

# **Feminist Theory from Margin to Center Study Guide**

**Feminist Theory from Margin to Center by Bell hooks**

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# Plot Summary

This in-depth exploration of what the author believes to be essential principles of feminism was first published in 1984, with a second (unrevised) edition published in the year 2000. Throughout the book the author explores various manifestations of her central contentions - that early feminist theory and practice was limited in scope, that true feminist movement has the potential to vastly improve the lives of men and women alike, and that more than ever feminist movement is simultaneously necessary and provocative - not to mention necessarily provocative.

The book begins with two prefaces, one to the first edition (published in 1984) and one to the second (published unrevised in 2000). In the first preface, the author gives her reasons for writing the book - a lack of awareness in the feminist movement of the perspective of African-American culture and society. In the second preface, the author comments on the (sometimes intensely) negative reaction the first edition received, particularly from white women. She also describes how reactions to the book and its ideas have since become more positive and accepting, and how the need for both feminism and a broader perspective on it is more apparent than ever.

The first chapter defines the author's perspective on contemporary feminism - how it initially developed without input from and/or consideration of the non-white, non-middle class experience. The second and third chapters examine how it has been increasingly difficult to determine a universally acceptable definition of what feminism is and what it's striving to achieve, suggesting that feminism's ultimate goals (the elimination of sexist oppression) can and will benefit men and women of all ages.

Chapters 4 and 5 contrast the experiences of women and men as they relate to feminist theory and movement, with Chapter 4 focusing on the way such movement has been undermined by sexism-driven competitiveness, imperialism-driven power struggles, and capitalism-driven prejudices. Chapter 5, meanwhile, explores the sometimes paradoxical nature of feminist's movement perspectives on men - that they are they enemy, that they are allies, that they are to be universally avoided, that they are in many ways as victimized by sexism as women.

Chapters 6 through 11 explore specific ways that the exploration, development and application of feminist theory apply in contemporary life. Re-defining the value of power, offering broader education to more women, ending gender-oriented violence, evolving new approaches to parenting, and exploring the boundaries of sexuality are all, in the author's perspective, important purposes of expanding and acting upon feminist theory.

Chapter 12 sums up the value of all that the book has discussed by suggesting that transformation is a process that takes more time than early feminists seem to have been willing to give it. The author suggests that everyone - men, women, conservative, liberal, academic thinker, emotional responder - have all, in one way or another and to varying degrees, lived according to the exploitative rules of a capitalist, imperialist, sexist society. She contends that only by first accepting that situation and working to



change the belief systems that gave rise to the rules can true, universally beneficial feminist movement take place, take root, and take charge.



# Prefaces

## Prefaces Summary and Analysis

"Seeing the Light: Visionary Feminism" (Preface to the Second Edition - January 2000)

The author discusses the development of, and need for, her exploration of feminist theory from the perspectives of race and class as well as gender. She describes how her work, which examines feminist theory from exactly that perspective, was originally dismissed when first published by mainstream feminists, whom she describes as white women of generally privileged backgrounds. She adds that over time those same feminists came to regard the author's innovations as necessary and valuable. She suggests that the feminist movement "has created profound, positive changes in the lives of girls and boys, women and men, living in our society, in a political system of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" - a system, she adds, that in spite of the social advances of the last few decades is still entrenched. She comments that the book's theories are still "amazingly sound," still relevant, and easily understandable by contemporary readers of all ages, classes, and educational backgrounds.

Preface to the First Edition (1984)

The author presents the central theory of her work - that there are those on the margins of society (placed there by race, gender, income, education, or other factors) and those at the center (placed there by "advantageous" manifestations of those same characteristics). She suggests that feminist theory to date has been developed and presented from the perspective of those in the center, and explains that her writings explore weaknesses in that centrist theory from the perspective of the margins. "Throughout the work," she concludes, "my thoughts have been shaped by the conviction that feminism must become a mass-based political movement if it is to have a revolutionary, transformative impact on society."

These two prefaces essentially sum up the thematic and intellectual content of the book - not that there is any particular distinction between the two. For the author, theme and idea are essentially the same thing, with both being tied to a third point of interest - intention, or more specifically the author's intention to pass her theories on to a wider audience. There is the sense here, and indeed throughout the book, that intent is nothing without ideas, ideas are nothing without a purpose for having them or talking about them (theme), and purpose is inert without an intention to serve as an engine for its realization. There is a certain irony in all of this, however. As discussed in "Style - Tone" and "Perspective", the author's intellect and skill with language (evident even here in these prefaces) does her something of a disservice, coming across as potentially alienating of the less educated, less intellectual woman she claims the movement must both reach and embrace in order to succeed.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

### "Black Women - Shaping Feminist Theory"

In this chapter, the author develops the thesis that feminist theory and the feminist movement have been defined by a certain sort of feminist - a middle-class white woman who, in spite of the conviction that "all" women are oppressed, has no real awareness of the life of a non-white, non-middle class woman (see "Quotes, p. 11). She cites Betty Friedan, author of what is often regarded as a seminal feminist work (see "Objects/Places - The Feminine Mystique") as a prime example of this sort of feminist, and points out the racist, classist flaws in her (Friedan's) theories. She presents anecdotal evidence (based on personal experience) that efforts made by black feminists (such as herself) to expand the basis of feminist thought have been met for the most part with resentment and derision, but on occasion with a dawning of new understanding. She suggests that those who define their feminism (or, for that matter, struggles against racism) in terms of wanting to be equal to white men are, in fact, sustaining the current system - more people who behave like white men, she suggests, simply means there are more white men (see "Quotes, p. 16). Finally, she suggests that black women (like herself) have an essential role to play in deepening feminist theory and making it manifest in a more broadly based feminist movement.

