

## ENGLISH - THE PENELOPIAD AND PHOTOGRAPH 51 ESSAY

### Topic 3 - 'In both ancient and modern times, women's lives are controlled by men.' How is this idea conveyed through the stories told in *The Penelopiad* and *Photograph 51*?

Misogynistic social structures and dogmatic values that permeate society enable the continual oppression of women in both the novella 'The Penelopiad' by Margaret Atwood and the play 'Photograph 51' by Anna Zeigler. In both Texts, Zeigler and Atwood assert that women are controlled through their respective patriarchal societies, however they ultimately depict women as being capable of exerting control through their own individual talents and characteristics. Although it is primarily the adversity faced by women elucidated by the authors, the similar hardships faced by others who find themselves at the bottom of institutionalised social structures are illuminated. Both inspirational women ultimately advocate for the 'spinning (of) a new story' from the perspective of those who have been traditionally marginalised by society.

Existing male dominated social systems that permeate society are crucial in the control of women irrespective of the time period. In Margaret Atwood's didactic novella, the oppressive reality for women due to the patriarchal monarchy is depicted as cruel and unyielding. This central dogma penetrates every facet of society highlighted from the outset via King Icarius' cruel attempted abandonment of Penelope, ordering her to be 'thrown into the sea' and hence acting as a catalyst for Penelope's lifelong dichotomy with male figure heads and her insular existence. The maids like Penelope are subjected to the lustful whims and demands of men, 'raped' by the suitors who 'probably thought nothing of it', their expected abuse a result of the ingrained societal ethos which places men upon a pedestal of power and confines women to be merely 'the dirty girls', 'paraded' like a 'package of meat'. Throughout the novel, the value of women is based on their appearance which is ultimately determined by male figure heads. Helen is upheld by the society due to her 'swan like' beauty and 'flirtatious' nature; fulfilling the societal expectations of the period through her confinement to the appearance-based value which society placed upon her. Similarly, the 'pretty cheeks' were only accepted and 'nurtured' by Penelope due to their being 'the most beautiful' amongst the servant girls and hence worthy of the opportunity to rise above others within the social hierarchy. Similarly, Rosalind in 'Photograph 51' is objectified and valued based on her appearance; Watson and Crick speculating the possibility for her to be 'possibly attractive' if 'she took off her glasses and did something novel with her hair'. Zeigler insists upon their 'lines running over some of [Rosalinds]' heightening the sense of disregard for her intellect and her 'subordina[cy]' in comparison to her male colleagues. Like Penelope, Rosalind's father in her youth abandons her by asserting that she is not to 'be a scientist'. His misogynistic decision based primarily on the prevailing social mores that confined women to the home as 'mothers' and that led to 'no female scientists receiving a research position during war time'. Although his attempts to quash Rosalind's desire to investigate 'endless shapes overlapping' were founded in his insecurity and fear of her marginalisation by society, the pre-existing patriarchal hierarchy enabled him to control Rosalind. This ultimately leading to her fear of ever not 'being right' and to seek helping the 'world w[i]n' rather than the 'self-aggrandizement' that the male scientists whose chauvinism is enabled by its institutionalism within King's college. The university similarly to the 'archaic' monarchy of Sparta and Ithaca views women as inferior which is highlighted via the 'male common room' and Wilkin's inability to take Rosalind 'to a location where she is permitted to dine' on her first day of work. In both texts, the pre-existing social mores facilitate the subservient attitude towards women and their confinement to restrictive values.

Although women's lives were controlled by men, individuals who find themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy suffer a similar 'fate'. In Zeigler's play, Gosling is the only individual who is yet to obtain his 'doctoral', a reality which is reflected in his treatment by his colleagues as 'subordinate'; with 'everyone .. invited but [him]' to milestone moments in the 'race for DNA' including the final unveiling of Watson and Crick's model and hence their 'place in history'. As a result of Gosling's position within the social hierarchy which is fundamental to the functioning of both King's College as an institution and society as a whole, he is attributed the 'menial' tasks that were originally assigned to Rosalind. Although Gosling is not female, by virtue of 'semantics' he is forced to grovel at the feet of his superiors, announcing his 'allegiance' to Rosalind in a manner reminiscent of the Monarchy omnipresent in both 'the Penelopiad' and Shakespeare's 'The Winter's Tale' which is heavily paralleled throughout 'Photograph 51'. The infantile behaviour exhibited by Wilkins and Rosalind within their dysfunctional 'work relationship' which is enabled by Gosling's 'working between them' and repeating each other's words in 'perfect succession' is juxtaposed with the intertextuality that Zeigler incorporates via 'The Winter's Tale'. The childish jealousy and disdain which Rosalind and Wilkins maintain for each other, is a reminder of the cruel resentfulness that drives Leontes to separate Hermione from their son Mamillus. His actions ultimately leading to the rapid decline of Mamillus who holds a mirror up to Leontes; sharing his 'insomnia' and eventually passing due to a lack of maternal care. Mamillus, symbolic of the work on DNA that could 'unlock the secret of life' - which is like a child to Rosalind - due to his place at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as a child, is given minimal care despite his male identity. By abusing his power and separating Hermione and Mamilus, Leontes like Wilkins and Gosling taking photograph 51 away from Rosalind, confirm their ultimate death from the start. Similarly, this maternal loss is exhibited through the death of Anticlea who dies as a result of her separation from Odysseus for 'ten long years'. Although in Penelopiad those who find themselves as the bottom of the social order are awarded the same 'fate' as the women, those who are at the bottom are primarily women themselves. Attwood, highlights that the confines of a strict patriarchal society allow for the further oppression of women over lower class men, with even Penelope's son Telemachus wanting 'to assert his authority' over her. The maids are the primary example of individuals at the bottom social order provided by Attwood, with their daily reality limited to the 'menial' tasks in a similar manner to Gosling and Rosalind. However, the maids were subjected to further objectification. Unable to 'refuse' if a 'visiting noblemen or the son of visiting noblemen ... [even] ignoble men' desired to 'sleep with' them, thus even 'ignoble men' hold some degree of power'. The gradually developing social equity between men and women is highlighted by Authors through the juxtaposition of the place within society of both sexes over time, with more men depicted below women in the social order as time progresses.

