4
Feminist criticism

"I'm not a feminist—I like men!"

"I'm not a feminist—I think women should be able to stay at home and raise children if they want to!"

"I'm not a feminist—I wear a bra!"

Contrary to the opinions of many students new to the study of feminist literary criticism, many feminists like men, think that women should be able to stay at home and raise children if they want to do so, and wear bras. Broadly defined, feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women. However, just as the practitioners of all critical theories do, feminist critics hold many different opinions on all of the issues their discipline examines. In fact, some feminists call their field feminisms in order to underscore the multiplicity of points of view of its adherents and offer ways of thinking that oppose the traditional tendency to believe there is a single best point of view. Yet many of us who are new to the study of feminist theory, both male and female, have decided ahead of time that we are not feminists because we don't share whatever feminist point of view we have found the most objectionable. In other words, before we even come to the theory classroom, many of us have reduced feminism to whatever we consider its most objectionable element and, on that basis, have rejected it. This attitude reveals, I think, the oversimplified, negative view of feminism that still persists in American culture today. For it is from the culture at large—the home, the workplace, the media, and so on—that we have gathered the antifeminist bias we sometimes bring into the classroom.

To see how this negative oversimplification works to blind us to the seriousness of the issues feminism raises, let's briefly examine one of the most maligned feminist claims: that we should not use the masculine pronoun *he* to represent both men and women. For many people, this claim suggests what they see as

the trivial, even infantile, nature of feminist demands. What possible difference could it make if we continue to use the "inclusive *he*" to refer to members of both sexes? We know what we mean when we do it: it's simply a convention of language that includes both males and females. Such people believe that feminists should just concentrate on getting women an equal crack at the dough and forget all this nonsense about pronouns! For many feminists, however, the use of the pronoun *he* to refer to members of both sexes reflects and perpetuates a "habit of seeing," a way of looking at life, that uses male experience as the standard by which the experience of both sexes is evaluated. In other words, although the "inclusive *he*" claims to represent both men and women, in reality it is part of a deeply rooted cultural attitude that ignores women's experiences and blinds us to women's points of view. The damaging effects of this attitude can be seen in a number of areas.

For example, before the centuries-old struggle for women's equality finally emerged in literary studies in the late 1960s, the literary works of (white) male authors describing experience from a (white) male point of view was considered the standard of universality—that is, representative of the experience of all readers—and universality was considered a major criterion of greatness. Because the works of (white) female authors (and of all authors of color) do not describe experience from a (white) male point of view, they were not considered universal and hence did not become part of the literary canon. It is interesting to note that popularity was not necessarily considered evidence of universality, for many women writers who enjoyed widespread fame during their lives were not "canonized" in literary histories, which focused primarily on male writers. Of course, those holding up this standard of greatness did not believe they were being unfairly discriminatory; they simply believed that they were rejecting literary texts that were not universal, that were not great. Even when (white) women authors began to appear more frequently in the canon and on college syllabi in the mid-1970s, they were not represented on an equal basis with (white) male authors.

Even today, unless the critical or historical point of view is feminist, there is a tendency to underrepresent the contribution of women writers. For example, in Matthew J. Bruccoli's preface to recent editions of *The Great Gatsby*, he notes that the 1920s was "an age of achievement . . . in American literature" (x) and lists the names of twelve authors to support his claim. Only one of those authors—Willa Cather—is a woman. What about Ellen Glasgow, Susan Glaspell, Nella Larsen, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Rolla Lynn Riggs, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Elizabeth Maddox Roberts, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), or Marianne Moore? That many students probably recognize only a few of these names illustrates the marginalization of many women writers by literary history, though not necessarily by the reading public at the time these women wrote. Similarly, in most Hollywood films, even today, the camera eye (the point of

view from which the film is shot) is male: the female characters, not male, are the objects gazed on by the camera and often eroticized as if a male eye were viewing them, as if the point of view of the "universal" moviegoer were male.

Perhaps the most chilling example of the damaging effects of this "habit of seeing" is found in the world of modern medicine, where drugs prescribed for both sexes often have been tested on male subjects only. In other words, in laboratory tests to determine the safety of prescription drugs before marketing them, men's responses frequently have been used to gather statistical data on the medications' effectiveness and possible side effects. As a result, women may experience unexpected side effects while male users are unaffected. How could medical scientists not have anticipated this problem? Surely, the cultural habit of seeing male experience as universal played a role.

Traditional gender roles

I offer the above examples up front because I think they show some of the ways in which all of us have been programmed to see (or to be blind), myself included. I consider myself a recovering patriarchal woman. By *patriarchal woman* I mean, of course, a woman who has internalized the norms and values of *patriarchy*, which can be defined, in short, as any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles. *Traditional gender roles* cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify inequities, which still occur today, such as excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions (in the family as well as in politics, academia, and the corporate world), paying men higher wages than women for doing the same job (if women are even able to obtain the job), and convincing women that they are not fit for careers in such areas as mathematics and engineering. Many people today believe such inequities are a thing of the past because antidiscriminatory laws have been passed, such as the law that guarantees women equal pay for equal work. However, these laws are frequently side-stepped. For example, an employer can pay a woman less for performing the same work as a man (or for doing more work than a man) simply by giving her a different job title. So women still are paid roughly between fifty-five and eighty cents, depending on their ethnicity and age, for every dollar earned by men.

Patriarchy is thus, by definition, *sexist*, which means it promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. This belief in the inborn inferiority of women is a form of what is called *biological essentialism* because it is based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as men and women. A striking illustration is the word *hysteria*, which

derives from the Greek word for womb (*hystera*) and refers to psychological disorders deemed peculiar to women and characterized by overemotional, extremely irrational behavior. Feminists don't deny the biological differences between men and women; in fact, many feminists celebrate those differences. But they don't agree that such differences as physical size, shape, and body chemistry make men naturally superior to women: for example, more intelligent, more logical, more courageous, or better leaders. Feminism therefore distinguishes between the word *sex*, which refers to our biological constitution as female or male, and the word *gender*, which refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine. In other words, women are not born feminine, and men are not born masculine. Rather, these gender categories are constructed by society, which is why this view of gender is an example of what has come to be called *social constructionism*.

The belief that men are superior to women has been used, feminists have observed, to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power, in other words, to keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political, and social power. That is, the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically, produced. For example, it is a patriarchal assumption, rather than a fact, that more women than men suffer from hysteria. But because it has been defined as a female problem, hysterical behavior in men won't be diagnosed as such. Instead, it will be ignored or given another, less damaging name, for example, shortness of temper. Of course, not all men accept patriarchal ideology, and those who don't—those who don't believe, for example, that because men generally have been endowed by nature with stronger muscles, they have been endowed with any other natural superiority—are often derided, by both patriarchal men and women, as weak and unmanly, as if the only way to be a man were to be a patriarchal man.

I call myself a patriarchal woman because I was socially programmed, as are most women and men, *not* to see the ways in which women are oppressed by traditional gender roles. I say that I'm recovering because I learned to recognize and resist that programming. For me, such recognition and resistance will always require effort—I'm recovering rather than recovered—not just because I internalized patriarchal programming years ago but because that program continues to assert itself in my world: in movies, television shows, books, magazines, and advertisements as well as in the attitudes of salespeople who think I can't learn to operate a simple machine, repair technicians who assume I won't know if they've done a shoddy job, and male drivers who believe I'm flattered by sexual offers shouted from passing cars (or, worse, who don't give a moment's thought to how I might feel or, worse yet, who hope I feel intimidated so that they can feel powerful). The point here is fairly simple: patriarchy continually exerts forces

absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive.

To cite a similar example of patriarchal programming, little girls have been (and some still are) told early in their educational careers that they can't do math. If not told so explicitly in words (by parents, teachers, or friends), they are told so by the body language, tone of voice, and facial expression of adults and peers. Because it is often assumed that little girls can't do math and, furthermore, that this deficiency doesn't really matter because most of them won't need math in later life, girls are not called on by the teacher as frequently as boys to perform mathematical operations. In fact, girls are often "rewarded" for failing at math: they receive ready sympathy, coddling, and other debilitating though enticing payoffs for being feminine. If girls manage to do well in math despite these obstacles, they are considered exceptions to the rule (which, from a child's point of view, usually means they are considered "freaks"). In short, girls are programmed to fail. Then the patriarchal mind-set points to girls' lower test scores in math and their failure to become math majors as proof that they are biologically ill-suited to mathematical studies, which, given the close relationship between math and logic, suggests that females are less logical than males. In other words, patriarchy creates the failure that it then uses to justify its assumptions about women.

Because I'm a recovering patriarchal woman, I am also very aware of the ways in which patriarchal gender roles are destructive for men as well as for women. For example, because traditional gender roles dictate that men are supposed to be strong (physically powerful and emotionally stoic), they are not supposed to cry because crying is considered a sign of weakness, a sign that one has been overpowered by one's emotions. For similar reasons, it is considered unmanly for men to show fear or pain or to express their sympathy for other men. Expressing sympathy (or any loving feeling) for other men is especially taboo because patriarchy assumes that only the most mute and stoic (or boisterous and boyish) forms of male bonding are free of homosexual overtones. In addition, men are not permitted to fail at anything they try because failure in any domain implies failure in one's manhood.

Failure to provide adequate economic support for one's family is considered the most humiliating failure a man can experience because it means that he has failed at what is considered his biological role as provider. The imperative for men to succeed economically has become an extremely pressurized situation in contemporary America because the degree of success men are expected to achieve keeps increasing: to be a "real" man in this day and age one must have a more expensive house and car than one's father, siblings, and friends, and one must send one's children to a more expensive school. If men can't achieve the

unrealistic economic goals set for them in contemporary America, then they must increase the signs of their manhood in some other area: they must be the most sexually active (or make others believe that they are) or be able to hold the most liquor or display the most anger. It is not surprising, in this context, that anger and other violent emotions are the only emotions permitted, even encouraged, in men, for anger is a very effective means of blocking out fear and pain, which are not permitted, and anger usually produces the kind of aggressive behaviors associated with patriarchal manhood.