The essential theme of this chapter is repeated throughout the book, to the point that it becomes a kind of motif or repeated refrain/image. While the author seems to be very careful about disengaging herself from any sort of emotional comment or tone, this repetition gives the sense that she has, to coin a phrase, something of an ax to grind. This is not necessarily a bad thing, if her assertions about the nature of early feminism and feminism in general are to be taken as correct - and the reader has no reason not to do so. In other words, if early feminists did indeed construct feminism around a limited perspective, the author and women like her have every valid reason to point out the flaws in this perspective, and the failings in the actions taken as the result of that perspective. Meanwhile, a particularly interesting point raised in this chapter is contained in the author's comments about women's desire to be like white men, a perceptive observation that, no doubt, was one of the triggers for the negative reaction the book received from early (mostly white) feminists as described in the prefaces.



# Chapters 2 and 3

## Chapters 2 and 3 Summary and Analysis

### "Feminism - A Movement to End Sexist Oppression"

This chapter begins with the assertion that it continues to be difficult to find a universally accepted definition of "feminism." She suggests that such a definition cannot be grounded in the desire for equality with men, since there are degrees of "equality" within the male gender; in other words, with which men do women want to have equality? She also suggests that defining feminism as enabling total personal freedom for women is limited - it is, she contends, grounded in preserving the patriarchal, capitalist, individualist status quo (see "Quotes", p. 30). She adds that defining feminism in terms of creating a sense of community for otherwise isolated women has a degree of value, but that the longing for such community is more common in white, middle class (and therefore disenfranchised) women than in non-white, lower class women, who already have a strong sense of community. She goes on to propose an alteration in the use of language around a woman's belief in feminist movement, from "I am a feminist" (which, she suggests, implies a rigid us/them mentality and/or belief system) to "I advocate feminism." This, she contends, suggests participation in a socio-cultural, change-system of activity and belief, as opposed to a more negatively connotated confrontational approach. Finally, the author suggests that feminism can be defined as "the struggle to end sexist oppression" in all its forms: economic, political, social, sexual.

"The Significance of Feminist Movement" In this chapter, the author discusses the potentially far-reaching benefits of feminist movement as defined in the previous chapter. She suggests that while feminism has, in many instances, been portrayed as anti-family (sometimes by feminists themselves, whom the author contends have been angrily determined to create safe, women-only communities), feminism as she conceives it is in fact pro-family. She suggests that in Western society, while the family has for centuries been dominated by a sexist, patriarchal, authoritarian model, feminism has the potential to transform the family into an entity of support, respect, unity and community. She also suggests that the aims and intentions of feminist movement (again, as defined above) are tightly woven with those struggling against classism, racism, and hetero-sexism. All such prejudices, she contends, are ultimately oppressive to humanity - they cannot be prioritized one over the other, one cannot be ignored or rejected in favor of another, and all are ultimately as destructive of society and the individual as the other.

This section is notable for its efforts to define a movement that has, for those within it, been difficult to define (as the author points out), and for those without has proven all too easy to define - in terms (as the author also points out) that have frequently been negative, stereotypical, and almost derisive. This section is also notable for the way in which it systematically both dissects and discards various possibilities for addressing



the question - a technique the author applies throughout the book as she examines the various challenges facing the growth and deepening of feminist movement.

Within that context, there are two particular points of interest. The first is what she proposes as the answer to the question "Are you a feminist?" It could be argued that the proposed answer, "I advocate feminism," is that of a stereotypical, over-intellectual academic; readers might be forgiven if they ask themselves, "Who talks like that?" That, however, is precisely the author's point: people SHOULD talk like that, in a way that invites further conversation without setting up and/or falling into preconceived ideas and attitudes. The second point is the author's dissection of the idea of respect for the family as a core belief and/or activity of feminism. Arguably, contemporary perceptions of feminism contain the (stereotypical?) notion that feminists are anti-family and pro-freedom. In other words, the author's argument might very well be perceived by many as surprising. Her point, however, is that traditional beliefs about the family and the relationships within it are grounded in the same restrictive "traditions" that sustain sexism, racism, class-ism, ageism, and all the other forms of discrimination at work in American society. By suggesting that the family would be the base unit of what she seems to be proposing as a society of compassion, the author is striving to simultaneously alter the perception of the movement held by those without and the purposes of the movement as defined by those within.





# Chapters 4 and 5

## Chapters 4 and 5 Summary and Analysis

### "Sisterhood - Political Solidarity among Women"

The author begins her discussion of the concept of "sisterhood" (unity between women) with the contention that at the beginning of feminist movement, "sisterhood" was defined (by the middle class white women at the forefront of the movement) by a shared sense of victimization. This, she suggests, perpetuates the prevailing sexist patriarchy that "teaches women that to be female is to be a victim." She then explores several ways in which society in general and women within that society absorb and manifest this particular belief, and then goes on to explore other ways in which enacting the concept of true sisterhood (solidarity in the cause of feminism as defined in Chapter 2 above) is challenged through sexism, hetero-sexism, class-ism, and racism. She makes the clear point that all these challenges exist not only in relations between white and non-white women, but in relations between different groups of non-white women, different groups of class and/or race defined women, and women of different sexual orientations. After exploring several examples of all these challenges, the author closes this lengthy chapter with the suggestion that women must learn to explore, understand, and communicate their individual experiences in order to create true sisterhood, solidarity in the face of all forms of oppression.

### "Men - Comrades in Struggle"

At the beginning of this chapter, the author again asserts that a movement towards feminist-oriented liberation can, and will, benefit people of both genders and all ages (see "Quotes," p. 68). She then analyzes various aspects of the relationship between men and feminist movement - in particular, the way in which early feminists acted out of the belief that all men were the enemy without taking into account differences in race or class - working and lower class men in general, she suggests, and particularly non-white men, have themselves been oppressed by the white, male, capitalist patriarchy. While she does make the claim that "all men support and perpetuate sexism and sexist oppression in one form or another...", she does say that "...men can lead life-affirming, meaningful lives without exploiting and oppressing women." She examines at some length the differences between black and white men, pointing out that in many ways black men weren't as threatened by strong women functioning outside traditional gender roles, but that in other ways they were (are?) just as capable of sexual oppression in all its forms (including violence, both sexual and non-sexual). She also points out that for feminist movement to ultimately be successful, not only do men and women alike have to be retrained to not accept and/or live according to traditional sexist attitudes. Men and women alike, of all classes, ages and races, must come to an awareness that sexual oppression damages everyone, and ending it can, and will, be of universal benefit.



