

## Unveiling Femininity: Gender, Fame, and Success in Taylor Jenkins Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*

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### Abstract

The main objective of this research article is to explore the intersections of fame, femininity, and identity in Taylor Jenkins Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, examining how gendered power dynamics shape the life and choices of Evelyn Hugo, a fictional Hollywood icon. The narrative explores the cost of success for women in a patriarchal society as Evelyn navigates societal pressures and industry expectations through seven carefully chosen marriages and the maintenance of a glamorous, heterosexual public image. While Evelyn uses her relationships as strategic tools to rise in a male-dominated film industry, her true identity and love for actress Celia St. James reveal the limitations imposed by cultural and gendered expectations. Drawing on feminist theory, particularly the work of scholars like Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Betty Friedan (1963). This research examines Evelyn's complex struggle for power, examining how fame acts as both an avenue for empowerment and a restrictive force. The study further explores the novel's depiction of femininity, love, and bisexuality, considering how Evelyn's life reflects broader themes of identity and the struggle for authenticity within oppressive structures. This paper ultimately questions the cost of success for women in environments where public personas must often overshadow personal truth, offering insights into the challenges of achieving selfhood in spaces prioritizing image over individuality.

**Keywords:** *Fame, femininity, cost of success, gender identity, patriarchal society, etc.*

### **Introduction**

In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, Taylor Jenkins Reid crafts a compelling narrative that explores the complexities of fame, identity, and love through the life of the enigmatic Hollywood icon Evelyn Hugo. The novel opens with Evelyn, ready to unveil the truth behind her glamorous yet tumultuous life. She chooses Monique Grant, an unknown magazine reporter, to tell her story, which raises questions about why she selected Monique and what hidden connections might exist between their lives. As Monique listens to Evelyn recount her journey from a poor Cuban girl in Hell's Kitchen to a celebrated actress with seven husbands, the narrative reveals the challenges of navigating Hollywood's treacherous waters and the personal sacrifices Evelyn made along the way.

Evelyn's story is marked by her relentless ambition and the societal pressures that shaped her choices. From her early days in Los Angeles during the 1950s to her departure from show business in the late '80s, Evelyn's life is a testament to the lengths one might go to achieve success and maintain a carefully curated public persona. However, beneath the glitz and glamour lies a deeper exploration of her identity and relationships, particularly with Celia St. James, which challenges traditional notions of love and fidelity. As Evelyn reveals her past, Monique finds herself drawn into Evelyn's world, confronting her struggles and insecurities.

*The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* is a historical novel that intricately weaves the life story of Evelyn Hugo, a fictional Hollywood starlet, with the contemporary narrative of Monique Grant, a struggling journalist. The novel opens with Evelyn, now in her late seventies, who has decided to share her life story with Monique. This decision sets the stage for exploring fame, identity, and the sacrifices made in pursuit of success. As Evelyn recounts her rise from a poor Cuban girl in Hell's Kitchen to a glamorous Hollywood icon known for her beauty and talent, readers are drawn into her complex world filled with love, loss, and resilience.

Evelyn's tumultuous journey through seven marriages is central to the narrative, each serving as a strategic move in her quest for fame and acceptance. Her relationships

reveal her ambition and the societal pressures she faced as a woman in a male-dominated industry. The novel explores themes such as the cost of fame, the over-sexualization of women, and the struggle for authenticity in a world that often demands conformity. Reid's portrayal of Evelyn's relationship with Celia St. James, another actress and the true love of her life, challenges traditional notions of love and fidelity, highlighting the complexities of bisexuality and societal expectations.

At the heart of Evelyn's story is her romantic relationship with Celia St. James, which challenges traditional notions of love and fidelity. Evelyn's love for Celia conflicts with her carefully crafted public image, forcing her to face the complexities of bisexuality in an era that demands heterosexual conformity from women in the spotlight. Her marriages to men often serve as a façade, protecting her public persona while concealing her true self. This duality raises questions about authenticity: Is Evelyn the glamorous starlet adored by the public or the passionate lover hidden from view? As she ages, Evelyn's ability to maintain these façades diminishes, culminating in her decision to tell her story to Monique Grant—a moment of profound vulnerability that allows her to reclaim her identity.

