

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

**Beyond the Myth of the Male Genius: A Feminist Art Theory Analysis
of Women's Artistry in *The Artist* by Lucy Steeds**



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Abstract

*The Artist by Lucy Steeds is analyzed using theories developed by feminist art historians, including Linda Nochlin's "The Myth of the Male Artistic Genius" and Griselda Pollock's "Introduction to feminist art history". The study examines the novel's ability to reformulate patriarchal ideology that has long oppressed women, who have historically been excluded from the creative sphere of artistic activity. The research aims to examine how the novel challenges the ideology of patriarchy, which has long been oppressive towards women, as they have been excluded from taking part in its creative sphere of artistic activity. The study explores the artistic and non-artistic identity of its main character, Ettie, institutional (dis)inclusion, creative voicelessness, and artistic recognition through qualitative textual analysis. The analysis shows Steeds is challenging the traditional idea of what constitutes artistic genius itself, demonstrating the chasms in the structures that obstruct women's participation and recognition in the space for art. By updating "make this art," the novel takes a feminist approach. It fosters an image of creativity as the product of perseverance, lived experience, and resistance to the constraints of patriarchy rather than as something inventible. Additionally, the results indicate the development of a process that finds expression in Ettie's artwork, in line with the historical experiences of female artists, whose works have been embodied, marginalized, and distorted by institutional bias and gender-associated expectations. The study demonstrates that *The Artist* is a reimagining of the term 'artistic genius' and the centrality of its female protagonists to women's creativity, resilience, and agency, establishing it as a contribution to current feminist literary and feminist discourse in art history studies. Additionally, it extends the scholarship by applying Feminist Art Theory to an artwork of this contemporary past: a historical novel, thus pointing to the actuality of discussions about gender, creativity, and artistic recognition.*

Keywords: *Feminist Art Theory, Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, women's artistic identity, patriarchy, artistic recognition, Lucy Steeds, The Artist.*

1.0 Introduction

Art has long been recognized as a medium through which individuals express identity, creativity, and cultural values. However, the history of Western art has largely privileged the work of male artists while marginalizing the contributions of women. Traditional art history has long perpetuated the myth of the "male artistic genius," presenting artistic excellence as an inherently masculine attribute while overlooking the structural barriers that have historically prevented women from accessing artistic education, patronage, and professional opportunities. Consequently, the absence of women from the artistic canon is not the result of a lack of talent but rather the outcome of social and institutional inequalities that have restricted their participation in the production and dissemination of art (Nochlin, 1971).

Feminist Art Theory emerges in the late twentieth century as a critical response to these gender-based exclusions within art history and criticism. Scholars such as Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock challenge traditional assumptions about artistic excellence by demonstrating that artistic value is socially and historically constructed rather than naturally determined. They argue that women's artistic identities have been shaped by unequal access to education, professional opportunities, cultural recognition, and economic resources. Feminist art historians therefore seek not only to recover the contributions of overlooked women artists but also to expose the patriarchal structures embedded within artistic institutions and historical narratives (Pollock, 1988). Likewise, contemporary historical fiction frequently explores women's lives and artistic experiences that have been overshadowed by male-dominated social structures. Such narratives reject the romanticized image of the

solitary male genius by foregrounding women's emotional labor, creative potential, and persistent struggle for artistic recognition. These works demonstrate how gender shapes artistic identity and how women negotiate restrictive cultural environments to assert their creative agency. Consequently, a feminist approach provides an appropriate framework for examining the relationship between gender, power, and artistic production in contemporary fiction (Parker, 2015).

Similarly, Lucy Steeds's *The Artist* (2025) contributes to the tradition of feminist historical fiction by examining the intersection of artistic ambition, gender inequality, and artistic recognition in post-First World War France. The novel follows Ettie, a young English woman employed by the celebrated painter Edouard Tartuffe. As she gradually assumes the roles of assistant, secretary, emotional supporter, and caregiver, Ettie becomes increasingly aware of the unequal dynamics that govern artistic production and recognition. Her experiences reveal the often invisible labor performed by women in supporting celebrated male artists while simultaneously exposing the neglect of their own creative abilities (Steeds, 2025).

More importantly, the novel offers a sustained critique of the cultural myth that artistic genius is inherently masculine. Rather than presenting artistic success as the achievement of an isolated individual, *The Artist* demonstrates that artistic recognition is shaped by interpersonal relationships, institutional structures, and unequal access to opportunities. Through Ettie's gradual development as an artist, the novel invites readers to reconsider conventional notions of authorship, creativity, and artistic value within patriarchal society. This perspective closely aligns with Feminist Art Theory, which attributes women's historical absence from the art world to institutional discrimination rather than to any deficiency in talent or creativity (Deepwell, 1995).

