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**Feminist and Gender Criticism and Heart of Darkness**

**WHAT ARE FEMINIST AND GENDER CRITICISM?**

Among the most exciting and influential developments in the field of literary studies, feminist and gender criticism participate in a broad philosophical discourse that extends far beyond literature, far beyond the arts in general. The critical practices of those who explore the representation of women and men in works by male or female, lesbian or gay writers inevitably grow out of and contribute to a larger and more generally applicable theoretical discussion of how gender and sexuality are constantly shaped by and shaping institutional structures and attitudes, artifacts and behaviors.

Feminist criticism was accorded academic legitimacy in American universities “around 1981,” Jane Gallop claims in her book *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory* (1992). With Gallop’s title and approximation in mind, Naomi Schor has since estimated that “around 1985, feminism began to give way to what has come to be called gender studies” (275). Some would argue that feminist criticism became academically legitimate well before 1981. Others would take issue with the notion that feminist criticism and women’s studies have been giving way to gender criticism and gender studies, and with the either/or distinction that such a claim implies. Taken together, however, Gallop and
Schor provide us with a useful fact — that of feminist criticism's historical precedence — and a chronological focus on the early to mid-1980s, a period during which the feminist approach was unquestionably influential and during which new interests emerged, not all of which were woman centered.

During the early 1980s, three discrete strains of feminist theory and practice — commonly categorized as French, North American, and British — seemed to be developing. French feminists tended to focus their attention on language. Drawing on the ideas of the psychoanalytic philosopher Jacques Lacan, they argued that language as we commonly think of it — as public discourse — is decidedly phallocentric, privileging what is valued by the patriarchal culture. They also spoke of the possibility of an alternative, feminine language and of *écriture féminine*: women's writing. Julia Kristeva, who is generally seen as a pioneer of French feminist thought even though she dislikes the feminist label, suggested that feminine language is associated with the maternal and derived from the pre-oedipal fusion between mother and child. Like Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray associated feminine writing with the female body. Both drew an analogy between women's writing and women's sexual pleasure, Irigaray arguing that just as a woman's *jouissance* is more diffuse and complex than a man's unitary phallic pleasure ("woman has sex organs just about everywhere"), so feminine language is more diffuse and less obviously coherent than its "masculine" counterpart (*This Sex 101-03*).

Kristeva, who helped develop the concept of *écriture féminine*, nonetheless urged caution in its use and advocacy. Feminine or feminist writing that resists or refuses participation in "masculine" discourse, she warned, risks political marginalization, relegation to the outskirts (pun intended) of what is considered socially and politically significant. Kristeva's concerns were not unfounded: the concept of *écriture féminine* did prove controversial, eliciting different kinds of criticism from different kinds of feminist and gender critics. To some, the concept appears to give writing a biological basis, thereby suggesting that there is an *essential* femininity, and/or that women are *essentially* different from men. To others, it seems to suggest that men can write as women, so long as they abdicate authority, sense, and logic in favor of diffusiveness, playfulness, even nonsense.

While French feminists of the 1970s and early 1980s focused on language and writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, North American critics generally practiced a different sort of criticism. Characterized by close textual reading and historical scholarship, it generally took one of two forms. Critics like Kate Millett, Carolyn Heilbrun, and Judith Fetterley developed what Elaine Showalter called the "feminist critique" of "male constructed literary history" by closely examining canonical works by male writers, exposing the patriarchal ideology implicit in such works and arguing that traditions of systematic masculine dominance are indelibly inscribed in our literary tradition. Fetterley urged women to become "resisting readers" — to notice how biased most of the classic texts by male authors are in their language, subjects, and attitudes and to actively reject that bias as they read, thereby making reading a different, less "immasculating" experience. Meanwhile, another group of North American feminists, including Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Patricia Meyer Spacks, developed a different feminist critical model — one that Showalter referred to as "gynocriticism." These critics analyzed great books by women from a feminist perspective, discovered neglected or forgotten women writers, and attempted to recover women's culture and history, especially the history of women's communities that nurtured female creativity.

