

## Diversifying Syllabi 2016 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter

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**Article/Essay Title:** “Oppression”

**Author:** Marilyn Frye

**Readability:** Easy to Moderate (Easily readable, but with some concepts that may be difficult for those unfamiliar with systematic versus individualistic thinking)

**Thesis:**

“When the stresses and frustrations of being a man are cited as evidence that oppressors are oppressed by their oppressing, the word ‘oppression’ is being stretched to meaninglessness; it is treated as though its scope includes any and all human experience of limitation or suffering, no matter the cause, degree or consequence....

We need to think clearly about oppression, and there is much that mitigates against this. I do not want to undertake to prove that women are oppressed (or that men are not), but I want to make clear what is being said when we say it” (1-2).

**Key Definitions:**

Oppression: “One is marked for application of oppressive pressures by one’s membership in some group or category. Much of one’s suffering and frustration befalls one partly or largely because one is a member of that category” (15-16).

Oppression is systematic, targets individuals *as* members of groups, is often internalized, is often experienced as a double-bind, and can be hard to recognize.

Group/Category Membership: “When you question why you are blocked.... It has to do with your ‘physical’ category” (7-8). An individual is oppressed “in virtue of being a member of a group or category of people that is systematically reduced, molded, immobilized” (8). A group, in this case, is picked out not necessarily by physical confinement or segregation, but rather by the constants shared by its members. In the case of women, Frye identifies “service work” (broadly construed) as part of women’s experience (9).

Double-Bind: A “situation in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation” (2). Example: women who are socially punished whether they have sex (easy, “slut”) or not (frigid, uptight).

Social Structure: “....All of our behaviors and activities are structured by more than individual inclination and the conditions of the planet and its atmosphere.... Structure consists of boundaries, limits, and barriers; in a structured whole, some motivations and changes are possible, and others are not” (10).

Gendered/Raced Harm: A harm toward a member of the dominant group that occurs because of the oppression of an oppressed group, but is not itself an instance of oppression toward the dominant member. “A set of social and economic barriers and forces separating two groups may be felt, even painfully, by members of both groups and yet may mean confinement to one and liberty and enlargement of opportunity to the other” (12). (This concept is described, but not named, in the article.)

### **Brief Summary:**

Frye spends the chapter attempting to define oppression and set it apart from every experience of human limitation or suffering.

#### Section 1:

Women (and other oppressed groups) are caught by “networks of forces and barriers” (3) that expose them to penalties no matter what they do. Each of these factors exists in tension with others, making it the case that their apparent options are actually unavailable to them (4). Their lives are shaped by these constraints, all of which are systematically related. To be oppressed is to be caged.

Birdcage Example: There is nothing about the individual bar of a birdcage that could keep a bird constrained. From the **microscopic** viewpoint, you could not see why the bird doesn't just fly around it. From the **macroscopic** viewpoint, however, it is clear that the bars are interrelated in such a way that the bird could not possibly go anywhere. So, too, with oppressive systems. Individual acts (such as the door-opening example) examined outside of their place within the bigger picture may not appear as harms even when they ultimately contribute to the larger structure.

#### Section 2:

“The ‘inhabitant’ of the ‘cage’ is not an individual but a group, all those of a certain category” (8). Individuals are oppressed as members of groups. A woman is oppressed as a woman. A man can never be oppressed as a man, but he might be oppressed as a member of some other group.

Many people do not believe that “woman” is a category of oppressed people because “they have been fooled by the dispersal and assimilation of women throughout and into the systems of class and race which organize men.... Our being dispersed makes it difficult for women to have knowledge of each other and hence difficult to recognize the shape of our common cage” (8). Frye thinks that a constant amongst all women is women's service work. Men do not serve women as women serve men. **(It would be a good idea to have a conversation about intersectionality when discussing this section).**

#### Section 3:

All humans suffer and encounter barriers and frustrations. The goal of this paper is to pick out the barriers and frustrations that constitute oppression.

“If one wants to determine whether a particular suffering, harm or limitation is part of one's being oppressed, one has to look at it *in context* in order to tell whether it is an element in an

oppressive structure: one has to see if it is part of an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people. One has to look at how the barrier or force fits with others and to whose benefit or detriment it works” (10-11).

White Playboy Example: A rich white boy who is injured in a skiing accident clearly suffers from his injury. However, his suffering is not the result of a structure of barriers and forces. Even if he is maliciously harmed by another, he is not suddenly oppressed.

We should look at the boundaries that set dominant and oppressed groups apart in terms of who they are designed to benefit. The boundaries that set apart women’s service work may exclude some men, but they are generally maintained to the benefit of men (13). One cannot conclude from the mere presence of an unpleasant barrier that the person is oppressed; rather, “One must look at the barrier and answer certain questions about it:

Who constructs and maintains it?  
Whose interests are served by its existence?  
Is it part of a structure which tends to confine, reduce, and immobilize some group?  
Is the individual a member of the confined group?” (14).

#### Section 4:

Many of the restrictions and barriers oppressed groups live with are internalized and self-monitored (14). The question we must ask is who benefits from these practices. For instance, men who don’t cry in front of other men are praised, marked as men, and granted acceptance. Women’s physical restraint, on the other hand, marks women as silly and incompetent (15). Acceptable behavior for both groups involves restraint “that seems in itself silly and perhaps damaging” (15). The difference is in the social effect on each. Both are part of a structure oppressive to women.

#### Conclusion:

A person is oppressed in virtue of their membership in some group or category, and much of their suffering occurs as a result of their membership in that category. In this case, that category is “woman.”

“...and isn’t it strange that any of us should have been confused and mystified about such a simple thing?” (16).

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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**Author:** Marilyn Frye

**Possible Applications:**

Social & Political Philosophy

Feminist Philosophy

Introduction to Ethics (could use it to flesh out a discussion of **harm or suffering**)

Critical Thinking

### **Complementary Texts/Resources:**

Iris Marion Young. 2004. "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality." In *Female Body Experience*. 141-159. (Particularly useful in relation to the bit in section 4 about women's physical restraint)

Iris Marion Young. 2004. "Five Faces of Oppression." In *Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance*.

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Sandra Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression"

Sarah Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys"

Rebecca Kukla, "Discursive Injustice"

### **Possible Class Activities:**

-Get into groups and have students identify all of the different senses of oppression at play (would work well if Young's "5 Faces of Oppression" is assigned later in the week/unit, where Young explicitly disentangles these various senses)

-Discussion question: why do certain forms of harm/restriction not count as oppression?

-Pair with this article, "On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites Are Worlds Apart": <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/on-views-of-race-and-inequality-blacks-and-whites-are-worlds-apart/>

-Pair with this podcast: <http://www.radiolab.org/story/more-perfect-plaintiffs/>

### **What traditional texts might this text replace?**

Hegel, *Phenomenology*, specifically Master/slave dialectic