

A history of submissive women in literature flashcard



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The feminine gender has long been one that has been repressed throughout history and forced to acclimate itself to a world dominated by men. Although major improvements have been made in the strife for equality, this continues to be a man's world. In the short stories "The Chrysanthemums" and "A Rose for Emily," as well as in the drama "A Doll's House," the protagonists are all frustrated women who are unfulfilled with their subservient lives. Partly imposed upon them by their setting's historical and societal norms, they choose to either do something about it or continue to internalize their dissatisfaction.

When analyzing these pieces of literature, it becomes quite obvious which of the protagonists fall under the category of those who decided to do something about their discontent and those who did not. It is also quite interesting that those who changed their situations to their advantage were both set in the same historical timeframe, unlike the ones who did not. Both Emily Grierson from "A Rose for Emily" and Nora Helmer from "A Doll's House" manifested this dissatisfaction with their lives and chose to challenge their oppressors. On the other hand, Elisa Allen from "The Chrysanthemums," chose to continue living her submissive existence.

In Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily," Emily Grierson, the protagonist, is one of these women who decides to change her fate from one of submission, due to her gender and the roles imposed on it by society, to one of control and power. In her case, though, the decision to take the reins in her own hands seems to have originated in her subconscious. Jack Scherting, who wrote an essay on this "subconscious" state, relates Emily's situation to

the Freudian concept of the “ Oedipus complex. ” He writes, “ Emily’s father had prevented her from maturing sexually in the normal and natural way.

Thus repressed, her sexual drives emerge in a tragic form-that is to say, in abnormal and unnatural behavior” (Scherting 400). Her psychotic action of murdering her lover and keeping him to decompose in her bedroom must have been her form of rebellion toward her father’s submissive treatment towards her. She had not been allowed to become a woman in her father’s care. In the story, the narrator (townspeople) say, “ We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had been robbed her, as people will” (Faulkner 31).

Emily Grierson was not the only woman who rejected the societal norms imposed on her and her gender. It has been a widely accepted fact that the women of pre-Civil War America were not the same as those who emerged from the ruins in 1865. According to Alexis Girardin Brown, “ Historians created a new concept to define the women in the 1880’s who had achieved so much strength and independence during the war and its aftermath: the ‘ New Woman’” (8). This “ new woman” concept is what eventually gave rise to the women’s suffrage movement and feminism in America (Brown 8).

Emily Grierson was most certainly one of these “ new women.

” Her story and what she eventually did to secure her new found independence could be said to almost be justified by Brown’s perspective of what was going on with women at that point in history. She writes, “ This newly acquired position of provider and protector led many women to

question the sphere in which they had been raised. Though few women actively sought these new roles, they had little choice but to accept them" (Brown 6). Emily was one that completely refused the " sphere in which she had been raised" (Brown 6). She went against everything her father, her oppressor, had told her and taught her and got herself a man at any cost. Another woman protagonist who also made the decision to change her role from a compliant housewife is Nora Helmer, from Henrik Ibsen's drama, " A Doll's House.

" Her choice to leave her husband at the end of the play was a much more cognizant decision for her than it had been for Emily Grierson. Nora's choice was not based on an inflicted psychosis, which had been the case with Emily and her father, but on a strong act of determination. According to Elizabeth Hardwick, Nora is " intrinsically independent and free-spirited" from the very beginning of the play (294). Unni Langas also wrote an essay on Ibsen's drama and about Nora's specific motives. He wrote, " When she performs acts that are generally reserved for men, or withdraws from practices associated with women, she shows the gender attribution of these acts to be social constructions and thereby contests their reified status" (157).

So, Langas claims that Nora's " rebellion" and discontent began long before she literally walked out on Trovald, her husband. The events that eventually unfolded at the end of the play and that lead her to finally leave her husband were just those last straws that broke the camel's back. Before her final stage exit, Ibsen has Nora say, " For eight years I have been patiently waiting," enforcing this idea of long-lived frustration (3. 1107).

