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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Elaine Showalter: A Feminist Re-visited

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Abstract

Elaine Showalter, an American literary critic, feminist, defined women's writing as the product of a subculture, evolving with relation to a dominant main-stream. She upholds that if women lived in a different country from men, and had never read any of their writings, they would have a literature of their own.She classified three sections of feminine novelists: The first, born between 1800 and 1820, identified with the Golden Age of the Victorian authors; The second generation, born between 1820 and 1840, were less dedicated and original. The third generation, born between 1840 and 1860, cope effortlessly with the double roles of woman and professional, and to enjoy sexual fulfillment as well as literary success. Showalter maintains that American women writers need a jury of their peers, as their writing has often been ignored, dismissed, or misunderstood because readers have simply not had the tools with which to understand it.

Keywords: Feminist, Jury, Peer, Scribbling; Androgynous, Gynocriticism; Malady.

Introduction:

Elaine Showalter (b.1941—), an American literary critic, feminist, and leading scholar of women's literature, is acknowledged to be a "founding mother" of the practice of feminist literary criticism, founder of feminist criticism, has invented gynocritics.

If there was a female literary tradition, Showalter was observes, it came from imitation, literary convention, the marketplace, and critical reception, not from biology or psychology. Her theoretical structure came from the sociology and ethnography of literature. She defined women's writing as the product of a subculture, evolving with relation to a dominant main-stream. She further adds that if women lived in a different country from men, and had never read any of their writings, they would have a literature of their own. Her A Literature of Their Own challenges the traditional canon, going far beyond the handful of acceptable women writers to look at all the minor and forgotten figures whose careers and books had shaped a tradition. Showalter avers that New Women had to present female sexuality and reproduction as positive creative forces, rather than as biological traps or the binary opposite of artistic creation. They had also to deal with the relationship between aestheticism and commodification. Their short stories, more than their novels, describe the struggle for new words and new forms.

Showalter classified three sections of feminine novelists. She points out that there were three generations of nineteenth-century feminine novelist: The first, born between 1800 and 1820, includes all the women who are identified with the Golden Age of the Victorian authors; The second generation, born between 1820 and 1840, these women followed in the footsteps of the great, consolidating their gains, but were less dedicated and original. The third generation, born between 1840 and 1860, these women seemed to cope effortlessly with the double roles of woman and professional, and to enjoy sexual fulfillment as well as literary success. Showalter observes that even the most conservative and devout women novelists, such as Charlotte Yonge and Dinah Craik, were aware that the ‘feminine’ novel stood for feebleness, ignorance, prudery, refinement propriety, and sentimentality, while the feminine novelist was portrayed as vain, publicity seeking, and self-assertive.

The female novel entered a new and dynamic phase in the 1960s which has been strongly influenced in the past ten years by the energy of the international women’s movement. The contemporary women’s novels observe the traditional forms of nineteenth-century realism, but it also operated in the contexts of twentieth-century Freudian and Marxist analysis. Showalter finds that the task of defining a subculture in relation to English women novelists is made surer by their remarkable social homogeneity over more than a century. Women writers were deprived of education because of their sex not because of their class. Nineteenth-century women writers were women first, artists second. A woman novelist, unless she disguised herself with a male pseudonym, had to expect critics to focus on her femininity and rank her with the other women writers of her day, no matter how diverse their subjects or styles.

Showalter maintains that woman must learn the chief lesson of successful progress, which is not to copy man, but to carefully preserve her beautiful unlikeness to him in every possible way so that, while asserting and gaining intellectual equality with him, she shall gradually arrive at such ascendancy as to prove herself ever the finer and the nobler creature.

