

Literature PBAT

Stepford Wives and A Doll's House

Assessment: Good

Text, Text, and World

PBAT Task:

Through the characterization of Matilda, author Roald Dahl illuminates the power and purpose of reading, “So Matilda’s strong young mind continued to grow, nurtured by the voices of all those authors who had sent their books out into the world like ships on the sea. These books gave Matilda a hopeful and comforting message: You are not alone.” In literature, we find insight into our world and the human condition. We may connect to a character’s journey, a poignant phrase, or an idea that challenges us and refreshes our perspective on our own experience. Literature conveys its compelling themes in a distinctive way, different from film, music, or other creative media. Examining how authors shape the clay of language into stories that move, inspire, or provoke us deepens our understanding of a book and our capacity for critical thinking.

Your English PBAT is an opportunity to engage deeply with two works of literature over the course of a semester and come to own conclusions about *what* insights they offer to readers about people and the world and *how* these themes are articulated.

Specifically, your task is to write a paper that **analyzes how an original theme unifies two works of literature** as well as **analyzes how specific elements and devices of literary craft develop this theme** for each of the works chosen. Elements and devices that convey theme include but are not limited to setting, characterization, conflict, symbolism, figurative language, point of view, tone, and narrative structure. In addition, your essay should **elaborate on an insightful connection between your texts and something outside the texts**, including but not limited to, a theory associated with a critical lens, substantive criticism of the literature, or biographical, historical, or cultural context of the literature.

As detailed in the Consortium rubric, work to include the following in your essay:

- Thesis:
 - A debatable thesis that shows depth of thought about two works and their significance.
 - A thesis that is clearly traceable throughout the paper, yet may evolve throughout the paper in investigation of evidence.
- Organization:
 - Organizational structure that gives your reader easy or enjoyable access to your written ideas.
 - Topic Sentences that are connected to focus of paragraph and development of argument
 - Explicit and elegant transitions from one idea to next
- Evidence:
 - Strong and thorough evidence that supports your interpretation.
 - A combination of obvious and subtle evidence.
 - Evidence that is properly introduced with context (when, who, whom, and what information).

- Use of several block quote passages that propel your argument
- Evidence that includes authorial craft that propels argument

- Analysis:

- Analysis that demonstrates detailed examination of text deepening understanding (not what it says but what it “shows” you of text.)
- Analysis consists of explanations that explain to a reader how the thinker came to their position.
- Analysis that draws connections between evidence and thesis
- Analysis that breaks down and explains evidence in multiple ways
- Analysis that examines and explains macro features of evidence (event, action, character) and also micro features of evidence (language use, tone, symbolism, etc)
- Analysis is never plot summary

- Style and Voice

- Evidence of ambition, passion for subject, or deep curiosity
- Display of intellectual engagement
- Creative, clear, and appropriate use of language and word choice (an essay is not a worksheet or lab report)
- Complexity of sentences that with use of words of emphasis, change of direction, sequence, and illustration, as well as appropriate punctuation, capture complexity of thinking

- Connections

- Makes insightful connection between text and something outside the text: a) a theory associated with a critical lens, b) substantive criticism of the literature or c) biographical, historical, or cultural context of the literature.

- Conventions

- Heading, header, title, quotations and works cited in MLA format
- Work is comprehensively proofread. Mechanical and grammatical errors rare or non-existent

Breaking Through the Birdcage

Instagram model? 100,000 likes? Perfect hair, perfect nails? No, that's just not enough, the perfect outfit; that's it! In modern day society, social media has taken a toll on women and how to go about societal expectations and "norms" that make them succumb to the idea of being perfect. Through social media, the idea of a "perfect" woman has been an easy way to corrupt modern minds as a continuation of keeping old ideas of what a woman *should* be, thriving. Has it ever concerned you why females have been confined to specific expectations for so long? Or what makes a woman the perfect fit for a mother or wife? How did this generalization of what a woman shall and shall not, come into existence and why is such an old tradition still incorporated into modern day society? According to Molly Georgina Thompson on *Social Expectations of Women*:

There is no wrong way to be a woman; however exceeding pressures placed upon us by the media constantly remind us that this is not true. We are either subtly told we are too fat, thin, spotty, slutty, frigid or even unladylike. Whichever swing we may choose to take with our appearances there will always be somebody telling us we are going about being women in the wrong way.

