Feminist and Queer Theory
Importance of Gender

- All cultures in all time periods make gender distinctions
- We start thinking more intensely about gender at times when gender configurations undergo changes or shifts
- For instance, “Woman Question” in the 19th Century
  - Is gender innate and biological or the product of socialization and environment?
  - Is the family structure natural, divinely ordained or socially constructed and variable?
Social Construction vs. Essentialism

Essentialism
- Biological view
- Gender is natural
- We’re born with innate gender differences
- Women are naturally “feminine”; men are naturally “masculine”

Social Construction
- Environmental view
- Difference between “sex” and “gender”
- We’re taught gender differences
- We “perform” the gender roles our society teaches us to perform
“Universal” Experience

- What used to be called “universal” experience equated “universal” with “male”
- *Hamlet* example
- Judith Fetterley and *The Resisting Reader*
But...on the other hand...

• In the wake of the conclusion that there is no “universal” subject, we can place *too* much emphasis on difference.

• We find another cliché: “men and women are different”
Klages’ Definition of Feminism

1. A feminist is someone interested in studying gender as a system of cultural signs or meanings that are assigned to “sexually dimorphic” (biologically different) bodies. These signs have a direct effect on how we live our individual lives and how our social institutions operate.

2. A feminist sees the gender systems currently in place as structured on a basic binary opposition in which one term, “masculine,” is privileged. This gives more social power to men.

3. A feminist thinks points 1 and 2 are wrong and should be changed.
Political Dimensions

• Q: But why do we even have to talk about politics? Shouldn’t academic subjects be free of politics?
• A: Reading literary texts or studying philosophy not so academic or ivory tower
• They can determine the conditions and terms on which our daily lives and social institutions are based
  – Rousseau’s and Locke’s ideas, for example, made possible the concept of individual rights and freedom and led to revolutions
Politics

- Politics, acc. to Klages, is about power. She wants to understand how cultural texts have the power to shape our everyday lives.
- Cultural texts can change or re-affirm the way we understand our world and the decisions we make about our lives.
- So, politics is an inherent and inescapable aspect of every branch of academic study.
- One can either choose to be conscious of the ‘politics’ of one’s discipline, or one can choose to remain ignorant of that dimension.
Questions Feminist Criticism Might Ask

- What are the power relationships between men and women (or characters assuming male/female roles)?
- How are male and female roles defined?
- What constitutes masculinity and femininity?
- How do characters embody these traits?
- Do characters take on traits from opposite genders? How so? How does this change others’ reactions to them?
- What does the work reveal about the operations (economically, politically, socially, or psychologically) of patriarchy?
- What does the work imply about the possibilities of sisterhood as a mode of resisting patriarchy?
- What does the work say about women's creativity?
- What does the history of the work's reception by the public and by the critics tell us about the operation of patriarchy?
- What role does the work play in terms of women's literary history and literary tradition?
Queer Theory

- Named as a discipline since 1991
- Grew out of gay/lesbian studies, which in turn grew out of feminist studies
- Feminism challenged idea that gender is essential or natural; queer theory challenges the idea that sexuality or sex acts are an essential, unchanging aspect of identity (or that they are “naturally” moral or immoral).
Queer Theory

Theory Toolbox:

• If gender theory demonstrates the disentanglement of “gender” from an essentialist notion of “sex,” queer theory demonstrates a similar disentanglement of sex acts from gender identity

• Queer theory argues there is no “natural” relation between anatomical equipment and a particular sex act
A word about language...

• Why “queer”?
  • Term “homosexual” linked to pathologizing discourse?
  • Reclaiming a pejorative term
  • Challenges notions of normative sexuality (retains meaning of “odd” or “unusual”, thus interested in sexuality that is labeled “queer” or non-normative)
Gender vs. Sexuality

• More difficult to think about sexuality as being socially constructed than gender?
• We can look around and see that ideas about gender are evolving (even in matters of style and dress)
• Sexuality seems to be about biology, the ways our bodies operate on a physical level.
Klages: Two ways our society defines sexuality

1. In terms of animal instincts (hormones, seasonal cycles, etc.) over which we have no control
2. In terms of moral and ethical choices (coded as good and evil) over which we’re supposed to have complete control

1. Problem with first, biological view, is that our sexuality doesn’t function like animal sexuality. In humans, reproduction often separated from sexuality
2. Second category often takes the form of moral statements about what is good or bad sexual behavior. These judgments have shifted over time, which is one of showing that these categories are social constructs.
Binaries

• Queer theory sees problems with viewing sex acts in a strict binary: heterosexual/homosexual; normal/abnormal. Interested in the way these binaries are transgressed.
• Idea that gender and sexuality aren’t essential parts of identity, but rather “performative” discourses
Linguistics/Speech Act Theory

Constative Utterances
• These speech acts state facts or describe a state of affairs that’s already assumed to be true

Performative Utterances
• Speech acts that actually make something happen through language:
  – “I now pronounce you man and wife.”
  – “I promise to pay back the $100 I borrowed.”
• These utterances are neither true nor false
• Like performance utterances, one’s sexual identity becomes culturally meaningful (recognizable) only through performance of certain acts.
Questions Queer Theory Asks

Interested in:

• How sexuality has been historically defined

• How various cultures or time periods enforced ideas about what kinds of sexuality are “normal” and which are “abnormal”

• Looking at all kinds of sexuality deemed “queer” or non-normative, including gender-bending

• How sexual behavior is a social construct