According to her, the androgynous mind is utopian projection of the ideal artist: calm, stable, unimpeded by consciousness of sex. It represents an escape from the confronted with femaleness or maleness. An ideal artist transcends sex, or has none. Radical feminists, Showalter observes, has tended to scorn newspapers and television, which, despite distortion and exploitation, have carried the messages of new feminism with remarkable speed to small towns in America. . A new wave of feminist energy had generated its own network of magazines, newsletters, and publishing houses, designed to promote and distribute women's literature. Thus, in 1977, Showalter arrived at the conclusion, that the British women novelists had to resist both the temptation to 'sacrifice personal development and freedom as an artist' by limiting themselves to writing about female experience, and the temptation to 'sacrifice authenticity and self-exploration' by accepting the dominant culture's definition of important literary subject matter. She adds that if a room of one's own is a place to gather strength a place to gather strength and conviction to act in the world, it is a place of birth.

Showalter believes that in the 1980s, feminist literary critics were wandering in the wilderness. In the American literary tradition, she further adds, the wilderness has been an exclusively masculine domain. She upholds that it is high time to learn from women's studies than from English studies, more to learn from international feminist theory than from another seminar on the masters. It must find its own subject, its own system, its own theory, and its own voice. Feminist criticism has gradually shifted its center from re-visionary readings to a sustained investigation of literary women. She adds that the concept of scripture feminine, the inscription of female body and female difference in language and text, is a significant theoretical formulation in French feminist criticism, although it describes a utopian possibility rather than a literary practice. All feminist criticism are struggling to find a terminology that can rescue the feminine from its stereotypical associations with inferiority. Showalter has coined the term 'Gynocriticism' which she elaborates that it is the study of feminist literature written by female writers inclusive of the interrogation of female authorship, images, the feminine experience and ideology, and the history and development of the female literary tradition. According to Elaine Showalter, gynocriticism is the study of not only the female as a gender status but also the 'internalized consciousness' of the female. The uncovering of the female subculture and exposition of a female model is the intention of gynocriticism.

Showalter maintains that linguistic and textual theories of women's writing are all gender marked as whether man and women use language differently; whether sex differences in language are theorized in terms of biology; socialization, or culture; whether women can create new languages of their own; and whether speaking, reading, and writing. Showalter firmly states that the advocacy of a women's language is political gesture that carries terrific emotional force. But despite its unifying appeal, the concept of a women's language is riddled with difficulties. Women's literature, she believes, is still haunted by the ghost of repressed language, and until we have exorcised those ghosts, it ought not to be in language that we base our theory of difference. Women's difficulties with feminine identity, She believes, come after oedipal phase, in which male power and cultural hegemony give sex differences a transformed value. We must go beyond psychoanalysis, Showalter asserts, to a more flexible and comprehensive model of women's writing which places it in the maximum context of culture. The ways in which women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are intricately linked to their cultural environments. The female psyche can be studied as the product or construction of cultural forces. 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. Nevertheless, "women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space. Women's culture refers to "the broad-based communality of values, institutions, relationships, and methods of communication.

Teaching Literature (2003) distills Showalter's insights about teaching and presents numerous personal anecdotes from colleagues and former students that demonstrate a variety of approaches to teaching in the field of literature. It seeks to unearth the roots of the fears the profession arouses. Knowing a subject well does not guarantee teaching a subject well. She states that teaching raises the most profound issues about how people learn, about freedom and control, about open-mindedness and didacticism. She wishes to help readers understand that teaching is a skill that can be taught and learned.

Showalter points out that women have always read men's writings, and thus lived in the same literary country as their brother, only recently has the reverse been true. Sister's Choice is the only bits-and-pieces critical book that draws attention to its own quilted nature. It is in many ways a program for further work rather than a contribution. It provides a concise, judicious introduction to several issues of broad historical, cultural and social significance.

