



Journal of Literary Education

Editorial

Feminism and Gender in Literary Education

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One is not born a woman; one becomes one
Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)

The starting point for the making of this current issue were some fundamental questions about the intersection of Feminist Criticism and Gender Theory with Education: What might it mean to read and teach literature through the prism of feminist criticism and/or gender theory? In which texts, ways and methods can we integrate a balanced gender approach into literary didactics? How and in which teaching approaches can we produce some powerful feminist readings of the literary texts, whether they are texts long established by tradition, or contemporary and multimodal ones, belonging to popular culture? And how can these concerns about feminism and gender be adequately addressed and embedded into the literature classroom? Although we knew that all the previous questions could not be effectively addressed in one single issue, we still envisaged a publication with insightful contributions to the overall theme of Feminism and Gender in Literary Education.

1. Teaching Literature with the lens of Feminist Criticism

According to Webster's New World Dictionary "in most Indo-European languages gender is not necessarily correlated with sex", that is to say, that "biological sex does not directly or even at

all generate the characteristics conventionally associated with it. Culture, society, history define gender, not nature” (Jehlen, 1995, p.263). In other words, the concept of gender has helped to highlight the fact that sexed identities can be a product of the socialisation process in any society. Not only does this mean that a child, from the moment they are born, has to learn how to fit into gender preconceptions about how males and females should be raised in societies, it also means that the people charged with the task of raising an infant already possess a set of preconceived ideas, expectations, and cultural preferences about how to raise that child in line with their biological gender and according to how boys and girls are supposed to be raised to fit in the society to which they belong. The successful socialization of every person usually comes with the respective development of certain masculine and feminine traits, characteristics that are used as a norm against which people are measured.

Feminist and post-feminist theories have had a crucial contribution to the articulation of gender identities from the perspective of women, and thus have also highlighted the overwhelmingly cultural character of gender and how ‘women’ and ‘femininity’ are not stable, easily defined categories. In fact, definitions of femininity have always been very much fragmented by age, class, and context in the past and throughout the centuries. Into early modern English for instance, as Higginbotham has shown (2013) the very word ‘girl’ was a gender-neutral term applied to both male and female children. In a similar vein, in contemporary Greek and more particularly in the Cretan dialect (spoken by the majority of the Cretan Greeks on the island of Crete) the word for the young boy is “kopélli” which literally means “girl”.

The interrogation of patriarchy and of patriarchal gender roles is one of the basic tenets of feminist criticism. Classic feminist studies, like Kate Millet’s (1970) or Luce Irigaray’s (1977), emphasized that women are phallically marked by men, their fathers, husbands, procurers, who, under the law of patriarchy have operated societies and dominated women, bearing various systems of oppression upon them. The ideologies that perpetuate or justify men’s position of power in societies can adequately be challenged through literature that invites readers to reject patriarchal ideology or to confront the stereotypes and prejudices about gender roles and the social position of women.

Another concept that feminists confronted was the “beauty myth” and the so-called temptation of woman to be “a beautiful object” (Steiner, 2001, p. xv). Martha Nausbaum has offered a systematic study on the objectification of women (1999), a complex notion however, that refers roughly to the practice of treating persons like objects and not as independent human beings with agency and their own needs and desires. The relation this myth has to the widely discussed

western concept of “beauty,” linked to metaphysical attributes and kindness (Tatarkiewicz, 2001, p. 153-178) illustrates many of the descriptions and depictions of female characters in traditional oral tales and general folklore.

According to Nussbaum, there are seven features involved in the idea of objectification: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. It might be for instance, a fruitful idea for fostering critical dialogue in the classroom to invite students to think of a heroine like Hamlet’s Ophelia as an objectified female character who is actually undergoing all the seven aspects of objectification throughout the play. Moreover, teachers can encourage students to be more vigilant every time they confront images of female bodies in films, advertisements and in the popular culture and to resist them since in these products female bodies are usually alienated from reality and have succumbed to the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989). We do not advocate to censor texts, especially the classic ones, but to help students understand the underlying values found in these texts, which can be part of a societal belief that is very much alive. On the other hand, besides highlighting the passivity projected by many princesses in fairy tales, it is also important to recover and disseminate alternative fairy tales with active female protagonists. Both views are important, the one that emphasises the traditional role of women and the other one, that emphasises the *forgotten* relevance of women: authors, protagonists, specific roles, etc. The point is students to become more adept at viewing texts, contexts and the world from different perspectives and to expand their repertoire of knowledge about how literature and culture have chosen to represent women and sexed individuals over the centuries. It is important for them to interrogate the roles that have been assigned to women, to challenge and to unsettle the sexual stereotypes, and to think critically about how the sexed bodies are represented and substantiated by literary language.

