Katie Roiphe is an author and a journalist. She argues that the current fear of rape and sexual harassment has been fueled by exaggerations of their actual incidence on campuses as well as by the rhetoric of "rape crisis feminists" such as MacKinnon and Pineau. The current broad definitions of sexual harassment and date rape used on college campuses, rather than empowering women, perpetuate stereotypes of women as both sexless and as powerless victims of male oppression.

Critical Reading Questions

1. What is the standard definition of sexual harassment? Why does Roiphe have concerns about this definition?
2. What is MacKinnon's view on sexual harassment, and what are its political implications?
3. Why does Roiphe maintain that the idea that a male student can sexually harass a female professor is insulting to women?
4. What view of men and women, according to Roiphe, is implied by the current rhetoric against sexual harassment?
5. According to Roiphe, why does such rhetoric create an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust and reduce the number of meaningful contacts between students and faculty?
6. What does Roiphe mean by the "zookeeper school of feminism"?
7. How, according to Roiphe, do people from other countries view the concern with sexual harassment in the United States?
8. How does Roiphe explain the high incidence of sexual harassment in the United States?
9. What does Roiphe suggest women do instead of focusing so much on the dangers of sexual harassment?
10. On what grounds does Roiphe argue that "people have a right to leer" or, as she puts it, "engage in reckless eyeballing"? What, according to Roiphe, are appropriate moral responses to being leered at?
11. Where does Roiphe draw the line between harmless "harassment" and harassment that is a genuine abuse of power?
12. According to Roiphe, why might telling a woman who did not feel victimized that in fact she was a victim of date rape or sexual harassment actually harm rather than empower her?

"Reckless Eyeballing: Sexual Harassment on Campus," in The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1993), 85–112. Some notes have been omitted.
For generations, women have talked and written and theorized about their problems with men. But theories about patriarchy tumble from abstraction when you wake up next to it in the morning. Denouncing male oppression clashes with wanting him anyhow. From playgrounds to consciousness-raising groups, from suffragette marches to pro-choice marches, women have been talking their way through this contradiction for a long time.

Sometimes my younger sister and I go out for coffee and talk about our relationships. We analyze everything: why he acts that way, how unfair this is, how we shouldn’t be waiting for his call, and how we have better things to do with our time anyway. How men are always like that, and we are always like this, and our conversation goes on, endless, pleasurable, interesting, over many refills, until we go home and wait for their calls.

Heterosexual desire inevitably raises conflicts for the passionate feminist, and it’s not an issue easily evaded. Sooner or later feminism has to address “the man question.” But this is more than just a practical question of procreation, more than the well-worn translation of personal into political. It’s also a question for the abstract, the ideological, the furthest reaches of the feminist imagination.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a prominent feminist writing at the turn of the century, found a fictional solution to the conflict between sex and feminism in her utopian novel, Herland. Her solution is simple: there is no sexual desire. . . .

Many of today’s feminists, in their focus on sexual harassment, share Gilman’s sexual politics. In their videos, literature, and workshops, these feminists are creating their own utopian visions of human sexuality. They imagine a world where all expressions of sexual appreciation are appreciated. They imagine a totally symmetrical universe, where people aren’t silly, rude, awkward, excessive, or confused. And if they are, they are violating the rules and are subject to disciplinary proceedings.

A Princeton pamphlet declares that “sexual harassment is unwanted sexual attention that makes a person feel uncomfortable or causes problems in school or at work, or in social settings.” The word “uncomfortable” echoes through all the literature on sexual harassment. The feminists concerned with this issue, then, propose the right to be comfortable as a feminist principle.

The difficulty with these rules is that, although it may infringe on the right to comfort, unwanted sexual attention is part of nature. To find wanted sexual attention, you have to give and receive a certain amount of unwanted sexual attention. Clearly, the truth is that if no one was ever allowed to risk offering unsolicited sexual attention, we would all be solitary creatures.

