

sexual politics

by Kate Millett · Language: EN

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Overview

Kate Millett's "Sexual Politics" is a foundational text of second-wave feminism, published in 1970, that argues patriarchy is a political institution – a system of power relations where men dominate women. Millett asserts that this system is more fundamental than class or race, permeating all aspects of society, from the family unit to economic structures, education, and even psychology. She meticulously dissects how patriarchal power is maintained through various means, including physical force, economic control, ideological conditioning, and the internalization of gender roles.

The book's central thesis is that sexual oppression is not merely a cultural phenomenon but a deeply entrenched political one, requiring a radical "sexual revolution" to dismantle. Millett challenges traditional notions of sex and gender, arguing that gender roles are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. A significant portion of the book is dedicated to a critical literary analysis, where Millett examines the works of prominent male authors like D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet. Through these analyses, she demonstrates how literature often reflects, reinforces, or occasionally subverts patriarchal attitudes and power dynamics, exposing the misogynistic undercurrents in celebrated works and revealing how cultural narratives contribute to the perpetuation of female subjugation. "Sexual Politics" remains a crucial work for understanding feminist theory and the historical context of the women's liberation movement.

Key Takeaways

- Recognize that patriarchy functions as a political system, not merely a social custom, exerting control through various institutional and ideological means.
- Critically examine how gender roles are socially constructed and often serve to maintain power imbalances between men and women.
- Understand that the family unit often acts as a primary agent of patriarchal control and socialization.
- Be aware of how literature and cultural narratives can both reflect and reinforce existing patriarchal structures and misogynistic attitudes.
- Challenge the notion that biological sex dictates social roles or inherent capabilities, advocating for equality regardless of gender.

- Consider the historical evolution of patriarchal power and how it has adapted and persisted across different eras.
- Advocate for a fundamental "sexual revolution" that dismantles hierarchical gender relations and promotes genuine equality.

Chapter Summaries

Part I: Theory of Sexual Politics

Millett introduces her core argument that patriarchy is a political institution, a system of power where one group (men) dominates another (women). She outlines the mechanisms of patriarchal control, including force, ideology, economic dependence, and the family as a primary agent of socialization. This section defines the concept of 'sexual politics' and lays the theoretical groundwork for understanding gender as a power dynamic rather than a biological given.

Part II: Historical Background

This part traces the historical evolution of patriarchal power, examining its manifestations from ancient times through the Victorian era and into the early 20th century. Millett analyzes how patriarchal structures have adapted and persisted, focusing on the suppression of women's rights and autonomy. She discusses the first wave of feminism, the backlash against it, and the ongoing struggle for women's liberation, highlighting key historical moments and ideological shifts.

Part III: The Literary Reflection - D.H. Lawrence

Millett offers a scathing critique of D.H. Lawrence's work, particularly 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' and 'Women in Love.' She argues that Lawrence, despite his reputation for sexual liberation, was deeply misogynistic, portraying women as subservient, irrational, and primarily defined by their sexual function in relation to men. Millett demonstrates how his narratives reinforce patriarchal power structures and idealize male dominance.

Part III: The Literary Reflection - Henry Miller

This section analyzes Henry Miller's novels, such as 'Tropic of Cancer,' as exemplars of patriarchal sexual politics. Millett contends that Miller's writing reduces women to mere sexual objects, devoid of agency or interiority, serving only the gratification of male desire. She highlights the pervasive misogyny and exploitative nature of his depictions, arguing that they reflect and perpetuate a culture of male sexual aggression and female dehumanization.

Part III: The Literary Reflection - Norman Mailer

Millett examines Norman Mailer's work, including 'An American Dream,' to illustrate how his narratives embody and celebrate a violent, aggressive form of masculinity. She argues that Mailer's characters often engage in acts of sexual violence and objectification, reflecting a deeply

ingrained patriarchal worldview that equates male power with the subjugation of women. Millett critiques his romanticization of male dominance and aggression.

Part III: The Literary Reflection - Jean Genet

In contrast to the previous authors, Millett explores Jean Genet's work, particularly 'Our Lady of the Flowers,' as a complex and subversive portrayal of sexual politics. She argues that Genet, as a gay man writing from a marginalized perspective, offers a unique critique of power dynamics, including those related to gender and sexuality. Millett sees Genet's work as challenging conventional gender roles and exposing the performative nature of masculinity and femininity, even within a patriarchal framework.

Themes

- Patriarchy as political system
- Gender as social construct
- Literary misogyny
- Sexual revolution
- Power dynamics
- Feminist theory

Notable Quotes

- "Patriarchy, reformed or unreformed, is patriarchy still." — From the introduction, setting the tone for the book's uncompromising critique of male dominance.
- "Sexual politics obtains when one group of humans is controlled by another." — Defining the core concept of sexual politics as a system of power and control based on sex.
- "The family is a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole." — Explaining how the family structure serves as a fundamental institution for perpetuating patriarchal power and socialization.
- "The most fundamental concept of patriarchy is that of the male as the superior sex." — Highlighting the ideological cornerstone of patriarchal systems, which posits male superiority as a natural order.
- "Revolution is the only solution." — Concluding a section on the necessity of radical change to dismantle patriarchal structures.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is sexual politics about?

Sexual Politics argues that patriarchy is a political institution, not just a social custom, where men dominate women. It examines how this power system is maintained through force, ideology, and economic control, and critically analyzes how literature reflects and reinforces these patriarchal structures. The book calls for a fundamental sexual revolution to achieve gender equality.

Is sexual politics worth reading?

Yes, "Sexual Politics" is considered a seminal work in feminist theory and is highly influential. It provides a rigorous framework for understanding gender inequality as a political power dynamic and offers incisive literary criticism. It's essential reading for anyone interested in feminism, gender studies, literary theory, or social justice, though its academic style can be challenging.

How does sexual politics end?

Spoiler: "Sexual Politics" concludes by reiterating the pervasive nature of patriarchal control and the urgent need for a radical sexual revolution. Millett emphasizes that true liberation requires dismantling the entire system of male dominance, not just superficial reforms. She calls for a fundamental reordering of society to achieve genuine equality between the sexes.

Who should read sexual politics?

This book is highly recommended for students and scholars of feminist theory, gender studies, sociology, and literary criticism. Anyone interested in the history of the women's liberation movement, the political dimensions of gender, or critical analyses of classic literature will find it invaluable. It is a challenging but rewarding read for those seeking a deeper understanding of patriarchal systems.

How long does it take to read sexual politics?

Given its length and academic density, reading "Sexual Politics" typically takes between 8 to 12 hours for an average reader. It's a substantial work that often requires careful reading and reflection, so setting aside ample time is advisable.