

Representation of men in Popular Culture Notes

Women talking for men

- It has been argued that because dominant men have learned to speak with the voice of reason and impartiality
- The workings of masculinity have remained invisible as these dominant men speak for all masculinity
- So it is argued that it is hard to analyse men's accounts of their own experiences because these accounts are not forthcoming.
- Men learn to hide any emotion from their accounts
- So they centre their lives around the demands of work, where male identity is supposedly constructed
- But feminism has sought to account for men's experience in particular ways –
- Which may assert all men to be fundamentally the same
- Reinforcing a traditional Kantian conception of masculinity as somehow dominated by an animal nature
- As something that can only be curbed by the strong hand of reason
- There is then a relationship between masculinity and reason

Existentialism and masculinity

- Some of the basic ideas associated with existentialism include
- There are no rules laid down and you are free to do as you please and the importance of the will
- we relate to the outside world mainly through our feelings but there are differences – some (Heidegger) note feelings like love and joy whereas Sartre notes feelings of boredom, anxiety, nausea and alienation.
- We need to exert our will in order to escape the emptiness of the world into a more meaningful existence.
- Existentialism is about awareness of existence of oneself and the relationship between the self and that which is not oneself
- Those who see themselves as part of a group and absorb the values of a group without reflection, live inauthentically (which is one of the criticisms applied to the new man idea)
- Existence implies a confrontation with what is not oneself – with the existences of other people and things
- Actions are central to existentialists – they say Man is defined, not by what he is, but by what he does and by what he chooses to do by what he commits himself to
- Choices have to be continually renewed or perhaps even altered
- We could think about masculinity in crises in relation to masculinity in existentialist crisis.
- If we think about the notion of masculinities that are presented in popular culture
- We could suggest that men are confused and anxious about the choices of how to be - Which version of masculinity to follow and to continually renew

Discourses of masculinity

- There is no one **unitary masculinity** – but several masculinities in contemporary western culture
- These are constituted through **diverse and changing** systems of representations of men
- Like femininity, masculinity has undergone drastic changes since the 60s and diversified
- **Three main discourses**
- There are supposedly **three key discourses** of masculinity which we draw upon in terms of representations
 - Old man, new man, new lad
- **Traditional – typical male values and behaviours**
- The discourses of traditional masculinity refers to those **values and behaviours** which have traditionally been seen as typically male – as defining men
- This is an **essentialist understanding**
- Men in this are **strong, powerful, authoritative, hard, aggressive, competitive, rational, lacking emotions, heterosexual, tough**
- **Strength and power** are key characteristics of traditional masculinity
- Work is also central
- It is more debatable whether fashion has been a part of masculinity **e.g.** even in the era identified as traditional masculinity 40s and 50s – there has been an interest in fashion and consumption
- Also men were **breadwinners** – which started to be questioned by various social movements including feminists
- The idea of a naturally **high male sex drive** is constructed across a range of sites from talk shows to film, and women's and men's magazines

Recapping theories of New Man and New Lad

- Beynon (2002) argues that there are two **strands to the new man**
- To emphasise its differences from traditional or old masculinity
- a. New man as nurturer**
 - The new man as **nurturer is in touch with his feminine** side but heterosexual
 - He is caring, sensitive, emotionally skilled and shares household duties including childcare
- b. New man as narcissistic**
 - New man as narcissist represents men as **fashion –conscious** and **health conscious consumers**
 - The new man is well groomed, and possesses a muscular body achieved through exercise and diet
 - Focus on **consumption, appearance, sexuality and emotions** at some level
- New man has been criticised for being **inauthentic in** popular culture
- **1990s metrosexual**

- In 1990s metrosexual emerged which is seen as a refashioned version of the new man as they share many characteristics
- The metrosexual is **young, middle class, trendy and lives in major** urban areas
 - Is heterosexual but comfortable enough **to play with the** rules of traditional masculinity – **including sexuality**
 - Believes in **gender equality** – and is prepared to take on greater roles in the domestic sphere – such as being an **active father**
 - **Beckham** is often cited as a metrosexual

Backlash against feminism – British and also US

- 1990s – the emergence of **the new lad**
- As a response to the new man and growing gender equality of the 80s and 90s often characterised by interest in **football, drinking and sex** and often loutish and aggressive manner
- Attitudes to women are marked **by sexism and objectification**
- Newness is highlighted by the **juvenile way through sexualised banter**, joking and pulling pranks
- The pervasiveness of **humour** means that **sexism and homophobia** usually feature in the form of jokes and irony

