

# **Where We Stand: Class Matters Study Guide**

**Where We Stand: Class Matters by Bell hooks**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Where We Stand: Class Matters Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1: Making the Personal Political: Class in the Family.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2: Coming to Class Consciousness.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3: Class and the Politics of Living Simply.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4: Money Hungry.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5: The Politics of Greed.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 6: Being Rich.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 7: The Me-Me Class: The Young and the Ruthless.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 8: Class and Race: The New Black Elite.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 9: Feminism and Class Power.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 10: White Poverty: The Politics of Invisibility.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 11: Solidarity with the Poor.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 12: Class Claims: Real Estate Racism.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 13: Crossing Class Boundaries.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 14: Living without Class Hierarchy.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>



## Plot Summary

Bell Hooks' book, "Where We Stand: Class Matters," is an account of Bell's personal and professional journey in a society that is plagued by classism, racism and sexism. Bell was born and raised in a segregated black community in a small town in Kentucky. Although race was discussed rather overtly, the subject of class was never broached. Bell's parents were hard-working people who had nothing left for luxuries after providing the basic essentials for their seven children. Bell and her siblings would long for material things—clothes and expensive gadgets—that other children had but instinctively knew that they could not have them. The scars from unanswered dreams and shattered hopes provide a tough lesson for a child and, as Bell can testify, one that lingers for years.

Bell was the first person in her family to attend college. Bell's freshman year at school was spent at an all girls college because it was close to home and her parents would not have to pay any tuition. Bell was quick to recognize that the all-white school was not the right environment for her. An astute teacher recognized Bell's intellect and was instrumental in getting her a scholarship to Stanford University. Her father was against her going that far away and her mother feared she'd be exposed to racial abuse at the upper class institution.

Bell instinctively knew that Stanford was the right place for her and although she did confront racism and classism, Bell was able to use those encounters as learning experiences—experiences from which she would draw years later when she became a renowned writer on a variety of societal issues. Bell became involved with a fellow student and lived with him for twelve years. They bought a house together and when they broke up, Bell began to feel the economic crunch a woman who separates from her husband or partner encounters as a single woman. She went on to earn a doctorate in literature and accepted a low-paying teaching position at Yale University. Later, she transferred to Oberlin College where she received a pay increase and was able to save enough money to buy a small house with all cash. After these tenures as a professor, Bell finally was able to pursue the career of her dreams—writing. She has written around thirty books, most of which cover important issues facing society.

Through her journey, Bell stayed true to her roots and values. Although she had climbed up the ladder of success, she was careful never to forget who she was and remain connected to her past. Bell wrote "Where We Stand: Class Matters," based largely on her personal experience of moving up in class status due to her phenomenal successes. Although she earned a lofty spot in the upper class, she found barriers still existed due to her race. She also found that relatives and friends from her past were confused and suspicious of her. They questioned why she still lived conservatively although she had the money to live in a much grander manner. Some distrusted her, thinking that ultimately she would abandon them for her high class colleagues.

In addition to her other work, Bell Hooks is also a renowned feminist and, as a black woman who worked her way up, has never forgotten her humble beginnings. She is an

advocate of the redistribution of wealth which, she feels, would provide the answer to global poverty without causing the poor to feel shame. Bell Hooks has drawn from her personal experiences and professional background and education to write this book which brings to the forefront the damage that classism does on an individual and communal level.



# Chapter 1: Making the Personal Political: Class in the Family

## Chapter 1: Making the Personal Political: Class in the Family Summary and Analysis

Bell Hooks recalls that her parents and siblings lived only for a brief period in a completely concrete house. It was a cold house and no memories about her time there lingered. Although the lack of money was always a main concern, Bell's mother fought hard to keep the worry from her children. Bell's father had married her mother when she was a teenage divorcee with two daughters. Bell's father had been a playboy and confirmed bachelor, but he was so taken with the teenage divorcee that he gave up his freedom. Bell suspected that her mother was pregnant when they married. Even though the concrete house was not a dream house, Bell's mother was finally out of her mother's domain and the tyranny that existed there. She was excited about having her own household and determined to make her second marriage work. Bell's father let it be known right away that he was the head of the household.

Bell's grandmother, Baba, was considered the beloved devil in the family—having a quick tongue and quicker temper, people learned to steer clear of her. Daddy Gus was unlike his wife, a quiet man who followed orders. He was the favored grandparent. The house was crowded with many relatives, none of whom had regular jobs or social security numbers. Baba's wrath was easily incurred if a child touched an object without permission or wanted something she shouldn't have. The child in Baba's house was truly seen and not heard.

Bell lived in Baba's house for a short period. She learned there that old objects were better than new, and found ones were better than bought. Bell figured out later that the family couldn't afford new, bought items. Every object had a value and a story to be told about it. Baba was illiterate but was a master storyteller. Bell learned from Baba that by looking deeply into something, one could find both its beauty and its story. The grounds of Baba's house were filled with flowers and vegetable plants. The lure of life was everywhere and in everything. Bell and her siblings and cousins were thrilled when they were chosen to collect fresh eggs from the henhouse.

Although conversations about aesthetics and meaning were rampant, talk of real jobs and class were non-existent. While Bell's mother spent her adolescence wanting to run away from Baba's house and seek a new life, no one talked about class. No one floated the concept about black agrarian southerners living in apartheid. Baba was adamant that the most certain way to fail in life was to let white people, or anyone, control your mind and body. Bell's father was contemptuous about the hippie lifestyle of his wife's family and was determined not to let his children be raised that way.



