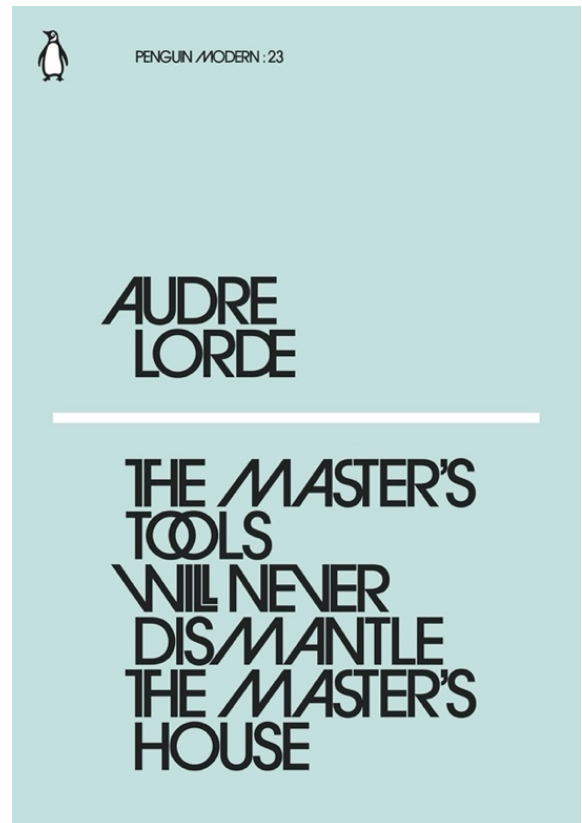


The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House

by **Audre Lorde**

From the self-described 'Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,' these soaring, urgent essays on the power of women, poetry and anger are filled with darkness and light.



Guided Reading and Discussion Questions

Poetry Is Not a Luxury

- 1.** How did Audre Lorde define poetry? How did she describe her personal relationship to poetry? How can poetry be used to access internal sources of power? What is your own relationship to poetry? Do you believe that poetry can help you access the “incredible reserve of creativity and power” (p. 2) within you? Can poetry help you understand this reserve within others? Why or why not?
- 2.** How did poetry help Lorde explore and accept new ideas and feelings? How can poetry help us “give name to the nameless” (p. 2)? Why is poetry sometimes seen as a luxury? What does it mean for poetry to be a right rather than a privilege?
- 3.** Are there poets whose work resonates with your own experiences, feelings, and ideas? If yes, how has poetry helped you understand your individual identities and relationship to the world? If no, how might you engage with poetry in a new way?

4. How has poetry been used to cultivate a “revolutionary demand” (p. 4) for freedom? How can poetry be used as a tool to resist institutions and profit-driven structures? Do you agree that there are no ideas, but only “new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves—along with the renewed courage to try them out” (p. 4)? Why or why not?
5. Lorde writes that our dreams “are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare” (p. 5). How might poetry help you understand and realize your own dreams? What are some other sources of strength and courage that you can access and explore?

Uses of the Erotic

6. Audre Lorde speaks of the erotic as “an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered” (p. 9). Is this similar to or different from your previous understanding of erotic energy and sensations? What is the difference between erotic and pornographic? Audre Lorde wrote this essay in 1978 as a feminist critique, directed towards women. If she were alive today, how might Lorde have revised this article to be more inclusive?
7. How have people who embrace erotic empowerment historically been treated? What are some current examples of ways in which the erotic is minimized, oppressed, or demonized? How can a personal understanding of the erotic serve as a source of power? Could the erotic also serve as a source of institutional power? Why or why not?
8. What does it mean “to demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work” (p. 7)? How can exploring a sense of desire and satisfaction encourage us to demand more from our lives? How might you seek a greater understanding of your own desires in order to inform and direct your life? What support, tools, or communities could help you?
9. How can erotic understanding serve as a source of both internal and external understanding? How can it help us connect to physical, emotional, psychic, and political work? When is there power in saying yes? When is there power in saying no?
10. How do you currently connect to and cultivate joy? Is your own joy connected to an understanding of your own erotic power? Why or why not? Is your connection to joy influenced by your identities or communities? If so, how? How can shared deep feeling help you establish and nurture connections with others and the world around you? How could you access and explore your own capacity for joy in new or different ways?
11. Lorde writes, “Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world” (p. 15). How can you cultivate an understanding of your own erotic power in order to pursue social change? Is this

opportunity available to everyone? Why or why not? How can an understanding of erotic connection lessen threats of difference?

