

gender roles

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Gender roles in *I sit and sew*

In this poem, women are presented as delicate and decorative beings who may not be able to perform the hard tasks that men do. In essence, *I Sit and Sew*, has been metaphorically used to highlight some of the traditionally ordained roles for women. The narrator in this piece indicates her strong desire to break off from her confines and consequently engage in other presumably beneficial activities just like the men do. Notably, she is tired of what society has forced her to do, sewing. Even though from every indication, the narrator shows her strong desire to know something of real life, she is unable to do so because she must sit down sew because believably, this is what society expects of her as a woman. *But—I must sit and sew* (Dunbar-Nelson, stanza 1)

At the beginning of the poem, the author registers her frustration with the useless and meek roles that women had been assigned in society during that time. In this society, there seems to be a complex intersection of gender roles. Women are expected to stick to specified societal roles while others are observably left for the men to do. Nelson, in this poem, has ideally contrasted the roles of men with that of women. The narrator repeatedly uses the phrase, *I sit and sew* to particularly emphasize the daunting and arguably difficult situation the women were placed in. The narrator first comments on her role as a woman and the limited and restrictive nature of her social role as a domestic worker, contrasting to men of the same society.

In an attempt to show power and might by the men during this period, women believed that they were only allowed to engage in less important tasks, possibly just to pass the time; *I sit and sew—a useless task, it seems* (Stanza one). In addition, they believed that by virtue of being women, men thought they could not be as productive as them. Although written during the period of the first world war, in this piece, Nelson has exhaustively highlighted that women, although confined to specific roles, were willing to engage in something bigger than performing boring and less productive housework (Single, pg 139). There exists an intense binary between male and female roles in this society. According to the narrator, women in this society are only allowed to perform domestic tasks, which have since become monotonous, and consequently tiring.

The situation during this time was observably hard and challenging for the women. The author has used imagery in this line, holocaust of hell and sodden mud and rain. While the narrator indicates her willingness to join the soldiers in the field of battle to offer either comfort and active helping hands in the war, men see this as only imaginary illusions and may never happen because women are assigned explicitly to domestic roles. The narrator as a woman also petitions for a review of the social conventions that have forcefully assigned specified roles considered lesser roles to women. She seeks the intervention of God to break the social and cultural bonds that confine the women to specific domestic roles. The narrator's protest against the confinement is primarily necessitated by her desire to engage in duty in the outside world rather than only performing this mundane domestic task—*my soul in pity flings, appealing cries, yearning only to go* (Stanza two).

Based on the social and cultural bonds, the narrator indicates that men freely roam the battlefields, unlike them. Besides fighting in the war, they are able to witness terrible things like the pouring fire and the true destruction. Seemingly, there is no chance of this happening because all women are allowed to sit down and sew; as boring as it could be, they can never break away from this. Despite feeling the intense need to help those wasting on the battlefield, the narrator accepts her fate as a woman and refrains from the thoughts of ever doing this because she must sit and sew. Using this line, the narrator attempts to compel the audience to continuously return to the reality that under no circumstances would she ever leave that unless the societal norms change.

Even though the narrator constantly dreams of the open battlefields and the land far away, the truth is that she is immobilized and constrained, and these thoughts are contradictory to the domestic sphere where she is confined. In this poem, sewing and war have been used to connote the social iconography of female and male gender roles. Nelson synonymously identifies the war with the male gender, and sewing becomes synonymous with the women. The female narrator has taken a better part of the poem highlighting her inability to move beyond her gendered role despite her willingness to go and help those seeking her help.

Works cited

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