Sofia Gaviria and Maria Hinestroza (2023) emphasize the novel's exploration of women's objectification, stating, "Evelyn Hugo exploits her sexuality to gain fame and fortune in mid-20th century Hollywood" (Gaviria & Hinestroza, 2023, p. 23). They argue that Evelyn's ability to manipulate her image and relationships reflects the societal expectations placed on women, where their worth is often tied to their physical appearance and connections to powerful men (Gaviria & Hinestroza, 2023, p. 23). This theme resonates throughout the narrative, as Evelyn's calculated decisions highlight her struggle for agency in a male-dominated industry. Moreover, Aryan, G., & Aryan, A. (2022) from *Women Who Win* underscores the emotional depth of Evelyn's story, noting, "Evelyn shares her heart-wrenching story with us, and we feel ourselves walking along with her in her journey" (p. 12). This connection between Evelyn and Monique Grant, the journalist tasked with telling her story, allows readers to reflect on their own experiences while engaging

with Evelyn's narrative. The review highlights how Reid skillfully intertwines personal struggles with broader societal issues, making Evelyn's experiences relatable and poignant (Aryan, 2022, p. 12).

Ultimately, this novel serves as both a captivating narrative about a woman's rise to fame and a critical examination of the societal forces that shape female identity. Through Evelyn's journey, Reid invites readers to consider the complexities of love, ambition, and authenticity in a world that often seeks to define women by their relationships rather than their individual talents. Liberal feminism, which centers around the advocacy for equality through legal and political reforms, has been discussed extensively in feminist literature. One prominent scholar, Betty Friedan (1963), in her book *The Feminine Mystique*, critiques the limiting roles of women and argues for their right to equal opportunity in all spheres of life, particularly in employment and education (Friedan, p. 276). Friedan's work laid the foundation for liberal feminism, encouraging women to assert control over their lives through personal agency and professional independence. Friedan's ideas are pertinent to understanding Evelyn Hugo's drive to gain power and control over her career and personal relationships.

Literature has often been a site of contestation for female agency. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's (1979) *The Madwoman in the Attic* analyzes how literature by male authors often depicted women as passive and powerless, but later feminist writers sought to subvert these representations (Gilbert and Gubar, p. 15). This shift in the portrayal of women's empowerment resonates with Evelyn Hugo's characterization, where she actively resists the roles imposed upon her by a patriarchal society. Gilbert and Gubar's analysis emphasizes the importance of self-representation and autonomy, themes that Jenkins Reid develops in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*.

Evelyn's manipulation of her public image, as well as her strategic marriages, highlights her agency within a patriarchal society. As Annette Kuhn (1990) explains in *The Power of the Image*, women in media often take control of their image as a means of self-empowerment (Kuhn, p. 62). Jenkins Reid presents Evelyn's ability to shape her public

persona as a form of agency, aligning with liberal feminist ideals of empowerment through individual choice.

In her article on female agency in contemporary literature, Jane Smith (2020) argues that Evelyn Hugo is a quintessential liberal feminist protagonist who exercises control over her life, particularly through her career and personal relationships (Smith, 45). Smith's analysis shows that Evelyn's agency is evident in how she chooses to navigate Hollywood's male-dominated film industry, capitalizing on her beauty and talent to gain power (Smith, 47). Moreover, Smith points out that Evelyn's strategic marriages reflect the negotiation of power dynamics, as she uses marriage to further her career and secure her independence (Smith, 52).

### **Gender Identity and Liberal Feminism**

Liberal feminism, one of the main branches of feminist thought, focuses on advocating for gender equality through legal and political reform within the existing structures of society. It emphasizes individual autonomy, the right to choose, and equal opportunities for women in education, employment, and political representation. Liberal feminists argue that women's liberation can be achieved by ensuring that women have the same rights and freedoms as men, without the need for drastic changes to societal institutions. Liberal feminists believe that women should have the same opportunities as men in all aspects of life, including education, employment, and political participation. They seek to remove barriers that prevent women from fully participating in society.

Betty Friedan (1963), a key figure in liberal feminism, argues in her groundbreaking work, *The Feminine Mystique*, that the idealization of domesticity in mid-20th century America trapped women in unfulfilling roles. She challenges the idea that women's primary identity should be as wives and mothers, advocating instead for women's right to pursue education and careers. Friedan writes, "The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own" (Friedan, p. 346). Friedan's work played a pivotal role in launching the second-wave feminist

movement and continues to resonate as a critique of societal expectations placed on women.