The juxtaposition of these two chapters is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, by placing explorations of the way women and men react to feminist movement in neighboring chapters, the author is structurally reinforcing her thematic contention that men and women both are oppressed by the current system. Secondly, parallels in the two spheres are experienced are paralleled in the structure of the chapters themselves; again, the work of early (white bourgeois) feminists is described as limited, again the affects of the overall (capitalistic, imperialist) system are defined in depth, and again the author's version of feminism is presented as the ultimate solution to the problem.

All that said, however, there is a glaring, almost inconceivably bald statement of what the author seems to think of as fact that suggests her theoretical uniting of men and women against the same oppressor is, to be blunt, lip service to her own ideal. This is her contention that "all men support and perpetuate sexism and sexist oppression in one form or another." Firstly, within the context of the book as a whole (which comes across as having been written with a clear, careful eye towards objectivity and reasoned thought), this statement comes across as reactionary, ill-considered, emotional, and just plain sexist. It almost doesn't matter whether the statement is true - the fact that the author makes it as baldly and with the conviction that she does suggests that somewhere, she is unable and/or unwilling to be as objective and as compassionate as the brand of feminism she advocates. Then there is the question of whether the statement IS true. The answer can't possibly be known without exploring the lives and attitudes of every single male on the planet, so aside from the question of how the author can make it at all, to some readers it may raise the question of whether any of the author's other arguments and/or perspectives can be taken seriously. In other words, with this statement the author comes dangerously close to portraying herself as the kind of feminist she so frequently disparages: limited in experience, in perspective, and in desire to expand either. Finally, there is the sense that this kind of absolutist statement is of the sort that she not only criticizes in the philosophy of early feminism, but that she would undoubtedly criticize if it were made of "all" women.



# Chapters 6 and 7

## Chapters 6 and 7 Summary and Analysis

### "Changing Perspectives on Power"

The author begins this chapter with the comment that many active in feminist movement have been, and continue to be, ambivalent about power. "Women interested in revolutionary change," she writes, "were quick to label the exercise of power a negative trait, without distinguishing between power as domination and control over others and power that is creative and life-affirming." She goes on to suggest that many who claim and/or have experienced success in feminism have, in fact, come to embody and/or capitalize upon male definitions of power and success - and in doing so are perpetuating the very sexism they claim to be striving against. She also points out that this societal trend (towards women wanting and claiming power in the same way as men do) reveals that women do not, as both sexist and traditional feminist culture have asserted, that women experience and/or wield power differently. She then suggests that lower and middle class women have, simply in order to survive, exhibited and enacted a kind of power that is both creative and life affirming, simply because they have lived in circumstances that have made dependence on another impossible. Their kind of power, the author suggests, is an ideal, a power of the sort "that will enable [women] to resist exploitation and oppression and free them to work at transforming society so that political and economic structures will exist that benefit women and men equally." One manifestation of that power, the author adds, relates to consumerism. If women, she suggests, resisted the temptations of capitalist culture and purchased only that which was necessary, a manifestation of capitalist, sexist oppression would lose power and transfer it to those who have hitherto been oppressed by it.

### "Rethinking the Nature of Work"

In this chapter, the author focuses again on transformation of thought. In this case, thoughts and perspectives on work. Again she begins with commentary on how early feminism regarded work - again citing Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, she suggests that early (white bourgeois) feminists ennobled work outside the home as freedom from male oppression. This, the author suggests, alienated many lower/middle and/or non-white women from feminism - they already WERE working, and they knew that in most cases it was far more difficult, painful and demeaning than the idealized portraits painted by the feminists. The author also suggests that for these early feminists, successful work was identified with capitalist, patriarchal standards of success (money and power) and adds that housework, which has come to be regarded by feminists and society alike as demeaning, can in fact be far more life affirming and creative than most work outside the home. Finally, she suggests that men and women alike can benefit from a societally-oriented shift in perspective towards work - from an activity that simply brings money to an activity that enables, and enriches, life.



With these two chapters, the author begins a process that continues over the next four chapters - examining and defining specific ways in which feminist movement can transform contemporary oppressive attitudes and behaviors. Structurally, each of the chapters follows the same format - an exploration of the flaws of early feminist thought is followed by a detailed description of how her version of feminism can transcend those flaws and begin to reform/revise society. At this point it's interesting to consider, here and throughout the book, how much the author relies on definitions, or more specifically changing definitions, to define changes in perspective. For example, in Chapter 6 she advocates changing the definition of power, in Chapter 7 the definition of work, and earlier in the book the definition of feminism itself. Ultimately, she's talking about preconception and about habit - about ways of thinking and being that men and women, white and non-white, young and old, have been trained into and have no idea that there are ways out of ... or, in fact, that there NEEDS to be ways out of.

A particularly intriguing element of the author's analysis in Chapter 6 is her contention that women with power tend to not wield that power differently than men. Her suggestion that this can happen in the family and extend all the way up the power ladder to heads of corporations and even of countries is in some ways surprising, and in other ways might confirm the suspicions of those who aren't quite sure that traditional perspectives on women and power are valid. For further consideration of this aspect of the author's argument, see "Topics for Discussion - Consider the book's comments in Chapter 6 ..."



# Chapters 8 and 9

## Chapters 8 and 9 Summary and Analysis

### "Educating Women - A Feminist Agenda"

Here the author points out that for the most part, feminist thought has been circulated via the written word - books, pamphlets, etc. This, she suggests, has limited participation in the movement to those who can read - large numbers of illiterate women (who perhaps, she suggests, have more to gain from true feminist movement) have essentially been excluded. Promoting literacy, she asserts, would go a long way to opening a broader selection of women to feminism and its goals, and to dispelling stereotypes about the movement. She also points out that much feminist writing has been intellectual, academic and/or theoretical, suggesting that this too has excluded a large segment of the female population. This, she adds, is a manifestation of a tension that exists within the larger feminist movement - between those who create and discuss ideas and theories, and those who take action in support of feminist movement. The author suggests that both manifestations of feminism are necessary and important, saying it's important for women of color in particular to transcend their prejudices against academic and/or intellectuals, and suggests that "encouraging women to strive for education, to develop their intellects, should be a primary goal of feminist movement."