I refer to male programming, at this point, for two reasons, both of which reflect my personal feminist biases. I want the men reading this chapter to see in feminism the potential for learning a good deal about themselves as well as about women. And I want readers of both sexes to see that, even when we think we're talking about men, we're also talking about women because, in a patriarchy, everything that concerns men usually implies something (usually negative) about women. For example, it is important to note that all the behaviors described in the preceding two paragraphs—behaviors forbidden to men—are considered "womanish," that is, inferior, beneath the dignity of manhood. Men, and even little boys, who cry are called "sissies." *Sissy* sounds very much like *sister*, and it means "cowardly" or "feminine," two words that, in this context, are synonyms. Clearly, one of the most devastating verbal attacks to which a man can be subjected is to be compared to a woman. Thus, being a "real" man in patriarchal culture requires that one hold feminine qualities in contempt. Homosexuality is included on the list of "feminine" behaviors, at least for American men, because despite the plentiful example of very masculine homosexual men, the American stereotype of the homosexual male is an extremely feminine one. This phenomenon implies that whenever patriarchy wants to undermine a behavior, it portrays that behavior as feminine. It is important to note, too, that the patriarchal concept of femininity—which is linked to frailty, modesty, and timidity—disempowers women in the real world: it is not feminine to succeed in business, to be extremely intelligent, to earn big bucks, to have strong opinions, to have a healthy appetite (for anything), or to assert one's rights.

To briefly illustrate the debilitating effects of patriarchal gender roles on both women and men, consider the story of "Cinderella." Feminists have long been aware that the role of Cinderella, which patriarchy imposes on the imagination of young girls, is a destructive role because it equates femininity with submission, encouraging women to tolerate familial abuse, wait patiently to be rescued by a man, and view marriage as the only desirable reward for "right" conduct. By the same token, however, the role of Prince Charming—which requires men to be wealthy rescuers responsible for making their women happy "ever after"—is a destructive role for men because it promotes the belief that men must be unflagging superproviders without emotional needs.

Unfortunately, the notion of a feminist critique of fairy tales has been the target of mockery by social commentators who offer absurdly humorous and what they claim are politically correct versions of classic fairy tales in order to show us the allegedly ridiculous extremes to which feminists and other "malcontents" would lead us. However, feminist readings of fairy tales can, in fact, provide a wonderful means for illustrating the ways in which patriarchal ideology informs what appear to be even the most innocent of our activities. Consider, for example, the similarities among the ever popular "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," "Sleeping Beauty," and, of course, "Cinderella." In all three tales, a beautiful, sweet young girl (for females must be beautiful, sweet, and young if they are to be worthy of romantic admiration) is rescued (for she is incapable of rescuing herself) from a dire situation by a dashing young man who carries her off to marry him and live happily ever after. The plot thus implies that marriage to the right man is a guarantee of happiness and the proper reward for a right-minded young woman. In all three tales, the main female characters are stereotyped as either "good girls" (gentle, submissive, virginal, angelic) or "bad girls" (violent, aggressive, worldly, monstrous). These characterizations imply that if a woman does not accept her patriarchal gender role, then the only role left her is that of a monster. In all three tales, the "bad girls"—the wicked queen in "Snow White," the wicked fairy in "Sleeping Beauty," and the wicked stepmother and stepsisters in "Cinderella"—are also vain, petty, and jealous, infuriated because they are not as beautiful as the main character or, in the case of the wicked fairy, because she wasn't invited to a royal celebration. Such motivations imply that even when women are evil, their concerns are trivial. In two of the stories, the young maiden is awakened from a deathlike slumber by the potent (after all, it brings her to life) kiss of the would-be lover. This ending implies that the proper patriarchal young woman is sexually dormant until "awakened" by the man who claims her. We could analyze these tales further, and we could analyze additional tales, but the point here is to see how pervasive patriarchal ideology is and how it can program us without our knowledge or consent.

I refer in the above paragraph to "good girls" and "bad girls," and this concept deserves more attention because it's another way in which sexist ideology continues to influence us. As we saw above, patriarchal ideology suggests that there are only two identities a woman can have. If she accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules, she's a "good girl"; if she doesn't, she's a "bad girl." These two roles—also referred to as "madonna" and "whore" or "angel" and "bitch"—view women only in terms of how they relate to the patriarchal order. Of course, how "good girls" and "bad girls" are specifically defined will alter somewhat according to the time and place in which they live. But it is patriarchy that will do the defining because both roles are projections of patriarchal male desire: for example, the desire to own "valuable" women suited to

be wives and mothers, the desire to control women's sexuality so that men's sexuality cannot be threatened in any way, and the desire to dominate in all financial matters. This last desire is well served by the patriarchal ideology that deems certain kinds of work improper for "good girls," an ideology that forced many women writers in Victorian England to publish their work under male pseudonyms and that required women writers on both sides of the Atlantic to accommodate their art to patriarchal expectations or face the consequences (as Kate Chopin did at the turn of the twentieth century when her work was buried due to its feminist content, not to be reprinted until it was rediscovered by feminists in the late 1960s).

According to a patriarchal ideology in full force through the 1950s, versions of which are still with us today, "bad girls" violate patriarchal sexual norms in some way: they're sexually forward in appearance or behavior, or they have multiple sexual partners. Men sleep with "bad girls," but they don't marry them. "Bad girls" are used and then discarded because they don't deserve better, and they probably don't even expect better. They're not good enough to bear a man's name or his legitimate children. That role is appropriate only for a properly submissive "good girl." The "good girl" is rewarded for her behavior by being placed on a pedestal by patriarchal culture. To her are attributed all the virtues associated with patriarchal femininity and domesticity: she's modest, unassuming, self-sacrificing, and nurturing. She has no needs of her own, for she is completely satisfied by serving her family. At times, she may be sad about the problems of others, and she frequently worries about those in her care—but she is never angry. In Victorian culture in England she was the "angel in the house." She made the home a safe haven for her husband, where he could spiritually fortify himself before resuming the daily struggles of the workplace, and for her children, where they could receive the moral guidance needed to eventually assume their own traditional roles in the adult world.

What's wrong with being placed on a pedestal? For one thing, pedestals are small and leave a woman very little room to do anything but fulfill the prescribed role. For example, to remain on her Victorian pedestal, the "good girl" had to remain uninterested in sexual activity, except for the purpose of legitimate procreation, because it was believed unnatural for women to have sexual desire. In fact, "good" women were expected to find sex frightening or disgusting. For another thing, pedestals are shaky. One can easily fall off a pedestal, and when a woman does, she is often punished. At best, she suffers self-recrimination for her inadequacy or "unnaturalness." At worst, she suffers physical punishment from the community or from her husband, which until relatively recently was encouraged by law and custom and which is still too often tacitly condoned by an ineffectual or complicit justice system. It is interesting to note, in this context, that patriarchy *objectifies* both "bad girls" and "good girls." That is, patriarchy treats women, whatever their role, like objects: like objects, women exist, according to patriarchy, to be used without consideration of their own perspectives, feelings, or opinions. After all, from a patriarchal standpoint, women's perspectives, feelings, and opinions don't count unless they conform to those of patriarchy.

In upwardly mobile, middle-class American culture today, the woman on the pedestal is the woman who successfully juggles a career and a family, which means she looks great at the office and over the breakfast table, and she's never too tired after work to fix dinner, clean house, attend to all her children's needs, and please her husband in bed. In other words, patriarchal gender roles have not been eliminated by modern women's entrance into the male-dominated workplace, even if some of those women now hold what used to be traditionally male jobs. For many of those same women are still bound by patriarchal gender roles in the home, which they must now fulfill in addition to their career goals.

Furthermore, the persistence of repressive attitudes toward women's sexuality is still visible in our language today. For example, we use the negative word *slut* to describe a woman who sleeps with a number of men while we use the positive word *stud* to describe a man who sleeps with a number of women. And though women's fashions have radically changed since the nineteenth century, the most "feminine" clothing still promotes patriarchal ideology. For example, the extremely tight corsets worn by nineteenth-century women prevented them from getting enough oxygen to be physically active or to experience emotion without getting "the vapors": shortness of breath or slight fits of fainting, which were considered very feminine and proved that women were too fragile and emotional to participate in a man's world. Analogously, one of the most "feminine" styles of clothing for today's woman is the tight skirt and high heels, which create a kind of "feminine" walk (while precluding running) symbolically akin both to the restrained physical capability imposed by nineteenth-century women's clothing and to the male sexual access to women's bodies such attire allows.

A summary of feminist premises

So far, we've examined how patriarchal ideology works to keep women and men in traditional gender roles and thereby maintain male dominance. That patriarchal ideology functions in this way is a belief shared by all feminists even if they disagree about other issues. In fact, feminists share several important assumptions, which might be summarized as follows.

FEMINIST ASSUMPTIONS

1. Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so.
2. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is *other:* she is objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have.
3. All of Western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, as we see, for example, in the numerous patriarchal women and female monsters of Greek and Roman literature and mythology; the patriarchal interpretation of the biblical Eve as the origin of sin and death in the world; the representation of woman as a nonrational creature by traditional Western philosophy; and the reliance on *phallogocentric* thinking (thinking that is male oriented in its vocabulary, rules of logic, and criteria for what is considered objective knowledge) by educational, political, legal, and business institutions. As we saw earlier, even the development of the Western canon of great literature, including traditional fairy tales, was a product of patriarchal ideology.
4. While biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender (masculine or feminine). That is, for most English-speaking feminists, the word *gender* refers not to our anatomy but to our behavior as socially programmed men and women. I behave "like a woman" (for example, submissively) not because it is natural for me to do so but because I was taught to do so. In fact, all the traits we associate with masculine and feminine behavior are learned, not inborn.
5. All feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal to change the world by promoting women's equality. Thus, all feminist activity can be seen as a form of *activism*, although the word is usually applied to feminist activity that directly promotes social change through political activity such as public demonstrations, boycotts, voter education and registration, the provision of hotlines for rape victims and shelters for abused women, and the like. Although frequently falsely portrayed in opposition to "family values," feminists continue to lead the struggle for better family policies such as nutrition and health care for mothers and children; parental leave; and high-quality, affordable day care.
6. Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not.

