
Gender Roles In “Boys And Girls” By Alice Munro

Gender roles and identities are a set of ideas and expectations categorized by societal norms. Although there has been extensive growth and advancement in defying gender classifications and stereotypes, they continue to exist in today's culture. With the help of comprehensive gender equality campaigns, significant practices are put into place in order to allow men and women equal rights and opportunities across the many sectors of society. These include: the economic sector, jobs, health, education, and the government.

Despite of the immense progress made, men continue to hold a degree of dominance while women are subject to subordination. In particular, this is reflective of the roles and responsibilities of men and women within families. This multifarious interplay between gender stereotypes often begins in the home. The short story, “Boys and Girls”, by Alice Munro explores the different positions that males and females are expected to exercise through the eyes of a young and curious girl. In fact, the author describes these gender stereotypes as extremely rigid and rigorous through the distinct ways the characters interact and key symbols that play an integral part in presenting the theme. Interaction between characters in a story can remarkably affect the mood, themes, and perceptions in a reader. Munro uses the characters in Boys and Girls to define distinct tasks each gender is expected to carry out, as a result of gender norms and values. This discrepancy between assigned roles solely based on gender binary is a paradoxical truth that is clearly visible throughout the story. In fact, she says, “I was given jobs to do and I would sit at the table peeling peaches that had been soaked in hot water.

As soon as I was done, I ran out of the house, trying to get out of earshot before my mother thought of what she wanted me to do next” (Munro, 49). Alice often struggled to understand her engagement and pursuits as a woman who had to stay indoors. Consequently, she did not enjoy the traditional roles that females were obligated to undertake, while men were allowed to do work outside of the home as well. Alice did not want to nor enjoyed helping her mother do tasks inside the house. However, Alice's mother expects her to stay indoors and complete the tasks she gives her for the sole reason that she is a female. Alice despised being controlled, restrained, and regulated; because she endeavoured to defy the norms. Furthermore, Munro uses the characters to contravene domestic behaviours that are expected of each gender and “apparent” differences in abilities. In fact, Alice's mother mentions that, “[when] Laird gets a little bigger, then you'll have a real help” (Monro, 50). This refers to the inability of a female to perform the duties a male can carry out with such ease and sufficient standards. with sufficient standards.

Moreover, Alice was not considered of substantial help to her father, also because of her gender. Thus, the author effectively uses these details to support the overall theme of crude stereotypes. Symbolism in literature is multifaceted and indicative of specific themes. As a matter of fact, a symbol can be an object, action, event, or character that has a deeper meaning in the context of the entire story. In Boys and Girls, Munro uses Flora, the character of a horse, as a key symbol in demonstrating power, privilege, and patriarchy. The horse is trapped in cruel conditions and “[is] given to [fit] of violent alarm, veering at cars, and even at other horses” (Monro, 51). Flora wants its' freedom and, therefore acts extremely forceful in attempts to be set free. In fact, on the day Alice's father and the hired man, Henry, are about to execute her,

she is mistakenly set free by Alice. This is symbolic as it reciprocates Alice's own beliefs about independence, autonomy, and self empowerment. Similar to Flora, she feels trapped by the stereotypical behaviors of her surroundings, forcing her to stay indoors and do housekeeping chores. Furthermore, Laird, who plays the role of Alice's brother is also a key symbol throughout the short story. His name in itself, is a synonym of Lord, chosen by the author which portrays the superiority and authority of men. In fact, towards the end of the story, Laird begins to recognize his supremacy and uses this to undermine Alice's' actions. He, "looked across the table and said proudly distinctly, 'anyway it was her fault Flora got away'" (Monro,). This solidifies the gender stereotypical behaviours within the family, in which Alice is deemed at fault once again.

Hence, the author strengthens the gender inequalities present at home through the symbolism. Gender stereotypes are an extremely cruel, but subtle method of controlling what is expected of a given sex. Restrictive gendered rules create an imbalance in occupations, relationships, and the economy. In the short story, Boys and Girls, author reveals the theme of stereotypes through domestic behaviors in characters and deeper meanings behind key symbols. Ultimately, the story is a true reminder of the many steps that remain towards a society that embraces gender equality.

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