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Encouraging Better Men

Men are really bad. Specifically, the social construct of cis-hetero-normative men is really bad. This type of “man” is exemplified by those who take bold action, assert their dominance, and toss aside the feeble emotions. This idea of masculinity was popular within many cultures for a long time. Most of human history was defined by war, and these ideas of masculinity promoted the soldiers needed. However, the new world for men is becoming “less comfortable” due to the changes in social norms. It is challenging to find the proper responses to “being a man.” Unfortunately, I have seen a rise in reactionary content against the mainstream culture that these men believe “dethroned” them. This content pushes toxic ideals of masculinity. In response to the toxic values, *Vagabond* offers an alternative perspective of masculinity that challenges masculine notions of strength and emotion in healthier ways.

*Vagabond* is a manga created by Takehiko Inoue from 1998 to 2015, and has been on an indefinite hiatus since. *Vagabond* received high praise within online culture, regarded with *Berserk* and *Vinland Saga* as the Big Three of Seinen manga. These three are renowned for their mature content, complex themes, and compelling protagonists. Seinen manga are created for a mature audience of adult men compared to mainstream, popular Shonen manga for young boys.*Vagabond’*s genre is classified as a historical manga because it is a fictional retelling of Miyamoto Musashi’s life. Miyamoto Musashi is considered the most famous swordsman in Japanese history with an undefeated 61 record in duels. Inspired by Eiji Yoshikawa's novel *Musashi,* Inoue wanted to illustrate the story that he envisioned when he read the novel. Contrary to many works focusing on Musashi’s later life, Inoue wanted to tell the story of how a young, violent “animal” turns into the enlightened philosopher later in life. Through this direction, Inoue demonstrates how men should develop into mature adults.

True strength extends further beyond the physical. Musashi’s entire journey within *Vagabond* is constantly driven by his perception of strength. In his own words, Musashi describes his goal as “becoming invincible under the sun.” When he is asked why, Musashi simply replies, “Well, I don’t know…’cause I’m a man.” Society views strength, broadly, as a masculine trait and men should *want* to be strong. Adichie characterizes that society wants “hard men” who should be “afraid of fear, weakness, and vulnerability” (10:45-53). In the beginning, Musashi effortlessly kills enemy soldiers and bandits that are larger and older than him. His physical brutality, animalistic instinct, and general disregard for life are on full display to show that he is strong. Within traditional masculinity, Musashi is a “hard man” who has overcome his humanity. Yet, Inoue illustrates that he is not even close to being truly strong as his entire perspective of strength is turned upside down by the end of the series.

Strength must bend to kindness. In the last arc before *Vagabond’*s hiatus, Musashi wandered to a small village and decided to help an orphan boy. The lands have been infertile for years, but Musashi continually tries to farm rice, partially from ignorance and partially from his own determination. Throughout the arc, Musashi learns the difficulty of farming and requires the assistance of others in order to properly farm. While initially hesitant of the infertile land, the villagers are inspired by Musashi’s determination. Musashi is taught that he needs to understand the weak and grow empathy for his crops. In addition, he realizes that the brute force he learned in combat is inefficient for farming, and he cannot just treat the hoe like a sword. When winter comes, they are unable to grow enough food and a famine ensues. At this point, Musashi has grown to care for everyone in the village and his kindness is already a major milestone for the former beast. In a final effort to save the village, Musashi travels to a famous lord to bow down and beg that they provide food to this village. He had previously declined an offer to become a sword instructor because he wanted to wander aimlessly. His demonstration of humility and kindness in putting the village before his own desires allows him to save the village. In this arc, Inoue demonstrates Musashi’s incredible emotional growth in what I view as Musashi’s greatest feats of strength. The way I see it, Inoue shows the strength to kill 100 pales in comparison to the strength to save 100.

Strength requires emotional acceptance. Adichie claims that society teaches “men to mask their true selves” (10:53-56). She alludes to the norm in society that men should be emotionless in the face of all events. In the middle of his journey, Musashi challenges a spear-fighter named Inshun. Inshun is an incredibly talented fighter that has become master of the spear-fighting temple at a young age. To illustrate Inshun’s strength, the initial battle between Inshun and Musashi ended in Musashi’s first defeat where Musashi fled for his life. Musashi at this point in the story has remained undefeated and killed countless others. It is later revealed in Inshun’s backstory that he witnessed his mother being raped and killed by a samarai. His father soon saw his dead wife in front of the samurai, and the ensuing fight ended with both men dead. Inshun did try to stop the man from attacking his mom, but he was too weak as a child. In an effort to cope with the trauma, Inshun took up the spear. It was his means of regaining control, of telling the world that he had power over his life, and his way of forgetting what had happened. It was not until Musashi challenged Inshun again and defeated him that Inshun acknowledged what happened to him. Since he became an orphan, Inshun had become much stronger physically but remained emotionally stunted. He remained isolated at the temple because he refused to interact with others. In turn, others grew hateful from his rejections and envious of his talents. He had remained undefeated up until his second duel with Musashi. His spotless record allowed him to think his coping was working. He did not bother to look inside at his trauma because his outside self was perceived as successful and strong. After he recovers, Inshun tells Musashi that he wants to fight again with a noticeable smile to illustrate his change. Narratively, Inshun demonstrates that true strength requires self-reflection and emotions have to be embraced.

Gadsby’s own relationship with their trauma holds parallels to Inshun. In *Nanette*, Gadsby expressed their desire to quit comedy because it limited their ability to move past their own trauma. Their comedy “froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and [they] sealed it as a joke” (40:11-24). Their experience of coming out did not reach its conclusion when treated as a joke, because jokes do not need an end (40:00-10). Inshun effectively isolated his traumatic memory to just his own weakness as a child, and he did not tend to his grief. For society, this is the response that men should have in dealing with trauma. Gadsby’s relationship with comedy is so tragically similar to Inshun’s relationship with his spear. They both received positive attention from their talents, but these band-aid solutions would never allow their trauma to end.

Masculine norms restrict the individual growth of men. Both Inshun and Musashi unfortunately became stunted individuals due to masculine norms. Adichie advocates that children should not be raised under gender expectations but rather their abilities and interests (19:48-59) Musashi became a violent beast because society encouraged his path as one of honor. Similarly, Inshun wanted to “be a man” and bury his trauma through his success as a spear master. However, both men would likely have gone on different paths without society’s influence. In Musashi’s case, there is a woman he loves; however, he refuses to settle down with her in order to stubbornly follow the path of the blade.

*Vagabond* is a story that continually seeks to question how ideas of strength and emotion are viewed by men. Musashi’s journey reflects many of the sentiments that other men experience, and his mistakes and revelations allow them to be better. Namely, there is a deeper connection between strength and emotion than what society promotes. There are severe limitations within this analysis of *Vagabond*. There are many other characters and events that contribute different aspects to the themes discussed. Additionally, I want it to be known that I cut out an entire fleshed-out section regarding how ambition should not conflict with individual desire. After some time, I realize that the connection between the Big Three Seinen protagonists is their spiritual journeys from angry boys into refined men. The reason why the usage of these protagonists in online discourse is their relatability, especially with their anger towards the world. It becomes so dangerous when these audiences do not fully appreciate the themes of the source material. For these men, they should know that Inoue’s masterpiece focuses on the change that occurs within Musashi’s narrow worldview instead of glorifying his early days of bloodshed.

Works Cited

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