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# **Towards Diversity**

## **Tracing Changing Constructions of Masculinities in some Twentieth Century Film and Fiction**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in English  
at Massey University, Albany Campus,  
Auckland, New Zealand

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2001

## **Abstract**

The theory that masculinities are plural (more than one possible version), socially constructed, and historically produced is supported in this analysis of masculinity in selected American, English, Australian and New Zealand texts of film and fiction across the twentieth century.

Post-structural thinking and the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan, applied to close readings of the selected texts, show that the moment of sexual division must be understood as a product of intense cultural mediation – an event experienced at the suggestion of the society in which men find themselves.

The liberal humanist notion of a fixed and coherent self which traditionally was a male self is shown to be increasingly (as the century progresses) displaced by plurality: masculinity is represented diversely, and also increasingly as changing and relational.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to pay tribute to my supervisor, Dr Mary Paul, whose knowledge and clear thinking always made me reshape my thoughts. I would also like to thank Dr Jenny Lawn for her advice and support during Mary's absence overseas. Thank you too, to my sister, Ruth, for all those hours of typing, and to my colleagues at Kaipara College for two years of tolerance and encouragement.

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## INTRODUCTION

Scholarly work on feminism has been around for thirty years while little has been written on masculinity outside the popular press. Yet there are many good reasons why both men and women should benefit from a close examination of masculine codes of behaviour and the images of manhood promoted by Western culture. I believe, first of all, that the discourse of radical feminism deserves a continuing response, and, secondly, I am affected by Peter Middleton's contention in *The Inward Gaze* that modern men have suffered greatly in a series of wars and that such study might be a useful step towards preventing their endless repetition (3). War is seldom absent from the texts I examine in this project.

There are many reasons for the paucity of material on the topic. There is a gender question within authorship for a start. As Middleton writes in the introduction to his book: "Women writers know there are men writers, and black writers know there are white men writers but we white men writers... often don't see our own condition." He goes on to quote American sociologist, Michael Kimmel who said in a newspaper interview: "When I look in the mirror... I see a human being – a white middle-class male – gender is invisible to me because that is where I am privileged. I am the norm. I believe that most men do not know they have a gender" (qtd. Middleton, 11). The usual reason given for men's lack of both political discourse and academic scholarship, when compared to feminism is that, as Middleton concedes, men have a vested interest in silence. But a more important reason involves the lack of a language for such reflection:

Masculine bias in many existing concepts of subjectivity and power is an obstacle to such gender reflection. Men after all have written plenty about their subjectivity and power, but they have constantly universalized it at the same time, and assumed that the rationality of their approach was the sum total of rationality. Universality and rationalism were built into these concepts to avoid such disturbing self-examination by men. (3)

Perhaps this gives me, as a woman, enough justification for writing a thesis largely about men. I say 'largely' first because masculinity and femininity are relational terms – to speak of one is to make reference to the other, and secondly I qualify the

statement because in writing this thesis I have discovered that to write about men or masculinity is to write much more broadly – it is to write about history, sociology and ideology, and to extend to questions of class, race and nation.

I have narrowed the project to the construction of masculinity in a range of twentieth century texts in film and fiction, texts produced by both men and women in Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Europe and the United States. I argue that the changes in masculinity that took place across this century can best be understood when seen alongside challenges to the long-held humanist's notion of self and subjectivity which saw the individual as a coherent, autonomous and immutable entity, subject to rational thought and argument. Literary and cultural works are often the first sites in which changing notions of self and society are developed or negotiated; it is for this reason that post-structuralist theorists have often used modernist or avante garde creative works (from the early twentieth century) to illustrate their ideas.

To discuss masculinity at all requires some attention to definitions. But to ask what is a man? (or a woman) leads one inevitably on to dealing with wider questions of subjectivity and to wrestling with theories of what constitutes the self. Stuart Hall, in an article entitled 'Brave New World' writes:

We can no longer conceive of 'the individual' in terms of a whole and completed Ego or autonomous "Self." SELF is experienced as more fragmented and incomplete, composed of multiple "selves" or identities in relation to the different social worlds we inhabit, something with a history, "produced",... in process. (qtd. Grant, 15)

Knowledge about gender involves the biological, the intuitive (the 'deep masculine' for example), the God-ordained, the socially constructed and the everyday commonsense knowledge acquired by simply living in the world. R. W. Connell discusses all of these claims to knowledge of masculinity in the early chapters of his book *Masculinities* (1995). His preference for the plural term arises from his claim that masculinities are historical, coming into existence at particular times and always subject to change. Informed by his research I have constantly asked myself: what practice has enabled this or that knowledge to emerge and whose interests are/were served by this social practice?

