Boys Will be Boys: An Analysis of the Portrayal of Masculinity in Film

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COM 260: American Cinema

Option A

Introduction

When you are asked to think of the "perfect man", what do you picture? Do you picture the stereotypical strong, handsome, independent man, or the tall, dark, brooding figure? Whatever you picture, it's clear that we all have our own definitions of "masculinity". The dictionary definition of masculinity is "the quality or nature of the male sex" (Merriam-Webster), however the working definition will change depending on the person who is defining it. Just as any other opinion or view someone may have, an individual's idea of what gender roles should be, depends on the environment in which they grow up in. For me personally, I got a pretty good idea of these traditional ideal's being pushed on the boys around me, more specifically, my two younger brothers.

Considering that I was the oldest, my brothers looked up to me and wanted to copy everything that I did. So that meant if I was playing dress up and carrying around my dolls, they also wanted to play dress up and have their own dolls to carry around. At this age they didn't see a difference between "boys and girls" toys, they just wanted to copy me. While my mom was more than willing to buy my brothers their own sets of costumes and dolls just so they could feel included, my dad shot down the idea almost immediately. He was raised with a younger brother and didn't have experience with a sister, so he believed that boys shouldn't have dolls, only action figures, which is what he grew up with. If my brothers wanted to play dress up, they had to wear costumes such as cowboys, superheroes or any other "boy costumes". While this didn't stop my brothers from wanting to copy me, they were eventually taught the difference between

what I played with and what they were "supposed" to play and would opt for the more "manly" option.

While this story is just my personal experience, my brothers are far from being the only kids who experienced this. Although family values play into the idea of what is considered "manly" and what is not, the media has begun to play a huge role in solidifying these ideals. It supports the idea that men should "support patriarchy, and the traditional characteristics of masculinity" and that it is "natural that man find the domination and exploitation of women and other men to be not only expected, but actually demanded" (Men, Masculinity, and the Media). Basically, the media portrays men as the "top dog", they are responsible for taking care of the family financially and making all the important decisions. In terms of film, they are the Rambo's, Dirty Harry's and Terminator's of the world, testosterone filled, powerhouses that can get any girl and defeat any villain. Very often we see these types of characters being the poster children for what we consider the ultimate man, but can this ultimate ideal of masculinity take different forms?

Movies often portray the idea that men must be masculine, however what does it mean to have masculinity? Are there different ways to show it and if so, is one way seen as less "manly" than another? Through the examples of the films *Taxi Driver (*1976), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), and *The Godfather* (1971), this paper will examine how these different movies portray the idea of its characters' masculinity and its effects on the movie as a whole.

Travis Bickle: The Struggle with Identity

Taxi Driver (1976), directed by Martin Scorsese, is an excellent film with the main character, Travis Bickle, being a great character study into the thoughts and actions of a man going through an identity crisis. The simplified plot of Taxi Driver is as follows; Travis Bickle (played by Robert De Niro), is an anti-social man that has just returned to New York from the Vietnam War. He decides to get a job as a taxi driver because he has no qualifications for anything better and wishes to work through the night, since he suffers from insomnia. During his night shifts, he bears witness to the corrupt, filthy, and crime-related lifestyles of hookers, pimps and criminals of downtown New York. These events along with his already fragile state of mind due to apparent mental illness, lead Travis to believe New York is filled with "filth" that nobody seems to want to "clean up".

Travis's bleak view of the world around him worsens throughout the film's progression. Eventually, it becomes evident that he has reached a kind of delirium, his thoughts are only occupied by the 'filth' that he witnesses every night as he works. The movie ends with Tavis acting on his desires to cleanse the filth. He kills Sport (Harvey Keitel), a pimp who had been "pimping out" twelve-year-old Iris (Jodie Foster), along with killing the timekeeper and Iris current "client". Travis's killing spree had earned him the title of "hero" in the eyes of the public as he had saved Iris and, in the process, cleansed the community of a group of thugs.

Throughout the film, Travis struggles with his identity and his masculinity (in this case they go hand in hand). He is no longer in war, so his previous identity of being a masculine soldier is no longer appropriate in his current setting. Although he is aware of

this, it's hard for him to fit into his surroundings and therefore, he attempts to change the world to fit what he wants his identity to be. He decides he wants to do what nobody else will do and "clean up" the streets of New York. In this case he can be considered a vigilante; "a member of a volunteer committee organized to suppress and punish crime summarily (as when the processes of law are viewed as inadequate)" (Merriam-Webster). By taking matters into his own hands, Travis is attempting to fulfill the idea he has of what a man should be and, in a way, scripts himself as the hero in the story of his own life (Portraits of the Postmodern Person in Taxi Driver, Raging Bull, and the King of Comedy).

