Preparation to read and write using the lens of Gender Criticism:

Like Cultural and Marxist Criticism, Gender Criticism focuses on the construction of social identity, on gender relations, and especially on access, relationships, and responses to power in this case identity and power related to gender. Gender Criticism examines a text focusing on what is revealed about gender norms and values— including gender expressions, gender roles, communication patterns, interactions, internal and external conflicts, etc.—in the society represented in the text.

At its most basic, Gender Criticism seeks to uncover what it means to be female or male in the society represented in the text and so examines how femininity and masculinity are depicted, which traits and behaviors are associated with femaleness and expected of women and which ones are associated with maleness and expected of men. It also looks at the extent to which characters’ gender roles, gender expressions, speech and communication patterns, and interactions depend on, conform to, or challenge these norms and values.

Of particular concern to Gender Criticism are the attitudes toward, treatment, and interaction of people based on their gender and relative access to power because of that gender. Gender Criticism thus focuses especially on analyzing and interpreting signs in the text of oppression of one group by another (or dominance of one group over another), the basis of the oppression (what allows or gives rise to it), the form(s) or expressions that oppression takes, its effects on or implications for both the oppressors and the oppressed, and also the response(s) to oppression: acceptance (through silence or inaction) or resistance (subtle or overt, passive or active), etc.

The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms points out:

Gender critics draw a distinction between gender, the identities and characteristics commonly associated with men, women, masculinity and femininity, and sex, the biological designation of male or female. They typically reject the essentialist view that gender is natural or innate and instead take the constructionist position that gender is a social artifact, a learned behavior, a product of language and culture.

Some gender critics have extended the term gender to reference sexuality as well, questioning the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality and arguing that these terms are social constructs, too. These critics, including queer theorists, view sexuality not as a fixed set of binary oppositions limited to hetero- and homosexuality but as a continuum encompassing behaviors and responses ranging from bestiality to bondage. Other gender critics, especially many gay and lesbian critics, take an essentialist position, arguing that sexuality is innate rather than culturally produced. . . .

[G]ender critics have analyzed masculinity as a complex construct that produces and reproduces a host of behaviors and goals such as performance and conquest, many of them destructive and most of them harmful to women.

Some extreme constructionists . . . have further complicated the sex-gender debate by arguing that even nature is in some sense a cultural construct. . . . [G]ender theorist Judith Butler argued that sexual difference, like gender, is culturally produced rather than natural, with notions about sex created as a byproduct of the cultural construction of gender. As a result, no one can really know how the body functions apart from the culture in which it lives. (Murfin and Ray 197, 198, 199)
Ultimately, Gender Criticism seeks to uncover the text’s attitude toward or argument about gender norms, conformity or nonconformity to them, the existence/perpetuation of oppression, etc., whether the text is upholding, promoting, questioning, challenging, or rejecting, etc., the norms or status quo, etc. Often the attitude or argument of the text is apparent in the subtle or not so subtle depiction of (and commentary on) the characters in terms of their gender and conformity or nonconformity to gender norms. With whom are we supposed to sympathize?

As with the other literary criticisms, you need to use Gender Criticism to focus your close reading/analysis of the text, and you need to prove your Gender Criticism argument with that close reading/analysis.

Also, while research is not excluded from Gender Criticism, the way it is from New Criticism and Deconstruction, it is not mandatory as it is in New Historicism. However, as with New Historicism, if you elect to do research, you are, nevertheless, expected to focus your argument on close reading/analysis of the text, using the research to support or deepen your argument and interpretation (not simply alongside or in place of your argument/interpretation). In addition, if you elect to do research, you are obligated to avoid plagiarism by following the conventions of MLA Style research when quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing primary and secondary sources and to select and evaluate secondary sources according to their validity and appropriateness so that they strengthen rather than weaken your argument and credibility.

Final note:
A successful argument based on Gender Criticism requires one to identify, prove, and explain the impact or implications of conforming to or deviating from specific gender roles or the outcome, implications, or effect of the oppression of one gender by another (or dominance of one gender over another), etc., in essence to point out the text’s argument—its meaning and/or purpose—about gender. As with any good claim, the claim of your Gender Criticism response paper or essay should focus on a single specific, unified argument. Note: A successful argument will focus narrowly on one overall way men or women express or respond to their gender roles or one group’s expression of or response to power/oppression.

