10/3/07 Kolodny, “Dancing Through the Minefield”

MIDTERM: look over by Friday, come with questions. As of now, scheduled for Wednesday, 10/10. Desirable; lots to be said for getting it over by fall break. But not essential; could start on part 2 of the class (which would not be covered on the midterm), and have midterm on Monday 10/15. We’ll decide on Friday.

• this article a look back from 1980: condensation of theoretical principles from a decade of largely untheorized feminist critical practice.

Let’s put this into a wider frame, then:

• starting point: core of feminist criticism: commitment to female equality. Not a specifically literary idea, but one which COULD be brought to bear on lif. And it was—in America, in the late 60’s.

• what it operated on: New Criticism, i.e. close readings of texts and study of a canon of great works
  • close readings: well positioned to analyze misogyny of male canon
  • canon: serious underrepresentation of female authors
If you look at her references, you’ll see that Kolodny is receptive to other influences, but the feminist response to NC is still mainly what she’s responding to.

• Note: even this is enough to seriously call into question the bases of literary study.

• additional complications, round 1:
  • not just American. Developing at the same time or a little later, but not reflected in the article:
    • French feminism. As constructed by Americans, primarily means Simone de Beauvoir and various feminist revisions of Lacan.
    • British feminism. Largely socialist feminism.

• So by the mid-80’s we have three well-developed bodies of theory. Things get more complicated, round 2:
  • second order critiques: Af-Am, lesbian
  • other theory is rising to the fore at the same time: post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, reader response, semiotics, Foucault, post-modernism
  • the canon is widening beyond literature: popular culture, other discourses

• But much of the methodology developed by feminism can be used in other domains
  • men’s studies, profeminism → gender studies
  • queer theory

• open discussion: are the following claims true? (If there is some dispute as to what the claims mean, then let’s say that they mean what Kolodny takes them to mean—that is, that we should use her examples and language as evidence for
  • Literary history is a fiction (1553ff).
    • if you say true: do you have to agree that it is a “patently mendacious critical fallacy” to claim that we read texts to reconstruct the past as it really was?
    • if true: is anyone’s literary history as good as any other?
    • if false: how do you account for the enormous changes in the canon over the past 30 years?
    • if false: if you at least acknowledge that a bias has operated in the construction of literary history, how do you account for it?

• Insofar as we are taught to read, what we engage are not texts but paradigms (1554ff.).
  • are these mutually exclusively terms? why not go with the more equal chicken/egg language on 1555?
  • if yes: what happened to the chicken? is Paradise Lost’s “debt to epic conventions” (1555) really there?
  • if no: do we really not need context to understand a text?

• Since the grounds upon which we assign aesthetic value to texts are never infallible, unchangeable, or universal, we must reexamine not only our aesthetics
but, as well, the inherent biases and assumptions informing the critical methods which (in part) shape your aesthetic responses (1557).

• need to break this down: 1) grounds of value are never universal, 2) we must reexamine aesthetics, 3) it is even more important to examine our biases and assumptions.