The North American endeavor to recover women's history — for example, by emphasizing that women developed their own strategies to gain power within their sphere — was seen by British feminists like Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt as an endeavor that "mystifies" male oppression, disguising it as something that has created a special world of opportunities for women. More important from the British standpoint, the universalizing and "essentializing" tendencies of French theory and a great deal of North American practice disguised women's oppression by highlighting sexual difference, thereby seeming to suggest that the dominant system may be impervious to change. As for the North American critique of male stereotypes that denigrate women, British feminists maintained that it led to counterstereotypes of female virtue that ignore real differences of race, class, and culture among women.

By now, the French, North American, and British approaches have so thoroughly critiqued, influenced, and assimilated one another that the work of most Western practitioners is no longer easily identifiable along national boundary lines. Instead, it tends to be characterized according to whether the category of woman is the major focus in the exploration of gender and gender oppression or, alternatively, whether the interest in sexual difference encompasses an interest in other differences that also define identity. The latter paradigm encompasses the
work of feminists of color, Third World (preferably called postcolonial) feminists, and lesbian feminists, many of whom have asked whether the universal category of woman constructed by certain French and North American predecessors is appropriate to describe women in minority groups or non-Western cultures.

These feminists stress that, while all women are female, they are something else as well (such as African American, lesbian, Muslim Pakistani). This “something else” is precisely what makes them — including their problems and their goals — different from other women. As Armit Wilson has pointed out, Asian women living in Great Britain are expected by their families and communities to preserve Asian cultural traditions; thus, the expression of personal identity through clothing involves a much more serious infraction of cultural rules than it does for a Western woman. Gloria Anzaldúa has spoken personally and eloquently about the experience of many women on the margins of Eurocentric North American culture. “I am a border woman,” she writes in *Borderlands: La Frontera — The New Mestiza* (1987). “I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo. . . . Living on the borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity is like trying to swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element” (i).

Instead of being divisive and isolating, this evolution of feminism into feminisms has fostered a more inclusive, global perspective. The era of recovering women’s texts, especially texts by white Western women, has been succeeded by a new era in which the goal is to recover entire cultures of women. Two important figures of this new era are Trinh T. Minh-ha and Gayatri Spivak. Spivak, in works such as *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1987) and *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993), has shown how political independence (generally looked upon by metropolitan Westerners as a simple and beneficial historical and political reversal) has complex implications for “subaltern” or subproletarian women.

The understanding of woman not as a single, deterministic category but rather as the nexus of diverse experiences has led some white, Western, “majority” feminists like Jane Tompkins and Nancy K. Miller to advocate and practice “personal” or “autobiographical” criticism. Once reluctant to reveal themselves in their analyses for fear of being labeled idiosyncratic, impressionistic, and subjective by men, some feminists are now openly skeptical of the claims to reason, logic, and objectivity that male critics have made in the past. With the advent of more personal feminist critical styles has come a powerful new interest in women’s autobiographical writings, manifested in essays such as “Authorizing the Autobiographical” by Shari Benstock, which first appeared in her influential collection *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings* (1988).

Some feminists have argued that traditional autobiography is a gendered, “masculinist” genre; its established conventions call for a life-plot that turns on action, triumph through conflict, intellectual self-discovery, and often public renown. The body, reproduction, children, and intimate interpersonal relationships are generally well in the background and often absent. Arguing that the lived experiences of women and men differ — women’s lives, for instance, are often characterized by interruption and deferral — Leigh Gilmore has developed a theory of women’s self-representation in her book *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Self-Representation*.

