Feminist Theories

Though a number of different approaches exist in feminist criticism, there exist some areas of commonality. This list is excerpted from Tyson:

1. Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so
2. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: she is marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values
3. All of western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, for example, in the biblical portrayal of Eve as the origin of sin and death in the world
4. While biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender (masculine or feminine)
5. All feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal to change the world by prompting gender equality
6. Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not (91).

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/11/>

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**First Wave Feminism**: Virginia Woolf's general contribution to feminism, then, is her recognition that gender identity is socially constructed and can be challenged and transformed….

**Second Wave feminism**: Simone de Beauvoir -- -- marks the moment when 'first-wave' feminism begins to slip over into the 'second wave'…. Woman is riveted into a lop-sided relationship with man: he is the 'One', she the 'Other'. ” 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman;... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an Other.'”

If we accept Foucault's argument that what is 'true' depends on who controls discourse, then it is apparent that men's domination of discourse has trapped women inside a male 'truth'……… Most feminists, however, consider that women have been brainwashed by this type of patriarchal ideology, which produces stereotypes of strong men and feeble women…..

**Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson**
A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory. 4th Edition
Prentice Hall. 1985

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Simone De Beauvoir’: The Second Sex

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De Beauvoir’s primary thesis is that men fundamentally oppress women by characterizing them, on every level, as the *Other*, defined exclusively in opposition to men. Man occupies the role of the self, or subject; woman is the object, the other. He is essential, absolute, and transcendent. She is inessential, incomplete, and mutilated. He extends out into the world to impose his will on it, whereas woman is doomed to immanence, or inwardness. He creates, acts, invents; she waits for him to save her.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/secondsex/summary.html>

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Beauvoir is concerned at the outset to explain how male writers have generally dealt with the female characters in their works. The striking similarity among the major authors she discusses consists in their setting up "Woman" as an absolute Other--she becomes something by which men may define themselves. The problem with that male scheme, of course, is that the woman exists only as a man's destiny--there is no room within it for female self-discovery or appropriation of her own destiny. One is reminded of Milton's phrase in Paradise Lost describing the relationship between Adam and Eve: "He for God only, she for God in him." It is the Adams of the world, according to authors like Montherlant, Claudel, and company, who relate directly to the higher things, while the Eves participate in such higher things--if they do so at all--only through interaction with men.

Beauvoir does not make her criticism a blanket one--it is hard to miss her real admiration for the texts of Stendhal, in which women are construed as free and equal human beings capable of engaging in reciprocal relations. **(This gives hints as to how to transform your text.)**

What, then, is the "myth of woman" that Beauvoir wants to analyse and dispel? It is the lore of the Eternal Feminine……. women are said to be irrational, sensitive, more erotically inclined than men, passive and earthy while men are all intellect and action, and so forth (**relate to Barthes/myth**)

Why have such (discriminatory)relations between men and women held sway over many centuries? Because it is necessary to a male-centered social order. Beauvoir explains that once social relations "congeal" into a relatively stable hierarchy, with patrimony being distributed among the males, women must accept their passive, submissive lot--to bear the children, manage the household (the locus of a man's property) and generally serve the men. The setting up of the Myth of Woman generates ambivalence since, after all, a woman may be feared as a destroyer of patrimonial order as well as praised for her willingness to conserve that order. A woman may, for instance, be a saving "angel of the hearth" (in Coventry Patmore's Victorian poem) or the adulteress who scatters men's concentrated wealth, thereby injuring an economic order favorable to men.

To be solely what someone else has made you is to be nothing at all. (great quote) As Beauvoir describes this state of affairs, men require that women be an absolute Other even to themselves, an empty Mystery without actuality, incapable of existing, incapable of exercising choice, in the way that men alone are permitted to do. (Contradiction in Adam and Eve: Eve is the one who makes the choice to eat the forbidden fruit therefore she is active and empowered…)

When Beauvoir calls for an "authentic relation with an autonomous existent," her term existent, a specifically existentialist term, implies that the social, political, and economic order must change so that men and women may relate to one another on an equal, mutual basis.

<http://www.ajdrake.com/teachers/teaching/guides/theory/e456_de_beauvoir.htm>

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Beauvoir : And St Thomas for his part pronounced woman to be an ‘imperfect man’, an ‘incidental’ being. This is symbolised in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called ‘a supernumerary bone’ of Adam.