Contemporary discourses

- **Simplistic to have three discourses**
- Obviously it is **highly simplistic to say** that these exist in this way –
- Often there are elements! And hence perhaps the confusion and crisis (or even the existential crisis)
- All discourses of masculinity are **multi-faceted** – revolving around a **range of issues, themes and behaviours**
- Representation of maleness and men in popular culture **are often partial**, Feona Attwood – suggests that **bricolage signifies** contemporary masculinity – the **mixing and appropriating** of familiar and new signifiers of masculinity
- **Sex and sexuality are central to the construction of masculinity**
 - The increase in sexualised imagery and the move towards ordinary or real models constitute (it is argued) a **normalisation of pornography**.
 - The men in **men's magazines** don't grow up

Men at work and home

- The fact that **work** in men's magazines is conspicuous by its **absence**
- Given the centrality of work to **masculinity as a source** of identity – this invites the question why there is such a lack of interest

- Jackson suggests that work **has become less stable**, more fragmented and more risky
- Instead a more secure source of **masculinity is sought in the body**
- The body **hasn't replaced work** as a key source of identity, but it has emerged as an **alternative site**

Some representations in popular culture

- **Hospital dramas**

- Men as doctors changed from infallible to more vulnerable characters (doctor hero)
- In more contemporary dramas such as Casualty and Holby City/ER there are **female doctors**
- But they have become more **vulnerable and human** and do make mistakes but still marked by rationality

- **Crime dramas**

- Very popular genre **is crime or police drama but often still male dominated**
- In the 50s there was **moral certainty**
- Whereas contemporary police tend to be flawed – **prepared to flout the law to achieve results**
- In a sense we could suggest that this is an **existential crisis of male** identity where the lines of what men should be have become blurred.

- **Soap operas**

- Used to be a female genre **but** have broadened appeal – to include business, crime and violence
- In soaps, the boundaries of work, domestic, professional and personal are blurred
- Male characters are drawn into the traditionally feminine activity of talking and thinking about personal and domestic affairs
- Fatherhood has also moved into the narratives in soap operas

Rise of the Geek

- Perhaps associating masculinity with rationality again particularly with representations of the trendy IT geek

Television programmes

- There are **make-over style** programmes on television which feature male as well as female subjects (what not to wear)
- Some programmes such as **Queer Eye for the Straight Guy** are explicitly make over shows for men
- These type of programmes invite viewers to marvel in a **humorous but critical** way at how **unfashionable, how unhygienic, and ungroomed** and out of shape some **men** are
- Which presumes a **consensus about a lack of** concern about **attractiveness is unacceptable for men**
- **Beauty and style presented as consumption**

- The creation of a **beautiful and stylish appearance** is presented to men in the same way as it has been presented to women for decades
- As a matter of **consumption**
- Where men have **become sexual objects** to be looked at and are judged and desired in terms of **beauty and aesthetics**
- **Detective films**
 - **Male centred action heroes use force, violence and detective skills**
 - **Detective films** are an example of male centred genres (usually)
 - Where the **action heroes use** detective skills as well as **physical force and violence**

Character House

1. David Shore's American medical television series, *House*, highlights Dr Gregory House as an **antihero** who diagnose patients by uncovering their secrets and lies.
2. House is **based** on Sherlock Holmes
3. Both **characters are eccentric** and **drug addicts**
4. Both have a **supportive best friend** (Dr Watson, Dr Wilson)
5. Both solve their cases **through reason and logic**

House as not essentialist

1. House also **embodies traits of the new man** and **new lad -Cooking** and also caring but is also **cynical** and **mistrustful** (which is a critique of the new man masculinity)
2. He often relies on **emotional manipulation** to solve his cases and keep his team working for him
3. He also relies on a **support network** or **family** which can be seen as domestic and therefore **feminised behaviour**

New Lads

1. House also fits some characters of the **new lad – narcissistic, misogynistic, uses prostitutes and infantile behaviour**
 2. House is a big kid – devices practical jokes
 3. **Maturity** was strongly associated with **Victorian masculinity**
 4. Today it seems to be rejected
 5. Implicit in the **immaturity** is the idea that **men are no longer perfect** or idealised
 6. **House is often mistaken** and his patient often **gets worse**
1. House **defies rules** and **ethics**
 2. His behaviour contains a **self-awareness** which acknowledges **shortcomings** and stereotypes but still **follows them**

3. House, like Holmes, **challenges social conventions** and stereotypes, **offering different, complex alternatives.**