*Autobiographics* was published in 1994, well after the chronological divide that, according to Schor, separates the heyday of feminist criticism and the rise of gender studies. Does that mean that Gilmore’s book is a feminist throwback? Is she practicing gender criticism instead, the use of the word *feminist* in her book’s subtitle notwithstanding? Or are both of these questions overly reductive? As implied earlier, many knowledgeable commentators on the contemporary critical scene are skeptical of the feminist/gender distinction, arguing that feminist criticism is by definition gender criticism and pointing out that one critic whose work everyone associates with feminism (Julia Kristeva) has problems with the feminist label while another critic whose name is continually linked with the gender approach (Teresa de Lauretis) continues to refer to herself and her work as feminist.

Certainly, feminist and gender criticism are not polar opposites but, rather, exist along a continuum of attitudes toward sex and sexism, sexuality and gender, language and the literary canon. There are, however, a few distinctions to be made between those critics whose writings are inevitably identified as being toward one end of the continuum or the other.

One distinction is based on focus: as the word implies, *feminists* have concentrated their efforts on the study of women and women’s issues. Gender criticism, by contrast, has not been woman centered. It has tended to view the male and female sexes — and the masculine and feminine genders — in terms of a complicated continuum, much as we are viewing feminist and gender criticism. Critics like Diane K. Lewis have raised the possibility that black women may be more like white
men in terms of familial and economic roles, like black men in terms of their relationships with whites, and like white women in terms of their relationships with men. Lesbian gender critics have asked whether lesbian women are more like straight women than they are like gay (or for that matter straight) men. That we refer to gay and lesbian studies as gender studies has led some to suggest that gender studies is a misnomer; after all, homosexuality is not a gender. This objection may easily be answered once we realize that one purpose of gender criticism is to criticize gender as we commonly conceive of it, to expose its insufficiency and inadequacy as a category.

Another distinction between feminist and gender criticism is based on the terms gender and sex. As de Lauretis suggests in *Technologies of Gender* (1987), feminists of the 1970s tended to equate gender with sex, gender difference with sexual difference. But that equation doesn’t help us explain “the differences among women, . . . the differences within women.” After positing that “we need a notion of gender that is not so bound up with sexual difference,” de Lauretis provides just such a notion by arguing that “gender is not a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings”; rather, it is “the product of various social technologies, such as cinema” (2). Gender is, in other words, a construct, an effect of language, culture, and its institutions. It is gender, not sex, that causes a weak old man to open a door for an athletic young woman. And it is gender, not sex, that may cause one young woman to expect old men to behave in this way, another to view this kind of behavior as chauvinistic and insulter, and still another to have mixed feelings (hence de Lauretis’s phrase “differences within women”) about “gentlemanly gallantry.”

Still another related distinction between feminist and gender criticism is based on the essentialist views of many feminist critics and the constructionist views of many gender critics (both those who would call themselves feminists and those who would not). Stated simply and perhaps too reductively, the term essentialist refers to the view that women are essentially different from men. Constructionist, by contrast, refers to the view that most of those differences are characteristics not of the male and female sex (nature) but, rather, of the masculine and feminine genders (nurture). Because of its essentialist tendencies, “radical feminism,” according to the influential gender critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “tends to deny that the meaning of gender or sexuality has ever significantly changed; and more damagingly, it can make future change appear impossible” (*Between Men* 13).

Most obviously essentialist would be those feminists who emphasize the female body, its difference, and the manifold implications of that difference. The equation made by some avant-garde French feminists between the female body and the maternal body has proved especially troubling to some gender critics, who worry that it may paradoxically play into the hands of extreme conservatives and fundamentalists seeking to reestablish patriarchal family values. In her book *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Nancy Chodorow, a sociologist of gender, admits that what we call “mothering” — not having or nursing babies but mothering more broadly conceived — is commonly associated not just with the feminine gender but also with the female sex, often considered nurturing by nature. But she critically interrogates the common assumption that it is in women’s nature or biological destiny to “mother” in this broader sense, arguing that the separation of home and workplace brought about by the development of capitalism and the ensuing industrial revolution made mothering appear to be essentially a woman’s job in modern Western society.