The Female Malady discusses hysteria, which was once known as the “female malady”. Showalter demonstrates how cultural ideas about proper feminine behaviour have shaped the definition and treatment of female insanity from the Victorian era to the present. , It traces the systematic treatment of mental disease, focusing on how women influenced the establishment as not only patients, but commentators in the form of employees and writers, activists and advocates. Showalter evaluates both a feminist history of psychiatry and a cultural history of madness as a female malady. She looks at the representation of the mad woman in legal, medical, and literary texts and in painting, photography, and film. These images were not simply the reflections of medical and scientific knowledge, but part of the fundamental cultural framework in which idea about femininity and insanity were constructed. The Female Malady is, in fact, an unflinching account of British psychiatry’s historical mistreatment of women, including its use of such concepts as hysteria to label and even institutionalize women whose only symptom is intellectual or political ambition. It provides a factual basis for feminist complaints about patriarchal culture’s pathologization of women. Showalter proclaims that ‘the dual images of female insanity’—madness as one of the wrongs of woman; madness as the essential feminine nature unveiling itself before scientific male rationality—suggest the two ways that the relationship between women and madness has been perceived. In the most obvious sense, madness is a female malady because it is experienced by more women than men. Women were believed to be more vulnerable to insanity than men; the images of female insanity came from a cultural context that cannot be tabulated or translated into the statistics of mental health. Hysteria, Elaine Showalter writes, is the psychosomatic expression of an internal conflict that can only be resolved through psychoanalysis. She calls Hystories "a declaration of independence," a description that in many ways may turn out to be the most meaningful.

Showalter’s A Jury of Her Peer is an unprecedented literary landmark, the first comprehensive history of American women writers from 1650 to 2000. She introduces to more than 250 female writers. These include not only famous and expected names: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Willa Cather, Dorothy parker, Flannery O’Connor, Gwendolyn Brooks, Grace Paley, Toni Morrison, and Jodi Picoult among them—but also many who were once successful and acclaimed yet now are little known, form the early American bestselling novelist Catherine Sedgwick and playwright Susan Glaspell. Showalter shows how these writers—both the enduring stars and the ones left behind by the canon—were connected to one another and to their times. In fact A Jury of Her Peers is an irresistible invitation to discover long-lost great writers.

Beginning her account in 1650 with Anne Bradstreet's collection of poems, the tenth muse lately sprung up in America, and continues through to the present, connecting the legacies of legends such as Emily Dickinson and Harriet Beecher Stowe to current authors like Jodi Picoult and Geraldine Brooks. Along the way, Showalter fills us in on neglected niches of literature by women such as Susan Glaspell and Sarah Orne Jewett, and further illuminates the importance of visionaries like Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Anne Porter. Showalter maintains that American women writers need a jury of their peers; they have not received the attention they deserve because they have not always had readers and critics who could understand their work. Their writing has often been ignored, dismissed, or misunderstood. She makes an attempt to correct this problem and to give American women writers their due.

Showalter upholds that “the female tradition in American literature is not the result of biology, anatomy, or psychology. It comes from women’s relation to the literary marketplace, and from literary influence rather than sexual difference.” 1 She succeeds in balancing attention to historical context and biography with a focus on the writing itself, showing how women’s writing emerged from and responded to the particular circumstances of each writer’s life, as well as making an argument about its aesthetic value and contribution to American literary history. She also has much to say about women’s relationships and their rivalries with each other. She describes how many writers attempted to form a tradition of women’s writing, while some struggled against it. For example, some early 20th-century feminists worked together to redefine literary conventions and to rewrite literary history, but others such as Edith Wharton and Willa Cather refused to identify themselves as feminists or as women writers at all, preferring to see themselves simply as writers. The “new women” of the 1890s who fought conventional women’s roles and tried to redefine female sexuality were, as Showalter points out, often at odds with black women writers of the time and unable to take the step from gender equality to racial equality. Feminism in the 1970s became a powerful force. Showalter is careful to argue that women writers did not form one monolithic group and did not speak with a unified voice. They disagreed about what it meant to be a woman writer and how women should respond to the often difficult circumstances within which they wrote.

Showalter aims to make the "invisible visible" by shining a light on "neglected" and "forgotten" American women writers and their more enduringly famous sisters. She examines over four centuries of American women's writing, positioned within pertinent social and historical contexts. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Showalter notices that Wollstonecraft was the most significant influence on American thinking about women's rights. Her work has really revolutionized the women's Rights and Women's writing.