Women who are capable of using their own skills and talents to transcend oppressive dogma are able to exert their own control. Within a social context, Rosalind is dismissed and demoralized based primarily on her gender and appearance, however it is ultimately her own affinity to her work and superior knowledge to her male colleagues that allows her to determine when the 'race' will be won. Without '[Rosalind's] work' Watson and Crick would be incapable of 'determining the innermost workings' of the 'helical' DNA structure, themselves initially constructing a model that 'would never hold together'. As a direct result of her determination and prioritisation of her work even from a young age, refusing to 'draw [her family's] little dog' but instead drawing 'endless shapes overlapping', despite 'no female scientists receiving work during wartime in Britain' Rosalind persevered and obtained a 'research position in Paris'. Not allowing the decisions of her male superiors to control her but allowing her own dedication to '[fling] open windows' in life for her. Similarly, another woman 'who existed in the environment in which [Rosalind] found herself', 'Margaret Ramsay' took charge of life and 'work relationships' by rejecting Wilkins' attempts to develop a relationship that involved 'much more than ogg[ing]'.

Margaret leaving after he 'confessed his love' to her, not allowing him to potentially use their relationship as professional black mail in the future. Penelope's mother the 'naiad' transcended the societal pressures of women placed upon her, avoiding the 'maternal' duties in favour of 'slipping into the fountain' or 'conversing with the fish'. Although her abandonment of her daughter fuels Penelope's isolated upbringing, the Naiad's ability to completely abandon dogmatic social mores culminates in her depiction as one of the few women who truly hold power. Helen wields the existing social structure itself as a method of manipulating men and holding both political and sexual power. Although she is merely granted power based on her appearance which is deemed as desirable by men, she utilises this as a method of obtaining control, 'taking pride in all the men that had died for her in the Athenian war' which she had caused by discarding the traditional societal ethos and 'indulging in the same kind of sluttiness' as men. Women in both texts, are seen as capable of rising above tyrannical male control via their own existing characteristics, however the juxtaposition of the 'stories' held centuries apart allow for understanding of the evolving nature of the characteristics that allow women to do so.

The version of history which is presented across the ages has been consistently from a male perspective resulting in a heightened sense of the omnipresence of male dominance. Both Texts are based on the premise of rewriting traditionally male versions of history, in order to project a future in which the female narrative is the dominant one. Attwood gives 'the telling of the story to Penelope and the maids' in order to combat the evolution of '[Odysseus]' version of events' into a 'stick used to beat women' who attempt to transcend pre-existing oppressive values. Similarly to Penelope and the Maids, the reality which Rosalind faced and 'her place in history' has been forgotten over time; despite her critical role in the discovery of the 'B form [being] definitely helical' the spelling of her name was not 'checked for textbooks' in spite of her work 'should have been enough to secure her place in history'. Rosalind being forgotten by society is juxtaposed by Zeigler via 'The Winter's Tale' which is referenced by the characters both at the start and end of the play, with the actor who played Hermione forgotten by the scientists as 'she just didn't stand out'; foreshadowing the 'destiny' of Rosalind as a woman in a male dominated field. Rosalind reveals that 'Hermione didn't truly come back to life' but it was 'hope' for that future that enabled 'leontes [to] project' her reincarnation which Zeigler implies is in the form of the future women whom Rosalind has carved the way for so that they will be capable of 'command[ing] ... respect'. Zeigler projects her hope for society through the parallel of Wilkins and Leontes who are both initially threatened by the female figure but come to eventually find their presence reassuring, wishing to 'begin again' and rewrite history. Whilst Attwood gives the 'weaving' of 'a new story' to the forgotten female figures, Zeigler contends the necessity for change by allowing the play to be narrated by Rosalind's male colleagues. The playwright allowing the patriarchal social system to permeate the reader's understanding of the play in a nuanced fashion by providing the men with their respective surnames in the dialogue whilst Rosalind is provided with only her first name; highlighting the urgency for societal transformation within our own lives. Zeigler and Attwood hold up a mirror to society, evoking a sense of the necessity for reflection on modern social mores in order to allow for a true reversal of the oppressive values that continue to confine women across the ages.

Existing patriarchal structures are the cause of control of individuals who do not exist at the top of the arbitrary system. But through understanding of the societal ethos that confines them, women are able to transcend the very system that exists to restrict them and define their existence. Zeigler and Attwood assert the necessity of abandoning the oppressive values that have restrained women across the ages in order to change the course of history for the women of the future.