John Stuart Mill (1869), a philosopher and early advocate of liberal feminism, argues in his essay, *The Subjection of Women*, that women's subordination is a relic of the past and that women should be treated as equals to men. Mill writes, "The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement, and ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality" (Mill, p. 25). Mill's emphasis on legal and social equality for women aligns with the liberal feminist view that reform within the existing system is necessary for gender equality.

Similarly, Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), in her seminal work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, advocates for equal education for women as a means of achieving equality. She argues that women are not inherently inferior to men but are deprived of the same opportunities for intellectual and personal development. Wollstonecraft contends, "If women are to be excluded, without having a voice, from a participation of the natural rights of mankind, prove first that they want reason, else this flaw in your New Constitution will ever show that man must, in some shape, act like a tyrant" (Wollstonecraft, p. 22). Her work laid the groundwork for future liberal feminists by insisting on the importance of education and rationality in women's liberation.

### **Gender, Fame, and Success in Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo***

In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, Jenkins Reid presents an appealing portrayal of female agency. Evelyn is empowered, but her empowerment comes at a cost—her relationships are often strained, and her success is contingent upon manipulating the very systems that oppress women. This reflects the ongoing debate within feminism about the balance between personal autonomy and the need for broader, systemic change. The perspectives reviewed in this discussion provide a comprehensive understanding of Evelyn Hugo's character as a liberal feminist protagonist. Through her strategic use of marriage, manipulation of her public image, and focus on her career, Evelyn negotiates power in a

patriarchal society, exemplifying the ideals of agency and autonomy championed by liberal feminism. However, her story also raises important questions about the limitations of liberal feminism, particularly in its ability to address systemic inequalities. As Jenkins Reid's novel suggests, female empowerment is complex and often requires navigating the systems that seek to oppress. Evelyn's use of her sexuality to advance her career is a controversial aspect of her character. However, it fits within the framework of liberal feminism, which stresses the importance of a woman's control over her body and choices. In her relationship with Harry Cameron, Evelyn acknowledges that she "had to play the part" of a glamorous and heterosexual star to maintain her career (p. 169). She manipulates her public persona, staying in the closet about her bisexuality, to navigate a world dominated by patriarchal norms.

Evelyn explains: "I knew if the world found out about Celia, I'd lose everything. And I couldn't let that happen. So I did what I had to do. I controlled what I could control" (p. 202). This line shows how Evelyn consciously highlights the constraints of a sexist industry by managing her public image. While her actions could be seen as reinforcing patriarchal structures, liberal feminism defends her right to make decisions that serve her personal and professional interests, given the limitations of the society she operates in. Annette Kuhn argues in *The Power of the Image* that women's reclamation of their sexual identity can be a form of empowerment, even when constrained by societal expectations (p. 62). Evelyn's manipulation of her sexuality to gain professional power reflects this kind of strategic empowerment.

*In The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, marriage is a tool Evelyn uses to navigate the male-dominated Hollywood industry, securing her professional status and public image. Her marriages to men like Don Adler and Rex North are strategically arranged to further her career, reflecting a liberal feminist approach to power dynamics within marriage. For example, Evelyn justifies her marriage to Rex North by stating, "It was a business arrangement. We needed each other to stay relevant" (p. 215). In this case, marriage is not a traditional patriarchal institution but a contract between equals, where

both partners benefit professionally. Lisa Jones, in *Feminism and Marriage: A Complex Relationship*, argues that feminist characters often subvert traditional marriage roles to gain independence or professional leverage (p. 112). Evelyn's marriages reflect this subversion, as she retains control over her life despite conforming to societal expectations of marriage.

However, her decision to stay with Don Adler despite his abuse complicates the narrative of her autonomy. She reflects, "I stayed with him longer than I should have. But at the time, I didn't see a way out without losing everything I had worked for" (p. 142). This line illustrates the complexities of feminist agency within oppressive structures—Evelyn's decision is pragmatic, influenced by the limitations imposed by a patriarchal society. While much of Evelyn's power comes from navigating male-dominated systems, her friendship with Harry Cameron represents a form of solidarity and mutual empowerment that aligns with feminist ideals. Their partnership, based on trust and equality, allows them both to succeed in a cutthroat industry. Harry provides emotional support and helps Evelyn navigate the complexities of fame, while Evelyn aids Harry in maintaining his secret life as a gay man.