Of course, the assumptions listed above are related, overlapping ideas, and, together, they imply that patriarchal ideology has a pervasive, deeply rooted influence on the way we think, speak, see ourselves, and view the world in which we live. The pervasiveness of patriarchal ideology raises some important questions for feminist theory. For example, if patriarchal ideology influences our identity and experience so strongly, how can we ever get beyond it? If our modes of thinking and our language are patriarchal, how can we ever think or speak differently? In other words, if the fabric of our existence is patriarchal, how can we ever become nonpatriarchal?

Getting beyond patriarchy

Feminists have long puzzled over the problem of getting beyond patriarchal programming and have offered many different solutions. For example, one way to deal with our apparent entrapment within patriarchal ideology is to consider the possibility that no ideology succeeds in fully programming all of the people all of the time. Every ideology has points of self-contradiction, of illogic, that permit us to understand its operations and decrease its influence, for instance, as Mary Wollstonecraft resisted patriarchal ideology in 1792 when she wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as Virginia Woolf resisted patriarchal ideology in 1929 when she wrote *A Room of One's Own*, as Simone de Beauvoir resisted patriarchal ideology in 1949 when she wrote *The Second Sex*, and as feminist theorists continue to resist it today. Perhaps the difficulty in theorizing our way out of patriarchal ideology arises when we think of our immersion in it as an all-or-nothing situation: if we're not completely beyond patriarchy, then we must be completely programmed by it. I think it might be more useful to look at our relationship to patriarchal ideology as a dynamic situation: we must constantly struggle to understand and resist the various ways in which patriarchy dictates our lives, although we can't always see all the ways in which it does so. Individually and collectively, we will move forward in some areas even as we remain static or backslide in others, but we must continue to move forward—to understand and resist patriarchal ideology—wherever and whenever we can.

Given the difficulties involved in resisting patriarchal programming, many feminist theorists and literary critics believe we should be especially cautious about using frameworks that are themselves patriarchal, such as psychoanalysis and Marxism. Such frameworks are considered patriarchal because they embody various elements of patriarchal ideology. For example, because he used male experience as the standard against which he measured female experience, Freud believed that women suffer from what he called "penis envy" and that they tend to see their first-born sons as "penis substitutes" to make up for their own lack. Despite Marx's insights into the ways in which economic forces determine the lives of both sexes, he failed to realize the ways in which women have been oppressed by men despite their economic class.

Nevertheless, many feminists draw on elements of psychoanalytic and Marxist theory as well as other critical theories because they find them useful in examining issues relevant to women's experience. For example, psychoanalysis can be used to help us understand the psychological effects of patriarchal ideology as well as how and why women and men internalize it. Marxism can be used to help us understand how economic forces have been manipulated by patriarchal law and custom to keep women economically, politically, and socially oppressed as an underclass. Structuralist principles can be used to study underlying similarities among the experiences and productions of women from various cultures as well as underlying similarities in the ways they are oppressed. And deconstruction can be used to find the ways in which a literary work covertly reinforces the patriarchal ideology it criticizes, which some feminist literary critics were doing in America before the theory of deconstruction reached American shores.

Deconstruction, which is discussed in chapter 8, helps us see, among other things, when our thinking is based on false oppositions, that is, on the belief that two ideas, qualities, or categories are polar opposites—for example, love/hate or good/evil—when, in fact, they are not. So deconstruction is also useful to feminists in helping us see the ways in which patriarchal ideology is often based on false oppositions. For instance, in refuting the sexist belief that men are naturally rational while women are naturally emotional, a feminist might do more than argue, for example, that women have been programmed to be more emotional or that both categories apply equally to both genders. Using deconstructive principles, she might argue that we are mistaken to separate the rational and the emotional into such diametrically opposed categories. Aren't our rational reasons for subscribing to a particular philosophical view or theoretical framework based, consciously or unconsciously, on how that viewpoint or framework makes us feel? Don't the rational and the emotional, properly understood, often work in tandem in our lives?

To my mind, one of feminism's strengths is the freedom with which it borrows ideas from other theories and adapts them to its own rapidly evolving needs. This is one reason why I believe that feminist theory will never become stale: it constantly incorporates new ideas from other fields and finds new ways to use old ideas. This is also why feminism can be seen as an interdisciplinary theory that can help us learn to make connections among seemingly divergent schools of thought. While all of the theories addressed in this book overlap with one another in various ways, few acknowledge that fact or use it to broaden or deepen their theoretical explorations to the extent that feminism does.

Of course, the question of how we can get beyond any ideology that dominates the way we think is a question relevant to any theory that purports to be new, which means it's a question relevant to all theories, though few directly address

it. In fact, many of the unsolvable theoretical problems that feminist thinkers continue to engage are unsolvable problems for every theory, though these problems either remain unacknowledged by practitioners in those fields or are considered solved by earlier thinkers. For example, related to the problem of the possibility (or impossibility) of getting beyond any ideology that dominates the way we think is the problem of one's own *subjectivity*: one's own selfhood, the way one views oneself and others, which develops from one's own individual experiences. Given that we can't be aware of all the ways in which our own subjectivity determines how we interpret the world, how can we ever know that our speculations about human experience, or about anything else for that matter, are anything but expressions of our own subjectivity?

As we'll see in subsequent chapters, deconstruction and new historicism engage this problem, but most of the other theories do not directly address it. For feminism, as for deconstruction and new historicism, all perceptions, therefore all acts of interpretation, are unavoidably subjective. We cannot leave ourselves out of the picture when describing what we see because what we see is a product of who we are: our gender, our politics, our religion, our race, our socioeconomic class, our sexual orientation, our education, our family background, our problems, our strengths, our weaknesses, our theoretical framework, and so on. To claim that we are objective, as patriarchy encourages men to do, is merely to blind ourselves to the ways in which we are not so.

From a feminist perspective, when we interpret texts or anything else, the way to deal with our subjectivity is not to try to avoid it but to be as aware of it as possible, to include it in our interpretation as fully as possible, so that others will be able to take it into account when evaluating our viewpoints. This is why it's especially appropriate that I refer in this chapter, as you may have noticed, to my own experience and biases. My experience as a middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual, white American woman with a Ph.D. in English and a lovingly dysfunctional family is bound to affect my interpretation of feminism as well as the feminist reading of *The Great Gatsby* I offer at the end of this chapter. Unavoidably, I'll see some things differently from other theorists and literary critics, and many of those differences can probably be accounted for by differences in the personal data I listed above. By knowing a little bit about me, it is hoped that my readers will be on the lookout for the ways in which my point of view is just that: what I see from where I'm standing.

French feminism

Additional strategies for getting beyond patriarchy have been offered by French feminists. Like American feminism, French feminism is diverse: it consists

of many different points of view. Also like American feminism, French feminism believes in the importance of social and political activism in order to ensure equal opportunity and equal access to justice for women. We're taking a brief look at French feminism as a separate category, however, because French feminists have tended to focus more strongly on the philosophical dimension of women's issues than have British and American feminists although French feminist theory has become, over time, an increasingly visible presence in Anglo-American feminism.

Generally speaking, the focus of French feminism has taken two different forms: *materialist feminism* and *psychoanalytic feminism*. The first form is interested in the social and economic oppression of women while the second form, as you might expect, concentrates on women's psychological experience. Although these two approaches to analyzing women's experience in patriarchal culture often contrast significantly, French feminists are also concerned with the ways in which women's social/economic and psychological experience are connected. For now, however, let's look at these two forms separately. I think that if we can gain a fairly clear idea of each, we will readily see the ways in which they compliment as well as contrast with each other.

French materialist feminism examines the patriarchal traditions and institutions that control the material (physical) and economic conditions by which society oppresses women, for example, patriarchal beliefs about the difference between men and women and the laws and customs that govern marriage and motherhood. Although Simone de Beauvoir didn't refer to herself as a materialist feminist, her groundbreaking *The Second Sex* (1949) created a theoretical basis for materialist feminists for decades to come. In a patriarchal society, Beauvoir observes, men are considered essential subjects (independent selves with free will), while women are considered contingent beings (dependent beings controlled by circumstances). Men can act upon the world, change it, give it meaning, while women have meaning only in relation to men. Thus, women are defined not just in terms of their difference from men, but in terms of their inadequacy in comparison to men. The word *woman*, therefore, has the same implications as the word *other*. A woman is not a person in her own right. She is man's Other: she is less than a man; she is a kind of alien in a man's world; she is not a fully developed human being the way a man is.

The first to argue that women are not born feminine but rather conditioned to be feminine by patriarchy, Beauvoir articulated an idea that is now called, as we saw earlier in this chapter, social constructionism in her now-famous words, "One is not born a woman; one becomes one" (cited in Moi 92). Indeed, Beauvoir argues that, despite patriarchy's assumptions to the contrary, women are not

species have as part of their natural biological makeup, whereas not all women want to have children or feel comfortable being mothers. Yet patriarchy tells them that they are unfulfilled as women if they don't have children, and there is a great deal of pressure brought to bear upon women in order to recruit them for motherhood. Clearly, how can we know what "woman" is "by nature," given that we never see her outside the social conditioning of patriarchy?

Beauvoir maintains that women should not be content with investing the meaning of their lives in their husbands and sons, as patriarchy encourages them to do. As Jennifer Hansen observes, "Beauvoir strongly believed that marriage . . . trapped and stunted women's intellectual growth and freedom" (2). In investing themselves so thoroughly in the accomplishments of their husbands and sons, Beauvoir claims, women are trying to escape their own freedom to fulfill their own potential in the world, a freedom that they often try to avoid because it is frightening: it demands personal responsibility while offering no guarantee of success or even of well-being. "If woman seems to be the inessential [being] which never becomes the essential," Beauvoir suggests, "it is because she herself fails to bring about this change" (10).