Bell and her family moved from the country to a house in the city which Bell found more memorable than the family's time in the concrete house. As the children grew older, there was more open talk about money and race, but no discussion about class. Bell's mother stressed the importance of while her father felt that an over-educated female was not attractive to men. The only respectable women in Bell's neighborhood were schoolteachers. These women lived alone in a world that considered it a tragedy for a woman to be alone and childless. Although desegregation laws were in place, they did not break the barriers that existed for southern blacks. Bell's parents provided wonderful role models for hard work for working class people. Bell instinctively knew that the issues of racism and classism had to be confronted to understand her place in the world



## Chapter 2: Coming to Class Consciousness

### Chapter 2: Coming to Class Consciousness Summary and Analysis

Bell's mother manipulated her out of wanting things they couldn't afford. Rather than being honest and telling Bell that they cannot afford the yellow dress she wanted, she led Bell to believe that no one would be caught dead in it. Though not her intention, this practice led Bell to question her ideas and thoughts for years to come. It taught Bell to settle, make do rather than reach beyond herself. Bell's first college was not one of her choosing but rather one that was nearby and basically cost-free to her parents. Bell was on a full scholarship in an all-white girl's college. She was not accepted by the other girls and lived an isolated existence. The girls that Bell befriended her first year were from working class backgrounds, not from wealthy backgrounds like many of the students.

A professor took note of Bell's intellect and suggested that Stanford University in California would be the ideal place for her. Her father was against such transfer even though it would be on a full scholarship. His child would have been too far away from home in Kentucky. Bell's mother's "class shame" made it difficult for her to accept that her daughter could attend a lofty university like Stanford. Bell and her family had been raised to stay isolated from other people in the community and to keep their family's business private.

As testimony of their isolation, Bell cited the time she was allowed to visit a cousin in Chicago. The family was so backward that the name of the city, "Chicago" seemed foreign and was difficult for them to pronounce. But it was on this trip that Bell heard her first family discussion of classism. Her relatives encouraged her—the world was open to her intellect and artistry. Bell had a talent for painting, but when she expressed a desire to be an artist at home, she was ridiculed—black folks don't make livings as artists. Inspired by her cousin, Bell decided on her own that she would indeed attend Stanford.

Bell felt lost and alone when she arrived at Stanford. She was terribly homesick and questioned her decision. Her greeting by fellow students was the polar opposite of her first university experience. At Stanford she was included and invited everywhere, although she suspected some of the attention was patronizing. Bell found that students from wealthy backgrounds, both black and white, had a prejudice against the working class.

Bell was selective in choosing her companions throughout her years at Stanford. During graduate school, she came to realize that she would not be accepted by the elites until she would be willing to leave her past behind. She would have to reconcile herself to the fact that the present was the only worthwhile reality. But Bell could not fathom

disclaiming her past. When Bell received her graduate degree, she vowed to keep her allegiance to the working class and to the values of hard work, honesty and respect for all. The issue of class was a matter that Bell continued to be confronted with and one which often led her to re-examine her feelings.





# Chapter 3: Class and the Politics of Living Simply

## Chapter 3: Class and the Politics of Living Simply Summary and Analysis

As a child in church, Bell was taught that the poor were closer to God because they lived simply. The scriptures told her that Jesus said that whatever is done for the least is done for Him. In Bell's community the sharing of resources was common. This sharing was admirable but no one made an overt connection to how capitalism affected everyone's life and how slavery had paved the way for it. Neighbors gave Bell's family clothing and other items when there was a need just as Bell's family gave such gifts when others were without. The poor were often ridiculed and humiliated. The only result Bell observed as a poor child was that poverty caused shame on an individual as well as a communal level.

Bell and her siblings were taught not to put themselves ahead of anyone and that material wealth had no virtue. At Stanford, Bell was shocked to learn that the idealized rich of her imagination were human—as weak and cruel and unsure as everyone else. Those students who considered themselves socialists were not interested in working class students, only in leading them. Bell read Marx and Gramsci but their theories held no tools for confronting classism in daily life. In the fifties and sixties, all people were taught in their churches was to be charitable and the pursuit of wealth could lead to evil. The seventies heralded in the dawning of the age of self-interest and with it, the conventional wisdom that everyone could be wealthy through hard work.

The devaluation of the poor coincided with a decline in religion. New age thought argued that the poor were to blame for their plight and the rich were therefore exonerated of any responsibility. Many, including the corporate world and mass media, believed and supported the concept that everything should be meted out according to wealth. To be poor in the U.S. was to be the object of shame and ridicule. To support the poor in the time when everyone was being told to fear poverty was not easy. David Hilifiker argued that the way to help the poor was to convince the rich that they could make money by investing in poor neighborhoods. Solidarity with the poor was the only practical way to decrease crime and violence and eliminate exploitation.



# Chapter 4: Money Hungry

## Chapter 4: Money Hungry Summary and Analysis

Children raised in poor homes were intimately aware of the pain of doing without material goods, as were children in households where the man frugally controlled all the funds. Many women, especially in past decades, were given allowances and did not know how much their husbands made. Bell's father thought money should only be spent for essentials while her mother saw the need for some luxuries. The children in such families were made aware of the burden they placed on their parents' economics causing them lasting shame and guilt. At Stanford, Bell felt the sting of having unstylish clothing but she had learned from her mother to make the most of the least. Bell would search the thrift stores for clothes that were both stylish and inexpensive.

