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Essay #1 English 2328 Section 70309- 004

Rebellion against gender roles in a family setting Sunday March 24th, 2019

Gender Roles have been a big part of society as far back as the 1800s. Placing people into a predetermined social role/status based on their gender. Men have the stereotype of being stronger, less emotional, and more masculine thus, the bread winner. Women known to have the stereotype to be more caring, emotional, and feminine thus, having the role of the 'house keeper', doing the cleaning, cooking, and preforming motherly duties. Women only to be seen, not heard. Two stories demonstrate this well. The short stories "The Revolt of Mother" by Mary Wilkins Freeman, and "Seven Syllables" By Hisaye Yamamoto, both contain main characters that are restricted by their gender roles, decide to rebel against gender expectations, and are then freed from their gender role as the outcome of breaking the social norm.

In the short story "The Revolt of Mother" by Mary Wilkins Freeman, the main character, Sarah Pen, is trapped in her gender role of being a good mother and house keeper to her family. One day she finds out her husband, Adoniram, is building a new barn in the same place he had promised to build a new house forty year ago. Sarah, frustrated about her husband's actions, still continues to be loyal to her wifely duties, "Sarah Penn's face as she rolled her pies had that expression of meek vigor... She made the pies faithfully, while across the table she could see, when she glanced up from her work, the sight that rankled in her patient and steadfast soul- the digging of the cellar of the new barn in the place where Adoniram forty years ago had promised her their new house should stand"(397). Sarah decides to confront her husband about his actions. She states that she has never complained once about anything in the forty-year that they had been married and she just wants to know why he is building a new barn after promising a new house. "I ain't never complained" but "I've been takin' care of the milk of six cows in this place, an' now you're goin' to build a new barn, an' keep more cows, an' give me more to do in it"

Sarah says “You’re lodgin’ your dumb beasts better than you are your own flesh an’ blood. I want to know if you think it’s right” (398-399). Despite all Sarah’s efforts to communicate with her husband, Adoniram has no response and plainly states, “I ain’t got nothin’ to say” (399), making Sarah feel powerless and trapped in her gender role due to the lack of emotion/empathy in her husband’s gender role/character.

It was when Sarah discovered the knowledge that the barn was ready to use, and that Adoniram would be gone for three days picking up a horse from his brother, that Sarah grasps the courage to rebel against her gender role. “She formed a maxim for herself, although incoherently with her unlettered thoughts. ‘Unsolicited opportunities are the guide-posts of the Lord to the new roads of life,’ she repeated in effect, and she made up her mind to her course of action” (401). It was then when Sarah packed all her things and moved into the new barn with her two children following her lead. Going against gender expectations and breaking the social norm. Sarah finally embraced the courage and strength she had secretly had all along, flipping social standards.

The results of Sarah’s action were positive for the most part. Although the village people did call Sarah to be either “insane” or “a lawless and rebellious spirit” (403), Sarah’s children respected her for her decision and stood by her side “without a murmur” (403). Adoniram is moved by his wife’s actions and can finally see what she had been telling him before. He apologizes and says “I hadn’t no idee you was so set on’t as all this comes to. I’ll put up the partitions, an’ everything you want, mother” (406). Freeman’s story of Sarah Penn’s actions opens up ideas and brings awareness to the expectation's women face when it comes to gender roles in communities. Critic Elizabeth A. Meese believes that the content in Mary Wilkins Freeman’s work “The Revolt of ‘Mother’” (394) was influenced by her personal experience with sexual politics, and is an excellent demonstration of the expectations of women when it comes to gender roles in society. Meese goes on to explain, “These signs of undecidability, then, can be read as demonstrations of how the author reflects the conscious and unconscious experiences of her

personal inner life and her perception of the public expectations for women in society; their different treatment, privilege, and status, as presented in the external world; and the differences between the social codes for women and for writer" (114). Freeman's work "The Revolt of 'Mother'" is a great example on how women can be restricted by their gender roles to the point of rebellion, in order to seek balance and equality between male and female genders.

In the second story "Seven Syllables" by Hisaye Yamamoto, the main character, Rosie, is restricted by her gender role of, one day, becoming a wife when her mother asks her not to marry in fear that Rosie will end up in an abusive relationship like her own; marrying only to move to American in response to preventing her own suicide. Rosie is asked by her mother to give up her gender role and says, "'Rosie, promise me you will never marry!' Rosie starred at her mother's face. Jesus, Jesus, she called silently, not certain whether she was invoking the help of the son of the Carrascos or of God" (2699). This shows how Rosie is restricted by gender expectations when her mother asks her to never marry. She calls for her lover she once imagined marrying, Jesus, in hope she would feel less trapped.

Rosie rebels and breaks social norms when she promises her mother she will never marry. Disagreeing with the gender role her parents played, and how her father is so controlling and her mother so submissive. On the ride home from the Hayano residence, Rosie "felt a rush of hate for both- for her mother for begging, for her father denying her mother. I wish this Ford would crash, right now, she thought" (2693). This shows Rosie's disapproval of gender roles in her parent's relationship. Rosie felt trapped in the decision of her mother's promise, and started to fear marriage might not be as good as it seems. Her rebellion against the gender role of getting married was to commit to her mother's promise of never marrying. The fact that Rosie choses to not marry seems to imply that Rosie will choose to commit suicide, "the vision had passed through her mind, three contorted, bleeding bodies, one of them hers" (2693), as her mother married instead of committing suicide, "threatened to kill

herself, Aunt Taka hastily arranged marriage with a young man with a simple mind" (2698). In both ways Rosie escapes the gender role which she felt restricted and trapped by.

The actions resulting in Rosie's decision to rebel against the gender role of becoming a wife by promising her mother that she will never marry seem to result in the depression of Rosie. Rosie and her mother already have a cultural gap to do language barriers, "Now, how to reach her mother, how to communicate, Rosie knew formal Japanese by fits and starts, her mother had even less English, no French" (2690), now Rosie must promise her mother to never marry her love, Jesus. The fact that Rosie choses to not marry seems to imply that the result of Rosie's promise will lead to Rosie's suicide, as her mother married instead of committing suicide. Despite their language gap, Rosie and her mother are still able to relate to each other's situations of feeling trapped in gender expectations. Critic Zenobia Baxter Mistri tells us how American and Japanese cultures in "Seven Syllables" by Hisaye Yamamoto, make demands which by themselves can create intense disequilibrium. Mistri explains, "Although the Japanese and American Cultures do not fuse in this tale, art and the artist do, for "Seventeen Syllables" becomes the daughter's symbolic haiku for the mother- the "yes, yes" (2699) said finally, packed with all the intuitive meaning and understanding in Zen fashion" (373). This tells us that Rosie and her mother can still relate to one another's experiences of social pressure/expectations and gender roles as a result of her rebellion despite their cultural differences.

Both stories, "The Revolt of 'Mother'" and "Seven Syllables" are great examples of how people can feel trapped by their gender roles or gender expectations in society, how people rebel against those expectations, and provide insight on how their actions of rebelling effected the overall situation at hand. The outcome of rebellion can be either positive or negative, but in both stories/situations each main character was restricted by their gender role, rebelled against the gender expectations, which actions of rebelling freed them from their undesired gender role. Gender roles between men and women have

been a big part of society since the 1800s and there's no doubt that gender roles will remain an essential part of our society's culture for years to come.

Works Cited Page

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