Feminism and Visual Interpretation

Read the argument, then test it against the image

1. bell hooks

What problem does feminism address?

Before reading. hooks begins by correcting a common misunderstanding about feminism. Read the paragraph to identify what she wants to change and who can help reproduce that problem.

Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. This was a definition of feminism I offered in Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center more than 10 years ago. It was my hope at the time that it would become a common definition everyone would use. I liked this definition because it did not imply that men were the enemy. By naming sexism as the problem it went directly to the heart of the matter. Practically, it is a definition which implies that all sexist thinking and action is the problem, whether those who perpetuate it are female or male, child or adult. It is also broad enough to include an understanding of systemic institutionalized sexism. As a definition it is open-ended. To understand feminism it implies one has to necessarily understand sexism.
Feminism Is for Everybody (2000), chapter 1, p. 1

Explanation. Her target is sexist thinking and action. An institution can reproduce it through ordinary rules; an individual of any gender can repeat it. A feminist reading therefore asks how power works, rather than assuming every woman in a picture is powerless.

Vocabulary. Sexism: unequal treatment or assumptions based on gender. Institutionalized: built into established rules or practices.

Check understanding. What is the problem in hooks's definition? Why does she specify people of different genders and ages?

Apply or challenge. What evidence would distinguish a gendered social expectation from one person's preference?

2. Linda Nochlin

Why does access to training matter?

Before reading. Nochlin has explained that study from a nude model was central to academic art training, while women's access was restricted. She uses an analogy to explain what that exclusion means.

> It is rather as though a medical student were denied the opportunity to dissect or even examine the naked human body.
> Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? (1971), Penn PDF p. 13

Explanation. An unequal result cannot be explained by talent alone when people receive unequal preparation. The analogy links an educational restriction to the work someone can learn to do.

Vocabulary. Analogy: explaining one situation through a comparable one. Life drawing: drawing from a living model.

Check understanding. What corresponds to medical training in this comparison? What essential learning has been withheld?

Apply or challenge. How does Nochlin extend hooks's account of institutionalized sexism? Do not use The Tea alone as historical proof about art schools.

3. John Berger

Learning to watch yourself

Before reading. Berger describes a social convention, not a biological difference. He argues that unequal judgments teach women to imagine themselves from someone else's point of view. Read the whole passage before deciding whether you agree.

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.

And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.
Ways of Seeing (1972), chapter 3, opening argument; three consecutive paragraphs

Explanation. The surveyor judges; the surveyed person is being judged. Berger argues that the external judgment can become a habit of judging oneself. His broad account should be tested and qualified, not applied as a rule about every woman.

Vocabulary. Tutelage: being under another's authority. Survey: inspect or judge. Supplanted: displaced or replaced.

Check understanding. Explain the difference between the "surveyor" and the "surveyed." Which sentence explains how the habit is learned?

Apply or challenge. Can an image show someone engaged in her own activity rather than arranging herself for a spectator? Identify visible evidence before inferring her thoughts.

4. John Berger

The mirror and the spectator

Before reading. Berger now tests that argument against a painting convention: a nude woman with a mirror, presented as an example of vanity. “You” addresses the painter or the viewer who accepts that convention.

The mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of woman. The moralizing, however, was mostly hypocritical.

You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting Vanity, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.

The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight.
Ways of Seeing (1972), chapter 3, mirror/Vanity discussion; three paragraphs, illustration omitted

Explanation. He identifies a contradiction: a painter offers a woman’s body for others to look at, then blames her for caring about appearance. The mirror can recruit her into the same act of looking. This is an interpretation of a convention; it does not establish what every mirror means.

Vocabulary. Vanity: excessive concern with appearance. Hypocritical: condemning something while participating in it. Connive: cooperate in an arrangement.

Check understanding. Who creates the display, and who is blamed for it? Why does Berger call the moral judgment hypocritical?

Apply or challenge. In Cassatt’s mirror image, is the woman looking at her appearance, pursuing another activity, or doing something else? Use the reflection as evidence.

5. Chloe N. Shields **A woman using her sight**

Before reading. Shields studies Reading Le Figaro (1878), shown beside the excerpt. Her subject is a woman reading a newspaper with a mirror behind her. This is the central clause of a sentence from the published abstract; the full paper was unavailable.

[…] Cassatt alters the woman-and-mirror trope to emphasize her subject's desire for an identity of female mind over female body. Refracting the Male Gaze (2016), published abstract; introductory clause omitted

Explanation. This interpretation challenges an automatic equation of mirror and vanity. Reading can make the woman an active user of sight and knowledge, rather than a body arranged for someone else. The interpretation still needs evidence.

Vocabulary. Trope: a recurring convention or motif. Agency: the capacity to act or make choices.

Check understanding. What does Shields mean by "female mind over female body"? How is that a reply to the mirror convention Berger criticizes?

Apply or challenge. Find the newspaper and its reflection. What is the woman attending to? Then compare The Coiffure or The Tea; that comparison is ours, not Shields's stated analysis.

6. Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen

Whose identity receives attention?

Before reading. Butterfield-Rosen reviews exhibitions that brought attention to Black models, including Laure, the clothed figure in Manet's Olympia. She asks how museum labels and scholarship organize our attention.

What is named channels what is seen. The proper names given to pictures, and to depicted persons, matter profoundly.
The Modern Woman (2019), pp. 194–195, complete two-sentence pull quotation

Explanation. A person can be visibly present yet receive little individual recognition. Naming Laure can change the questions we ask about her work and contribution. A recovered name alone cannot tell us what she chose or repair the inequalities of the historical record.

Vocabulary. Recognition: acknowledging someone's identity or contribution. Historical record: the evidence that survives about the past.

Check understanding. How can a name change what a viewer notices even though the painted image stays the same?

Apply or challenge. Compare a label that says only "maid" with one that identifies Laure. What changes, and what remains unknown? How does this complicate an account of "women" as a single category?

Keep the connection:

hooks: identify the inequality. Nochlin: explain the conditions. Berger: examine looking and judgment. Shields: test that explanation against Cassatt. Butterfield-Rosen: ask whose identity and contribution receive attention.

Return to The Tea: one claim, two visual details and one limit. Carry understand → paraphrase → evidence → application → qualification into Berger on reproduction, Steyerl, Kissick, Sontag and Jacobs. This is class preparation, with no extra homework or graded submission.