The Protagonist In Alice Munro’s Story Boys And Girls

The protagonist in Alice Munro’s story “Boys and Girls” is a young girl who grows up during the 1980s. She grows up with a brother named Laird and her two parents. Throughout the story, the protagonist experiences the many struggles of being a girl during this time. In the story, Alice Munro emphasizes through characterization and conflicts in the plot, the negative impact of gender role limitations placed by society. The main conflicts in the story consist of the expectations between a girl and boy, but also the protagonist’s struggle to find her own identity.

For starters, the protagonist has a younger brother Laird, to who the author gives a name, yet the narrator does not. According to Marlene Goldman, “a narrative which highlights the almost invisible societal forces which shape children, in this case, the narrator and her brother Laird, into gendered adults.” This outside source is significant because it reveals how males are viewed as superior to women at this time. Through the symbolism of not giving the daughter a name, undermines her and labels her as unimportant. Also, according to Webster's Dictionary, another meaning for Laird is “Lord”, which plays a big role in how the parents view which child is more valuable. During the time of this story, men and women weren’t considered equal. Therefore, comparing a man to a woman was almost the same as comparing a lord to an average human during this decade. With that said, this will be how the world portrays the two genders for years to come.

Another aspect the plot examines is how the younger generations will have the same opinions on the roles of genders in society. According to Reingard Nischik, “Children, as the text clearly illustrates, do not evolve naturally into gendered adults. Instead, the construction of gendered subjects constitutes a form of production.” This quote emphasizes the natural innocence of a child, and how they must learn to hate or despise specific things. Therefore, growing up the protagonist views herself as more of a “tomboy”, and accepts the fact she would rather be outside in the yard with her father. She thinks nothing of it until she notices this constant sense of judgment from her mother, as she is always being told the ladies belong in the house and to help her with laundry. With that said, this portrays how because adults view the limitations of women's role in society, they will pass the same perspective down to their kids. It is shown kids are taught from a young age that boys are the more dominant gender, and it should be that way. This is why little kids make a big deal when a girl beats a boy in P.E or in a game, and this impacts their way of thinking when they get older. Analyzing this makes the reader curious as to if this way of thinking will ever end, and to wonder if women will be more respected in the real world.

The protagonist overhears the mom telling her husband, “Wait till Laird gets a little bigger, then you’ll have real help.” Hearing this crushes the protagonist's feelings, because she now does not feel comfortable with herself, and is overwhelmed with her mother’s judgment. The mother's character is symbolic of the judgment of society. In other words, during this time, women are supposed to be very lady-like and proper, so whenever women would see a girl outside doing men's work they would scold that girl. According to Patricia Adler, “learning and evaluating roles and values for their future adult behaviors, of which their “gender regimes” are important”. Furthermore, this is why the mother judges the daughter because she believes the men will handle the outside work, so both she and her daughter should take care of the house. This

constant judgment of the mother caused the protagonist to lose confidence in herself, which symbolizes women feeling too powerless in society to stand up and make a change.

Not only does the story reflect the limitations of a woman, but indirectly ties into the protagonist which is a girl, to the mindset of men in society. In other words, the protagonist has the same opinions and way of thinking as males in this era. For instance, the protagonist states, “It seemed to me that work in the house was endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing; work done out of doors, and in my father’s service, was ritualistically important.” This quote expressed the thoughts of almost all men during this time in society because men's outdoor work was viewed as more important. Although the women worked all day in the house and made sure the household was running smoothly, this way of life wasn’t respected by men. According to Stefani Albanesi, “For example, these norms may dictate dress or acceptable occupations. Social conventions may also set down different roles within the family or establish a hierarchy with respect to the sharing of work, resources and decision-making in the household and more broadly.” This is important because it reveals men were allowed to have higher-paying jobs, work outside, and have the role of providing for the family. This is why society portrays both men and their occupation/outside work as activities women could never succeed in. At the end of the story, Laird starts to realize his gender superiority. As he explains to his parents the reason for the blood on his hands, he reveals it was from Flora. The mother asks Laird to scrub the blood off, but Laird only washed his hands after his father told him to do so. Furthermore, it suggests how the mother is viewed as nothing, while the father is perceived as the authority figure. The protagonist also belittles the mother, which is revealed when she states, “She was kinder than my father and more easily fooled, but you could not depend on her”. This textual quote emphasizes how it takes place at a time where there is no equality between the two genders. Men in this society are dominant, and both Laird and the protagonist suggest the roles of males and females in that society.

