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Film Studies

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The Power of The Dog: Not Your Typical Western

Though their track record is by no means exceptional, Netflix does produce the occasional gem. Directed by Jane Campion, *The Power of The Dog* released last year to critical acclaim, being nominated for 12 awards at the Oscars along with winning numerous other awards. While this is impressive, it's not necessarily the commercial appeal or critical success that makes the film so important. The *Power of The Dog* expertly leverages the Western genre (with its long-standing traditions/culture of extreme masculinity) and through the usage and adaptation of many traditional Western elements, juxtaposes its themes of homosexuality and toxic masculinity to argue that masculinity at its core is an act, and not a very favorable one at that. While this may not be an incredibly groundbreaking argument for the newer generations, by approaching the topic with this story in the Western genre, a category that primarily still finds viewership in the older and more conservative population, the film is able to convey its views to an audience that may not otherwise effectively be reached, and an audience that some would argue most need to hear what the film has to say.

Movies in the Western genre (and more specifically the protagonists that exist within them) have long been perceived in America as blueprints to masculinity, toughness, and heroicity. As Irina Chirica lays out in her article "Masculinity in The Western Genre," the stoic Western hero rarely speaks, falters, or generally shows any sign of femininity. While this may seem to be indicative only of what the Western genre is by definition, that definition (or at least

perception of that definition) was shaped by the period where the genre was the most popular. The Western was at its peak of popularity in the 1930s-60s, with its portrayals of masculinity and strict gender roles being primarily driven by reactions to “Victorian” culture in America (Chirica), yet was potentially exasperated by the widespread enforcement of and adherence to the Hay’s Code in midcentury Hollywood. There has been homosexuality in the Western Genre historically, as argued by *The Celluloid Closet*, but for the majority of the time that the genre has been around, it’s been almost exclusively displayed in a negative light, such as through portrayals of gay characters as “sissy” caricatures. These attitudes have largely persisted in the genre, even as the popularity of the genre has decreased, and social views have generally become increasingly liberal.

For the first half of the film, *The Power of The Dog* embraces the culture of the Western genre. Phil is the embodiment of this uber-masculine protagonist in the harsh environment of the Wild West. He does not shower, speaks few words, is a strong cowboy, and asserts how tough he is by leading his gang in berating Peter, a young man who displays stereotypical feminine tendencies such as his mild manners and various creative pursuits. Phil even goes as far as to castrate sheep with his bare hands, despite other methods being readily available. In his eyes, to be feminine is to be weak and vulnerable, unacceptable for the arduous life of ranching in Montana.

Upon closer examination though, it is abundantly clear that Phil is not who he portrays himself as. He came from education and money, but like many wealthy men of the time, headed West in an effort to appear tough and masculine (Hamilton 29). He additionally clearly has the capacity to be kind and vulnerable (as demonstrated with his relationship with Peter in the latter half of the movie) but acts cruel and distant in order to adhere to his idea of what a man acts like.

It is later also revealed that his relationship with his mentor was more than just the mentor/mentee relationship that he would like to have everyone believe, but rather it was one of a sexual nature. Homosexual relationships and attractions are often considered by those who strongly conform to traditional stereotypical gender and sexuality roles to be some of the most feminine things a man can participate in. Through all of these factors, it is demonstrated that Phil's entire personality, even existence, is completely fabricated in an effort to protect himself and more subliminally, to repress his sexuality. This can be seen because after Peter stumbles upon Phil naked at the pond, Phil becomes much more kind to and connected with Peter. Phil recognizes that Peter has seen him at his most vulnerable, and yet everything is still okay. The distance that Phil places in all of his relationships has been penetrated, and because of this, Phil is able to drop the act that he is always participating in— at least in regard to his relationship with Peter.

The relationship that the two hold in the latter half of the film treads the line between one of sexual attraction and one of mere male-bonding/friendship. Though this may be an extreme example since Phil is explicitly depicted as having homosexual attractions and Peter is depicted with mannerisms typically associated with homosexuality, these sorts of relationships are not uncommon in the Western genre. Categorized as “homosocial” (a term coined by the critic and gender theorist Eve Sedgwick in her 1985 book “Between Men”), these relationships consist of members of the same sex forming bonds, and are relationships which Sedgwick argues blur the line between friendship and homosexuality (Sedgwick 1-2). She goes on to argue that the continuum is “a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted” (Sedgwick 1-2). The Western provides the perfect setting for these relationships to remain (seemingly) platonic while still being intimate: one of demanding physical labor, harsh living

conditions, and of course, exaggerated performances of masculinity. This is hardly an environment where homosexual relationships would traditionally be viewed as flourishing, and yet is an environment which forces men into very intimate situations, both in regards to their physical location (isolated environments with close quarters), and their circumstances (shared experiences in hard labor, social isolation, and the inevitable hardship that the genre imposes).