Why is it so difficult for women to recognize their own subjugation, let alone do something about it? Beauvoir points out that, unlike other oppressed groups—for example, oppressed classes and oppressed racial and religious minorities—there is no historical record of women's shared culture, shared traditions, or shared oppression. They have been, in this sense, "written out" of history, not considered a topic worth covering. Furthermore, she observes that women

> lack a concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit. . . . They have no [collective recorded] past . . . no religion of their own. . . . They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men—fathers or husbands—more firmly than they are to other women. (11)

In other words, women's allegiance to men from their own social class, race, or religion always supersedes their allegiance to women from different classes, races, or religions. In fact, women's allegiance to men also supersedes their allegiance to women from their *own* class, race, or religion.

One of many thinkers influenced by Beauvoir, Christine Delphy offers a feminist critique of patriarchy based on Marxist principles. Delphy, who coined the phrase *materialist feminism* in the early 1970s, focuses her analysis on the family as economic unit. Just as the lower classes are oppressed by the upper classes in society as a whole, she explains, women are the subordinates within families. As such, women constitute a separate oppressed class, based on their oppression as women, regardless of the socioeconomic class to which they belong. For

commonly trivialized as "housework," not considered important enough to be seriously analyzed as a topic, or a problem, in its own right. An understanding of the implications of this situation is central, she notes, to an understanding of women's oppression. Delphy points out that

> [a]ll contemporary "developed" societies . . . depend on the unpaid labour of women for domestic services and child-rearing. These services are furnished within the framework of a particular relationship to an individual (the husband). They are excluded from the realm of exchange [i.e., these services are not treated like the jobs people do for money outside their own home] and consequently have no *value*. They are unpaid. Whatever women receive in return is independent of the work which they perform because it is not handed out in exchange for that work (i.e., as a wage to which their work entitles them), but rather as a gift. The husband's only obligation, which is obviously in his own interest, is to provide for his wife's basic needs, in other words he maintains her labour power. (60)

In addition, Delphy contends that women's domestic work in their own homes is unpaid not because their work is unimportant or involves less time or labor than the paid work performed by men outside the home, but because patriarchy defines women in their domestic roles as nonworkers. And nonworkers, of course, should not expect to be paid. Ironically, "all the anthropological and sociological evidence reveals," Delphy notes, "that the dominant classes make the classes in their power do the productive work—that the pre-eminent sex does less work" (61). In other words, in a patriarchy women do the domestic labor at home that men don't want to do, and their work day is twenty-four hours long. So when you add it all up, women work longer hours than men, though women's work in the home isn't recognized as real labor deserving of pay. It should not be surprising, then, that in order to understand anything about sexuality or gender we must first understand, Delphy argues, that all relationships between men and women are based on power: patriarchal men want to keep all of it; nonpatriarchal women want power to be equally distributed. As more and more American wives take jobs outside the home, while they still perform the lion's share of domestic labor and child-rearing tasks, Delphy's analysis seems especially relevant to the lives of American women today.

For our final example of French materialist feminism let's take a look at the work of Colette Guillaumin. Guillaumin observes that men are defined primarily and referred to primarily in terms of what they do, according to their value in society as participants in the workforce, as decision makers, and so forth. Women are defined primarily and referred to primarily in terms of their sex. As Guillaumin notes, from phrases she collected within a single forty-eight-hour period, a "group meeting to give their opinion on some matter" was said to consist of a "company director, a lathe-operator, a croupier [a person who runs a gambling table at a casino] and a woman" (73). Similarly, Guillaumin

reports, a world leader, discussing a repressive regime to which he was opposed, said, "They killed tens of thousands of workers, students, and women" (73). In other words, Guillaumin observes, in terms of their function in society, "female human beings . . . [are] . . . primarily and fundamentally women" (73). And for Guillaumin, this means they are primarily and fundamentally property, for example, property to be "exchanged" or "given away" (depending on the culture to which they belong) in marriage.

The primary form of women's oppression, Guillaumin argues, which also reveals their function as property, is appropriation. As she explains, it is not merely the case that women are exploited, as everyone knows, in the labor market (for example, paid less than men for the same work) and in the home, where they are generally not paid at all for their labor. Women are also oppressed by what Guillaumin calls "direct physical appropriation," by which she means "the reduction of women to the state of material objects" (74) and which she compares to slavery and serfdom. In the case of women, Guillaumin calls this appropriation *sexage*. Sexage occurs, she believes, in four main forms: (1) the appropriation of women's time, (2) the appropriation of the products of women's bodies, (3) women's sexual obligation, and (4) women's obligation to care for whichever members of the family can't care for themselves as well as for healthy male family members.

Let's take a brief look at each of these forms of sexage. As Guillaumin observes, (1) the marriage contract puts no limits on the time wives (and any other women living in the family, such as daughters, aunts, and grandmothers) will have to work and specifies no holidays on which they won't have to work. (2) In some cultures, women's hair and even their milk are sold by male members of the family; the number of children a couple will have is decided by the male; and children are still the legal property of the husband. (3) Women's sexual obligation to men occurs both in marriage and in prostitution. For Guillaumin, the primary difference between the two is that time limits are placed on a man's use of prostitutes, and he must pay for the specific acts he wants. (4) Although the caretaking of babies, children, the elderly, and the sick is sometimes carried out by paid workers (who are usually women), the overwhelming majority of it is done by unpaid female family members or, in some cultures, by unpaid female religious workers, such as nuns. The overall effect of all four areas of appropriation is to deprive women of a sense of their individuality as well as of their independence and autonomy. In short, women are, as Guillaumin puts it, "the social tool assigned to those tasks" (79) that men don't want to do.

In contrast to materialist feminism, French feminist psychoanalytic theory is interested in patriarchy's influence on women's psychological experience and creativity. Its focus is on the individual psyche, not on group experience. For the oppression of women is not limited to the economic, political, and social

domains; it includes women's psychological repression at the level of the unconscious as well. And it is here, in each woman's personal psychology, that she must learn to liberate herself if women's materialist liberation is going to have any lasting foundation. For a woman can't be liberated in any meaningful way if she doesn't know that she needs to be liberated. And for many French psychoanalytic feminists, the possibilities for women's psychological liberation must be investigated at the site at which most, if not all, of their psychological subjugation occurs—language—because it is within language that detrimental patriarchal notions of *sexual difference* (what patriarchy believes are the essential, or inborn, differences between women and men) have been defined and continue to exert their repressive influence.

For instance, Hélène Cixous argues that language reveals what she calls *patriarchal binary thought*, which might be defined as seeing the world in terms of polar opposites, one of which is considered superior to the other. Examples include such hierarchical binary oppositions as head/heart, father/mother, culture/nature, intelligible/palpable (that which can be understood by the mind versus that which can be felt by the body), sun/moon, and activity/passivity. Oppositions like these organize the way we think, and for each opposition Cixous asks, "Where is [the woman]?" (91). That is, which side of each opposition is assumed to define some aspect of the female? Clearly, according to patriarchal thinking, the woman occupies the right side of each of these oppositions, the side that patriarchy considers inferior—heart, mother, nature, palpable, moon, and passivity—while it is assumed that the male is defined by the left side of each opposition, the side that patriarchy considers superior: head, father, culture, intelligible, sun, and activity. "Traditionally," Cixous notes, "the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition activity/passivity" (92). In other words, patriarchal thinking believes that women are born to be passive while men are born to be active because it is natural for the sexes to be different in this way. Thus, if a woman is not passive, she is not really a woman. Of course, it follows that women are naturally submissive to men, that men are natural leaders, and so forth.

For Cixous, women will not learn to resist patriarchal thinking by becoming part of the patriarchal power structure, that is, by obtaining equal status and equal opportunity in current patriarchal society. For women's acquisition of power within the existing sociopolitical system would not adequately change the system. Indeed, the result would be that women would become more like patriarchal men because they would learn to think as patriarchal men have been trained to think. Instead, she argues that, as the source of life, women are themselves the source of power, of energy. We therefore need a new, feminine language that undermines or eliminates the patriarchal binary thinking that oppresses and silences women. This kind of language, which Cixous believes best expresses itself in writing, is called *écriture féminine* (feminine writing). It is fluidly organized and freely associative. It resists patriarchal modes of thinking and writing, which generally require prescribed, "correct" methods of organization, rationalist rules of logic (logic that stays "above the neck," relying on narrow definitions of cognitive experience and discrediting many kinds of emotional and intuitive experience), and linear reasoning (x precedes y, which precedes z).

Although women's prolonged bonds with their mothers, with their original source of power and energy, have given them a privileged relationship to *écriture féminine*, a man who can get in touch with his early bond with his mother can also produce it. As examples of such writing, Cixous names the work of French writers Marguerite Duras, Colette, and Jean (John) Genet as well as that of Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector. I think we can speculate that literary works such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* might also serve as examples. Cixous sees this kind of writing as a way to spontaneously connect (or reconnect) to the unfettered, joyous vitality of the female body, which as we saw earlier, she emphasizes as the source of life. Thus, for her, writing can be an enactment of liberation. The abandonment of patriarchal thinking envisioned here may indeed seem utopian, but as Toril Moi observes, "[u]topian thought has always been a source of inspiration for feminists" (121).

Similarly, Luce Irigaray suggests that, in a patriarchal culture, much of women's subjugation occurs in the form of psychological repression enacted through the medium of language. In other words, women live in a world in which virtually all meaning has been defined by patriarchal language. Therefore, though they may not realize it, women don't speak as active originators of their own thoughts. Rather, they passively imitate previously spoken ideas. This state of affairs is not as surprising as it initially may seem when we consider the history of Western patriarchal thought. As Irigaray observes, for Western philosophers the woman is just a mirror of their own masculinity. That is, men have defined femininity in terms of their own needs, fears, and desires. For example, she points out that Freud—although she finds his theories useful, even groundbreaking—was projecting the masculine fear of castration onto women when he hypothesized that women suffer from penis envy, that they feel they have been castrated. Clearly, such a viewpoint assumes that women want the same things men want, that women do not have feelings or desires that are theirs alone. Caught within patriarchy, Irigaray posits, women have only two choices: (1) to keep quiet (for anything a woman says that does not fit within the logic of patriarchy will be seen as incomprehensible, meaningless) or (2) to imitate patriarchy's representation of herself as it wants to see her (that is, to play the inferior role given her by

patriarchy's definition of sexual difference, which foregrounds men's superiority). Obviously, this is hardly a real choice.