The category of sexual harassment, according to current campus definitions, is not confined to relationships involving power inequity. Echoing many other common definitions of sexual harassment, Princeton’s pamphlet warns that “sexual harassment can occur between two people regardless of whether or not one has power over the other.” The weight of this definition of sexual harassment, then, falls on gender instead of status.

In current definitions of sexual harassment, there is an implication that gender is so important that it eclipses all other forms of power. The driving idea behind these rules is that gender itself is a sufficient source of power to constitute sexual harassment. Catharine MacKinnon, an early theorist of sexual harassment, writes that “situations of co-equal power—among co-workers or students or teachers—are difficult to see as examples of sexual harassment unless you have a notion of male power. I think we lie to women when we call it not power when a woman is come on to by a man who is not her employer, not her teacher.” With this description, MacKinnon extends the province of male power beyond that of tangible social power. She proposes using the words “sexual harassment” as a way to name what she sees as a fundamental social and political inequity between men and women. Following in this line of thought, Elizabeth Grauerholz, a sociology professor, conducted a study about instances of male students harassing their female professors, a phenomenon she calls “contrapower harassment.”

Recently, at the University of Michigan, a female teaching assistant almost brought a male student up on charges of sexual harassment. She was offended by an example he used in a paper about polls—a few sentences about “Dave Stud” scenteraining
ladies in his apartment when he receives a call from a pollster—and she showed the paper to the professor of the class. He apparently encouraged her to see the offending example as an instance of sexual harassment. She decided not to press charges, although she warned the student that the next time anything else like this happened, in writing or in person, she would not hesitate. The student wisely dropped the course. To understand how this student’s paragraph about Dave Stud might sexually harass his teacher, when he has much more to lose than she does, one must recognize the deeply sexist assumptions about male-female relations behind the teaching assistant’s charge.

The idea that a male student can sexually harass a female professor, overturning social and institutional hierarchy, solely on the basis of some primal or socially conditioned male power over women is insulting. The mere fact of being a man doesn’t give the male student so much power that he can plow through social hierarchies, grabbing what he wants, intimidating all the cowering female faculty in his path. The assumption that female students or faculty must be protected from the sexual harassment of male peers or inferiors promotes the regrettable idea that men are natively more powerful than women.

Even if you argue, as many do, that in this society men are simply much more powerful than women, this is still a dangerous train of thought. It carries us someplace we don’t want to be. Rules and laws based on the premise that all women need protection from all men, because they are so much weaker, serve only to reinforce the image of women as powerless.

Our female professors and high-ranking executives, our congresswomen and editors, are every bit as strong as their male counterparts. They have earned their position of authority. To declare that their authority is vulnerable to a dirty joke from someone of inferior status just because that person happens to be a man is to undermine their position. Female authority is not (and should not be seen as) so fragile that it shatters at the first sign of male sexuality. Any rules saying otherwise strip women, in the public eye, of their hard-earned authority.

Since common definitions of sexual harassment include harassment between peers, the emphasis is not on external power structures, but on inner landscapes. The boundaries are subjective, the maps subject to mood. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s definition, any conduct may be deemed sexual harassment if it “has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual’s work or academic performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive working or academic environment.” The hostility or offensiveness of a working environment is naturally hard to measure by objective standards. Such vague categorization opens the issue up to the individual psyche.

The clarity of the definition of sexual harassment as a “hostile work environment” depends on a universal code of conduct, a shared idea of acceptable behavior that we just don’t have. Something that makes one person feel uncomfortable may make another person feel great. At Princeton, counselors reportedly tell students, If you feel sexually harassed then chances are you were. At the university’s Terrace Club, the refuge of fashionable, left-leaning, black-clad undergraduates, there is a sign supporting this view. It is downstairs, on a post next to the counter where the beer is served, often partially obscured by students talking, cigarettes in hand: “What constitutes sexual harassment or intimidating, hostile or offensive environment is to be defined by the person harassed and his/her own feelings of being threatened or compromised.” This relatively common definition of sexual harassment crosses the line between being supportive and obliterating the idea of external reality.