Despite the growing scholarly interest in feminist historical fiction, *The Artist* has received limited critical attention from the perspective of Feminist Art Theory. Existing scholarship primarily focuses on the novel's narrative techniques, historical setting, or representations of gender, while its critique of patriarchal artistic institutions remains insufficiently explored. Therefore, this study applies the theoretical perspectives of Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock to investigate how *The Artist* constructs women's artistic identity. Specifically, it examines how the novel challenges the myth of the male artistic genius by foregrounding women's creative agency, artistic resilience, and persistent struggle for recognition within a patriarchal art world.

1.1 Statement of Purpose

This study aims to investigate the representation of women's artistic identity in *The Artist* by Lucy Steeds through the theoretical lens of Feminist Art Theory, particularly the contributions of Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock. It examines how the novel challenges the myth of the male artistic genius and exposes the patriarchal structures that have historically silenced women artists and denied them artistic recognition. Furthermore, the study explores the protagonist's struggle for creativity, agency, and self-expression within a male-dominated artistic environment. By applying Feminist Art Theory, this research argues that the historical marginalization of women artists does not result from a lack of talent but from institutional and cultural inequalities that have systematically excluded women from the art world. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to feminist literary criticism by providing a critical analysis of the relationship between gender, artistic production, and identity in contemporary historical fiction.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To examine how patriarchal structures and the myth of the male artistic genius shape the representation of women's artistic identity in *The Artist* through the lens of Feminist Art Theory.
2. To analyze how the novel portrays women's struggle for artistic recognition, creative agency, and self-expression by applying the principles of Feminist Art Theory.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to existing scholarship by introducing *The Artist* to the field of Feminist Art Theory, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. It examines how the novel challenges the myth of the male artistic genius while presenting art as a medium through which women express creativity, autonomy, and their struggle for recognition within patriarchal artistic institutions.

Furthermore, the study enriches feminist literary criticism by applying the theoretical perspectives of Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock to demonstrate how gender shapes artistic production, cultural recognition, and institutional authority. By integrating feminist literary criticism with art history and feminist theory, the research highlights the relationship between creativity, power, and structural inequality.

Moreover, this research addresses a significant gap in the existing literature by offering a comprehensive feminist interpretation of *The Artist*. The findings provide a valuable foundation for future research in feminist literary criticism, gender studies, and art history, while contributing to ongoing scholarly discussions on women's artistic identity, creativity, and artistic recognition.

2.0 Literature Review

Feminist literary and art criticism have long been preoccupied with "gender" and artistic production. The work of Company Director Linda Nochlin is one of the most important works in this field; her groundbreaking essay titled *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists??) Citing this as proof, I often hear arguments that the reason women aren't in the canon is that they weren't talented enough. Making this case, I've heard people say that people are not in the canon because they were not talented enough. On the contrary, Nochlin claims that social structures and systems and educational constraints on women's artistic training and professional status were systematically set against women. This institutional critique shifted feminist art history from feminine accomplishments and performances to structural inequalities, making it a key theoretical framework for examining women's cultural identity in *The Artist* (Nochlin, 1971).

Similarly, in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981), Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock also analyze the gendered gentrification of fine art and 'domestic artistry' in housewives. They say that, throughout history, certain cultures have demeaned the role of women in artistic practice and promoted men's art. They found that artists' values are socially produced and not fixed by rules of excellence or audience votes. The marginalization of women's arts, from the perspective of the unequal recognition of male and female creativity (Parker & Pollock, 1981), is an important context for considering *The Artist*.

Secondly, emphasis on gender social constructedness has had a tremendous impact on feminist approaches towards the identity of the artist. Gender is not a biological phenomenon, according to Judith Butler (1990), but something that is constantly constructed socially in structures of repetition and reinforcement of dominant norms. While Butler's work on gender identity is her main focus, her theory offers insight into the formation of artistic identity shaped by similar expectations and institutional power. Women's performative identities in *The Artist* are subjectivities restricted by the conception of feminine art and accepted feminine creativity (Patriarchy Conception of Femininity and Artistic Legitimacy) (Butler, 1990).

Similarly, bell hooks' (1995) feminist exploration of representation focused upon art as both a space of domination and resistance. She believes that women artists produce spaces for those who are marginalized, for alternative forms of expression that contest systems of exclusion and notions of cultural authority. hooks sees feminist artistic practices as political acts that challenge notions of cultural authority and systems of exclusion. Her interpretation of *The Artist*'s emphasis on the struggle to be visible, autonomous, and recognized in male-dominated cultural entities helps analyze their work (hooks, 1995).