### "Feminist Movement to End Violence"

The author begins this chapter with commentary on the nature of violence against women, suggesting that on several levels the practice is a manifestation and perpetuation of traditional patriarchal thought - men have power, women are victims. This, she adds, is true of early feminist thought that placed men's inbred attitudes and aggressions at the heart of the difficult relations between the two genders, alongside women's inbred tendencies towards nurturing and submission. As she extends her analysis to the subject of war, she repeatedly points out that women too have a capacity for violence. There are, she suggests, notable numbers of women in Western society who condone war (and therefore violence), not only in terms of going into combat but in terms of encouraging their sons, husbands, partners, brothers, etc. to do so. She suggests that Western society, men and women alike, has become desensitized to violence, particularly because of its prevalence in the media, adding that in the process violence has become sexually titillating and/or a manifestation of love. Ultimately, she says, violence is in fact a manifestation of imperialism and power, of a hierarchy of control and opposition that exists on every level - from family to community to local government to national government to international relations. "Women and men", she writes, "must oppose the use of violence as a means of social control in all its manifestations ..."



Here again the author explores particular issues in contemporary society in terms of how feminism can and should effect transformation, but here again she undercuts her argument, this time through the manifestation of a probably unintentional irony, apparent in Chapter 8. There, while focusing her ideas and attention onto the question of women's literacy, she writes as she does throughout the book: with an expansive vocabulary, complex sentence structure, and intellectual phrasing. In short, she is doing exactly what she says shouldn't be happening: attempting to communicate ideas in a way would, in all likelihood, fall short of reaching those whom she says need to hear her message most. Again, there is nothing inherently wrong about the way the author writes. As she herself suggests, growth and maturation in feminist movement will only come about through the careful, rational exploration of new ideas, and consideration of ways in which those ideas can be made manifest. However, it is a paradox; how do those ideas get explored and communicated with the necessary intellectual rigor while at the same time making it possible for everyone, educated and non-educated, to understand and/or absorb them? For further consideration of this question, see "Style - Perspective" and "Tone."

Finally, in terms of her discussion of violence (and again in terms of her discussion of parenting in the following chapter), it's interesting to note that the author makes no mention whatsoever of biology - of how men and women (may be? are?) genetically "hard wired," as it were, for certain traits. The point is not made to suggest that the either gender, or both, is particularly hard wired for violence or parenting or for anything. It's important to note, however, that there is some implication of biological factors in the author's comments on how women's experience of both power and violence can be similar to men's. The question is, therefore, why doesn't she go into it any further?



# Chapters 10 and 11

## Chapters 10 and 11 Summary and Analysis

### "Revolutionary Parenting"

As she begins her analysis of feminist ideas of parenting, the author comments that early feminists (again referring to them as white bourgeois women) saw parenthood as a trap, another way the male patriarchy exercised its power (see "Quotes," p. 135). She goes on to explore the tensions between that perspective and deeply ingrained views of motherhood - that it is a woman's unique gift and as such should be held sacred, that the mother is the only parent capable of good parenting, and that the home is the only place where such parenting can occur. She portrays all these beliefs as manifestations of ingrained sexist thought, suggests that breaking down and eliminating such beliefs will go a long way towards eliminating systemic sexism. She offers several examples of the way this breaking down can take place, including encouraging males to practice parenting and to believe that they are capable of GOOD parenting, and also enabling parenting to take place outside the home - in child care centers (staffed by workers of both genders), and in the community.

### "Ending Female Sexual Oppression"

This chapter's discussion of sexuality begins with the author contrasting the concept of early feminist sexual liberty (the choice to have sexual relations with whoever and whenever it's desired) with that of ending sexual oppression, which the author says are not the same thing. The former, she suggests, is in fact another manifestation of women adopting male-defined, heterosexist attitudes (i.e., the belief that unrestricted, male-female sex is the ultimate goal). The latter, she suggests, is in fact true freedom, enabling both men and women to be free FROM those same attitudes. Here, for the first time in the book, she mentions gay men, in this case referring to them as suffering similar oppression to women simply because they don't follow the model of male, essentially sexist heterosexuality (i.e., women are bodies and souls to be used and discarded). The author also discusses concepts of female heterosexuality within feminist movement, suggesting that many heterosexual women feel, for whatever reason, that enjoyment of sexual activity with men is a betrayal of the movement - that true female sexuality excludes men. Ultimately, she contends that a true ending to sexual oppression will not come until men and women alike are freed from having to conform to strict expressions of sexual behavior of ANY orientation.

These two chapters essentially explore the question of gender roles as defined by the patriarchy, and the author's contention that ALL aspects of such roles must be broken down. Here again is the structural motif of first breaking down traditional feminist thought and presenting her own theories of how feminist movement could improve the situation. Here again is a relative lack of discussion of the role of biology in gender relations, suggesting that the author is of the "nurture trumps nature" school of thought.



Meanwhile, a new element introduced in Chapter 11 (albeit briefly) is the perspective and experience of gay men, which some readers may perceive as being late in the action, so to speak. It is the only time in the entire book that male homosexuality is even referenced. It's very telling to note that there are references to lesbians, their perspectives, and the role they play/have played in feminist movement throughout the book. Some readers might be tempted to wonder why the experience of gay men was not at least mentioned in relation to the author's theories of how men too are oppressed by the current dominant system, or why they aren't at least a possible exclusion to the author's contention that "all men" are in some way perpetuating the sexist status quo. Those same readers might reasonably be inclined to wonder whether the author carries with her a (perhaps subconscious) degree of the distaste for male homosexuality that is often found within black communities, those of Jamaican origin in particular.

