

# Reflection on "the 310 story" essay sample



**ASSIGN  
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When I first signed up for this class, I knew practically nothing about women’s studies, women’s issues, gender studies, gender roles, etc. The term “ genderification” was not a part of my vocabulary; I didn’t even think it was a word. Honestly, I needed this class to fulfill a requirement for graduation. I didn’t sign up because I found the subject matter that terribly interesting or because I had some sort of great interest in learning more about feminism. But after taking this class, I feel like I have learned so much about things I knew absolutely nothing about, things I never would have thought about or that never would have occurred to me: things about society, our culture, how our culture defines the female gender and how that definition is enforced and reinforced from birth, the pressure women are under to fulfill that rigid definition of gender that seems to be nothing more than a cyclical “ damned if you do, damned if you don’t” scenario, how women are expected to behave a certain way but then are further denigrated for behaving in that way which is too much like a *woman* .

These are all attitudes that permeate our society, a gendered social ideology that is all but invisible to most people. This gendered ideology is perhaps the strongest organizing principle in the social hierarchy, and yet it has so strongly seeped into people’s very conception of society and humanity that no one sees it for what it is anymore—a gendered stereotype.

No, in fact most people don’t see it as negative at all, or as *anything* at all really. The vast majority have come to accept it blindly and readily, so this gendered hierarchy exists with very little challenges to its ultimate

authority. It is so predominant, it has been able to make itself invisible to people. People in our culture don't see things as " Well, this is just the attitudes or perceptions of *our* culture." They see things as " This is what *is* ." To dispute this would be to challenge the entire social order, how we define our *lives* . So it remains unchallenged and male-centric gendered ideologies continue ruling our world, and people just accept it for what it is without question and the female gender is continually considered the " lesser" of the two.

I think this was really the ultimate point of " The story of 310." Our culture adheres to these highly stereotyped and unexamined gendered rules without question, but if we look hard enough (and know what to look for) we can see evidence of this gendered ideology constantly reaffirming itself in all aspects of our lives. These gross stereotypes are everywhere, but they are cleverly buried and most people fail to consciously notice them.

Subconsciously, however, they have not only noticed them, but are using them as a basis for their own understanding of culture, society, social interaction, social organization, and social hierarchy. Whether you realize it or not, that harmless diet pill commercial is feeding you a host of different stereotypes about women (or, the female gender), and it is with these stereotypes that you will come to form your perception of the world around you, and that perception becomes the ultimate Truth. Thus, gendered ideologies are self-perpetuating, and it takes a keen eye to be able to deconstruct the many different elements that lead to the overall conception that the female gender is " below" the male.

"The 310 Story" is really an exploration of the social constructions of femininity, as well as an exploration of the number of places in mainstream culture and methods of communication in which we can see these constructions being formed and upheld (and, less frequently, undermined). For our major writing assignment, we had to choose a current issue of a "women's" magazine to deconstruct how it presents the social construction of femininity, whether it affirmed or challenged these stereotypes, and how effectively the chosen magazine acts as a reflection of consumer culture.

A very careful and critical reading of the current issue of *Elle* provided me with an understanding of just how dominant the stereotypes of the female gender actually *are*, and it displays just how much these stereotypes have permeated every aspect of our culture. The magazine touched very little on any kind of work at all—as if to say not only that women *don't* (or is it shouldn't?) work, but that they also don't concern themselves with such "boring" things. Reading this magazine leads one to believe that not a single woman in the world has any interest in the business world, as it is a "man's" world, or in having any kind of career.

The only careers that are so much as hinted at are the very fluffy kind—interior designer, pastry chef, etc. Careers for which one does not have to necessarily bother with schooling, which by this magazine's portrayal would presumably be a big bore for any *natural* woman, but also careers that one must have the financial wherewithal (or, more specifically, have a husband with such) to actively pursue such casual luxury interests. This is not the reproductive labor Evelyn Nakano Glenn addresses in "From Servitude to Service Work," which also makes sense because the average *Elle* reader is

apparently rich and white and would presumably have maids and nannies to take care of such unbecoming responsibilities.

There was also an abundance of evidence in the advertising that confirmed John Berger's analysis on visual politics; in almost every last advertisement, the model is staring straight out at the viewer, looking pointedly lusty and inviting, in a way that can only be described as being for the visual pleasure of males—and NOT that of the almost completely female readership of the magazine. The near-total lack of food-related advertisements or editorial clearly indicated the social construction of women's hunger which Susan Bordo addresses in "Hunger as Ideology," presupposing the idea that a "real" woman just doesn't eat, and certainly doesn't concern herself with food.

This project, to go through this magazine page-by-page, blurb-by-blurb and analyze what every last detail indicated on the greater social scale, opened my eyes in a way I never thought possible, and made me see things that I never thought I was missing. With every page the gender-stereotyped social construction of femininity that dominates our culture is continually reified and reaffirmed, constantly hammering the point home. Publications such as this, as well as the advertisers that also have similarly-themed television and radio commercials, billboards, and other marketing, act as a sort of gender police, forever ensuring that women are aware of what their role in the social order is and making sure they abide by it.

The gendered polarization of our culture begins with the concept of "women's work." Our related reading, "From Servitude to Service Work,"

addresses the idea of what women's work *is* and what it is thought it *should* be, and goes on to show the further polarization of white women's work versus non-white women's work and how the greater trivialization of women's work in comparison to men's work further trickles down and becomes evident in the trivialization of non-white women's work in comparison to white women's work. Glenn notes, " Marxist feminists place the gendered construction of reproductive labor at the center of women's oppression.

