

## To Examine Gender and Gender Roles in the Selected American Modern and Postmodern Plays

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of the study is to describe how gender was portrayed and how gender roles were depicted and defined in the selected works of Modern and Postmodern American plays. This study was based on the Symbolic Interaction Theory of gender that suggests that social roles are learned over time and are subject to constant reinforcement. The significance of this study was derived from the broad topic of gender. The plays in this study are as follows- written during the Postmodern period: *Fences*, *Uncommon Women and Others* and the plays written during the Modern period: *Trifles*, *Moon for the Misbegotten*. The study is an attempt to answer two Research Questions firstly to explore the types of gender roles and behaviors that the characters presented and secondly to examine has the time period or the sex of the playwright were factors in the presentations of gender. Gender behaviors were divided into four categories: Behavior Characteristics, Communication Patterns, Sources of Power, and Physical Appearance. Using narrative analysis techniques, the plays were analyzed for the specific traits in each category. The majority of the characters were assigned traditional gender roles and displayed traditional gender behavior traits. Based their gender roles and behavior in their roles, characters faced limitations that confined their actions and restricted their choices. Characters experienced consequences for their behaviors, and female characters received harsher punishments for deviant behaviors than male characters. Gender portrayal in Modern plays was more in keeping with traditional patterns than in Postmodern plays. Female playwrights presented more diverse roles for female characters and often explored gender as a major theme in their plays. Where applicable, race, in concert with gender, was an additional factor that governed characters' behaviors by further restricting behavior or possible actions.

**Keywords:** Gender Roles, Feminism, Modernism, Postmodernism, American Theatre.

## Introduction

Down through the ages, plays have often been interpreted as more than merely entertainment. Playwrights, through the act of composing plays, can write plays that mirror culture by reflecting a given culture's values, mores and lifestyles and are critiques in society. Playwrights can also create plays that reflect how they interpret their own culture; having been raised in a given time period, playwrights write as a product of a given set of societal rules. Yet the line, if it even exists, between strictly mirroring culture or producing work as a product of a culture is thin and blurred at best. According to Aristotle (c. 335 B. C.), "drama is the imitation of men in action". He asserted that the act of imitation was integral to man's learning, and man's capacity for selfintrospection was what separated him from all other animals. He stated that "the reason why men enjoyed seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves, and in saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he'" (cited in Dukore, 1974, pp. 34). Assuming that Aristotle's insistence on the importance of imitation was correct, playwrights create worlds that imitate life. They give their characters personalities and actions that are responses to the world that the playwrights create for the characters' existence.

## Gender Roles and Society

One striking characteristic of the 20th century was the women's movement, which brought women to the forefront in a variety of societal arenas. As women won the right to vote, achieved reproductive freedom through birth control and legalized abortion, and gained access to education and employment, Western culture was forced to examine its long held views about women and the roles they play in society. The study of gender and gender roles dominated much of the scholarship in sociology, anthropology, and psychology during the last half of the 20th century. The terms gender and sex are often used interchangeably, but these terms define different concepts and are not interchangeable. The following definitions are used throughout this study: the term sex refers to the biological, hormonal, and chromosomal differences that determine if a person is male or female (Lindsey, 1997). Gender refers to "meanings that societies and individuals ascribe to male and female categories," (Eagly, 1987, pp. 4) and the term gender roles defines prescribed behaviors that are deemed appropriate for women and men.

Gender roles, differing from sex roles which are physiological differences based on sexual genitalia, are social constructs, and they "contain self-concepts, psychological traits, ... [and] family, occupational, and political roles assigned dichotomously to members of each sex" As the study of gender roles became formalized, six predominant schools of thought emerged in an effort to explain why women and men occupy differing roles within a given culture. If plays are considered social models, then how female and male characters are presented suggests how society at large views the roles of women and men. Furthermore, the presentation of gender in plays can serve to reinforce or to call for a change in accepted gender behavior for women and men. Modernism, as a cultural and literary movement, began to develop as early as the late 1880s but traditionally runs from 1900 to approximately 1950,

with the first 25 years of the century characterized. As the 20th century progressed and society became more dependent upon technology as a way of life, changes in artistic expression and philosophic views called Modernism into question. Since the late 1950s, changes, reflected in new literary and artistic pieces and in philosophical ideas are often referred to as the "Contemporary" period, but for this study these changes were referred to as the period of Postmodernism.

