

The way to womanhood in boys and girls essay

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Alice Munroe, Boys and girls, Existentialism's feminism 1 . Brief introduction

Alice Munroe, a Canadian female writer, was born in the town of Wingman, Ontario into a family of fox and poultry farmers. Such a birth enabled her in her later creation to depict vividly from the angle of a female the farm work that was traditionally prescribed as men's responsibility, or even right, as described in a Chinese old saying, " while men till the land outside, women weave cloth inside. It could be said that the early life in his father's farm exerted great influence on his writing. She began writing as a teenager and published her first story in 1950 when she was still a college student.

Alice Neuron's first collection of stories, Dance of the Happy Shades which was published in 1968, was highly acclaimed and won that year's Governor General's Award, Canada's highest literary prize. Boys and Girls, an early story written by Munroe, was a famous one of the stories embodied in the edition. This short story is narrated by a young girl who can be considered as the author of her early childhood. It details the time in her life when she leaves childhood. Her father was a fox farmer and often worked in the cellar of the house with the hired man, Henry.

She would often sit with her younger brother, Laird, on the top of the cellar's step and watch the two adults doing the fox-killing work. In the eyes of the girl the scene in the cellar was a " warm, safe, brightly, lit downstairs world" compared to her bedroom, which was " not finished" and filled with " stale cold air". As a child, she and her little brother as well, had the special self-scaring imagination and also had their own solutions to eliminating the fear. One solution was story-telling. The girl often told herself such stories that only " took place in a world that was recognizably mine, yet one that

presented opportunities for courage, boldness and self-sacrifice". In these stories she was the "hero", riding a horse and rescuing people from danger. Obviously such heroic stories were usually fantasies that a male child, namely, a boy might often bear in mind. It can be said, therefore, that the girl was more or less masculine, and she wanted to be treated as a boy doing the "ritualistically important" farm work instead of helping her mother do the house work which seemed to her endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing.

In the fox pen she also helped her father feed the foxes such as bringing water for the foxes. The image of the father perceived by the girl was rather positive and impressive, "tirelessly inventive and his favorite book in the world was Robinson Crusoe". And when talking about the watering job, the girl intentionally stressed her difference from Laird: while her younger brother just carried his little cream and green gardening can which was filled too full and knocked against his legs and slopped water on his canvas shoes, she herself had the real watering can and it was right her father's. The deliberation of highlighting such a difference revealed that the girl did not yet realize fundamentally her real sexual role, or, say, she was not "told". The father did not, at that time, reveal the truth, as he once told a feed salesman that the girl working for him was his new hired man.

Hearing such words she was "red in the face with pleasure." Not until later did she gradually understand what physically being a girl meant. The talks between her mother and father down at the barn, the physical changes she saw from the mirror, her grandmother's conception about the rules of social conduct for girls, all these factors led her into the struggle in her inner world.

“ It seemed that in the minds of the people around me there was a steady undercurrent of thought, not to be deflected on this one subject. The word girl had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the word child; now it appeared that it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become. It was a definition, always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment.

” Such a consciousness of gender was reassured by the way that she behaved when the horse Flora, a mare driver, was struggling to escape from the farm and for freedom.

She let the horse free when she could have helped her father to catch it. It predicted, to some degree, a girl’s frailty, if not a child’s natural tender feeling for animals. Also it could be understood in this way that the fate of the horse stirred her sympathy. Freedom, then, was not only what the horse desired, but also what the girl was longing for. She longed for the way that things used to be, that she worked for her father in the fox pen, told herself those heroic stories, and asked her brother to do everything as she wished.

However, as the little boy had been gradually growing up into a man, she had to become a certain gender that she was destined to be: woman. The horse event caused her to realize and accept such a necessary change. Her father resumed the girl’s identity, “ ‘ she’s only a girl,’ he said. At the end of the story, the narrator seemly found an answer for her inner struggle, one that she had but only to acknowledge that she could not be exempted from the identification: maybe it was true. 2.

The Being of A Woman 2. 1 Some theoretical background From the analysis stated above we can see how a girl seeks for identity of herself in a traditional patriarchy society. The story can thus be considered as a feminist parable of sorts.