The categories become especially complicated and slippery when sexual harassment enters the realm of the subconscious. The Princeton guide explains that “sexual harassment may result from a conscious or unconscious action, and can be subtle or blatant.” Once we move into the area of the subtle and unconscious, we are no longer talking about a professor systematically exploiting power for sex. We are no longer talking about Hey, baby, sleep with me or I’ll fail you. To hold people responsible for their subtle, unconscious action is to legislate thought, an ominous, not to mention difficult, prospect.
The idea of sexual harassment—and clearly when you are talking about the subtle and unconscious, you are talking about an idea—provides a blank canvas on which students can express all of the insecurities, fears and confusions about the relative sexual freedom of the college experience. Sexual harassment is everywhere: it crops up in dinner conversations and advertisements on television, all over women’s magazines and editorial pages. No one can claim that Anita Hill is an unsung heroine. It makes sense that teenagers get caught up in the Anita Hill fury; they are particularly susceptible to feeling uncomfortable about sexuality, and sexual harassment offers an ideology that explains “uncomfortable” in political terms. The idea of sexual harassment displaces adolescent uneasiness onto the environment, onto professors, onto other men.

The heightened awareness of the potential for sexual encroachment creates an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust between faculty and students. Many professors follow an unwritten rule: never close the door to your office when you and a female student are inside. One professor told a male teaching assistant I know that closing the door to his office with a student inside is an invitation to charges of sexual harassment.

The inflamed rhetoric against harassment implies that all women are potential victims and all men are potential harassers. “Men in the Academy,” an essay in the book Ivory Power, vilifies the male academic so effectively that the author is forced to acknowledge that “nonetheless, not all male professors harass female students.” That this need even be said is evidence that this perspective is spiraling out of control.

The irony is that these open doors, and all that they symbolize, threaten to create barriers between faculty and students. In the present hypersensitive environment, caution and better judgment can lead professors to keep female students at a distance. It may be easier not to pursue friendships with female students than to risk charges of sexual harassment and misunderstood intentions. The rhetoric surrounding sexual harassment encourages a return to formal relations between faculty and students.

The university, with its emphasis on intellectual exchange, on the passionate pursuit of knowledge, with its strange hours and unworldly citizens, is theoretically an ideal space for close friendships. The flexible hours combined with the intensity of the academic world would appear to be fertile ground for connections, arguments over coffee. Recently, reading a biography of the poet John Berryman, who was also a professor at Princeton in the forties, I was struck by stories about his students crowding into his house late into the night to talk about poetry. These days, an informal invitation to a professor’s house till all hours would be a breach of propriety.

Feminists concerned with sexual harassment must fight for an immutable hierarchy, for interactions so cleansed of personal interest can be no possibility of borders crossed. Although this approach to education may reduce the number of harmful connections between teachers and students, it may also reduce the number of meaningful connections. The problem with the chasm solution to faculty-student relations is that for graduate students, and even for undergraduates, connections with professors are intellectually as well as professionally important.

In an early survey of sexual harassment, a law student at Berkeley wrote that in response to fears of sexual harassment charges, “the male law school teachers ignore female students...this means that we are afforded [fewer] academic opportunities than male students.” Many male professors have confirmed that they feel more uncomfortable with female students than with male students, because of all the attention given to sexual harassment. They may not “ignore” their female students, but they keep them at arm’s length. They feel freer to forge friendships with male students.

The overstringent attention given to sexual harassment on campuses breeds suspicion; it creates an environment where imaginations run wild, charges can seem to materialize out of thin air, and both faculty and students worry about a friendly lunch. The repercussions for the academic community, let alone the confused freshman, can be many and serious.

