

The Ruth & Ted Braun Awards for Writing Excellence at Saginaw Valley State University

The Promotion of Masculinity in Western Films

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GENERAL EDUCATION

*Nominated by Dr. Erik K. Trump
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John has been a successful farmer and professional musician throughout his life. His musical career has earned him many honors and awards, and provided him with the opportunity to play on the same stage with numerous stars, although he especially enjoys the challenge of songwriting. John has returned to school at SVSU to pursue his degree in music while studying additional formats such as jazz and classical.

Western films have a long history of providing entertainment. Their popularity can be explained by the presence of abundant action, the good versus evil theme with which most people can identify, and heroes with values for viewers to emulate. However, in most westerns the heroes are male characters who exhibit strong masculine traits such as a reliance on action in place of verbal communication, a lack of demonstrated feelings, and an attitude of dominance toward women. In her book *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, Jane Tompkins argues that in these ways western films promote masculinity at the expense of women. The older western films discussed by Tompkins obviously promote masculine traits and show how modern society can emasculate men; newer westerns, however, do the same, but disguise the promotion of masculinity better, making them even more influential.

Westerns have been expressly created to encourage men to hold on to their masculinity when it is threatened by modern society. According to Tompkins, "The western owes its popularity and essential character to the dominance of women's culture in the nineteenth century and to women's invasion of the public sphere between 1800 and 1920" (44). In recent years, western films have warned men of the emasculating features of modern society.

Salesmen, bank clerks, and businessmen are portrayed as being weak, while a hard-working cowboy with a gun is powerful and dominant. The movie *City Slickers*, an updated and humorous western from 1991, provides many examples that show the potential of modern society to emasculate men. In *City Slickers*, three men leave the city to find themselves and their masculinity by going on a cattle drive in the west. Toward the end of the film the rancher Clay Stone tells the businessmen, "When you three first got here, you were as worthless as hen shit on a pump handle." Barry and Ira, owners of an ice cream company, are portrayed as weak businessmen who have also been emasculated by modern society. The message is that men in modern society with regular jobs are useless and weak. Anne Butler says *City Slickers* is a film "to warn young American males that unless they literally plunged back into a nineteenth-century cattle drive and learned to be men, modern society threatened to emasculate them" (66). Tompkins agrees that the rationale for western films is to encourage men to hang on to their masculinity, making manhood the ideal. She says, "It is not one ideal among many. It is *the* ideal, certainly the only one worth dying for. It doesn't matter whether a man is a sheriff or an outlaw, a rustler or a rancher, a cattleman or a sheepherder, a miner or a gam-

bler. What matters is that he be a *man*. That is the only side to be on” (18).

Westerns promote the maintenance of masculinity by showing cowboys as dominant characters who have many skills and often live dangerously. In many scenes they may not even speak, instead taking action to prove their dominance. Tompkins writes, “The Western man’s silence functions as a script for behavior; it expresses and authorizes a power relation that reaches into the furthest corners of domestic and social life. The impassivity of male silence suggests the inadequacy of female verbalization, establishes male superiority, and silences the one who would engage in conversation” (59). In the film *Red River* (1948), Dunson is a stubborn cowboy who does things his way, no matter what the price. He makes it clear that no one, especially Tess Millay, will change his mind about killing Matthew Garth. In this way, the man is shown as controlling his destiny, and the message to male viewers is to hang on to their masculinity by not letting women change their minds or stand in their way. In *City Slickers*, Curly, a genuine cowboy, is a very dominant, masculine character. He takes charge and lets his actions speak for themselves. Even the male characters from the city, while not as dominant as Curly, show how they are more influential and stronger than women. For example, Ed shows he is the one in control of his relationship with his wife when he states, “I’m gonna go home and I’m gonna get Kim pregnant.” Other scenes from films like *Red River* and *City Slickers* continually show the men’s power and decision-making.