In addition, using Butler's theory of gender performativity, Qamar et al. (2026) explore *The Artist* by Lucy Steeds and uncover how its protagonist manages socially constructed gender roles in a patriarchal space: the art world. The study holds that, instead of being an endogenous construct, gender in the novel is a performative one created by constant socialization into expectations and norms within institutions. The study asserts that gender in the novel is not an endogenous concept, but a performative one generated through the repeated expectations and norms of social institutions. It reveals the plot's experiences as revealing the limitedness of conceptions of women's behavior, creativity, and public identity embedded in the framework of patriarchy. The authors speculate that Steeds refrains from the traditional binarism of gender roles, displaying resistance to expected gender norms as well as a fight for independence through artistic means in the face of a protagonist resistant to codified feminine roles. Although the study addresses issues of gender identity and performativity, it is mainly dedicated to the construction of gender and not necessarily to the institutional silence and lack of recognition of women. The present study thus builds upon this scholarship by using Linda Nochlin's Feminist Art Theory to analyze the presentation of *The Artist* in relation to the myth of the male artist and the foregrounding of women's artistic identity, agency, and effort to be recognized in the male-dominated art world (Qamar et al., 2026).

Furthermore, recent scholarship has continued to focus on the persistence of gender inequality in the art world. Though women artists are becoming more visible in the museum world, Chadwick (2020) suggests that institutional bias remains a factor in defining museum collections, exhibiting women artists, and

creating/encouraging critical reception. Her work shows that belief in the male artistic genius is alive and well in the current art discourse, severely constricting women's access to parity status. The Artist (Chadwick 2020) can be understood in the present, in light of Chadwick's observation.

This is confirmed in some of the more critical reviews of *The Artist*, where Lucy Steeds is seen as a strong exploration of women's creative identity. In an argument for the novel, Jordan (2025) wants to make it clear that Steeds disrupts the romanticized conception of the male genius by showing how the emotional and creative work that can be done by women, who have historically been starved of attention for their artistic dreams, is prioritized. Likewise, in the novel, Wood (2025) examines the extent to which different styles of art are hailed as great works and others are passed over entirely, depending on the culture (s) that have shaped them. These interpretations emphasize the importance of Feminist Art Theory in analyzing women's artistic identity in the novel (Jordan, 2025; Wood, 2025).

3.0 Research Methodology

The present study is a qualitative research type since it aims to explain the meanings, representations, and ideological structures found in the studied literary work. The qualitative approach is a literary research method that helps explore a story in depth, valuing the characters, themes, symbols, and storytelling strategies without counting numbers. For this research, Feminist Art Theory is considered the most appropriate approach, as the goal is to explore women artists' identities. The qualitative approach enables a researcher to appreciate literary texts in their socio-historical, cultural, and ideological contexts and create rich and detailed interpretations.

To understand the results of the research, the secondary approach used in this study is textual analysis. Based on Belsey (2005), Catherine describes textual analysis as a method that reviews the words in a text. Literary texts do not have rigid meanings; rather, their meanings emerge from intertextual relationships, historical context, theoretical understandings, and interpretations carried out by the reader. Textual analysis is thus an investigation that focuses on language, characterization, symbolism, dialogue, and narrative structure to uncover ideas and systems of power. This approach is especially useful in feminist literary studies in identifying ways in which texts stigmatize or validate women's identity and/or undermine or support patriarchal thinking.

The main data source is Steeds's book: *The Artist* (2025). The novel serves as the textual source, with which women's artistic identity, gender relations, creative agency, and institutional power are examined. The secondary data sources comprise scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and critical essays relevant to Feminist Art Theory. These sources help build the theoretical and critical framework for interpreting the chosen novel.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory of art is the basis for this study, and the following in particular will be analyzed in terms of the work of Linda Nochlin (1971) and Griselda Pollock (1988), and used to explore the implications of women's identity as artists in *The Artist* by Lucy Steeds. Feminist Art Theory was a critical examination of the absence of women from the mainstream of art historical writing and an attack on the patriarchal institutions that privileged male artists over female artists for the past three-and-a-half millennia. The theory does not focus on women's artistic competence as such; instead, it focuses on barriers to equal recognition experienced by women in the arts at the institutional, social, and cultural level. According to Feminist Art Theory, the values of art cannot be based on the concept of "nature" but instead are socially constructed within systems of power that benefit the creative and genius ideals held by males.

