. D. Leavis, which might be considered as liberal humanist, and one by Frank Kermode which might be seen as post-structuralist. Comparisons can also be made with Eagleton's Marxist account of the same novel in his book *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, to which Gilbert and Gubar refer.

Gilbert and Gubar's strategy with Brontë's novel is to see it as a female version of the male form known as the *Bildungsroman* (this German term means the 'formation' or 'education' novel) in which the hero's growth to manhood is traced, as a process of 'triumphant self-discovery', whereby an identity is discovered and a mission in life conceived and embarked upon – a classic example would be James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. For the heroine, however, things are different, and an equivalent novel (like *Wuthering Heights*) about the growth to womanhood records a process of 'anxious self-denial', this being the 'ultimate product of a female education'. Gilbert and Gubar say that 'What Catherine, or any girl, must learn is that she does not know her own name, and therefore cannot know either who she is or whom she is destined to be'. The process of denial involved they describe as 'social castration'. Effectively, Catherine has to leave behind all her instinctive preferences,

signified by the Heights, and take on an alien attitude, signified by Thrushcross Grange. The point of the word 'castration' here is that in order to achieve acceptability and femininity Catherine has to lose the power which men take for granted, namely power over their own destiny. This is symbolised by the phallic guard-dog, 'purple tongue hanging half a foot out of its mouth', which bites Catherine's foot as she enters the Grange, a symbolic castration, they say. She then undergoes the initiation ritual of imprisonment at the Grange, similar to that undergone by traditional heroines like Persephone and Snow White.

The Grange is the home of 'concealment and doubleness'. Here she learns, as Brontë says, 'to adopt a double character without exactly intending to deceive anyone', that is, say Gilbert and Gubar, she must learn 'to repress her own impulses, must girdle her own energies with the iron stays of "reason"'. This 'education in doubleness' involves 'an actual doubling or fragmentation of her personality', as Heathcliff, 'her rebellious alter-ego' is forcibly excluded from her life. In this spirit of self-denial she agrees to marry Edgar, even though she says of Heathcliff that he is 'more myself than I am'. In this process Heathcliff too is degraded and powerless, and so 'Catherine has learned, correctly, that if it is degrading to be a woman it is even more degrading to be *like* a woman'. Hence, Gilbert and Gubar argue, against the run of *Wuthering Heights* criticism, that Edgar does not represent an image of effeminacy in contrast to the manliness of Heathcliff; on the contrary, in his ruthless employment of his social and sexual power, he is an embodiment of the patriarchal principle. The marriage 'inexorably locks her into a social system which denies her autonomy', so that Heathcliff's return, the 'return of the repressed', as we might call it in Freudian terms, 'represents the return of her true self's desires without the rebirth of her former powers', hence the inevitable descent into self-rejection (Catherine fails to recognise her own face in the mirror), self-starvation, madness, and death, 'a complex of psycho-neurotic symptoms that is almost classically associated with female feelings of powerlessness and rage'. Thus, the events of the novel are 'strongly' read as emblems of the construction of gender identity.

Selected reading

Readers

- Belsey, Catherine and Moore, Jane, eds, *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (Palgrave, 2nd edn, 1997). Excellent introduction. Manageable size. Important essays on the crucial issues.
- Cavallaro, Dani, *French Feminist Theory: An Introduction* (new edn, Continuum, 2006).
The best current collection of key essays in this field.
- Eagleton, Mary, ed. *Feminist Literary Criticism* (Longman, 1991). Interesting collection, with essays paired to represent opposing views on key issues. Very good editorial commentary.
- Eagleton, Mary, ed. *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Blackwell, 2nd edn, 1995). Includes material on black feminism and the impact of postmodernism on feminism.
Short extracts from a wide range of critical material.
- Freedman, Estelle B., ed. *The Essential Feminist Reader* (Modern Library Classics, 2007).
A comprehensive collection, including historical classics and creative as well as critical material.
- Humm, Maggie, ed. *Feminisms: A Reader* (Longman, 1992).
An excellent book, wide-ranging and accessible, on feminisms from Woolf to the present day, including black and lesbian feminisms. Sub-sectioned by category, with a separate introduction for each one.
- Marks, Elaine and de Courtivron, Isabelle, eds, *New French Feminisms* (Harvester, 1981).
The pioneering book in introducing much of this material to English-speaking readers.
- Moi, Toril, *French Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Blackwell, 1987).
- Rooney, Ellen, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* (Cambridge Companions to Literature, 2006).
Contains extremely useful updating essays on feminist aesthetics of reading, feminism and novel reading, feminism and psychoanalysis, feminism and postcolonialism, etc.
- ### General
- Brownstein, Rachel, *Becoming a Heroine* (Penguin, 1982; rpt. Columbia University Press, 1994).
A readable and thoughtful account of what it takes to become a heroine in a 'classic' novel.

Christian, Barbara, *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000* (University of Illinois Press, 2007).

A collection by a major practitioner and theorist, edited after her death by Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabi, and Arlene Keizer.

Gilbert, Sandra and Gubar, Susan, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (Yale University Press, 1988). Much of interest. See chapter seven, 'Women, literature and the Great War', and compare with the example of gay criticism in the next chapter.

Gilbert, Sandra and Gubar, Susan, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, 2nd edn, 2000).

A famous book with chapters on Austen, Brontës, George Eliot, etc.

Greene, Gayle and Kahn, Coppelia, eds, *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (Routledge, 1985).

Greene, Gayle and Kahn, Coppelia, eds, *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Routledge, 1993).

An interesting collection of essays in intellectual autobiography by leading figures in the field.

Jacobus, Mary, ed. *Women Writing and Writing about Women* (Croom Helm, 1979).

Chapters on *Villette*, George Eliot, Woolf, Ibsen, etc.

Jacobus, Mary, *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (Methuen, 1986).

Chapters on *Villette*, *The Mill on the Floss*, Freud's case studies (see 'Dora and the Pregnant Madonna', etc.).

Mills, Sara, et al., *Feminist Readings: An Introduction to Feminist Literature* (Prentice Hall, 1996).

Discussions of major varieties of feminism and their application to a range of canonical literary texts. Readable, practical, and informative.

Minogue, Sally, ed. *Problems Within Feminist Criticism* (Routledge, 1993).

An interesting book which deals with some topics which have caused real difficulty.

Moi, Toril, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (Methuen, 1985).

A very influential book, though its view of the main kinds of feminist theory and criticism has been challenged.

Moi, Toril, *What is a Woman?* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

A very interesting fundamental rethink of many aspects of feminism.

Ruthven, K. K., *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

A useful overview with a bias towards 'Anglo-American' variants.

Showalter, Elaine, *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (Pantheon, 1985).

Showalter, Elaine, *A Literature of Their Own* (Revised and expanded edn, Virago 1999).

Includes a new opening chapter on the reception of the original edition of this book, and a postscript chapter on the legacy of feminist criticism.

Stubbs, Patricia, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (Routledge, new edn, 1981).