

DISCUSSING FEMINIST ISSUES AFTER NEW CRITICISM IN SHORT STORY ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION TO BUILD LEARNERS' CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS: TRA VINH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' AND LECTURERS' REFLECTIONS

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Abstract – *To interpret the underlying meanings of a literary work is a very common task in a literature course. A logical analysis and interpretation of a literary text often needs to be supported by literary theory. This study investigates whether students' critical thinking is built after they explore a short story by the two approaches, New Criticism and Feminist Criticism, in their literature classes. This paper illustrates how the teacher guided forty-four junior English major students in their school year 2023–2024 at Tra Vinh University to look for textual evidence from a short story in their literature course to support their analysis and interpretation from both approaches. The students firstly analyzed and interpreted Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* by applying New Criticism and Feminist Criticism. Later, they wrote reflective papers to give the lecturer their feedback. The findings from the students' papers reveal that all the students reacted positively towards the application of both approaches since they like to explore a literary work to the full when both approaches can fill each other's deficiency as well as help to build the students' critical thinking skills. Finally, the lecturer's reflections on her instructional practice are presented.*

Keywords: *critical thinking, Feminist Criticism, New Criticism, short story, Tra Vinh University.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Students and teachers of literature have applied several critical approaches to analyze or interpret and dig deep into a literary work. Among these, New Criticism analyzes the work based on its textual internal elements such as characters, plot, and themes, while Feminist Criticism explores the social issues such as gender roles, patriarchal ideologies hidden in the text. Although both approaches are widely used in literary studies, the combination of them in a real classroom setting aiming to build the students' critical thinking is rare. To fill this gap, this study investigates if the integration of New Criticism and Feminist Criticism in analyzing one short story in a literature class can foster students' critical thinking.

This research investigates third-year students' reactions in a literature course by applying both New Criticism and Feminist Criticism to Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, adapted by Sellen [1]. First, the students apply the New Criticism by examining the setting, characters, plot structure, conflicts, themes, and figurative language used in the tale in the first stage. In the second stage, Feminist Criticism is applied through discussing the feminist issues emerging from the tale, such as patriarchy, traditional gender roles, and objectification of women. Finally, the students write reflective papers to reveal how both approaches affect their perspectives.

By combining literary approaches into classroom practice, this research helps educators know how students react to different analytical frameworks and if there are changes in the way they interpret or analyze literary works. The findings will shed light on pedagogical strategies in teach-

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Received date: 24 April 2024; Revised date: 30 March 2025; Accepted date: 31 March 2025

ing literature, showing how literary theories can be integrated to develop students' analytical and critical thinking skills. This study is significant to educators who search for learners' engagement in literary text analysis and encourage them to query social issues in order to strengthen their literary analysis and support their academic growth.

This study addresses two questions:

1. How do the students react to New Criticism before, during, and after the lessons? Do lessons applying New Criticism help to build students' critical thinking skills?

2. How do the students react to Feminist Criticism before, during, and after the lessons? Do lessons applying Feminist Criticism help to build students' critical thinking skills?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *The role of literary analysis and interpretation in developing critical thinking*

Fisher [2, p.15] stated that critical thinking clearly demands a person's ability to interpret and evaluate things through 'observations, communications and other sources of information' by 'reasoning and arguing issues through'. Hence, looking for textual evidence provides a strong foundation to support students' arguments in their literary analysis and interpretation because the words from the text 'validate our interpretation' [3, p.121]. On the other hand, literary analysis needs to apply a literary theory, which is also referred to as 'critical theory' [4, p.142], as 'when we interpret a text we always do so from a theoretical perspective' [5, p.1]. In addition, critical theory is viewed as 'an appropriate pedagogical resource' for literature and composition courses that emphasize 'critical thinking, social issues, or cultural diversity' [6, p.ix]. Moreover, literary theories develop students' own 'unique interpretations of texts', enliven their 'experience of analyzing texts, for it gives readers avenues of access to develop critical insights' [7, p.x-i]. Especially, students increase 'their ability to think creatively and to reason logically' and develop the 'ability to see any given problem from a variety of points of view', which is a worthy skill

that students should have in any profession [6, p.1].

Consequently, the process of literary analysis and interpretation applying a literary theory entails critical thinking. Therefore, the combination of the dual literary approaches, New Criticism and Feminist Criticism, expects to develop students' ability to analyze short stories from different perspectives, thereby bolstering their critical engagement with literature.

B. *New Criticism: focusing on textual analysis*

Short history and main principles of New Criticism

New Criticism, initiating from ideas in the work of the two critics Richards and Eliot [8], was born to focus on a literary work itself. This term became popular with John Crowe Ransom's publication *The New Criticism* [9, p.53] and the movement for New Criticism started in the 1920s from the group Fugitives with their publication of the magazine *The Fugitives* at Vanderbilt University in Nashville in Tennessee in which they considered reading a text of art as 'art' [10, p.34].

Fundamental New Critical concepts to understand literature

New Criticism comes from the New Critical theory, which is used to interpret a text to understand literature by querying the meaning of the text through the textual evidence from reading the text itself. The following concepts are mainly explained by Tyson [3], and they are helpful for students in interpreting texts.

Theme – A theme is the complete 'meaning of the work as a whole' [3, p.124]. For example, 'unhappy and happy moments' is a topic, but 'life is full of unhappy and happy moments' is a possible theme. Formal elements – These elements form the literary work such as 'images, symbols, metaphors, rhyme, meter, point of view, setting, characterization, plot, and so forth' [3, p.123] and they are identified by literary language to examine if the work has unity when the formal elements support the theme. Organic unity – A text has organic unity when all its formal elements work together as an inseparable whole to

make a theme. In addition, through organic unity, the complexity of a text is seen through four linguistic devices (paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension) and figurative language, such as images, symbols, metaphors, and similes [3, p.124–126]. Close reading – It is the careful examination of every aspect of a literary work, including all formal elements and themes, to look for organic unity as well as linguistic devices and figurative language that show the complexity of the work.

In summary, the core principle of New Criticism is ‘close reading’ to examine the ‘formal elements’ to find out if the work has unity when the formal elements support the theme [3, p.123–124]. New Criticism is text-oriented [11, p.77] because it goes against scholars’ and teachers’ attention previously paid to the biographical and historical context of a work [10]. Therefore, students would ignore information about the author, the historical and social context of the literary work. Instead, they concentrate on analyzing the work, focusing on the formal elements and linguistic features [12, p.57], such as linguistic devices and figurative language when implied meanings emerge from the literary language.

