

Carol Stewart
GWS 222 — Gender Narrative Essay
September 28, 2026

The Roles Beneath the Roles

Gender has shaped my life in ways I did not fully recognize until I was much older. I grew up with traditional ideas about what men and women were supposed to be, and I still value many of them. I believe being male or female matters. I love being feminine, and I love being a wife, mother, and grandmother. I have also become more aware of how many of my ideas about womanhood came from my family, religion, and culture rather than from choices I consciously made for myself.

Until I was eight, my parents represented the roles I understood as normal. My dad was the provider, the person who could fix or assemble almost anything, and an example of strength and capability in my life. He was incredibly intelligent, truly a genius, but he was also fun. Music was one of his great joys, and when my mom left to run errands or fulfill Church responsibilities, we would turn it up and dance like no one was watching. Those are still some of my favorite memories of him. My mom filled a different role. She cooked, cleaned, sewed our clothes, cared for us, served at church, and seemed to do everything a good mother and housewife in the late 1970s and early 1980s was supposed to do. I cannot dismiss her life as simply restrictive because there was love, generosity, and security in what both of my parents did.

After my dad died by suicide, those roles became more complicated. My mother withdrew for a time and later went

back to school, while my paternal grandparents became the strongest adults in our lives. My grandfather was a businessman, a Church leader, a fixer, and the visible authority figure in the family. My grandmother cared for the home and much of the family, but I never saw her as unimportant. She had enormous influence, even if my grandfather's authority was more obvious. Their marriage taught me that traditional roles could include real partnership, but it also showed me how easily men's authority could be more visible while women's work was simply expected.

As my mother withdrew, I began taking on responsibilities I did not yet understand in terms of gender. I helped nurture, feed, clean, and maintain our home while I was still growing up myself. No one needed to tell me those were women's responsibilities. I had watched women do them, and when they were not being done, I stepped in. I learned early to notice what needed to be done and take responsibility for it. Caring for people still feels natural to me. I also recognize the cost of believing that a woman should automatically notice and carry everyone else's needs.

My stepfather complicated my understanding of masculinity. Until then, most of the men I respected connected being a man with responsibility. They worked, provided, fixed things, taught, protected, or contributed to their families. My stepfather was highly critical without carrying the kind of responsibility I had learned to associate with male authority. His criticism also made me painfully aware of my appearance and personality during my teenage years. I learned to look at myself by first noticing what needed fixing. Perfection began to feel

less like an impossible standard and more like something I was supposed to keep trying to reach.

The expectations surrounding feminine appearance still affect me deeply. I love makeup, hair, clothes, skincare, fashion, and looking feminine. Those things are fun for me, and I am grateful for the tools that help me feel confident enough to walk out the door and face the world. What I hate is how often I feel that I need them. I hate the pressure I feel from other people and from myself to look a certain way, and I hate how quickly I can become critical of myself without my hair done or makeup on. Somewhere along the way, looking feminine became tangled up with looking acceptable. I do not want to give up things I genuinely enjoy simply to prove that I am independent. I want to know that I am still enough when I take it all off.

Those early ideas about men and women followed me into marriage. Losing my dad so young made fatherhood especially important to me, and I deliberately chose someone I believed would be an involved father. I did not want to raise children alone. Marriage and motherhood have taught me that having a husband and wife in the same home does not automatically settle who carries the emotional responsibility, remembers what everyone needs, plans ahead, adjusts, or makes sure things get done. A family can sincerely believe men and women are equally important while still developing habits in which one person's work is more visible and another person's work is simply expected.

None of that makes me regret motherhood. Being a mother is one of my favorite parts of being a woman. My children are some of the funniest, most interesting, talented, and completely individual people I know. My relationships with them have been

built through years of loving, teaching, worrying, planning, celebrating, making mistakes, and growing alongside them. Motherhood did not take away my identity. It became a central part of it. I simply do not believe it should be the only part of me that is allowed to grow.

Returning to college at fifty has made that especially clear. My own mother went back to school when I was young, and decades later I found myself doing the same thing under very different circumstances. I discovered that I had not lost my intellectual ambition. I had simply not given it much room. I love studying, researching, writing, and realizing that I am still capable of learning, succeeding, and changing. School has not made me less devoted to my family. It has shown me that developing myself does not take anything away from the people I love.

I still believe men and women can be different without one being more important than the other. Elder David A. Bednar writes that men and women contribute “differently but equally” and are intended to progress together toward perfection (Bednar, 2006). I appreciate that idea because equality does not require sameness. Some of the strongest men I have known have also been gentle, affectionate, funny, and emotionally present. A woman can be maternal and intellectually ambitious, feminine and direct, nurturing and strong. I do not want to discard the qualities I was taught to value. I want greater freedom to decide what those qualities are allowed to look like.

My views of gender are more complicated now than they were when I was young, but I think that complexity has made them more honest. I can appreciate the women who cared for homes, raised children, created traditions, and held families

together without believing every woman must live exactly that way. I can admire men who provide, protect, lead, and fix things without believing those qualities belong only to men. I can love makeup, motherhood, femininity, and the traditions that shaped me while admitting that some of the expectations attached to them have hurt me. I am not interested in becoming less feminine. I am more interested in understanding which parts of femininity are truly mine and which parts I have spent my life believing I had to be.

Source: Bednar, David A. “Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan.” Liahona, June 2006.