In an excessive effort to purge the university of sexual corruption, many institutions have violated the rights of the professors involved by neglecting...
to follow standard procedures. Since sexual harassment is a relatively recent priority, "standard procedures" are themselves new, shrouded, and shaky. Charges of sexual harassment are uncharted territory, and fairness is not necessarily the compass. . . .

The university has become so saturated with the idea of sexual harassment that it has begun to affect minute levels of communication. Like "date rape," the phrase "sexual harassment" is frequently used, and it does not apply only to extremes of human behavior. Suddenly everyday experience is filtered through the strict lens of a new sexual politics. Under fierce political scrutiny, behavior that once seemed neutral or natural enough now takes on ominous meanings. You may not even realize that you are a survivor of sexual harassment.

A student tells me that she first experienced sexual harassment when she came to college. She was at a crowded party, leaning against a wall, and a big jock came up to her, placed his hands at either side of her head, and pretended to lean against her, saying, So, baby, when are we going out? All right, he didn't touch me, she says, but he invaded my space. He had no right to do that.

She has carried this first instance of sexual harassment around in her head for six years. It is the beginning of a long list. A serious feminist now, an inhabitant of the official feminist house on campus, she recognizes this experience for what it was. She knows there is no way to punish the anonymous offender or everyone would be behind bars, but she thinks the solution is education. Like many feminists, she argues that discipline is clumsy, bureaucracy lumbering, and there is no hope for perfect justice in the university. She is more concerned with getting the message across, delineating acceptable behaviors to faculty and students alike, than in beheading professors. She subscribes to a sort of zookeeper school of feminism—training the beasts to behave within "acceptable" parameters.

Many foreigners think that concern with sexual harassment is as American as baseball, New England Puritans, and apple pie. Many feminists in other countries look on our preoccupation with sexual harassment as another sign of the self-indulgence and repression in American society. Veronique Neiertz, France's secretary of state for women's rights, has said that in the United States "the slightest wink can be misinterpreted." Her ministry's commonsense advice to women who feel harassed by coworkers is to respond with "a good slap in the face."

Once sexual harassment includes someone glancing down your shirt, the meaning of the phrase has been stretched beyond recognition. The rules about unwanted sexual attention begin to seem more like etiquette than rules. Of course it would be nicer if people didn't brush against other people in a way that makes them uncomfortable. It would also be nicer if bankers didn't bang their briefcases into people on the subway at rush hour. But not nice is a different thing than against the rules, or the law. It is a different thing than oppression women. Etiquette and politics aren't synonyms.

Susan Teres of SHARE said, at the 1992 Take Back the Night march, that 88 percent of Princeton's female students had experienced some form of sexual harassment on campus. Catharine MacKinnon writes that "only 7.8% of women in the United States are not sexually assaulted or harassed in their lifetimes." No wonder. Once you cast the net so wide as to include everyone's everyday experience, identifying sexual harassment becomes a way of interpreting the sexual texture of daily life, instead of isolating individual events. Sensitivity to sexual harassment becomes a way of seeing the world, rather than a way of targeting specific contemptible behaviors. In an essay attempting to profile the quin- tessential sexual harasser, two feminists warn in conclusion (and in all seriousness) that "the harasser is similar, perhaps disturbingly so, to the 'average man'."

As one peruses guidelines on sexual harassment, it's clear where the average man comes in. Like most common definitions, Princeton's definition of sexual harassment includes "leering and ogling, whistling, sexual innuendo, and other suggestive or offensive or derogatory comments, humor and jokes about sex." MacKinnon's statistic includes obscene phone calls. These definitions of sexual harassment sterilize the environment. They propose classrooms that are cleaner than Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers's neighborhood. Like the rhetoric about date rape, this extreme inclusiveness forces women into old roles. What message are we sending if we say We can't
work if you tell dirty jokes, it upsets us, it offends us. With this severe a conception of sexual harassment, sex itself gets pushed into a dark, seamy, male domain. If we can’t look at his dirty pictures because his dirty pictures upset us, it doesn’t mean they vanish. It means he looks at them with a new sense of their power, their underground, forbidden, male-only value.