Bell and her male partner bought a house together. There she learned to budget and to keep a household account for emergencies. There were still arguments over money. Bell had to work twice as hard as her male partner did for the same amount of money. It was a sexist society and earnings were not equitable among men and women. When the relationship ended after twelve years, Bell suffered a major income drop. She could not keep the house they had bought, and really good jobs were difficult to come by. She finished her doctorate and took an assistant teaching job at Yale. Bell's major goal was to pay off the debts she had accumulated while in her relationship. It was a struggle, but she learned to live within her means. She took a slightly better job at Oberlin College and saved enough that she was able to buy a small house with all cash. While working in the day as a professor, she spent off hours pursuing her real dream of becoming a writer.

In Bell's upward mobility from poor to upper middle class, she learned she had to step back at times and re-check her value system. She noticed that the more money she made as a professor and then as a writer, the more she began to want things that she had been fine without. In a perfect world, she felt that rich and poor alike should not over-identify with material objects. The resistance to do so was a strong challenge to the culture of greed.



# Chapter 5: The Politics of Greed

## Chapter 5: The Politics of Greed Summary and Analysis

Greed is part of human nature, but most parents do not want to raise their children to be greedy. The church was one of the only places where the evils of greed had been discussed. With New Age thinking that everyone can have whatever they want, fueled by the decline of the church, concern for the ethics of greed is fading. The eighties saw communal concern for justice and social welfare replaced by "conservative notions of individual responsibility and self-centered materialism." (page 64)

The idealism of students to battle oppressive capitalism quickly faded with the opportunities for wealth and advancement they encountered in the real world. These individuals represent the dawning of a generation truly blind to sex or race—they are willing to abandon their own race or gender for their own self-promotion. This new way of thinking solidified the growing concept that anyone can make it regardless of their origins. The media was complicit in this overblown notion by citing the examples of the relatively few successes of blacks and women. By propagandizing, that success was there for the taking, the focus on social justice withered.

Greed and desire for material items fostered crime and violence in poor communities. When the promised opportunities for wealth did not materialize, the drug culture offered an alternative path to the good life. Drug dealing provided a way for the poor and uneducated to mimic the life of the rich and educated—a lifestyle that is pimped through advertising. The notion that the wealthy life is a possibility for everyone took hold on society, conservatives pushed for an end to the "welfare state," not taking into consideration the true cost that poverty and crime would have on the nation as a whole.

One commonality that exists between the poor and rich is greed. Greed is displayed before the nation by elected officials whose main concerns are often lining their own pockets. Everyone must recognize the greed, or potential that exists for it, within himself in order to be prepared to battle against it.

# Chapter 6: Being Rich

## Chapter 6: Being Rich Summary and Analysis

Although the rich don't talk openly about their riches, they are obsessed to maintain and increase their wealth. Most poor and working class people do not know rich people. However, the media, especially television, has shown the non-rich just how much they don't have while at the same time promoting the myth that the U.S. is a classless society. TV portrays the rich as heroes whose main concern is to help the poor. This whitewash disguises the reality that the rich are mostly concerned with themselves and their riches.

Sit-coms never depict the reality of the poor; instead, greed for good ratings produces shows with upper-middle-class young people who are wealthy and privileged. Talk shows that portray rich people and celebrities as everyday people with the same problems as everyone else have enhanced the false notion of a classless society. The media made Princess Diana into a rags-to-riches story when in fact she was a member of the British aristocracy. The fascination with her was never discussed within the parameters of class, an omission which is blatantly dishonest.

Just as many poor only know other poor people, the rich are happy to be isolated with other wealthy people. By maintaining this isolation from other classes, they are required to answer fewer questions about their status and feel greater security in maintaining their wealth. While traditional Christian teachings stressed the foibles of the rich, some modern spirituality depicts the rich as the chosen ones. The solidarity of the rich allows them the fantasy that they have no connection or responsibility to the under-classes. This nation is rich enough for everyone to have access to success and prosperity. When there is acceptance that abundance can be shared, the rich will be free of their fear of losing their wealth and the poor will not be the victims of the greedy.



# Chapter 7: The Me-Me Class: The Young and the Ruthless

## Chapter 7: The Me-Me Class: The Young and the Ruthless Summary and Analysis

Most foreigners think that everyone in the United States is rich. Much of this fantasy has been created through the media, especially by television. Even if one turns off the TV, he is surrounded by advertising and reminders of the opulence and materialism that awaits us. Research shows that the favorite pastime of teenagers is shopping. Designer clothes and fancy cars have become the norm. Those who don't aspire or achieve the good life are losers. Major issues threatening the nation, like racism and classism, are in large part ignored.

The envy felt by children who cannot have designer clothing and high-tech gadgets is internalized into shame and externalized into violence. The grand lifestyle of the rich, white teenager is depicted in movies like "Clueless" and "Anywhere But Here." In such films, the longing to be rich is presented as a positive aspiration, while such features serve to enhance the shame of those lacking in material wealth. Although today's teenagers deny the reality of classism, they adhere to the mores and standards of the wealthy. The youth of both the poor and working class, and that of the wealthy, share a lack of vision as to a range of possibilities—their reality is either rich or poor; there is no in between.

Parents give lip-service to the evils of greed and money, but at the same time teach them through their own lives that money, and the acquisition of it, is the most important pursuit to have. Young black rappers and athletes who accept money, awards and fame and thank God for their success, send the message that the most important role of God is to bless the faithful with riches. When youngsters, through continued poverty and diminished hopes and dreams, realize the fallacy of the success for all concept they become hurt and enraged which oftentimes results in violence.