### **PostModern Period**

- **Fences**

As outlined by the gender categories, the characters in *Fences* are defined by their roles in the family. Having been on his own since the age of 14, Troy is an independent and dominant male. He is aggressive with his friends and family and is the breadwinner for the family. Although Bono looks up to Troy as a natural leader, Troy's position as a leader is threatened when he takes his status too far and believes he has a right to have an affair. Rose, in keeping with her position as the wife, is responsible for the operations of the house including the cooking and the cleaning. None of the characters in the play take on roles outside of the traditional divisions. More than any other characters in this study, both Troy and Rose address the limitations and consequences for their gender roles. Troy is overwhelmed by his role as the provider and he is always worrying about how to have enough money to provide the home that Rose requires. By his own admission, he became so wrapped up in providing that he forgot about himself, and thus had an affair to ease his life and find a moment of peace and joy in living. Likewise, Rose put everything that she had into being a good wife for Troy. She let go of herself to be the kind of wife that Troy needed. She is rewarded for her efforts by his infidelity. For Troy the consequences for his actions are severe; he loses his wife, his son, and his best friend. Rose eventually finds peace with Troy and a deeper understanding of herself. *Fences* does present gender following certain patterns and those patterns are opposites. For the next generation of Maxsons, Cory and Raynell will be imbued with the strength and experience of their parents, and hopefully some of their mother's wisdom as well.

- **Uncommon Women and Others**

The gender roles for the characters in *Uncommon Women and Others* are a blend of traditional and non-traditional roles. Kate and Muffet are working women who have not married at this time. Samantha is married and is expecting a baby. Rita, although she is married, is still focused on being a writer. Holly is still a student and does not work and is unmarried. Of those who do not attend the reunion, Carter is working, and Leilah is married. Of those who have chosen to work, all are in traditionally masculine fields—law, insurance, and filmmaking. By the time of the reunion, all the women have made clear choices about their futures, except for Holly and possibly Rita. For Samantha, her choice to marry and be a housewife causes her to feel inferior in comparison to her classmates because she did not decide to work, but all of her friends admire her for her choice. Yet each character, to one degree or another and regardless of her decisions, has had to come to terms with the nature of society in the 1970s after the second wave of feminism. As Wasserstein pointed out in a 1987 interview, *Uncommon Women and Others* "was a play about Holly and Rita, which examines the fact that the Women's Movement has had answers for the Kates of the world (she

becomes a lawyer), or the Samanthas (she gets married). But for the creative people, a movement can't provide answers." The one character who was truly limited by gender expectations was Mrs. Plumm. She definitely had interests that did not fall in line with acceptable female behavior, but she succumbed to the pressure and married because that was what was expected of her. She spent her entire professional career teaching women how to use their charm and personality in order to develop signs of good breeding and civility. These skills only cultivate dependency and are not valued in a work setting. In truth, she is propelling the women into a situation that was similar to hers. Although there are no male characters in the play, the male view does come into the play and it does impact the characters. They have male teachers and the voice of Mount Holyoke is male. Even with no direct characters and only an indirect presentation in the play, the male and female gender characteristics are developed along specific patterns and those patterns are polar opposites in nature.

### **Modern Period**

- **Trifles**

As detailed by the gender behavior categories, the male and female characters in *Trifles* follow traditional and prescribed gender roles and behaviors. The men are the leaders, and they control the situation. Their work in the public sphere is assumed to be valuable and is never belittled during the play. The women are domestic caretakers who are responsible for household chores such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, and canning fruit. Their work is trivialized in several passages. Even the title of the play connotes the diminished status of their world because as Hale comments in reference to Minnie worrying about her preserves, "Well, women are used to worrying over trifles". The characters are not taking on roles outside of their traditional gender assignments; the men do not clean up the mess in the kitchen, and the women do not advise the men in legal matters concerning the case at hand. The only exception is the covert act by the women to hide important evidence from the men. This act is an act of defiance that requires strength, courage, and independent thinking on their parts. All the characters are in a position where their gender roles determine and limit their situations. As a consequence, the men, looking from a logical point of view, dismiss the very room and its activities that could have won them a conviction. For Minnie, the consequences are the greatest; she had no outlet for her frustrations and she suffered in silence in her marriage and now in a jail cell. Glaspell's work does present the gender traits of the characters by using patterns, and those patterns are opposites. Both the men and the women, from the beginning of the play until the end, are presented as two literally separate worlds. The gender patterns are established and maintained through the dialogue and the actions of the characters.

- **Moon for the Misbegotten**

The gender roles for the characters in *Moon for the Misbegotten* are traditional in one regard, yet the characters' behaviors often run contrary to their assigned roles. Hogan is the breadwinner for the family, and he is aggressive but often in an indirect way. By his own admission, he is dependent on Josie's company and her work around the farm. Josie assumes the role of mother and wife within the household, but she is far from dependent or passive. She is just as comfortable working outside on the farm as she is working inside the house.

