Nancy Hartsock’s essay on the feminist standpoint is a challenging essay but it’s interesting and has been very influential, still today. Her basic claim is not that hard to understand. It might go something like this:

Women have a distinctive perspective on reality because their experiences are different from those of people who occupy other positions in society. This different perspective is a privileged perspective that makes it possible to understand reality better, perhaps to understand it as it really is.

What makes this a Marxist feminist theory? While Hartsock draws on psychoanalytic feminism (especially in her account of women’s relational lives, drawing on the work of Flax and Chodorow), her essential theoretical perspective draws on several of Marx’s insights. Hartsock, like Marx, begins with the fact that human beings are defined by their labor. Hartsock enlarges this to include not only productive labor but reproductive labor, the work women do raising children. Hartsock will argue that the relationship between mothers and children creates a specifically feminist relational self. She also draws on Marx’s insight that there is a difference between the bourgeois and the proletariat. Remember that according to Marx our consciousness is shaped by our social experiences. If two groups of people live very different kinds of life then we would expect there to be differences in their patterns of thought. Marx further argued that it is possible to gain a more accurate understanding of the social reality of capitalism from the perspective of that class which is socially marginal. If you are socially marginal, you don’t have a vested interest in preserving the current system. You might get a sense of what Marx means by this by thinking about the analogous case of domestic abuse. Imagine a woman who is the object of domestic violence in a long term relationship. Think about her perspective on the relationship and how it might differ from the abuser’s. He doesn’t give her life much thought and doesn’t try to understand her perspective. She is certainly aware of her own perspective but she also has to constantly be aware of him and his. She is probably always thinking about what sets him off on his abuse, what makes him angry or prone to hit her. So she sees reality from a broader perspective that includes her own but also his. This might lead us to think that she has a privileged perspective on their relationship and sees it more adequately than does he. That’s not to say that her own perspective might not be partial. It’s just that it is not as partial as his. So Hartsock might say that in this relationship there are different levels of reality and the abused woman has access to deeper, more explanatory levels of reality than does the man.

Hartsock is going to apply these points to women’s lives more generally and suggest that because are on the outside of a capitalist patriarchal system that they have a privileged perspective on that system that men don’t share. There are three sections, in particular, we should pay close attention to. The first is where she explains what a standpoint is. She lists five characteristics and you should familiarize yourself with them. The second is her account of women’s distinctive double day, the manner in which women contribute both to subsistence (as workers in the public sphere) and as mothers (working in the private sphere). One of the interesting aspects of this section is her discussion of women’s complex relational world. This is a topic we will return to in our discussion of psychoanalytic feminism. The third section spells out some of the implications of these
differences. She tries to explain how the masculine sense of self leads to the construction of both a class society and the masculinist world view. Since the construction of the masculine self is built upon an opposition between self and other, one can expect a patriarchal society to reflect that same opposition. Two aspects of her discussion receive more attention: how the masculine sense of self leads to dualism and to a preoccupation with death rather than life. See if you can figure out her reasoning in this section.

In evaluating Hartsock’s basic claim, you might consider whether she is right that women occupy a distinctive and privileged standpoint. Think about what we have been talking and reading about, consider your own intuitions and experiences, and try to evaluate her claim.