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Wittig, Monique

in Literary Theory from 1966 to the Present

from The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory

Monique Wittig was a novelist, theorist, and feminist activist, known primarily for her fictional works and theorization of feminism from a materialist, lesbian perspective. Wittig was a central figure in the feminist movement in France, and her writings on heterosexuality and the oppression of women have greatly influenced feminist thought and queer theory.

Wittig was born in Dannemarie, France on July 13, 1935. In 1964, after studying language and philosophy at the Sorbonne, Wittig published her first novel, *The Opoponax* (1966 [1964]), which garnered critical praise and was awarded the Prix Médicis. Wittig was involved in the student uprisings of May 1968 and produced her second novel, *Les Guérillères* (1972[1969]), in this climate of radical activism. During the 1970s, Wittig was a leading activist in the radical French feminist movement and involved in founding several activist groups, such as the Petites Marguerites and the Féministes Révolutionnaires. Wittig also participated in the 1970 protest march to the Arc de Triomphe, during which French and American feminist activists laid a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, commemorating the soldier's unknown wife. In 1976, after publishing her third novel, *The Lesbian Body* (1975[1973]), Wittig immigrated to the United States and held visiting professorships at various universities. Wittig earned her doctorate in 1986 and joined the University of Arizona faculty, where she produced her most well-known theoretical work, a collection of essays entitled *The Straight Mind* (1992). On January 3, 2003, Wittig died from a sudden heart attack in Tucson, Arizona, at the age of 67. There is no clear divide between Wittig's theoretical works and her fiction, as ideas introduced in her novels are given explicit treatment in her nonfiction works. Within Wittig's theories, language is what connects the conceptual realm with material reality, and therefore any change to the social order is necessarily mediated through language. In this light, writing becomes a political force, and any distinction between Wittig's political activism and her writing is likewise problematic, as all of her works, fiction and nonfiction, are deeply political and fundamentally concerned with combating women's oppression. As reflected in her feminist epic *Les Guérillères*, the revolution Wittig calls for is a conceptual one, an overthrow of categories that are steeped in patriarchal assumptions. A self-described materialist feminist, Wittig argues that the notion of sexual difference masks the social and political forces that segregate the sexes, and the very categories of "man" and "woman" create a supposedly natural justification for social oppression. In other words, according to Wittig, it is the system of oppression that establishes sex/gender categories, not vice versa. Drawing on Marx, Wittig views the struggle between the sexes as a class struggle, one that cannot be resolved until all sex/gender categories are abolished.

In her essay "The straight mind," Wittig extends the feminist critique of patriarchy to include heterosexuality, which she condemns as a political regime that universalizes and perpetuates the oppression of women. Wittig asserts that the concept of "woman" is defined by the obligatory heterosexual contract, an analysis that leads to Wittig's famous and controversial statement: "Lesbians are not women" (1992: 32). Wittig upholds lesbians as uniquely positioned outside the system of patriarchy and heterosexuality, and therefore not encompassed in the category "woman." Distinguishing lesbians from women and deeming "woman" inextricable from patriarchy, Wittig calls for the total abolishment of "woman" as a class and as a concept. In her novel *The Lesbian Body*, Wittig portrays her deconstruction of "woman" by figuratively dismantling the female body as traditionally conceived and refiguring it from a lesbian perspective.

Wittig's technique of invoking the universal viewpoint from a minority, specifically lesbian, perspective provides another method of challenging dominant patriarchal concepts. In her essay, "The point of view: Universal or particular?" (in Wittig 1992), Wittig asserts that marginalized writers can only effect change by universalizing the minority experience. Wittig's fiction consistently subverts traditional narrative perspective and is characterized by unconventional use of pronouns. In *The Opoponax*, her experimental novel about the progression from childhood to adolescence, Wittig conflates the universal with the particular through her use of the French collective pronoun *on*, which is alternately translated as *one*, *we*, and *you*. In this way, the voice of a single girl becomes the voice of anyone, and through portraying one female coming-of-age, Wittig evokes the development of all human identities and perceptions.

Wittig's emphasis on language and its influence on material reality have encouraged some critics to draw parallels between Wittig and Hélène Cixous, particularly in the context of *écriture féminine*. Wittig herself, however, disavows any connection with so-called feminine writing, on the grounds that such a concept reinforces women's marginal subject position. She is careful to distinguish herself from other French feminists who celebrate sexual difference, referring to these perspectives as a backlash against the feminist trend of questioning gendered categories. Parallels have also been drawn between Wittig and Adrienne Rich, whose essay "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence" (1980) was published in the same year as "The straight mind." Rich's critique of heterosexuality closely mirrors Wittig's, but Rich distinguishes between lesbianism as an erotic choice and

lesbianism as conscious identification with women. Though Rich leaves room for women to adopt a lesbian perspective without necessarily adopting homosexual behavior, Wittig asserts that, in order for social transformation to occur, the heterosexual contract must be completely broken and the marginal category of "woman" abolished.

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