In the literary classroom context, feminist and gender-orientated criticisms have proved to be useful as an analytical tool for both students and teachers. They offer an interpretative angle for students to read and respond to literature, and to exercise their critical consciousness on matters not only related to gender and sexuality but also to closely related subjects such as power, oppression, privilege, exclusion, and freedom. It is important to point out the contribution of intersectionality (Davis 2008), showing that we cannot attend a single aspect of texts (such as gender) and neglect other important aspects (such as race, age, etc). For example, the following poems, which are very different from each other yet equally celebrated, can stimulate rich discussion in the classroom, prompting students to address issues of female subjectivity, women’s confinement and/or patriarchal oppression and the untamed expression of female imagination through embroidery, which is nevertheless a traditional female domestic

art, endowed in the poems with a startling emancipative power. The first one is Federico García Lorca's "La Monja Gitana" from *Romancero Gitano* (1928), the second is "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" (1951), a famous feminist poem by the poet and feminist advocator Adrienne Rich. By reading and discussing the poems, students can begin to feel and understand the subtleties of the poetic language and how it is used by poets to connote complex clusters of ideas around women and their suppression inside oppressive institutions like church and marriage. They can also brainstorm a list of the binary oppositions¹ embodied in the poems' imagery and create a nuanced representation of the female protagonist. An astonishing variety of binary opposed notions can be found and then scrutinized during the discussion.

*La Monja Gitana*²

Silencio de cal y mirto.
Malvas en las hierbas finas.
La monja borda alhelíes
sobre una tela pajiza.
Vuelan en la araña gris,
siete pájaros del prisma.
La iglesia gruñe a lo lejos
como un oso panza arriba.
¡Qué bien borda! ¡Con qué gracia!
Sobre la tela pajiza,
ella quisiera bordar
flores de su fantasía.
¡Qué girasol! ¡Qué magnolia
de lentejuelas y cintas!
¡Qué azafranes y qué lunas,
en el mantel de la misa!
Cinco toronjas se endulzan
en la cercana cocina.
Las cinco llagas de Cristo
cortadas en Almería.
Por los ojos de la monja
galopan dos caballistas.

¹ Binary opposition is a fundamental concept of Structuralism (Barry, 2002). Therefore, we may consider this activity for the classroom Structuralist in its justification.

² You can read an English translation in <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/la-monja-gitana-gypsy-nun.html>

Un rumor último y sordo
le despega la camisa,
y al mirar nubes y montes
en las yertas lejanías,
se quiebra su corazón
de azúcar y yerbaluisa.
¡Oh!, qué llanura empinada
con veinte soles arriba.
¡Qué ríos puestos de pie
vislumbra su fantasía!
Pero sigue con sus flores,
mientras que de pie, en la brisa,
la luz juega el ajedrez
alto de la celosía. (Lorca,2009², p.112).

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's finger fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.(Rich, 2016, p. 4)

2. Gender in Literature Classroom

Gender theory constitutes a major and multifarious area within the field of literary and cultural studies. According to Catharine R. Stimpson “simply speaking, gender is a way of classifying living things and languages, of sorting them into groups: feminine and masculine. However, no system of classification is ever simple” (1986, p.1). In fact, the perspective of gender resists the binary

conception of identity (male vs female) and embraces the destabilization of it, emphasizing the 'trans-sectional' and 'transcultural' (Jamison Green, Ashley Hoskin et al., 2019, p.44-45) nature of identities and challenging cisnormativity. According to Scott (cited by Aughterson and Grant-Ferguson, 2020, p.3):

'Gender' opened a whole set of analytic questions about how and under what conditions different roles and functions had been defined for each sex; how the very meanings of the categories 'man' and 'woman' varied according to time, context, and place; how regulatory norms of sexual department were created and enforced; how issues of power and rights played into definitions of masculinity and femininity; how symbolic structures affected the lives and practices of ordinary people; how sexual identities were forged within and against social prescriptions. Gender provided a way of investigating the specific forms taken by the social organization of sexual difference;[...].

In a similar perspective, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) famously declared that gender is a socially and culturally constructed category, and that gender identity is rather the product of performance, not a natural quality, essentially divided into binary categories. It is, after all, a culturally specific concept inherently "inflected by bodily, cultural, sexual and racial discourses and experiences" (Aughterson and Grant-Ferguson, 2020, p. 5). She criticised the traditional feminism since it represented, from her perspective, this reductionist binary position based in a heterosexuality that put aside the "sexual dissidences". Her contributions introduced the queer theory into the debate.