Again, this idea of the “rebellious woman” at the end of the nineteenth century was not only reserved to post-Civil War America as was the case with Emily Grierson. Nora Helmer and her insurgence, against all ethical and moral norms of society at the time, did not go unnoticed in Northern Europe. According to Marilyn Yalom, “The idea that a respectable woman should renounce her role as wife and mother, leave her husband and children, and strike out on her own was seen as an insult to society’s most cherished values” (263). The ending caused such an uproar particularly in the conservative nations of Scandinavia and Germany that the ending had to be rewritten for these specific groups of audiences (Yalom 263). In fact, some of the changes in gender roles that took place at the time Ibsen wrote “A Doll’s House” can be seen in consequence to the play’s release and in the play’s substance.

For example, “The Scandinavian changes effected in the 1870’s made it possible for Nora in ‘The Doll’s House’ to negotiate a bank loan without her husband’s knowledge—a transaction that her confidante greeted with surprise” (Yalom 264). There was also a new emerging idea of financial independence for women both in Europe and America as well. Laws that were being passed at the time, particularly in Scandinavian countries, allowed both wed and unwed women the right to possess their own earnings for the first time in history (Yalom 265). This must have also played a role in Ibsen’s play making it legitimately possible for someone such as Nora to be able to walk out on her marriage, as she did, and to take care of herself financially.

The third and final piece of literature analyzed is the short story "The Chrysanthemums," by John Steinbeck. In this story, the woman protagonist, Elisa Allen, is different from both Nora Helmer and Emily Grierson. She is the only one who chooses to continue her submissive role as a frustrated housewife. It's no mystery to the reader that Elisa is unhappy in her role as a woman living in a male dominated society. Marilyn Mitchell and Harold Bloom write, "Elisa is a woman trapped between society's definition of the masculine and the feminine and is struggling against the limitations of the feminine" (3). On a different note though, Elisa's discontent, according to Elizabeth E.

McMahan, is rooted in something a bit different. McMahan claims that Elisa, "wants, among other things, to be admired as a woman" (215). She believes that her dissatisfaction as a woman stems from her discontent with the way her husband and society at large treat her! Basically, she yearns to seek for fulfillment as a woman just as a man would and to not be socially excommunicated for it. The man with the wagon, with whom Elisa became so entranced, seems to only exacerbate her desire to be able to leave in search of better things.

Marilyn L. Mitchell writes, "Elisa may know nothing of the world beyond her valley, but she believes in her talents and in the possibility of a life more rewarding than her own" (224). Regardless of her longing to live the life she wants to live, away from her husband and with the freedom to do whatever she wants, she fails to achieve it. John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums" is set in a very different time period than the other two previously discussed

pieces of literature. Steinbeck was influenced by different historical factors compared to the authors of the "A Doll's House" and "A Rose for Emily."

One would assume that a woman such as Elisa Allen, living in a world where women had many more rights and privileges, would have been the one to abandon her submissive lifestyle. This was not the case though. One major factor that would most likely have influenced Elisa, as well as any other dissatisfied woman from abandoning her role as housewife, was the onset and effects of the Great Depression. Annelise Orleck writes, "In her 1933 book, 'It's Up to the Women,' Eleanor Roosevelt argued that women, through self-sacrifice and creativity, would save their families from the worst ravages of the Depression" (2). This seems to have been a commonly shared idea of what a woman, specifically a wife, should represent in desperate times according to many of the researched historical references.

Another reason why women of this era, such as Elisa, might have stayed with their man was for financial security. Jobs and money during the Depression were precious commodities and were mostly reserved for the male sex, considered the more productive and efficient of the two (Orleck 5).

Therefore, without the ability to earn their own income, women such as Elisa would rather stay by their man and retain their financial "security" than venture off on their own. Further validating these points, Orleck says, "There is abundant evidence to show that poor wives and mothers did approach their traditional responsibilities with heightened urgency during the Depression" (2). So, while Emily Grierson, Nora Helmer, and Elisa Allen were all living subservient lives at some point throughout their literary existence,

they all eventually took very different approaches to their uniquely individual situations.

Emily Grierson and Nora Helmer rebelled against their oppression, while Elisa Allen failed to do so. Regardless of what road each one of these women chose, they were all strong women in the long run Works Cited Brooks, Cleanth, Robert Penn Warren. Short Story Criticism. Ed.

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