

Growing Up Girl – Sorrows of Girlhood

By Jamie Shepherd, August 4th 2024

To be a girl is to question everything. Why am I being treated like I am inhuman? Is it so wrong that I don't want to bear children? Have I done enough for myself? Am I writing myself into a fictitious girlhood, and does that matter?



Feminine Connection. Image by Violetta Kostyreva.

There comes a time in every woman's life where she realises that she's not the girl she once was. For some, it's when they're at work and a customer refers to them as a "lady" for the first time. For others, it's when they realise their favourite pair of jeans no longer fit their waist. For me – I was looking in the mirror in a bar bathroom during the earliest hours of my 20th birthday.

Maybe I'd had too much to drink, or maybe the mirror was just significantly graffitied, but I couldn't recognise the person in the mirror looking back at me. She looked older, wiser, just plain uncanny. The longer I looked at her, the more I began to resonate with her. I started recalling every step of her life, like tracing my finger around an oak or an elm bearing each new summer in its rings. After all, I am a summer baby.

This sudden realisation that I am not going to be young forever and the growing heartache I feel for the little girl I no longer am has caused me to meditate about what it means to be a girl, and reminisce on the fleeting experience of the girl's childhood.

I find that there is, of course, a selfhood – in which everyone has an individual, personal life experience. But, the special thing about what we call 'girlhood', is that all women share common experiences throughout their lives.

I would go as far as to compare girlhood to godhood. They are similar in that we spend our lives ceaselessly creating. As children, we play dress up and *fantasise* about various kinds of self. Girl as fairy, girl as angel, girl as princess. As we grow older, we *become* various kinds of self. Girl as maiden, girl as madwoman, girl as mother. To be a woman is to perform, resulting in the endless creating of characters we play to appease the world we live in and avoid the undying scrutiny from the world watching us.

I have recently a series of stories by Camilla Grudova titled “The Doll’s Alphabet”, that explores this concept of self-creation and realisation as a woman. It reads like a warped fairytale, in which a girl unstitches herself, and another turns into a wolf. The symbolism of the girl changing in such violent ways represents the negotiations we make when we begin to construct and settle in with the almost mythological idea of ‘girl’.

I will spare you the countless titles and explanations of literature I feel fit to this subject. Though, I’ve learnt by reading countless books by female authors that many women grow up riddled with feelings of anguish. It seems to be an underlying theme in almost every book they write. Like Eve before she bit the apple, the young girl lives blissfully unaware of herself and her body as a sinful, hated thing, scrutinized by the world she was born into. The guilt and shame of living in the body a woman has been written as far back as the Bible, and perhaps further.

As for myself, I sit here now at the young age of 20 and wonder if there is any way to move past the guilt of womanhood that seems to follow me wherever I go. As much as I adore sharing my lip gloss and keeping my fingernails neatly painted, I can’t help but wish I could also unstitch myself and un-become woman. The overwhelming responsibility of performing as woman is like a tidal wave. In the eyes of society, there is no right way to exist in such a body.

Its unavoidable. Its hypocritical. It’s the patriarchy. This is where the sorrows of women lie, underneath the glass ceiling. Many like to pretend that the glass ceiling doesn’t exist, but the truth is that it does, and the glass is thick and unmoving.

Is it true, that under this ceiling, we are doomed to fear ourselves forever? Consider that women have been taught to fear the fact of aging (please, look at all the anti-aging creams in your mother’s medicine cabinet). If we cannot accept ourselves the way we are now, why must we fear experience and success and motherhood and all the things that make us women?

While it is true that we as women currently still suffer under the patriarchal system, it is also true that we have the means to continue fighting for ourselves. For our success, for our bodily autonomy, and for our freedom. We have the means to hold on to the hope that all of our questions about our place in this world will be answered and no longer rhetorical.

What I do know to also be true, contrary to the overwhelming sorrow, is that the feminine experience is something sacred and it has been for millennia. I think this is the most important thing for us to remember. I say this in the most poetic way possible - our bodies shed our blood and bring life onto our soil. We as women are able to manage such pain for years in order to create something beautiful. There it is again - the feminine act of creation. The godhood. The girlhood.

Way back in Ancient Greece, women would travel to the woods to perform rituals under the full moon in which they would link hands and dance for the moon, thanking her for the gift of life. In modern times, women replicate these ancient rituals as they link hands on the dancefloor of a bar, thanking their girlfriends for the gift of companionship.

And there I am, on the dancefloor at the bar, linking hands with my friends as we celebrate my twentieth trip around the sun. I'm not thinking about the tragedy of girlhood anymore. I'm not sure I'm thinking at all. The only thing that matters is that I am holding hands with my girlfriends, and I am a realised woman who manages to persevere through it all.

"Godhood is just like girlhood – a begging to be believed." – Kristin Chang.