Instead of learning that men have no right to do these terrible things to us, we should be learning to deal with individuals with strength and confidence. If someone bothers us, we should be able to put him in his place without crying into our pillow or screaming for help or counseling. If someone stares at us, or talks dirty, or charges neutral conversation with sexual innuendo, we should not be pushed to the verge of a nervous breakdown. . . .

I would even go so far as to say that people have the right to leer at whomever they want to leer at. By offering protection to the woman against the leer, the movement against sexual harassment is curtailing her personal power. This protection implies the need to be protected. It paints her as defenseless against even the most trivial of male attentions. This protection assumes that she never ogles, leers, or makes sexual innuendos herself.

Interpreting leers and leer-type behavior as a violation is a choice. My mother tells me about the time she was walking down the street in the sixties, when skirts were short, with my older sister, who was then three. A construction worker made a comment to my mother, and my three-year-old sister leaned out of her carriage and said, “Hey, mister, leave my mother alone.” My mother, never the conventional sort of feminist, told my sister that the construction worker wasn’t hurting her, he was giving her a compliment.

Although my mother’s reaction may not be everyone’s, this is a parable about individual responses. There is spectrum of reactions to something like a leer. Some may be flattered, others distressed; some won’t notice, and still others, according to some feminist literature, will be enraged and incapacitated. In its propaganda the movement against sexual harassment places absolute value on the leer. According to its rules, whatever that construction worker said to my mother was violating, harmful, and demeaning. According to its rules, my three-year-old sister was right. By rallying institutional authority behind its point of view, by distributing these pamphlets that say leering always makes women feel violated, this movement propels women backward to a time when sexual attention was universally thought to offend. They are saying, as Catharine MacKinnon neatly summarizes it, that “all women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water.” But I think it depends on where you learned to swim.

History offers an example of another time when looks could be crimes, but today feminists don’t talk much about what happened to black men accused of “reckless eyeballing,” that is, directing sexual glances at white women. Black men were lynched for a previous incarnation of “sexual harassment.” As late as 1955, a black man was lynched for whistling at a white woman. Beneath the Jim Crow law about reckless eyeballing was the assumption that white women were the property of white men, and a look too hard or too long in their direction was a flaunting of white power. Reckless eyeballing was a symbolic violation of white women’s virtue. That virtue, that division between white women and black men, was important to the southern hierarchy. While of course lynchings and Jim Crow are not the current danger, it’s important to remember that protecting women against the stray male gaze has not always served a social good. We should learn the lessons: looks can’t kill, and we are nobody’s property.

All of this is not to suggest that abuses of power are not wrong. They are. Any professor who trades grades for sex and uses this power as a forceful tool of seduction deserves to face charges. The same would be true if he traded grades for a thousand dollars. I’m not opposed to stamping out corruption; I only think it’s important to look before you stamp. Rules about harassment should be less vague, and inclusive. They should sharply target serious offenses and abuses of power rather than environments that are “uncomfortable,” rather than a stray professor looking down a shirt. The university’s rules should not be based on the idea of female students who are pure and naive, who don’t harbor sexualities of their own, who don’t seduce, or who can’t defend themselves against the
nonconditional sexual interests of male faculty and students.

As feminists interested in the issue themselves argue, "Many have difficulty recognizing their experience as victimization. It is helpful to use the words that fit the experience, validating the depths of the survivor's feelings and allowing her to feel her experience was serious." In other words, these feminists recognize that if you don't tell the victim that she's a victim, she may sail through the experience without fully grasping the gravity of her humiliation. She may get through without all that trauma and counseling. Buried within this description of helping students overcome the problem of "recognizing their experience as victimization" is the nagging concern that the problem may pass unnoticed, may dissolve without political scrutiny. To create awareness is sometimes to create a problem.