Peter Middleton, in his definition, brings up the question of backroom power. He maintains that "The term 'masculinity' is almost as elusive as 'subjectivity' but whereas subjectivity has been in the glare of intellectual attention for centuries, masculinity has

been left behind the scenes, writing the scripts, directing the action and operating the cameras, taken for granted and almost never defined” (152, 3). My selection of stories by Katherine Mansfield shows the effects of this ‘taken for granted’ power. These stories also interrogate some of the compelling cultural myths of their time including the idea of the fixed self and the immutable nature of sexual identity.

The idea of a fixed self is questioned by Mansfield’s insistence on multiple perspectives which suggest that everything should be looked at through multiple lenses. In ‘Prelude’ the little girl Kezia looks out on the garden/world through two coloured glass panels in the dining-room window. Through one a blue lawn and blue arum lilies appear; through the other, a yellow lawn with yellow lilies... Then her sister appears – to dust the dining-room tables and chairs on the lawn – “a little Chinese Lottie”... as she seems through the yellow glass: “Was that really Lottie? Kezia was not quite sure until she looked through the ordinary window” (225). It is hard for her to see Charlotte for what she really is – assuming (an)other is ever truly knowable. Kezia, however, feels reassured of truth/reality/normality when she returns to the clear glass but the certainty offered has already been subtly undercut by the incongruity of the indoor furniture being seen in an outdoor setting. In fact the family is house-moving but the scene (Part II in the sequence) gently foreshadows many terrifying incidents of insecurity, misunderstanding and confusion to come. And most of these are suffered by women or girls as a result of the actions – unconscious or deliberate – of men or small boys.

The difficulty of arriving at precise definitions is further addressed by Peter Middleton when he comments on the term ‘masculinity’:

Its relation to other nouns like male, man, manhood, manliness and virility is far from obvious. As adjective, the term ‘masculine’ moves between the identification of a person’s sex as male and socially validated norms of acceptable behaviour for males. As noun, its referent will depend on what assumptions about subjectivity and society determine its context. For some sociologists masculinity is a role, for some post-structuralists it is a form of representation. Central to all the usages seems to be an element of acculturation. Masculinity is socially constructed, but how and why will depend on the theory we use, as well as the significance given to the idea of social construction. (153)

Connell, as a sociologist, endorses these views on masculinity as a social construct. His claim that “definitions of masculinity are deeply enmeshed in the history

of institutions and economic structures” (29) is borne out in my analysis of the novel *Man Alone* (1939). Here we look at masculinities both produced and modified by the historical, political and economic forces at work in New Zealand in the early settler years. Jock Phillips’ research into colonial and twentieth century New Zealand is commended by Connell for its focus on “social relations on the widest possible scale – the global expansion of European power” (29). In particular Phillips’ book *A Man’s Country?* (1987) demonstrates the role of the state in fostering if not creating specific models of masculinity. Early in the book Phillips discusses the effect of men outnumbering women in the new society. All-male work-places and noisy, unruly drinking establishments created a masculine subculture which resulted in serious problems of social order. But the colonial state, in promoting the family farm as the basis for agricultural settlement, gradually tied masculinity into marriage and thus modified the model of masculinity that threatened to become the norm. Later, however, the demands of social control changed. At the turn of the century when things were much quieter – when the male/female ratio was more balanced, the Maori people almost conquered, and urbanisation on the increase – “the state reversed course and set about the incitement of a violent masculinity”:

First for the Boer War, then for two World Wars, white New Zealand men were mobilized for the British imperial armies. In fascinating case studies of public rituals around arrival and departure, Phillips shows how politicians and press fabricated a public account of New Zealand manhood. This linked a farmer-settler ethos with racist notions of imperial solidarity. Maori men, at the same time, were mobilized for Maori battalions with appeals to a separate warrior myth. (Connell, 29, 30)

Such contradictory messages about manhood were bridged by the promotion of organized sport – especially rugby – to produce an exemplary kind of masculinity. When the 1905 All Black touring team returned from England they were met by the Prime Minister at a civic welcome-home ceremony. In Connell’s words “the exemplary status of sport as a test of masculinity, which we now take for granted, is in no sense natural. It was produced historically, and in this case [the 1905 All Black case] we can see it produced deliberately as a political strategy” (30).

In the preface to the revised edition of his book Phillips comments on the mixed reception it has enjoyed since its first publication in 1987. He claims that literature

students influenced by post-structural theory have found much in it to interest them “as it deals extensively with structures of discourse” and “it was within such structures that masculinity came to be understood in New Zealand” (viii). Psychoanalytic theory can suggest ways in which these historical/cultural discourses become attached to the individual at the moment of sexual division.