Patriarchal power is also evident, for Irigaray, in what many thinkers refer to as *the male gaze*: the man looks; the woman is looked at. And it is the one who looks who is in control, who holds the power to name things, the power to explain the world and so to rule the world. The one looked at—the woman—is merely an object to be seen. Thus, in a patriarchy, women are merely tokens, markers, commodities in a male economy. In other words, women function to display men's relations to other men. To cite the simplest example, a patriarchal man who feels he must have a beautiful woman on his arm in order to impress other people isn't interested in impressing other people. He's interested in impressing other men. In short, patriarchy is a man's world: men invent the rules of the game, they play it only with one another, and women are merely to be found among the prizes.

Like Cixous, Irigaray argues that the way to get beyond patriarchy is by means of the same vehicle that programmed us within patriarchy: language. And she believes that women-only groups are necessary for the development of nonpatriarchal ways of thinking and speaking. Irigaray calls her notion of woman's language *womanspeak*, and she finds its source in the female body, specifically in what she sees as the contrast between female and male sexual pleasure. For her, female sexual pleasure is "far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined" (28). And so is womanspeak more diversified, more multiple in its meanings, more complex, and more subtle than patriarchal language. As Irigaray puts it, when a woman dares speak in her own way, " 'she' sets off in all directions leaving 'him' [the patriarchal man] unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand" (29). For some feminist thinkers, Irigaray's definition of womanspeak is particularly controversial because, among other things, it seems to reinforce patriarchal stereotypes of women as illogical or even irrational. One productive way to view womanspeak, however, might be to consider what seems to me, at least, to be the very strong possibility that Irigaray is *not* saying that women speak incoherently but that this is how it *seems* to patriarchal people, programmed to attribute meaning only to language that conforms to patriarchal rules of logic, that is, to linear, thesis-oriented language.

In contrast, Julia Kristeva, another French psychoanalytic feminist, doesn't believe in *écriture féminine* or womanspeak because she believes that any theory that *essentializes* women (that is, that posits essential—inborn, biological—characteristics for women) misrepresents their infinite diversity and leaves them

vulnerable to the patriarchal essentialization of women as naturally submissive, overly emotional, and so forth. Indeed, for Kristeva, *the feminine* can't be defined because there are as many definitions of *the feminine* as there are women. We can, however, know this about femininity, Kristeva asserts: it is marginalized, oppressed, just as the working class is marginalized and oppressed.

Furthermore, what have been generally accepted by many feminists as the biological differences that make women female and men male (as opposed to the differences socially imposed by patriarchy that define us as feminine or masculine) are seen by Kristeva as social differences rather than biological differences because of their concrete effects on women in the real world. As she puts it, the "sexual, biological, physiological, and reproductive difference [between women and men] reflects a difference in . . . the social contract" (" Woman's Time" 188). In other words, if one is born with the biology of a female, one's place in society is accorded fewer rights—particularly the right to own and control one's body sexually, both in terms of the kind and number of sexual relationships one will have and in terms of abortion and contraceptive rights—than if one is born with the biology of a male. In the final analysis, the issue is not how biological difference should be defined; rather the issue is that whatever meaning biological difference may have is instantly consumed, overshadowed, displaced by the social (patriarchal) meaning that accompanies it. And it is the social meaning given to sexual difference that oppresses women. Thus for Kristeva, as for most French feminists—including materialist feminists like the ones discussed earlier—the difference between sex and gender posited by Anglo-American feminists does not exist. Patriarchy defines and controls the way we relate to sex (female) and gender (feminine) as if they were the same thing. Indeed, there is no word in French for *gender* as we use the word in English.

Instead of embracing *écriture féminine* and womanspeak as a means to take us beyond patriarchal oppression, Kristeva maintains that women and men can get beyond patriarchal language and patriarchal thinking by seeking access to what she calls the *semiotic* dimension of language (not to be confused with the field of study called *semiotics*, which is the analysis of cultural sign systems). For Kristeva, language consists of two dimensions: the symbolic and the semiotic. The symbolic dimension is the domain in which words operate and meanings are attributed to them. What she calls the semiotic dimension of language is that part of language that, in contrast, consists of such elements as intonation (sound, tone of voice, volume, and for lack of a better word, musicality); rhythm; and the body language that occurs as we speak, which reveals our feelings and bodily drives (for example, bodily drives that relate to the sexual, to survival, and so forth). Perhaps we can say, then, that the semiotic consists of the *way* we speak, for instance the emotions that come across in our voice and body language as we talk. So it is not unexpected that, as Kristeva notes, "Scientific

discourse, for example . . . tends to reduce as much as possible the semiotic component. On the contrary . . . [in] poetic language . . . the semiotic . . . tends to gain the upper hand" (*Desire in Language* 134).

Indeed, the semiotic is the first "speech" infants have available to them—the vocal sounds and bodily movements they produce—before they acquire language. And they learn this "speech" through their contact with the gestures, rhythms, and other nonverbal forms of communication associated with the mother's body. Thus it is through the semiotic aspect of language that we remain, though unconsciously, in continual contact with our precognitive, preverbal experience: with our instinctual drives and with our earliest connections to our mothers. It is noteworthy, Kristeva observes, that both our instinctual drives and our earliest connections to our mothers are repressed by our entrance into language. For language is the dominion of patriarchy, which controls its symbolic, or meaning-making, dimension. The semiotic, however, remains beyond patriarchal programming, and whatever patriarchy can't control outright, it represses. Of course, Kristeva is not suggesting that we can or should return to the semiotic state of the infant but that we can and should access that part of our unconscious where the semiotic resides, for example, through such creative means as art and literature. For these are the vehicles that allow us a new way to relate to language and to thereby overcome the stranglehold patriarchy has on the way women and men think.

Before we leave this section, I think it's important to address an issue of which you may or may not be aware. Often, when the phrase *French feminism* is used, we think of the kinds of topics that fall within the realm of French psychoanalytic feminism. For many Americans, the work done by French materialist feminists doesn't come readily to mind because that work—with the exception of the writing of Simone de Beauvoir—hasn't received as much press, so to speak, in mainstream academia as has psychoanalytic feminism. Certainly, there are a variety of reasons for this imbalance. Surely, one reason is the fact that the branch of American academia that has had the most influence over the dissemination of critical theory is more accustomed to the kind of abstract theorizing we find in French psychoanalytic feminism and therefore has welcomed it more readily. In addition, however, I can't help but notice that French psychoanalytic feminism's tendency toward abstraction has the double pay-off of (1) being difficult for novices to understand, thereby securing the position of those professors, theorists, and literary critics already holding academic power in the field of critical theory, and (2) rendering French feminism vulnerable to ridicule and dismissal, which is rather ironic given that the work of many leading American theorists is often rather abstract. Unfortunately, the desire to ignore or dismiss French feminism has been a desire of long standing in much of American academia, including among some feminists as well as nonfeminists.

It's true that much French psychoanalytic feminism does seem to have been written primarily for people who have the educational background to comprehend it. Among other factors, most of it draws on, extends, or quarrels with the work of two French thinkers whose work is quite difficult for the uninitiated to understand: Jacques Derrida, who came up with the interpretive approach called deconstruction, and Jacques Lacan, who offers us an interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis the logic of which, if we are to reap its full benefit, requires, I think, an understanding of both structuralism and deconstruction. (If you wish, you can read about Lacanian psychoanalysis in chapter 2 and about structuralism and deconstruction in chapters 7 and 8, respectively.) In fact, most French feminists, though their work may be less abstract than that of the psychoanalytic feminists discussed above, write within a philosophical tradition with which students of literature in America might not be acquainted. So don't be put off when you first read the work of French feminists for yourself. Whatever their philosophical orientation may be, they're not trying to exclude you. Like the philosophers upon whom they draw and with whom they often disagree, they're trying to break new ground and open up new ways of thinking. And I hope you'll agree that learning to think in new ways is a task that, though difficult, is well worth our effort.

Multicultural feminism

Awareness of one's own subjectivity, which as we noted above is a feminist goal, has become especially important as white, middle-class, heterosexual feminists, who have always held the most visible positions of leadership in women's movements in America, are finally recognizing the ways in which their policies and practices have reflected their own experiences while ignoring the experiences of women of color, lesbians, and poor, undereducated women both in America and throughout the world. While all women are subject to patriarchal oppression, each woman's specific needs, desires, and problems are greatly shaped by her race, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, educational experience, religion, and nationality.

For one thing, patriarchy operates differently in different countries: there are significant differences between patriarchy in the United States and patriarchy in, say, India, Mexico, or Iran. Furthermore, even within the borders of a single country, cultural differences affect women's experience of patriarchy. In the United States, for example, the experience of patriarchy for women of color is inseparable from their experience of racism (see chapter 11); lesbians' experience of patriarchy is inseparable from their experience of heterosexism (see chapter 10); poor women's experience of patriarchy is inseparable from their experience

of classism (see chapter 3); and so forth. And you can imagine the complex operations of oppression in the lives of women who belong to three or more of these categories. Therefore, the promotion of *sisterhood*—psychological and political bonding among women based on the recognition of common experiences and goals—must include respect for and attention to individual differences among women as well as an equitable distribution of power among various cultural groups within feminist leadership.

African American feminists have been especially helpful in revealing the political and theoretical limitations inherent in white mainstream feminists' neglect of cultural experience different from their own. For example, black feminists have analyzed the ways in which gender oppression cannot be understood apart from racial oppression. A black woman is oppressed by patriarchy, black feminists observe, not just because she's a woman but because she's a black woman, a category that has been defined historically in America as less valuable than the category of white woman. The Victorian ideal of the "true woman" as submissive, fragile, and sexually pure, which still influences patriarchal thinking today, excluded by definition black women and poor women of all races, whose survival demanded hard physical labor and who were vulnerable to rape and to sexual exploitation in the workplace. The logic was circular and deadly: a woman whose racial or economic situation forced her into hard labor and made her the victim of sexual predators was defined as unwomanly and therefore unworthy of protection from those who exploited her. This view was widely held by men, both white and black, and by white women as well. Black women, therefore, were in a double bind. They could expect neither gender solidarity from white women nor racial solidarity from black men, the two groups on whom they should have been able to count for help.