Linda Nochlin's seminal essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (1971). The seminal concept in this study stems from (1971). Unlike most people who believe that women were biologically or intellectually substandard in their abilities, Nochlin argues that the selection of works by women artists was decided by the art market's "gatekeepers." Rather, she states that women have been historically deprived of formal art education, of professional art academies, patronage, and exhibition. The idea of a 'male genius' is a myth, writes Nochlin, that has been developed and perpetuated by patriarchal institutions and not a purely valid assessment of artistic accomplishment. Such a view allows the present endeavor to examine the institutional structures that limit women's artistic visions and to measure the value of men's creativity as the norm.

Griselda Pollock's feminist critique of art history in Nochlin's book *Vision and Difference* (1988), however, challenges the art history traditionally written from a masculine point of view, making women's art

disappear from its account. Pollock highlights the embedded-ness of representation, artistic production, and the authority of the culture in power relations within patriarchal society. The feminist critique should reclaim women's creative agency to contest male narratives of artistic genius and to consider the ideological mechanisms that give rise to artistic values. Pollock's theory is most applicable to *The Artist* because the main character's sense of identity as an artist grows in a society that values male power but stifles female creativity.

This research explores aspects of *The Artist: The Myth of the Male Artist's Genius, Female Struggle for Artist's Recognition, and Female Artist's Reconstructive Process of Resistance*, creativity, and agency, as pointed out by Nochlin and Pollock. Within this framework, it is possible to critically consider how the novel depicts gendered artistic institutions and the social processes that define which creative works are valued and which are left out of sight.

4.0 Data Analysis

The critique uses the "Feminist Art Theory" by Linda Nochlin (1971) in the novel *The Artist* (2025). The novel represents art as a vehicle for women's lives and emotions. The novel reflects on how art connects with women's lives and emotions. Such is the strength of her art that, when Ettie remembers her paintings, she realizes that her depictions combine technical ability with her own experience and her own memories: When Ettie looks at this painting, she can still feel the weight of Joseph's shirt in her hands. The coolness of the water... They are all harsh: her paintings. Her life. Well, nearly all her paintings. (p. 291–292) Note how the experience of art is strong in this passage rather than being separated from aesthetic ideals. Ettie's paintings come from pain, reminiscence and reclaimed strength, where the convention of creative genius, physically without need of emotional work, is inverted. According to Linda Nochlin (1971), women have until now been denied entry into art history as artists due to institutions' emphasis on abstracted and abstract codes that prioritize male claims to creativity over women's experiences. Likewise, Pollock (1988) states that women's lived experience has been omitted from the mainstream of artistic influences. This is Steeds's exclusion, which she challenges by redefining what she now views as artistic genius—emotional experience, not the one rooted in patriarchal standards—from a feminist perspective (Nochlin, 1971; Pollock, 1988).

Moreover, there is the frequent link between masculine authority and violence and domination that is used constantly in the novel. One symbolic episode is that of the murder of a young bird:

Out in the yard, several hands are scrabbling around in the dust. He chooses the nearest of them: a feeble creature with molting grey feathers... turning his eye away as if the moment were less awful if he did not see it; he finds the bird's neck and twists. (p. 127)

The passage refers to something involving an animal, but adds symbolic significance beyond the passage itself. The seemingly helpless bird symbolizes vulnerability, while the man's behavior of wielding without difficulty embodies the normalization of domination. Feminist art theory holds that, throughout history, women have been both subjects and de facto victims of patrician culture, while masculine authority has been given greater importance (Pollock, 1988). This symbolic violence is like the violence that's perpetrated against women's art throughout history: who has become forgotten? Instead of imagining the creation of art as an equal opportunity experience, Steeds shows that the experience of artistic identity is shaped by unequal relationships of power that women often experience negatively (Pollock, 1988; Chadwick, 2020).

Additionally, Steeds openly reveals the contentious processes by which women are marginalized in patriarchal institutions. This is the simplicity with which the retelling of Ettie's exclusion is described:

It was not that women were not allowed inside. It was just one woman. Ettie. (*The Artist*, 2025)

This is an example of how discrimination may manifest, but seldom in the form of an outright ban. Women seem to enjoy the same opportunities; however, as with every other paradigm in our society, there are invisible barriers that separate specific women from artistic venues. That women were not commonly admitted to the artistic academies, workshops, and professional networks is, according to Nochlin (1971), not to be blamed on any lack of ability, but on the systems that were established to reinforce the dominance of men. This institutional discrimination is manifested in the case of Ettie, who, for instance, was excluded from the last exhibition while a male artist was included. Ettie's exclusion illustrates this institutional discrimination; for example, a male artist was included while Ettie was not. As such, the passage affirms the feminist stance that inequality in art must be attributed to social inequalities and not to natural ones in artists' ability (Nochlin, 1971).