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12. Did the title of this collection of essays take on a different meaning after reading Audre Lorde's speech from 1984? "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" is often used as a quote taken out of context—what does it mean when this quote is used without context or understanding of the speech it is taken from? Who is the "Master" that Lorde names in this speech? What are the tools? How do you personally relate to the "Master's House"?
13. What was Lorde's critique of New York University and the conference where she presented this speech? Why do you think she attended this conference? Do you believe that it was Lorde's responsibility to interrupt or change the event? Why or why not? How did Lorde call out white women? What call to action was she articulating?
14. How has feminist discussion historically excluded significant input from BIPOC, LGBTQ, and poor women-identified people? How has this exclusion manifested within institutions, reading lists, and in workplaces? Have you personally witnessed groups of people excluded from conversations about feminism? If yes, how?
15. What is the meaning of interdependency? What does Lorde mean when she speaks about interdependency between women as the path to freedom? What is the difference between tolerating difference and seeing it as a necessity? Why does Lorde assert that community is a requirement for obtaining liberation? What communities are you a member of? Are any of these communities actively working towards liberation? Are any of these communities tolerating or oppressing difference?
16. Lorde states, "In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower" (p. 19). What do you think this means in today's world? Have you personally been intimidated by difference? If yes, how? How are different expectations set for women of color and for white women?

Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism

17. Audre Lorde delivered this essay as the keynote address at the National Women's Studies Association Convention in 1981. How did Audre Lorde critique the academy? Who is excluded from conversations about racism within the academy? Can this be remedied with specific actions to include people who have been historically excluded? Why or why not?

18. How did Audre Lorde describe her personal relationship with anger? What is the difference between destructive and constructive anger? How can anger serve as a catalyst for positive change? Who profits when anger and grief are used to create separation and division?
19. Have you witnessed female anger, particularly Black female anger, portrayed as a negative quality? If yes, how? How is anger portrayed in relationship to other racial and gender identities? How do your personal identities influence your relationship to your own feelings and expressions of anger? Do you fear or silence your own anger? Why or why not?
20. Lorde states that, “Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve none of our futures” (p. 23). When have you witnessed guilt and defensiveness wielded by others? Have you shielded yourself from harder work by falling back on guilt or defensiveness? If yes, how can you move forward? How might you encourage others to understand and transcend these feelings?
21. What does Lorde mean when she asserts that the mainstream does not want white women to respond to racism? How do your personal identities shape your individual response to racism? How can coalitions serve as catalysts for action and change? Are you a member of any coalitions or groups responding to racism? Why or why not?

Learning from the 1960s

22. What were your own beliefs and opinions about Malcolm X prior to reading this essay? What sources and institutions shaped those views? How did Audre Lorde’s opinions about Malcolm X shift over time?
23. What does Lorde mean when she states, “we must move against not only those forces which dehumanize us from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves” (p. 38)? Have you internalized oppressive values? If yes, how do they influence your life and actions? Why is it important to work towards both internal and external liberation? How can we encourage others to work towards liberation?
24. How has difference historically been used to create divisions within Black communities, organizations, and coalitions? How are divisions created today? Have you witnessed divisions within communities, organizations, or coalitions that you are a member of? How can the past inform how we use our energy and resources today? How does current rhetoric about unity support or conflict with Lorde’s opinions about how we should work towards change?

25. Do you believe that it is possible to engage in a single-issue struggle? Why or why not? How have single issues divided communities and groups? Have you personally witnessed division created by a single issue? What does it mean to be a self-actualized human focused on and working towards change?
26. Lorde asks the question, “How are you practicing what you preach...and who exactly is listening?” (p. 50). How would you answer this question today? How do you hope to answer this question five years from today?

For Further Discussion and Action

1. Explore the [Audre Lorde Project](#), a Community Organizing Center for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two-Spirit, Trans and Gender Non Conforming People of Color Communities.
2. Learn about Audre Lorde’s life and scholarship in Berlin, Germany. Read Cheanna Gavin’s essay, [Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years](#). Watch the documentary trailer for [Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992](#).
3. Read Aisha Shaidah Simmon’s essay, [Afterword: Standing at the Lordean Shoreline](#).
4. Read poems by Audre Lorde selected by the [Poetry Foundation](#).
5. Read Nikki Mills’ essay, [Writing Ourselves into the Discourse: The Legacies of Audre Lorde and May Ayim](#).
6. Read adrienne maree brown’s essay, [Love as Political Resistance: Lessons from Audre Lorde and Octavia Butler](#).
7. Explore the poetry featured on [Split This Rock](#), an organization that “cultivates, teaches, and celebrates poetry that bears witness to injustice and provokes social change.” Read poetry featured in the database and sign up for the [Poem of the Week Series](#).

About this Guide’s Writer

Rachael Zafer is the author of over a dozen discussion guides for texts like *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, and *What the Eyes Don’t See* by Mona Hanna-Attisha. You can view all of her guides at www.rachaelzafer.com/curriculum.