

# Middlesex by jeffrey eugenides: contradicting roles of gender

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Middlesex, by Jeffrey Eugenides, is a coming of age story of a Greek intersex male in the United States. The main character of the book, Cal, is an intersex male with feminine traits and a vagina.

Intersex is a type of person that doesn't fit into the generic male, female genders because their chromosomes don't match with either their primary and/or secondary biological structures as well as their hormones. The way in which someone is intersex varies from person and sometimes can go unnoticed because some intersex people have defined structures that would be normally classified as male or female. Callie was raised as a girl as his parents for the duration of his adolescence weren't aware of the fact that he was intersex because he did have a defined vagina at birth. Middlesex addresses several different concepts, from society's construction of gender and how biology, especially that of intersex people questions society's identification and classification of people; and fate versus free will; and the rebirth of someone once they can truly be themselves rather than what they were classified as.

In Middlesex, the ever-changing notion contradicting roles of gender are relevant throughout the book. In an article titled "The Five Sexes, Revisited", Anne Fausto-Sterling explains how she at first categorized people into five basic genders: "In addition to males and females, "herms" (named after true hermaphrodites, people born with both a testis and an ovary); "merms" (male pseudohermaphrodites, who are born with testes and some aspect of female genitalia); and "ferms" (female pseudohermaphrodites, who have ovaries combined with some aspect of male genitalia)" (Fausto-Sterling). She later revisits these 5 sexes and realizes that there are many <https://assignbuster.com/middlesex-by-jeffrey-eugenides-contradicting-roles-of-gender/>

more combinations of hormones, body parts, features, and socially constructed gender profiles than she initially included in her first article. As a genetic male raised as a female due to his body parts at birth, Cal, who would be a “ merm” according to, “ The Five Sexes, ” switches between “ gendered” viewpoints, often finding himself somewhere in between. At different points in the novel, Cal conforms to the constraints of a generic male or female gender, wearing dresses and having the hair of a young girl or the suit, tie and physique of a grown man.

In Middlesex, gender is a grey area rather than the black and white, male or female genders society has created. While Cal eventually finds himself living as a man, he admits that he is still “ Tessie’s daughter” in many ways and suggests that how he was raised will always be a part of him. Cal’s character reveals the problems within the idea of a defined gender and the characteristics that have been deemed to appropriate those genders, finalizing that people are their own amalgamation of traits. Eugenides’ book ends with Cal finding herself somewhere in the middle of male and female and the author manages to beautifully allow the character and reader to simultaneously find peace in this multi-gendered identity at the end of Cal’s journey. Eugenides challenges the idea of socially constructed gender and gives everyone the scope of a simple human finding himself, making the concept of gender-identity much more relatable to any cis-gendered person. In Middlesex, Eugenides creates a debate between choice and destiny throughout the novel, from Lefty and Desdemona’s game of “ rock, paper, scissors” to determine which girl Lefty will marry to the determination of Cal’s gender, Eugenides poses the question: was this series of events a mere

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coincidence or fate? In the book, Cal suggests that the gene that his family carries was destined to survive and that it manipulates people and loves to ensure its manifestation. As Cal tells the story of his grandparents' decision to not be siblings, but spouses, he suggests that the gene itself, yearning to be made visible, propels Lefty and Desdemona to marry — until finally, even in America, with a gene pool as wide as the country itself, the recessive mutation 5-alpha reductase deficiency survives in Cal. As Cal says of his conception, “ Delay the act by an hour and you change the gene selection. ” This debate between free will can frustrate a reader or allow the reader to find the beauty in these mishaps. For instance, so much of Cal's struggle would have been avoided if only that game of “ rock, paper, scissors” had a different outcome and Lefty didn't end up marrying Desdemona and giving birth to the gene mutation that Cal hosts. This revelation can be frustrating when a someone divulges into Cal's extremely complex journey and struggle and comes to the realization that if only one character chose a different hand motion in a game, Cal's entire life would be far more simple. However, with that being said, someone can also see the beauty in this if they consider it to be destiny.

Taking the viewpoint that Cal was meant to be a person in between male and female and his journey was the only way to truly find himself and happiness, that subtle game of “ rock, paper, scissors” becomes fate and allows Cal to progress as a human being and teach society what it means to be an intersex person. When Cal is 14 years old, he is injured by a tractor, a doctor discovers that he is intersex. He is taken to a clinic in New York and undergoes a series of tests and examinations. After learning about being

intersex and facing the prospect of sex reassignment surgery, intersex labeled at birth female “ Callie” experiences a rebirth to assume his male self, Cal. Cal runs away and hitchhikes cross-country and reaches San Francisco, where he joins a burlesque show as Hermaphroditus. To become a male, Cal teaches himself to forget what he has learned growing up as a female. Eventually, Cal goes home after he is arrested by the police during a raid on his workplace. He is released into his brother, Chapter Eleven’s custody and learns of their father’s death. The siblings return to their family home, and in a private moment, Cal’s grandmother Desdemona recognizes his condition and associates it with stories from her old village about children born of incest. Desdemona knew that there is an increased chance of genetic disease for children born from incest, so she confesses to Cal that her husband, Lefty, is also her brother. As Milton’s funeral takes place at the church, Cal stands in the doorway of his family home, assuming the male-only role in Greek traditions to keep his father’s spirit from re-entering the family home. Cal taking on the traditional role of a male in Greek traditions is a critical moment in the book because its the publication to Cal’s family that he is a male which finalizes his rebirth. This statement was so powerful in how the author took the emotion of someone’s coming out and put it in a public forum at an already emotional funeral. It strikes such a sense of passion in the reader as they empathize with the death of Cal’s father, topped with the revelation to Cal of his grandparent’s incestual relationship, finally garnished with Cal’s public statement to his family of his gender identity. Cal’s embrace of his inherent male identity and renunciation of his childhood female gender identity is articulated when he reflects, “ I never

felt out of place being a girl, I still don't feel entirely at home among men". When Eugenides said this, it seemed off-putting, as if Cal went through a stunning transformation from female to male and still didn't feel complete, however upon further reflection, it comes across as so real to the emotional journey and mental state of someone in Cal's position.

Overall, the author did an astounding job finalizing Cal's rebirth in this epically emotional manner and gave a very real, not sugar-coated depiction of Cal's mindset where he becomes the best of both worlds as an intersex person. Eugenides masterful use of characterization and character development allowed any reader to form a relationship with Cal and sympathize with him throughout his transformation and journey to find himself. Middlesex gives readers a deeper understanding and emotional relationship with intersex people as well as confronting a broken man-made gender assignment system and fearlessly faces the task of shattering the way many people see society to show that people are more than the generic male and female genders, that they are on a spectrum of genders and traits. The only criticism is that it is possible that portraying Cal, as intersex as a result of his grandparent's incestual relationship, could give the notion that all intersex people are the result of incest which in our society is practically forbidden. This element of the plot does not shed the best light on intersex people as a whole by suggesting that it is rooted from something so taboo, and while it is not a true fact that intersex people are the result of incest, to the ignorant minded, it can come off as so in this read.

Overall, Eugenides confronts society's construction of gender, debates fate versus free will; and writes an amazingly relatable narrative about the rebirth of someone finding their gender identity. Eugenides takes complex and political issues and manages to integrate them into a coming of age story educational and relatable for any reader.