Some say that, having been created after Adam, she is evidently a secondary being: others say on the contrary that Adam was only a rough draft and that God succeeded in producing the human being in perfection when He created Eve…

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Kate Millet: Sexual Politics

Kate Millett's (*Sexual Politics*) argument -- ranging over history literature psychoanalysis, sociology and other areas -- is that ideological indoctrination as much as economic inequality is the cause of women's oppression, an argument which opened up second-wave thinking about reproduction, sexuality and representation (especially verbal and visual 'images of women', and particularly pornography). Millett's title, Sexual Politics, announces her view of 'patriarchy', which she sees as pervasive and which demands 'a systematic overview -- as a political institution'. Patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male, and this power is exerted, directly or indirectly, in civil and domestic life to constrain women. Millett borrows from social science the important distinction between 'sex' and 'gender', where sex is determined biologically but 'gender' is a psychological concept which refers to cuIturally acquired sexual identity and she and other feminists have attacked socia1 scientists who treat the culturally learned 'female' characteristics (passivity etc.) as 'natural'. She recognizes that women as much as men perpetuate these attitudes, and the acting-out of these sex-roles in the unequal and repressive relations of domination and subordination is what Millett calIs 'sexual politics'.

…… In narrative, for instance, the shaping conventions of adventure and romantic pursuit have a 'male' impetus and purposiveness. Further, the male writer addresses his readers as if they are always men,

………..as we have noted in relation to Woolf and de Beauvoir, it is also possible for the female reader to collude (unconsciously) in this patriarchal positioning and read 'as a man'…………. It appears that, for Millett, male authors are compelled by their gender to reproduce the oppressive sexual politics of the real world in their fiction,

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Even more influential was [Kate Millett](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kate_Millett)'s polemical and hard-hitting 'Sexual Politics', published the following year. By "politics" Millett refers to the mechanisms that express and enforce the relations of power in society; she represents Western social arrangements and institutions as covert ways of manipulating power so as to establish and perpetuate the dominance of men and the subordination of women. In her book she attacks the male bias in Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and also analyzes selected passages by D.H.Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet as revealing the ways in which their authors, in fictional fantasy, aggrandize their aggressive phallic selves and degrade women as submissive sexual objects.

Barry, Peter. Beginning Theory. An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory. 3rd ed.Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009. 118

The Israelites lived in a continual state of war with the fertility cults of their neighbours; these latter afforded sufficient attraction to be the source of constant defection, and the figure of Eve, like that of Pandora, has vestigial traces of a fertility goddess overthrown. There is some, probably unconscious, evidence of this in the Biblical account which announces, even before the narration of the fall has begun - "Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living things." Due to the fact that the tale represents a compilation of different oral traditions, it provides two contradictory schemes for Eve's creation, one in which both sexes are created at the same time, and one in which Eve is fashioned later than Adam, an afterthought born from his rib, peremptory instance of the male's expropriation of the life force through a god who created the world without benefit of female assistance.

The tale of Adam and Eve is, among many other things, a narrative of how humanity invented sexual intercourse. Many such narratives exist in preliterate myth and folk tale. Most of them strike us now as delightfully funny stories of primal innocents who require a good deal of helpful instruction to figure it out. There are other major themes in the story: the loss of primeval simplicity, the arrival of death, and the first conscious experience of knowledge. All of them revolve about sex. Adam is forbidden to eat of the fruit of life or of the knowledge of good and evil, the warning states explicitly what should happen if he tastes of the latter: "in that day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." He eats but fails to die (at least in the story), from which one might infer that the serpent told the truth.

But at the moment when the pair eat of the forbidden tree they awake to their nakedness and feel shame. Sexuality is clearly involved, though the fable insists it is only tangential to a higher prohibition against disobeying orders in the matter of another and less controversial appetite - one for food. Roheim points out that the Hebrew verb for "eat" can also mean coitus. Everywhere in the Bible "knowing" is synonymous with sexuality, and clearly a product of contact with the phallus, here in the fable objectified as a snake. To blame the evils and sorrows of life - loss of Eden and the rest - on sexuality, would all too logically implicate the male, and such implication is hardly the purpose of the story, designed as it is expressly in order to blame all this world's discomfort on the female. Therefore it is the female who is tempted first and "beguiled" by the penis, transformed into something else, a snake. Thus Adam has "beaten the rap" of sexual guilt, which appears to be why the sexual motive is so repressed in the Biblical account. Yet the very transparency of the serpent's universal phallic value shows how uneasy the mythic mind can be about its shifts. Accordingly, in her inferiority and vulnerability the woman takes and eats, simple carnal thing that she is, affected by flattery even in a reptile. Only after this does the male fall, and with him, humanity - for the fable has made him the racial type, whereas Eve is a mere sexual type and, according to tradition, either expendable or replaceable. And as the myth records the original sexual adventure, Adam was seduced by woman, who was seduced by a penis. 'The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the fruit and I did eat" is the first man's defence. Seduced by the phallic snake, Eve is convicted for Adam's participation in sex.