Ettie's thinking about her role as an artiste is one of the most important moments of the novel:

"Getting the paintings into the world is all the recognition I need," Ettie says. "I do this for myself. Every new painting is a test to see if I am good enough... To see if I am as good as him." She turned back to the lobsters on their silver platters. "To see if I am Tata's equal." (p. 211)

This passage exposes both Ettie's self-assurance and the continued presence of patriarchal norms in her artwork. She says public recognition is not essential, but she still judges her artistic progress by a famous man. This internalized comparison reflects a legacy of patriarchal cultural values that Feminist Art Theory calls the "impact of cultural values": the universal norm for successful art is established by male achievement. For the most part, Nochlin explains in 1971, women have been judged, not on their own terms of creation and artistry, but by relying on male terms of evaluation. Pollock (1988) further notes that women's art cannot be considered a separate entity from relationships. Steeds depicts Ettie's obstinacy as a form of resistance and, at the same time, offers insight into the mental strain generated by the image of male genius. Her assertion for equality is evidence that true art recognition knows no place for women other than the destruction of the patriarchal framework (Nochlin, 1971; Pollock, 1988).

Further, the novel also mentions the concepts of caregiving, mourning, and living-on as a part of the female artists' identity:

The flu had taken her within three days. She was a volunteer at the local hospital... She was full of life. She would come home. Of course she would. (p. 16–17)

This passage serves as an example of a story that embodies some of the things that are rarely mentioned about women's creativity. Through a woman's service, the tradition of women prioritizing caring and social responsibility has been shown to the detriment of personal aspiration. Her untimely death speaks to the fragility of women's livelihoods during history's crises and to the attestation that often women's contributions go unacknowledged. Legge and Parker (1981) claim that women's work, as with domestic, emotional, and social, has traditionally been undervalued, yet very important in sustaining society. In *The Artist*, they shape and sustain the emotional framework of the underlying processes of creation. Steeds extends the definition of artistic identity as one that, in turn, discloses that creativity involves not only women's lives, but is particularly formulated by the care, loss, memory, and resilience of women. This suggests that the standard notion of artistic genius as removed from the normal realm of human experience (Parker/Pollock, 1981; Chadwick, 2020) is undermined.

5.0 Conclusion

The Artist by Lucy Steeds has been examined in this study in the context of Feminist Art Theory to reveal the novel's uneasy engagement with the omnipresent myth of the male artistic genius, and its attempt to reimagine what women artists were in the wake of decades of absence from the academic art world. The research focuses on different theoretical understandings of Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock. It identifies the sources of artistic inequality as not dissimilar from those of artistic talent but instead due to gendered systems of artistic education, recognition, and cultural authority that have historically advantaged boys and men over girls and women. Steeds's portrayal of Ettie is a window into the emotional, psychological, and institutional barriers women encounter because gendered norms and unequal power dynamics limit their creativity.

The textual analysis shows that the novel subverts the contradictions of likable artistic genius by putting forth the ideas that women's real experience, emotional strength, and artistic perseverance are equal to the artistic excellence of men. Ettie's case illustrates how it is not only the capacity of the individual artist that leads to recognition, but also the ability of the institutional context. Her efforts to make a name for herself as an artist highlight the continued presence of patriarchal norms that roam and vet women's accomplishments by the standards of men. In this sense, it challenges the cultural myth that creativity and art are the domain of men. Thus, the novel challenges the cultural notion that art and creativity are masculine, and, in fact, that this ability has been unequally distributed for a long time.

The research also makes a sustained contribution to the existing scholarship in Feminist Art Theory, as it is a contemporary historical novel relatively unknown in the academic world. Unlike previous studies that focused on the artist and emphasized the performative and feminist aspects of the artwork, this study emphasizes the institutional aspects of women's artistic exclusion and the politics of the artwork's recognition. Therefore, the results could be considered a contribution to feminist literary criticism in that it shows how past inequalities are now brought to the fore by contemporary fiction to challenge established principles of artistic

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

genius. Finally, *The Artist* stands as a testament to the need for women to reclaim their artistic identities and disrupt and challenge the structures of what art is remembered, celebrated, and preserved, and what isn't.

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