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English 391

Professor Ferguson

November 4th 2014

Investigative Proposal

The role of women in society changes over time and has been changing more rapidly in the last century. From decade to decade there is a noticeable difference in the way that women are active in society. One way in particular is the woman’s voice being heard, specifically in the realm of the written word. There have been female writers for hundreds of years and they seem to sing similar tunes: those of finding their place in a man’s world. From generation to generation what that place is changes, but it’s always a question. What I would like to investigate is if the woman’s role in literary criticism has changed in the last twenty years.

There have always been female writers, but have there been women critiquing them, or mainly men? Has the way that women critique writers, both men and women changed over time? Investigating such questions could point to whether women feel more comfortable critiquing now than then. If there is a difference in how harsh female critics are, that could point to broader societal pressures to be less sensitive: for them to “man up” possibly.

My method for looking into how their language might have changed would be to use Voyant. I would upload critiques by women and ones by men from March 1994 and March 2014. First I would see what the most frequent words were for women in 1994, then men in 1994 and see if there was a significant difference. Then
I would do the same in 2014. Then I would compare women in 1994 to women in 2014 and then do the same for men. This would track linguistic trends to see if one generation of women wrote more similarly to men in that time or to women in another time, or they are all equally similar or different.

I would use the New York Times book reviews from March 1994 and March 2014. There are weekly book reviews published in plain text form on the New York Times website which are available. If the results warranted it, I would expand to other book reviews, maybe the same time frames but from England if I could find such a corpus to use.