

## A Lens of One's Own: Using Feminist Literary Theory

### 1. What is the feminist lens?

Feminist literary criticism helps us look at literature in a different light. It applies the philosophies and perspectives of feminism to the literature we read. There are many different kinds of feminist literary theory. Some theorists examine the language and symbols that are used and how that language and use of symbols are "gendered." Others remind us that men and women write differently and analyze how the gender of the author affects how literature is written. Many feminist critics look at how the characters, especially the female characters, are portrayed and ask us to consider how the portrayal of female characters "reinforces or undermines" sexual stereotypes (Lynn, 1998). Feminist literary theory also suggests that the gender of the reader often affects our response to a text. For example, feminist critics may claim that certain male writers address their readers as if they were all men and exclude the female reader.

Like feminism itself, feminist literary theory asks us to consider the relationships between men and women and their relative roles in society. Much feminist literary theory reminds us that the relationship between men and women in society is often unequal and reflects a particular patriarchal ideology. Those unequal relationships may appear in a variety of ways in the production of literature and within literary texts. Feminist theorists invite us to pay particular attention to the patterns of thought, behavior, values, and power in those relationships.

Feminist literary critics remind us that literary values, conventions, and even the production of literature have themselves been historically shaped by men. They invite us to consider writings by women, both new and forgotten, and also ask us to consider viewing familiar literature through a feminist perspective.

### 2. How do we apply the feminist lens?

We apply it by closely examining the portrayal of the characters, both female and male, the language of the text, the attitude of the author, and the relationship between the characters. We also consider the comments the author seems to be making about society as a whole.