

Dear Society, Lighten Up

First came man, then came woman. This is how it has been and after a while, that simple order of creation became the order of power as well. No matter the era, the values placed on women and their level of subjectivity underneath men is what leads to their success or demise. Women are forced to bend to society's will to simply be accepted and even then they have to undergo objectification. Despite being intelligent, despite being beautiful, women face limits and criticisms most men never have to worry about. *Taming of the Shrew*, *The Natural*, and *Brave New World* include female characters influenced by society's expectations to point out that no matter the interaction with society, a woman is influenced by society always. Despite the time difference, the women within these works undergo similar experiences to women today and are a critique into how society needs to lighten up because a majority of women are subject to abuse from outside sources that are a detriment to a woman's wellbeing.

Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* includes two major female leads within its play, both of which must deal with society's ideals. Of these, only one seems to defy the expectations placed upon her. Kate is renown as a shrew within Padua, but this is not because of her appearance; on the contrary, it is admitted that she is attractive. Hortensio even admits that if she "...were of gentler, milder mold" (Shakespeare 1.1.60) men would want her hand in marriage. Instead it is the fact that Kate resists the characteristics that society wants her to have that deem her the title of 'Shrew.' She is not submissive, she is not timid, and she is not soft-witted. It is her temper, free will, and intelligence that led to Padua's unwillingness to accept her. And this 'reputation' has an effect on her: she is deprived of affection for the way she chooses to be and, even if not aware of it, it causes her anxiety. Psychologist Sigmund Freud would claim that this

would be the true reason Kate mistreats her sister (Shakespeare, 2.1.1-22); violence toward her sister is her way of displacing or lashing out on others as a way to deal with her own deep-rooted emotions. Along with the case of displacement, Kate's own self-concept is damaged; she even believes that "[Bianca] is [her father's] treasure, she must have a husband/[and Kate] must dance barefoot on her wedding day" (Shakespeare 2.1.32-3). Kate sees herself as second best because that is what society has told her her whole life, that rather than being the treasure of her own wedding she will be the measly entertainment instead. Her own self-perception is what, in turn, leads to her self-deception. Once Petruchio enters the scene, he and Kate exchange intellectual insults that no other woman would have the capacity to think of, let alone utter. When Petruchio sneaks his proposal on her and sets a date for their marriage without her consent, Kate opposes at first and criticizes her father for allowing such a thing, "You have showed a tender fatherly regard/To wish me wed to one half lunatic" (Shakespeare 2.1.279-80). But moments later she is strangely quiet. Kate is intelligent enough to know what follows marriage: full devotion to a husband and compliance to his bidding. Kate's silence, and in a sense, submission, hints that her self-image is so weak and that she is so tired of society's treatment towards her, that she will accept something truly a threat to her very nature which is presented when Kate prides herself in her stinging remarks (and personality) and Petruchio replies with "My remedy is then to pluck it out" (Shakespeare 2.1.211).

After her marriage, Kate undergoes, in its rawest forms, mental and physical torture. Petruchio deprives Kate of sleep and food to essentially tame her, and he disguises his true intentions as concern. "...She eat no meat today, nor none shall eat/Last night she slept not, nor tonight she shall not/...That is all done in reverent care for her" (Shakespeare 4.1.191-8). Despite

his cruel treatment, it is questionable if Kate has really been tamed. Kate sometimes finds ways to circumvent Petruchio's wishes and advances; she agrees to kiss Petruchio, a sacrifice she is willing to make in order to stay in Padua instead of returning to her husband's estate where she would undergo further abuse (Shakespeare 5.1.141-151). These instances hint that Kate's strong will and intelligence are indestructible even after what she has gone through in her marriage. But that leaves the question: if Kate is so intelligent why does she go through such difficult instances of abuse? Kate allows for a little give and take with her wishes and needs for the same reason she married Petruchio: so that society would stop criticizing her and in turn accept her. Kate submitted to the one thing society wanted of her and in return was commended for it, something she never experienced before. Kate also received the affection of Petruchio with the case that she must satisfy his need of power every once in a while. Although she is finally welcomed into society, Kate sacrificed part of her free will as well as the privilege of enunciating the more than trivial thoughts that crossed her mind, all of which is something men did not have to worry about at the time.