Education about sexual harassment is not confined to the space of freshman week. As sexual harassment is absorbed into public discussion, it enters grade schools as easily as colleges. An article in New York magazine documents the trickle-down effect: "After her first week at a reputable private school in Manhattan, 8-year-old Alexandra didn't want to go back. A 9-year-old boy had been harassing her: He said he wanted to hump me. She wasn't sure what 'hump' meant."

The article describes what happened when Alexandra discovered the name for her traumatic experience. She was listening to Anita Hill's testimony on the radio when she suddenly exclaimed: "That's what happened to me! He didn't touch me, but his words upset me!" The article concludes that "Alexandra's first lesson in sexual harassment may not be her last, but thanks to her parents, who listened to her, believed her and supported her, she'll at least be better prepared to deal with sexual abuse than the women and men of Anita Hill's generation." As Alexandra grows up, will she be better able to deal with sexual abuse, or will she just see it everywhere she looks? Will she blur the line between childish teasing and sexual abuse for the rest of her life? The prospect of a maturing generation of Alexandras, sensitized from childhood to the issue of sexual harassment, is not necessarily desirable from the feminist point of view. As Joan Didion wrote in the sixties, certain segments of the women's movement can breed "women too sensitive for the difficulties of adult life, women unequipped for reality, and grasping at the movement as a rationale for denying that reality."

Responding to sexual harassment in its most expansive definition purges the environment of the difficult, the uncomfortable, and the even mildly distasteful. Feminists concerned with sexual harassment reproduce their own version of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland, based on the absence of messy sexual desire. Although it takes some imaginative leaps to get there, their version of Herland is a land without dirty jokes, leers, and other instances of "unwanted sexual attention." Whether or not visions of a universe free from "sexual harassment" are practical, the question becomes whether they're even desirable.

Mary Koss, author of the Ms. magazine survey of rape, writes that "experiencing sexual harassment transforms women into victims and changes their lives." Koss sees this transformation into victimhood as something caused by sexual harassment, an external event. In Koss's paradigm, after the student has been harassed, her confidence is perilously shaken, her ability to function and trust men disrupted forever. She sees the "lecherous professor" as the agent of transformation. She does not see that it is her entire conceptual framework—her kind of rhetoric, her kind of interpretation—that transforms perfectly stable women into hysterical, sobbing victims. If there is any transforming to be done, it is to transform everyday experience back into everyday experience.

NOTES

2. Ibid.
5. Sue Rosenberg Zalk, "Men in the Academy." In M. Paludi (ed.), Ivory Power: Sexual Harassment
11. MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State, 149.
14. Ibid.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss whether Roepe believes that the current rhetoric on sexual harassment does more harm than good.
2. What does Roepe mean when she says that broad definitions of sexual harassment “sterilize the environment”? Do you agree? Support your answers using examples from your campus.
3. Do you agree with the definition of sexual harassment now in common use? If so, explain why. If not, come up with a definition of sexual harassment that overcomes some of the problems in the current definition cited by Roepe.
4. Do you agree with Roepe that people have a right to leer? What are some of the pros and cons of including leering under the definition of sexual harassment? Support your answers. Discuss how a liberal feminist might respond. Discuss how Beauvoir might respond to these questions.
5. Discuss Roepe’s claim that feminists such as Pineau who tell victims of date rape that they have been “traumatized” are actually perpetuating the old ethos of female victimhood and contributing to the institutionalization of female weakness.
6. Discuss whether Roepe adequately addresses the problem of sexual harassment as sexual discrimination and a violation of the right to equal opportunity. Does sexual harassment, even though it may not directly harm a particular woman, create a hostile working or academic environment which, in turn, limits women’s opportunities and freedom? Support your answer.
7. Does sexual harassment violate Kant’s categorical imperative? Support your answer. If so, discuss what policy should be adopted on your campus for dealing with it.