# Chapter 8: Class and Race: The New Black Elite

## Chapter 8: Class and Race: The New Black Elite Summary and Analysis

Bell discusses how the accounts of the voyages of black explorers who came to the Americas before Columbus were suppressed. Most people, including blacks, have never heard of these travels with the "black" narrative in America beginning with slavery. Many whites coming to the New World, who were portrayed historically as upper-class, were actually working class people, and in some cases indigent. There was a caste system among blacks in the New World in which some had higher statuses than others. Lighter skinned blacks, relatives of white slave owners, were often treated better than darker skinned blacks.

In the forties and fifties, middle-class black, referred to as the black bourgeoisie, took on the role as mediator between the black masses and the white people. By the 1960s, class-based racial integration threatened the solidarity of the black masses. Some blacks who had achieved success in business or education, were viewed as higher class and were the first beneficiaries of new civil rights laws. These blacks began to leave the others behind. It was easy to distinguish between blacks who wanted to uplift the entire race as opposed to those who exploited the community for their personal gain.

Bell compares the drug culture in the black community to the beginnings of Nazi Germany. The people in public housing live in crowded conditions and are often denied basic needs. In this latter-day fascism, crack cocaine took the place of gas chambers. The black upper-class feels a detachment to their underprivileged brothers. Middle-class, upper-class and wealthy blacks can manage to avoid racism even though it still is rampant in the United States. These black elites sometimes use their power to silence the poor blacks. More and more blacks are entering the wealthy ranks and have more allegiance to their class than they do to their race. They lead poor blacks to believe that their complaints are merely sour grapes. Self-determination of all blacks is not possible until the black elites and the poor reach solidarity. Those black conservative voices that have been recruited by the media and white elites, need to be challenged for their abandonment of the black masses. Only through such actions can the dream of black self-determination materialize.



# Chapter 9: Feminism and Class Power

## Chapter 9: Feminism and Class Power Summary and Analysis

When the feminist movement began, it received mass media attention, but the focus was on the relatively few privileged white women who began to have the same opportunities as privileged white men. Poor and working class women received virtually no attention. Betty Friedan wrote of the housewife, trapped in the home. But, in reality, the upper-class, educated white woman didn't work outside the home not because she couldn't but rather because she did not want to take on low-paying, menial jobs—the jobs that many low-class black and white women had been working at for years.

Lesbians of all classes and races were at the forefront of the feminist movement, leading the charge to end male domination. These same feminists were the first to discuss the issue of class which ultimately led to the realization that true feminism could not succeed until the issue of class was confronted and dealt with. The debate on classism led to the crux of the issue which was the intersection of classism and racism. The white leaders of the movement were from elite backgrounds and had a difficult time relating to black women who were on the lower rung of the work force or had climbed their way up.

The white elitist leaders of the feminist movement portrayed the success of the high-profile white women as a good sign for all women. These changes had no impact whatsoever on working-class women. Successful women began to take on the same elitist attitude as their male counterparts which eventually destabilized the entire movement. Sexist men who were well-positioned had no motivation to support radical feminism. They had no incentive to support a change that would force them to operate under more progressive strategies.

Progressive feminists receive little attention from the media or the corporate world; but when they do get attention, it often is negative. Conservative thinkers portray the feminist movement as over and that success is only possible under the existing standards and class structure. The only hope of true feminist liberation is to confront the classism, sexism and racism that exploits and oppresses women. There are steps that society as a whole can take to create freedom and equality for women. Progressive feminist concepts provide hope as well as ways to empower women and men. For feminism to succeed, men must accept and support it just as vigorously as women.



# Chapter 10: White Poverty: The Politics of Invisibility

## Chapter 10: White Poverty: The Politics of Invisibility Summary and Analysis

Southern blacks were the victims of classism that existed within the white race. Poor whites who were rejected by wealthy whites, took their anger out on the only group to whom they felt superior. Black children feared poor whites more than other whites because they were blatant and cruel about their hatred for them. While rich whites found the actions of the poor whites despicable, they were reluctant to speak out fearing they would be viewed as favoring blacks over their own race. Such support would threaten white supremacy.

Desegregation closed all the black schools in the south and Bell had her first opportunity to witness classism among the white community during high school. She saw how the poor whites were shunned by the upper and middle class whites. The anger of rejection led the poor whites to be oppressive toward blacks because their skin color allowed them this behavior. Race privilege has allowed poor whites the chance to live a better life, even in poverty, than poor blacks. The largest sub-group of the nation's poor is the poor white of the south. Blacks migrated in large numbers to cities in the north, leaving the poor whites, who lived in isolated rural and suburban areas in the southern states, behind. While poor blacks lived in concrete ghettos in the city, the poor southern white version of the ghettos were trailer parks. There was a resurgence in white supremacist thinking in recent times. Blacks were perceived to be enjoying their successes from government sponsored programs instead of from hard work and education. Poor blacks and poor whites, however, came to the same realization that they were suffering from the same oppression and exploitation at the hands of the ruling class.

In today's society, black and white workers have the opportunity for more interaction than in the past and there is potential for solidarity to develop between them. However, hurt lingers in blacks who, for decades, were abused by poor whites. Black workers are struggling to overcome the past knowing that solidarity with the poor whites will only strengthen their cause. Although racism against blacks still exists in the white community, it has decreased. Whites have replaced some of their anti-black prejudices with a general xenophobia.