In Norway during the 1800's, women were not given the rights they deserved and were seen as less than men and given certain rules they had to follow. According to "The Position of Women in Norway" by Pernille Lonne Morkhagen, "prior to the start of industrialization in the nineteenth century, the role of women was entirely subservient to men. Although Norwegian women received a modicum of education, the possibility for being independent was remote." Unlike Norway at that time, the US during the 70s was supposed to be a place that left gender inequality in the past and working towards a

country that gave women new rights. Within the novel *The Stepford Wives* and the play *A Doll's House* the writers develop this idea of a perfect life which controls the lives of the protagonists. Mother of two children and wife to Walter, Joanna, seeks a new life for her family when they agree upon the well known, pristine society of "Stepford" to call their new home. Amongst this so called "perfect" society, a town of undercover manufactured women roam the premises, which initiates curiosity within Ms. Joanna to unravel the secret within the not so perfect town after all. In *A Doll's House*, Nora, a Norwegian woman who is undermined by her husband, lives a life of what society sees as perfect. When Nora has to attend to her husband's illness, she makes an important decision which puts her "perfect" family and life on the line of imperfection. The decision Nora makes, eventually controlled her life until she came to the realization of the Nora that she should be. In both *The Stepford Wives* and *A Doll's House*, the authors use literary elements such as setting, characterization and symbolism to convey the effect of the ideological system which controls women based on the idea of "perfection" which results in these women succumbing to these confined ideas in order to receive approval from others.

Allan Johnson's definition of patriarchy states that society promotes male privilege within societies. "What is patriarchy? A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege* by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered" (Johnson 5). In both *The Stepford Wives* and *A Doll's House*, both civilizations are built on this idea. The lives of the women in Stepford are controlled by and centered around the Men's Association program while Nora is controlled by her husband, father and Krogstad because of the power men hold in society. Due to this, the women are

expected to follow specific protocols in order to execute the perfect life society expects every woman to live. As suggested by Marilyn Frye, the oppression of women is like being held in a bird cage. This is because women are limited but not aware of such. She states, "The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable..." Both protagonists fall under the type of oppression of women, yet come to the realization of so and later rebel against societal norms of a woman. Nora and Joanna are both unaware of the patriarchy that they live in therefore are outraged when it is brought to light. Joanna realizes earlier on in the novel and strives to overcome this which she ultimately fails at. On the other hand, Nora notices the "system" she is in later on in the play, when she and her husband get into an argument and she finally stands her ground against him, which she is then seemingly successful in escaping the birdcage. These communities unjustifiably conformed women into these "cages" so that they fit the model of a "perfect" woman. Unlike Nora, who lived in the 1800's, Joanna was more of a modern day woman. Considering this, it is strange how the idea of the bird cage continued to subliminally thrive, centuries later within the town of Stepford.

The author of *The Stepford Wives*, Ira Levin, uses symbolism throughout the entire society of Stepford to exemplify the scheme of perfection that constructs and controls the lives of women. Everything from the houses they live in, down to the pavement and grass they walk on, is built to perfection in order for their neighborhood to be up to par with society's expectations. The houses being built to perfection allows the women to be able to provide for the male species. As well as it controls the lives of