The female roles in western films assist in portraying this dominance of masculinity. Female characters are shown as weaker as they beg men for companionship or need to be saved by male heroes. In *Red River*, when Matt meets Tess in a hotel room, she speaks rapidly in an attempt to warn him about Dunson. Matt, however, stays calm, acting as if nothing could worry him. Tess begs Matt to stop her from her incessant talking by saying, “Stop me, Matt, stop me.” Tompkins claims this scene “gets to this point at the woman’s expense” (60). Likewise, *City Slickers* uses weaker female characters to make the men seem more powerful and dominant. For example, when Bonnie, the only woman on the cattle drive, is in trouble, Mitch tries to help her by talking to the cowboys who are bothering her. Even though he fails, Bonnie tells him, “Listen, it took a lot of courage to do what you did. Thank you.” Curly is shown as being even more masculine by using action instead of verbal communication to end Bonnie’s predicament. The topic of women is discussed regularly by Mitch, Ed and Phil, with frequent references to sex, which is one of the few reasons cowboys need women in western films. Even Curly tells Mitch about the number of women he has been with, but managed to avoid marrying. This sends a message to male viewers that in order to maintain masculinity, a man like Curly should date women, but stay away from

marriage, as he did. Tompkins discusses this when she writes, “the saloon girl’s breasts, her dress, her hair, her voice if she is singing, her red lips, are all a reminder of what the cowboy has for so long done without, and must continue to renounce if he is to survive” (87). The movie *Open Range* likewise portrays the weakness of female characters. The main female character in the entire film, Sue Barlow, seems strong, but her life is incomplete until a man saves her from loneliness. Tompkins claims that women in westerns always play silly, less active parts. “They may seem strong and resilient, fiery and resourceful at first, but when push comes to shove, as it always does, they crumble” (61).

The physical context of western films also helps support the masculinity of the male characters. For example, westerns show cowboys riding in vast, open spaces, while women are shown mostly inside houses or staying in town. Tompkins says that “town always threatens to entrap the hero in the very things the genre most wishes to avoid: intimacy, mutual dependence, a network of social and emotional responsibilities” (85). In *City Slickers*, the men have to find an environment away from women with lots of space to roam in order to feel like men again. Only one woman is part of the cattle drive, and she needs to be saved by men in order to survive her first day. In *Open Range*, Charley is uncomfortable in town, while Sue never leaves town, even remaining there to wait for Charley to return to her. The physical contexts in these films have similar qualities; they are vast, lonesome, quiet, dangerous, rugged, and harsh. Often they are referred to as being no place for a woman.

Tompkins analyzes older western films only, but the influence of modern westerns may be just as great. These modern films disguise the promotion of masculinity more, but that does not make their message any less influential. Even if the message is not intentional and not recognized by the viewer immediately, it can still influence attitudes and beliefs over the long run and therefore be very influential in our society. In the book *Mass Politics: The Politics of Popular Culture*, Daniel M. Shea says that “the real impact of popular culture, then, may not be the direct action it triggers but its power to shape attitudes and perspectives over the long run” (4). Similarly, Murray Edelman points out that this power to shape attitudes may not even be recognized by the viewer. In his book *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions*, he writes, “not all who share the sentiment are acquainted with, or even aware of, the art that played a part in crystallizing their political role” (11).

An example of the dominance of masculinity that may not be as noticeable to many viewers can be seen in *City Slickers*. Mitch returns home from a tiresome adventure on a cattle drive, but still gets into the driver’s seat of his minivan. This insinuates that the man is in control and should

drive the family vehicle. Another example is shown in the relationship between Phil and his wife. Even though it is done in a humorous way, his wife is characterized as very pushy and controlling. Phil has to escape to the west to find his masculinity, and his pending divorce is a way for him to retake control of his life. Similarly, in *Open Range*, as discussed previously, Sue is not complete until she finds a man. She openly admits this, even though she already had a successful career and a pleasant home. This sends a message to modern women that a good career and personal happiness are not enough without a man.

These examples help us see that Tompkins' argument applies to newer western films as well. It is not only older films that send messages to viewers about the power of masculinity. Modern films contain the same types of messages and disguise them even better, which can make the dominance of male characters over female characters seem even more natural. Therefore, this can cause the message to have a stronger and more long-term influence, one that may not even be noticed by many members of the audience at the time.

Western films mainly have male characters who are dominant, powerful, and skillful heroes. The message to men is to hold on to their masculinity in order to retain their edge in society. At the same time, these films portray women as weaker characters who need men in order to save them or complete their lives. This also helps to show the dominance of masculine characters. Tompkins argues that westerns encourage men to hold on to their masculinity and also warn them about the emasculating influences of women and modern society. While older westerns are more obvious with this message, current westerns take the same message and disguise it, making it seem more natural and therefore making it more influential.

Works Cited

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