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The Dark Side of the “Good Women”

In her feminist essay, “Talking Back: Feminist Responses to Sexist Stereotypes,” Sheila Ruth discusses the negative effects particular that ideals, once considered the major requirements of traditional femininity, can have on women. To expect perfection from anyone is to set them up for a life of failure and disappointment. The film *Girl, Interrupted* takes many of these negative ideals into account and shows viewers the extreme extent of the psychological and emotional damage that can result in women who feel pushed to meet these standards. All of the women residing at Claymoore have striven for and failed, from their perspective, to meet some aspect of society’s standards.

No matter how many times we are told that beauty is only skin deep, it is the natural inclination of many people to first note a person’s appearance upon meeting them. Ruth describes the human obsession with physical attractiveness as a “cultural phenomenon” that is socially defined by the men in a patriarchal society (136). She claims that in these societies men concoct the image of an ideal woman in their own special interest, and no matter how unrealistic the image, exhort their expectations on the women around them. The negative effect of this social concept of beauty is overtly displayed in *Girl, Interrupted* through the character of Janet, who suffers from anorexia, an eating disorder in which people starve themselves in order to lose weight. The audience watches as Janet struggles with inner demons that destroy a seventy-four pound woman’s self-esteem, telling her that she’s too fat. The scene in which the women are

practicing yoga shows the extent of the damage that can be done to a woman, psychologically, as well as physically, when she cannot cope with her own, and society's harsh expectations. As they proceed through their exercises, they catch a glimpse of Daisy leaving through the window. Janet has a meltdown, screaming that it's not fair, she wants to be pretty so that she can leave Claymoore and that "seventy-four is the perfect weight." As she sits on the floor crying, the yoga instructor asks her what kind of tree she can be on the ground. Janet replies, "I'm a fucking shrub." By identifying herself with a shrub, which is a typically short and fat, Janet supplies a vivid metaphorical analogy revealing the depth of her self-image. It is ridiculous that Janet could consider herself fat as she is clearly underweight for a grown woman. The audience can assume that Janet begins to eat, as she is eventually allowed to wear regular clothes and go on the group outing. At this point she is still light enough to walk on snow drifts without falling through, providing additional evidence for the audience without saying a word. However, as Ruth predicts, Janet's persistence in comparing herself to what she believes to be the perfect body has left her "...defeated, and always at a disadvantage, always self-deprecating" (136). Although this movie is set in the sixties, the image of the ideal woman being exceptionally skinny still persists today. The theme is also carried out in a more recent movie, *The Devil Wears Prada*, where the main character is told she is too fat because she is a size six and "six is the new eight." By the end of the movie the main character has managed to move down to a size four, but in the process must make several life-altering decisions and forsaking a close relationship.

While Janet suffers from a self-inflicted condition from which she could potentially recover from with the help of therapy and a desire to rehabilitate, the character of Polly finds herself in an entirely different situation. As a child, Polly lit herself on fire, leaving her entire body severely scarred. She is unable to deal with the ramifications of her actions as an adult,

knowing that her scarred face often startles people, resulting in pity or revulsion. Other superficial qualities that are often incorporated into the concept of the ideal woman include “perfect” hair, skin, teeth, shape, and proportion. Ruth states that not only do men desire these qualities in a woman, but the men expect the women to come by these features “naturally” (137). In the opinions of Sheila Ruth and *Girl, Interrupted’s* Lisa, someone such as Polly would likely never be able to find a man to love her. Although there may be someone out there who would be able to accept Polly, as scarred as she is, Ruth doubts the presence of basic compassion in the majority of humankind. This is especially difficult for Polly because she yearns for love and yet, believing the stereotype, finds it unlikely she will ever be able to obtain love because of her scarred features.

Polly’s longing for love is expressed in a very emotional scene, where the audience watches Polly as she witnesses the goodbye between Susanna and Toby. The viewers know that Polly is deeply affected by what she sees, for as she watches out the window, a tear rolls down her cheek and she tenderly touches her scarred face. Later that same night, Polly suffers from an attack, which, in Lisa’s opinion, is directly linked to Polly’s realization that no man will ever want to touch her, as Toby touched Susanna. Through Susanna’s observations, we come to see that Polly’s childlike demeanor is an attempt to make people love her for something other than her appearance. Throughout the film Polly embarks upon a heart-wrenching journey to find love, yet always seems to find herself on the wrong side of a locked door or looking through a window. Susanna realizes this longing in Polly and perhaps can, to a certain extent, relate to these feelings. Although Susanna has been seen in the company of several men throughout the movie she is never content within those relationships. The men that she chooses are the kind that see only what she seems to be and not her entire persona. In the end, she leaves Daisy’s cat with

Polly, knowing that she has grown attached to the cat. As Susanna embarks upon a new life outside the walls of Claymoore, she knows there will be new opportunities for her and yet this may be one of the few chances Polly has to extend her love to living object. The cat offers an unconditional love reacting to the kindness it senses in Polly and not her image.