How New Criticism builds critical thinking

In close reading in New Criticism, literature students look for textual evidence to logically support their analysis and interpretation of the literary work. This strengthens their logical reasoning skill when textual evidence serves as a reason that leads to the conclusion in the structure of an argument [2, p.36] after reading the work. For example, students need the textual evidence found in close reading to reason their arguments in a class discussion, to select correct answers in a literature quiz, or to have a persuasive writing to respond to the literary text as a follow-up step of close reading [13, p.528]. Consequently, students develop their logical reasoning skills, which fosters critical thinking because students have to defend their arguments logically based on literary text analysis.

C. Feminist Criticism: history, basic concepts, and critical thinking development

History and basic concepts

Feminist theory explores ‘the gendered subject and a political theory of equality and emancipation’ [4, p.190]. This paper attempts to give brief descriptions of feminism’s four waves in the United States during the nineteenth century. The first wave (1840s–1920s) concentrated on equal rights for women under the law, such as the right to vote, study, work, and especially the right for married women to own property, to keep their own wages, and to have guardianship of their own children. The second wave (1860s–1980s) also sought equal rights for women under the law, such as the right to equal access to jobs, to equal pay for equal work, and the right to apply for mortgages and to hold credit cards under their names. The movement also fought for legislation against domestic violence, including marital rape. The third wave (1990s–2000s) fought against sexual harassment in the workplace and for the elevation of women to positions of power. The fourth wave (2010s–present day) focuses strongly on the problem of sexual aggression against women and girls. These four waves contribute to women’s empowerment [6, p.101–103].

Elaine Showalter: Two models and three stages in women’s writing

Elaine Showalter is an American literary critic, feminist, writer on cultural and social issues, and one of the founders of feminist literary criticism in United States academia. Showalter has divided feminist literary criticism into two models. The first model, women as readers of male authors’ works in patriarchal society, is referred to as ‘feminist critique’, which looks for and critiques images and stereotypes of women in literary works, the deletions and illusions about women, and the exploitation and manipulation of female characters. The second mode, women as writers in patriarchal society, is called ‘gynocritics’ and focuses on females’ texts, sexuality, creativity, and traditions. In addition, women and women writers should be viewed ‘within their larger social, economic, and cultural contexts, not

just merely as members of the female sex' [14, p.522].

Showalter also divides female literary history into three stages. The first stage, the 'feminine' period (1840–1880), consists of Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot. In this period, women attempted to imitate the dominant male aesthetic standards in writing. In the second stage, the 'feminist' era (1880–1920), women protested male values. Two progressive feminist writers of this era include Elizabeth Robins and Olive Schreiner. The third stage, the 'female' age (1920–1960), is the self-discovery phase when women turned to self-exploration, self-discovery, and a search for a specifically female identity [15, p.127].

The following five basic concepts taken from Tyson [6] are examples of patriarchal ideologies that feminism opposes.

Patriarchy is a society in which all or most power is in men's hands. A patriarchy gives men power by supporting patriarchal gender roles [6, p.142].

The traditional gender roles or the patriarchal gender roles are from patriarchy and considered men to be 'naturally rational, strong, protective, and decisive' and women to be 'naturally emotional, weak, nurturing, and submissive', and the patriarchal gender roles show many inequities between two genders when women must be responsible for childcare and domestic chores [6, p.142].

The objectification of women when 'good girls' and 'bad girls' are objectified and considered as patriarchal objects [6, p.142].

'Sex' refers narrowly to the biological difference between men and women, as feminist thinkers believe, while 'gender' is broad, socially and culturally constructed aspects of feminine and masculine [6, p.143].

'True womanhood' or a 'true woman' refers to the patriarchal norm of a woman who always fulfills her patriarchal gender role, is defined as fragile, submissive, always stays at home, and needs masculine protection and gallantry and who makes men feel capable, powerful, and in control [6, p.144].

How Feminist Criticism builds critical thinking

Feminist Criticism belongs to the context-oriented [11, p.78], and it questions how the work is shaped by 'its representation of patriarchal norms and values' and if this representation 'support or undermines these oppressive norms and values' [3, p. 463]. Because feminism is considered as 'a political, cultural, and philosophical movement' which supports the equality of women and men and emancipates women from the limits of patriarchal structures [16, p.91], Feminist Criticism requires students to query if the society in the literary work is patriarchy or if female characters are portrayed with traditional gender roles. Then, students argue if the disparity between male and female characters exists in the work. Through this learning process, students practice analytical reasoning by supporting their inquiries and arguments with textual evidence and finally develop their critical thinking as 'Inquiry and argument are identified as key dimensions in a process-based account of critical thinking' [17, p.121]. By inquiring how gender roles are depicted and analyzing female characters' portrayals, students learn to dispute gender biases and assumptions and try alternative interpretations of the literary work. As a consequence, this learning process gradually builds students' critical thinking skills.

D. Combining New Criticism and Feminist Criticism in short story interpretation

Combining New Criticism and Feminist Criticism in short story interpretation is a dual-layered approach when one fills the other's drawback. Firstly, New Criticism is text-oriented, where students analyze the literary work itself without external influences. Hence, they invest their time to investigate and learn the beauty and complexity of language. Secondly, Feminist Criticism is context-oriented, where students interpret the work through its social and gender implications, such as patriarchal society and traditional gender roles [11, p.78]. By applying the two theories, students have the opportunity not only to engage

with the structure and language of the work but also to critically evaluate its cultural and ideological significance. This dual approach bolsters students' analytical skills to reach to advanced level of literary analysis.

