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Dear Cheri,

Your letter interested me because I am involved in soliciting women to annotate a world bibliography of women writers, and the annotation falls into two parts: (1) an interpretive summary of the work - and this can mean an evaluation of form and content, in the sense of the "reality" of characters, the depth of thematic treatment, etc., and, of course, along with this (2) a feminist critique. Now a feminist critique to me involves (1) how the work does or does not contribute to an understanding of the condition of Woman (and this involves a comment on the author's own consciousness and intent); (2) how the female characters represent sex role alternatives - if they do, (3) whether concrete issues of present concern to us are presented; (4) how the characters express experiences not on record as being female experiences (for example, the cosmic experience of Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, the archetypal experiences of the search, etc., all of which are female experiences, too). #3 I see as a deeper restatement of #2; (5) how the work fits into (and again this is an extension of the above) a general cultural critique; and (6) whether or not the artist is a good craftswoman, a subjective criterion based upon the knowledge and sensitivity of the feminist critic.

I am fearful of a feminist critique which stresses only 2 and 3 above. Art would have a tendency to devolve into dogma if we judged to work as "good" because the female heroine fit into our concept of what Woman should be. We ~~will~~ will, on the other hand, never encourage women writers to develop female characters who exhibit a full humanity, if we don't always apply a cultural critique.

Let me ramble on to a statement in the introduction to Mallett's Sexual Politics:

It strikes me as better to make a radical investigation which can demonstrate why Lawrence's analysis of a situation is inadequate, or biased, or his influence pernicious, without ever needing to imply that he is less than a great and original artist,..."

I suppose the point to be made here is that an aesthetic critique must ~~be~~ include both the comment on the artistry and the observations on content. To move it around another way, a woman artist who writes a lousy story on a woman active in the Movement, or involved in getting an abortion, should be accorded the respect of critical appraisal: a lousy writer but important in that she is trying to use new materials. Again, I would avoid the simplistic, more dogmatic approach which #'s 2 and 3 above might - might, mind you - tend towards.

To answer some of your other questions, let me give an observation or two on Shirley Jackson's Life Among the Savages.

The main character is a housewife; her life is treated with indulgent irony and humour. When she opens a closet, everything falls out, etc., etc. Her role is definitely treated with gentle humour and approval. There are no sex role alternatives present in the story - none at all. There are no intimations of visions or longings after other things - such as freedom. In fact what we have here is the sex role stereotype presented as desirable - and the work could be considered a minor comedic classic. I don't think the work should be ~~damned~~ damned because it presents woman in her traditional role; rather the feminist critic, after having or at the same time as she considers the overall qualities of the work, must move into the broader cultural criticism which Millett talks about above.

This brings us to "female experience." "Female experience" as defined in Western culture has, of course, as we know limited the humanity of women. Feminist criticism, in pointing this out, should not also limit our experience because of the narrowness of the criteria. It should weigh everything against the backdrop of *la conditio* the broader sense of tragedy, against the backdrop of those experiences which heretofore have been recorded of males - such as the experiences of the Buddha, those charted in the B. Gita, etc. So we are faced with getting our own experiences into print - abortion, child care, etc. - but also moving us as a group beyond these more immediate experiences. If the individual writer is not able to bridge the gap, at least the feminist critic should point the way. The ~~writer/should~~ feminist writer should help us define our problems as well as give us a sense of life beyond the observable. So should the feminist critic.

I don't know if all of the above flows smoothly one point into the next, because I find it hard to concentrate with the office noise level what it is at this moment. But I hope it makes sense. One more point: feminist criticism should also point to still largely invisible female role models that go beyond the traditional: the Tubmans, Devlins, Jane Kennedys, K. Davises, etc. who can be used to create new characters in literature. We must also be able to read about our own physiology in literature - to see our bodies mirrored in a new way.

I suppose everything that I have said so far reveals that I think the best criticism is ultimately cultural criticism. Unfortunately very few critics "make it" - they usually end up reviewers. I consider Edmund Wilson, Richard Gilman, G.B. Shaw, Pauline Kael, sometimes Susan Sontag, Marya Mannes, Kate Millett solid critics. Good feminist criticism, like good criticism in general, must come from a feminist with a wide perspective on the human struggle towards freedom and the record of this struggle.

Yours in Sisterhood,

Joyce Nower