While Kate had to sacrifice a part of herself, Bianca never suffered to the same extent because she was deemed a beautiful maiden deserving of love. However, at the ending of the play, Kate is the one that fits society's ideals, not Bianca, who disobeyed her husband near the closing of *Taming of the Shrew* (5.2.76-81). Kate was denied the right to be an individual, while Bianca was not, due to the fact that her mentality was not affected by the rejection of society. Carl Rogers, a humanistic psychologist, believed everyone is born innately good. But to *stay* 'good' one needs an environment filled with empathy, genuineness, and acceptance. And from the surface level, Bianca was raised in that ideal environment; her father loved her and society

approved of her. But if one were to look at Bianca's true desires, her environment was everything but ideal. Bianca's interactions within *Taming of the Shrew* always concerned men, flirtation, desire, all of which point to her embracing and enjoying her sexuality and what comes with it. When Lucentio, in disguise, professed his love for Bianca, she did not scream and run to her father for protection as any other innocent daughter would, instead she replied to him with "...I know you not/...I trust you not/...despair not," (Shakespeare 3.1.41-3). Any other girl of 'pure' virtue would deny Lucentio, but not Bianca. Surprisingly, she even bolstered his hopes for a future with her. Bianca knew that if she were to flaunt her true self, if she were to go around administering (possibly sexual) relations with Lucentio or any man, or if she were to vocalize the crude humor that passed through her head (as seen near the end of the play), then society would denounce her as something worse than a shrew: a whore. This fear led Bianca to wait until marriage to reveal her true self, leaving only her sister as the one who knew her true identity. Kate freely taunted Bianca often with jeers such as "Is it for [Gremio] you envy me so?" (Shakespeare 2.1.18). She jokes that Kate is only so fit to have the affection of an old man and stealthily points out Kate's ripe age. Kate's intelligence also shines through in this scenario as she can freely unmask her cruel thoughts onto Bianca because if Kate were to sell her out, society would simply think Kate was lying out of jealousy. Kate lets loose once married, especially when she speaks out amongst the men (Shakespeare 5.2.40-1) during her wedding banquet. Kate, too, is unafraid to be her true self because once married, society could not do unto her what it had done to Bianca. It could not tear her down because technically, a man, Lucentio, still had the power over her; to criticize Bianca was to criticize Lucentio which society would not dare to do, and thus Bianca had really played society at its own game. Bianca did

succeed in some aspects, but it cannot be overlooked that she had hidden her true self for years on end under her father and that even with Lucentio's name to protect her, she would still face criticisms behind her back and abuse to her face.

Society's tendency to cast out women outlasted Shakespeare's time. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* has many characters that face exclusion. One of them is Linda, the mother of our protagonist. Linda faces a rare case of exclusion due to the fact that she suffered it twice, once from the Native American tribes and again, in the New World. In one case, Linda simply acts as conditioned and is immediately shunned due to committing deeds seen as vile within the Native American society. This led to Linda seeking comfort in alcoholism. Although unaware of the consequences that came with alcohol abuse (besides a hangover) she chose to live in a constant high rather than pushing through both difficult and memorable days. Linda is nudged into alcohol addiction because she failed in both understanding and submitting to the will of the Native American society, she continuously slept with men even after the wives within the tribe came to beat her (Huxley 126). If the Native American society had accepted her despite her opposing morals, she would have never dived into a world of drunkenness because there would have been no need for it at all. After being rescued from the Native Reservation, Linda is welcomed into her home society, the New World. Even within the society she was born in, however, she is considered a creature of disgust for she no longer possessed physical beauty—something the New World society valued greatly. Linda is already aware of her position and chooses to turn to soma, back to her constant high, her sanctuary from society's criticisms. There is a small instance that hints at Linda's yearning to be accepted by society. Once she sets

her eyes upon Tomakin, her ex-lover, she searches for the affection she once received from him, and when she is denied such hope is when she truly understands that she belongs nowhere.

Although Linda was removed from the dystopian society, the effects of her need to fit in never truly left her. Linda was given the chance to abandon her society's values once she gave birth to John. She had the chance to experience a relationship that overlooked sexual relations, and instead focus on a platonic long lasting one. But Linda was so wrapped up in being a part of society she failed to create such a relationship, "...she pushed him away hard. His head banged against the wall. She shouted; and then, suddenly, she began to slap him. Slap, slap..." (Huxley 127). The impact of society, and her need to please it was ingrained within her and thus led to her downfall as well as her failure as a mother, for instead of seeing a child of her own she saw a walking reminder of all she had lost.

