Women

By May Swenson

Women should be pedestals
Or they should be little horses
moving pedestals those wooden
moving oldfashioned sweet
to the painted rocking
motions horses

the gladdest things in the toyroom

The feelingly
pegs and then
of their unfeelingly
ears To be
so familiar joyfully
and dear ridden

To be riding

To be chafed

egos dismount and the legs stride away

Immobile willing
sweetlipped to be set
sturdy into motion
and smiling Women

should always pedestals
be waiting to men
On What women Should Be

The poem “Women” by author May Swenson accurately and beautifully employs metaphors to depict the objectification that most women struggle against in life. The “things” we, the reader, are told women “should be” in the poem echo the limiting and controlling voices that many women hear either out loud, or maybe worse, in their own head. The poem uses the phrase “should be” to discuss how women are treated in American culture. All persons should be recognized as autonomous (self-governing) agents (one who acts). Unfortunately, for many persons this is not realized. My focus will be the objectification of American women by not only men, but by women as well. Professors Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton have each written extensively on the topic of objectification. Nussbaum created the seven ways she feels people are treated as things, and Langton expands on this list. When viewing Swenson’s poem through their guidelines, recognizing how women are treated as things becomes easier while also highlighting the damage that objectification does to women’s ability to both be, and to be accepted as, autonomous agents.

Swenson does not believe women “should be” any of the things she describes in her poem, and yet she recognizes, rightly I would argue, that things or objects are exactly what women are made to feel they “should be” (stanza 1). Treating a woman as an object is treating her as something other than the person she is. In the poem women are told, “Women should be pedestals moving pedestals moving to the motions of men” (stanza 1): Here a woman is a table, an object, used to lift up a man and move in ways that elevate his status or serve him.
She is not being treated as an autonomous agent; she is being treated as something she is not, an object. Martha Nussbaum, a professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, argues in her essay “Objectification” that “in all cases of objectification what is at issue is a question of treating one thing as another: One is treating as an object what is really not an object what is in fact, a human being” (218). Essentially, there is no insult in calling an object a “thing”. A chair is a chair; it cannot feel or express its desires, as it does not possess these abilities. A chair is not an autonomous agent acting on and of its own volition. A person, more specifically an adult woman, does however have the ability to express herself autonomously. When she is not attributed these abilities, she is being treated as an object. An example of this type of objectification would be the trophy wife. This is a married woman who is very attractive. She does not need to be smart or interesting. She elevates her husband because she is viewed as beautiful by other men and women. She is a prize or thing he has won, and he now can show off as his. The “pedestal” or trophy wife exists as an object to raise up her husband and allow herself to be beneath him. The idea of beauty being used as a means of objectification of women goes beyond the trophy wife, though, and is one of the more common ways women are treated as objects.

Women are objectified by men and other women when they are limited to their physical appearance. In Swenson’s poem, women are told how they “should be” in how they should look. She uses the metaphor of a small, painted and sweet toy horse to stand in for women (stanza 2). Rae Langton, a philosophy professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in her essay “Autonomy-Denial in Objectification”, writes on this type of objectification as part of her list of ways to identify when a person is being treated as a thing. She says, “Reduction to
appearance: one treats it primarily in terms of how it looks or how it appears to the senses” (229). When using the poem as a view of current beauty standards for women, women are told in order to be considered beautiful to men, or in general, they “should be” petite, wear makeup and be visually appetizing. Also, they should do all of this while remaining an object unable to move on their own (stanza 2). These ideas of beauty leave many women to feel they are not beautiful as they do not fit these standards. In telling women they should look certain ways, they are not being allowed to make autonomous, self-affirming decisions about their beauty or their body. Furthermore, when reducing a woman to her appearance, it is not uncommon to associate certain personalities or ideas with certain looks. For example, the pretty girl cannot also be the smart girl and the skinny girl is the lucky girl, because everyone wants to be thin. This is a very damaging way to objectify women as it involves not only others limiting women’s autonomous decisions but also women limiting themselves. By evaluating a woman only in her appearance she is not being viewed as a person. Not only are the women who do not fit the ideal beauty standard harmed by this objectification but also the women considered beautiful. When a woman is limited to her appearance, she is being limited as a person.