women, in order to keep them inferior to men, the symbolism of architecture within the town of Stepford serves to highlight how male superiority uses the idea of perfectionism in order to manipulate the society. This is done as in how the Men's Association building was constructed from its architectural design to the literal placement of the building, it overlooks the whole town, giving them power within society. During the rising action of the plot, the protagonist Joanna, decided to take pictures out on the town when she captures the substantial "Men's Association" building. Looking at the building she describes such a structure as, "the Men's Association house, up on the hill, had a surprisingly comic look to it: a square old nineteenth-century house, solid and symmetrical, tipsily parasolled by a glistening TV antenna" (Levin 44). The fact that the building was specifically on top of a hill, overseeing the entire town gives off the suggestion of male superiority seems though the men are literally on top of everyone in the plan of Stepford. In light of how Joanna states that the structure is one of the "nineteenth century," it connects to the also old system of casting women in discriminatory roles. During the 1700s-1900s, the structure of buildings were very different to the ones that are made in today's century as well, considering that technology and architecture has evolved as time continued to go on. One would think that if technology and architecture can evolve with time, that the idea of women's role in society would evolve as well. During this time women were cast into imaginary "bird cages" where they were limited to certain expectations and ways of living. Most women were not aware of these expectations rather than it is subliminally embedded in their heads, hence the "bird cage" reference, because birds are not aware of the limited space they live

in compared to the rest of the world. A well deserved woman was one who cleaned the house, cooked for her family, was “beautiful” according to society’s expectations, had children and had a working husband. Stepford was referred to as “the Town that Time Forgot considering how the idea of men being superior to women is an old way of thinking, but it was still executed throughout the town. Considering the systematic scheme of casting women as inferior to men is old, it would make sense that the structure of the Men’s Association building was a building the reflected that old time period as well. Since the idea of keeping women inferior to men by developing specific roles for them is an old way of controlling society, the purpose of keeping the Men’s Association building as one of the “nineteenth century” is to keep the society in an era that would allow the biased, patriarchal system to continue to thrive. In modern day society, it is evident that some significant places, such as churches, still hold old types of architectural constructs. In most churches, men are usually found in charge, and women have little say. The old architecture and idea to cast men superior to women, seem to have a correlation. The vicinity of such a place that originated from a time that expected women to be a specific way, allows these expectations to continue. Around the Men’s Association was a large fence that blocked the association off from the rest of society. The protagonist’s son noticed such an irregular structure and pointed it out to Joanna, “Boy, they’ve got a great big fence!” with a reply from Joanna as so, “To keep women out (Levin 12).” The Men’s Association evidently represents a sort of power the men withhold in the neighborhood, giving off the vibe that women should “stay out” or consequences would be served. In addition to the Men’s Association building, the family houses in Stepford also serve as

symbolism for the “perfect” life you live in Stepford. Joanna sought a new life for her and her family when she was referred to Stepford. The town has always been described as one that was along the lines of perfect which was shown through all the houses in Stepford as well as the serenity of the town itself. “Perfection” suggested by Stepford meant, that women had to be essentially created in order to satisfy a man’s expectations. This is because, as the women arrive to Stepford as their own, they are evidently changed over time in order to fit the description of what is a perfect woman within the eyes of a male beholder. This is evident when Joanna’s only “normal” friend Bobbie had completely changed from a “slob” who normally kept her house unorganized, to a neat freak who needed to clean her house every chance she got. The “perfect” woman cleans the house every chance she gets, watches the children, never questions the husband and lives in a perfect house just to set everything off. The houses show that the women are able to provide for the man. With this, they are able to give the man a nice bed to sleep in and a divine kitchen to cook his meals in as well as a sense of pride or ego that suggests as a woman, she is perfect because she has such to provide for a man. Every house was grand, pristine and of high quality which lived up to the standards of society that claimed that women need to live an exemplary life. It is clear that women in this town are being manipulated by the idea of perfection, considering how all of them are forced to live and thrive in these exemplary houses. Not only that but, the women are controlled by the superiority of men in society, who hold higher positions in society than women do. This makes it easier for the male species to dominate the female. Such as, the Men’s

Association, where this association was seen of as “high authority”, giving the men easier access to potentially exert the biased expectations they desire women to execute.

