

Eric Dammer
Dr. Craig Heller
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The Unsaid in Nora Ephron's "A Few Words about Breasts"

A woman has to live up to norms in society that dictate the way she looks and acts. The men who react to Nora in her former teenage life that lingers in her memory are likely to judge her in comparison to stereotypes of physical beauty, which she and perhaps a majority of American women obsess about at some age, but particularly when teens. It is not necessarily so just because the majority of men obsess about breasts and other female characteristics, though this also occurs particularly in the teen years. On the contrary, Nora's teen tale is told in two parts cleanly separated by the specific gender of those that reacted to her physicality. By far the more memorable reactions and thoughts Nora relates so many years later as an adult are those she has in response to the women in her younger life who did not act on behalf of her healthy self-image nor even attempt to achieve moments of ephemeral self-contentedness in the society they shared. The less memorable response of men—"some minded, some did not, but I always did"—may mirror a lackluster response from the opposite sex due to her conception of failure in meeting the criteria for full womanhood. Nora's essay relates the internal response of a teenage girl growing up but not out, and it is this internal reality that the author attempts to convey throughout the passage.

It becomes clear that Nora becomes embittered against anyone that makes her uncomfortable because of her physical attributes, particularly her surreptitious breast size that remains beyond her control throughout her teen years, but especially as she tries to control the perceptions of others by wearing padded cups of varying size. Moreover, her

reaction to these emotions further limits and discomforts her whether she is talking to men or women. By the time she is beyond adolescence, she has an “obsession with breasts” primarily because she cannot accept or totally respond to the pressure society puts on her to fit in. Between the two sexes, it is the stress and unfeeling comments that she faces at the behest of other women—many whom identify with her—to which Nora is primarily reacting in this essay.

Apparently, Nora’s work here implies that the differences in the way women think about themselves and their bodies are first and foremost shaped in sympathy with or in opposition to the views they encounter within their peer groups in society, not their physiology per se. Physiological deviance from the norm or ideal in this case is just the catalyst for an inevitable common critical reaction of peers in Nora’s teen woman society. It may be men that instigate society’s values of magazine-cover beauty over common sense and true good health, but young females have additional emotional baggage: a woman may find members of her own sex to be hypocritical when each individual woman makes a choice to either buy into these values or oppose them. As a group, young women are likely to try either approach in dealing with the subordination they expect from men, depending on the situation at any given moment. Nora’s childhood friend abandons the opposition once she fills out. But Nora must then increasingly contend with subordination by other women just like her friend. The women accepting of men’s interest in breasts seem to then project or transfer their earlier fears of subordination onto other women as breast size becomes a competition at some point in teen womanhood.

It is this hypocrisy Ephron is targeting in her essay, which she does so effectively that I can't help but question if her internal thoughts and reactions are a bit more wry and cynical than they could naturally remain, unless she continues to surround herself with immature teens. Reconsidering her tone, it becomes clear that Ephron is targeting the hypocrisy that is certainly independent of age and can remain with a woman of any age unless she recognizes its roots. Insofar as her essay brings other women to this realization and towards a will to change (presumably towards a stance of nonchalance regarding such physical deviations from the norm), it is clear that Ephron's writing is feminist in nature. In apparent contradiction to its goal, however, is the negative tone and pervasive sad ignorance of the facts it most clearly conveys, whether unintentional or deliberate. The end result is that only those readers willing to confront the example she presents with hardened unemotional analysis may appreciate the full implication of her work. This seems to signal that an individual woman is not entirely free to choose her own approach towards the issues with which society presents her in the present because socially acceptable responses are conditioned by historical context.

Like Nora's depiction of herself as a teen, and now as an adult with some remaining teen tendencies, it is clear that the problem is bigger than an internal one. The focus on her own feelings and responses to the unkind thoughts and actions of other women and men belies the fact that society's obsession with breasts predates the world in which the feminist debate is raging. Since ancient times, breasts have been symbols of fertility in a wide cross-section of early historical cultures. The symbolism of fertility corresponds to the physiological function of breasts as producers of the milk that sustains the newest members of the young generation and the corresponding traditional role of

women as mothers raising children. Much earlier in the twentieth century—beginning with increased industrialization and marketing in the 1940s—many women chose to avoid breastfeeding in favor of packaged synthetic formulas. The lure of a scientific formula for better infant health undercut the fertility symbol that had been hardwired into society for scores of centuries. With more women joining the workforce and with less time to rear their young, the trend presumably did not fully reverse, nor has it even though medical opinion now recognizes biological benefits of natural breastfeeding not available from formula.

Breasts can be considered symbols of motherhood that have become more confusing for modern women not only because of their increasing disuse but also because the contradictory feelings that are evoked by females in modern society are consistent with an increasing lack of role models. The remaining semiotic fertility of breasts clashes with their hindrance to women who dream of working in career tracks as professionals, dedicated above all to work, without having to worry about their physiology distracting their coworkers. And this in turn clashes with the goal in the back of most women's minds that they may one day choose to raise children. There is no way women can get around these contradictions as they fumble towards their own individual version of modern womanhood. While not necessarily related to practical reality, these seemingly irreconcilable contradictions in the female social subconscious would seem to be one major cause of teen hypocrisy on the issue of breast size. The teen years are when these contradictions between old and new custom and expectations first become apparent and immediate for women in western society. Nora Ephron's tone, which remains sullen throughout her essay, is a powerful justification for an argument that women mature

when they leave behind the unrealistic worries and contradictions with which their options in modern society present them.

The sardonic tone Ephron relies on throughout her essay corroborates the current stand of social feminists that privacy and independence are insufficient for a lone woman to change the direction or misdirection prescribed by history. Catherine MacKinnon argues that subordination of the collective needs of women to the imperatives of male supremacy cannot be countered by autonomous action on the part of an individual woman, much in the way that race and economic means are beyond the complete control of a woman (Miller 18).

To put the issue into perspective for men who may not be able to empathize with the situation of a woman like Nora Ephron, it is important to project the same dilemma onto a set of social norms limiting the freedom of males. Such stringent physical standards of outward appearance are not required of men by their male peers and no one physical quality is of such importance as breasts for women as a group when considering the most important qualities of men. It might seem that men therefore do not have the internal mechanism or tendency to be hypocrites about such matters; but, we should know better. Men, too, ostracize their own kind from society, but the characteristics that are subject to scrutiny are wider ranging. In some cases, the absence of particular emotional characteristics is an ideal. For example, men are not supposed to show strong emotions beyond anger and camaraderie in the macho stereotype. At minimum, a macho man must appear in control of his emotions at all times in the company of other men and in public. The result is that men striving to fit this stereotype do not share their emotions; in their peer group, reinforcing the macho stereotype frowns upon any social interaction

spurred particularly by what society deems an unmasculine emotion. And so the stereotypical man that buys into and fits the macho mold is a thoughtless, shallow person that does not consider the softer feelings of others. The scope of their comfortable array of situations in which they can socially interact is thus limited. Most men are not completely vested in a stereotypical behavior, and the same can be said of women in general. However, the damage caused by the limiting forces imposed by any stereotype on individuals in society becomes obvious in this context and may extend the meaning of feminist undertones in Ephron's story to the other half of society.

WORKS CITED

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