Read over the following pages to gain a better understanding of Gender Criticism and how to apply it to your literary analysis:

**Key Terms/Concepts:**

**Sex** is a biological determination and refers to whether a person is biologically a man or woman, male or female. The terms male and female or maleness and femaleness are associated with sex.

**Gender** is socially constructed and refers to “the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex. Behavior that is compatible with cultural expectations is referred to as gender-normative; behaviors that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations constitute gender non-conformity” (APA).

**Feminine** and **masculine** or **femininity** and **masculinity** are terms associated with gender.

**Gender Identity:** An individual’s sense of his or her own gender as male or female, masculine or feminine.
Gender Expression refers to the “way in which a person acts to communicate gender within a given culture; for example, in terms of clothing, communication patterns, and interests. A person’s gender expression may or may not be consistent with socially prescribed gender roles, and may or may not reflect his or her gender identity” (APA).

Gender Roles: society’s idea of how boys and girls or men and women are expected to behave and should be treated, behaviors that can be considered “scripted” by society. Gender has everything to do with the society, in which one lives (Milton Diamond). Socially constructed ideas of gender roles, like ideologies in general, “are difficult to change because they are generally accepted, without question, to be naturally the way they are and should be” (Dobie).

Excerpted and edited from Ann Dobie’s “Glossary of Terms Used in Literary Criticism” in Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism (except where noted):

Androcentric: Attitudes, practices, or social organizations that are based on the assumption that men are the model of being.

Heterosexual privilege: The assumption that heterosexuality is the standard by which sexual practice is measured.

Homophobia: Fear, dislike, and/or disapproval of homosexuals and homosexuality. It is observable in demeaning images, casual comments, jokes, and other forms of expression.

Misogyny: Hatred[, dislike, or mistrust] of [or ingrained prejudice against] women.

Subaltern: A person of inferior status. The subordinate position of subalterns may be based on gender, class, race, ethnicity or culture. Subaltern writers seek to make their marginalized cultures which are largely unrecognized by history known and valued for their past and present.

Symbolic Order: Feminist critics are concerned with this phase of development in which women are socialized into accepting the language and Law of the Father [because it is the father who enforces cultural norms and laws] and are thereby made inferior.

Questions to Ask Yourself When Preparing to Write a Gender Criticism Paper:

Do characters speak with typically female mannerisms, such as unfinished sentences or silences (suggesting hesitation or a non-confrontation or appeasement) or exclamations or weeping or expressions of sympathy/empathy (suggesting emotionality)?

Do characters speak with typically male mannerisms, such as imperative, declarative sentences, interruptions or speaking over others, etc.?

Do characters conform to expected norms? Are women nurturing, giving, passive, emotional, obedient/submissive? Are men aggressive, outspoken, confident, demanding, unemotional/impassive?

Do some characters defy expected gender norms, women taking on masculine characteristics or men taking on feminine characteristics?

How do characters perceive and judge themselves and others based on their conformity to or defiance of gender norms? How do they respond to or treat others based on the others’ conformity to or defiance of gender norms?
What stereotypes of women do you find?

What stereotypes of men do you find?

Does the work seem to promote or uphold stereotypical gender roles or norms, expressions, and the social status quo in terms of power relations? Does it challenge or question or resist or defy them? How?

Who holds the power? How do they demonstrate or use that power? How aware are they of the power they hold? How entitled to or desirous and protective of power are they?

Who is powerless? How do they demonstrate their lack of power and/or their awareness of their powerlessness? How do they acknowledge and/or respond to those with power?

According to this text, what does it mean to be female? What does it mean to be male?

What divisions of labor exist between men and women?

Who holds positions of authority and influence?

Who controls the finances?

What kinds of accomplishments do the women characters achieved and are they acknowledged and respected for these accomplishments?

Do the male characters consult the female characters before taking action or merely inform the women of their past or intended actions?

Who is primarily responsible for making decisions?

Do the women play an overt role in decision-making or do they work surreptitiously (unnoticed) in the background?

Are the roles or jobs women play minor, supportive?

How do the male characters talk about the female characters? How do the male characters talk to the female characters? How do the male characters act toward the female characters?

How do the female characters talk about the male characters? How do the female characters talk to the male characters? How do the female characters act toward the male characters?