Similar to the society of Stepford, in *A Doll's House*, the narrator describes the house of Nora and Torvald as one that is along the lines of ideal. The “ideal” is unrealistic and biased, mostly developed to satisfy male expectations. This house seems pretty substantial based on the descriptions used in the opening scene and highlights the perfect living situation expected by society:

SCENE-- A room furnished comfortably and tastefully but not extravagantly. At the back a door to the right leads to the entrance hall; another to the left leads to Helmer's study. Between the doors stand a piano. In the middle of the left-hand wall is a door and beyond a window. Near the window are a round table, armchairs and a small sofa. In the right-hand wall, at the farther end, another door; and on the same side, nearer the footlights, a stove, two chairs and a rocking chair; between the stove and the door a small table. Engravings on the walls; a cabinet with china and other small objects; a small bookcase with well-bound books. The floors are carpeted, and a fire burns in the stove. It is winter. (Ibsen 1)

As described, this house is seemingly large; elongated halls, valuable items, and a lot of space. This type of house fits just right into the idea of society's perfect living situation. If one lived somewhere that was opposite of the luxuries of this house, the woman would be looked upon as one that cannot provide, or a fail at her duties as a woman. This is because, being able to provide for a male has been an internalized role for women for

hundreds of years. Due to this idea being one that has existed for so long, society looks upon women as a “disgrace” of a woman if she does fails to exceed these expectations. During this time, if you were a woman without a husband, without a sizable house, or had no children, you were looked down upon. To avoid this, women were enforced to live a life they had no control over; every woman had to be cookie-cutter perfect which gave no room for originality or that would be along the lines of taboo. As previously addressed, since society has become so accustomed to the image of what a perfect woman should be, it is looked at as “wrong” if a woman goes against these roles. For example, it is expected for a woman to be married and have kids by a certain age. Henrik Ibsen, the playwright of, “A Doll’s House” highlights this idea when Nora asked her long time friend Ms.Linde if she had any kids. When Ms.Linde replied with “No,” Nora said “How dreadfully sad that must be. I have three lovely children” (Ibsen 7). Nora responded this way because she is accustomed to the proposition that all women are supposed to live a life where they are married by a certain age, have children and live in a stable home with a working husband. Little does Nora know that Ms.Linde’s life might not be “dreadfully sad” without children. Women can live just a happily life without living up to society’s expectations as they could be with living their lives as society expects them to. Along with looking like a “presentable” woman for societal standards, living situations played a major part in successfully filling this role. Therefore the implication of the prestigious houses incorporated into both texts.

Ira Levin’s characterization of Joanna Eberhart propels the plot and emphasizes the realization of the controlled system she lives in as she continuously seeks to learn

more about the roles of women in Stepford. During the rising action of the novel, Joanna's eyes are open to the skeptical occurrences within the so called "perfect, wonderful" Stepford. She grows curious when she comes to the realization that the women in this town hold a very peculiar role for modern day society. It becomes evident to Joanna of the patriarchal system she now lives in which executes sexism amongst women, by the way the wives of Stepford succumb to their husbands' desires and live as housewives. When Joanna visits her neighbor, Carol Van Sant, Carol refuses Joanna's offer for a cup of coffee. Joanna then goes to tell her husband, "That Carol Van Sant is not to be believed. She can't come over for a cup of coffee because she has to *wax the family room floor*. Ted goes to the Men's Association every night and *she* stays home doing *housework*" (Levin 10). The tone in Joanna's voice, hence the italics on the emphasized words, tell that Joanna is genuinely confused and surprised that "*she*," Carol, a woman in that day and age is still obligated to do "*housework*." Obviously for the 1970's, Joanna is baffled by this and persistently seeks to change these ways. Early in the novel, as Joanna continues to search for more women in the town to gather a meeting to establish a "Women's Association", the narrator states,

She spoke to the mother of one of Kim's classmates in Dr. Verry's waiting room; and to Yvonne Weisgalt, on the other side of the Stavrose; and to Jill Burke, in the next house over. All of them turned her down; they either had too little time or too little interest to meet with other women and talk about their shared experiences. (Levin 22).