E. Related feminist studies

At first, this section will mention studies of short stories, folklore, and novels written in the Vietnamese language in Vietnamese literature mentioning feminist issues, feminist theory, and feminist criticism for research, teaching, and learning purposes or discussing issues from a feminist perspective. Then, this part will present other feminist studies of literary works written in other languages and other countries in teaching and learning literature. New Criticism as a sole approach was widely studied previously, but it is not investigated much as a single one in the contemporary trend, therefore, this paper presents the feminist-related studies in literature of Vietnam and other nations. Firstly, feminist issues are revealed from different points of view and perspectives in the female writer Nguyen Thi Thuy Vu's short stories in Nguyen Thi My Duyen's paper [18]. In the findings of the study, from the first person point of view with the 'I' narrator who is a character in her short stories, this female writer can easily describe women's feelings with a true sense, women's activeness, women's instinctive emotions, women's propensity for sexual freedom, women's desires, female character's psychology, female character's deepest feelings through self-confession. From the third person limited point of view, the writer expresses women's quest in life and their suffering. Then, from the third person omniscient point of view, she describes the feminist issues through 'invisible walls that limit female aspirations for living' [18, p.59] in patriarchal society, marriages as good or bad luck, and prostitutes' life working in bars in Sai Gon before 1975 and the writer demands equality for these female characters through these short stories. Specifically, through space and time perspectives, this writer recounts women's life, death, sorrow, and desire for hap-

piness, which are affected by stuffy space and narrated and alternated present and past incidents using the flashback technique.

Secondly, to study the feminist spirit in a Vietnamese female writer's short story, Le Thi Thanh Xuan's [19] paper analyzes Y Ban's typical short stories. The findings indicate that feminist spirit is firstly mirrored by the images of women who struggle and yearn for happiness and love through good things and simple family life such as the doctor of philosophy in Y Ban's *Tự (Oneself)*, the daughter in *Bức thư gửi mẹ Âu Cơ (The letter to Mother Au Co)*, the character Thi in *I am đàn bà (I am a woman)*. These female characters are built with strong personality and direct use of language about sexual desire such as 'dreaming of sexual culture', 'wishing to be embraced by the person number three in an elevator' [19, p.67] and they are in complete contrast to female characters in traditional literature in the past. Female characters in Y Ban's short stories are modern independent women who always seek happiness, love, and self-satisfaction. Secondly, the feminist spirit is reflected through Y Ban's writing about sex as a feminist trend aimed at liberating women's emotional lives. The modern women's sexual instinct and need, their need for self-liberation of their own beings, are portrayed in female characters by this writer through specific descriptive language without vulgarity. For instance, the character Thi in *I am đàn bà* is accused of sexual harassment, but the sexual language in the short story is not vulgar, and her sexual behavior brings a message of humanity value to readers.

Thirdly, in the study of femininity and feminist perspective in contemporary Vietnamese literature, Nguyen Thi Nam Hoang [20] traces the origin of the feminist culture of worshipping the Mother Goddess in Vietnamese religions, myths, and legends, and the effect of femininity has been reflected in Vietnamese writers' and artists' works. Since 1986, when Vietnamese females have been able to freely participate in social activities, more than two hundred Vietnamese female writers and artists have joined the As-

sociation of Vietnamese Writers (Hội Nhà văn Việt Nam) and specialized in prose, studies, and critiques. As a result of the growth of female Vietnamese writers, as this study points out, femininity has been reflected in contemporary Vietnamese literature by firstly the ‘expansion of scope’ of writing to reflect the world of women’ [20, p.52], for example from women’s life in love, marriage, and family to concern with identity, actions to overcome barriers of traditional morality, to follow the call of instinct, and their wish for happiness and individuality affirmation. Secondly, femininity has been reflected by both the ‘diversification and female-specific features’ in the character’s psychology expressed through the emotional world, feelings, thoughts, and subconscious and ‘literary techniques’ through direct dialogues, imaginative dialogues, and thoughtful monologues [20, p.53–4]. For example, a character confides oneself to another character as in Le Minh Khue’s *Chuyện bếp núc* (*Kitchen story*) and character has imaginative dialogs with another as in Y Ban’s *Bức thư gửi mẹ Âu Cơ* are the two among several techniques the writers use to reflect the depth of a character’s personality and soul. Femininity and female perspectives appear in contemporary Vietnamese literature through female writers’ various writing techniques, such as the change in point of view, narrator, events in the story plot arranged in the flow of character’s psychology instead of time order, the diversity of plot structures, and their unique discourse and writing styles.

Fourthly, Truong Thi Thu Thanh [21] applies the theory of discourse and feminism in analyzing short stories written by contemporary female Vietnamese writers. The results have shown that female writers have portrayed modern Vietnamese women in various life situations, but their common characteristics are the desire for love, the search for happiness, and the strong fight for freedom.

Fifthly, relating to feminist consciousness, Duong et al. [22] search the goddess images in the three types of folklore narration – myths, legends, and fairytales – and find that feminist

consciousness exists in these stories and conveys females’ dreams of a fair and equal society that supports women’s rights.

Sixthly, from the feminist perspective, Pham Phi Na’s [23] study analyzes images of Mekong Delta women in Nguyen Ngoc Tu’s novel *Biên sử Nước* (*Water Chronicle*). Those women, from different ages and backgrounds, go through life suffering, but all have the strong desire for happiness. They have portrayed the images of women who are on their journey to affirm their female gender identity and who ‘do not hesitate to express their hidden [female] gender feelings [and memories] in real life’ [23, p.295]. These images, as Pham Phi Na [23] concludes, initiate the call for public recognition and respect for women who can live according to their true gender identity.

In Vietnam, most feminist studies in the Vietnamese language by Vietnamese educators and scholars above have been written from their views as readers, researchers, or critics of literary works. There is a lack of classroom research discussing feminist issues reflected from the pedagogical angle.

Van’s study [24] discusses the strong and weak points of six approaches in teaching literature, in which the sixth one – critical literacy approach – includes feminism and encourages students to explore social and political factors. The study also points out that students engaging in the literature learning process clearly become active learners with critical thinking. However, the application of each approach in literature classes is not illustrated.

One research study explores the Vietnamese students’ difficulties in learning the theories of criticism in the course ‘Introduction to literary criticism’. The theories in the course include New Criticism, Reader-Response Criticism, Marxist Criticism, Feminist Criticism, Psychological Criticism, and Cultural Studies focusing on New Historicism. The participants learned the theories and applied them in analyzing English stories in their university program at a university in the Mekong Delta. The study surveyed seventy-nine EFL students who gave their attitude towards

learning literature in a study in 2023 [25]. The results indicate that students experienced several difficulties, such as a lack of literary terminologies, literary knowledge, and linguistic competence. They revealed their low study motivation at the moment of the survey although they realized the importance of the course. However, this study did not dig into the classroom practice of any criticisms.

