

# Symbolism in a woman on the roof essay sample



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A Woman's Power Struggle Of the symbolism in Doris Lessing's short story, "A Woman on the Roof", the most obvious symbols are the woman, her roof and the three workmen. This story is about a woman's power struggle. In a time period such as the one this story takes place in, it may sound a bit ironic and historically speaking, we would not mention the words woman and power in the same sentence. Lessing uses symbolism to show the power struggles woman went through to gain freedom from an unequal, sexist, and male dominating society.

The woman sunbather is the most influential symbol in Lessing's story. She presents the conflict of power between men and women. "Stanley let out a whistle. She lifted her head, startled, as if she'd been asleep, and looked straight over at them. The sun was in her eyes, she blinked and stared, then she dropped her head again" (806). By not responding to the whistle, the sunbather has begun to have power over the men. Throughout the story we see how the sunbather begins to gain more and more power by using her nonverbal communication: "She wore a red scarf around her breast and brief red bikini pant" (pg 805). By wearing the color red and being half naked, the woman sunbather is symbolically representing she has confidence in her sexuality. In addition, the color red symbolizes that she is a woman of power. Other examples of her ability to gain more power are: "She sat smoking, and did not look up, when Stanley let out a wolf whistle" (805), and "the woman stayed on her blanket, turning herself over and over. She ignored them, no matter what they did" (806). Clearly, she is a woman who is breaking the barrier of power between men and women.

The three workmen men are furious, they yell, scream, whistle and stomp, not because they are upset that she is on the roof sunbathing, but rather, because she refused to give them the power they desperately wanted by acknowledging any of their obnoxious behaviors. To each workman, the woman in red who ignores them represents different levels of rejection. Tom, the youngest workman has never had the experience of rejection from a woman. “ Tom felt alone again. Last night she had him into her flat: it was big and had fitted white carpets and a bed with a padded white leather headboard. She wore a black filmy negligee and her kindness to Tom thickened his throat as he remembered it” (868). Tom puts the woman into a submissive role and assumes she will automatically accept him and share his same desire of passion. The next workman, Stanley has had rejection before. He cannot tolerate the blow that rejection has on his ego: “ Stanley whistled again. Then he began stamping with his feet, and whistled and yelled and screamed at the woman, his face getting scarlet. He seemed quite mad, as he stamped and whistled, while the woman did not move, she did not move a muscle” (809). The rejection from the women on the roof is almost driving Stanley to insanity. His anger is a reflection of how he has dealt with his memory of past rejections. The oldest workman is Harry. He is on a level where he considers the woman in red to be untouchable. Perhaps this is due to him being married for so many years and the possibility that he has suffered many rejections from woman and being ignored by a woman is not a new thing in his life.

The three workmen symbolically represent the value system of the early 1960's, in which men had attitudes that were domineering and sexist toward

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women. From early on these attitudes were illustrated; “ they made jokes about getting an egg from some woman in the flats under them, to poach it for their dinner” (805). The men in the story obviously are assuming that all women should be home in the kitchen ready to cook. A sexist comment such as this demonstrate the value system of men’s beliefs about gender roles: the man will supply the family with everything it will need: the home, food and source of income. The woman will bear the children, take care of the home, and any other external need whether it be cooking, sewing or cleaning. This ignorance about women and their roles in society is what has kept women repressed throughout the centuries.

As the story continues the sexist comments also continue; “ If she’s married, her old man wouldn’t like that” (806) and “ If my wife lay about like that, for everyone to see, I’d soon stop her” (806). Through these quotes from the workmen we are given insight to how men feel they are superior. Men believed they had the power to control women and their actions, and that the women will be submissive abiding to all their demands. However, the woman on the roof ignores the harassment and obnoxious behavior of the three workmen. By doing this, she is making a statement for all womankind, no longer will there be a semblance of the inequalities of power women have in correlation to social roles, relationships and society.

Lessing uses the roof to symbolize the different economical statures of the woman and the three workmen. “ Her roof belonged to a different system of roofs, separated from theirs” (806). This quote illustrates that the woman sunbather is in a higher economical class than the three workmen are. Daily out on her roof she bathes in the hot, hot sun, proving the theory that she

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does not need to work, she has a luxury that the three workman are envious of. The workmen “ were all angry because of her utter indifference” (806). In the overall scheme of things, the woman clearly was financially secure and money equals’ power in our society. Up on the roof the three workmen “ felt free, on a different level from ordinary humanity” (pg 806).

This quote shows that the three workmen know they are in a different economical class than the woman. Perhaps it is at this moment that each of them daydream that they were in the same economical class as the woman sunbather. Up on the roof the workmen could see from roof to roof, they knew they were working in an area where rich upper class people live. They had the experience of feeling free and seeing what it is like to have the opportunity to relax and enjoy life. However, they are brought back to reality knowing that they are blue-collar workers. Once again, the woman sunbather has gained power over the three workmen through being in a higher economical stature than any of them.

Doris Lessing’s, “ A Woman on the Roof”, demonstrates that there is a definite inequality in power among men and women. Whether it is in a relationship, in so far as gender and emotional involvement are concerned; or in a social role, in that there are always safe guards preventing women from having an equal stance in the social structure of society. The idea of men being domineering and women viewed as secondary is slowly but surely changing. The woman on the roof was a symbolic goddess. She stood for a woman’s right to equal treatment of power by ignoring the three workmen, wearing red, and holding her head up high as she took a journey through a non-traditional role. The feminist movement may not be as strong as the <https://assignbuster.com/symbolism-in-a-woman-on-the-roof-essay-sample/>

1960's, but women already have a foot in the door to equality. No longer shall women be seen as submissive, timid, overmatched, or inferior but as equal, because unequivocally as this story demonstrates, it is the woman who asserts her power and wins.

#### Works Cited

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