

Women's Societal Persecution in Sexton's "Her Kind" and Piercy's "Barbie Doll"

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Abstract

Throughout history, women who have not met society's standards have been both literally and figuratively "burned at the stake." This societal condemnation generally stems from people's obsession with the "perfect woman." This ideal varies from culture to culture, but in the United States, women have been stereotyped as subservient homemakers and mothers who are trained from birth to assume these traditional roles. In the poem "Her Kind," Anne Sexton uses rich metaphoric imagery, for the same purpose that Marge Piercy uses symbolism and bold diction in her poem "Barbie Doll," to show how society sees it necessary to alter or eradicate any woman it deems undesirable and imperfect. Although both Piercy and Sexton present the reader with strong female characters who suffer the devastating effects of society's scrutiny, the characters react to this judgment differently.

In "Her Kind," Anne Sexton uses powerful metaphoric imagery to compare a female speaker's societal troubles which stem from living as a woman on the fringes of society, to that of the trialed "witches" of the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries. In the first stanza, Sexton says that:

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
Haunting the black air, braver at night;
Dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
Over the plain houses, light by light;
Lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind. (Sexton 1-7)

Here, the speaker is not saying that she has literally been a witch, but she empathizes with the persecuted women of earlier centuries. When Sexton states that she is "braver at night" and that she has "done her hitch/over the plain houses," she is stating that the darkness is her only escape from the judging eyes of people who lead perfect, conventional lives in suburbia (Sexton 3-4). The speaker knows what it is like to be the isolated "witch" who does not fit the "typical" woman's mold, and who is a "lonely thing" that is cast out of society for not fitting in (Sexton 5). By saying that "a woman like that is not a woman, quite," she is showing that people view women who are non-conformist as flawed and not even as legitimate women.

In the second stanza, Sexton goes on to say that the speaker has:

Found the warm caves in the woods,
Filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
Closets, silks, innumerable goods;
Fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:
Whining, rearranging the disaligned.
A woman like that is misunderstood.
I have been her kind. (Sexton 8-14)

Sexton is again using metaphor to compare details of the speaker's life to that of a witch. She seems to be unhappy with the long-established, traditional image of a woman: One who "fixes the suppers" for her family, "rearranges the misaligned" in her home, and who is "whiny" and complaining (Sexton 11-13). In the same way that the witch is isolated because of the stigmas attached to her lifestyle, Sexton is saying that a housewife can be lonely and misunderstood as well because of the isolation that comes from her subordinate role in society. Just as the "witch" or outcast is mistaken as evil or manipulating, the housewife can be misread as an insignificant or lesser person.

In the third and final stanza, arguably speaking to society, Sexton states:

Your flames still bite my thigh
And my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind. (Sexton 18-21)

Although the speaker may not have been literally tortured or burned, she feels that she could be regarded as a modern-day witch in some respects. Society has emotionally "burned" and "tortured" her by passing judgment upon her status as a woman. However, the speaker is not embarrassed about challenging the status quo. This is because she has not committed any crime; society is the only wrong-doer, given the fact that it feels the need to silence and correct any woman who does not meet its specifications. Furthermore, as she does in stanzas one and two, Sexton concludes the verse with the statement "I have been her kind" (Sexton 21). By saying that she has "been her kind" Sexton's speaker is suggesting that she, as an atypical woman, has felt like an outcast just as the supposed "witch" of earlier centuries. Here, Sexton is revealing that every woman is potentially the speaker's "kind" in some form. All women are judged and placed into categories based on social standing or other external factors. The rest who do not meet the qualifications for any grouping are tossed aside and deemed unfit and unworthy. A woman who is of "this kind" is seen as a threat to the "norm" and must be altered or removed.

Similarly, in the poem "Barbie Doll," Marge Piercy's use of symbolism demonstrates just how detrimental society's predetermined gender assignment can be to a girl's psyche and sense of self-worth. From the moment of birth, the "girlchild" was:

Presented dolls that did pee-pee

And miniature GE stoves and irons
And wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy. (Piercy 2-4)