Unfortunately, this dilemma persists today. White mainstream feminism, while it has tended to marginalize black women because of their race, nevertheless encourages them to prioritize gender issues over racial issues, arguing that black women are oppressed more by sexism than by racism. At the same time, the black male community, while it has tended to marginalize black women because of their gender, nevertheless encourages them to prioritize racial issues over gender issues, arguing that black women are oppressed more by racism than by sexism. As Lorraine Bethel observes, an understanding of this double oppression forms the basis of African American feminist criticism:

> Black feminist literary criticism offers a framework for identifying the common socio-aesthetic problems of authors who attempt to fashion a literature of cultural identity in the midst of racial/sexual oppression. It incorporates a political analysis that enables us to comprehend and appreciate the incredible achievements Black women . . . made in estab-

> qualities and sensibilities. Such understanding requires a consciousness of the oppression these artists faced daily in a society full of institutionalized and violent hatred for both their Black skins and their female bodies. Developing and maintaining this consciousness is a basic tenet of Black feminism. (178)

On the other hand, some black women feel that feminism is a divisive force in the black community. As a result, some have either abandoned feminism or sought ways to reconcile it with the concerns of the black community, as Alice Walker did when she called herself a "womanist" (xi) because she works for the survival and wholeness of her people, men and women both, and for the promotion of dialogue and community as well as for the valorization of women and of all the varieties of work women perform. Similarly, as Carolyn Denard points out, many African American women "advocate what may be called ethnic cultural feminism" (172), which is "concerned more with the particular female cultural values of their own ethnic group rather than with those of women in general" (171). Drawing on the novels of Toni Morrison to illustrate this approach, Denard explains that ethnic cultural feminism acknowledges the damaging effects of sexism on women of color, both inside and outside their ethnic community, but it "does not advocate as a solution to their oppression [a] . . . political feminism that alienates black women from their ethnic group" (172). Furthermore, ethnic cultural feminism "celebrat[es] the unique feminine cultural values that black women have developed in spite of and often because of their oppression" (172).

Whatever theoretical preferences black feminist critics bring to their analyses of literature, their interpretations often demonstrate the importance of understanding gender issues in cultural context. Given that some cultural groups have their own categories of literary criticism and that some women may find their concerns addressed in more than one category, it might be useful to pause here and note what some of those categories are.

Depending on its theoretical orientation, literary criticism that addresses women's issues may fall under one or more different headings. Among them are feminist criticism, African American criticism (which studies, among other things, works by African Americans within the context of African American experience, history, and literary traditions), lesbian criticism, Marxist criticism, and postcolonial criticism (which studies, among other things, works that have emerged from cultures that developed in response to colonial domination, for example, works by writers from India, which was controlled by Britain until 1947). Of course, women's issues will also be addressed in any literary criticism that focuses on women writers from a particular ethnic group: for example, to name a few we haven't mentioned, Chicanas, Latinas, Native American women, and Asian American women. Although all of these categories may address

women's experience, generally speaking it is only when a feminist perspective helps guide the interpretation that a piece of criticism is referred to as feminist. Clearly, these categories easily overlap, and it is not unusual to find literary critics who consider themselves hybrids of a sort, for example, Marxist-feminist or lesbian-feminist-Chicana critics.

Gender studies and feminism

As we have seen throughout this chapter, feminist analysis focuses a good deal on the enormous role played by gender—that is, by a society's definitions of femininity and masculinity—in our daily lives. For example, our gender plays a key role in forming our individual identity: both our self-perception and the way we relate to others. And our gender strongly influences how we are treated by others and by society as a whole as it is embodied in such institutions as the medical profession, the law, the educational system, and our culture's hiring and employment practices. In addition, queer theory, which you can read about in chapter 10 ("Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism") has brought a good deal of attention to gender issues over the last several years by raising questions concerning our society's heterosexual assumptions about sexuality and gender, for example, its assumption that males are "naturally masculine" and that females are "naturally feminine." It seems logical, then, that gender has emerged as a field of study in its own right devoted to these and to all topics pertaining to gender. Indeed, you may already have taken a course called Gender Studies or Women and Gender Studies: the latter title is often given to courses about gender when their primary focus is the relationship between gender and the patriarchal oppression of women.

For our purposes, an understanding of some of the major issues addressed by gender studies is a useful and perhaps indispensable part of our understanding of the ways in which feminist concerns are continuing to evolve and expand. Among other issues that figure prominently in gender studies are the following overlapping topics: (1) patriarchal assumptions about gender and gender roles that continue to oppress women, (2) alternatives to the current way we conceptualize gender as either feminine or masculine, (3) the relationship between sex and gender (between the ways our bodies are biologically constructed and the genders to which we are assigned), and (4) the relationship between sexuality and gender (between our sexual orientation and the ways in which we are viewed in terms of gender). Of course, we've discussed throughout this chapter many of the ways in which patriarchal assumptions about gender and gender roles continue to oppress women, so let's take a look now at each of the three remaining areas.

To begin, we need alternatives to the current way we think about gender because the current way we think about gender includes so many inaccuracies. Although research findings about gender, just like research findings in every field, often can be complex and contradictory, they can nevertheless alert us to the ways in which we've taken as facts too many widely held but unsubstantiated opinions and myths about gender. Let me cite just two striking examples, starting with a belief that I think most of us share about the biological operations of testosterone, or the "male hormone."

We've often said or heard it said about a male exhibiting overly or inappropriately aggressive behavior, "Oh, he just has too much testosterone." That is, aggressive behavior in males is generally considered an instinct rather than a product of such social factors as upbringing, psychological dynamics in the home, exposure to a dangerous environment outside the home, and the like. And once a behavior is considered instinctual and linked to gender, it is difficult for many of us to see it in any other light. Robert M. Sapolsky points out, however, that studies of testosterone levels in males have been limited to showing merely that increased testosterone levels *accompany* increased aggression. That is, there is no research indicating that increased testosterone levels *cause* aggression; it is merely assumed that they do so. Sapolsky's research indicates that, in fact, testosterone does not elevate aggression. Rather, "aggression elevates testosterone secretion" (16). Sapolsky observes that "[s]ome testosterone" is necessary for "normal aggressive behavior" (17), but the range of what is necessary is very wide. "[A]nywhere from roughly 20 percent of normal to twice normal" (17) produces roughly the same amount of normal aggressive behavior in males. So even if we know the testosterone level for each individual in a given group of males, we will not be able to predict their aggression because the range of what is considered a normal amount of testosterone is so wide. Excessive amounts of testosterone, Sapolsky notes, can "*exaggerat[e]* the aggression that's already there" (17, Sapolsky's italics), but it doesn't cause aggression. In other words, testosterone permits aggression to occur only if that aggression is elicited by "the social factors and environment in which [aggression] occurs" (Sapolsky 19).

Just as unsubstantiated opinion has been widely accepted as fact concerning the role of testosterone in male aggression—a role that is also associated, for many of us, with the male "instinct" to be the breadwinner and to protect the home—so has unsubstantiated opinion been widely accepted as fact concerning the role of the maternal instinct in females. Again, because caregiving, especially caregiving to infants and young children, has been labeled a female instinct, it is difficult for many of us to consider it in any other light. As Linda Brannon notes, however, "research on . . . emotion has revealed that there may be few gender differences in the inner experience of emotion. Gender differences appear in how and when emotion is displayed" (213), she observes, rather than in how

and when emotion is felt. Specifically, Brannon finds that "[r]esearch on gend
differences in responsiveness to babies has shown differences in self-reports, b
not in physiological measures, of responses to babies" (214). Thus, "girls an
women show more responsiveness to babies because they believe they shoul
and . . . boys and men show less responsiveness for the same reasons" (214).

Of course, women are still much more involved in childcare than men, an
women who take care of children report that they experience both a great dea
of pleasure and a great deal of irritation in caring for them. It is interesting t
note, however, that men who spend a great deal of time caring for children ofte
report similar responses (Brannon 214). Indeed, most of us have seen the grow
ing trend in fathers' increased involvement in the lives of their children. More
over, Brannon points out, "research indicates that . . . the concept of materna
instinct has no support as a biologically based explanation for caregiving, an
both men and women have similar emotions related to nurturing" (214). Whil
no one is trying to say that women are not good caregivers to children, a mor
accurate statement is that many women *and* men are good caregivers to childre
and enjoy that role a great deal; at the same time, however, many women an
men wouldn't choose that role as their primary function in the household if the
had a choice. In short, nurturing is not a role biologically linked to sex althoug
many people long have believed it to be.

Both of the examples just given suggest that gender is socially constructed rathe
than a matter of biology: women and men usually behave in ways associate
with their assigned gender because they are socially programmed to do so, no
because it is natural for them to do so. However, if there is one dimension o
gender studies that is perhaps even more capable of making us rethink our con-
ventional way of viewing gender, it is cross-cultural studies in gender. For as Joan
Z. Spade and Catherine G. Valentine point out, "The variations and fluidity
in the definitions and expressions of gender across cultures illustrate that the
American gender system is not universal" (5).