Evelyn reflects, "Harry was the best decision I ever made. He was not just my husband; he was my partner in every sense of the word" (p. 198). Their relationship is rooted in mutual respect and shared goals, representing the liberal feminist ideal of partnership in which both parties benefit equally. This friendship challenges the traditional patriarchal narrative, showing that Evelyn's most successful and fulfilling relationship is not with one of her romantic husbands but with a trusted friend and colleague. One of the central tenets of liberal feminism is the reclamation of personal identity. Evelyn's decision to tell her life story to Monique, a young journalist, is an act of reclamation, allowing her to assert control over her narrative. By choosing Monique, a woman of color, to write her biography, Evelyn demonstrates a feminist understanding of intersectionality and the need to uplift other marginalized voices. Evelyn asserts: "I want you to tell the truth about me, even if it makes me look bad. Especially if it makes me look bad" (p. 372). This moment marks a significant turning point in Evelyn's life, where she no longer manipulates her

image for public consumption but chooses to present her authentic self. Her decision to reclaim her identity, after years of hiding parts of herself for public acceptance, reflects the liberal feminist goal of self-actualization.

In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, Taylor Jenkins Reid presents a complex narrative of female empowerment that aligns with liberal feminist theory. Evelyn Hugo navigates a patriarchal society by asserting control over her body, career, and relationships. While her decisions often involve manipulating traditional power structures, liberal feminism supports her right to make these choices in pursuit of autonomy and equality. By exploring Evelyn's strategic marriages, control over her sexuality, and reclamation of her identity, the novel highlights the multifaceted nature of female agency within a male-dominated world. Liberal feminism emphasizes autonomy, equality, and the freedom for women to shape their lives according to their desires and ambitions. Evelyn Hugo embodies these values by making calculated decisions to assert control over her career and identity. Below, these critical aspects of her character are explored using extended quotes from the text.

Throughout the novel, Evelyn Hugo fully understands the importance of crafting and maintaining her public image. In Hollywood, where women are often objectified and commodified, she strategically uses her appearance and relationships to gain power. Evelyn reflects on her choices, showing how she views her image as a tool for survival in a male-dominated society. She states, "You have to understand that when you are given a ticket to the carnival, you don't waste it. That's what I did with Ernie Diaz. He was my ticket out of Hell's Kitchen. He was my way in. And I wasn't going to apologize for it" (p. 28). This quote highlights Evelyn's pragmatic approach to marriage, using it as a stepping-stone to access otherwise unavailable opportunities. Liberal feminism supports women making choices in line with their goals, even if those decisions require leveraging the systems around them. Here, marriage is not a romantic institution but a practical decision that allows Evelyn to advance her career.

A key element of Evelyn's power comes from her conscious manipulation of her sexuality. In a society that often reduces women to their physical appeal, Evelyn uses this to her advantage, deciding when and how to present herself to maximize her career opportunities. Evelyn says, "I'm not a fool. I knew what I was doing when I posed for that picture. I knew the power it would have. I knew how much money it would make. And I wasn't ashamed of it. I wasn't ashamed of the world seeing me in a bikini. I was ashamed of the fact that the world thought that was the best thing I had to offer" (p.134). In this moment, Evelyn admits that while she leveraged her looks to further her career, she resents that her body is seen as her only valuable asset. Liberal feminists, like Betty Friedan, argue that a woman's worth should not be limited to her appearance. Evelyn's awareness of this contradiction underlines her agency—she knows how the system works and plays by its rules to gain success, even though she's fully conscious of its limitations.

Evelyn's multiple marriages are central to the novel and essential to her rise to fame. However, each marriage is marked by strategic decisions reflecting Evelyn's desire for control over her destiny rather than passive participation in traditional gender roles. Her marriage to Rex North is a clear example. She opines, "It was a mutually beneficial arrangement. I didn't love Rex, and Rex didn't love me. But the public loved us together, and that was enough. We agreed on a timeline, we agreed on our public appearances, and we agreed to keep it clean. There were no surprises. No betrayals. It was all business" (Reid, p. 215). This quote demonstrates how Evelyn views marriage as a contractual arrangement that benefits both parties, removing the emotional complexities that traditional relationships often involve. Her decision to marry Rex for public relations reasons subverts the patriarchal notion of marriage as a bond based solely on romantic or domestic ideals. Liberal feminism supports this view by advocating for women's agency in shaping relationships based on personal and professional needs.