Is heterosexuality viewed as the norm?
Lisa Esther
Yanover
English 123

Sample Response Paper: Applying Gender Criticism to Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery”
19 Aug. 2014

Man’s Humanity to Man

Robert Burns claimed in 1784 in his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge” that
“Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn” (lines 55-6), ironically
characterizing cruelty as an inhuman and primitive trait despite the human tendency to be cruel,
which his poem so clearly acknowledged and illustrated. Shirley Jackson, author of the short
story “The Lottery,” would disagree with the assumption that cruelty is inhuman. She had no
such illusions or expectations of humanity’s essential benevolence. Viewed through the lens of
Gender Criticism, the story reveals characters who cling to traditions, including traditional
gender roles, as a matter of course and regardless or because of their results. “The Lottery” thus
paints a picture of humanity as inherently, naturally cruel and condemns humanity as ultimately
irredeemably savage.

The story depicts the traditional gender norms, implicating them in the perpetuation of
injustice. The traditional gender dichotomies are made apparent first in the children. The boys
are described as active, aggressive, and independent, several of them together “mak[ing] a great
pile of stones . . . and guard[ing] it against the raids of the other boys” (Jackson 964). They are
focused entirely on their own activity, using it to establish their dominance among themselves,
apparently oblivious to the girls’ presence. The girls, in contrast, are shown to be passive,
withdrawn, and dependent, “[standing] aside, talking among themselves, looking over their
shoulders at the boys” (964). They wait, relegated to the sidelines, merely talking, constantly
aware of the boys, who seem to dominate the girls’ attention. These same dichotomies carry
over into the depiction of the adults. The men stand at a distance, “surveying their own children,
speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes” (964) as if to assert their authority, objectivity,
and importance. The word “surveying,” in particular, suggests an attitude of physical and
emotional distance as well as dominance or ownership. The women, in contrast, are made to
seem inconsequential: “The women, wearing faded house dresses and sweaters, came shortly
after their menfolk. They greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip as they went to join
their husbands” (964). The women are made to seem like appendages to their husbands, coming
after them, suggesting both subordination as well as subjugation as if they are obeying an
implicit command. Similarly, the women’s talk is described simply as “gossip,” unlike the
weightier matters of livelihood the men discuss. The power differential is clearly recognized by
the children, most noticeably by the boys, who, when called by their mothers, “came reluctantly,
having to be called four or five times” (964) but were immediately obedient to their fathers as
exemplified by Bobby Martin who “ducked under his mother’s grasping hand and ran, laughing,
back to the pile of stones[,] but when his father spoke up sharply . . . came quickly and took his
place between his father and his oldest brother” (964). Clearly, the behaviors and attitudes are
learned. It is no wonder, then, that just as the boys do not heed the girls or the women, neither
do the men. The men are responsible for all of the decision making and activity. The women
wait on the men and wait to be told what to do. The men, who are shown to be responsible for
the governance of the society, are thus shown also to be primarily responsible for the
perpetuation of its traditions. If the women did protest, it seems unlikely that their protest would
be heard by the men. So we might, in fact, understand Mrs. Adams’ response to Old Man
Warner that “[s]ome places have already quit lotteries” (967) as “the most significant challenge to the lottery . . . [and] an oblique but nevertheless real gesture of resistance” (Oehlschlaeger, par. 2) and along with it Tessie Hutchinson’s repeated outcries, “It wasn’t fair! . . . It isn’t fair, it isn’t right” (Jackson 967, 969), as protests against the larger injustice not just her own victimization. However, their protests are quickly and effectively dismissed or silenced: Mrs. Adams’ by Old Man Warner’s subsequent outburst and Tessie Hutchinson’s first by her husband and then at the end by the community acting as a mob. It’s thus made horrifyingly clear that protests against injustice and brutality, even those from within the community, are bound to be ineffectual.

Shirley Jackson’s cynicism, reflected in the story’s unapologetic portrait of humanity as irrevocably savage, is deeply disturbing, and it’s understandable why audiences then and now have been both transfixed and outraged by her story. The horror it confronts us with may be a fiction, but that doesn’t negate its truth, especially the potential to recognize ourselves in the villagers. Haven’t we individually and collectively faced situations when we have been silent in the face of injustice, when we have clung to traditions that allowed the perpetuation of injustice, when we have chosen to protect ourselves and preserve our wellbeing by sacrificing other people and their wellbeing, sometimes without question or hesitation? When it comes down to it, their humanity is ours. If Tessie Hutchinson’s final outcry is an ironic protest against the human tendency to allow and perpetuate brutality, meant for us to hear as Jackson’s appeal to us, there seems to be little expectation that we will, in fact, hear it.
Works Cited