Josie appears not to be limited by her gender and its roles because she takes on non-traditional roles and behaviors depending on the situation. Even though she may be content with her situation, she experiences consequences for and is conflicted by her behavior. For all of her bravado and brash ways, Josie, at times, wants to be "like" other women. She wants to marry but will not admit it or take the steps to make that happen. She is proud of her strength and physical prowess, but she can be self-deprecating about her size as well. For as much as she would like to be like a refined woman, she is unhappy when she must be coy and sweet. Josie assumed the maternal role within her family, but she did not ask Jim to turn her into his mother. Jim, by turning her into a mother, used Josie; he used her because she is a different kind of woman than his prostitutes. He used her to make his life better without considering her feelings. Although he is grateful to Josie for her compassion, he did not take into account the impact of his choice to convert her into his savior for one night. The portrayal of gender in *Moon for the Misbegotten* is presented in strict patterns and the patterns are polar opposites, but in the case of Josie, although she acknowledges differences in male and female behavior, she does not always follow the patterns. She is comfortable in not acting like a traditional woman. Hogan, and to a greater extent Josie, exhibit traits and take on roles that are generally associated with the opposite gender. Josie is the most complex character, and she exhibits the most blending of feminine and masculine traits. Yet in the final analysis, Josie gets trapped in a maternal role and is rewarded for her sacrifice by remaining alone for the rest of her life.

## Discussion

All of the gender trait categories used for defining traditional male and female behavior were evident in most of the plays in this study. Gender behavior was defined based on a variety of descriptors derived from research in the social sciences, and then those attributes were applied to pieces of literature. However, looking at the plays as a whole unit, regardless of setting, produced some interesting conclusions as well. There were no males who took on what would be defined as non-traditional roles. None of the males who were unmarried or not in a breadwinner capacity were criticized for their status. The adherence to female/domestic and male/breadwinner created situations where the characters were limited in the actions that they took, and their actions were determined by their roles. These limitations, and the characters' abilities to recognize limitations, were spread along a continuum.

The characters' future actions and places in society were determined by their sex. They accepted their situations but there was a sadness about the characters, and this sadness separated them from the happiness brought on by blind acceptance. They did not attribute their final situations to how they were defined as men and women in a family setting, but as the information in the analysis of these plays suggested, the characters were caught in a gender bind. In *Trifles* and *Fences*, the characters recognized that there were limitations to being held in rigid roles, but the limitations were explored only in the home setting. The sex of the characters placed them in situations they dealt with in the only manners that they could, and they were stuck in their situations. The degree to how articulate the characters were about their situations varies from play to play.

In *Uncommon Women and Others* the characters recognized their limitations within their situations; however, in this last group the notion of the limitations expanded from the intimate and the personal to a larger social concept. In the plays that addressed race as a



limiting factor for the characters' situations, race and gender were equally addressed. As an outgrowth of the limitations, consequences developed for the characters. The consequences for the characters varied from play to play and were individual responses or evaluations of the circumstances.

In *Trifles*, Minnie's situation led her to commit murder for which the consequences were grave, but because Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters accepted some responsibility for Minnie's quandary, and by sympathizing with her situation, they concluded their actions would lessen her consequences in a legal sense. Because the characters willingly accepted their positions. In *Moon for the Misbegotten*, because Jim did accept Josie as anything but a maternal entity, she was left unfulfilled as a person. She stoically accepted her future. *Uncommon Women and Others* presented a variety of women in varying circumstances, the consequences for the characters differed. Mrs. Plumm was denied the career she wanted and married a man she did not love because of the expectations of her family. Samantha, although claiming that she is happy in her marriage, perpetually felt intimidated by others, while Rita and Holly were both trapped in states of indecision. Kate sacrificed personal relationships because she could not find a balance between her career and her private life.

## Conclusion

To conclude the female characters suffered more and deeper consequences than the male characters. Almost all the women did not get something that they want, or their efforts to change their situations resulted in physical harm, emotional instability, or death. Troy, in *Fences*, was the only male character to lose his status as a result of his situations. Troy brought on his own fates, and he is responsible for his ultimate situation. However, he never understood nor admitted fault. Turning from the specific analyses of the plays to broader concepts, most researchers agreed gender was a concept viewed in terms of opposite characteristics—a trait identified as male will have its opposite identified for the female. All the plays in this study depicted gender in terms of concrete and opposite patterns. For example, the female characters in *Trifles* were not allowed to participate in the murder investigation because of the perceived notion that suggested that a woman lacks interest and understanding of things beyond the domestic; Josie, in *Moon for the Misbegotten*, was reminded by her father that should curb her "rough" and manly tongue if she was get to a husband.

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