Not all of the desired traits in a so called “good” woman are made of exterior or superficial qualities; Ruth also cites several personality traits that are important in the identity of the perfect woman. Two key attributes of personality that Ruth discusses are self-effacement and fragility (137). She states that, even though the role of women in society has evolved over the last several decades, it is still true that no one likes an aggressive woman. In current patriarchal societies there is the common belief that if a woman does not give in, or submit to a man’s demands, she will likely lose that man. Fragility is similar to the concept of self-effacement, but it encourages women to be dependent, as well as submissive. The character of Daisy exhibits both of these qualities in abundance throughout the movie, in both her physical and emotional being. When interacting with male characters, Daisy assumes a self-enfacing attitude, often meek and reserved. However, Daisy’s behavior is an oddity as the audience can see that she possesses a certain amount of spirit underneath the docile exterior she presents to her father, and also perhaps to Melvin. It is not uncommon to see Daisy attempt to dominate situations with the other inhabitants of Claymoore through intimidation or airs of superiority. When it comes to dealing with her father, however, Daisy assumes the role of an excessively needy and dependent person. Her dependence upon her father is established early in the movie, but its initial appearance is deceiving. In the first interaction between Daisy and her father, when he comes to visit her at Claymoore, she is seen hugging her father and petting his coat in an affectionate manner as he prepares to take his leave after visiting. Soon after, the extent of

Daisy's dependence upon her father is revealed during the scene in which Susanna and Lisa visit Daisy in her room. During this scene the audience discovers that the chicken Daisy is eating came from her father's rotisserie, and that these chickens are the only thing that she will eat. Daisy attempts to justify her father's behavior by convincing herself that her father truly cares about her because he brings her these chickens; this is also why she saves the carcasses. Hidden underneath her bed, the carcasses serve as a constant reminder of her father's "love" for her, and of its underlying corruption.

Aside from her material dependence upon her father for her food and housing, there is also an emotional dependency. Daisy longs for a semblance of stability and domesticity and sees her father as the only means of obtaining this goal. Upon her release from Claymoore, Daisy is allowed to move into an apartment. This may seem as though it is a step towards self-dependency, but in fact is only an extension of her dependency upon her father. "My dad got me an apartment...he fixed it up nice for me." Daisy remains dependent upon her father for her food and housing, only now she no longer has the cushion of the Claymoore employs between her and her father. Melvin had not believed that Daisy was ready to be on her own and had suggested that she move into a halfway house. However, due to her father's insistence and Daisy's compliance, she makes the move into the apartment that her father has fixed up for her. As Daisy tells the others of her future apartment, there is a wistfulness to her voice in every little detail, making the apartment out to be a dreamlike haven. Ruth's article states that even if those upon whom one depends are competent and trustworthy, which Daisy's father is not, the person forced to be dependent must feel some lack of self-respect and inferiority (137). With her dependency upon her father continuing after she leaves, all of Daisy's old problems and insecurities simply follow her from Claymoore to her "new life."

Daisy attempts to lie to herself, but signs of her abnormal life and psychological disorder are starkly displayed in the layout and design of her new home. The scene in which Susanna and Lisa visit Daisy after they have escaped from Claymoore reveals the true dark nature of Daisy's life that she attempts to bury underneath her sunshine yellow house décor. Ruth shows how a person in a situation such as Daisy's, completely dependent upon another, is left feeling vulnerable and dependent, easy targets for ridicule, often by those with no true comprehension of their situation. Lisa has no problem pushing Daisy's buttons, forcing her to face that sense of ineffectualness and self-degradation she attempts to bury under tough exterior. Lisa reveals the true nature of Daisy's relationship with her father by suggesting that there is something of the sexual nature between Daisy and her father and accusing Daisy of welcoming her father's attentions. It is highly unlikely that Daisy finds very much happiness in her life as she cuts herself and takes Valium after leaving the hospital, a drug she had formerly refused to take. Daisy's life has been made up of a series of events and societal beliefs that, according to Ruth, have culminated to place her at the mercy of her circumstances. While she may know that the treatment she is subjected to by her father is wrong, it is the only life that she knows. Unable to escape and forced to face the reality that Lisa presents, Daisy succumbs to her depression and kills herself.