Similarly, another study investigated the fifteen teachers who taught literature and one hundred fifty students at five universities in the south of Vietnam [26]. The results from the interview and questionnaires reveal that both teachers and students find literature important in their English language program. However, students encountered challenges in studying English literature due to the lack of ‘(1) background knowledge related to literary texts, (2) knowledge of literary language, and (3) preference for the subject’ [26, p.258–259]. The study suggested that Vietnamese teachers should modify the English language curriculum and literature courses by inserting an introductory course to literature, designing interesting and extra-curricular activities to prepare students for literature learning, and selecting texts carefully to raise students’ interest in studying literature.

In terms of classroom tasks, one research explored the impacts of seven types of task-based activities on students’ engagement in the British American literature courses in a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The results from the questionnaire survey on 120 students and from interviews of two teachers and 12 students showed that the group presentation activity and literary gala had the most and least impact on students’ involvement in tasks, respectively. Among the two courses that the participants took, they thought that the Introduction to Literature needed more task-based activities than the Introduction to Literary Criticism course [27].

In countries outside Vietnam, several educators and scholars have examined feminist theory and feminist criticism in books and book chapters in English. Since 2000, feminist theory or fem-

inist criticism has been discussed by Bennett et al. [28], Klarer [11], Habib [29], Selden et al. [15], Waugh [30], Golban et al. [31], Eagleton [32], Guerin et al. [33], Bressler [9], Castle [4], Minogue [34], and Pugh et al. [7], but these scholars mainly discuss the history and development of the theories. Only Tyson [3, 6, 35] and Dobie [10] concentrate on guiding learners on how to analyze and interpret literary works.

Analyzing the treatment of gender in patriarchal society in medieval and modern eras, Nurulhady [36] studies the two medieval texts, the British *The Knight’s Tale* by Chaucer and the Javanese text which is the Indonesian translation of Paraton, in which women’s position is considered passive and submissive in the patriarchal society where male characters have priorities and power. The author also argues that although a female character in the third modern text such as Dedes (in the English version *Arok of Java: A Novel of Early Indonesia* of the twenty first century Indonesian adaptation of Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s *Arok Dedes*) is possibly given some power but hard to maintain it because of the echo of lingering patriarchy.

Only a few studies in other countries have investigated feminist criticism in a literature course, focusing on classroom practice [37, 38].

To evaluate how well undergraduate students could apply some main concepts of psychoanalytical and feminist criticism while reading Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Stoica [37] analyzed their seminar portfolio containing written papers on several topics such as pleasure and death drives, daydream in connection to unconsciousness, feminine writing, the female body, and so on. The results have shown that students could understand and handle psychoanalytical concepts well, thanks to their previous training in this critical approach. Meanwhile, the students limited themselves in criticizing patriarchal power in feminist criticism. However, applying these two theoretical approaches has shaped and reshaped students’ critical thinking.

Taking the lenses of feminist and critical framework, ten university lecturers in Zimbabwe

as participants in Chindedza's research [38] responded to feminist issues and feminist literary text selection. Participants firstly found the unfair treatment of male characters towards female ones in the texts written by male authors. Secondly, they realized that the ratio between female and male writers of texts selected in their literature course for undergraduate level is one-fourth (among the total twelve texts, three texts were written by female writers, and nine ones by male writers). These lecturers suggest an equal ration of chosen texts by male and female writers as well as promise to insert texts on feminist issues in their curriculum.

New Criticism is not new as 'By the 1970s, New Critical influence had waned' and 'As of the 1980s, New Critical work, relegated to the status of superseded paradigm, was generally mentioned only in brief excerpts' [39, p.1] and recent studies on Feminist Criticism such as Guo [40], Karimullah et al. [41], and Priyanka et al. [42] mainly discuss feminist issues and feminism without relating to classroom setting or Lindor [43] and Ferguson [44] are book reviews. So, this paper expects to fill the gap by demonstrating how the dual-theory approach can be used to enhance students' critical thinking through analyzing and interpreting a short story in literature classes. By applying both New Criticism and Feminist Criticism in classroom practice, this study provides new insights into literary pedagogy, encouraging students to engage with a literary work from multiple perspectives.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This is a qualitative action research. The participants in this study were 44 junior students in their school year 2023–2024 while they were studying the bachelor program of English studies at Tra Vinh University (TVU). In their fifteen-week British literature course, students learned several new critical theories and experienced the equivalent approaches. However, this study focused on two approaches only, New Criticism and Feminist Criticism, in which textual data is used to collect evidence to support the students'

analysis or interpretation. The lecturer who delivered literature lectures to her students is one of the authors of this study. The study includes three stages. In the first stage, students analyze Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* [1] in their British literature course by applying New Criticism. In the second stage, they discuss feminist issues emerging from the same tale by using Feminist Criticism. In the last stage, students freely wrote their reflections or thoughts on the two approaches above as feedback to the lecturer. The lecturer also reflected on her teaching process and self-assessment in her teaching notes and her recall of classroom practice. This tale is chosen for students to apply the Feminist Criticism as they previously tend to view it as a war-love story in the ancient time. The lecturer also wants the students to interpret this simple tale to investigate the students' reflections on the combination of both New Criticism and Feminist Criticism. This research includes two instruments: (1) students' reflective papers and (2) teacher's reflections.

(1) Students wrote freely on a paper to reply to this request, 'Write freely to give your teacher your personal reflective feedback or thoughts on Feminist issues and Feminist Criticism'.

(2) Teacher's reflections in her teaching notes during and after classes, and the direct classroom interactions and observations gave the teacher on-the-spot feedback of the teaching practice and it offers valuable proof for teacher's recall.

The students' papers were collected, numbered (to replace their real names), read through, grouped in clusters of ideas, then coded, counted, and calculated the percentage of (times) frequency of codes. The lecturer's notes were reread, analyzed, and reported in both teaching advantages and drawbacks.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Illustration of instructional practice: using textual evidence to interpret the story from New Criticism and Feminist Criticism

The short story *The Knight's Tale* in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* [1] in the students' British literature course was used

for illustration of teaching practice. Overall, *The Knight's Tale* is short (five and a half pages long, excluding the pictures), narrated in the pre-intermediate level of English, which is quite easy for students, has three illustrating pictures, and contains some follow-up questions and exercises at the end. Textual evidence is used as the main tool to validate the students' story interpretation, and it can be words, phrases, diagrams, or even photos that are found in this story [6].

