

Alliance University

What is the significance of gender roles in “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid?

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“The Girl” is a short story written by Jamaica Kincaid. This short story is just one sentence that contains rules and regulations for the daughter to follow. The mother is sharing tasks and responsibilities that she must complete in order to become a woman that is desirable to a man. The mother thinks that by doing so the girl will have a good life. However, the opposite is true. Gender roles have the possibility to psychologically impact the individual and dampen their possibility for success.

To start with a quote from “Girl”, “this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man...” Gender roles can be helpful in some scenarios, but in most cases cause issues for young girls and may lead to them losing their voice. In this story, although it was short, these gender roles led to adverse psychological effects on her. This story revolves around the rules that a mother is giving to her child; however, the mother's biggest fear is that her daughter will turn into a slut. These rules are the problematic outcomes of gender roles and how they can strip girls of their identities. Young girls' identities can become being a good wife and keeping a clean house before they are allowed to live their lives for themselves.

In a piece on the “Girl” by Bailey Carol, she states, ““Girl”'s emphasis on performative acts reiterates the inextricable link between gender and performance” (Bailey). This is undoubtedly true. The mother in this story is telling the girl how to be a woman, however, all of these womanly duties are tasks and expectations, mostly to do with men. The first few lines of this story clearly show this idea, “Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk barehead in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil...” All of these tasks are to be done in order to be a woman. All of these tasks are inherently linking gender with performance. If the girl in this story performs well enough, and does what she is expected to do, she will be

able to be seen as a useful woman and be desirable in the eyes of a man This is what her mother wants from her

Carol goes on to say that this text, “ illustrate how the tensions and contradictions surrounding the constructions of womanhood, are engaged through performative acts, some of which ostensibly conform to prescribed gender roles but that actually undermine them” These gender roles are also taking away from the potential of women All of the tasks that the mother shared with her daughter were service oriented These tasks had nothing to do with the intelligence or the ability of this girl This was undermining the girl’s possibilities The girl in the story coils has been an extremely intelligent girl, capable of much more than mundane female tasks, however, to obtain a good life and a good husband, performance tasks were necessary to show your usefulness to a man In the short story by Kincaid the mother shares with her daughter that in order to be a woman she needed to know the skills to succeed “ This is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming...” All of these things the mother is telling her to do are performance based and will help her become a woman according to the mother

Gender roles can do more than just undermine a girl’s abilities, they can increase aggression In a journal entitled, “Role Stress and Aggression among Young Adults: The Moderating Influences of Gender and Adolescent Aggression” by Ruth X Liu and Howard B Kaplan explores the idea that gender roles can lead to aggression As a society, when we force individuals into roles that are in direct conflict with how they view themselves, they develop high levels of aggression This journal points to the fact that women are expected to be caring, nurturing and kind, they are expected to be mothers and house-wives, to care for men and their

children When these roles are not met, it is likely that these individuals will be seen as “less feminine and inappropriate by men and women alike” (Liu and Kaplan) When these feelings come up, this can lead to feelings of aggression as their perceived self does not match their true self

This journal agrees and supports the fact that the mother in “The Girl” has the ability to lead to adverse effects on the girl By the mother forcing the daughter into these perceived roles, it can lead to aggression as she is not allowed to be her true self The mother’s main goal is to keep her daughter from becoming a slut She wants her daughter to be desirable and to make a good life for herself As stated in the journal, acting in a way not in line with these journal roles can lead to an individual being seen as less feminine and inappropriate The mother was trying to keep this from happening in order to help her daughter in her own way

In another essay written on gender roles in “The Girl’ by Jamaica Kincaid the author states that the mother expects a great deal from her daughter and wanted to make her daughter who she wanted her to be The daughter in this story was forced to listen as the mother spoke at length about what was expected of her The mother wanted her to be the perfect housewife and doing these tasks was the only way this was going to happen In the story, the mother stated, “this is how you smile to someone you don't like very much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely...” In this excerpt, the mother is even dictating the perfect way that she should smile Every aspect of the girl's life was created to make her a desirable woman for a man The way she ate, the way she dressed, even the way she smiled had to convey that she was the perfect woman and was capable of providing for the man

In a textbook entitled, "Human Behavior in the Social Environment" by Jose B. Ashford, the gender roles are explored in the dimension of adolescence. This textbook explored the guidelines working with these clients. Gilligan and Brown led a study on the effects of this phenomenon. Gilligan and Brown found that girls at this age are desperate for attention, love and popularity. When they are put under the restrictive gender roles, they are not able to truly be themselves. "The girls' experiences are documented with vivid anecdotes as they describe their losses and their inability to express themselves." (Ashford et al.) As girls this age are expected to look and act a certain way, they are forced to be something they are not. They lose themselves, they lose their identity. Erik Erikson describes that in this stage, adolescents are struggling with identity versus identity confusion. If all of these expectations are being forced upon them, their identity will be at risk. Erikson also said that this identity is coming from their peers primarily at this point. In terms of gender roles, their friends are now putting them in these roles as well. (Ashford et al.)

In this textbook, Brown and Gilligan, "have encouraged practitioners to help strengthen healthy resistance and courage in girls. The major lesson is the importance of helping girls discover their voices." (Ashford et al.) When working with clients as indicated by this book, it is important for them to have courage and a healthy resistance. This was absent in "The Girl". This story was a continuous sentence from a mother to her daughter. In this story there was no resistance, there was no courage in that girl to speak up even when she was being accused of being a slut. Even the last line of the short story indicates that after all of this instruction the mother is still disappointed with what the daughter has become.

Gender roles have the ability to create identity issues in an individual as well as dampen the potential they have in life. By creating a persona that is in direct opposition with who the

individual sees themselves as can lead to identity confusion as well as aggression. The story “The Girl” showed that gender roles are task oriented and can have a negative impact on the individual.

Works Cited

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