# Chapter 11: Solidarity with the Poor

## Chapter 11: Solidarity with the Poor Summary and Analysis

Growing up, Bell and her family rightly placed the blame of black poverty on slavery. No one discussed predatory labor and how capitalism needed excess labor in order to achieve success. Many naively thought that if discrimination were eliminated, there would be jobs for all. The realization that this was a myth began to emerge after civil rights laws were passed in the sixties. The reality was that nothing much changed. Those who were under-skilled and under-educated still were without decent jobs.

The under-employed blacks began to enter the welfare rolls with more frequency. When being on welfare became more acceptable, it followed that it was not as shameful to have children out of wedlock. Many blacks were portrayed as living off others. The negative stereotype took root and caused even more self-doubt and shame among poor blacks. This unfair depiction of poor blacks gave the affluent and privileged classes permission to turn their backs on them.

By the seventies, talk of the poor being the chosen ones was silenced. It was a shame to be poor. And even though there were more whites on welfare, it was the black woman who became its "poster boy." The drug culture took hold to ease the pain and sorrow of the oppressed. If the government really wanted to destroy the drug cartels, they could. Illegal drugs, however, keep the poor in their place and fuel the suspicions that people grew to have about them.

Although the United States is not attempting to eliminate the conditions that cause poverty, strategies and tactics must be developed to cope with economic hardship without demoralizing the poor. Those who are poor see no value to their own lives and are convinced that a life of affluence is the only one with any meaning. People can survive without material wealth as long as basic needs are met. One of these basic human needs is self-esteem. Those who are affluent must form a solidarity with the poor so that strategies can be developed to help them without stripping them of their dignity.



# Chapter 12: Class Claims: Real Estate Racism

## Chapter 12: Class Claims: Real Estate Racism Summary and Analysis

When Bell first was interested in purchasing real estate in New York City, she was told that buildings that were all white had more to do with class than with race. Though she was upper-middle-class at the time, properties with all-white residency that she showed an interest in would mysteriously be sold or off the market the next day. Today in the U.S., racial apartheid has become part of society led by the white dominated real estate market. White residents in league with white realtors privately vowed to keep undesirable elements out of their buildings.

The idea that monetary success will allow a person to transcend race in the real estate market is a myth. Agents and residents swear that they are not racists, but at the same time will point out how the value of their homes may decrease with an influx of black residents. A deep-seated fear exists among whites that black people will mug and rob them—even though statistics show that such crimes are more likely to be white on white. Even the most progressive whites refuse to acknowledge that the real estate market is ruled by white supremacist thinking.

Young elite whites have been moving into formerly poor, black neighborhoods bringing new life to blighted areas by refurbishing old buildings and pouring money into the community. This change has not benefited poor blacks, in fact, it has hurt them. The renovated neighborhoods now demand higher rents, forcing the poor blacks into even more dilapidated conditions. This trend resulted in racialized class warfare. However, people do not see themselves as racists, but support the standards that created and maintain both racism and classism.

Conservative attacks on the "welfare state" have caused an increase in homelessness among poor blacks, another subject that is not widely publicized nor discussed. Housing, more than any other issue, will ultimately force the nation to address classism. As housing becomes less affordable, class discrimination in housing will become more evident. The growing number of homeless, both those turned away from public housing and those returning to parental homes because they cannot afford housing, will make the issue more visible.



# Chapter 13: Crossing Class Boundaries

## Chapter 13: Crossing Class Boundaries Summary and Analysis

Bell grew up in a segregated black neighborhood with people of all classes. Some were so poor they lived in shacks while others, like Bell's family, were busy, working class families. When her father began working, blacks were paid less than whites for the same work. By the end of his career, these unfair practices were outlawed. Even though her father worked three jobs at times, money was still tight. Raising seven children was not an easy task. Although Bell's childhood was segregated, it was an isolated and somewhat protected one. When she went to Stanford, she encountered her first real experience with class differences. Bell was a black girl from a working class family attending a very rich school. She understood later why her parents had first balked at her going.

Bell learned at college that crossing class lines was not easy. Bell took advantage of her situation and got to know as many people from diverse backgrounds as she could. She was shocked to hear the negative stereotypes that many of the elite students had about the working class. Bell was able to move between the classes yet maintain her own identity by always making sure not to abandon her past and keeping it part of her present. Her connection to her childhood and to the working class was the basis for much of her writing.

Bell had been the first in her family to attend college and was always thankful for the support she received from her family and community. One way she could honor her community was to draw from it for her writing. As Bell earned more money, there were some hard feelings and difficult times with family members. Some relatives could not understand that Bell, who became very successful, did not wear flashy clothing or live in a large house. She also had to deal with needy relatives, friends and even students who asked for loans. Bell was careful to help those who were in desperate situations and turn down those who just wanted material items for their own gratification. Some responses were met with resentment, but Bell knew that denying a person of material things was appropriate when that person had other more serious problems to confront. Bell's most important lesson was that although it took courage to be honest and speak out about class, it was the first important step in challenging class elitism.



# Chapter 14: Living without Class Hierarchy

## Chapter 14: Living without Class Hierarchy Summary and Analysis

Most Americans do not recognize class difference and continue to believe that ours is a classless society. Bell has tried to portray the struggle of the few, like her, who are able to squeeze their way up from the working class to the upper class. Although she has written many books and made great amounts of money, writing about classism and the experiences and struggles of her family and friends still leave her weeping when putting them down on paper.