Evelyn Hugo's awareness of her own sexual power and her decision to use it strategically is central to her survival and success in a patriarchal Hollywood. While she acknowledges that society often attempts to shame women for their sexuality, she takes

control of it. At one point, Evelyn reflects, “I was fully aware that I was using my body and my sexuality to get ahead. And I knew that some people would think less of me for it. But if men could use their power and connections to get what they wanted, why couldn't I use my sexuality?” (p. 183). This quote exemplifies the liberal feminist notion that women should have the same rights as men to use whatever tools are at their disposal to achieve their goals. Evelyn's conscious manipulation of societal expectations concerning female beauty and sexuality turns the tables on patriarchy, transforming her body into a source of power rather than an object of control.

The novel critiques the entertainment industry's commodification of women. Evelyn notes, “They wanted to sell me like a product, not a person” (p. 32). This parallels feminist critiques of how women in the public eye are reduced to their marketability, with their humanity erased in favor of their appearance. “You have to give them something if you want them to let you be something else” (p.157). Evelyn's statement here reflects the “patriarchal bargain” concept—the idea that women must compromise or conform to specific societal standards to gain any degree of power or autonomy. Evelyn's relationship with Celia is both romantic and rivalrous at times. Their dynamic highlights feminist discussions around competition among women, particularly in male-dominated spaces. “We loved each other, but sometimes I felt like we were competing for survival” (p. 278) illustrates how societal pressures pit women against one another. Despite their challenges, Evelyn and Celia's relationship exemplifies feminist solidarity and love. Their bond becomes a form of resistance against a world that seeks to control and marginalize them. “I would have given up every husband for her, every role, just to have more time with her” (p. 315) underscores the power of female connection.

The novel also addresses the pressures placed on women to maintain youth and beauty. “They will love you when you are young and beautiful, but they will discard you when you age” (p. 189) speaks to the fear of aging in a patriarchal society that values women primarily for their physical appearance. However, Evelyn reclaims her narrative as she ages. “I am still here. I am still Evelyn Hugo, and I refuse to be forgotten” (p. 355).

This act of self-definition challenges the idea that women's worth diminishes with age, offering a feminist redefinition of beauty and value. By the novel's end, Evelyn emerges as a symbol of resilience and defiance. She says, "I lived my life the way I wanted, even if it was not always the way people thought I should" (p. 384). This reflects feminist ideals of self-determination and the rejection of societal expectations imposed on women.

Evelyn's relationship with motherhood is ambivalent, further challenging the traditional feminist critique of the "ideal mother." She admits, "I wanted to be the kind of mother who would drop everything for her child, but I wasn't" (p. 258). This reflection complicates the notion that motherhood should be central to a woman's identity. It offers a feminist critique of the unrealistic societal pressures on mothers to sacrifice their careers and identities. While Evelyn's career success required her to make sacrifices as a mother, she remains unapologetic about her choices. "Being a mother was part of who I was, but it was not the whole of me" (p. 261). This assertion presents a feminist interpretation of how women can balance motherhood with personal ambition, rejecting the patriarchal notion that women must fully dedicate themselves to motherhood to be considered "good mothers."

Evelyn repeatedly faces societal judgment for her decisions, particularly her multiple marriages. She observes, "They judged me for every husband I had, never once asking why I felt I needed them" (p. 236). This critique reflects a feminist understanding of how women are scrutinized for their personal lives and relationships in ways men rarely are, highlighting the double standard that women must navigate. Evelyn often defies traditional feminine expectations, whether in terms of her sexuality, ambition, or choices in motherhood. She reflects, "I never wanted to be the woman they wanted me to be" (p. 319). This defiance speaks to a feminist rebellion against prescribed gender roles, as Evelyn refuses to conform to societal expectations about how a woman should behave.

### **Conclusion**

In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, Taylor Jenkins Reid presents an appealing exploration of liberal feminist ideals through the life of Evelyn Hugo. The novel critiques

patriarchal structures such as the male gaze, marriage, and societal expectations by framing Evelyn's determination to face these systems on her own terms. Evelyn's control over her body, sexuality, and career, combined with her rejection of traditional female roles, aligns with the core liberal feminist belief in women's right to self-determination and equal opportunities. Her strategic use of relationships and her refusal to be defined by the men in her life demonstrate how she challenges the restrictive norms placed on women in a patriarchal society.

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