

The problem of female identity: restrictive gender constructs in 'the help' and i...

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Kathryn Stockett's novel, 'The Help', and Sylvia Plath's poem 'Morning Song' can be closely linked together through gender constructs, especially those enforced upon women. With corresponding themes of motherhood, female identity and a patriarchal society, in both the novel and the poem, gender constructs are ultimately seen as restrictive for women, if not destructive. As the fates of specific characters and personas indicate, limitations of this sort can convince women of their inferiority, or even be linked to their downfall.

Motherhood is a theme which is not one-dimensional, as both positive and negative aspects of the role of the mother are shown in both 'The Help' and 'Morning Song'. However, despite the positive associations with motherhood, both the novel and the poem show how the role ultimately restricts women from a career, and freedom outside of the home. In her poem, Plath describes herself as 'cow-heavy', which connotes images of a mother preparing to breastfeed for her baby, but also could signify that after she has given birth to her child, she feels a great burden on her as a mother; should she continue writing poetry? Why is her husband, Ted Hughes, not mentioned beyond her giving birth? The personal pronouns of 'I' and 'my' in the poem beyond the second stanza, signify the pressure on Plath as a mother, with no further mention of Hughes whilst she is caring for her child. The burden of motherhood is also visible in the character of Celia Foote in 'The Help', as she is unable to bare a child, and therefore feels as if she is inferior to the other women and a burden herself, exemplified by their exclusion of her as 'white trash'. 'Doctor Tate', Celia's doctor, is also responsible for her thinking of herself as a burden to Jonny, as she's

inconveniencing him by having a miscarriage, and she's 'ashamed' of calling him up - 'I can't do it again'. It's almost as if Celia's fears of being a burden through her failure at bearing a child are haunting her, and are embodied in Tate, who is described as a 'snake' and lets out a 'sick hiss', representing the corruption in the Garden of Eden, which could be interpreted as Celia's own Eden of becoming a mother as being corrupted. The pressures of motherhood on both Plath and Celia can also be shown through Celia being depicted as 'hysterical', and Plath having a long history of mental illness, which only got worse after her giving birth to Freida, and eventually lead to her suicide at thirty. Back in the 1960s, little was known about mental illness and women were thought to be 'hysterical', which could be quickly fixed by 'a pill', which was a trendy and easy solution to their illness. Plath's postnatal depression and recurring mental illness was most likely interpreted as hysteria, and this lack of understanding surrounding mental illness could well have led to her suicide. Similarly, if Celia wasn't supported by her husband, unlike Plath, she may have well faced the same fate.

Although drastically shorter than 'The Help', 'Morning Song' can show many aspects of female identity depicted in the novel, as at first glance being a female is restrictive in society which makes finding an identity hard, but this arguably works to both their advantage, as it makes them strive to find their own independent identity. Skeeter in 'The Help', who is compared to an awkward mosquito, is depicted as not particularly feminine, as she is 'tall and skinny', and wears ill-fitting clothes: 'Her blue skirt gaps open at the waist'; this signifies that she doesn't quite fit into the typical female identity

of the other housewives. Consequently, Skeeter can be arguably compared to Scout in 'To Kill a Mockingbird', as to thrive in society both Scout and Skeeter has to behave less effeminate to avoid being pictured as weak - "Scout, I'm tellin' you for the last time, shut your trap or go home ... you're gettin' more like a girl every day!". Similarly to Skeeter, Plath's child is said to have 'moth-breath', which can be depicted as equally awkward as a mosquito, and as moths are creatures of the night, it could be Plath's recognition that Freida will have to live in the shadows of male colleagues. However, despite this initial disadvantage, both Skeeter and the child are described as individuals, in turn giving them their own unique female identity as strong and independent, and due to their biological disadvantage, this makes them both strive to achieve beyond the constraints of being a female. The child's initial weakness of being compared to a moth can be equally a strength, as to become a moth, a caterpillar must transform during its time in a cocoon, finding its own individual identity and in turn becoming stronger. This breaking out of the cocoon and becoming independent, can also be seen as breaking through the constraints of being a female in society, shown at the end of the poem as the child's 'clear vowels rise like balloons' - she has found her voice in society, and she's rising above criticism. Comparatively, Skeeter "discovers her voice and passion through collecting and publishing Black women's stories of surrogacy and servitude" (Stephanie Crumpton). Skeeter is described as the least ladylike white woman, so she utilises the female identities of the black maid's stories in order to find her own independent identity, in turn using her weakness to her advantage. Therefore, at a first glance the inferiority of women in 1960s America in

regard to men can be seen as entirely restrictive, but at a second glance, this allows a select few women to strive even more to achieve their goals. Skeeter and the child ultimately find their female identity and strength as individuals, as they refuse, or are learning to refuse to follow restrictive gender constructs.

Patriarchy is arguably a woman's worst enemy, and as depicted in 'The Help' and 'Morning Song', the female is seen as inferior in regard to men, which is extremely restrictive for women in terms of being taken seriously in a career whilst having a family. Plath's struggle to remain writing as a poet whilst caring for her first child, Freida, can be compared to Minny in 'The Help', as Minny must juggle a family, a career and deal with an abusive husband simultaneously. Minny has a cynical view of men due to her husband, Leroy, failing to share the huge task of caring after their five children; 'He gone forget these babies cause mens is real good at that'; and due to her fear of his violence: 'I ain't never gone get no work again, Leroy gone kill me'. The 'personal is political' is applicable in this instance, as both Minny and Plath are condemned to a life inside of the home taking care of their families, and they get abused purely because men are deemed to be the superior sex in society and politics, therefore making Leroy and Hughes' actions acceptable in 1960s America. The influence of patriarchy on Plath's 'Morning Song', can be seen in Plath's 'Victorian Nightgown', which represents the restraints that are put upon women to cover up and look presentable. The nightgown can also represent the physical pressure that Plath feels as a mother, with the nightgown engulfing and suffocating her,

just as the patriarchal world suffocates women with rules of how to behave, look and feel. This aesthetical pressure on women in 1960s American can also be seen in 'The Help', as at The Benefit, women 'look like they're dressed for church', and Hilly's 'tight-fitted' dress restrains her, and 'ruffles clutch at her throat'. This can represent that Hilly is being suffocated, not just with the pressure put on her to look presentable as it's her night, but also the pressure patriarchy places women to depict themselves as demure and elegant, rather than flamboyant like Celia, who is condemned to be an outsider by the women; ironically they enforce their own oppression. Further analysis of Hilly's dress show that she's playing an act of a demure woman, as 'the only genuine parts ... are her fingers and her face', symbolising that she's displaying herself as the perfect female role model for all the other housewives to follow. These restrictive gender constructs of conservatism upon women ultimately lead to their destruction, as they enforce these constraints upon themselves, and condemn those who do not follow suit as outsiders.

Gender constructs, as depicted in literature that reflects the mid 20th century, are indeed extremely restrictive upon women, particularly surrounding female representation in a patriarchal society, and in motherhood. Such restrictive constructs can most definitely lead to women's downfall and destruction in society. However, when women are able to overcome these constructs, and find strength through their own independent female identity, 1960s American women find the strength and will to succeed, and overcome these restrictive, if not destructive constraints.