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 main 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.**

## Toxic Masculinity

1. Refers to traditional stereotypes which include misogyny, homophobia and also promotes violence, bullying, aggression.

2. Also refers to emotional repression an arises out of hegemonic masculinity.

3. There are still representations of toxic masculinity in the media and popular culture – including YouTube amongst others.

4. Geek toxic masculinity is also found in programmes such as *The Big Bang Theory*.

5. Where toxic masculinity has become embedded in geek culture and makes fun of males for not living up to the hegemonic ideal.