

## Gynocriticism

Gynocriticism is a concept developed by Elaine Showalter in her essay “Toward a Feminist Poetics” (1979). It is a kind of literary criticism with women as writer of textual meaning, as against woman a just a reader. According to Showalter, when a woman is a reader, her reading focuses on how women are depicted in literary texts, 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.” This she simply calls feminist critique, which studies women characters, their conditions and experiences as written by men. On the other hand, there is another type of criticism which is concerned with woman as writer – with the woman who creates history, text, its meaning, structure, themes, genres, and characters. Showalter finds no term existing in English to describe such a specialised discourse, and so she calls it gynocriticism by adapting the French term “la gynocritique” for the purpose.

Gynocriticism is concerned with gynotexts or women’s writings and focuses on the female subject, female language, female experience, and female literary career. Hence, it can be seen as attempting to construct a female framework for the analysis of literature. Gynocritics are primarily engaged in studying female literary texts and depicting that there is a distinctly feminine mode of experience and distinctly female way of thinking, perceiving, and expressing.

At the foundation of Showalter’s gynocriticism, lies the argument that women write differently from men and therefore should be read differently. Women’s writing, Showalter argues, has its own patterns and themes, its own distinct identity. To fully understand how it differs from the dominant male literary tradition, it requires a critical reading which is appropriate to these differences. She believes that, only a gender-specific analysis of women’s writing would be sensitive to its motivations and expressions. To apply traditional critical methods and assumptions would be to force female artistic expressions into an ill-fitting male mould. Showalter argues that, ignoring the gender of writers like Jane Austen and George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) would mean some real and important insights into their works being lost. Gynocriticism seeks to uncover these valuable insights and nuances hidden in the text. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar described woman’s writing as a literary palimpsest (in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*), a ‘double-voiced’ text, having one visible conventional text and other hidden or concealed subtext. Gynocriticism is about unearthing and exploring these subtexts in the hidden recesses, recurrent images and motifs in the works of women writers. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* provides a particularly compelling example. In its recurring images of dark corridors, locked rooms, and barely contained fires, the novel betrays an uneasy acceptance of the inhibitions and frigidity of Victorian womanhood. The madwoman in the attic of the respectable home (Bertha Mason in Thornfield) represents the rage of repressed sexuality and the frustrated voice hiding behind the “Angel in the House” that every woman was supposed to be. This analysis shows that, by reading literature with an awareness and sensitivity to latent meanings, the gynocritic reader can get beyond the surface of the text and begin to explore its many possibilities.

However, like many other feminist literary theories, Showalter’s concept has also been criticised by some other feminists as well. Her insistence that women’s writing needs to be read differently is seen as creating a parallel female canon and thereby perpetuating the marginalisation of women writers. Also, despite Showalter’s protests, gynocriticism has been seen by some feminist critics, as moving dangerously close to essentialism, and her “female tradition” had been accused of generalising female experience. But in spite of these criticisms, it cannot be denied that focusing on the works of women writers has been significantly valuable in challenging the neglect they have long suffered in the male literary sphere and the phallogocentric politics of canon formation. Also suggesting a way of studying the concealed narratives/subtexts in the works of women throughout history has been a significant contribution in understanding the experiences, anxieties, repressions and expressions of women through time.

Some examples of Gynocriticism:

- *The Female Imagination: A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women’s Writing* by Patricia Meyer Sparks
- *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* by Elaine Showalter

- *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*  
by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar