

Gender and  
realization in "boys  
and girls" by alice  
munro



**ASSIGN  
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Gender Roles and stereotyping are two prominent themes in literature.

However, for families living on a farm during a time when everyone worried about money, differences between boys and girls were more practical than society.

This differentiation is exhibited in the pivotal passage in which the young narrator overhears a discussion between her mother and father which culminates in the line, " It's not like I had a girl in the family at all" (Munro 513).

The mother is clearly concerned about her daughter. Although she does not realize it at this point, the narrator inevitably succumbs to the requirements of her gender in Alice Munro's " Boys and Girls."

As a young innocent, the narrator seems not to understand the full impact of gender roles in her immediate world. Other than the physical differences of anatomy between her and her brother, Laird, she never considers him in any way superior to her.

She notes how she carries the heavier water pail, how she was able to fool him into believing that skeletons lived in their room, and how she helped her father pitch hay in the barnyard. She makes it a point to share her stories of bravery and courage with the readers: " I rescued people from a bombed building...

I shot two rabid wolves who were menacing the schoolyard" (Munro 511).

She clearly has yet to associate these acts of bravado with male heroes and proudly assumes the role.

The narrator is particularly pleased with her father's introduction of her as "my new hired man" (512). She does not yet have a reason to react to the salesman's next words: "I thought it was only a girl" (512).

At this point, the narrator believes that those words are somehow for other girls and that she will be able to rise above their implications. Surely she would never be considered incapable or unwanted in a physically laborious setting.

Gradually, the narrator begins to realize that gender creates differences in the value placed on people. Already, the narrator has chosen the world of her father, which included the foxes, the barn, and his ingenious devices. Even though she was admittedly shy and did not ask him questions, she felt more comfortable working with him.

Conversely, the kitchen provides a huge contrast in the narrator's mind. She does not like the hot, green, oily and smelly kitchen, asserting that "It seemed to me that work in the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing ; work done out of doors, and in my father's service, was ritualistically important" (513).

She has, perhaps unknowingly, seized upon the very beginnings of realization that gender dictated a person's labor. The value the narrator places on the man's work is the start of her education in gender expectations, but she has yet to fully personalize these.

The narrator's suspicions are aroused when she sees her mother at the barn, and an inkling of doubt as to her usefulness in a world of men creeps into her

mind. She notes that " It was an odd thing to see my mother down at the barn (Munro 512).

Her mother gives her the first indication that soon she would be supplanted by her younger, and in her eyes, far inferior, brother: " Wait till laird gets a little bigger, then you'll have a real help" (513).

The unspoken dialogue is important though the narrator claims to not hear it. He must have said something to the effect that she, the narrator, wasn't getting enough done. However, she interprets his attention as placating and dismisses the notion that Laird would ever be more useful than she.

Ironically, she even validates the stereotype by her thoughts that " I felt my mother had no business down here..." (513). She has yet to connect herself and her mother along gender lines. Even though the narrator never questions her mother's love for her, at this point, her mother is merely someone to be carefully watched for further signs of betrayal.