When men treat women as objects, even as beautiful or special objects, they are still treating them as an object. In Swenson’s poem, this is evident in the loving use of the horse. She writes, “…their ears so familiar and dear to the trusting fists to be chafed” (stanza 3). The “ears” trust the “fists”. The ears belong to the horse, an object that is loved. So much loved that parts of it are being rubbed raw from use. In applying this metaphor to a man’s treatment of a woman, it takes on a frightening implication. The woman trusts the hands and the man behind
the hands enough to be with him in either a sexual way or simply in a trusted relationship, and he abuses that trust by harming her he is treating her as an object. Worse still she is an object that is acceptable to abuse in favor of his pleasure. This entails one of the forms of treating a woman as an object that Nussbaum includes in her list- treating an object as “Violable”.

Nussbaum writes, “Violability. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that is permissible to break up, smash or break into” (218). The woman, like the “ears”, have been treated as breakable. While the woman may be loved, and the repeated use may indicate that she is favored, the fact that her body can be used to this point indicates she is being seen as an object and not valued as a person. Her ability to be used is what a man values, and that is a form of instrumentality.

One of the most significant ways men objectify women is by instrumentally using them. According to Nussbaum, instrumentality involves turning a person into a tool to use for one’s purpose and no longer recognizing them as a person in and of themselves (223). This use is commonly viewed in the sexual setting. Swenson writes of woman used and dismissed in this way when she writes of the rocking horse, “To be joyfully ridden rockingly ridden until the restored egos dismount and the legs stride away” (stanza 4). Once satisfied the man physically abandons the women with no concern for her autonomous desires or satisfaction. The line “egos dismount and the legs stride away” is literally written on the loins of the womanly shape in the poems form (stanza 4). She has been objectified for his satisfaction. This idea of sexual instrumentality is not new, and is evident according to Nussbaum in Immanuel Kant’s criticism of sex. Kant, according to Nussbaum, believes “sexual desire is a very powerful force that conduces to the thing-like treatment of persons, by which he means, above all, the treatment
of persons not as ends in themselves but as means or tools for the satisfaction of one’s own
desires” (224). This treatment most often applies to men’s treatment of women. When women
are viewed as a means to an end of men’s sexual desires. When a man reaches his climax that
often signals the end of the sexual experience. Women are told by men that they take too long
or are too difficult to bring to climax and so their needs are left to be satisfied at their own
hands or not at all. Ultimately, women are being told they “should be” satisfied in their ability
to be a tool used to satisfy a man. In that moment, as in other moments, if a woman says
nothing about what she needs or wants, or if she does and is ignored, then she is being
silenced.

If a woman is silenced either by being told she should not speak, or that when she does
her voice does not matter, she is being denied her rights as an autonomous agent to be heard.
Swenson tells women in the poem that they “should be”, “Immobile Sweetlipped sturdy and
smiling women should always be waiting” (Stanza 5). The word “sweetlipped” is implying a
woman should not speak against a man because that would not be a feminine or “sweet” way
to act. Moreover, women should look happy about it. The woman’s true feelings have been
silenced, they are not important and if silenced for too long that woman may give up her voice.
Langton feels strongly about speech in relation to women being treated as objects. This is
apparent when she says “Speech is a distinctive capacity of persons, just as distinctive perhaps
as autonomy and subjectivity” (229). People communicate through speaking. It is an important
way in which we connect with others or how we do not. To be autonomous requires one to
make decisions. Speaking gives a voice to those decisions and allows for them to be, hopefully,
acknowledged and acted on. Often times, in the context of education, girls are told that if they
speak too often they are being opinionated or domineering. While a man who speaks up is asserting himself and taking charge. In telling girls this we are telling them to deny themselves the right to speak and be heard. Their autonomous right to make decisions for themselves and give voice to those decisions is being destroyed. If a woman is silent men, or other women, will speak for her and what she truly wants, as an individual, will not be known. If a woman does speak but what she says is used as a means to harm her, then she is being silenced in a different way.