Bell has given lectures on poverty, recalling how relatives at times lived without services such as electricity and phones. These people lived in pain—the pain of doing without and the pain of not knowing if or when there would be an end to their misery. As a progressive, she advocates the redistribution of wealth which presents a strong challenge to capitalistic oppression. She and many activists like her work tirelessly to share resources, develop strategies to help the needy and break the barriers of racism, sexism and classism.

Bell's allegiance will always be with working people who are part of all classes. These individuals see money as useful and a way to improve one's life, but are not obsessed with wealth. Bell predicts that one day in the future there will be a true redistribution of wealth when all the workers of the world can unite. It is her hope that once this ideal is achieved that everyone can live well and without shame.



# Characters

## Bell Hooks

Bell Hooks is the author of "Where We Stand: Class Matters." She is a renowned author, having written about thirty books. She has a doctorate degree in literature and has been a successful professor both at Yale University and Oberlin College. Hooks is a well-known social activists having fought against barriers and injustice from classism, sexism and racism.

Hooks begins her book on classism during her childhood in a segregated community in a small town in Kentucky. Writing this book, she drew from those experiences and those of her parents and relatives who faced racism and classism their entire lives. Hooks was the first person in her family to attend college. She was first sent to a private girl's college near her home. She was the only black student and did not feel the school was a good fit for her. An attentive professor recognized Hooks' intellect and suggested she attend Stanford University. Against her parents' wishes, who were fearful of her being so far away from home and in a white elitist environment, she decided to accept the scholarship and transfer to Stanford. She learned much about classism and its impact on racism during her time there.

After graduation, she took teaching positions at Yale University and later at Oberlin. She finally achieved her goal of writing and lecturing and achieved outstanding success in both. Hooks is a well-known activist and became an expert on the impact of racism, sexism and classism on the feminist movement.

## Bell Hooks' Mother

Bell's mother had been a teenage divorcee with two children when she met Bell's father. Her father had been a confirmed bachelor but was swept away by the beautiful teenager. They married and eventually had seven children. The first house that Bell can remember living in with her parents was a construction field house made of concrete. Although the house was far from ideal, Bell's mother was thrilled with having her own house and getting away from her domineering mother.

Bell's mother understood the desire that Bell and her siblings had for material possessions. But in a one-income family with seven children to care for, there was not much money left for non-essentials. Rather than deny her children, Beth's mother would play psychological games in an attempt to remove their longings for things they couldn't have. For example, Bell remembers wanting a yellow dress. Instead of being honest and telling Bell they couldn't afford the dress, her mother told her that no one would be caught dead in the dress. Her mother's intentions were good, but this practice caused Bell to doubt her ideas and question her judgment, impressions that lingered for years.



Bell's mother was against her going away to Stanford. It wasn't that her mother didn't think she was smart enough to be at an elite school; rather, she feared that her daughter would be exposed to abuse from racism and classism from the white elite students who made up the majority of the school population.

## **Bell Hooks' Father**

Bell Hooks' father worked as a janitor for most of his life. He sometimes worked three jobs to earn enough to care for his family.

## **Baba**

Baba was Bell's eccentric grandmother who ran her household with an iron fist. Although she was illiterate, her ability to tell stories influenced Bell.

## **Daddy Guss**

Daddy Gus was Bell's grandfather. Unlike his wife, Baba, he was quiet and gentle. He was the favored grandparent of Bell and her siblings.

## **Charlotte Bunch**

Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron were the editors of "Class and Feminism," an anthology of the seventies that depicted how feminism is impacted by classism. Hooks referenced this work.

## **Nancy Myron**

Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron were the editors of "Class and Feminism," an anthology of the seventies that depicted the issue of how feminism is impacted by classism. Hooks referenced this work.

## **W.E.B. Du Bois**

"The Talented Tenth" was an essay written by W.E.B. Du Bois who believed that only one in ten blacks would succeed. Hooks referenced this work.

## **Rita Mae Brown**

In her essay, "The Last Straw," writer Rita Mae Brown describes the elements that create class and classism. Hooks used this essay as reference material.

## **Ellis Closs**

Bell Hooks references "The Rage of the Black Middle Class" by Ellis Closs. This book covers the rage that successful blacks experience even after they have achieved success.



## Objects/Places

### The Rage of the Black Middle Class

"The Rage of the Black Middle Class" is a book by Ellis Closs, referenced by Hooks. Closs warns that the black middle class cannot expect to escape racism.

### The Talented Tenth

"The Talented Tenth" was an essay written by W.E.B. Du Bois who believed that only one in ten blacks would succeed. Hooks references this work.

### Class and Feminism

"Class and Feminism" is referenced by Hooks in her book. The book confronts classism within the feminist movement.

### The Last Straw

"The Last Straw" is an essay by Rita Mae Brown. Brown describes the elements that create class and classism. Hooks uses this essay as reference material.

### Kentucky

Bell Hooks was born and raised in rural Kentucky in a segregated black community. She drew from her experiences there in writing about the classism and racism that was prevalent.

### Private Girl's College

Bell Hooks' first college year was spent at an all-white girl's college. Her parents chose the school because it was close to home and they would not be burdened by any expenses.

### Stanford University

Against her parent's wishes, Hooks decided to take advantage of a free scholarship to the top-notch school. Her parents didn't want her to be so far away from home and they feared her being exposed to potential abuse and isolation from the elite white students.





## **Yale University**

After getting her doctorate, Hooks secured a low-paying assistant teaching position at Yale University.

## **Oberlin College**

Bell Hooks left Yale University for a better paying job at Oberlin College. She was able to make and save enough money there to buy a small house with cash.

