

The meaninglessness
in social and sexual
conformity:
expression in "be
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Traditional gender roles have existed since the dawn of the patriarchy; they remain thoroughly enforced by our media and culture, portraying men as hyper-masculine: somehow tougher and stronger than the delicate woman. These expectations set on both women and men create a large and rather impossible set of standards on how people are supposed to present themselves, express themselves, and love others. Through her poem "Be Nobody's Darling," Alice Walker critiques the patriarchy and the culture of conformity that it creates. She also reflects on women's needs to break out of its misogynistic, conformist culture and embrace femininity, sexuality, and individuality in order to live a meaningful life.

The poem's form symbolizes the need to break free of existing structures that may interfere with one's freedom of expression. "Be Nobody's Darling" is written with no rhyme or meter, and is classified as a free-verse poem, not following any set pattern. The nonexistent structure of the poem symbolizes breaking free from society's set standards and structures. Without a designated pattern for the poem, Walker expresses her thoughts and individuality with no bounds, which is what she tells readers to do through the actual content of the poem; she reinforces this message through the form. Because the intended audience of this poem is mainly women, Walker focuses on the social structure of the patriarchy. By deconstructing the format down to no rhyme or meter, she symbolically deconstructs the patriarchy down to its faults, namely its misogyny and culture of conformity.

Through the use of symbolism and deconstructionist ideals, Walker portrays femininity as strength rather than a weakness, emphasizing the importance

of embracing one's femininity. In lines 3 through 8, Walker tells the reader to:

“ Take the contradictions

Of your life

And wrap around

You like a shawl,

To parry stones

To keep you warm.”

Traditionally, women wear shawls. Shawls are an outwardly feminine choice of clothing. Oddly enough, Walker describes a shawl, a generally light and delicate accessory, as a sort of protection against “ stones” and a source of comfort. When one thinks of protection from attack, thoughts of armor, shields, and even weapons such as swords come to mind. Swords are often used as phallic symbols, as seen in *Romeo and Juliet* and other famous works. Knights, who are always men, often wear armor and carry shields. All three of these traditional methods of protection have masculine connotations, which society immediately associates with power and strength. By using a shawl as a symbol for protection, Walker portrays femininity as an inherently powerful thing, despite the patriarchy's traditional views of women being fragile and powerless. Not only are these sources of protection generally considered masculine, but they are clunky, uncomfortable, stiff, and heavy. A suit of armor weighs the wearer down, and makes it hard for

one to move. Armor sacrifices freedom of movement for protection. On the other hand, a lightweight shawl makes no sacrifices of freedom. Rather, it is free and lightweight, yet strong and protective. Femininity frees the woman who embraces it.

Walker stresses the importance of female independence through her portrayal of solitude in the poem. The line "Be pleased to walk alone" makes a reader picture a woman walking alone because the previous metaphor of the shawl is extremely feminine (line 15). Patriarchal society frowns upon women being alone or independent; it wants women to only exist when paired with a man. Also, marriage and family life are often forced upon women. If a woman follows these expectations, she is never alone: she lives with her families from birth until marriage, then lives with a man and her own family. Female independence, represented by "walking alone," is received by society with "askance" (line 12). Walker tells her audience to greet askance with askance, because independence plays a crucial role in finding oneself.

The patriarchy creates conformity, which comes with judgment, negativity, and meaninglessness; therefore, breaking out of social constructs allows one to live a more fulfilled life. Walker paints an ugly picture of conformity, referring to conforming as "[...]succumb[ing]/To madness" (9-10) and calling those who conform "impetuous/Fools" (19-20). Her use of negative words reflects her negative attitude towards conformist society, especially to the construct of the patriarchy. She portrays conformity as a "river" (18), which flows in one direction. These "impetuous fools" who "line the crowded/river beds" simply follow the flow of the river of the masses, do without <https://assignbuster.com/the-meaninglessness-in-social-and-sexual-conformity-expression-in-be-nobodys-darling/>

questioning or thinking, and float down this river of conformity. Contrary to this blatantly negative tone, Walker changes her attitude to a much more positive one when she discusses self-expression and independence. She advises her readers to:

"[...] Be nobody's darling;

Be an outcast.

Qualified to live

Among your dead" (26-29)

Generally, men use "darling" as a pet name to refer to their female partner. It also has an element of possession; "my darling" is commonly used. By saying to not be anyone's possession or pet, Walker once again emphasizes female independence. Also, her use of the word "outcast" implies that a person is rejected from society. Generally, people are rejected from society when they violate something in society, especially a social norm, law, or tradition. The society rejects the outcast, and the outcast rejects the society; society "look[ing] askance at you/And you askance reply" (12-13). Walker advocates for this and rejecting those oppressive societal expectations that stifle expression. She elaborates, saying that people who embrace their individuality and their inner "outcast" are "qualified to live," in contrast to the "dead" conformists. Conformists do not actually live their lives. Conformists merely exist, metaphorically being "dead." Embracing individuality is the key to life.

Once a woman does not conform to the patriarchy, embracing her individuality and sexuality is crucial to reach self-actualization. Society's view of female sexuality has been massively distorted by the patriarchy. People have many sexual expectations for women, expecting her to be both sexual and innocent at the same time. It produces judgement and misogyny against women, for example: if a woman has a lot of sex, she's a slut; if a woman does not submit to a man's sexual desires, she's a tease or a prude; etc. Also, pornography is generally made for straight male consumption, and frequently involves women being abused, dominated, and/or objectified by men. Conforming to these standards set by the patriarchy makes expressing one's unique sexuality nearly impossible.

Despite the patriarchy's standards on female sexuality, Alice Walker rejects the traditional guidelines and expresses her sexuality freely. In the middle of the 1990s, she was openly in a same-sex relationship, which was considered very progressive. In an interview, Walker described her sexuality as: "I'm curious. I'm open to the spirit of a person whether that's a man or a woman or whoever, that's not what's important to me. What's important is the spirit" (Beauty In Truth). This is important to note because her sexual expression is extremely unconventional in traditional terms, which enforces the point that setting oneself free from social constructs frees one's individual sexuality and self-expression. In the poem, she continues her symbol of the "river" of conformity and mentions the "river beds." The word "beds" can be interpreted to have a sexual connotation. These "beds" along this conformist river represent women's sexuality being suppressed by the boundaries and expectations of the patriarchy. Beds of conformity

symbolize female sexuality attempting to conform to the impossible standards society places on women, and its negative effect on individuality, especially “ nontraditional” sexual expression and love.

“ Be Nobody’s Darling” uses symbolism, form, and tone to critique the stifling nature of the patriarchy and the toxic culture of conformity that it creates. Contrary to the traditional views of what being a woman entails, Walker provides images of individuality and femininity as strength. In society, women are perceived as weaker and are expected to meet impossible standards that suppress their individuality and sexuality, never allowing them to reach self-actualization; therefore breaking free from social constructs, especially the patriarchy, and expressing oneself is crucial if one wants to live a meaningful and fulfilled life.

Works Cited

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