If sex turns out to be gender where mothering is concerned, what differences are grounded in sex — that is, nature? Are there essential differences between men and women — other than those that are purely anatomical and anatomically determined (for example, a man can exclusively take on the job of feeding an infant milk, but he may not do so from his own breast)? A growing number of gender critics would answer the question in the negative. Sometimes referred to as “extreme constructionists” and “postfeminists,” these critics have adopted the viewpoint of philosopher Judith Butler, who in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) predicts that “sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along” (8). As Naomi Schor explains their position, “there is nothing outside or before culture, no nature that is not always and already enculturated” (278).

Whereas a number of feminists celebrate women’s difference, postfeminist gender critics would agree with Chodorow’s statement that men have an “investment in difference that women do not have” (*Einstein and Jardine* 14). They see difference as a symptom of oppression, not a cause for celebration, and would abolish it by dismantling gender categories and, ultimately, destroying gender itself. Since gender categories and distinctions are embedded in and perpetuated through language, gender critics like Monique Wittig have called for the wholesale transformation of language into a nonsexist, and nonheterosexist, medium.
Language has proved the site of important debates between feminist and gender critics, essentialists and constructionists. Gender critics have taken issue with those French feminists who have spoken of a feminine language and writing and who have grounded differences in language and writing in the female body.\(^1\) For much the same reason, they have disagreed with those French-influenced Anglo-American critics who, like Toril Moi and Nancy K. Miller, have posited an essential relationship between sexuality and textuality. (In an essentialist sense, such critics have suggested that when women write, they tend to break the rules of plausibility and verisimilitude that men have created to evaluate fiction.) Gender critics like Peggy Kamuf posit a relationship only between gender and textuality, between what most men and women become after they are born and the way in which they write. They are therefore less interested in the author's sexual "signature" — in whether the author was a woman writing — than in whether the author was (to borrow from Kamuf) "Writing like a Woman."

Feminists like Miller have suggested that no man could write the "female anger, desire, and selfhood" that Emily Brontë, for instance, inscribed in her poetry and in Wuthering Heights (Subject 72). In the view of gender critics, it is and has been possible for a man to write like a woman, a woman to write like a man. Shari Benstock, a noted feminist critic whose investigations into psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory have led her increasingly to adopt the gender approach, poses the following question to herself in Textualizing the Feminine (1991): "Isn't it precisely 'the feminine' in Joyce's writings and Derrida's that carries me along?" (45). In an essay entitled "Unsexing Language: Pronominal Protest in Emily Dickinson's 'Lay this Laurel,'" Anna Shannon Elfenbein has argued that "like Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson crossed the gender barrier in some remarkable poems," such as "We learned to like the Fire / By playing Glaciers — when a Boy —" (Berg et al. 215).

It is also possible, in the view of most gender critics, for women to read as men, men as women. The view that women can, and indeed have been forced to, read as men has been fairly noncontroversial. Everyone agrees that the literary canon is largely "androcentric" and that writings by men have tended to "immasculate" women, forcing them to see the world from a masculine viewpoint. But the question of whether men can read as women has proved to be yet another issue dividing feminist and gender critics. Some feminists suggest that men and women have some essentially different reading strategies and outcomes, while gender critics maintain that such differences arise entirely out of social training and cultural norms. One interesting recent development of gender and writing is Elizabeth A. Flynn's argument that women in fact make the best interpreters of imaginative literature. Based on a study of how male and female students read works of fiction, she concludes that women come up with more imaginative, open-ended readings of stories. Quite possibly the imputed hedging and tentativeness of women's speech, often seen by men as disadvantages, are transformed into useful interpretive strategies — receptivity combined with critical assessment of the text — in the act of reading (Flynn and Schweickart 286).

