Machismo and Adolescence

In his article, “I’m the King: The Macho Image” Rodolfo Anaya advocates that young male adolescents do not follow the guidelines of machismo (manliness). Early in his article, while defining machismo, Anaya states, “Drunkenness, abusing women, raising hell (all elements of la vida loca) are some mistaken conceptions of what macho means…In fact, much of this negative behavior is aped by a new generation, because as young men they are not aware that they are being conditioned. Young men acting contrary to the good of their community have not yet learned the real essence of maleness” (59). Anaya’s claim is questionable and arguments to his assertion can go both ways. The primary goal of this paper will be to critique Anaya’s claim by using examples from Elva Treviño’s, Barefoot Heart to demonstrate how both Rudy and Luis fit the definition of machismo, despite their young age. First, I will focus on both Luis and Rudy as a whole. Then, for the rest of the paper, I will turn my attention to Rudy and show how his actions to protect and bring honor to his family fit the definition of machismo.

Both Luis and Rudy began working in the beet fields of Minnesota alongside their parents at a very young age. Over the course of the summer, while most of their classmates enjoyed their time off school and had fun, Luis and Rudy were expected to work. They performed difficult labor tasks under harsh weather conditions with no complaints. Their strong will to work clearly shows the amount of character they had as adolescents. In addition to character, Luis and Rudy also handed all of the money they earned to their parents. As Treviño states it, “My parents let me keep all my money, whereas all my brothers and sisters had worked as my father’s slaves; he kept all the money” (186). Their generosity demonstrates their dedication to advance their family’s financial situation. Most importantly, it shows the extensive care they have for their family. Looking out for the family is an important aspect of machismo. Anaya himself states it, “Macho means taking care of la familia. Perhaps this is the most important definition of macho, the real, positive meaning of the word…A man must be honorable, for himself and for his family” (66-67).

Perhaps a contradiction to my first claim could be that Delmira, Delia, and Diamantina (the girls in the family) had the same expectations as Luis and Rudy. Although this is true, after the family stopped working in the beet fields, Luis, Rudy, and their father continued to go to Minnesota to work in a canning factory. As Treviño puts it, “Apá changed directions. He decided to go to the Wisconsin canning factories and take only Luis and Rudy with him. It was terrible work, but it paid well. Only men were hired, so Amá, Diamantina, and I stayed home” (131). Even though the women were not allowed to work in canning factories there could have been other alternatives for Elva, Diamantina and her mother, but her father decided to leave them at home.

Rudy is a perfect example of what it is to be macho. At 10 years old Rudy could not work in the beet fields because of his young age. According to Treviño, “My mother had thought only briefly about sending him to the nuns along with my sister and me. He was too independent and grown up for this. Besides, he insisted that he wanted to do his share of work” (121). In addition to his willingness to work, Rudy always got the job done. He was efficient, quick and always did a good job. Treviño adds, “Rudy did his work very well. He only had to be told once how to do a job and he would be finished before everyone else” (121). Without a question, Rudy’s devotion to hard work fits the definition of what it is to be macho.

Touching back to the concept of family, Rudy always stood up for both his siblings and parents. He was the brave one in the family. Treviño emphasizes that “Rudy was the “valiente” in the family, the Emiliano Zapata type of macho guy, even at six years old” (71). During his time at grade school, the Mexican kids had to sit at the back of the bus and Rudy and his siblings were no exceptions. That is until one day Rudy had had enough, “‘I’m going to sit at the front’ declared Rudy…Rudy was the first one in and he planted himself firmly in the first seat. The others, suddenly tentative settled themselves around him. The bus driver saw what was happening. He put on the emergency break and stood up. ‘What the hell are you doing here? Mexicans in the back! You know that!’ Rudy, with fire in his heart and eyes, said calmly but firmly, ‘If you want to sit me in the back, you’ll have to pick me up and move me.’…After that, they sat in the front every day. And no one said anything” (72). Rudy’s reckless decision to stand up to the bus driver could have gone south if the driver did not hate his job. He could have gotten him and his siblings banned from the bus or worse yet, expelled from school. In a way, Rudy’s action could be used to support Anaya’s claim about young men acting up and living la vida loca. This support, however, falls apart when examining Rudy’s actions with more depth. Looking closely, we can see that Rudy confronted the bus driver in order to protect his family. His resistance knocked two birds with one stone: he protected his family and stood up to discrimination. He brought honor to both his family and the Latino community. Honor is an important attribute that all real men inherit. As Anaya’s himself puts it, “A man must be honorable, for himself and for his family” (67). That being said, one can clearly see how Rudy continues to fit the definition of machismo. He brings honor to both himself and his family.

Moving forward, during Elva’s fourth year in grade school, little money was spent on janitorial services. The school decided to come up with a program where students picked up trash from the school playground. The duty to pick up trash alternated from class to class. Elva enjoyed her duties as a student. However, one day while she was picking up trash by the playground she spotted Rudy from a distance. Elva comments, “I saw him walk out of our house, across the street from the school playground. I turned away from him, hoping he wouldn’t recognize me, but hid did…He saw me picking up trash and decided It was his job to save me from this filth work (some of the trash was used toilet paper) since my parents spoke no English and couldn’t help me themselves.” (145-146). Angered by seeing his sister picking up trash, he went up to the principal of the school and said, “My little sister, Elva Treviño, is in the back of the school picking up trash. She’s not a janitor and you can’t user her that way. It’s dirty work and she’s a child. You gringos think you can use Mexican children to do your dirty work. If I ever see her picking up trash again, I’ll be right back here in your office, and then I’ll be MAD!” (146). After this incident, Elva was called in by her teacher and was told that she would no longer pick up trash. She was also cut from the safety patrol (something Elva enjoyed). After school, while Elva was still upset, she confronted Rudy yelling, “Stay out of my business! I can take care of myself!” (146). Elva felt disappointed, she states, “I felt that this was the worst thing Rudy had ever done to me. He had brought attention to me when I had been trying to fade into the woodwork” (146). Although this was an arrogant action on Rudy’s part, he was just looking out for his sister. He did not want her picking up other people’s trash, especially used toilet paper. Although Elva was too young to realize it at the time, Rudy’s confrontation with the principal was his way of showing he cared for her. Furthermore, we can suggest that Rudy’s care for his youngest sister falls under the category of looking out for the family in machismo.

A notable contradiction that reinforces Anya’s claim about young men being reckless is when Rudy wrecks the family car. Treviño notes, “He was walking to school because the previous week he had wrecked our car while fooling around with is friends” (146). His father, surprisingly, did not punish Rudy since he had earned the money for the car while working at the canning factory that previous summer. Earning the money for the car does not justify Rudy's reckless actions. The special thing about Rudy, however, was that he handled difficult circumstances in a very mature manner. According to Treviño whenever Rudy got into trouble, he would never defend himself against his parents. He would just take in whatever his parents told him without talking back or making excuses (121). Rudy faced his problems like a real macho.

Summing things up, when looking closely at Barefoot Heart, we can see how both Rudy and Luis break down Anaya’s claim about young males. As stated earlier, arguments to Anaya’s claim can go both ways. The examples mentioned throughout this paper, nevertheless, are concrete evidence that young men such as Luis and Rudy can live up to the definition of macho regardless of age. Still, my arguments only critique a small portion of Anaya’s paper. The rest of his article still stands and I feel as though Anaya does a good job at defining machismo in later examples.