The film suggests that "identity is not authentic but always synthetic, a kind of customized amalgam of images and slogans drawn from" (Portraits of the Postmodern Person in Taxi Driver, Raging Bull, and the King of Comedy). Travis's identity and in turn, masculinity, is fully dependent upon his surroundings. He seeks to be the ideal, romantic man to Betsy and when that doesn't work, he decides to become the violent hero instead, seeing as he truly believes it's what he is meant to do. His masculinity is "frustrated by the inescapable presence of postmodernity" (The City and The Self: Intertextuality, Masculine Identity and Images of Postmodernity in Martin Scorsese's Taxi Driver (1976) and Michael Mann's Heat (1995)), meaning he feels pressure to behave in this way because society pushes it on him and tells him that in order to be considered a "manly" hero, he must be violent, and numb to any emotions, with the exception of anger.

This pressure from society is very apparent in how it reacts to Travis's "heroic" actions at the end of the film. They celebrate the fact that he gets rid of the "filth" on the streets and this in turn validates his masculinity. By becoming the "taxi driver who battles gangsters" (Portraits of the Postmodern Person in Taxi Driver, Raging Bull, and the King of Comedy), Travis finally becomes the masculine, heroic figure that he so longed for. The violence that would, in most cases, be scoffed at, is celebrated because it was done in the name of gaining masculinity, which makes it all ok in the eyes of the public.

Homer Parrish: Shattered Masculinity

The Best Years of Our Lives, directed by William Wyler, tells the story of three veterans, Fred Derry, Homer Parrish, and Al Stephenson, returning to the fictional mid-western town of Boone City after the conclusion of World War II. Each man must face the challenges that come with integrating back into post-war society. Homer loses both of his hands during the war and now has to use mechanical hook prostheses. While home, he must deal with the adjustments he, his family and his girlfriend, Wilma, will face in light of his disability. Al's tendency to drink and adjust to the banking business causes tension with his family and business associates. Lastly Fred, who suffers from shell shock, or PTSD as we now call it, becomes frustrated with his wife and being unable to find suitable employment.

Although each one of these characters has their own story and in their own way deals with, as you could say, a "hit to their ego", the person I really want to focus on is

Homer. Unlike Fred and Al who suffer more from mental issues in their return home, Homer's issues are both mental and physical. His physical issues are obviously the loss of his hands, which were burned beyond saving in a naval battle, and his mental issues, presumably depression and anger, are a result from his injuries. Not only do these issues affect Homer personally, but they also affect how he is now viewed by society.

While traveling home, Homer explains to Al and Fred that "the Navy provided him with excellent training in the use of the hooks but that he still dreads returning home" (Heroes and Misfits: The Troubled Social Reintegration of Disabled Veterans in 'The Best Years of Our Lives.'). Homer's reluctance to go home is quite understandable. Seeing someone with prosthetics is jarring enough, but to come back home to face your friends and family who haven't seen you like this can't be easy. Another reason why Homer is reluctant to come home, is because he must face his girlfriend, Wilma. Before he left, Homer had promised Wilma that when he came home from war, they would get married. However, with his now injured state, Homer considers himself the opposite of the ideal version of a man and won't be able to take care of Wilma the way that a man is expected to. Instead, she would have to step into the role and take care of him. This leads him to question his worth because he only knows one way of living, to take care of his family which he can't really do.

Before coming home, Homer already feels like he will be made out to be a monster. He is told by doctors and society that his prosthetics can make him angry and desperate, all leading to him being a menace to society (Heroes and Misfits: The

Troubled Social Reintegration of Disabled Veterans in 'The Best Years of Our Lives.').

This can seem like it's simply not true, considering his family and friends feel sorry and want to sympathize with him, however his anger towards the things he cannot control and his inability to step up as the "man" for his family, leads many to be afraid of him and his reactions. He often feels as if those who are trying to help him with everyday tasks that he is capable of doing (albeit they are a bit harder to do) are simply "babying" him and no longer view him as being a capable head of household. He even tells Wilma after taking off his hooks, that he is "as dependent as a baby" (The Best Years of Our Lives).

Homer's somewhat obsession with not being "man" enough for Wilma is the cause of deeply rooted values of the time. His masculinity is built upon the traditional idea that the man will need to be independent and be able to provide for his family. Not only can Homer not be fully independent (he, at the very least, needs someone with him every night to help him take off his hooks) he is afraid that he is not fit enough to take care of anyone since he can't take care of himself. It's a matter of pride and his sudden loss of masculinity through something as simple as physicality, is a great example of how fragile masculinity can be (The Problem of Recognition: The Disabled Male Veteran and Masculinity as Spectacle in William Wyler's The Best Years of Our Lives). Unlike many other examples of masculinity in film, Homer is the example of what can happen when a man becomes overwhelmed in the ideal sight of a man.

In the end, one of the reasons why I love this film is because Homer abandons all his fears about his "loss of Masculinity". He realizes in the end that Wilma's persistence and care is not out of pity, but out of genuine love. He allows himself to express to her his fears of not being good enough for her and he finally opens himself up to be happy. He not only regains his sense of masculinity, but develops in the process, a new kind, one that allows him to truly be himself and do all that he can with what he has.