In singling out a catalyst of the gender approach, many historians of criticism have pointed to Michel Foucault. In his History of Sexuality (1976, tr. 1978), Foucault distinguished sexuality (that is, sexual behavior or practice) from sex, calling the former a "technology of sex." De Lauretis, who has deliberately developed her theory of gender "along the lines of... Foucault's theory of sexuality," explains his use of "technology" this way: "Sexuality, commonly thought to be a natural as well as a private matter, is in fact completely constructed in culture according to the political aims of the society's dominant class" (Technologies 2, 12). Foucault suggests that homosexuality as we now think of it was to a great extent an invention of the nineteenth century. In earlier periods there had been "acts of sodomy" and individuals who committed them, but the "sodomite" was, according to Foucault, "a temporary aberration," not the "species" he became with the advent of the modern concept of homosexuality (42–43). By historicizing sexuality, Foucault made it possible for his successors to consider the possibility that all of the categories and assumptions that currently come to mind when we think about sex, sexual difference, gender, and sexuality are social artifacts, the products of cultural discourses.

In explaining her reason for saying that feminism began to give way to gender studies "around 1985," Schor says that she chose that date "in part because it marks the publication of Between Men," a seminal book in which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick "articulates the insights of feminist criticism onto those of gay-male studies, which had up to then
pursued often parallel but separate courses (affirming the existence of a homosexual or female imagination, recovering lost traditions, decoding the cryptic discourse of works already in the canon by homosexual or feminist authors)” (276). Today, gay and lesbian criticism is so much a part of gender criticism that some people equate it with the gender approach, while others have begun to prefer the phrase “sexualities criticism” to “gender criticism.”

Following Foucault’s lead, some gay and lesbian gender critics have argued that the heterosexual/homosexual distinction is as much a cultural construct as is the masculine/feminine dichotomy. Arguing that sexuality is a continuum, not a fixed and static set of binary oppositions, a number of gay and lesbian critics have critiqued heterosexuality as a norm, arguing that it has been an enforced corollary and consequence of what Gayle Rubin has referred to as the “sex/gender system.” (Those subscribing to this system assume that persons of the male sex should be masculine, that masculine men are attracted to women, and therefore that it is natural for masculine men to be attracted to women and unnatural for them to be attracted to men.) Lesbian gender critics have also taken issue with their feminist counterparts on the grounds that they proceed from fundamentally heterosexual and even heterosexist assumptions. Particularly offensive to lesbians like the poet-critic Adrienne Rich have been those feminists who, following Doris Lessing, have implied that to make the lesbian choice is to make a statement, to act out feminist hostility against men. Rich has called heterosexuality “a beachhead of male dominance” that, “like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution” (“Compulsory Heterosexuality” 143, 145).

If there is such a thing as reading like a woman and such a thing as reading like a man, how then do lesbians read? Are there gay and lesbian ways of reading? Many would say that there are. Rich, by reading Emily Dickinson’s poetry as a lesbian — by not assuming that “heterosexual romance is the key to a woman’s life and work” — has introduced us to a poet somewhat different from the one heterosexual critics have made familiar (Lies 158). As for gay reading, Wayne Koestenbaum has defined the (male twentieth-century first world) gay reader” as one who “reads resistantly for inscriptions of his condition, for texts that will confirm a social and private identity founded on a desire for other men... Reading becomes a hunt for histories that deliberately foreknow or unwittingly trace a desire felt not by author but by reader, who is most acute when searching for signs of himself” (Boone and Cadden 176–77).

Lesbian critics have produced a number of compelling reinterpretations, or in-scriptions, of works by authors as diverse as Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, and Toni Morrison. As a result of these provocative readings, significant disagreements have arisen between straight and lesbian critics and among lesbian critics as well. Perhaps the most famous and interesting example of this kind of interpretive controversy involves the claim by Barbara Smith and Adrienne Rich that Morrison’s novel _Sula_ can be read as a lesbian text — and author Toni Morrison’s counterclaim that it cannot.