Adam's curse is to toil in the "sweat of his brow," namely the labor the male associates with civilisation. Eden was a fantasy world without either effort or activity, which the entrance of the female, and with her sexuality, has destroyed. Eve's sentence is far more political in nature and a brilliant "explanation" of her inferior status. "In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children. And thy desire shall be to thy husband. And he shall rule over thee." Again, as in the Pandora myth, a proprietary father figure is punishing his subjects for adult heterosexuality. It is easy to agree with Roheim's comment on the negative attitude the myth adopts toward sexuality: "Sexual maturity is regarded as a misfortune, something that has robbed mankind of happiness . . . the explanation of how death came into the world.''

What requires further emphasis is the responsibility of the female, a marginal creature, in bringing on this plague, and the justice of her suborned condition as dependent on her primary role in this original sin. The connection of woman, sex, and sin constitutes the fundamental pattern of western patriarchal thought thereafter.

<http://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/millett-kate/theory.htm>

**Did Man or God Create Woman? Feminist Interpretations of the Story of Eve and Adam**

June 19, 2009 By [theyellowdart](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithpromotingrumor/author/theyellowdart/%22%20%5Co%20%22theyellowdart) [8 Comments](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithpromotingrumor/2009/06/did-man-or-god-create-woman-feminist-interpretations-of-the-story-of-eve-and-adam/#comments)

**Did Adam or God Create Eve?**

Perhaps no text has influenced current gender roles and concepts of sexuality in Western culture more than the biblical Yahwist (J) account of creation found in Genesis 2-3. [1] This familiar story of the creation of Eve and Adam (the archetypal woman and man) in the Garden of Eden has a long and varied history of interpretation within the Christian tradition, having very often been used as a prooftext to demonstrate that women are inferior and/or subordinate to men socially, morally, and religiously. Such patriarchal and subordinating interpretations of Eve (and hence woman) to Adam (and thus man), in fact, are found in some biblical texts themselves. For instance, 1 Timothy 2.11-15 (NRSV, alternate translations in brackets), uses the story of Eve an Adam in an attempt to show why woman (or specifically wives) are not to teach but to keep silent in public worship and to fully submit to the authority of man (or her husband). According to the author of 1 Timothy (who is most likely not Paul, but a later disciple of Paul writing in his name), this is because Eve was created secondarily to Adam, and because she was the transgressor who was deceived by the serpent, while the man was not deceived. This passage reads:

Let a woman [wife] learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman [wife] to teach or to have authority over a man [her husband]; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

However, are such patriarchal interpretations of the Eve and Adam story correct? Is the text *itself*patriarchal–bent on demonstrating the inferiority and inequality of women to men–or is it simply that the text has been *interpreted*patriarchally throughout its history of interpretation (on account of the fact that it has most often been interpreted by male elitists), when in fact the text itself is actually egalitarian, underscoring the equality of the sexes?

The Yahwist account of Eve and Adam has received a number of (re)interpretations in modern feminist biblical scholarship. Feminist biblical scholarship, recognizing that gender is a social construct, and hence “a matter of power” [269], and that all writing is gendered in perspective, generally seeks to (re)discover the history and voices of women–whose written records are typically very limited and who have often been erased or ignored from historical memory–and to “expose the culturally based presuppositions in classic discourse.” (270) Here I will present several critically informed feminist interpretations of the story of Eve and Adam found in Genesis 2-3.

*Phyllis Trible*

Trible suggests that it is not until after the “fall” that hierarchical distinctions between man and woman come about; rather, before Eve’s and Adam’s banishment from the garden there is a high degree of equality between the sexes that is evinced in the text. She notes that God first made the human (*adam*) without gender, since, although a masculine pronoun is used for the new creature, it is not until the woman is made from this creature that the sexes are differentiated. Appealing to binary logic (the ability to establish difference[s] based on opposites), the male cannot really be distinguished without the female, and vice versa. Moreover, Trible suggests that woman is really the pinnacle of creation, and that it is significant that she is described as man’s “help(er)” (Hebrew*‘ezer*), since this word is often used elsewhere as a descriptor of God–clearly a superior being to the man. Finally, she notes that woman is the active and assertive agent in the story, while the man is passive.

*Mieke Bal*

Bal develops Eve as “a character of great power” (271). Eve’s act of eating the fruit is truly humanity’s first act of human independence, making humanity, now possessing a real knowledge of good and evil, more like God/the gods (Gen. 3.22). It is by this act, Bal suggests, that humanity and divinity can truly enter into a genuine relationship. Eve did not “sin” (no such word is found in the story), but rather chose reality, and “her choice marks the emergence of human character” (271).