The need to fit into society and its physical and mental toll can also be seen in *The Natural*. Roy's life seems to be influenced by women in one way or another. These women, although different in their own ways, all have one thing in common, the society they live in and the impact it has on them. The first woman to be introduced is Harriet Bird. Roy immediately points out her beauty and it's noted that her physical appearance seems to be the only thing most of the people focus on, not her talents or thoughts. Harriet tends to draw men in, she chews them up, seeing if they satisfy her hunger and if they do she spits them out once content. Harriet, in a sense, is a siren and Huxley makes her so to point out that men tend to look at women as an object of mystery to be solved. He points out that society is so interested in what doesn't matter that what does is often overlooked, such as mental health. Harriet Bird's mental instability is obvious when she shoots Roy. She tests him, looking for something beyond his superficial outer

layer, and when he fails to meet her deeper values she shoots him. Harriet Bird's almost psychopathic tendencies were obviously not *just* due to society's impact, but it was clear that whenever she vocalized her thoughts that involved something beyond hair, clothes, or makeup she was brushed off as having "a fantastic imagination" (Malamud 26). Harriet has been cast off in the past so often for her unique inquisitiveness and she's been told that she speaks nonsense which she begins to believe in herself, "She dropped her hand futility. 'Please forgive me. I sometimes confuse myself with the little I know.'" (Huxley 28). The constant belittlement of Harriet leads to the damage of her self-esteem, the verbal abuse she faced clearly had some impact on her mental health thus provoking her mission to kill one of the greatest athletes that did not pass her "superficiality test."

The next woman to be introduced in Roy's life was Memo Paris. Roy, and other men, only focus on her beauty and nothing else, as well. Memo fits perfectly into society's "ideal woman" on the outside, but the more of Memo that is revealed, the more it's evident she is not the admired nurturing mother role that society yearned for, especially during the Cold War, when a mother's arms seemed most comforting. During *The Natural's* creation, society promoted domesticity of women, especially since more and more women entered the labor force due to the Cold War. The more change that occurred in the male to female labor ratio, the more attacked society felt as traditional values were imperiled. Memo's personality fit into neither the working woman nor the nurturing mother, and because of it, she felt the need to find comfort in a man or money. Despite not fitting perfectly into what was valued, she did fit into what the physically ideal woman was. Skinny and beautiful. Memo was forced into this box from a young age, "I won a beauty contest where they picked a winner from each state and she was sent to Hollywood

to be a starlet” (Malamud 113) and was never pushed into any other role than “the beauty queen.” Because of this Memo only desired a life filled with frivolous pleasures. Memo was forced into incredibly uncomfortable situations due to the fact that society perceived her as a beautiful party girl who was only concerned with men’s attention. Memo faced advances from Roy and was so uncomfortable that she felt the need to create an excuse of having a sick breast to keep him away (Malamud 116). Memo, although fitting into some of society’s ideals, was denied the right to be something more than just a pretty face, granted she chose to accept that, and also had to face uncomfortable experiences due to being a woman.

The last woman to enter Roy’s life was Iris Lemon. Although she didn’t fit exactly into what society considered ideal physically, she did fit due to having nurturing tendencies, she was a grandmother, after all. Roy’s view, which signifies society’s view, considered Iris “fat.” He constantly chose Memo over Iris which also hints society’s favorability towards Memo. Iris is a wise woman, ready to take care of Roy; she’s interested in learning about him and helping him: “She stroked his brow slowly with her fingers. ‘What happened fifteen years ago, Roy?’” (Malamud 151). Roy even hints that Iris fits his dream future, not Memo, he wants children, a home, all of which Memo would oppose. But despite all of this, Iris is often overlooked. Iris faces sexual assault, and later, rejection because Roy and society seem wary to accept a woman who is a grandmother at such a young age. Society is hypocritical in the sense that it promotes motherhood in such times of distress (due to the Cold war) and yet within the work Iris, the figurehead of motherhood, is always second to. With Memos’ beauty and Iris’ nurturing tendencies, the ideal woman would be created, but that just shows that what society wants in a woman is unrealistic, if it takes two women to create what man wants, then how will *half* of that

ever please man. Iris is often taken advantage of throughout *The Natural*, in her first night with Roy she's simply an object of pleasure within his eyes; a prop for man to use. Malamud criticizes that the only reason society wants a "domestic" woman is to use her as an outlet for the fear and stress that came with the Cold War.

Society will always have constraints on what a woman should or should not do. Whether a woman is to accept or deny her role in society is up to her, by doing so, however, will never mean that she's free of society's harsh evaluation, rather it means you suffer more of it. Of course, women aren't the only ones subject to society's strict demands, but that does not mean the amount of criticism is equal for both men and women. These works highlight why women should be allowed to do as they please, as otherwise the outcomes lead to abuse, addiction, and so much more.