The “dolls, stoves, irons, and lipstick are all conventional things that little girls, especially in the West, are given to clue them in to societal expectations. This is not an intentional or necessarily coercive process, but one which adults themselves have gone through and have come to believe is ‘natural’” (Semansky 38). These items are collectively and symbolically used as devices to prime the “girlchild” for the roles which she is predestined to assume as an adult (Piercy 1). She is expected to be a good mother, a submissive housewife, and at the same time she should look the part of a woman too, hence the lipstick. All of this pre-planning and manipulation would be enough to put pressure on even the strongest woman, let alone a mere child. Thus, by puberty, it seems that the “girlchild” has reached her breaking point as a result of society’s need for womanly perfection. Even though she is “healthy,” “intelligent,” and “strong,” she is seen as faulty because people only “saw a fat nose on thick legs” when they looked at her (Piercy 7-8, 11). To society she is nothing more than a defective “Barbie Doll” who needs to be repaired or discarded. People see no worth in her intellect or other positive attributes since she, being a girl, is only viewed as something with a physical and not mental value. Upon cracking under pressure, the “girlchild” removes the “flawed” body parts which are viewed as abominations, thereby killing herself. The people around her, however, do not mourn. By driving her to commit suicide, they were able to morph her into their perfect “Barbie.” They were all too ready to “transform her, to have her conform to the gendered role she could not inhabit during her life” because the only way that “society could ensure that future generations would grow into the gender roles that the girlchild did not would be if the girlchild were not around to be a negative role model” (Semansky 39). They accomplished this by painting make-up on her face, dressing her in a “pink and white nightie,” and packaging her in a casket (Piercy 22). Once all individuality was stripped from the “girlchild,” she became ready for display and was finally looked upon as acceptable.

Throughout “Barbie Doll,” Piercy’s diction further reveals just how important the preservation of the womanly ideal is to society and the lengths it will go to to protect it. In the very first line of the poem, Piercy refers to the girl as a “girlchild,” which reveals that what happens to her could happen to any young girl (Piercy 1). She goes on to say that the girl was “presented dolls that did pee-pee” (Piercy 2). By using the word “presented,” Piercy is saying that the dolls were not just given to her as mere gifts. These presumably innocent toys are plastic representations of the gender-specific role of motherhood, a position which is being bequeathed to the “girlchild.” Upon reaching puberty, Piercy says that the girlchild was “exhorted” to “play coy” and to “come on hearty” (Piercy 12-14). Not only were these exhortations demands; they were also contradictory since one cannot be “coy” and “hearty” at the same time. This, arguably, was a large factor in the girlchild’s death because she felt that she could not meet society’s unrealistic and contradictory expectations of a woman. Since she could not conform, she removed her “faulty” nose and legs and “offered” them up to society. By using the word “offered,” Piercy shows the reader that the girl is sacrificing her nose, legs, and whole being for the “greater good” of society. In people’s opinion, since she did not meet their standards for a girl, she did not deserve to live to become a flawed woman. Upon the

girlchild's death, Piercy says that there is "consummation at last" and that it is a "happy ending for all women" (Piercy 24-25). By using the word "consummation," she is suggesting that the girl has been consumed by society's need for her to be a living, or in this case dead, doll and that its plan for her is complete. This, in people's minds, is the fairy tale ending that all women should hope for. After all, the "girlchild" did reach society's epitome of beauty, and since good looks are more valuable than life itself, it seems that she could not have asked for more.

Both Anne Sexton and Marge Piercy wrote "Her Kind" and "Barbie Doll" during the 1960's, respectively. During this time, "roles began to expand...as more opportunities developed for women" (Semansky 39). However, despite the expansion of women's activity in society, in "Barbie Doll" and "Her Kind," Piercy and Sexton seem to be reflecting upon the past and future hardships that women had and would encounter. In "Her Kind," the nameless speaker dealt with societal isolation which mirrored that of the "witches" in past centuries. In spite of this, however, she felt no shame in being considered a modern-day witch by society; she saw this as a badge of honor because it distinguished her from all of the other cookie-cutter women whom society holds in such high regard. However, in Piercy's "Barbie Doll," the reverse is true. When the "girlchild" was faced with discrimination from those around her, she succumbed to society's pressure for perfection and committed suicide just to be considered beautiful and feminine. Despite all of the advancements women have achieved in the years since the 1960's, they are still pressured to meet a standard for beauty and behavior which society has created for them. Even as women inch ever closer to gender equality, it seems that they will never outgrow past ideologies which dictate how they should look and behave.

Works Cited

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Biographical Sketch

Rebecca Albright is a freshman Honors student and English major from Queen City, Texas. She takes particular interest in societal construction of gender roles and expectations.