*Carol Meyers*

Meyers seeks to interpret the story of Eve and Adam within its historical-cultural context of ancient Israelite (pre-monarchical) agrarian society. For Meyers, the emphasis on food and sustenance, which would have been of the utmost importance in the context of an ancient agrarian society, overrides the themes of disobedience and its effects. The garden is well watered; there is no need for the toils of plowing, planting, and harvesting field crops. “For Meyers, Genesis 2-3 is not a story of “the fall” (no word for “fall” or “sin” is ever mentioned) but a wisdom tale dealing “with the meaning of the paradoxes and harsh facts of life”" (272). Meyers, based on her own translation of Genesis 3.16, suggests that God’s judgment for woman is not pain in childbirth but rather multiple pregnancies, and, like her husband Adam, increased agrarian toil. Her translation of Genesis 3.16 reads:

I will greatly increase your toil and your pregnancies; [along] with travail shall you beget children. For to your man is your desire, and he shall predominate over you.

Thus female subordination after Eve’s and Adam’s departure from the garden is limited to the domain of sexual activity, and is not concerned with general social hierarchy.

However, other commentators have been less optimistic that the character of Eve (and hence of woman in general) may be so equally rehabilitated. As mentioned, all writing is gendered, and “Genesis 2-3, as a story of origins, is, among other things, in the business of constructing gender roles…” The man “names both genders–and according to him, the woman is derivative of the man,” which is further underscored by the fact that God “relates woman to the man as his “helper”.” The man suggests that the woman’s primary role is to be the “mother of all living.” God assigns each sex their own specific duties. Thus “the narrative establishes a particular kind of life style for men and women” (273).

*Susan Lanser*

“Susan Lanser, applying the principles of speech-act theory to the text, argues that inference and context are as important to the production of meaning as the formal characteristics of language.” (273) Thus the man (Hebrew *ha’adam*), when first introduced into the story, would be assumed to have a masculine gender. Moreover, when the man calls the new creature “woman,” this is an act that defines her (and not simply a recognition of sexual difference), just as the man’s naming the animals defines them. Lanser argues that the accusatory formula of Genesis 3.14 that is directed to the serpent is carried over into Genesis 3.16, and so this statement is, in fact, a divine punishment, and not a simple descriptive statement.

*David Clines*

Clines, contra Trible, argues that the word “helper” attributed to Eve does not (necessarily) indicate her superiority to the man, and at any rate she is still secondary to the man and his status, roles, and function(s). For Clines, Eve is still only essential to the man for the act of procreation.

*Phyllis Bird*

Bird, although recognizing that the story of Eve and Adam is clearly androcentric in nature, nevertheless finds more to salvage than Lanser or Clines. For Bird the first human is certainly male (contra Trible), but the man does not *fully*represent humanity. Bird comments that “Although the help which the woman is meant to give to the man is undoubtedly help in procreation, the account in Genesis 2 subordinates function to passion. The attraction of the sexes is the author’s primary interest, the sexual drive whose consummation is conceived as a re-union” (274). For Bird, the subordination of woman to man is not a part of God’s original creation. Human sexuality, originally meant as a means of happiness and fulfillment, can be turned into a weapon of oppression.

*David Jobling*

Jobling, utlizing structuralist analysis informed by Marxist and feminist ideology, seeks to find meaning in the text by highlighting its own tensions. For Jobling, there is tension in the presentation of Eve. Although the story blames Eve (the woman) for the negative vicissitudes of life, nevertheless she is, as Trible pointed out, an active and intelligent character while the man is passive. Jobling observes that “at the deepest level of the text, where the fall myth as a whole is in tension with “a man to till the earth,” the possibility is evoked that the human transformation in which the woman took powerful initiative was positive, rather than negative, that the complex human world is to be preferred over any male ideal,” although he notes that this is not occasioned by an ancient feminist perspective, but rather by a patriarchal insecurity which attempts to both legitimize its power and make sense of “femaleness” (276).

**Who Has Been “Deceived”?**

As has been seen, there have been many different interpretations and applications, from ancient times until the present, of the story of Eve and Adam in Genesis 2-3. These interpretations bring a number of important questions to the fore: Is Eve truly equal to Adam, or is the biblical story of Eve and Adam irretrievably patriarchal? Or is there perhaps some middle ground? Simply, of what significance is the biblical story of Eve and Adam for informing a modern understanding of human sexuality and gender, and especially among those Judeo-Christian traditions (including LDS Christianity) that accept the Bible as an authoritative religious text in some sense? What interpretations of the story seem most valid to you, and why, and how can or should this text be appropriated in today’s society (or societies)?

*Notes*

[1] The following discussion is from Danna Nolan Fewell’s article “Reading the Bible Ideologically: Feminist Criticism” in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, edited by Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), pgs. 268-282. All quotes (including those of other authors) and page numbers refer to this article.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithpromotingrumor/2009/06/did-man-or-god-create-woman-feminist-interpretations-of-the-story-of-eve-and-adam/>