In the midst of all that is wrong with Daisy's life, it is obvious that she desires a semblance of stability and domesticity. As women who see a life of domesticity as desirable, Daisy and Polly provide ideal foils for Susanna, who hopes to avoid this fate, making her the ultimate anti-feminine figure. The idea of domesticity combines all of the attributes required of a "good" woman and tosses in the idea of the perfect housewife, in which the woman cares for the children and takes care of the home. None of the women in this film actively strive for

domesticity, but it seems that for Polly and Daisy, this would be their ideal life. While this traditional lifestyle is acceptable for some, Ruth points out the lack of respect that women receive when they move away from this lifestyle and into the workforce.

Susanna actively attempts to escape what she sees as the restricting lifestyle of domesticity that is embodied by her mother. She tells her high school counselor that she doesn't want to live the same kind of life as her mother, who assumes the role of the traditional housewife in this film: taking care of the home, hosting house parties for her husband and always following his lead. In one of Susanna's flashbacks, we see her mother chiding her as she shows up late for her father's birthday party, in what her mother perceives as inappropriate attire. While Susanna is dressed in a black and white checkered shirt and black slacks, her mother is wearing a green dress, makeup, and jewelry. The mother's clothes enhance the role in which she has been cast as she plays the perfect hostess, smiling at everyone, bringing in a birthday cake that she likely baked herself, and all the while scolding Susanna under her breath. Susanna sees her mother's life as dull and worthless, a fate that she is determined to escape. She tells the counselor that she wants to write, not march on Washington or be a 'bra burner.' From the counselor's raised eyebrows and pursed lips, however, it is easy to see that she perceives these to be about the same thing. The same limiting factors that exist in this movie are discussed by Ruth, who describes the restricting limits that "...narrow (women's interest) and then condemn us (women) for our 'narrowness'" (137). A writer would not fit what Ruth's essay describes as the woman's work, which should consist of task-oriented work, versus policy-oriented tasks. Susanna's life is full of these contradictions as she seeks to escape the norm. Her dark clothing and white nightgowns could be symbolic not only of her sexual experiences, but also of her life. Several scenes reveal that Susanna is sexually active and has been with at least two different

men, at yet she is still depicted in the traditional Victorian nightgown of the virginal woman. Susanna is often shown wearing dark pants, significant as many of the other women, even those in Claymoore often wear skirts or dresses. Her shirts are usually a darker color and frequently have some type of striped pattern. The stripes bring to mind a prison, and hint at Susanna's inner struggles, her ambivalence. Also, in comparison with the tighter fitting styles worn by Janet, and at some points Lisa, Susanna's clothes often appear loose and almost protective. Susanna cannot escape being a woman and even embraces her womanhood through her sexual escapades, while at the same time rejecting the traditional ideal of a domestic female. Adherence to the traditional idea of female domesticity would demand she retain her virginity until after marriage. By engaging in sexual intercourse prior to marriage, Susanna is able to embrace her femininity, while scorning tradition, all at the same time.

This movie takes place in the 1960s and brings to light many aspects of gender inequality that were relevant then and continue to be relevant today. *Girl, Interrupted* encourages women to look for life outside the mold created for them by society. In the beginning, Susanna's high school counselor attempts to put her in her "proper" place by discouraging her from pursuing her dreams as a writer. However, in the end, the audience is able to see that Susanna finds acceptance and/or approval from Dr. Wick and the lady who oversees and approves Claymoore's patients for life in the 'real' world. *Girl, Interrupted* provides a vivid picture of the results of a society bent on confining its members to specific roles. Susanna is able to come to terms with her life and find a way to accept the person she has become. Other patients, such as Janet who is seen wearing clothes towards the end, share Susanna's sense of hope; while still, some of the other patients, such as Daisy, are not so lucky. This movie attempts to show the devastating impact that can be had on a person's life when they do not conform to the norm. By raising awareness

of these problems, it is possible to rally more people to support the cause. Even those who do not take radical measures to pursue change can influence subtle changes in their immediate environments by changing the way they think. No one can achieve perfection and to expect it often results in disappointment not only for those who can't achieve it, but also for those who expect perfection.

Works Cited

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