

American Feminism

*from Bressler, Charles. Literary Criticism: an Introduction to Theory and Practice. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2003.

The American Feminist critic Annette Kolodny helps set the major concern of American Feminism: the restoration of the writings of female authors to the literary canon. Believing that literary history is itself a fiction, Kolodny wishes to restore the history of women so that they themselves can tell “herstory.” In order to tell and write “herstory,” however, women must first find a means to gain their voice in the midst of numerous voices—particularly male voices—clamoring for attention in society.

Like Kolodny, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), assert that the male voice has for too long been dominant. Because males have also had the power of the pen and therefore that press, they have been able to define and create images of women as they so choose in their male texts. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the coercion of this male power has caused “anxiety of authorship” in women, causing them to fear the act of literary creation itself and the act of writing. Literary creation, they believe, will isolate them from society and may even destroy them. Gilbert and Gubar’s solution is that women develop a “woman’s sentence” that would encourage literary autonomy. By inventing such a sentence, a woman can sentence a man to isolation, to fear, and to literary banishment from the canon, just as for centuries men have been sentencing women. In effect, by formulating a woman’s sentence, women writers can finally free themselves from being defined by men.

A woman’s sentence, argue Gilbert and Gubar, could also free women from being reduced to the stereotypical images that all too often appear in literature. They identify two principal stereotypical images as “the angel in the house” and the “madwoman in the attic.” If a woman is depicted as the angel in the house, she supposedly realizes that her physical and material comforts are gifts from her husband. Knowing this fact, her goal in life is to please her husband, to attend to his every comfort, and to obey him. Through these selfless acts, she finds the utmost contentment by serving both her husband and her children. If, perchance, a female character should reject this role, the male critics quickly dub her a “monster,” a freakish anomaly who is obviously sexually fallen.

Gilbert and Gubar assert that either of these images—the angel or the madwoman—are unrealistic representations of woman in society. One canonizes and places the woman above the world, while the other denigrates and places her below the world. Further, the message is clear to all women” If you are not angel, then you are a monster. Such stereotypical, male-created images of women in literature must be uncovered, examined, and transcended if women are to achieve literary autonomy.