## **New York City**

After becoming a successful writer, lecturer and professor, Hooks still felt the sting of racism and classism when she attempted to purchase an apartment in an all-white building in New York City.

# Themes

## Crossing Class Lines

Bell first encountered diverse classes when she attended Stanford University. Crossing class lines, she learned, was not necessarily positive or easy. When she took the steps of crossing the lines that had been drawn by classism, she did not always like what she found. Curiosity led Bell to ignore her fears and to take advantage of her situation by getting to know many people from diverse backgrounds. As a person from a working class background, she was shocked to hear the negative stereotypes that many of the elite students held about the working class.

Hard-working people caring for their families and homes were looked down upon by these wealthy kids. These youngsters undoubtedly learned their prejudices from their parents who, through years of experience, had learned to hide them better. But there it was in front of her—classism at its worse. An employed, law-abiding person was given no credit but was ridiculed basically for not being wealthy!

Having achieved a great level of success, many relatives and friends from her past viewed her with resentment and curiosity. They questioned why she didn't wear flashier clothes and live in a better house. To them, the outward show of wealth and success was the most important. Those from her past also feared that she would eventually abandon them in favor of her wealthy colleagues.

However, Bell had vowed to never reject her past no matter how successful or wealthy she would become. She was able to have mobility between the full range of classes, from the well-to-do to the indigent and hopeless because she refused to reject her roots. The struggles that she and her family and friends were forced to endure over race and class were the experiences Bell drew from to write many of her books.

## The Impact of Racism on Classism

Bell Hooks is a well-known social activist who, through advanced education and personal experiences, gained expertise in recognizing and fighting the inter-connected barriers of classism, racism and sexism. She knew that for her own peace of mind and to be able to accept and understand her own identity, she had to come to terms with racism and how it impacts classism.

As a leading feminist, Bell saw the chances to achieve a feminist society dwindle because of the issues of racism and classism that were largely ignored by white elitist feminist leaders. They were difficult subjects to broach and one which these upper-class white women did not understand and showed no proclivity to do so. Bell, through her own personal encounters and that of others, grew to understand that true feminism



could not be achieved without addressing classism and how it naturally intersects with sexism and racism.

When the very successful Bell Hooks sought to purchase an apartment in a tony, all-white building in New York City, she felt the sting of racism and classism and how they were irrevocably connected. She learned that white supremacist concepts rule when it comes to the real estate market. Although the wealthy real estate agents and residents of the building claimed to have no racial biases, they were quick to infer that their apartment values would decrease with the influx of black residents. Although Bell earned a position in the upper class through her successful career, racism kept her from truly being accepted in the class that she, in terms of money and success, belonged in.

## Resource Sharing

As a child, Bell Hooks recalls the practice of resource sharing that was common in her segregated black community in rural Kentucky. When a neighbor of Bell's was in need of food or clothing or some other essential item, the surrounding neighbors would provide what was needed. In turn, when it was Bell's family that was lacking something essential, the neighbors would come to their rescue. There was no shame or guilt associated with this practice, it was just considered neighborly and Christian.

In Bell's adult life, she began to wonder why the practice of resource sharing was not more commonly used and indeed why it was used less frequently in black communities. A stigma of guilt and shame began to be associated with the recipients of these "hand-outs." Bell had the very strong opinion that sharing resources could ease the hardship of the less fortunate. In the sixties and seventies, when welfare became a federal program, conservatives and mass media began to label the people on these programs as lazy freeloaders. Unfortunately, the black woman was singled out as the worst offender which caused much guilt and shame to be experienced by this needy sector of the population. Public outrage grew over the program which was ultimately greatly downgraded to the detriment and suffering of many.

Bell Hooks is a renowned social activist and has expertise on the issues of classism, racism and sexism. She drew from her childhood's community practice of resource sharing in developing a solution to end poverty without bringing shame to the needy. By the redistribution of wealth, everyone in the nation and even the world could have their basic needs met without causing the poor to lose their dignity.

# Style

## Perspective

Bell Hooks is a renowned author, lecturer, professor and social activist. She has written over thirty books and is a well-known feminist who has fought against the barriers of classism, racism and sexism. She is a highly educated individual, having attained her doctorate in literature. Her qualifications to write about the profound issue of classism in her book, "Where We Stand: Class Matters," are above reproach.

Hooks is doubly qualified in penning this book since she herself has experienced first-hand the impact of classism on one's life. As a black woman, she also brings to the debate the barriers she has faced with classism and how it intersects closely with sexism and racism. Hooks' educational and professional background coupled with her own life experiences brings a personal perspective to the account and provides authenticity and clarity to a harrowing issue that many do not recognize. By drawing on her struggles and those of her family and friends, Hooks uses anecdotal accounts to shine light on a global problem that is growing and largely ignored.

From her experience as a problem-solving activist, she shows her natural bent toward providing solutions. Knowing what it was to do without as a child and then ultimately rise to the upper class in terms of monetary gain and career success, Hooks understands what it means to cross class lines and to never forget one's roots, values and foundations. At the conclusion of the book, Activist Hooks provides possible solutions to ending the strife of the poor and the lower class not only on a national but a global basis.

## Tone

Bell Hooks is a professor and professional writer and lecturer. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hooks employs a professorial style in writing her book, "Where We stand: Class Matters." Her writing style is informative and instructional as she defines and then reemphasizes throughout the book the points that she is trying to drive home. Although she, like many people raised in the poor black south, describes the shame and humiliation she and her family experienced and the reality of a life of "doing without," Hooks shows no overt signs of bitterness or regret. As a teacher, she uses her personal struggles to convey to her readers the impact of classism on all people and how it intersects with sexism and racism.

