The gender conflict in Munro’s “Boys and Girls”

The protagonist in Alice Munro’s short-story “Boys and Girls” is a girl who grows up in the mid-20th century in Canada. She lives with her family, which consists of her mother, father, and little brother Laird, on their farm, and her life is characterized by different gender roles. Munro does not give the girl a name, and by not doing so the protagonist is seen as someone without an identity and any power of her own. The fact that the girl’s little brother has got a name indicates that he, simply because he is a boy, is more important, and that he is the one with power. The protagonist of the story is torn between the “girl” life with her mother inside the house in the kitchen, and the “boy” life with her father outside the house helping out with the farm. The main conflicts in the story are the different expectations between a girl and a boy, but also the protagonist’s feelings towards, and struggle to find, an identity of her own.

The girl’s belief that she can be of great value to her father in his work are destroyed when she realises society’s view and expectations of her. The protagonist wants to work with her father out on their fox farm and likes the attention that her father gives her while working. This is shown when a salesman comes to the farm during the time that the protagonist is outside helping her father rake the fresh cut grass; her father introduces her as his “new hired man”¹ to which the salesman answers “I thought it was only a girl.”² If it had been her brother, Laird, instead of the girl then the situation would probably have been a lot different. This is because he will eventually take the girl’s place as the father’s helper and then the father’s place as the fox farmer. This is something that the protagonist’s mother says to the father when she wants the girl to come inside to do the chores of a girl: “Wait till Laird gets a little bigger, then you’ll have a real help”³.

The girl in the story tries hard to find her own identity, and she does not want to be just a traditional girl. This is quite evident when the girl talks about her mother and the work that the mother performs. The protagonist thinks of her mother as a person that cannot be trusted, she thinks that her mother is plotting “[...] to get me to stay in the house more, although she knew that I hated it.”⁴ The protagonist does not find her mother’s work as important as her father’s; the inside work she thinks of as “endless, dreary, and peculiarly depressing”⁵ while the outside work with her father was “ritualistically important”⁶. The protagonist does not want to be just a

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¹ Munro, Alice. (2013) p.140
² Munro, Alice. (2013) p.140
³ Munro, Alice. (2013) p.141
⁴ Munro, Alice. (2013) p.141
⁵ Munro, Alice. (2013) p.141
⁶ Munro, Alice. (2013) p.141
girl inside the house, she want to become someone who makes a difference. This is very evident when the protagonist talks about the stories that she tells herself every night before she falls asleep. The stories are filled with heroic moments and the central person in these stories is the girl herself. This heroic woman is what the protagonist wants to become in the future, but it is the opposite of the stereotypical girl that her family insists her to become.

The protagonist’s struggle to find her own identity is also expressed with her identification with a horse called Flora. Flora is to be killed as fox meat, but since the horse is powerful, rebellious, and strong she manages to run away from the father. The protagonist is the only one close enough to the gate, but when the female horse comes galloping towards her she do not close it, but instead opens it as wide as she can. The girl says, “I did not make any decision to do this, it was just what I did” which indicates that she identifies with the horse. The girl wants to run free and do whatever she feels like she does not want to be held back by the chains of society. Even though the girl opens the gate she knows that her father will catch the horse:

They would catch up with her in the truck. Or if they did not catch her this morning somebody would see her and telephone us this afternoon or tomorrow. There was no wild country for her to run to, only farms.

The protagonist’s feelings toward the horse’s escape are somewhat the same as her feelings toward herself. She knows that there will be no wild country for her just as there will be no freedom for Flora. She knows that “A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become.”

In conclusion, the protagonist in Munro’s “Boys and Girls” is a girl in search of her own identity. She wishes to work outside with her father, but tradition and expectations force her to grow up and become a girl who works inside the house together with her mother instead of becoming the free and independent woman of her dreams. Throughout the story the girl confronting the expectations and boundaries that are set up for her. She tries to fight them and finds some encouragement and inspiration in the horse, Flora, but in the end she knows that the expectations are too many, and she finally accepts them.

Reference list


7 Munro, Alice. (2013) p.146
8 Munro, Alice. (2013) p.146
9 Munro, Alice. (2013) p.142