The Power of The Dog (along with other queer Western films such as Ang Lee's 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain*) takes this common Western genre relationship and explicitly sexualizes it. In addition to attempting to break down the misconception that there were no gays in the old West, the film makes a bold statement about the underlying nature of these relationships. It argues not that these relationships all have underlying homosexual attractions, but rather that it doesn't matter whether they do or not, since the act of exaggerating masculinity and homophobia is explicitly harmful and detrimental to everyone involved in the relationships. In fact, it is up to the interpretation of the viewer as to whether the connection that Phil felt to Peter was one of sexual attraction which was just repressed at the beginning of the film and manifested itself as homophobia until Peter found out the truth, or if perhaps it was a bond of Phil finally finding someone that he could be vulnerable with.

Through these various plays on traditional Western themes and tropes, the argument that the film can be seen to be making is that masculinity is, in Phil's case quite literally, an act, and a toxic one at that. In fact, in contrast to Phil, while Peter indeed holds many stereotypically feminine traits, he also holds traits not typically associated with female characters such as his cunning and maliciousness, and amazingly does what traditionally only the masculine hero in Westerns was able to do: prevail over the villain. But not only is he prevailing over the literal villain of the story, but also over toxic masculinity in general. It was Phil's cruel acts of his

perverted ideas of masculinity that caused Peter's father to kill himself, and that was driving Peter's mother to destroy her life through alcoholism and potentially eventually the same fate. The film argues that authenticity to oneself without problematic adherence to societal standards and expectations will win over a false persona of bravado, cruelty, and lack of vulnerability (i.e., toxic masculinity).

What makes this insight so interesting is not just the subtext of the story and its commentary on gender roles, but also the environment which it makes its arguments in. By leveraging the Western genre to make these arguments, *The Power of The Dog* is able to convey its views to an audience that may not typically be exposed to these themes. The Western genre not only depicts a more conservative society, but also finds viewership in one. The effects of the massive popularity of the genre in the middle of the 19th century are still apparent with the film tastes of older demographics—those that were filmgoers during this period—which generally are seen as still holding more conservative viewpoints. Additionally, conservative and religious cultures which more strictly adhere to traditional values and roles are still very common in many agricultural and rural areas, which may identify with the settings, themes, and ideologies of the traditional Western. While of course these are not the only audiences that are viewing the films, it can be seen as a primary audience, particularly because the secondary, more liberal audience that typically consumes queer films (which *The Power of The Dog* can also be considered as) does not conform so strongly with the issues of gender and sexuality that the film fights against.

That is not to say that this audience is homophobic and actively practices toxic masculinity, but rather to say that there may be more of these individuals that consume this genre than other genres that have normalized more progressive themes and characters. The creator of the film is a female director who primarily makes feminist films with female protagonists, and so

it takes no stretch of the imagination to consider her attempting to push her messages to a wider audience in order to maximize the cultural impact of her films.

The film certainly succeeded in reaching some of these audiences. As a singular public example, Sam Elliot (a particularly prolific actor in many past Westerns) was very vocal about his disapproval of the film, quoted as saying, "They're all running around in chaps and no shirts. There's all these allusions to homosexuality throughout the fucking movie," clearly implying his distaste for deviations from the gender and sexuality norms in Westerns, and even potentially implying that there were no homosexuals in the American West. Though he later apologized for the comments, it still can be shown to prove the intentions of the director as aimed in the correct direction. One would be hard pressed to find such public admonishment for films that would be normally classified into the queer genre, primarily due to the fact that they find a lot of their viewership in queer audiences.

The Power of The Dog is certainly not the first queer cowboy film, nor is it the first film to condemn toxic masculinity, but it is indeed groundbreaking in the fact that it does both of these things simultaneously and effortlessly. The film masterfully leverages a genre that typically could be considered almost the antithesis of the themes that it attempts to convey, in order to reach new audiences that need to hear the messaging. Through the subversion of expectations of the hyper-masculine main character that is typical of the genre, and his relationship with a more stereotypically feminine character who was comfortable embracing his real self, the film is able to add an interesting perspective on the danger of toxic masculinity and the virtues of authenticity, all while making commentary on the ridiculousness of what the Western hero typically consists of. The response to this movie's release was by no means overwhelmingly negative, but the fact that there was any public outcry over its release shows the need for films

like this to continue to be made, and directors to continue to try to reach previously unaddressed audiences. While the movie may not have stopped toxic masculinity in our society, it is these small steps in the direction of progress that later look like giant leaps.

Works Cited

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