Gay male critics have produced a body of readings no less revisionist and controversial, focusing on writers as staidly classic as Henry James and Wallace Stevens. In Melville’s _Billy Budd_ and _Moby-Dick_, Robert K. Martin suggests, a triangle of homosexual desire exists. In the latter novel, the hero must choose between a captain who represents “the imposition of the male on the female” and a “Dark Stranger” (Queequeg) who “offers the possibility of an alternate sexuality, one that is less dependent upon performance and conquest” (5).

Masculinity as a complex construct producing and reproducing a constellation of behaviors and goals, many of them destructive (like performance and conquest) and most of them injurious to women, has become the object of an unprecedented number of gender studies. A 1983 issue of _Feminist Review_ contained an essay entitled “Anti-Porn: Soft Issue, Hard World,” in which B. Ruby Rich suggested that the “legions of feminist men” who examine and deplore the effects of pornography on women might better “undertake the analysis that can tell us why men like porn (not, piously, why this or that exceptional man does not)” (Berg 185). The advent of gender criticism makes precisely that kind of analysis possible. Stephen H. Clark, who alludes to Rich’s challenge, reads T. S. Eliot “as a man.” Responding to “Eliot’s implicit appeal to a specifically masculine audience — “You! hypocrite lector! — mon semblable, — mon frère!” — Clark concludes that poems like “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” and “Gerontion,” rather than offering what they are usually said to offer — “a social critique into which a misogynistic language accidentally seeps” — instead articulate a masculine “psychology of sexual fear and desired retaliation” (Berg et al. 173).

Some gender critics focusing on masculinity have analyzed “the anthropology of boyhood,” a phrase coined by Mark Seltzer in an article in which he comparatively reads, among other things, Stephen Crane’s _The Red Badge of Courage_, Jack London’s _White Fang_, and the first _Boy Scouts of America_ handbook (Boone and Cadden 150). Others
have examined the fear men have that artistry is unmasculine, a guilty worry that surfaces perhaps most obviously in "The Custom-House," Hawthorne's lengthy preface to The Scarlet Letter. Still others have studied the representation in literature of subtly erotic disciple-patron relationships, relationships like the ones between Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby, Charlie Marlow and Lord Jim, Doctor Watson and Sherlock Holmes, and any number of characters in Henry James's stories. Not all of these studies have focused on literary texts. Because the movies have played a primary role in gender construction during our lifetimes, gender critics have analyzed the dynamics of masculinity (vis-à-vis femininity and androgyny) in films from Rebel Without a Cause to Tootsie to last year's Academy Award nominees. One of the "social technologies" most influential in (re)constructing gender, film is one of the media in which today's sexual politics is most evident.

Necessary as it is, in an introduction such as this one, to define the difference between feminist and gender criticism, it is equally necessary to conclude by unmaking the distinction, at least partially. The two topics just discussed (film theory and so-called queer theory) give us grounds for undertaking that necessary deconstruction. The alliance I have been creating between gay and lesbian criticism on one hand and gender criticism on the other is complicated greatly by the fact that not all gay and lesbian critics are constructionists. Indeed, a number of them (Robert K. Martin included) share with many feminists the essentialist point of view; that is to say, they believe homosexuals and heterosexuals to be essentially different, different by nature, just as a number of feminists believe men and women to be different.

In film theory and criticism, feminist and gender critics have so influenced one another that their differences would be difficult to define based on any available criteria, including the ones outlined above. Cinema has been of special interest to feminists like Trinh T. Minh-ha (herself a filmmaker) and Spivak (whose critical eye has focused on movies including My Beautiful Laundrette and Sammie and Rosie Get Laid). Teresa de Lauretis, whose Technologies of Gender (1987) has proved influential in the area of gender studies, continues to publish film criticism consistent with earlier, unambiguously feminist works in which she argued that "the representation of woman as spectacle — body to be looked at, place of sexuality, and object of desire — so pervasive in our culture, finds in narrative cinema its most complex expression and widest circulation" (Alice 4).