The American gender system is referred to as a binary system because it consists
of two genders, masculine and feminine, that are based on two sexes, male and
female, and because those two genders are considered polar opposites. There is
no in-between: you're either masculine or feminine because you're either male
or female, and if you're not one or the other of these two genders, then there
must by something wrong with you. In numerous other cultures, however, there
are gender systems that are not binary. Among the many that have existed in
the past and those that still exist today, let's take a brief look at a few interest-
ing examples. Specifically, let's take a look at two Southeast Asian cultures in
which men and women are considered more alike than different

hat they are not considered different genders in our sense of the term—and at
Native American cultures in which there are more than two genders.

hristine Helliwell, for instance, observes that there are many societies in
outheast Asia that emphasize the similarities between men and women rather
han their differences. As one example, she points to the Gerai people of Indo-
esia, where

> there is no sense of a dichotomized [separated into two polar opposites] masculinity and femininity. Rather, men and women are seen to have the same kinds of capacities and proclivities [inclinations, especially toward objectionable behavior]. . . . [I]n terms of the central quality of nurturance (perhaps the most valued quality in Gerai) . . . Gerai people see no difference between men and women. (126)

n fact, even the sexual organs of Gerai men and women are "explicitly concep-
tualized as the same. . . . [T]hey have the same . . . conical shape, narrower at the
base and wider at the top"; the difference is simply that women's sexual organs are
"inside the body" while men's are "outside the body" (Helliwell 127). In case you
have difficulty visualizing this similarity, you might imagine the penis as analogous
to the birth canal and the testicles as analogous to the ovaries: the overall, bird's-
eye-view formation is roughly the same; it's just the location that's different.

Another useful illustration of the similarities between women and men—this
time in terms of the power dynamics that can be found in some cultures—is
offered by Maria Alexandra Lepowsky's example of the people of Vanatinai, a
small island near New Guinea, where "[i]deologies of male superiority or right of
authority over women are notably absent, and ideologies of gender equivalence
are clearly articulated" (150). Men and women in this culture have equal rights
over their own labor and the products of their labor, equal access to the accumu-
lation of material wealth, and equal access to the acquisition of prestige in the
community. "Women are not characterized as weak or inferior. Women and men
are valorized for the same qualities of strength, wisdom, and generosity" (Lep-
owsky 158). As both the cultures of the Gerai and of the Vanatinai Islanders
illustrate, we can't claim that male dominance is natural or universal—although
many Americans do claim just that—and therefore we can't claim that domi-
nant behavior in human beings is biologically linked to sex.

In other cultures, gender systems are neither binary, like the gender system in
force in the United States today, nor what might be called unitary—that is, with-
out significant gender differentiation—like the two gender systems described
above. In contrast, some cultures see gender as a system of multiple possibilities.
As one example among many, consider the hundred or more North American
Indian societies that had multiple gender systems, that is, systems consisting
of more than two genders, especially prior to the takeover of the Americas by

European colonizers. Native North American societies tended to define gender in ways specific to their own cultures, differing in what aspects of social life were considered primary in their conceptions of gender. Yet most Native North American cultures included three or four of the following genders: (1) women; (2) female variants, or variant gender roles adopted by biological females; (3) men; and (4) male variants, or variant gender roles adopted by biological males (Nanda 66).

In determining a person's gender, neither biological sex nor sexual orientation was generally the primary factor in Native North American societies. Rather, occupational interests and pursuits were of central importance. Clothing sometimes played a role, although persons adopting variant gender roles might have worn, depending on the culture to which they belonged, any combination of men's and women's clothes. In some North American Indian cultures, gender variants played valued roles in the community, such as healers or performers of sacred ritual functions, because gender variance was associated, as it is in many cultures, with sacred power. Whatever the case, however, members of many communities could choose, irrespective of biological makeup, the gender to which they wished to belong (Nanda 66).

In addition to exploring alternatives to our current binary conception of gender, gender theorists are also interested in the relationship between sex and gender: between the ways in which our bodies are biologically constructed and the genders to which we are assigned. As Judith Lorber puts it, despite common belief,

> [n]either sex nor gender are pure [separate, autonomous, discrete] categories. Combinations of incongruous genes, genitalia, and hormonal input are ignored in sex categorization [as male or female], just as combinations of incongruous physiology, identity, sexuality, appearance, and behavior are ignored in the social construction of gender statuses [masculine or feminine]. (14)

In short, the whole idea that there are only two genders is based on the idea that there are only two sexes. However, researchers from a variety of fields have revealed that such is not the case: biological sex does not fit neatly into two separate, opposite categories. It would be more accurate to say that, following the European model, American society has imposed the two-sex system despite the fact that this system does not fit a significant portion of the population. In other words, biological sex categories have not imposed the two-gender system on Americans; rather, Americans have imposed the two-gender system on biological sex categories.

According to Anne Fausto-Sterling, although complete frequency data is difficult to find, a reasonable estimate based on numerous available records indicates that approximately 1.7 percent of all children born each year are *intersexual* (51),

or as some gender theorists refer to them, *intersexed*. That is, they have some combination of male and female reproductive organs, genitals, chromosomal and/or hormonal makeup. Fausto-Sterling observes,

> Even if we've overestimated by a factor of two, that still means a lot of intersexual children are born each year. At the rate of 1.7 percent, for example, a city of 300,000 people would have 5,100 people with varying degrees of intersexual development. Compare this with albinism [an albino has no pigmentation and therefore has white hair, white skin, and red eyes], another relatively uncommon human trait [in the United States] but one that most readers can probably recall having seen. (51)

The reason we don't "see" the numerous intersexed individuals to whom Fausto-Sterling refers is not simply because the parts of the body involved are usually inside the body or hidden under clothing. Rather, as Sharon Preeves notes, so embedded is our belief that there are only two sexes and two corresponding genders, that intersexed infants have been routinely, quickly, and often without their parents' knowledge or consent, surgically altered to physically resemble either a male or a female (32).

The decisions on how to "sex" the infant are usually based on cosmetic factors (will the child look "normal"?) and social factors (if the child is sexed as a boy, will he be able to urinate standing up and will his penis be large enough as an adult to perform sexually?) rather than on the possibility that the child may be in every other respect—chemically, hormonally, genetically—a different sex or a combination of both sexes. For example, an intersexed infant may have a male genetic makeup (xy), but if the penis part of its genitals is considered too small by the medical team in charge, unlikely to pass as "normal" when the child matures, and probably unable to urinate from a standing position (for example, because the urethra opens at the base of the penis instead of at the tip), the infant is most likely to be surgically and hormonally reconstructed as a female. This practice has continued despite studies showing that the size of an infant's penis or clitoris is unrelated to the size of its adult genitals (Preeves 33).

As recently as the 1990s, Preeves reports, transgender activists (a transgendered person's gender doesn't match his or her biological sex) have argued that intersexed individuals should not be seen as abnormalities but as normal people belonging to a different sex category. Some activists have, in fact, suggested that there are really five sexes that occur naturally: (1) female, (2) female intersexed (an intersexed person with more prominent or functional female sex organs), (3) true intersexed (an intersexed person with equally prominent or functional male and female sex organs), (4) male intersexed (an intersexed person with more prominent or functional male sex organs), and (5) male (Preeves 37).

Perhaps the most striking point to consider here is not the frequency of intersexed births, though their frequency will certainly come as a surprise to many of us, but the reaction of the medical profession to the situation. Unless there were a health consideration at stake (for example, a nonfunctioning urethra), does there have to be such a rush to surgery? Why isn't it more common to first offer parents educational materials so they can have the opportunity to learn about the many ramifications of their child's sexual makeup? Why aren't parents immediately put in touch with an organization of parents with intersexed children, or more to the point, why do such organizations not—or not enough of them— exist? Why doesn't the child, as it matures, have the option to learn about his or her intersexuality and, if a surgical change is an option, why can't the child make the choice at a later point in time?

Surely the reasons why include what might be called the tyranny of the two-sex/two-gender system. And I think it's reasonable to suspect that, at least to some extent, society practices the same two-sex/two-gender tyranny on the medical profession that the medical profession practices on society. "What's wrong with my child?" "Can't the doctor fix it?" Surely these questions leap to the minds of many parents who are told that their newborns are intersexed because we're all socially programmed to think within the confines of our binary sex/gender system. For many gender theorists, however, the problem is that parents too often are not told that their infants are intersexed. Rather, they're generally told that their infants have a genital birth defect and that the doctors need to discover and restore the newborn's "true sex" (Fausto-Sterling 30). What kind of choice can that language possibly offer parents?

Finally, many gender theorists are interested in the relationship between sexuality and gender, that is, between our sexual orientation and the ways in which we are viewed in terms of gender. For one thing, much of the cruel and unfair treatment many nonstraight people endure is due largely to the fact that they often don't conform to traditional gender behavior or appearance. In fact, many gender theorists agree that while "binaristic understandings of femininity and masculinity shape the ways we perceive gender . . . the assumption of heterosexuality determines the ways we constitute that femininity and masculinity" (Cranny-Francis et al. ix). In other words, *gendering* a child (raising a child to conform to his or her traditional gender role both socially and psychologically) is always heterosexual gendering. Thus, "the sex/gender system establishes not only the sex of bodies but also the kinds of desire they can have" (Cranny-Francis et al. 6).

It's interesting to consider, in this context, a noteworthy piece of history revealed in old medical and theological writings of some Western European cultures. These writings indicate, Sharon Preeves reports, that in centuries past some Western European cultures considered intersexed people members of a third sex, sometimes viewed as normal, sometimes viewed as abnormal, but nevertheless acknowledged as belonging to a unique sex (34). In addition, intersexed people were usually allowed to choose their sex, gender, and sexuality. Sounds good, but here's where things really get interesting. Consider it: intersexed people were acknowledged as members of a third sex—not male or female—but they nevertheless had to choose to identify themselves as either male or female. And once they made their choice, they were not allowed to change their minds. So not only was this system controlled by the binary sex/gender mind-set that still controls our culture today, but it was also controlled by the homophobia that continues to plague us. For as Preeves points out, this pick-one-sex-and-stick-to-it attitude, which was enforced legally, was based on the fear that, without this law, an intersexed person could choose to be a woman (use her female genitals only), marry a man, then change her mind and choose to be a man (use her male genitals), in which case a married couple would consist of two men (36).