By far the most interesting aspect of this chapter, however, is the conclusion the author reaches at the conclusion of Chapter 10, where she advocates freedom from any sort of restriction and/or rules of sexual behavior. It could be argued that in espousing this belief, the author is essentially placing herself firmly in the camp of the individualistic, narcissistic, western, philosophy that throughout in the book she says must be broken down.





# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

"Feminist Revolution: Development through Struggle"

The book's final chapter begins with commentary on the belief held by early feminists that demanding necessary change and pointing out areas for that change would be enough to make it happen. The author suggests that this belief was both idealistic and unrealistic, suggesting that necessary, feminism-oriented change can only come about partly through a thorough understanding of the socio-political systems that gave rise and perpetuate sexist attitudes, and partly through a long, painstaking process of changing those attitudes, in both women and men. She suggests that experience of such a process is both foreign and unappealing to society (particularly in the United States), as accustomed as its citizens are to having to wait for anything. She points out, however, that such a process is necessary if deeply held sexist, capitalist, imperialist beliefs are to change for the long term, adding that "the world we have most intimately known, the world in which we feel 'safe' (even if such feelings are based on illusions)" must end "if we are to transform our present reality."

This chapter is essentially an epilogue, urging readers to be simultaneously proactive and patient - to take action, but give the necessary repercussions of those actions time to fully take effect and to realize their potential. Here again she suggests that early feminists got their ideas wrong, and here again she is essentially talking about changing definitions and breaking habits. Finally, here again she expresses her beliefs in coolly defined terms that barely hint of the deep feeling and determination that, it could be reasonably suggested, are necessary if such proactivity and patience are eventually to be rewarded.



# Characters

## The Author

bell hooks (the lower case initials are deliberate) "is the author of numerous critically acclaimed and influential books on the politics of race, gender, class and culture." She is a respected lecturer on feminist theory throughout the United States and around the world, and has published several books on feminism in addition to this one. Her theoretical and experiential perspective is defined as much by her race (she is African-American) as by her gender; her essential hypothesis is that early feminist movement was defined solely by the desires and perspectives of members of the white, upper-middle class, unaware (as the author contends) of the limits of both their experience and their ways of thinking. Practical manifestations of that hypothesis are then defined in her writing by considerable thought: she is a university educated academic, which seems (at least to some degree) to set her apart from the women she seems determined to help.

The point is not made to suggest that she lacks actual experience living as a black woman in a society (the United States) that is systematically both racist and sexist, but rather to suggest that her analysis and her proposals for change have developed in an environment just slightly removed from the every day. The phrase "ivory tower" is often used to describe academics living and working in the seeming isolation of a somewhat idealized university environment. At the risk of sounding racist, but to refer to the title of a popular magazine for African-Americans, perhaps a phrase that might apply more appropriately to the author's situation and perspective is "ebony tower." For further consideration of the author's perspective and point of view see "Style - Point of View."

## Women of the Margins

The author contends that women outside the societal "center" (as perceived by American society at large - white, upper middle class, educated) have for the most part been left out of feminist movement as the result of the circumstances of early feminism. Over the years, the author suggests, these "women of the margins" have made their perspectives and experience known and felt within feminism. As a result, she adds, feminist movement has developed deeper understanding of what is needed, why it's needed, and what can be done to meet those needs.

## Betty Friedan

Betty Friedan is the author of "The Feminine Mystique" (see "Objects/Places"), one of the earliest and most influential books on feminist movement. For the author, both Friedan and her book are symbolic of the problems in perspective embodied in the movement from its earliest days to the present - that it is essentially a movement of



upper middle class white women grounded in a discontent that in essence is as sexist, imperialistic and capitalistic as the system it's trying to change.

## **Women of Privilege**

Where the author presents herself as an advocate for "women of the margins" (see above), she presents Betty Friedan (see above) as an advocate for "women of privilege." These, the author suggests, are white, upper middle class women who, at the time of the early feminist movement, became discontented with what they perceived as the limitations of their role, function and experience and who, as the result of that discontent, strove to become more like the men who they believe oppressed them. This, the author contends, sent feminist movement into a direction that instead of changing the system, reinforced it and eventually damaged both the movement's progress and reputation.

## **White Men**

The author suggests that white men as a group are not necessarily the oppressive monsters that early feminism made them out to be. She suggests that while large numbers of white men are, in fact, oppressive on many levels (economic, sexual, political, emotional, physical), there are also large numbers of white men who are just as oppressed by the system as women. Feminist movement, she writes, can and will benefit these men as much as it can and will benefit women.

## **Black Men**

In terms of black men, the author suggests that while they have a degree or two more power than black women simply because they are male, they are for the most part just as oppressed by the capitalist, imperialist, racist, sexist American system as black women. Again, she suggests that feminist movement (with its ultimate purpose of ending the tyranny of that system) can and will benefit black men as much as it will women.

## **Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou**

These two well known black women authors are cited by the author as cautionary voices against non-compassionate thinking and action.

## **Rita Mae Brown, Leah Fritz, Sookie Stambler, Carol Ehrlich,**

This group of women is among several well known feminist theoreticians and activists, black and white alike, cited by the author throughout the book.



## **Barbara Smith, Cathy McCandless, Carol Hanisch, Phyllis Ches**

This second group of women, like the first above, have had works cited by the author throughout this book. It's important to note that not all the women authors cited write in support of the author's theories. She frequently cites works by authors whose own theories oppose and/or contradict her own.

## **Barbara Ehrenreich and Karin Stallard, Susan Schecter, Susan**

Women in this third group, like the women in the two groups above, are cited by the author in her analysis. It's important to note that the women in all three groups are ostensibly American, writing from a uniquely American perspective. The few cited writers working from a non-American perspective are identified below.

## **Christine Delphy, Antoinette Fouque, Heleieth Saffioty**

These three writers cited by the author are non-American in perspective, and are three of the relatively few examples of the author's efforts at presenting a broader, international perspective on her theories.

## **Mihaelo Markovic, Bob Greene, John Hodge, Paul Hornacek**

This is a list of male writers cited by the author in her analysis. As noted above, it's important to remember that not all of these individuals write in support of the author's theories; there are occasions in which she presents quotes in order to rebut them.