The lecturer designed and delivered the lessons in three stages (see Table 1). In the first stage, she guided the students to do the common analysis of story elements (setting, characters, plot, point of view, themes, conflicts, and so on) using the New Criticism approach. In the second stage, the lecturer introduced Feminist Criticism to students. She attempted to adapt Dobie's [10, p.115–116] guidelines for reading as feminist by concentrating on 'studies of power' and 'division of labor', but skipping the queer theory, studies of difference, and studies of female experience as these might be sensitive and hard for students especially in her Asian classroom context. She also introduced Tyson's [3] feminist concepts in the second stage. The lecturer asked students to explore gender inequality to interpret the male and female images by looking at: (a) male and female characters' power which is reflected through characters' status or positions, rights, and actions; (b) male and female characters' voices in love and marriage through their speech, actions, behaviors, thought, and so on; (c) male and female characters' social classes and division of labor; (d) The learning outcomes of the second stage to build students' skills (analytical skill, and critical thinking), and to interpret a short story from the feminist view. In the last stage, the lecturer asked students to write reflective papers from 20 to 45 minutes to reveal their thoughts before, during, and after lessons instructed by New Criticism and Feminist Criticism and collected these papers to get feedback and data collection.

The instructional practice for stage two contains group work discussion topics in three aspects with guiding questions (see Table 2). Some

questions go beyond the story when the story does not give much information about feminist issues to be discussed in class. The group discussion activity was designed with the aim to support students' confidence (to talk in a small group at first) and gradually build students' critical thinking with logical reasons. Students were divided into three different groups, and each group discussed one topic by taking turns to answer questions (each question was printed on a different piece of paper and was folded up to be drawn randomly). Then, there would be group presentations (to talk to the whole class at last) to share the key points in their discussions.

Another additional activity used in class is the team debate of 'For and Against Female characters', in which one team supports female characters in the tale while the other team opposes female characters. The description of this team debate is presented in Table 3.

B. The findings and discussion

The English students' reflections before, during, and after lessons applying New Criticism and critical thinking

All students (100%) had no challenges before studying the lesson applying New Criticism. However, when the lesson proceeded, three students (6.8%) admitted they had trouble with expressing the implied meanings of three statements containing figurative language (two on hyperbole, one on metaphor). Students (100%) were satisfied after the lessons (see Table 4). To be more specific, students reflected that they had learned to select the event as a textual proof to support their choice of the climax in the story plot. For example, one student wrote, 'I am sure that the final battle between Arcite and Palamon is the climax. I see the atmosphere is tense. There will be a big change after this fight: Theseus declares the winner can marry Emily' [45].

There was no specific reflection on critical thinking in terms of changes in their minds. However, all students learned that they had to establish an argument by giving a reason before

Table 1: The three stages of the instructional plan of Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*

Stages	Students’ activities	Teacher’s preparation or guide
Stage one: New Criticism is applied traditionally (6-8 hours)	Activity A: Doing common story analysis of literary elements by New Criticism [3, p.123]: Identify or/and analyze the setting, characters, plot, point of view, themes, conflicts, linguistic devices (paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension), figurative language (metaphor, simile, hyperbole, irony).	Activity A: Handout A for common story analysis: the setting, characters, plot, point of view, themes, conflicts, linguistic devices (paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension), and figurative language (metaphor, simile, hyperbole, and irony).
	Activity B: Discussing the two themes in groups. (1) There is no law in love, and courtly love is out of control; (2) Human life is unstable as joy and sadness are inseparable, and one person’s misfortune can be another person’s fortune.	Activity B: Explaining ‘courtly love’, monitor the group theme discussion.
	Activity C: Finding text organic unity: Do literary elements contribute to the theme(s)?	Activity C: Handout C (a checklist for text organic unity)
	Students’ learning outcomes: To be able to interpret the tale using New Criticism; to develop analytic skill	
Stage two: Feminist concepts and discussion (4-6 hours)	Getting to know some terms and concepts used in feminist theory: Taking notes on feminist concepts. Groupwork: Discussing feminist issues, adapted from Dobie and Tyson [10, 3]. Scrutinize the story to look for and collect textual evidence (words, phrases, statements, quotes, pictures) that help you discuss and interpret feminist issues and validate your interpretation focusing on the inequality between male and female characters in the tale in actions and power, in love and marriage, social classes and division of labor.	Introducing and explaining feminist terms and concepts: imbalance of power [10], patriarchy, traditional gender role, objectification of women, sexism, true womanhood [3]. Asking students to discuss feminist issues: Giving instructions, guidance, and supports when needed. Offer each group a set of pieces of paper containing questions and handout D for group discussion.
	Team debate: ‘For and Against Females’	Procedure of the team debate ‘For and Against Females’
	Homework: Designing a table or poster to illustrate the inequality between male and female characters in the tale and present it to your classmates later.	The students’ presentation: They are presenting in groups as the warm-up activity in the next class.
	Students’ learning outcomes: To be able to interpret the tale using feminist concepts or to interpret the male and female images from the feminist view; to develop analytic skill, debating skill, and critical thinking	
Stage three: Write a reflective paper (30-45 min.)	Write freely a reflective paper to give the lecturer your specific and personal feedback on a sheet of paper to reflect your thoughts before, during, and after lessons by New Criticism, and before, during, and after lessons by Feminist Criticism. Write as much as possible without caring about errors. Just reveal your thoughts, opinions, suggestions, and what you have learned and either what you are in doubt.	Collecting students’ papers, reading the feedback, and coding the ideas.

concluding something either about characters or a story event.

For instance, a student wrote:
I can make arguments, surely, for example, ‘At first, Arcite wins so he can marry Emily, but later he is badly injured by falling off his horse and dies, so he can’t marry her’. Another argument is... ‘The God Venus is not pleased with the battle result, so she makes the earth shake’ and 1 more ‘The God Venus interferes in the battle result, so human fates are unstable’. Do you like these two arguments, teacher? [46].