Feminist film theory has developed alongside a feminist performance theory grounded in Joan Riviere's recently rediscovered essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929), in which the author argues that there is no femininity that is not masquerade. Marjorie Garber, a contemporary cultural critic with an interest in gender, has analyzed the constructed nature of femininity by focusing on men who have apparently achieved it — through the transvestism, transsexualism, and other forms of "cross-dressing" evident in cultural productions from Shakespeare to Elvis, from "Little Red Riding Hood" to La Cage aux Folles. The future of feminist and gender criticism, it would seem, is not one of further bifurcation but one involving a refocusing on femininity, masculinity, and related sexualities, not only as represented in poems, novels, and films but also as manifested and developed in video, on television, and along the almost infinite number of waystations rapidly being developed on the information highways running through an exponentially expanding cyberspace.

In the epigraph to Johanna M. Smith's essay "Too Beautiful Altogether," Hélène Cixous argues that, through history, men have seen women as a "dark continent" to penetrate and to "pacify." Smith accepts Cixous's metaphorical characterization of patriarchal subjugation as geographical conquest, but she also significantly develops Cixous's insight by suggesting that there is an actual (not just metaphorical) link between the subjugation of women in Western society and the historical colonization of non-Western women and men by European powers. The imperialist and patriarchal ideologies that have colluded to silence and subjugate are of course reflected in a novel like Conrad's Heart of Darkness, since works of literature inevitably reflect the dominant ideologies of the age in which they were written. But when seen from a fresh critical perspective, an imaginative work by a visionary writer may also be seen to reveal contradictions within ideologies, particularly ideologies that are beginning to break down. (Both the imperialist ideology of civilizing through conquest and the patriarchal ideology of "separate spheres" were "under pressure in the late nineteenth century," Smith points out.) We can see through the contradictions within ideologies of gender and of empire, Smith suggests, when we see Heart of Darkness through the lens of "feminist revision."

Approaching Marlow's narrative as the product of a moment both in the history of imperialism and in the history of patriarchy, Smith shows how patriarchal and imperialist ideologies guide the creation of
the novel’s (minor) women characters, either causing them to remain silent (for if they spoke, they would surely condemn their oppressors, calling them what they are) or causing them to speak the myths men would have them speak.

Smith’s essay affords an excellent example of the feminist approach because, at one point or another, it reflects the interests and practices of each of the now-traditional forms of feminist criticism. By beginning her essay with the admission that a man’s novel about manly adventure may not seem important to the feminist enterprise, Smith reminds us of the priorities of American gynocritics, which were to recover and analyze literary works written by women. In her subsequent attention to the subject of silent women and women who speak but speak as men — as well as in her suggestion that feminist readers may hear Conrad’s women speaking their mind through the “gaps” in Marlow’s discourse — Smith shows an awareness of French feminist issues. Smith’s analysis even more obviously exemplifies the feminist critique of a literary work by a man, in the way that it points out how Conrad, through Marlow, repeats a belief system that domesticates women, thereby subjugating them to a separate, secondary sphere.

But Smith’s essay is far more than a reprise of traditional feminist approaches. It reflects the insights of contemporary, postcolonial feminism(s) in its sensitivity to matters of race, class, and nationality. (Smith shows that the gender construct defining the femininity of the story’s dark-skinned native woman is very different from the one defining the identity of Marlow’s aunt or Kurtz’s Intended.) “Too Beautiful Altogether” also reflects the thinking of most feminist gender critics insofar as it views the feminine not as an essential quality of woman but rather as a cultural construct, the several versions of which prescribe the identity of women, groups of women. In its final pages, Smith’s essay even addresses the construct of masculinity, thereby reflecting the concerns of nonfeminist as well as feminist gender critics. “The ideology of separate spheres enables masculine imperialism,” Smith argues. “By creating an alternative women’s sphere ‘lest ours get worse,’ men can continue to confront their ‘own true stuff’ in their world. And the violence with which Marlow’s lie sacrifices the Intended to this masculine world,” Smith concludes, “indicates the strength of its homosocial bonds” (p. 201).