# Objects/Places

## The United States

America is the social, political, and economic setting for the author's experience and analysis. She argues throughout the book that America's culture is fundamentally sexist, and prejudiced in favor of the economically advantaged and the economically driven, of the mature and the heterosexual, and controlled by those who see power as both a means and an end. This complexity of oppressions, the author suggests, is the true system against which feminist movement must struggle and which it must cause to change at a fundamental, systemic level.

## Margin and Center

Within American society, the author suggests, there are two broadly defined groups of people: those who live according to the rules set in place by the system (the "center"), and those who live outside those rules (the "margin"). The author's theoretical assertion throughout the book is that feminist movement is a movement from margin to center, a movement of empowerment for ALL on the margins, not just women

## The Feminine Mystique

This book, written by feminist author Betty Friedan (see "Important People"), was one of the first, and continues to be one of the most notable, books ever written on the subject of feminism. The author contends that its theoretical and practical premise is essentially flawed - that both are defined by the discontent, and geared towards the empowerment, of white, upper middle class women (see "Important People - Women of Privilege").

## Feminism

Difficulty arriving at a broadly applicable and acceptable definition of feminism is, the author suggests, one of the fundamental problems of the movement, and one that must be addressed before it can (will?) accomplish its goals. For the author's definition of feminism, see Chapter 2.

## The Redstocking Manifesto

According to the author, this document was "one of the first written statements that endeavored to make an anti-male stance a central feminist position ..." For further consideration of this aspect of the movement, see Chapter 4.



## **The Family and Housework**

The family, the author contends, is one of several aspects of female life within American society and culture that must be re-evaluated and re-defined in broader terms relating to the goals of feminist movement. It must, she suggests, be held as a nurturing, life-affirming unit for men, women and children, rather than as a manifestation of age and/or gender defined power. Housework, she adds, must be regarded in the same way: as a chance for any home-maker, male or female, young or old, to contribute to a nurturing, peaceful, creatively-stimulating environment without any societally-conditioned notions of control.

## **Sisterhood**

The author writes frequently, but particularly in Chapter 4, that re-evaluation of the notion of "sisterhood" (common ties among women regardless of gender / age / class / education differences) is as essential as a re-evaluation of family. Too many relationships between women, she writes, are defined by expectations and rules placed on them by the existing system. Such relationships, she suggests, need to be defined by what is common rather than by what is different.

## **Power**

The author suggests that power is, like so many other aspects of contemporary society and culture, defined by the current socio-political-economic system; which is in turn defined by sexism, racism, classism, and ageism. Notions of power, and of the way it manifests, can and must be redefined along the general lines of feminist theory - as activity and perspective that is life affirming and nurturing.

## **The Culture of Violence / Pornography**

Both these aspects of contemporary culture are pointed to by the author as manifestations of the dangers associated with life in the current system of sexism, racism, classism, etc. Violence, she contends, is glorified and romanticized, while pornography objectifies and degrades sexuality. In short, the author suggests, both violence and pornography are manifestations of inappropriate power, desensitizing those who participate in it, turn a blind eye to it, condone it and/or are exploited by it to some fundamental human rights - to respect, to integrity, and to life. Feminist movement, she contends, can and eventually will enable men and women alike to break free of the psycho-spiritual chains that violence and pornography place on their bodies, minds and spirits.

## Literacy

The author suggests that a key means of fostering improvements in all the above areas - in essence, to bring awareness of feminist theory and to put it into practice - is to increase literacy among women. For further consideration of this aspect of the author's theories, see Chapter 8.



# Themes

## The Necessity for / Value of Feminist Movement

This is the author's over-arching theme. Feminist movement, she contends, as defined on the terms she proposes, has the potential to transform contemporary American society on almost every level. She suggests that such movement (characterized as the "movement to end sexist oppression" - see Chapter 2) has the potential to free America from a number of profoundly disempowering, deeply entrenched and functioning (not necessarily functional) perspectives: racial, social, political, economic, moral and sexual, as well as those relating to age and gender. Feminist movement is, in other words, at the core of profound, not to mention essential, cultural transformation.

A cornerstone of the author's point is the belief that men as well as women can, will, and should benefit from feminist movement. She repeatedly suggests that if women break down repressive gender value systems maintained socially and culturally for centuries, men will also be freed from what oppresses them - exploitative economic structures, repressive gender roles, demeaning racial positioning, etc. It's important to note that the author acknowledges that men, particularly white men and those who think like them (including significant numbers of black men and women both white and black), are responsible for perpetuating those various systems of oppression. She also contends, however, that once that sort of thinking breaks down, not to mention the actions triggered by that thinking, true freedom for all on the so-called "margins" of society - the young, the very old, the non-white, the non-male, the non-heterosexual, the non-wealthy - under all circumstances will be the result.

## Americanism

### Americanism

Underpinning (some non-Americans might say undermining) the author's presentation is her perspective as a black female citizen of the United States. This is significant on a couple of levels. The first is more relevant academically than ideologically - of the dozens of authors whose work she cites and/or comments on, only three are specifically non-American. This creates the sense that the author is either uninterested in or unaware of feminist theory and/or practice in other cultures. In and of itself, this is not necessarily or automatically a bad thing. The author's experience and understanding is of a particular situation, being a black woman in America, which is arguably different from being a black woman (or a black man or child for that matter) anywhere else. Nowhere but in America is there such a volatile mix of idealized capitalism, ostensible freedom, culturally ingrained racism, and spiritual/religious conservatism. Additionally, nowhere is there such aggressive, vocal, constitutionally mandated advocacy for all of them.





In short, the author is perfectly entitled to write about what she knows, understands, and is concerned about. There is also the sense, however, that her hypothesis and theories of transformation might carry more weight if they were examined within a more expansive socio-political context. Such sweeping statements as "all men support and perpetuate sexism and sexist oppression in one form or another..." (Chapter 5) might come across as less narrowly judgmental and more archetypal than they tend to do now. In other words, this is a profoundly American book that, while examining the American aspects of what is arguably a world-wide movement effectively and with passion, does itself something of a disservice by aiming its potentially healing, laser-like attention so narrowly. For further consideration of this aspect of the novel, see "Topics for Discussion - What is the state of feminist movement ..."