The Corleone's: Men of Tradition

The Godfather (1971), directed by Francis Ford Coppola, is regarded as one of the greatest films of all time and with very good reason. The story itself is comprehensive, attention grabbing and goes to great lengths to develop the characters. The main plot of the film is Vito Corleone's (head of the Corleone mafia family) youngest son Michael has just returned from WWII. The entire Corleone family is involved with the Mafia, except for Michael who just wants to live a normal life. The business of the family is kind and generous to those who give respect but can be ruthlessly violent whenever anything stands against the good of the family. When Vito passes away, Michael becomes the unlikely Don (head) of the family and must now learn how to navigate the crazy world of the mafia.

Crime and mobster films usually primarily revolve around a male dominating the roles and depiction of gangsters and the mafia (Revenge, Masculinity and Glorification of Violence in the Godfather). The Godfather is no different. The men in the Corleone

family are obviously very powerful as they are responsible for making all the decisions. Women of the Corleone family are involved in cooking, household activities, managing children and raising babies. "They are mere spectators to the criminal activities of the larger agenda of organized crime" (Revenge, Masculinity and Glorification of Violence in the Godfather). All the men involved in the mafia are very stereotypical "gangsters". They are intimidating, strong and cunning, what some might view as a very "macho" man. These men often project their power through unity and shared goals. "This allows for the more aggressive masculine traits to be dispersed throughout the collective, rather than pinpointed within an individual identity, but also allows aggression to be displayed as a necessary function of survival" (Screening the Mafia: Masculinity, Ethnicity and Mobsters from the Godfather to The Sopranos). This essentially means that there is a hierarchy of power in the mafia. All these men care deeply about their pride and image is very important. Given that Michael doesn't really fit into this sense of "pride" that is present in all the other men in the family, how is it that he eventually becomes the head of the family?

Michael kind of just "falls" into the family business. With no one really left to fill the position after Vito's death, Michael is forced to step up and become the head of the family. The reason why he wasn't first choice was because one, he was the youngest, two, his older brother Sonny was the one who was supposed to step up and three, Vito simply never saw Michael in the position of Don. He was the closest son to Vito, hence why he always wanted him to be out of the crime business and into something more favorable, like politics (Revenge, Masculinity and Glorification of Violence in the

Godfather). When Sonny is killed and Vito has a heart attack and dies, Michael now must carry on the family business.

Although Michael wasn't the ideal choice for the position of the Don, it didn't have anything to do with his masculinity. He can be seen in the beginning as someone who is in the traditional sense, manly (considering he is a veteran). However, according to his family, he didn't possess the ability to be able to make the "tough" decisions needed to be the Don. When he does ultimately gain the position, he is shown to be more than capable of handling the responsibility, even being more aggressive and violent than his father, thus gaining the "masculinity" that the rest of the family possesses.

The two "Dons" (Vito and Michael) have very different techniques on how to run the family so they can both be viewed as very "masculine". However, Michael's ways of "getting things done" will most likely be viewed by the audience as the more "masculine" option. Vito was a modest man that was admired as a husband, father and a godfather. "He cares about the family image and although Michael, though he had remarkable success and had constructed safe horizons for his family by executing ruthless and coldblooded murders, he lacked that sense of humanity". (Revenge, Masculinity and Glorification of Violence in the Godfather). Michael went from a man who was hesitant to kill, to a ruthless leader that orders the deaths of all his rivals in an instant. The masculinity that we see from him now is very different from the one we see him possess in the beginning. The atmosphere and the activities of the mafia change him, and we see him gain more confidence in himself than before. This gives us, as an audience, a

sense of how values and ideals pertaining to masculinity and our surroundings can really change a person and how we view them.

What's the Verdict?

So, what about the question posed in the beginning of this paper, is one portrayal of masculinity viewed as being less "manly" than another? Well, I believe the answer to this question is a matter of opinion. If you grew up in a culture surrounded by stereotypical "gender rules" where the man is the head of household and portrays only strength, then you would probably agree that *Taxi Driver* and *The Godfather* have more "manly" characters than in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. On the other hand, many may view the veteran's story of rebuilding and adapting to be more genuinely masculine than the other two characters. Overall, every single character possesses some form of "masculinity", it's just up to the viewer to decide which one is more appealing to them.

Conclusion

In summation, movies often portray the idea that men must be masculine and that is clearly shown through the films *Taxi Driver (*1976), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), and *The Godfather* (1971). Although the portrayal of masculinity varies between the three films, it can be said that the overall idea of having to be a "tough, strong" man is the same. These ideals of masculinity have been deeply rooted in our society for a long time considering all these films were made in different years and still present the

same values. Even though cinema today has made advancements in portraying women

in these traditionally masculine roles (i.e., *Wonder Woman* (2017)), instead of men, the

idea of being manly in a certain way is still very apparent. We still have a long way to go

in terms of breaking these toxic ideals in both society and film.

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