There are many theories as to where the meaning of a work of literature comes from, some state that the meaning comes solely from the text, but reader-response theory as well as feminist criticism negate that claim and state that the meaning comes from the reader themselves. This means that there is not a singular meaning in a work of literature or poetry, but many. These different meanings are influenced by the experiences of the reader.

While both forms of criticism focus on the reader’s meanings and interpretations, feminist criticism looks at the woman’s perspective and role she plays as a reader and a writer. In Patrocinio Schweickart’s essay *Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading*, she states that “reader-response theory needs feminist criticism” (Schweickart, 210). Although both of these forms of criticism are centered on the reader and their unique meaning and interpretation of a text, feminist criticism calls for a more multifaceted process of interpretation that revolves around how a female reads and writes and how female reading and writing differs from the “universal” male reading and writing.

Both forms of criticism focus on the meaning based upon the individual or interpretive community. An interpretive community is a group of people with shared or similar experiences that create similar meanings for a work of literature. Since there are many different interpretive communities based off of different experiences, there is no universal meaning, but multiple meanings according to reader response theory.

These meanings may not be the meanings the author intended. Through certain skills of interpretation that a reader has learned and through their own personal experiences, a reader creates their own meaning for a text.
These two types of criticisms, though similar because they pertain to the reader, are very different. Reader-response theory is lacking something, and that is the woman’s perspective. Though reader-response theory may deal with one’s experience based off their race and culture, it does not address gender. The experience and interpretation is assumed to be “universally” male. Women have been reading with a male point of view their whole lives as well as with a female point of view. Feminist criticism tries to break that up and disrupt that singular, male reading of a work of literature. This is why reader-response theory needs feminist criticism. Without the woman’s perspective, there a whole interpretive community that is being ignored. Feminist criticism not only looks at someone’s experiences, race and culture, but also gender. This creates another perspective to read and interpret literature with.

In the literary canon, the main perspective is of a man. There is little representation of female writers and that makes it difficult for women and men to interpret literature from a woman’s point of view. Since a woman has such little representation, the woman is forced to identify with the male point of view, and is taught to interpret like a male. But she is not able to completely connect with that male character or author because despite her learnings to think like male, she is ultimately, not a male. Her interpretation is split between a “universal” male perspective that she cannot completely relate to, and a female perspective that has been repressed her whole life. Since she cannot completely relate to the universal meaning, she is left feeling like she is missing something because she cannot completely understand the text.

The process of reading as a woman is completely different than the process of reading as a male, even though interpreting in that way was what she has been taught her whole life. “As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with the male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose
central principles is misogyny” (205). To break away from this teaching, feminist criticism is necessary. Schweickart explains the three moments of feminist reading, which are necessary to understand how a woman reads and also the woman’s perspective in reading androcentric works of literature.

The first moment of feminist reading is how a woman is immasculated by the text. This means that she is forced to become more male, and more importantly to not be female. By reading androcentric texts, she begins to identify with the male point of view, and separate from being a woman. This does not give more the power to the woman, it “doubles her oppression” (Schweickart, 205). She cannot fully identify with being a male, because she is not male, but since she is immasculated, she cannot identify with being a woman either. This immasculating forces her to tear away from herself and her experiences and create a different and unsound interpretation that is not unique to her experiences as a woman.

The second moment is the recognition of the fact that she is critical to those androcentric writings. “Without her, the text is nothing” (Schweickart, 210). She would not be immasculated if it wasn’t for her or the author. After she recognizes that she is an agent in this immasculating, and that she can stop it, she can move onto the third moment of feminist reading which is to break down the reading process to stop the immasculating of herself. She can bring attention to this immasculating and begin to reform the literary canon. She must take control of the reading in order to escape.

To stop these androcentric readings and writings, feminist critics like Kate Millett and Judith Fetterly are trying to “disrupt the process of immasculating by exposing it to consciousness, by disclosing the androcentricity of what has customarily passed for the
universal” (Schweickart, 205). The ignorance of the immasculation of women is what keeps this androcentricity alive. By teaching the process that a woman goes through while reading, this brings about awareness of the process and encourages the type of reading a woman goes through, as well as stops the immasculation of the woman. Schweickart calls for “the revision of the canon to include a significant body of works by women, and for the development of the reading strategies consonant with the concerns, experiences, and formal devices that constitute these texts” (Schweickart, 208). This is something that reader response theory lacks. The recognition of the lack of representation women have in literature. To change this, “we also need a community of women readers who are qualified by experience, commitment, and training, and who will enlist the personal and institutional resources at their disposal of struggle” (Schweickart, 208). To have women correctly represented in literature, a female representation must be present.

The many divisions of feminist criticism can create a certain impossibility of reading a work of literature. “If reading is impossible, then there is now way of deciding the validity of an interpretation— the very notion of validity becomes problematical” (Schweickart, 215). Since there is so much division and duality, it is almost impossible to come to one single meaning and questions if there is a correct meaning. This is what reader-response theory proposes and how it works with feminist criticism. The interpretations are valid based upon the agreement of others. “To read a text and then to write about it is to seek to connect not only with the author of the original text, but also with a community of readers” (Schweickart, 215). The interpretation that one comes up with is valid as long as others agree with the interpretation. There is not one single meaning that comes from the author, though that meaning from the author is valid because some agree with it. It is okay to have more than one meaning for a work of literature. Reader-response
theory is a gateway into feminist criticism. Reader-response focuses on the experiences that form interpretations, but ignores gender. This is where feminist criticism comes in and makes the reader understand the work of literature from a non-male point of view, a view that is very much different and much more complex than the “universal” male. These types of criticism complement each other and offer a different way to read literature. Feminist criticism goes deeper and offers a disruption and a way to break from the androcentric canon that has held for so many years. By reading and interpreting as a feminist critic, readers are exposed to a new world of interpretations.