## Correcting Flaws in Early Feminist Thought

Throughout the book, in almost every chapter, the author develops her theory that a certain narrowness of perspective defined early feminist theory and practice, to the point of almost debilitating the movement before it got off the ground. She portrays that narrowness as emerging from the experience of those who initiated the movement - white, upper middle class women (like Betty Friedan - see Chapter 1, and also "Important People" and "Objects/Places - The Feminine Mystique"). Specifically, the author suggests that early feminist thought neglected, perhaps deliberately, the experience of non-white, non-educated, non-affluent women. This, she contends, led many such women not only to avoid participation in the movement but also to active rejection of it. Black women in particular, she suggests, were put off by early feminism's rejection of family, of its idealized focus on getting women jobs and employment equality, and perhaps most importantly, on its initial rejection of any perspectives other than its own - that men were the enemy, but what they had achieved and had access to was the goal.

At the same time as she points out the weaknesses in early feminist thought, the author offers examples of what she believes feminist theory should be instead and how it should manifest in action - examples formulated, it seems, in direct and deliberate reaction to those weaknesses. It's important to note that the author makes what seems to be significant effort to speak as respectfully as possible of early feminists/feminism - a difficult balance to walk when she is being unequivocally critical of both.



# Style

## Perspective

As discussed in "Important People - The Author" and in "Themes - Americanism," the essential perspective at work in this book is that of an intellectual, university educated, African-American woman. This perspective is grounded in an experience of the downsides of each - the criticism resulting from being intellectual, the disapproval resulting from exploring feminist theory more than living its practice, and the struggle of living as a black woman under the systemic racism and sexism of American society. Her reasons for writing, therefore, are to explore ways of rising above those downsides, for herself and other women whose lives are lived on the so-called "margins" of society. There is the clear sense that on some level, her intended audience is indeed those other marginalized women, but in terms of the execution of her work and theories, there is also the sense that she isn't quite reaching far enough, or in the right way. Specifically, her use of language and style of writing (see "Tone" below) are both somewhat bookish, with the result that many of the women she says must be reached (the under-educated in particular - see Chapter 8) would, in all likelihood, not be reached. Here, then, is the paradox inherent in the book's essential being - while the author calls for increased ties among women, the way she presents her call would, in all likelihood, alienate (at least to some degree) the very women she says are most important to reach. Does that mean that ultimately she is writing, perhaps against her best intentions, for an audience of fellow academics? The unfortunate answer would appear to be yes.

## Tone

As discussed in "Perspective" above, the tone of the book is distinctly dry and academic. Language use is frequently complex, and tends to a heightened sophistication in both structure and vocabulary ("praxis" seems to be a favorite word; the author uses it frequently in each chapter when the word "practice" would serve just as well). It's interesting to note that on the few occasions when the author relates personal experience to the theories she's exploring, her use of language doesn't change, almost as though she's trying to both view and narrate her subjective experience in objective, more distant terms. This distance of tone carries through to her discussion of the theories themselves, offering little that seems anecdotal, or that would be personally relevant, to the people that she suggests her theories are intended to help. In short, and as discussed in "Perspective" above, this distant/objective tone would, in all likelihood, be somewhat alienating for the author's perspective audience - if, that is, her intended audience is in fact the marginalized women she claims to want to help.

Another potentially alienating factor is a certain sense of self-satisfaction that creeps into the work, a feeling that self-confidence has evolved into self-righteousness. Blanket



statements like "all men support and perpetuate sexism and sexist oppression in one form or another..." (Chapter 5) and "the blueprint for feminist movement presented in [this book] is amazingly sound ..." tend, in fact, to resemble the sort of statements made by the early feminist movement that the author takes such extensive pains to rebut. It could be argued that such expressions of conviction are part of the author's point, that feminist movement will neither advance nor take hold without firmness of purpose. It could also be argued, however, that there are ways to express such purpose that don't sound quite so much like the kind of imperialistic judgmental-ness the author claims to be struggling against.

## Structure

The book is quite linear in structure, essentially consisting of a series of essays exploring a particular manifestation of the central theme (see "Themes - The Necessity for / Value of Feminist Movement"). Within each essay, the author follows a similar pattern - she sets out the thesis of that particular chapter (how its subject relates to the central theme), and briefly explores her prime sub-theme (how early feminism was flawed in relation to its consideration of that chapter's subject). The main body of each chapter is taken up with exploration of the ways that chapter's subject is experienced in contemporary American society and how feminist movement can, could, and should change that experience. Each chapter concludes with a paragraph summing up what has been presented.

This clarity, specificity and uniformity of structure is undeniably academic in flavor. There is the sense of "dissertation" about the work, a sense heightened by the extensive footnoted quotes throughout (the book is both thesis, development of personal ideas, and synthesis, incorporation and analysis of the ideas of others). The positive result is one of clarity, thoroughness and detail. The negative result is dryness, dispassion, and a certain sense of rigidity, all of which combine to undermine (to a certain degree) the author's contention that the purpose of feminist movement is not just to end sexist oppression but to promote a nurturing, life affirming environment. In other words, all three elements of style (perspective, tone, structure) suggest a certain dictatorial-ness rather than nurturing, that the author is perhaps keeping the emotional value of her work and life at bay - the value that might make that work more accessible to those whose lives she claims to want to change.



## Quotes

"Feminist struggle takes place anytime anywhere any female or male resists sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. Feminist movement happens when groups of people come together with an organized strategy to take action to eliminate patriarchy." Preface to the Second Edition, p.xi.

"...survival depended upon an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of [the] whole." Preface to the First Edition, p. xvi.