They point out that this labor is performed disproportionately by women and is essential to the industrial economy. Yet because it takes place mostly outside the market, it is invisible, not recognized as real work" (57). The idea is that women are not supposed to be in the workplace, because that is a place for *men* , and therefore because they are not *in* the workplace, they must not *do* work. Cooking, cleaning, and caregiving are not allotted the distinction as being actual forms of labor, but are rather written off as simply being what women are *supposed* to do—or, even more demeaning, what they're good at.

This devaluing of women's labor both in- and outside of the home can be seen throughout the working force—women tend to be hired into the lower-paying, lesser-skilled jobs, despite being armed with the same education, and they also tend to be employed in the lesser-valued forms of work such as administrative work (which, in its own right, can be compared to caregiving, when you consider the administration staff often includes the secretaries, receptionists, and assistants). Even when women do find

themselves in the workplace, they still do not command the respect of their male counterparts, much less comparable salaries.

This gendered polarization does not just occur in the workplace, or just among adults. Children are “taught” gender from birth—if not entirely by their parents, than by the society they observe around them. Barbara Risman explores the genderification of children in families which strove to resist social gendering and examines her findings in her “Ideology, Experience, Identity: The Complex World of Children in Fair Families.” In it she discusses the history of gender theory as it relates to children and their acquisition of gendered characteristics—basically, learning what it means to be a boy versus what it means to be a girl, and acting out all that each entails. Risman concludes: “The cognitive effects of living in a gendered (and sexist) society, the reality of gender socialization, and the active efforts of boys and girls to negotiate their own worlds interact to shape their daily lives, and perhaps to affect their future options” (133).

She further contends, “Socialization clearly happens both in children’s play and in their families” (133). Which is precisely the reason Risman took a specific interest in studying the children of egalitarian families, families which tried very hard and very specifically to raise their children in a gender-neutral environment. The results were very interesting: while the majority of the children all aligned themselves with feminist and egalitarian ideals, and while many of them were able to actually articulate a rudimentary understanding of gender construction, the majority of them still displayed social genderification. “...the children of these families seem to be adopting their parents’ gender rules about adult responsibilities. But when it comes to

developing their own identities, these children seem to be at least as influenced by their cognitive images and folk knowledge learned from peers as those messages from home" (149).

Granted these children potentially displayed a bit more gender-transgressing behavior than other children would, they still have an understanding of what it means to be a " boy" or " girl," and they struggle to internalize their own learned ideas and beliefs (from their families) alongside what they have come to understand for themselves about social order (from their peers and school, in the neighborhood, from the media, etc.). While Risman hopes that these very children can one day be the cornerstone in the dawn of a post-gender society, her findings speak much more loudly: the gendered socialization of children will occur as a result of the *society* in which they live, with or without the help of the parents.

Gender polarization is apparent in all aspects of society—even in our language. This is something that almost *everyone* takes for granted; yet the things we say and how we say them are primary indicators of what our culture thinks about certain things. Casey Miller and Kate Swift address this is " Semantic Polarization," in which they discuss certain key words that we as a society use on a *daily* basis without considering their origins, their true meanings, or what they indicate about our perceptions and beliefs as a society as a whole. As Miller and Swift note, " Inevitably, since they are accepted and used within the culture, these everyday words carry a burden of the culture's preconceptions and prejudices" (60).



Miller and Swift go on to give a very thorough reading and interpretation of the various dictionary definitions of “manly” versus “womanly,” in which the word “manly” and its derivations are ascribed all that which is positive and desirable. The only negative attached to it is to be described as its opposite: womanly. “Womanly” is defined circularly, with phrases such as “that which is befitting of a woman,” and by contrast to the definition of “manly” has no clear positive connotation to it, only its latent negative implications (which is commonly a perception of weakness).

Miller and Swift further delve into linguistics by showing how, throughout the history of the usage of a particular word, “changes in the meanings of words according to their sex assignment follow a pattern that might be called semantic polarization” (69). In other words, as a specific word over time comes to specifically describe that which is female, the word takes on further negative connotations that do not/did not exist in the “male” version of the word. Words, and the things they describe, are effectively devalued by simply feminizing them—such as by adding the feminine suffix *-ette* to it (i. e., to call a woman a “suffragette” was meant as a degrading insult, and effectively devalued the entire suffrage movement by degrading it into something petty and feminine).

As a man I did not enter this classroom with any kind of predisposed concern or knowledge about the course topics. Simply because I am a man, these issues just didn't concern me; not out of carelessness or callousness, but just because I was simply not aware of them. The readings and the assignments in this class have awakened me to just exactly what it means that gender is a social construction or that femininity and masculinity are both social

constructs, as opposed to be absolute truths. I've always heard about gender inequality and have heard the statistics about how women get paid less money for equal work, and suffer sexual harassment, and so on.

I never denied any of this, but I certainly did not give it any further thought either. Now I not only feel as though I *understand* what gender inequality actually is and what it means, but I also know now that it is at the very *root* of our society. That society is in fact, in many ways, organized and built on the principle of gender inequality. The social hierarchy begins with females being demeaned. I don't think I'll ever look at any advertisement in the same way again, knowing now how entirely loaded each image is with greater social implications. For a class that I took just to graduate, I never thought I would take as much out of it as I did. "The 310 Story" is one I am thankful I had the opportunity to hear.

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