When a woman is silenced because a man disregards, or goes against her autonomous wishes she is having her autonomy violated. In Swenson’s poem women are told in the last stanza that they “should be” “willing to be set into motion by men” (stanza 6). Willingness implies a choice. However, in telling women what they “should be willing” to do for men, women are being told that, really, they have no choice (stanza 6). At no other point in “women” has it been questioned whether women would be willing participants in deciding how they “should be” (stanza 6). By placing the word “willing” at the end of the poem it makes it clear that what is expected of women is acceptance of their role as the “pedestal”. Langton writes of this particular form of autonomy denial when she says, “someone is ‘treated as an object’ in part by attributing autonomy to them in one way- so that autonomy can be denied a different way” (234). In Swenson’s poem acceptance is encouraged, but it does not dictate how the women will be treated. If women do not want to be the table they will still be the table if men want them to be. Langton’s example of autonomy violation is a rape case where the rapist demands to hear the woman’s cries of “no” in order to more fully satisfy his need to violate her. This type of autonomy denial is clearly disgusting. We have laws against rape to help guard
against this type of abuse. There is another form of autonomy denial, though, that Langton highlights as also important. Non-attribution of autonomy. Non-attribution is damaging to women’s autonomy much like autonomy violation, and yet its application is more subtle and thus it goes more often unnoticed and unpunished.

A harmful way that women’s autonomy is denied by men is when it is not even attributed to them. The poem as a whole is an example of this type of autonomy denial. The title “women” indicates this poem is directed at women. Not one woman, but women as a plural. From the first line “Women Should be” Women are being told how they “should be” because they apparently cannot figure it out on their own (stanza 1). It is assumed by men that they can answer this question for women and so the question need not be asked explicitly. Women’s autonomy is not being denied overall, it is not even being taken into consideration. Women are not being asked what they feel they should be. They are being told what they should be by men. They “should be” objects, like pedestals, rocking horses and immobile pretty toys (stanzas 1-6). Langton views non-attribution of autonomy to be “primarily a matter of attitude” (233). This approach to autonomy is assumed by men when they treat a woman as incapable of making choices for herself. When a man decides that a woman does not even need to be attributed autonomy he is saying she does not need to be given the opportunity to govern herself. Therefore, that man will tell that woman what she “should be”. As Langton writes,

“the basic problem has been that women have been cast in the role of human tools, as Aristotle described slaves; women have been treated as beings whose nature is to be directed by another, and whose purpose is instrumental; women have been treated as lacking in autonomy, and have had their autonomy systematically violated or stifled.
This links the idea of oppression with that of objectification: when women are treated as tools, they are treated as things, items lacking in agency” (241).

Women have been regulated to the status of object by both men and women through having their autonomy denied, violated or not attributed. Women have been treated as tables used to place men above them or used as little legless horses only moved when a man decides to ride them. The form of “Women” is that of a shapely female body stripped down to her shoulders, breast, stomach, vagina and legs. In eliminating her head the woman shaped by the poem cannot speak for herself. She has no feet so she cannot move on her own. She does not have arms and therefore will not be able to reach out or touch anyone. In forming the poem this way Swenson is visually reminding the reader of the confining way women are told they should look and act according to men and occasionally other women. This form also makes the poem harder to read at first glance. It requires one to look closer to appreciate the complexities involved. In this way Swenson is speaking to the complexities of women.

Swenson is denying anyone’s ability to judge this poem, this representation of women, without reading carefully. If women can be treated and considered this way; recognized, accepted and heard as human beings and not viewed as objects limited by their body or usefulness to others than they can first and most importantly see themselves as autonomous and second be seen and accepted by others as autonomous.
Works Cited