Keeping with Virginia Woolf's assertion that a woman needs to be freed from the daily drudgery of domesticity in order to create, or have "A Room of One's Own", Showalter follows a chronological organization to confirm her thesis that American women writers have escaped from the confinement of domesticity and social pressure and now are "free" to take on any subject they want, in any form they choose. Under this scenario, the 1990s is a watershed, the endgame of the female struggle for equal acceptance within the traditional male canon.

American writers were indebted to the English language and the forms of English literature, women writers were indebted to masculine literature and its forms. Showalter notices that "the essential problem for women writers was finding, or inventing, a suitable form: not traditional poetry, not the romantic novel, not the philosophical essay, but some combination and transformation of them all." 2 American women's poetry, she proclaimed, "is chiefly derived from the incidents and associations of everyday life and the quiet joys, deep pure sympathies, and secret sorrows of home, formed a natural sphere for woman, whose inspiration lies more in her heart than in her head.

The 1850s were both a pivotal decade for American literature and highly contested decade for American literary historians. These years were marked by the literary masterpieces of great men like—Ralph Waldo Emerson's Representative Men (1850), Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (1850), Herman Melville's Moby Dick (1851) Henry David Thoreau's Walden (1854) and Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass (1855). In literary terms, it was a decade of culturally influential and increasingly artistic women's literature. In political terms the 1850s were a decade of feminist agitation and organizing. The decade also saw the emergence of the African-American woman writer. American writers argued over the great national questions of racism and freedom, and connected American literature with worldwide struggles for self-determination.

The decade of the 1890s ushered in the era of the New Woman. The New Women, Showalter observed, rejected conventional female roles, redefined female sexuality, and asserted their rights to higher education and the professions.

American New Women writers had to deal with internal differences of race, region, national origin, and religion that were absent or obscured in England, and most white writers of the decade, however advance on feminist issues, were regressive in their attitudes toward immigration, other racial groups, and religious minorities. At the same time, the years from 1890 to 1910 were labeled "The Black Woman's Era" because of the visibility of significant black women writers. Women writers in the 1890s were striving for brevity and concentration. Showalter points out that Literature at the ends of centuries tends to have special preoccupations with the past and future. These women writers were also viewed as exotic blossoms, flowers of freedom.

Showalter perceived that the first years of the twentieth century seemed like the promised golden dawn of American women's writing. Women playwrights, especially Susan Glaspell, changed the form, structure, language, and focus of the theater. Showalter upholds that American women's writing had first been feminine, obeying national expectations about womanly submission and domestic obligation: from the 1890s, it had taken a feminist position on women's rights and literary daring.

In the 1920s American women wrote, Showalter observed, about disillusion, desolation and childlessness in images of weeds and parched fields. The relationship between feminism and modernism had been antagonistic at the turn of the century, with feminism linked to Victorian aesthetic practices and modernism committed to the overthrow of all conventions and repressions.

The 1930s were not a period of remarkable poetic activity. The worst casualties of the decade were the women poets; the number of books of poetry by women declined by two thirds, and during the depression, most of the little magazines edited by women, which had shaped careers in the twenties, folded. Showalter noticed that women poets faced stresses from all sides, but particularly from modernists and Marxists. Modernists regarded women as muses who could inspire major poems but lacked the genius and the detachment to create them. One cultural contribution of the 1930s, Showalter observed, was the radio soap opera; daytime radio offered a rich choice of serial dramas about women, stories to brighten the lives of lonely housewives. War had inspired women to write poetry. An unusually large number of books written by women have appeared at the beginning of the fall season, and wondered whether the war might be the reason.

The years 1941 to 1945 gave women opportunities to work outside the home, and gave them psychological and social encouragement to do so, after the war, they had to be forced back into domesticity, in order to make room for the returning male veterans and to rebuild the population. Indeed, the fifties marked a new phase in women's domestic destiny. In the nineteenth century, Showalter asserted, women were keeping house; at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were involved in homemaking and domestic science; by mid century they were house wives. Fiction by American women in the 1950s combined the themes of domesticity, creativity, and sexuality in a wide variety of permutations. During the fifties, however, an underground literature of lesbianism began to appear with the success of Pocket Books.