In their depiction of masculinities the specific texts I have chosen for this project illustrate a movement towards recognition of diversity, plurality and the post-structuralist’s notion of meaning – one which arises from the infinite play of differences within a closed system. Early in the century – in Mansfield, for example, the process is covert but the hints are there and the writing strains to reveal the hidden. Only recently has the double sidedness of her stories been exposed. By the late nineties *The Full Monty* celebrates freedom (for women at least) and presents, however cautiously, new gender options, new models of masculinity for the millennium.

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At the beginning of the century the humanist notion of ‘man’ began to be deconstructed and the values of autonomy and stability when applied to the self, called into question. Freud’s discovery of the unconscious had a profound effect on twentieth century thinking, as did his ‘narrative’ of the Oedipus complex. As Connell notes, Freud’s early work coincided with “a ferment in the European intelligentsia that produced modernist literature, avant-garde painting and music, radical social ideas, spirited feminist and socialist movements, and the first homosexual rights movement” (*Masc.*, 8). He maintains that Freud was sufficiently open to this ferment to question almost everything European culture had taken for granted about gender. He sees Freud’s work as the starting-point of modern thought about masculinity and laments the tendency of later masculinity researchers to disregard those ideas. Disrupting the “apparently natural object ‘masculinity’, he made enquiry into its composition both possible and necessary” (*Masc.*, 8). Connell claims that Freud understood that sexuality and gender were not fixed by nature but were constructed through a long and conflict-ridden process. Increasingly he saw the Oedipus complex as the key moment in this development – precipitated in boys by rivalry with the father and terror of castration. In ‘Little Hans’ and the ‘Rat Man’, two case studies, these ideas were documented in 1909. They illustrated the dynamics of a formative relationship. But he argued also that

homosexuality was not a simple gender switch – that male inverts often retain the mental quality of masculinity. At this point he offered the hypothesis that humans were constitutionally bi-sexual – that currents of masculinity and femininity coexisted in everyone. As Connell sees it, this implied that adult masculinity was a complex and precarious construction. In the Wolf Man case he identified a pre-Oedipal narcissistic masculinity which underpinned castration anxiety. The case is famous for the clinical method of separating layer after layer of emotion and ‘mapping the shifting relationships between them’ (*Masc.*, 9). He sees the study as a challenge to all later research on masculinity since it documents, above all, the tensions *within* masculine character and its vicissitudes through the course of a life.

Later Freud developed his theory of personality structure. By internalizing the parents’ prohibitions the super-ego is formed in the aftermath of the Oedipus complex. What is most significant here is that Freud saw it as having a *gendered* character, arising as it does from the child’s relation with the father, and more distinct in boys than in girls. He also identified a sociological dimension in the super-ego, treating it as the means by which culture obtains mastery over individual desire, especially aggression. “Here was the germ of a theory of the patriarchal organization of culture, transmitted between generations through the construction of masculinity” (*Masc.*, 10). Connell claims that the point Freud most insistently made about masculinity was that it never exists in a pure state. Layers of emotion coexist and contradict. He always saw femininity as part of a man’s character – but later psychoanalysts were to abandon his theory of bisexuality.

Kaja Silverman, in *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983), makes similar observations. She also points out that Freud notes in “An Outline of Psychoanalysis (1940)” the difficulty of attributing any absolute value to the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ because they do not correspond to any human essence. In doing so, she claims that “he comes very close to suggesting that the categories of male and female only acquire meaning through their opposition to each other – in other words, that they comprise a binary set analagous to antonyms in language, and must be understood as belonging to a closed system of signification” (39). Only within the confines of this system could oppositions like aggressivity/passivity designate two different sexual positions, “just as if it is there and there alone that the penis signifies ‘plenitude,’ and the vagina signifies ‘lack’” (39). Lacan, she explains, extended the notion of lack to include the male subject as well as the female by distinguishing between penis and phallus – where phallus designates the

privileges of the Symbolic, privileges from which the son is temporarily excluded. But, she points out, even the Freudian paradigm makes clear the inadequacy of the male subject, in its acknowledgement that he relies for his authentication upon the felt inferiority of the female subject. She cites Hollywood melodramas and the ease with which they challenge the male subjects' potency by putting it repeatedly into crisis. *Rebel Without a Cause* is a text I examine which focuses on male inadequacy, and *The Best Years of Our Lives* is a movie of the forties which opens the curtain on male castration. These texts go to show that the moment of sexual division must be understood as a product of intense cultural mediation - an event experienced in retrospect and at the 'suggestion' of the society in which men find themselves.