All students (100%) also found that focusing on the text is easier than other outside factors such as the author’s life and time. This also led to an increase in their analytical and argumentative skills (97.7%) and their interest in learning English (90.9%) after exploring hidden meanings through figurative language analysis (see Table 4).

The English students’ reflections before, during, and after lessons applying Feminist Criticism and critical thinking

Toward challenges, before studying the lessons, all students (100%) either had no ideas about Feminist Criticism and some just made some

Table 2: Group discussion in stage two in detail – to discuss feminist issues

Discussion topics	Questions for group discussion of Feminist issues: Use textual evidence to answer questions and give your interpretation
Patriarchal society: Inequality between male and female characters in terms of actions and power	Leading questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who decides to attack Thebes? Who wins? Who loses? - Who, male or female characters, fight in the battle? - Who are more powerful: male or female characters in the story? Explain with textual evidence. - Who is the most powerful character in the story? Is it a male or a female? Explain why (s)he is the most powerful. - Underline the sentence(s) that show the traditional gender roles in the patriarchal society in the tale: Men are protective while women need to be protected. - Is the society in the story patriarchal, matriarchal, egalitarian, polyarchy, anarchy, or sociocracy? How? Do you like that society? Why (not)? Key question: What are your interpretations of the male and female images that show inequality in terms of actions and power in the tale?
Patriarchal society: Inequality in love and marriage	Leading questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does a male or female character dare to declare his or her love? Who? - Does Emily have the chance to give her own voice to choose the man to marry? Explain with textual evidence. - Who, male or female character, decides Emily's marriage? - Make a list of both positive evidence (to raise women's value) and negative proof (to lower women's value) in order to decide if equality or inequality between genders exists in the story. The evidence can be words, characters' actions and feelings, the description, and so on. - What do you interpret about Emily's situation when Theseus says this to Emily 'Emily, even though you didn't know anything about their love!' and to Arcite and Palamon 'Your two armies will fight and the winner will be the husband of Emily.' And Arcite says this to Emily before he dies, 'I am sorry now that I quarreled with Palamon who loves you too. After I die, if you wish to marry him, think of him' [1, p.37–38] - Is there equality between male and female characters in love and marriage in the tale, and how? - Is there equality between males and females in love and marriage in our families, and how? - Is there equality between males and females in love and marriage in our country, and how? Key question: What are your interpretations of the male and female images that show inequality in terms of love and marriage in the tale?
Inequality: social classes, division of labor	Leading questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which characters belong to the upper class? List them out. What kind of work do you guess they would possibly do? - Which characters belong to the lower or working class? List them out. What kind of manual labor work do you guess they would possibly do? - What do you think after you read the following extract from the story? Extract: '[Arcite] took off his lord's clothes and put on the clothes of a poor man. He was a strong, hard-working young man, so he was given a job. Arcite became the personal servant of Lady Emily! But if anyone recognized him, he would die.' [1, p.34–36] - What do you think about male and female servants' work in the ancient time? Please share your interpretation of the following extracts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A group of women beg Lord Theseus to help them: 'Help us, Lord Theseus. We are all widows. Creon has murdered our husbands' [1, p.32]. - The servant Philostrate (who is Arcite in disguise) exclaims to himself 'I am in a terrible situation. I cannot use my real name. I am only a servant to the lady that I want to make my wife' [1, p.36]. Why couldn't a servant marry the master or mistress in the old time? Key question: What are your interpretations of the male and female images that show inequality in terms of social classes and division of labor in the tale?
Learning outcomes	Students are able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use textual evidence to support their answers or text interpretations. - Interpret the male and female characters in the tale after discussing feminist issues from different dimensions, such as gender inequality, power, right, social status or positions, and division of labor, and different topics, such as marriage, fighting, competing, love, and so on. - Build their critical thinking, analytical skills, and debating skill.

Table 3: Debate team activity:
For and against female characters

Component	Details
Debate Topic	<i>The Knight's Tale</i> by Chaucer
Debate Theme	For and Against Female Characters
Aims of the Activity	- Develop students' speaking skills - Encourage discussion of feminist issues in a competitive format
Team A (For Female characters)	- Supports female characters - Finds textual evidence that raises women's value and social position
Team B (Against Female characters)	- Opposes female characters - Finds textual evidence that lowers women's value
Speaking Procedure	- One member from Team A speaks for 30 seconds to support women - Then one member from Team B speaks for 30 seconds to oppose women - Teams take turns in this format
Rules	- Each student may speak only once - Each turn is limited to 30 seconds - Students must support their points with evidence from the text

Table 4: Results of students' written reflections on New Criticism

No.	Items reflected in students' papers	Frequency (times)	Percentage (%)
	Challenges before the lessons		
1	- No challenges - Having experience in story interpretation or analysis by applying new criticism	44	100
	Challenges during the lessons		
2	- Not easy for me to write the implied meanings of a statement containing figurative language (1 metaphor, 2 hyperbole)	3	6.8
	Challenges after the lessons		
3	- No challenges - Feeling satisfied	44	100
	Critical insights and reflections after the course		
4	I have to give a reason before I conclude something	44	100
5	I find it easier to concentrate on textual evidence rather than external influences	44	100
6	My analytical and argumentative skills are strengthened by looking for and using textual evidence	43	97.7
7	English is more interesting for me to learn after I practice analyzing the figurative language in the tale	40	90.9

guesses, and all witnessed them as political and social campaigns. Especially, all of them had never thought that these issues would be discussed when analyzing and interpreting a short story in a literature course before the lessons, and therefore, they all had no experience in doing this at all (see Table 5). Three students (6.8%) admitted that they had heard about femi-

nist issues theoretically somewhere else but had never applied or experienced it practically, and one (2.3%) felt worried, one got nervous, and another was uncomfortable before they heard that feminist theory and feminist criticism would be introduced in this literature course for the first time. During the lessons, ten students (22.7%) misunderstood between genders (masculine and feminine, living in a culture) and sexes (males and females, biologically from birth). When the lessons ended, 15 students (34.1%) felt difficult to remember all the feminist concepts.