Before we leave this topic, it's important to remember that, in talking about sex and gender, we're talking about people and how they live their daily lives. So let's give some thought to the experience of people who don't feel they fit neatly into a traditional heterosexual binary sex/gender system like ours. For despite the progress made in such fields as feminism, gender studies, and queer theory, our society persists in thinking that the words *sex* and *gender* mean basically the same thing and that the only people worth thinking about are the straight people who fit the traditional masculine-male/feminine-female categories. This state of affairs ignores the theoretical progress that has given us, for example, such concepts as gender identity, androgyny, and the category of sex/gender identification called *questioning*. Consider the enormous contribution that these three examples alone offer us in terms of our ability to understand the complexity of the concept of gender. The term *gender identity* implies that one's gender may not match one's biological sex—indeed, may not match either primary biological sex—for if it always did, we wouldn't need the term *gender identity*. *Androgyny* tells us that, regardless of one's sex, one's gender identity may consist of some combination of feminine and masculine behaviors. Finally, *questioning* opens the door both for people who feel unsure of their sexual orientation and for people whose "sex and gender identification . . . may not [have] an existing label" (Perry and Ballard-Reisch 30).

Unfortunately, gender discrimination exists today in a myriad of forms, yet too often the only people aware of it are those who must suffer it themselves or whose loved ones must suffer it. Linda A. M. Perry and Deborah Ballard-Reisch report three examples of sex and gender discrimination that I think you will find both instructive and thought-provoking. Let me just list them here briefly to give

you an idea of the range of gender identification available to human beings and of the oppression with which anything deemed different is so often met.

In the first example offered by Perry and Ballard-Reisch, a heterosexual man who is married, a father, and also at times a *cross-dresser*—one who adopts the attire of the opposite sex but who behaves in a manner associated with one's biological sex—and has been verbally and physically abused by both straight and gay people. As a heterosexual cross-dresser he doesn't fit the stereotype of the gay cross-dresser with which both communities are familiar, and he has therefore experienced rejection from both (21–22). In another example, Perry and Ballard-Reisch describe a gay *transvestite* (one who adopts both the attire and the behavior of the opposite sex, usually in an exaggerated manner) who repeatedly has experienced rejection by members of the gay community wanting to advance gay political visibility—to give gay people a stronger voice in social and political issues—and fearing to offend straight people. The irony is self-evident and painful: a group that advocates diversity, that has been rejected because of its own diversity, rejects one of its members for being diverse (22–23). In Perry and Ballard-Reisch's final example, we meet a man who has had a biological sex change from female to male in order to have a body that matches his gender identity, which has always been masculine. Before his sex-change procedure, he had been a masculine lesbian. Now, as a man, he is still sexually attracted to women, so, of course, he is now a heterosexual male. His problem, it seems, should be solved. However, he is still unable to find acceptance because of his sex/gender history. He has spent his life trying to explain his sexual and gender identities and being harassed and battered due to his difference. As a biological female, he didn't feel he fit into society because his gender identity was that of a masculine male attracted to women. After his sex change, he did not feel he fit into society because his family and friends would not accept his physical transformation. Nevertheless, he persists in being open about his sex/gender history because he believes that being "out" is necessary in order for society to recognize how large a number of people do not fit the heterosexual standard of "normality" (24).

Clearly, feminism and gender studies are intimately related. They share some of the same subject matter as well as a desire for justice and a belief in the power of education to change our society for the better. For centuries feminism has worked for gender equality: for a dissolution of the patriarchal gender roles that, even today, continue to short-circuit efforts to achieve complete equality between women and men. And gender studies is working to broaden our understanding of how complex the concept of gender really is.

Of course, there are many more feminist issues than the ones discussed in this chapter. And as in every field, there is a great deal of disagreement among feminist theorists and literary critics concerning, for example, how (and how much) women are programmed by patriarchal ideology; whether or not there is a distinctive way of writing that might be called feminine; whether or not the work of women writers should be interpreted along different lines than writing by men; the ways in which various cultural factors intersect with sex and gender in creating women's experience; and as we have just seen, the new horizons offered by the efforts of gender theorists to enlarge and problematize our conception of gender. Our purpose here is merely to introduce you to the main ideas and the general principles you need to know in order to read feminist theorists and literary critics with some understanding of the issues they raise.

Feminism and literature

Naturally, some literary works will lend themselves more readily than others to feminist analysis or at least to certain kinds of feminist analyses. For students new to the field, I think it useful to examine the ways in which literary texts reinforce patriarchy because the ability to see when and how patriarchal ideology operates is crucial to our ability to resist it in our own lives. This approach, applied to literary works in the male canon, was the dominant mode of feminist literary analysis in America during the 1970s, and it usually requires reading "against the grain" of the text's apparent intention, for patriarchal literature is usually unconscious of the sexist ideology it promotes, or perhaps more precisely, patriarchal literature sees nothing wrong with its own sexism.

A feminist analysis of the patriarchal ideology operating in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), for example, might examine three related areas: (1) the ways in which the female characters (Biff's and Happy's various "conquests," the woman Willy meets in the Boston hotel room, and Linda Loman) function as tokens of male status; (2) the ways in which the "good-girl"/"bad-girl" view of women validates the Loman men's sexism; and (3) the ways in which Linda Loman has internalized patriarchal ideology. A feminist reading would also note that the play reinforces patriarchal ideology through its sympathetic portrayal of Willy and apparent approval of Linda's support for his patriarchal attitude. Such a reading would also relate the play's patriarchal ideology to the period in which it was written and is set: post–World War II America. This was a time when American patriarchy attempted to counteract the war-time freedom of women who took on the jobs and family responsibilities of their absent men by reestablishing the belief that "the (good) woman's place is in the home."

Of course, it is also important to be able to recognize when a literary work depicts patriarchal ideology in order to criticize it or invite us to criticize it. For example, a feminist reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) might examine the

ways in which the novel invites us to criticize the sexist behaviors and attitudes it portrays. A striking illustration of the novel's insight into patriarchal psychology is its depiction of women as the site upon which men's pain and anger are displaced, a memorable example of which we see in the young Cholly's hatred of Darlene, upon whom he displaces his hatred of the white hunters who humiliate them. In addition, the novel's feminist agenda is revealed in its appreciation of strong women—such as Aunt Jimmy, M'Dear, and Mrs. MacTeer—and of the importance of sisterhood to women's survival. *The Bluest Eye* also shows us how gender issues intersect with race, for Cholly's hatred of Darlene is a direct result of the black youngster's powerlessness in the face of the white hunters' racism, and the importance of sisterhood to women's survival becomes especially acute when the women are victims of the combined forces of sexism and racism.

Finally, many literary works have a conflicted response to patriarchal ideology, as we see, for example, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). On the one hand, the text undermines patriarchy's belief in female weakness through its portrayal of women's strength: Caroline is the sole financial and moral support of her ruined father; Justine bears up bravely and nobly under the community's unjust condemnation of her, which includes the penalty of death; and Safie defies her patriarchal father and successfully undertakes a dangerous journey in pursuit of her own goals. The monster, too, can be read as an indirect advocate for women's rights. In many ways, the monster occupies the woman's position in eighteenth-century European society: it is considered inferior to men and therefore denied the rights and comforts men enjoy. Nevertheless, it acquires an education on its own, is clearly very intelligent and articulate, and wants only to be accepted as an equal member of the human family, to which it will willingly contribute its share (as we see it do when it anonymously helps the De Lacey family).

On the other hand, the novel reinforces patriarchal ideology through its admiration of the way in which Caroline, Justine, Elizabeth, and Agatha conform to traditional gender roles. Three of these "madonnas" devote themselves to nurturing others to the point, whether they realize it or not, of sacrificing their lives for them. Caroline dies as a dutiful mother, tending Elizabeth; Justine dies as a dutiful servant and surrogate mother, when it should be Victor who dies; and Elizabeth dies as a dutiful wife and surrogate mother, trusting her husband's judgment and catering to his needs, when, again, it should be Victor who dies. Even Safie's independent behavior is in service of the traditional woman's desire to secure herself a husband. In addition, the novel does not seem to invite us to criticize the *misogyny* (hatred of women) or *gynophobia* (fear and loathing of women as sexual and reproductive beings) clearly evident in Victor's murderous rage against the female monster and more subtly suggested by his prolonged avoidance of Elizabeth. This reading of *Frankenstein* might also examine the
... conflicted response to patriarchal ideology is reflected

in Mary Shelley's own conflicts concerning her personal experience of patriarchy: for example, she was an ardent admirer of the antipatriarchal essays of her late mother, Mary Wollstonecraft; she violated patriarchal values when she eloped with a married man, Percy Shelley; yet she seemed extremely dependent on, even submissive to, her husband.

Because feminist issues range so widely across cultural, social, political, and psychological categories, feminist literary criticism is wide ranging, too. Whatever kind of analysis is undertaken, however, the ultimate goal of feminist criticism is to increase our understanding of women's experience, both in the past and present, and promote our appreciation of women's value in the world.

Some questions feminist critics ask about literary texts

The questions that follow are offered to summarize feminist approaches to literature. Approaches that attempt to develop a specifically female framework for the analysis of women's writing (such as questions 6, 7, and 8) are often referred to as *gynocriticism*.

1. What does the work reveal about the operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy? How are women portrayed? How do these portrayals relate to the gender issues of the period in which the novel was written or is set? In other words, does the work reinforce or undermine patriarchal ideology? (In the first case, we might say that the text has a patriarchal agenda. In the second case, we might say that the text has a feminist agenda. Texts that seem to both reinforce and undermine patriarchal ideology might be said to be ideologically conflicted.)
2. What does the work suggest about the ways in which race, class, and/or other cultural factors intersect with gender in producing women's experience?
3. How is the work "gendered"? That is, how does it seem to define femininity and masculinity? Does the characters' behavior always conform to their assigned genders? Does the work suggest that there are genders other than feminine and masculine? What seems to be the work's attitude toward the gender(s) it portrays? For example, does the work seem to accept, question, or reject the traditional view of gender?
4. What does the work imply about the possibilities of sisterhood as a mode of resisting patriarchy and/or about the ways in which women's situations in the world—economic, political, social, or psychological—might be improved?
5. What does the history of the work's reception by the public and by the critics tell us about the operations of patriarchy? Has the literary work been ignored or neglected in the past? Why? Or, if recognized in the past, is the work ignored or neglected now? Why?