As mentioned, gender is inextricably involved with power, culture, language, and with themes and debates of key interest for the contemporary literature classroom. The ways we chose, read and teach texts in the classroom, the policies and the conventions within which we operate, the acts of reading and interpretation we perform, the point of views we adopt in order to deal with our students' emerging sexuality, are all issues inevitably related to gender. Nevertheless, contemporary critical practices have kept putting into question and interrogating the sexual rhetoric we use in literary analysis (consider, for instance, when we describe certain rhymes as 'feminine' and 'masculine'), or the gendered position within which we ascribe certain qualities to texts (e.g. books that are labelled as appealing to boys or girls). In today's classroom, the discussion about gender is more relevant than ever. The advancement of the LGBTQ+ and the #MeToo movement, the ongoing discussion on queer performativity, the increase in publication of children's books with queer characters, the international appeal of drag-queens television shows, are some of the factors that have contributed to an increasing awareness of gender

identities, especially among young people. Adolescents and young individuals are more conscious today of the complexity to define their identity and more open to negotiate a multiplicity of identities that can be connected to a variety of contexts and situations.

We live on a planet that has been undergoing an unprecedented identity crisis with a unique potential for (re)construction. The fight for equality, inclusion and tolerance is open and ongoing and it is undoubtedly true that there are many more battles that have not been won yet, in societies and in education. However, literature has always proved –and we humbly believe still is– a *via regia* for fostering tolerance among people and for celebrating the diverse, multicultural and multilingual character of our societies. By embracing more critical discourses on gender, feminism, and sexuality inclusively in the literature classroom, students have more chances to become critical readers and responsible citizens, as well as to welcome other people into their lives regardless of their gender, the colour of their skin, or who the persons they choose to love and cherish might be.

3. This issue

In this issue, we have tried to offer a selection of texts dealing with these different sides of gender and literary education.

We open the volume with Catherine Butler’s reflection on trans literature for children and young people. She highlights in her article “Portraying Trans People in Children’s and Young Adult Literature: Problems and Challenges” the increase of books with trans contents but also the contradictions and misleadings of authors when dealing with this subject.

Guillermo Soler’s contribution “Queerizando las Facultades de Educación: hacia una escuela inclusiva” (Queering Education Faculties, towards an inclusive school) offers research about the inclusion of a queer perspective in the classroom. He analyses the potential and the issues teachers can find trying to address queer theory with students.

Macarena García-González reviews the issues that a new phenomenon, such as the proliferation of books about prominent women in history, can entail. “Chasing Remarkable Lives: a Problematization of Empowerment Stories for Girls” develops a criticism for the reading of publications like *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* or books focused on gender issues.

“Breaking female stereotypes: Bianca Pitzorno’s girls and the power of literature on gender socialization”, written by Dalila Forni, delves deep into the works of famous Italian writer Bianca Pitzorno. Her books very often inquire into the very primal concept of gender by putting characters in paradoxical positions.

Amarilis Hidalgo de Jesús' "De bosques, sueños, galaxias y mares: poemas y narrativas para niños y adolescentes" (Of Forests, Dreams, Galaxies, and Seas: Poems and Narratives for Children and Adolescents) analyses some works written by Latin American women. Gender identity is connected to national or ethnic identities which are displayed through the writing process.

The article by Theodora Menti and Christina Sideri "Gender in Literature. Woman's Position from traditional to modern society" includes some suggestions for dealing with the position of women through history. Some classic and contemporary texts are analysed, enlightening their uses in the classroom.

"La mujer y el personaje femenino en cuentos jordano-palestinos de tradición oral" (Women and female characters in Jordan-Palestinian tales from the oral tradition), by Margarita Isabel Asensio Pastor, also offers research about women's position but, in this case, in the context of Jordan-Palestinian traditional tales. This ethnographic investigation sheds light on some stereotypes about Muslim cultures that can be very useful for teachers.

In the miscellaneous section, we can find Johari Murray's "Socio-cultural Positioning of Age Identities in Picturebooks," which offers research about the representation of age in two picturebooks with African American main characters. The intersection between age and identity produces an interesting field to be explored.

Claudia Pazzini's essay "L'abito immaginato. Abbigliamento e identità nell'albo illustrato moderno" (The imaginary dress. Clothing and identity in modern children's picture books) analyses a set of picturebooks where dresses are especially relevant since they help to study the construction of different identities.

Finally, "Psychometric evaluation of recall and recognition tasks for the measurement of young spectators' theatrical memory", written by Alexia Papakosta, Konstantinos Mastrothanasis, Aphrodite Andreou and Ioanna Blouti presents a quantitative research about young audiences' memory in theatre plays.

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How to cite this paper:

Kalogirou, T., Mínguez-López, X. & Millan, C. (2020). Editorial: Feminism and Gender in Literary Education. *Journal of Literary Education*, (3), pp. 1-9. doi: 10.7203/JLE.3.19203