We may first give a hint on the background of the time when the story was published: 1968, the year when Pierre Elliot Trudeau became Prime Minister of Canada. Eloquent, forward-looking, and energetic, this prime minister's entry into office represented the forces and collective will of a decade of major social change. His winning of this highest office represented the solidification of substantial changes in mores and beliefs that so clearly distinguishes the latter half of the twentieth-century from the earlier half.

Indeed, it was a time of great social change not only in Canada, but also in nearly every part of the western world. The movement of feminism had reached the summit of its development, and its influence had infiltrated deeply into the fields of culture and literary works. Feminist criticism came into being at that time. In real world women fought for their economical and political rights and other equal right in relative fields, and in their works the feminist writers spared no efforts in destructing male-oriented power discourse and constructing texts positively and righteously depicting females. Since its birth feminism has "sought to disturb the complacent certainties of such a patriarchal culture, to assert a belief in sexual equality, and to eradicate sexist domination in transforming society" (Roman Sealed et al.

2004: 121). The fundamental and ultimate solicitude for female should not be confined to the pursuit of specific material and spiritual benefits, though they are of great significance and apparently more related to female's everyday life. Great values should also be put to the investigation of the being of women in the society, especially their interior existence in a patriarchal society. A baby can not automatically realize the meaning of his or her sex the moment he or she is born. However, this is not the case for those adults around the new mother celebrating the birth of a new life and also for the mother herself.

They now quite well, either from their own and other's experience or from social convictions, that the new baby is doomed to have a course of life presupposed by his or her physical sex. Maybe it is overestimated, but it is at this point that the male and the female distinguish themselves. When the baby grows old enough to realize it, the distinction between the two sexes has been so deeply engraved into her mind, if it is a girl, that only through constant struggling can this distinction be removed. Otherwise, she has to accept the socially decided distinction and only hope for self-conscious equal treatment from the male. So far as the solitude for female is concerned, Simons De Behavior, one of the most forerunners of contemporary feminism, is one that goes very far in this respect. She is a French feminist, and a lifelong partner of Jean Paul Sartre, the famous advocate of Existentialism. In her hugely influential book *The Second Sex* (1949), De Behavior recognizes the vast difference between the interests of the two sexes and assaults on men's biological and psychological, as well as economic, discrimination against women.

She establishes with great clarity the fundamental questions of modern feminism. When woman tries to define herself, she starts by saying “ I am a woman”: no man would do so. This fact reveals the basic asymmetry between the terms “ masculine” and “ feminine”: man defines human, not woman, in an imbalance which goes back to the Old Testament. Being dispersed among men, women have no separate history, no natural solidarity; nor have they combined as other oppressed groups have. Woman is riveted into a lop-sided relationship with man: he is the “ One”, she the “ Other”. Man’s dominance has secured an ideological climate of compliance: “ legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the fortunate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth”, and the assumption of woman as “ Other” is further internalized by women themselves. In her work *De Behavior* carefully distinguishes two concepts: sex and gender, and sees an interaction between social and natural functions: “ one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman; ..

. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an Other. ” (Roman Sealed et al. , 2004: 121) It is the systems of interpretation in relation to biology, psychology, reproduction, economics, etc.

Which constitute the male presence of that “ someone else”. Making the crucial distinction between “ being male” and being constructed as a “ woman”, *De Behavior* can posit the destruction of patriarchy if women will only break out of their objectification. 2. The hard way to womanhood

Simons De Barrier's Existentialism's Feminism can help us understand much better about the girl when we turn our attention back to the story. We can see, in the narration of the whole story, how the girl turns into a woman. Of course she was physically born as a female, but only in terms of sex not gender.

She herself was nuclear of her own gender, or she was in such an illusion that she could keep the same gender as Laird, her younger brother. From the narration of the girl we learn that she was glad and willing to do those stereotyped by the society as a man's work. For example, her preference of the "downstairs world" (where the foxes were killed) to her own bedroom, the wild imaginative heroic stories she told to herself in which she played the role that was, almost without exception, played by men in real world, the tricks she played on her little brother which was usually a thing for an elder brother, not for a sister, and her hard work for her father whom she admired and even intentionally imitated, and for whose praise she was always expecting, all these reveal that she was unconscious of her own being for herself.