Turning to critical insights, after studying the lessons, the most striking result to emerge from the data collected from 44 students' written papers of reflections is the change in their thinking: all (100%) become consciously aware of paying attention to gender issues as well as other social and political matters in literary texts and real life. Their radical change proves that their critical thinking is constructed. All students admitted that they had not thought about feminist issues when reading a literary work before starting this course, but after learning to interpret *The Knight's Tale*, they realize that they have learned to look at feminist matters, although they are not directly mentioned in the work. For instance, one student stated that:

I have known that there have been talks and campaigns for the equality between men and women, in talks, in meetings, on TV. But I had never thought of feminist issues in a short story that I had read before this literature course. So, when my teacher started to introduce feminist criticism, I had no idea what it was at first. Later, the teacher asked me, guided me to look at the equality between male and female characters in *The Knight's Tale*, especially Emily. I recognized that I could investigate feminist issues even though the tale is mainly about war and love. I mean I learn to look at matters beyond the words in the story, from a new perspective or direction, not to be trapped inside such traditional analysis of characters, themes and conflicts

as before. [47]

In addition, all students (100%) could realize the patriarchal society to be accompanied by the traditional gender roles in literary works and modern life. The students have learned to look beyond the texts since the tale does not mention gender inequality directly in words, but the implied meanings do. For instance, in one reflective paper, a student wrote:

I cannot see words like ‘gender disparity’, ‘patriarchy’, and ‘traditional gender roles’ in *The Knight’s Tale*. The narrator says nothing about these. But after discussing feminist issues in my group, I found out that these terms really exist in the tale through the underlying meanings. I also see that inequality between men and women exists in other stories and daily life. Somebody’s spoken speech contains this, such as ‘Don’t cry like a woman’ in our everyday conversation.... Hhm... Why don’t they say ‘Don’t cry like a feeble person’? [48]

Secondly, students show their confidence in their ability to identify female images (75%). Nearly most of them (79.5%) felt interested in going through literary elements in the common story analysis as usual at first, then starting to discuss issues from a feminist view. Approximately half of the participants (61.4%) believe discussing feminist issues is beneficial in story analysis, while only one-third of the students (34%) promise to be attentive to feminist issues in their writings in the future.

A small number of students (22.7%) sympathized with powerless women in stories. Around eight students found the similarity between Vietnamese and British literature when women in the old stories suffered from inequality. One student (2.3%) loved to discuss and analyze feminist issues in literary texts. Interestingly, Participant 9 showed her/ his very strong sympathetic emotional affection to the female character, Emily, who is objectified in *The Knight’s Tale*, when (s)he wrote on her/ his reflective paper:

I feel sorry for her. Because it’s like an

arranged marriage in Vietnam in the old days. I mean, Emily is like a beautiful robot. I feel very sad when no one in the story asks her: Do you agree to marry Palamon? Who do you choose or like? No one cares about her opinion. No one asks her anything. Lord Theseus, Arcite, and Palamon, all of them ignored her thoughts and desire. The two men start their fighting to get the right to marry her without caring about her feelings. Even the Queen Hypolyta is silent! Emily is treated as a robot! Not happy, not sad, having no feelings! Poor Emily! [48].

Overall, students find discussing feminist issues beneficial and have almost no serious troubles in learning them after the lessons.

The findings coincide with research arguing that literature exposure facilitates students’ critical thinking [24]. This study provides evidence that applying New Criticism and Feminist Criticism in tandem helps students develop both analytic skills through close reading and socio-cultural awareness and leads to building their critical thinking.

Firstly, New Criticism supports the foundation for students’ literary analysis. Students analyzed *The Knight’s Tale* by a structural framework focusing on formal elements without being interfered by external factors. From close reading, students have found textual evidence to validate their interpretations [3], and this provides the students with strong support for developing analytical precision and thus enhance their analytical skills.

The success of students’ interpretation of the text based on textual evidence lay in the teacher’s clear instructions and facilitation. To illustrate this, here was one example from the lecturer’s class. The students were asked to find out Emily’s image and role in the tale and the lecturer facilitated them by questions: How many times does Emily appear in the tale? Does the narrator describe her face, her dress, her personality, her work, her desire? What do you know about her by reading the story? How many times does

Table 5: Results of students’ written reflections on Feminist Criticism

No.	Items reflected in students’ papers	Frequency (times)	Percentage (%)
	Challenges before the lessons		
1	- I have learned nothing about feminist theory. - I have no experience in story interpretation or analysis relating to feminist issues from the feminist view. - Discussing gender issues in a story interpretation is something totally new in my studying and I had never thought of these issues before the course started.	44	100
2	- I admit that I heard about gender issues theoretically in Vietnamese language, in political and social campaigns, but had never thought of discussing feminist issues and interpreting a story from feminist view practically.	3	6.8
3	- I feel worried before learning feminist theory.	1	2.3
4	- I feel nervous before learning feminist theory.	1	2.3
5	- I feel uncomfortable when hearing that feminist theory will be introduced in class.	1	2.3
	Challenges during the lessons		
6	- I misunderstand between genders and sexes.	10	22.7
	Challenges after the lessons		
7	- It is hard for me to recall all the feminist concepts.	5	11.4
	Critical insights and reflections after the lessons		
8	Changing in my thinking: I am consciously aware of gender issues, as well as other social and political matters, in literary texts, the writer’s society, and real life.	44	100
9	I recognize that gender inequality exists in patriarchal society accompanied by the traditional gender roles in literary texts and real life: I learn to look beyond the texts.	44	100
10	I am interested in both doing the common story analysis and in discussing feminist issues from the feminist lens.	35	79.5
11	I am able to find out female images portrayed in the text through textual data.	33	75
12	Using concepts from feminist theory allows me to analyze gender inequality more deeply.	27	61.4
13	I am going to apply the feminist theory in my other writings in the future.	15	34.1
14	I recognize that patriarchal belief is hard to change.	10	22.7
15	I feel sympathetic to powerless women in stories.	10	22.7
16	I see that gender disparity has existed in both British and Vietnamese short stories in the past.	8	18.2
17	I feel sympathetic to a female character in a story.	1	2.3
18	I love to analyze and discuss feminist issues.	1	2.3

Emily speak? What does she talk about? Does she express her love, her dream? Does she reveal her thoughts? Does she have the right to decide on her marriage, to choose her husband? The possible evidence can be ‘Emily is beautiful, gentle, sweet, kind, talks only one time (to beg Theseus not to kill Arcite and Palamon), and appears passively three times in the story’. Hence, a student’s evidence and possible interpretation could be like this: Emily says nothing about her, the two lords Arcite and Palamon declare their love to her, but Theseus is the one who decides who will marry her without asking if she agrees or not. The two men love her, fight fiercely to marry her, but none asks if she loves one of them, what she wants, what she thinks, and if she is pleased with the men’s demands on her, with their decision or not. I believe Emily’s image in the story is a dim, passive, weak, and

obedient woman. She reflects the image of a ‘true woman’ who fulfills the traditional gender role in a patriarchal regime. Though Sellen’s adaptation of *The Knight’s Tale* is at a lower intermediate level and the character Emily did not show her internal thoughts, the students still had enough evidence to interpret her image.