The 1960s were a decade of tumultuous change in almost every aspect of American life. The black power movement, the Vietnam War and the anti war movement, the plague of assassinations, the women's liberation movement, the counterculture and sexual revolution, the beginnings of protest for gay rights, transformed American society. Never before, and never since, has American poetry been such an effective medium for social, political, and cultural transformation. For women who lived through it, the 1960s were the equivalent of the French Revolution for the British Romantic poets, like Wordsworth describing his youth in The Prelude, they felt charged with hope.

The 1970 witnessed the will to change in American women writers. American feminism exploded in the 1970s, as women expressed optimism and determination about the possibilities for change in relations between women and men, and women and society. Women were starting to write about their lives as if their lives were as important as men's.

In the 1980s, women fully joined the literary juries of the United States, as writers, critics, reviewers, publishers, anthologist, and historian, contributing to the verdicts, and challenging the laws. No longer dependent on judgments the denied them representation, women writers felt empowered collectively and individually by the support of women readers, the attention of women scholars, and the impact of feminist activists. A new confidence and assertiveness marked American women's attitudes toward their position as professional writers.

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The most important change of the 1980s, however, was that the impact of feminist criticism and the attention paid to women's writing meant that all reviewers and critics, male and female, had a better understanding of the symbolic codes, genealogies, and traditions of women's writing and were better readers of its texts. Emphasis was shifting from a definition of "peers" as "other women" to a more complex, diverse understanding of what constituted a peer. Multiculturalism appeared as part of the culture wars that raged in the 1980s, political and academic battles over cultural and racial diversity in the university humanities curriculum. Nevertheless, the eighties witnessed an explosion of literature by women writers identifying themselves with minorities and hybrid cultures—Mexican-American, Asian-American, Arab-American, and many others in addition to African-American.

With the approached the twenty-first century, American women writers had traversed the three stages of feminine, feminist, and female writing, and had moved into the fourth stage: free. Asked why she rarely chose to write about women, Annie Proulx replied, "writers can write about anything they want, any sex they want, any place they want"3 No longer constrained by their femininity, women were free to think of themselves primarily as writers, and subject to the same market forces and social changes, the same shifts of popular taste and critical fashion, the same vagaries of talent, timeliness, and luck, as men.

One of the most dramatic aspects of the changed environment for women writers, observed Showalter, was the feminization of the literary market. American women had long been significant presence among readers and buyers, but in the 1990s, editors, publishers, and booksellers publicly acknowledged that women dominated the book market. Another notable phenomenon of women's writing in the 1990s was the extreme female gothic –glory novels and terrifying memoirs, as if an unflinching confrontation with the bloodiest chambers of the body was the initiations rite into the boys' club of contemporary fiction and art. By the 1990s however, the idea of a literary tradition had changed. Globalization transformed the once-monumental sense of a national identity and a national literature.

A peer is not a clone. Reading women's literature sympathetically and fairly is not simply a matter of being a woman reader. Nor must the reader exactly reproduce the writer's nationality, race, religion, ethnicity, region, sexual orientation, or age, in order to be a suitable respondent. A literary peer is a reader who is willing to understand the codes and contexts of literary writing. But in addition,

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Showalter believes, a peer must be willing to assume the responsibility of judging.

Showalter's contribution to feminist criticism and women's studies have thus helped influence the canon of British and American literature, bringing new visibility and legitimacy to often forgotten or underappreciated female authors. American women's writing was influenced by the English tradition, but it also transformed and expanded that tradition in terms of its own historical, cultural and racial context. The nineteenth-century scribbling women find new juries of readers at the end of the twentieth century and successfully pleaded their own critical case.

Showalter maintains that American women writers need a jury of their peers; they have not received the attention they deserve because they have not always had readers and critics who could understand their work. Their writing has often been ignored, dismissed, or misunderstood because readers have simply not had the tools with which to understand it. The nineteenth-century scribbling women find new juries of readers and successfully pleaded their own critical case.

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