If we take the background of the story (namely, the fox farm) as a minimal symbolization of a patriarchal society, in which the father and his business was the dominant element, and the mother and the household affair was the subordinate element, we may see more clearly how the girl was manipulated by the male-society. Firstly, the environment the girl lived in influenced her to the extent that she had no other choice but to do things that were imposed on her, i. e. , she passively played a masculine role in an

environment dominated by men, namely, her father, the hired man Henry Bailey, and even the little boy. Yet we may say that at least she could do the same things as her brother, and even seemed more important than him in early period of the story. However, the difference between Laird and her lay in that Laird, though still very young, had much more freedom than her. He could continue to do the farm work which he might like or not, when he grew up. He was free to choose.

But that was not the case for the girl. In the mint-society she was just a temporary being, and not for herself. She was, as we may say in a careful way, a kind of “ tool”, as, according to some feminists, females are treated in real world as “ tools”-? to breed and to feed. It is because that her bother was not old enough that she was allowed do the farm work. She was only a temporary substitute that was used. When she was gradually growing up, she could hardly stay “ outside” as she wished. “ Outside” can be regarded as the symbolization of field and of man’s world.

It was not her free will to enter the world, and still, not her free will to leave the world and go back “ inside” where she belonged according to social conventions. Secondly, we can have a close look at the attitude the father showed at the event in which the girl, as it seemed, intentionally liberated the mare. The father turned out to be very tolerant and generous.

He didn’t scold his daughter for her wrong doing. Instead, he considered it as the inherent quality of a girl-? frailty, a sort of weakness that could otherwise be called “ kindness” on female. This, however, was nothing but a rude and arbitrary attitude, and psychological discrimination. The fact was that the

girl, though elder, was still young. Probably, it was out of sympathy from a child, not of frailty from a girl that the mare was freed. The resistance and struggle of the horse, which in its nature longed for freedom, infected the child who also yearned for her freedom.

Unfortunate was that her parents could not be more clear in their minds about her physical sex and the gender role she had to play. The father just treated her as a substitute hand in the farm. When one time he said to the feed salesman came down into the pens, “ like to have you meet my new hired man”, it was not meant seriously, Hough it made the girl “ red in face with pleasure. ” If, on the other hand, it was the boy that freed the horse, the result might be quite different.

The father might scold him because he was a boy, and a boy was not allowed to make such a mistake, not even as a child, or he might say, “ He is just a kid. ” which meant it was common for a kid to show sympathy on an animal. Thus two criteria were utilized, one for the boy, and one for the girl, though both were children. The criterion for the boy is the one for men, the “ One” dominating the world and the criterion for the girl is the one for he “ Other” subordinate in the same world. Now let’s turn to the girl’s mother, the second female in the story. In the family she was in a subordinate position, and had internalized woman as the “ Other”. The girl’s attitude toward her mother may symbolize that the world of female adults, from the eyes of the child, was unattractive and even depressing.

In the mini- patriarchal world, the mother, her kitchen and her housework, which constituted her whole world, were at an interior position. She had no

decisive power concerning the girl's identity, I. E. Whether she should go back inside and do what a girl should do. Obviously, the mother was an important factor leading to the girl's hesitation to step into womanhood.

Father and mother should be the two equal poles in a family, each functioning in a different way. However, in such a patriarchal civilization a boy is destined to become a dominate father, and a girl, a subordinate woman, and finally an interior mother. The young protagonist struggled on the way to womanhood because she sensed, from the women around her, especially her mother, that women were considered the social inferiors of men. Once she became a woman, freedom would be exempted from her forever, though she ever realized that she did not ever have any freedom. All her attempts to prevent this from occurring by resisting her parents' and grandparents' endeavor to train her in the likes, habits, behavior, and work of women proved to be useless. 3.

Conclusion Existence is an unavoidable, eternal theme for our human being. As human consists of only two groups, men and women, the issue confronting every individual is, sooner or later, to understand the opposite sex, or gender. Seen from the history of human being, men have drawn too much attention from themselves, and at the same time, from women.