However, the New Criticism concentrates on the text analysis only, so this approach limits students’ exploration to discuss broader social and political factors, and this gap is filled when the students move to Feminist Criticism.

Secondly, Feminist Criticism serves as an eye-opening approach. Before this literature course, the students admitted that they had never examined feminist issues when reading literary texts. Consequently, discussing feminist issues like women’s roles and social positions, and the equality between men and women in a literary

works has helped students explore a new zone in their literature study when they start to wonder social and political related matters from the feminist view as they go beyond the literary works or stories they read. Their reflections indicate that analyzing literature through the feminist view, as well as discussing feminist issues, offers them an opportunity to query social issues and political structures. Therefore, this helps to build the connection between texts and society as well as between literary theory and practice.

Teaching students to analyze story elements and discuss feminist matters in a literary work can fit into Carter and Long's three models, which include the cultural model, the language model, and the personal growth model [49]. Firstly, toward the cultural model, when students study *The Knight's Tale*, they learn and gain insightful lessons about socio-cultural issues that appear in the story, such as about the king, queen, lords, gods, battles, and patriarchal ideologies in ancient times. Secondly, they learn and use simile, metaphor, and relative clauses, and this is part of the language model when linguistic elements in the literary text are analyzed. Thirdly, this type of teaching can fit into the personal growth model when students have grown, recognized the inequality between males and females, and the conflicts between the social classes in the story, and they can develop themselves by getting aware of the social or political issues in and even beyond the story. It is because feminist theory is connected to political and social issues relating to equality and emancipation [4]; therefore, interpreting texts from a feminist view appears practical to learners when texts connect to real-life issues.

The positive of discussing feminist issues as described in the personal growth model is confirmed when it coincides with one of the benefits of teaching feminist theory that ten TVU lecturers identified in a workshop discussing approaches to interpret literary texts on November 11th, 2023. They all agree that feminist criticism allows learners to connect social and political issues in the story with the ones in their real life and get

a broader and more practical view of the world. They would become more concerned with critical issues relating to gender equality, social economy, and politics of their own country and the world after experiencing feminist criticism. As a result, feminist criticism helps build students' critical thinking, and this is proven by the pedagogical appropriateness of a critical theory, which is the feminist theory in this case, in building learners' critical thinking [6]. Feminist criticism benefits students by building their critical thinking, and this is proven by the significant result collected from the participants' reflections as they have changed their thinking. Since experiencing feminist criticism, they have been consciously aware of gender issues in study and life. Again, building students' critical thinking by using critical literacy pedagogy, in which feminist criticism is employed, is validated by Bobkina et al. [50] and Minogue [34]. This is also supported by Tyson [3, p.5] when he says, 'When we interpret a literary text, we are doing literary criticism.'

Thirdly, combining theoretical approaches enhances students' analytical and critical thinking skills. This study demonstrates that using multiple theoretical perspectives enables students to produce more nuanced interpretations. At first, students were comfortable with New Criticism as they were familiar with this common analysis. The New Criticism sets the foundation for students' understanding from analytical practice and close reading as they fix their eyes and thoughts to the tale. Later, Feminist Criticism pushed the students to reconsider their assumptions, enquire about social and feminist issues, and produce their interpretations, messages, or give their own opinions. This cognitive shift reflects higher-order critical thinking skills, as indicated by Bloom's taxonomy [51] when 'produce' is equivalent to 'create'. In summary, New Criticism and Feminist Criticism support each other and promote students' analytical and critical thinking skills.

Finally, there are some implications for teaching literature. As usual, each approach or literary theory has its strengths and weaknesses, there-

fore, teachers should not guide students to analyze and interpret a story by only one approach. Hence, teachers should ‘find the combination of theory and literary text that works’ [6, p.6] for the learners, such as New Criticism and Feminist Criticism or New Criticism and another type of criticism to give students better lessons and understanding. The reason is to allow students to learn the beauty of the English language first, then to critically express their thoughts on social, economic, and political issues in and out of the literary texts. If a story is analyzed and interpreted by the feminist criticism only, students lose a good chance to explore the specific features of the target language they are learning.

The teaching illustration above is just one way to apply the feminist theory in short story interpretation to build students’ critical thinking skills, and different teachers may have other better ways to apply it or to integrate it with another theory to benefit their students. Generally, the findings are positive, and the lecturer believes that literary theories in general, and the combination of the two theories in particular, are helpful to build and develop students’ ability to give argumentative replies and foster students’ analytical and critical thinking skills when they study literature.

V. CONCLUSION

Analyzing a short story by New Criticism and discussing feminist issues by Feminist Criticism are beneficial to students because they build their analytical and critical thinking skills by giving solid arguments with textual evidence and becoming aware of social and gender matters, respectively. To interpret a short story by discussing issues from the feminist view in particular, and from other critical theories in general, is helpful to build students’ critical thinking because they are exposed to the learning opportunity and environment in which they can fully develop themselves to be critical thinkers and critical learners as well.

Introducing certain types of literary theories for literary text analysis and interpretation is necessary and crucial to students when these critical

theories are expected to build tertiary students’ competence, including knowledge, skills, and attitudes in terms of linguistics, culture, politics, and social issues through learning literature in their foreign language. Each type of literary theory has its advantages and disadvantages. Teachers and students must know these positive and negative features of each type of literary theory to decide which one to use to analyze a text properly and persuasively. This article is expected to give teachers some ideas of how to apply a type of literary theory in teaching students how to interpret a literary text. Feminist criticism and one ancient story are used as illustrations of instructional practice in this study, so future studies should choose a contemporary story or a poem, or another type of literary text to be used along with the combination of two or more critical theories to reflect and share the instructional experience and enrich the teaching sphere.

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