Regardless of the fact that every single woman she approached turned her down, Joanna did not give up; this made her more willing to find women to get involved and uncover the reason why Stepford was the "Town That Time Forgot". Joanna continues to sought out the reason for the corruption of women in Stepford by looking through newspapers

for information, asking neighbors for information on the town's history, and even contacting the health administration to question if there was a leak of chemicals in the air in Stepford. All of this lead her up to the realization that there was nothing in the air after all, the women were literal robots created to please the idea that society oppress women to be. The words "Town That Time Forgot", said by Joanna's friend Bobbie, in reference to Stepford, suggests that in a town during the 20th century, it should be of one that grants equality amongst women, yet does the opposite and keeps women mentally chained within a patriarchal system which should have been extinct years ago.

Unlike Joanna, Nora did not come to the realization of the "bird cage" she was in until later on in the plot. Nora spent her whole life making sure everything was perfect for her husband Torvald. When Torvald became sick, Nora borrowed a significant amount of money from Krogstad, a lawyer and former acquaintance to her husband, in order to be able to financially care for Torvald. The fact that she had borrowed money from someone without her husband's permission, she had kept a secret from Torvald because she believed it would ruin her picture perfect lifestyle. When Nora's long-time friend, Mrs. Linde, asks Nora if she had told her husband about the money she had borrowed, Nora replies as such;

Good heavens, no! How could you think so? A man who has such strong opinions about these things! And besides, how painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly independence, to know that he owed me anything! It would upset our mutual relations altogether; our beautiful happy home would no longer be what it is now (Ibsen 12).

Nora refused to admit to her husband of her actions because she feared that her life was on the line. The phrase "his manly independence" highlights the idea of the "male

centered” patriarchal society she lives in. She depends on her husband in order to live the life every woman is expected live. Seems though Nora is unaware of how she lives a caged life, she does everything in her power to keep her husband and family intact, even if it means keeping secrets. Nora’s shocked tone, as evidenced in the exclamation marks within her speech, reveal how women are limited to so much, seems though she is highly worried that her life would be ruined if her husband knew she did something that would not define her to be the “perfect” wife she strives to be. Although this is the case at the beginning of the play, when Torvald eventually finds out about the money Nora had borrowed, and an argument breaks out, Nora realizes that she has been playing along under a sadistic male controlled life all along. Nora states “Our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was Papa’s doll child...That is what our marriage has been, Torvald” (Ibsen 67). Here, Nora has become aware of the cycle of the confinement of women she has been living in and retaliates by leaving Torvald and leading her own life. The “Doll House” is a symbol for the man-made perfect life she lives in which is controlled by male figures, where she is the doll and her husband and father “play” and build her life. Nora felt as if she had no control over what she had to live for or what she could do in life but, it took her time to finally realize this and break out of the “bird cage” and “doll house” she had been living in her whole life.

For centuries, women have been unfairly expected to fit a description along the lines of perfect, this description was mainly expected to satisfy male needs. Unfortunately women are continuously following this idea of having to be “perfect” in order to be up to

par with society's expectations. In the real world, females suffer from insecurity and being unsure of their worth due to “failing” to exceed in being the perfect woman. If one does not fall into all the categories of what society finds to be the perfect woman, one is ugly? Or she is not worth it? She is not a real woman? Well, this is what society makes us females feel. The world should finally grow up and realize that not every woman is going to fit a cookie-cutter role, so that should not be expected of such. Confidence is key and a necessity in life, but this cannot be achieved if women have to constantly think about being faultless and acceptable to society. Yes, not all women believe they have to be conform to society’s expectations but, there is a large population of women who do and it intoxicates their minds and lives, just as it did Joanna and Nora. Society needs to leave that old idea of women having to be “perfect” according to men, in the 1800’s and not bring it into the future of the world unless, the women of the world will continue to be the women who they were not meant to be, and for the women who are still trapped in the birdcage, shall be let out.