

The harm of stories



Throughout time, storytelling has evolved and changed with society. While oral storytelling is not as prevalent as it once was, the stories that were once passed down orally have now been written and passed through generations and cultures in this manner. However, the form that the story takes has not had an effect on storytelling as a whole. Storytelling has provided a way for tellers to pass along ideas on culture, ways of life, and traditions that may otherwise have died out. Oftentimes, stories can become convoluted after being passed on via word of mouth, yet, others keep their integrity. No matter the truthfulness of the story, storytelling has consistently proved to be harmful due to its ability to influence the listeners' or readers' thinking. In this paper, I will prove that stories are inherently harmful due to the ability the teller has to influence the listener through relatable or believable stories, whether they be fact or fiction, to solidify the gender hierarchy as shown in literary stories such as *Sunjata*, *Lysistrata*, and the *Tale of Genji*.

The solidification of the gender hierarchy through stories cemented women into a position below men, of which women were and still are unable to escape or to improve on. The gender hierarchy is commonly manifested through the objectification of women. This is exemplified through these stories, which have kept women from advancing in society, due to both society's disapproval and the views that these ideas give women of themselves. Even though they are more than capable of playing a part in society, they believe that they are not able to or are shown that they are not welcome to. With the help of cultural norms, stories have promoted the view that women are less than men. All throughout time, stories have prevented

women from being able to break out of these ideas and improve their status in society.

The societal ideas regarding women are demonstrated through Sunjata, the West African Epic of the Mande People. Within this poem, the societal norms of the Mande people are passed along through the words and actions of different characters when speaking of or to women. In this poem, after the hunters killed the buffalo, the Condé stated:

We said any hunter who kills this one,

We will bring out three age sets of girls,

And any girl they choose from among them will become his wife. (Sunjata, 28)

By offering these women, the Condé people demonstrate the societal objectification of women. This form of objectification portrays women as if they are not even truly people, but simply a gift or object that can be given to men as a reward. This is extremely harmful to women because it traps them into this societal idea and makes it close to impossible to escape or even want to escape. If society portrays women as only objects, then it is difficult for them to see themselves as anything else. This makes it impossible for women to improve their societal status or even to demonstrate that they are living, thinking, breathing humans.

Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* helps to uphold the gender hierarchy by solidifying the idea that the main purpose of women is to serve and satisfy men.

Throughout this play, the women of Greece use their sexuality in order to

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have a say in political affairs. In Athenian society, women do not have much of a say in political matters, even though they are both interested and capable. However, because the women cannot have a say in society, the supposed role of women comes into play. Due to the societal sexual objectification of women, the only way that women can affect the political world is through manipulation of their sex lives. When explaining this plan to the women, Lysistrata declares:

If we

Sit in our quarters, powdered daintily

...

The men will swell right up and want to boink,

But we won't let them near us, we'll refuse-

Trust me, they'll make a treaty at a dash" (Lysistrata, 830).

By using a lack of sex to manipulate the men, Lysistrata and the other women of Greece demonstrate their want to have a say in society. However, because the only way that they get a say is by manipulating their sex lives, they reinforce the idea of women as sexual objects and the idea that the main job of women is to satisfy men. The sexual objectification of women is excessively harmful due to the way that such ideas affect both society and women themselves. The objectification of women in any way is dehumanizing. It is hard for women to gain respect from men, each other, or even themselves if it is hard for them to even see themselves as a part of

society. This struggle kept women from moving beyond these roles or improving on their societal status.

The ideas involving the gender hierarchy and the objectification of women by society are solidified through the storytelling of Murasaki Shikibu in *The Tale of Genji*. This Japanese tale puts forth many ideas revolving around the place that women were to have in society, despite being the work of a female author. One example of this is the conversation between Genji, Tō no Chūjō, and the Warden in which they discuss women and their qualities. Within this section, the Warden declares, “ we men should really consider picking a completely childlike, compliant woman... a woman we can mold into an acceptable and flawless wife” (*Genji*, 1175). With this, while acknowledging that women are, in fact, humans, the Warden suggests that they are not all good enough to be worth the time and effort of men. He suggests that instead, women should be molded and changed in order to fit the physical and emotional wants of men. This objectifies women in that it suggests that their worth is determined by men, which is extremely harmful to women due to the dehumanizing nature of such ideas. By displaying and passing along these ideas, stories such as this can cause women to feel as though society is right about their roles and values, which can prevent women from even wanting to break free from these constraints. These stories help to reaffirm societal ideas, such as the objectification of women, to men. This helps to support the continuation of the gender hierarchy and prevents women from making any progress to stop objectification.

Storytelling has been important throughout time in many cultures.

Throughout these stories, from Greek plays to West African epics, the gender

hierarchy and the objectification of women has played a large role. The West African Epic: Sunjata has supported this by putting forth the dehumanizing idea that women are no more than objects that men are to take care of. Through Aristophanes's play *Lysistrata*, the gender hierarchy is shown through the sexual objectification of women and the only means through which they are able to have a say in society: the manipulation of their sex lives. In Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*, the gender hierarchy is demonstrated through the constant objectification of women through the idea that women are meant to satisfy their male counterparts, not only in a physical sense, but also in an emotional sense. Stories such as these demonstrate the harm that stories can do by reinforcing the ideas concerning the gender hierarchy and the objectification of women. Through the constant telling and retelling of tales that center around the societal norms regarding the role of women, it is impossible for women to escape such roles. These stories were especially harmful during their respective time periods due to their ability to constantly reinforce the gender hierarchy and ideas regarding societal norms of objectifying women. By having a constant reminder of these expectations, women were unable to break free from these ideas. This kept women from changing their place in society and instead forced them to fit into the mold that society created. Overall, storytelling is intrinsically harmful to women due to the teller's ability to influence the listener and the society through stories that cement the place of women in society.

While these stories are all from past civilizations, they have lived on through modern times. As they are told again and again throughout different parts of

the world, they help to pass along the gender ideas of older civilizations. This is harming to any progress being made on getting rid of the gender hierarchy. By constantly reinforcing the status of women as below that of men and the idea of women as objects whose purpose it is to satisfy men, it is much harder for women of the modern day to break out of these molds