

Unorthodox gender roles in "boys and girls" and "the yellow wall-paper"



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Judith Fetterly coined the term “immascultation” in her 1978 book “The Resisting Reader,” using it to define the process by which “women are taught [...] to identify with a male point of view and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values” (3). In the short stories “Boys and Girls,” by Alice Munro, and “The Yellow Wall-paper,” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the narrators can be thought of as immascultated readers of themselves. Munro’s unnamed speaker—a young girl who initially finds more joy outdoors assisting with man’s archetypal work than in a “hot dark kitchen” with her mother—“[would] not evolve naturally into [a] gendered adult” if she did not accept her femaleness and embrace femininity (Goldman 62). Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-paper” is an unreliable narration that conveys gender oppression in the form of “[the female protagonist’s] well-meaning but insensitive husband” (Martin 736). At times, both Munro’s and Gilman’s narrators defy gender conventions; the young girl’s is a story of growth that features a symbolic rite of passage, while the oppressed woman seeks meaning and independence despite deterioration of the mind. Munro introduces the protagonist as impressionable and deferential to her patriarch father. The young girl views her mother in stark contrast to her father insofar as gender roles and “ritualistically important” work is concerned: “I felt my mother had no business down here and I wanted [my father] to feel the same way” (Munro 4). The main reason for the speaker’s differing from feminine ideologies concerns her great respect and admiration for her father and his gruelling, meaningful job. She “rake[s] furiously, red in the face with pleasure” when her father introduces her as his “new hired hand” to a feed salesman, to which the salesman jokingly responds, “‘Could of fooled me’ [...] ‘I thought it was only a girl!’” (Munro 3). For most of the story, the <https://assignbuster.com/unorthodox-gender-roles-in-boys-and-girls-and-the-yellow-wall-paper/>

narrator disregards the conventional gender role for a girl of her age, instead remaining steadfast and content as a fox farmer's assistant. Her mother, wishing to "use [the girl] more in the house," resents the position, although Munro makes clear the girl's aversion for her mother as well: "It seemed to me she would [try to keep me working with her in the house] simply out of perversity, and to try her power." As her story progresses, Munro symbolizes boys and girls with two horses named Mack and Flora. Mack is described as "slow and easy to handle," while Flora, a mare, is more unruly and spontaneous, though the family "love[s] her speed and high-stepping" (Munro). During the winter of the horses' arrival, and in the speaker's eleventh year, she comes to a newfound self-realization regarding her atypically-gendered state: "A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become" (Munro). When she learns of the impending death of Mack, she, along with her younger brother, Laird, locates a spot from which to witness the shooting. Afterwards, the girl's legs are shaky and she is grateful to be down from their vantage point. This disquieting state is in clear contrast to Laird, who she finds to be "not frightened or upset;" her father, who shot the horse in such an "easy, practiced way;" and Henry, her father's hired help, who laughed at Mack's post-shot convulsions (Munro 6). This further perpetuates her reduction of masculine ideologies, as she reflects on the shooting with feelings of shame and begins to view her father and his work with "a new wariness" (Munro 6). Later on, during the botched shooting of Flora, the girl unconsciously throws the gate to the farm open for the horse to run free. Following this act, the girl finds herself "trying to make [her] part of [her bedroom] fancy" and "concern[ing herself] at great length with what [she looks] like" (Munro 7).

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Here, Munro is instilling feminine ideologies into the speaker, making it seem as though Flora's freedom, however temporary, serves to represent the young girl's transition into a more archetypal role. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman creates a character isolated from "society and stimulus" by way of her controlling husband, John (2). The narrator displays a sense of naivety or ignorance to John's dominant, oppressive ways: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (Gilman 1). Because he is "a physician of high standing, and [her] own husband," the narrator is coerced into following his orders, which, in this case, keep her confined to one small room in their new mansion (Gilman 1). Initially, she "disagree[s] with [his] ideas," desiring "less opposition and more society and stimulus," but John forbids it, and "hardly lets [her] stir without special direction" (Gilman 2; 3). This blind faith in what is essentially man's oppression over his wife is an example of her being emasculated. Gradually, the woman's mind slips into psychosis. The solitary, forcedly bland confinement worsens her state of mind, until, eventually, she sees herself as an apparition inside the "repellent" yellow pattern which adorns the walls. She continues to dream of escaping, but describes "bars [...] too strong to even try" to jump from the window, making for a prison-like atmosphere and further illustrating her total entrapment (Gilman 15). Despite the woman's state of insanity, she is able to achieve an individualistic freedom. Her mind deteriorates further while she remains transfixed on this woman in the wallpaper until the climax. John, the man chiefly responsible for his wife's state of mind, arrives to check on her and faints when he sees the torn wallpaper and his wife "creep[ing] smoothly on the floor" (Gilman 15). Exemplifying women's liberty from oppression, the narrator exclaims, "'I've got out at last' [...] 'you can't put <https://assignbuster.com/unorthodox-gender-roles-in-boys-and-girls-and-the-yellow-wall-paper/>

me back!” (Gilman 16). Similarly, within the last line of the story, Gilman conveys a sense of achievement and a sort of progress in the narrator, as she ““ had to creep over [her collapsed husband] every time!”” (16). The immascultation of the protagonists is evident in both Alice Munro’s “ Boys and Girls” and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “ The Yellow Wall-paper.” Munro crafts a storyline that witnesses the growth of a child and the opposing gender roles that come with it, while Gilman creates a woman’s journal which implies that a tyrannical, abusive husband is chiefly responsible for her mental collapse. Gender ideologies are referenced throughout either short story: “ Boys and Girls” details a young girl’s change from masculine to feminine; “ The Yellow Wall-paper” deals in gender oppression and, thus, women’s rights.