While her narrative is descriptive of her own life experiences, she uses it as a teaching tool in an effort to spread recognition and understanding of the conditions under which many poor and uneducated people are forced to live. Hooks is artful in using her own struggles to exemplify the suffering of people who encounter class and racial barriers in their daily lives.



Just as teachers strive to do, Hooks has laid out her case in detail and with clarity. She uses real-life examples to solidify the message that she wants to send her readers. Hooks uses "Where We Stand" as a vehicle to educate the uninformed and the uncaring about the sub-culture that exists under the oppression of classism.

## Structure

Bell Hooks' book, "Where We Stand: Class Matters," is divided into fourteen chapters. Hooks sets the premise of the book in her introduction entitled, "Class Matters," where she discusses the widening gap between the rich and poor and places the blame, in large part, on classism. Hooks' work is written in chronological order with a minimum of flashback episodes. Hooks takes the reader through her personal journey, one that continually exposed her to classism and its intersection with sexism and racism.

The first chapter covers the class struggles she witnessed as a child growing up in a segregated black community in the South. Although classism was never discussed opening during her childhood, Bell's later experiences opened her eyes to the racism and classism that her parents and community suffered from during her childhood and beyond.

The succeeding chapters take the reader through Bell's experience at Stanford, an upper crust elite school whose student population was comprised largely of white upper-class and wealthy students. She saw first-hand the impact of classism as it intersects with racism. Bell then describes her struggles in crossing class lines while not abandoning her roots.

The concluding chapters are devoted to Bell's life after she achieved monetary success through her teaching and writing and became part of the upper class. Despite this success, she still felt the impact of racism and classism in trying to purchase an apartment in all-white buildings in New York City. Her success also led to conflicts within her family. There was resentment and confusion about her success as well as requests for loans from those who actually needed help and those who just longed for expensive material items.

Bell concludes her work with her advocacy of the redistribution of wealth which, she feels, would provide the answer to poverty without causing the poor to feel shame.



## Quotes

"She was in her second marriage to stay. It was to be the site of her redemption—the second chance on love that would let her dreams be born again." (Chapter 1, page 12)

"Living in a world above the absolutes of law and man-made convention was what any black person in their right mind needed to do if they wanted to keep a hold on life. Letting white folks or anybody else control your mind and your body, too, was a surefire way to fail in this life." (Chapter 1, page 17)

"I had planted my feet on the path leading in the direction of class privilege. There would always be contractions to face. There would always be confrontations around the issue of class—I would always have to reexamine where I stand." (Chapter 2, page 37)

"Solidarity with the poor was the gesture that intervened on shame." (Chapter 3, page 41)

"Understanding the class politics of money and greed has been essential to creating a life where I can be economically self-sufficient without hoarding and without refusing to identify with those who remain economically disadvantaged." (Chapter 4, page 62)

"Once the public could be duped into thinking that the gates of class power and privilege were truly opened for everyone, then there was no longer a need for an emphasis on communalism or sharing resources for ongoing focus on social justice." (Chapter 5, page 67)

"When we recognize that abundance can be spread around, that more of our nation's citizens should have access to material plenty that enables us all to live 'a good life,' the rich will not need to live in constant fear and alienation. And those with little or no class privilege will not be preyed upon by the greedy." (chapter 6, page 79)

"In 1903, he [W.E.B. DuBois] emphasized this point, insisting that it was important to develop 'the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.'" (Chapter 8, page 91)

"Ruling class interests have a stake in reinforcing a politics of white supremacy, which continues to try to socialize white working-class and poor people to blame their economic plight on black people or people of color globally. Since anti-black racism has never been eliminated in the culture, it does not take much effort on the part of the dominant white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture to brainwash poor whites to believe that it is black folks who stand in the way of their academic advancement." (Chapter 10, page 117)



"The poor may be with us always. Yet this does not mean that the poor cannot live well, cannot find contentment and fulfillment." (Chapter 12, page 129)

"In a society like ours where class is rarely, if ever, talked about, it is worthy of note that whenever racism in real estate and housing is talked about, most white people will argue that discrimination is really about class rather than race. My most progressive white friends and acquaintances refuse to acknowledge that white supremacist thinking rules when it comes to real estate." (Chapter 12, page 134)

"Most American citizens do not acknowledge the reality of class difference, of class exploitation, and they continue to believe that this is a classless society." (Chapter 14, page 156)



## Topics for Discussion

What was Bell's childhood like? How can Bell's grandmother, Baba, be characterized? What influence did she have on Bell?

What were Bell's parents' views on money and luxuries? How did Bell's mother convince her that she didn't really want the yellow dress she asked for? What lingering effect did this kind of manipulation have on Bell?

What was "resource sharing," which was practiced in Bell's community during her childhood? How does that relate to the redistribution of wealth which Bell refers to as the answer to capitalistic oppression and elite classism?

What did Bell experience at Stanford relative to classism? What surprised Bell about some of the elite white students she encountered there?

How did racism among the white classes ultimately impact the poor blacks? Why did poor whites of the south abuse poor blacks? Why did upper-class whites not speak out against this abuse?

After becoming successful and wealthy, why did Bell experience problems in the real estate market in New York City? What conflicts arose among relatives and friends after Bell achieved success?

What caused the feminist movement that began in the sixties and seventies to fail? What is essential for feminism to succeed? How does the success of feminism intersect with racism and classism?