

## **Feminist Criticism**

Feminist criticism examines how gender roles affect how texts are created and interpreted—AND how texts construct gender roles. Feminist criticism asserts that texts work to construct and define our sense of what it means to be of a particular gender; they tell and show readers what it means to be a “good” man or woman by establishing clear patterns regarding appropriate behavior for each gender. Politically, feminist criticism will generally lead to criticism of patriarchy and its effects on both men and women; feminist critics often conclude that women are underrepresented in texts (particularly “classic” texts) and that both men and women characters are limited by a narrowly conceived spectrum of expected behaviors.

### **Some common assumptions related to feminist criticism:**

- Traditional gender roles are mostly socially constructed rather than “natural”
- Labeling gendered behavior as “natural” sometimes serves to pass off assumptions as indisputable fact
- Patriarchy, a system of social organization that organizes women as subservient to men, exists—and affects us all
- Language, images, tradition, and cultural norms will, by default, work to reinforce patriarchal assumptions about gender
- Writers’ understandings of gender roles will inevitably affect the texts that they produce
- Readers’ understandings of gender roles will inevitably affect their understanding of the texts that they consume

### **Connections to other critical lenses:**

Feminist criticism and Marxist criticism share a focus on POWER. Feminist criticism, however, focuses specifically on how gender roles affect and are affected by power distribution. Like deconstruction, feminist criticism is also in the business of rooting out the underlying assumptions that inform a text; however, feminist criticism are most interested in critiquing those assumptions that are informed by patriarchy and/or convey assumptions about how men and women ought to behave, look, etc.

### **Relevant questions to ask of a text from a feminist criticism lens:**

- How does a writer’s own gender inform or affect his/her attitudes toward the world they are writing about?
- Which behaviors in men/women in the text are deemed acceptable in the text? Which are rewarded? Which are punished?
- What signs of patriarchal assumptions exist within the text (for example, gender stereotyping or a strictly limited range of acceptable behavior for men and women)? Are these assumptions challenged, promoted, or left unexamined?
- How are power relationships between characters in the book dictated, or at least influenced, by gender roles?
- How does gender disrupt or otherwise affect communication between characters in a text?
- How might your own gender affect your reading of this text?