

Feminist Literary Criticism: Gilbert & Gubar

Elke D'hoker

Women's Movement

1960s-1980s

General context: post-war domestic ideology; civil rights movements

Keywords:

1. Discrimination
2. Patriarchy
3. Emancipation/liberation
4. Difference
5. Identity

→ Importance of literature



Feminist literary criticism

1. Feminist critique / woman as reader

- Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1970)
- Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (1968)
- Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes. Women in Society* (1970)

2. Feminist recovery / woman as writer

“In contrast to [an] angry or loving fixation on male literature, the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture”. (Showalter, ‘Towards a feminist poetics’, 1979)

- Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (1977)
- Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977)
- Patricia Meyer Spacks: *The Female Imagination* (1975)
- Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel. 100 Good Women Writers Before Jane Austen* (1986)

3. Feminist analysis / woman as critic

Gilbert and Gubar

Sandra Gilbert , em. Professor University of California;
poet

Susan Gubar, em. Professor of English at Indiana
University

- *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. (1979)
- *No Man's Land: The Place of the Women Writer in the Twentieth Century*, 3 vols. (1988, 1989, 1994)
- (eds.) *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English* (1985, 1995, 2007)
- (eds.) *Norton Anthology of Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism* (2007)



The Madwoman in the Attic

Preface (to 1st and 2nd editions)

Part I. Toward a Feminist Poetics

The Queen's Looking Glass: Female Creativity, Male Images of Women, and the Metaphor of Literary Paternity

Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship

The Parables of the Cave

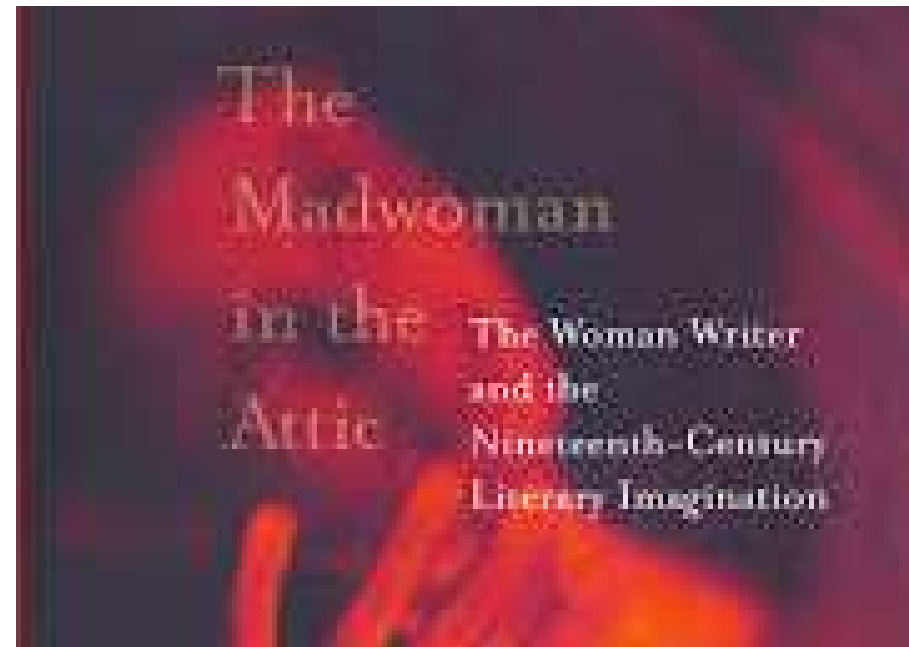
Part II. Inside the House of Fiction: Jane Austen's Tenants of Possibility

Part III. How Are we Fal'n?: Milton's Daughters

Part IV. The Spectral Selves of Charlotte Brontë

Part V. Captivity and Consciousness in George Eliot's Fiction

Part VI. Strength in Agony: Nineteenth-Century Poetry by Women



The Madwoman in the Attic

“Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors – such patterns recurred throughout this tradition, along with obsessive depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia. Seeking to understand the anxieties out of which this tradition must have grown, we undertook a close study of the literature produced by women in the nineteenth century, for that seemed to us to be the first era in which female authorship was no longer in some sense anomalous. As we explored this literature, however, we found ourselves over and over again confronting two separate but related matters: first, the social position in which nineteenth-century women writers found themselves, and, second, the reading that they themselves did. Both in live and in art, we saw, the artists we studied were literally and figuratively confined. Enclosed in the architecture of an overwhelmingly male-dominated society, these literary women were also, inevitably, trapped in the specifically literary constructs of what Gertrude Stein was to call ‘patriarchal poetry’. For not only did a nineteenth-century woman writer have to inhabit ancestral mansions (or cottages) owned and built by men, she was also constricted and restricted by the Palaces of Art and Houses of Fiction male writers authored. We decided therefore that the coherence we noticed in literature by women could be explained by a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of self, art, and society.” (preface to First Edition)

The Madwoman in the Attic

- shortlisted for Pullitzer Prize, National Book Critics Circle Award, instant classic
- Rita Felski: “The madwoman in the attic was a powerful allegory, yoking together spatial imagery, psychological diagnosis, and linguistic analysis. Like any good metaphor, it created new ways of seeing, casting familiar works of literature in a startling yet compelling light.”
- Popular domain



Charlotte Perkins Gilman

- American feminist, activist, writer, 1860-1935
- “The Yellow Wallpaper”, published in *New England Review* (1892)



"I am sitting by the Window in this Atrocious Nursery."

THE YELLOW WALL-PAPER.

By Charlotte Perkins Stetson.

