

# An analysis of three girls



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“ A sex symbol’s currency lies in her youth, her curves, in the suggestion that a sexual encounter lurks around the next corner.” (Sharon Krum, The Guardian) The power struggle between genders in society is something that can be seen every day, particularly in the media. The importance of female celebrities to stay in the spotlight based on their appearance and sex appeal is a clear example of the imbalance between the genders, and their roles in society. Three Girls by Joyce Carol Oates is a story about a lesbian couple, and their observation of the behavior of a disguised Marilyn Monroe who, surprisingly to the narrator and her companion, wants to be seen as nothing more than a common person. During the progression of the story, the author provides perspective on the gender roles women faced in 1956 New York, and gives the reader insight into the thoughts and reservations of a lesbian couple in this time period. Through both implicit and explicit expression, Oates implements feminist and marxist ideas of power struggle into Three Girls in order to establish themes of imbalance and subordination by women in society.

Feminist ideas are used throughout this story in both explicit and implicit ways to help describe the gender roles placed upon females, particularly celebrities, in the 1950s. “ That figure was a garish blond showgirl, a Hollywood ‘ sexpot’ of no interest to intellectuals”. (Page 79) The author explicitly includes the narrator’s description of Marilyn Monroe to explain her status in society, and to elaborate on Marilyn’s significance in Hollywood. This description also establishes Marilyn Monroe as a foil to the main characters. Though Marilyn Monroe was seen as a massive sex symbol during the 1950s, and was well-known for her beauty and allure to men, “ no

one ever gave her credit for who she was” (Nancy Friday, *The Guardian*). Marilyn received attention for her appearance and alluring traits rather than her actual accomplishments in her life, and the struggles she endured to establish her career. These quotes implicitly emphasize the idea that Marilyn, even as an established film star, is assumed to be little more than sex appeal to men in a patriarchal society. This is significant, as it allows the author to portray the imbalance between genders in society, and that Marilyn, as a woman, was subject to the principles and decisions of men.

Marxists ideas are used throughout this story in both implicit and explicit ways in order to portray the power imbalances between genders in society. The quote “ We dreaded her being recognized by a (male) customer or a (male) clerk” (Page 80) explicitly establishes the influence that the males in the bookstore have over the main characters’ actions. They are fearful of what may happen if Marilyn’s true identity is discovered, which causes them to act with caution to prevent that outcome, influencing their behavior to be subordinate to that of the men in the store. As Marilyn and the main characters are approaching the male cashier, “ Marilyn Monroe seemed for the first time to falter. She fumbled to extract out of her shoulder bag a pair of dark glasses and managed to put them on”. (Page 82) These quotes emphasize the fear that the women felt in the male-dominant bookstore. Implicitly, this situation acts as a symbol for women in a male-dominant society. Marilyn is breaking out of her gender role as a sex object that entertains the desires of men, and is fearful that she will be condemned and exposed for doing so. Marilyn, as someone that grew up “ through a series of foster homes” and was “ sexually abused” as a child (Nia, *My Hero Project*)

had been in a position subordinate to men her entire life, whether it be her own family or strangers that she was subject to abuse from. She had been seen as an object for sex the majority of her life, and was put into a position beneath those that had that dominant power over her. This, along with the idea that a woman's role in society in the 1950s was subordinate to that of a man's help elaborate on the Marxist ideas of dominance and power of the male gender over female gender during this time period. This idea of male dominance contributes to the overall theme of imbalance and subordination by women in society.

The central theme that the story *Three Girls* is written upon is the imbalance of power between gender roles in 1950s American society. Along with the subordination by women towards men, this imbalance is portrayed by the author using both explicit and implicit methods of implementing feminist and Marxist ideas. With the use of Marilyn Monroe, the story aids in emphasizing the main reasons why feminism was established in the United States, and uses Marilyn's struggle of inferiority to men in order to create a message about the impact of such strict gender roles on one's life. "Feminists say.. [don't] allow the world to turn you into a sex object. Make something of your lives. Become somebody."

#### Works Cited:

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