Also, not only are women not appreciated during this time but are working countless hours for no pay. For instance, the narrator states, “My mother was too tired and preoccupied to talk to me, she had no heart to tell about the Normal School Graduation Dance; sweat trickled over her face and she was always counting under her breath, pointing at jars, dumping cups of sugar. It seemed to me that work in the house was endless, dreary, and peculiarly depressing.” In regards to the textual evidence, it's a known fact slave worked from the moment they woke up until they were allowed to go to bed. And from the narrator's depiction of her mother's regularly busy schedule, this is what it’s comparable to. Furthermore, sweating over the stove, constantly cooking, cleaning, scrubbing, etc can be hard on both the body and the mind. This constant sense of working is why the mother does not have time to build a relationship with her daughter. Being portrayed as an object that was only placed on Earth to serve men, has impacted the protagonist to want to be more like a boy. Furthermore, working countless hours in the house without any type of reward or payment would be considered absurd today. But because it wasn’t till later women started speaking up, they would be trapped in this set way of life society has trapped women into.

The daughter's conflict of finding who she is and what she wants to become in the world is represented through her encounter with Flora. Flora is one of the fathers of many horses they have, and he is supposed to kill it. Although the horse managed to scramble away, Flora is making a run for it but has to pass a fence that the protagonist is standing by. When the horse gets closer the daughter opens it, allowing Flora to break free. This out-of-character action portrays how she views Flora as more than a horse, but a resemblance of an internal conflict

within the protagonist. The protagonist’s wanting Flora to escape is a sign of hope, that maybe one day she can feel free from society's expectations. In other words, the reader can come to the conclusion how the girl dreams of living in a society where women have the power to pursue their dreams and live a lifestyle of choice. Although her sense of realism tells her to not get her hopes up because there will be no escaping her fate of being a housewife in this time of society unless there is change.

This story provides a plot and characterization that provides a sense of the need for change. The ideals of women being subordinate to men impact the overall meaning for women to rise up and make a difference. According to Leila Taylor, “In July of 1948 marked the nominal beginning of the movement which in the nineteenth century was named “Women's Rights”. For us that term has become commonly interchangeable with “suffrage” which describes a seventy-year-old campaign for women to gain civil and political power.” This statement from Leila signifies how it was not much before “Boys and Girls” were written, that a political movement began. This is important because knowing this information provides a much deeper and more meaningful message in the story. The hardships and gender limitations of both men and women were to be written as a short story of the past. In other words, to signify change, and the time period that men had all the respect and provided for the family was over. This would lead to a new era in a society where women would have high-paying occupations, have political power, and have the overall respect from the world that no man can control them anymore. These ideals are still being pushed further and further to this day. For instance, in 2020 there are women making more money than men, holding positions in political positions, and making a difference in the world. Another impact of gender limitations that no one really focuses on is the males' acceptance in letting women be more successful. Today, it is acceptable for women to work a high-paying job and the men are stay-at-home dads. Consequently, the acceptance of women doing more has influenced an acceptance of men doing less, and for this reason, throws the ideals of gender roles out of the window.

In conclusion, the protagonist is a girl in search of her own freedom and identity. She wishes to work outside with her father, but the traditional gender limitations force her to grow up and become a girl who works inside the house, instead of becoming the free and independent woman of her dreams. Throughout the story, the protagonist strives to break these stereotypes, and prove to herself and her parents that a girl can be just as successful as a boy. All in all, 'Boys and Girls' by Alice Munro is about gender limitations in society. At the time of the story, it was normal to think that men are more powerful, but through the impact of the story's ideas on limitations, society has changed as a whole where any gender can respectfully pursue their dreams.