

Towards A Feminist Poetics (1978) – Elaine Showalter (1941–)

Summary:

Elaine Showalter is an American literary critic, feminist and writer on cultural and social issues. She is one of the founders of feminist literary criticism in United States academia, developing the concept and practice of gynocritics.

She is well known and respected in both academic and popular cultural fields. She has written and edited numerous books and articles focused on a variety of subjects, from feminist literary criticism to fashion, sometimes sparking widespread controversy, especially with her work on illnesses. Showalter has been a television critic for People magazine and a commentator on BBC radio and television.

Feminism: Feminist Criticism:

Showalter is concerned by stereotypes of feminism that see feminist critics as being ‘obsessed with the phallus’ and ‘obsessed with destroying male artists’. Showalter wonders if such stereotypes emerge from the fact that feminism lacks a fully articulated theory.

Another problem for Showalter is the way in which feminists turn away from theory as a result of the attitudes of some male academics: theory is their property. Showalter writes: ‘From this perspective, the academic demand for theory can only be heard as a threat to the feminist need for authenticity, and the visitor looking for a formula that he or she can take away without personal encounter is not welcome’. In response, Showalter wants to outline a poetics of feminist criticism.

In *Toward a Feminist Poetics*, Showalter divides feminist criticism into two sections:

The Woman as Reader or Feminist Critique:

‘the way in which a female reader changes our apprehension of a given text, awakening it to the significance of its sexual codes’; historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena’; ‘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’; ‘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’; ‘political and polemical’; like the Old Testament looking for the errors of the past.

One of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-orientated. If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men thought women should be. [...] The critique also has a tendency to naturalize women's victimization by making it the inevitable and obsessive topic of discussion.

The Woman as Writer or Gynocritics (la gynocritique):

Showalter coined the term 'gynocritics' to describe literary criticism based on a feminine perspective. Probably the best description Showalter gives of gynocritics is in *Towards a Feminist Poetics*:

“In contrast to [an] angry or loving fixation on male literature, the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture.”

This does not mean that the goal of gynocritics is to erase the differences between male and female writing; gynocritics is not “on a pilgrimage to the promised land in which gender would lose its power, in which all texts would be sexless and equal, like angels”.

Rather, gynocritics aims to understand the specificity of women's writing not as a product of sexism but as a fundamental aspect of female reality. Its prime concern is to see ‘woman as producer of textual meaning, with the history themes, genres, and structures of literature by women’. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity. It studies linguistics and the problem of a female language in literary text. It reviews the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career. It proposes ‘to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on women's experience’. Its study ‘focuses on the newly visible world of female culture’; ‘hypotheses of a female sub-culture’; ‘the occupations, interactions, and consciousness of women’. It projects how ‘feminine values penetrate and undermine the masculine systems that contain them’. And at its extreme, it is ‘engaged in the myth of the Amazons and the fantasies of a separate female society’.

Showalter acknowledges the difficulty of “[d]efining the unique difference of women’s writing” which she says is “a slippery and demanding task” in “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”. She says that gynocritics may never succeed in understanding the special differences of women’s writing or realise a distinct female literary tradition. But, with grounding in theory and historical research, Showalter sees gynocriticism as a way to “learn something solid, enduring, and real about the relation of women to literary culture”.

Showalter then provides an exemplary feminist critique of Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* to demonstrate that “one of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-oriented,” meaning that, in some sense, every feminist critique, even when criticizing patriarchy, is focused toward the male. As an alternative, Showalter presents gynocritics as a way “to construct a female framework for the 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.”

To begin to trace out this radically female-centered theory, Showalter notes excerpts from feminist historians and sociologists. She then moves on to an engaging discussion of the experiences of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and other female authors to show the need for “completeness” in discussing women authors’ work, in which “it is necessary to leave oneself room to deal with other things besides [women writers’] work, so much has that work been influenced by conditions that have nothing whatever to do with art.”

Three Phases:

From these experiences, Showalter then begins a rough sketch of some of the elements that have characterized women’s writing: awakening, suffering, unhappiness, and matrophobia, among others. She concludes with her classification of women’s writing into three phases that “establish[es] the continuity of the female tradition from decade to decade, rather than from Great Woman to Great Woman.”

Thus, Showalter traces the history of women's literature, suggesting that it can be divided into three phases:

The Feminine Phase (1840 – 1880):

Showalter sees the first phases taking place from roughly 1840 to 1880; she calls this “the Feminine phase” and declares that it is characterized by “women [writing] in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture... The distinguishing sign of this

period is the male pseudonym... [which] exerts an irregular pressure on the narrative, affecting tone, diction, structure, and characterization.”

The Feminist Phase (1880 – 1920):

The second feminist phase follows from 1880 to 1920, wherein “women are historically enabled to reject the accommodating postures of femininity and to use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood.” This phase is characterized by “Amazon Utopias,” visions of perfect, female-led societies of the future. This phase was characterized by women’s writing that protested against male standards and values and advocated women’s rights and values, including a demand for autonomy.

The Female Phase (1920 —):

It is one of self-discovery. Showalter says, “women reject both imitation and protest—two forms of dependency—and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature”. Significantly, Showalter does not offer a characteristic sign or figure for the female phase, suggesting a welcome diversity of experience that is too broad to be encompassed in a single image.

Rejecting both imitation and protest, Showalter advocates approaching feminist criticism from a cultural perspective in the current female phase rather than from perspectives that traditionally come from an androcentric perspective, like psychoanalytic and biological theories, for example. Feminists in the past have worked within these traditions by revising and criticising female representations, or lack thereof, in the male traditions (that is, in the Feminine and Feminist phases). In her essay *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* (1981), Showalter says, “A cultural theory acknowledges that there are important differences between women as writers: class, race, nationality, and history are literary determinants as significant as gender. Nonetheless, women’s culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space”.

Conclusion:

On the whole, we may conclude that her views on feminist poetics are intelligent, largely devoid of rhetorical extremities, and confidently provocative. Showalter speaks with calmly convincing authority, as one who firmly believes in the verity of what she’s saying.

She is both earnest in that she sees change needing to occur immediately, and patient, in that she expects that, given time enough, the wisdom and truth of her cause will prevail.