"Sexism as a system of domination is institutionalized, but it has never determined in an absolute way the fate of all women in this society. Being oppressed means the absence of choices ... many women in this society do have choices (as inadequate as they are); therefore exploitation and discrimination are words that more accurately describe the lot of women collectively in the United States." p. 5

"...people who are truly oppressed know it even though they may not be engaged in organized resistance or are unable to articulate in written form the nature of their oppression." p. 11.

"Racist stereotypes of the strong, superhuman black woman are operative myths in the minds of many white women, allowing them to ignore the extent to which black women are likely to be victimized in this society, and the role white women may play in the maintenance and perpetuation of that victimization." p. 15

"As long as these two groups [white women and black men], or any group, defines liberation as gaining social equality with ruling-class white men, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation and oppression of others." p. 16

"...many women active in feminist movement were interested in reform as an end in itself, not as a stage in the progression towards revolutionary transformation." p. 21

"When women internalized the idea that describing their own woe was synonymous with developing a critical political consciousness, the progress of feminist movement was stalled." p. 26

"Exploited and oppressed groups of women are usually encouraged by those in power to feel that their situation is hopeless, that they can do nothing to break the pattern of domination." p. 28

"The ethics of Western society informed by imperialism and capitalism ... teach us that the individual good is more important than the collective good, and consequently that individual change is of greater significance than collective change." p. 30

"...the failure to emphasize the necessity for mass-based movement, grass-roots organizations, and sharing with everyone the positive significance of feminist movement



helped marginalize feminism by making it appear relevant only to those women who joined organizations." p. 35

"By challenging Western philosophical beliefs that impress on our consciousness a concept of family life that is essentially destructive, feminism would liberate family so that it could be an affirming, positive kinship structure with no oppressive dimensions based on sex differentiation, sexual preference, etc." p. 39

"...sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures; by the individuals who dominate, exploit or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo." p. 43

"Racism is fundamentally a feminist issue because it is so interconnected with sexist oppression." p. 53

"Divisions between women of color will not be eliminated until we assume responsibility for uniting (not solely on the basis of resisting racism) to learn about our cultures, to share our knowledge and skills, and to gain strength from our diversity." p. 57.

"If women always seek to avoid confrontation, to always be 'safe', we may never experience any revolutionary change, any transformation, individually or collectively." p.67

"Feminism defined as a movement to end sexist oppression enables women and men, girls and boys, to participate equally in revolutionary struggle." p. 68

"Naming oppressive realities, in and of itself, has not brought about the kinds of changes for oppressed groups that it can for more privileged groups, who command a different quality of attention." p. 76.

"Since men are the primary agents maintaining and supporting sexism and sexist oppression, [these] can only be successfully eradicated if men are compelled to assume responsibility for transforming their consciousness and the consciousness of society as a whole." p. 83

"Women interested in revolutionary change were quick to label the exercise of power a negative trait, without distinguishing between power as domination and control over others and power that is creative and life-affirming."

"Women need to know that they can reject the powerful's definition of their reality - that they can do so even if they are poor, exploited, or trapped in oppressive circumstances." p. 92

"As long as the United States is an imperialist, capitalist, patriarchal society, no large female majority can enter the existing ranks of the powerful." p. 94



"By grouping white women of all classes with non-white people in affirmative action programs, a system was effectively institutionalized that allowed employers to continue discriminating against non-white peoples ..." p. 99

"By concentrating solely on ending male violence against women, feminist activists may ... encourage women to resist male coercive domination without encouraging them to oppose all forms of coercive domination." p. 119

"... we must resist the socialization and brainwashing that teaches passive acceptance of violence in daily life, that tells us violence can be eliminated with violence ... women ... must withdraw support for war by working to transform passive acceptance of violence as a means of social control in everyday life." p. 131

"Early feminist attacks on motherhood alienated masses of women ... especially poor and/or non-white women, who find parenting one of the few interpersonal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated." p. 135

"The focus on 'men' and 'male behavior' has overshadowed emphasis on women developing themselves ... so that we can begin making the cultural transformations that would pave the way for the establishment of a new social order." p. 161.



## Topics for Discussion

Consider this quote from the preface to the second edition - "Feminist movement continues to be one of the most powerful struggles for social justice taking place in the world today." Do you believe this statement to be true? Why or why not?

Consider the book's theories on the relationship between "margin" and "center." What other social/ethnic groups might these theories apply to? In what ways have these groups attempted to move from the margins to the center? In what ways have they preserved and/or celebrated their status on the margins? Have they compromised their essential identity by moving from the margin to the center? Have they improved their overall status and/or circumstances within society? Both? Neither? Explain your answer.

Consider the book's comments in Chapter 6 on the nature of female power. Discuss these comments in the context of female political life in the 20th Century: In England, the prime minister-ship of Margaret Thatcher; in America, the presidential candidacy of Hillary Clinton; in India, the prime minister-ship of Indira Gandhi; in Pakistan, the activism of Benazir Bhutto; in Germany, the chancellorship of Angela Merkel.

In what ways do the lives and activities of these powerful women reflect the author's concerns? Prove their validity? Disprove them?

In what ways does contemporary popular culture reflect the author's concerns in Chapter 6 on the nature of power? Consider the images of women in music videos, television, video games, films (action, romantic comedy, etc.). Do these images reflect genuine female power? Or are they in fact manifestations of the author's point that for many, feminist movement simply translates into women becoming more like their white male oppressors?

What is the state of feminist movement, and of women in general, in non-American cultures? Is there, for example, the tight relationship between racism, sexism and classism that the author describes here? What models of feminist movement might effectively be incorporated into American feminist movement?

What is your personal experience of racism (either as a recipient or as a participant in racist behavior)? Of sexism? Of ageism? Of class-ism? How did it make you feel? How have your feelings and opinions changed as the result of encountering this book? What do you think you can/could/do to combat the forms of discrimination you've experienced?

Do you agree with the author that the circumstances that give rise to these forms of discrimination is systemic? Why or why not?

Consider the author's definition of Western Ethics (see "Quotes" - p. 30). Which do you think is more important, the collective good or the individual good? Why or why not? In what ways do these two goods influence each other, in either positive or negative ways?