"How To Be a Man": American Masculinities, 1960-1989

Abstract

The editors of Esquire, America's longest-running men's interest magazine, announced the publication's mission statement in its inaugural issue: "Esquire aims to be the common denominator of masculine interests—to be all things to all men." Throughout the majority of its publication history, being all things to all men has involved providing its male readers with fiction by canonical male authors. As such, this study examines the role of masculinity in works of American prose and fiction by canonical male authors, as they were originally published in Esquire magazine. Esquire can fruitfully be used as a tool for textual analysis, a lens through which historically and culturally specific arguments about particular constructions of masculinity can be made. In particular, I argue that situating these texts in the pages of Esquire, among its fashion advertisements and editorial content, is valuable for demonstrating how masculinities are constructed in relation to the marketplace. Reading specific texts within the frame of Esquire, I show that the works of contemporaneous authors—specifically Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, Raymond Carver, Truman Capote, Tim O'Brien, and Don Delillo—are complicit with, struggle against, or attempt to subvert the masculine codes and behaviours promoted by the magazine. I demonstrate that gender is an always-present and always-contested factor in writing, sometimes obvious but sometimes subtle, and that the gendered subtexts of written works can be brought to the surface when read as part of a project dedicated to explicating "How to Be a Man." Furthermore, this study reveals the value of conceiving of masculinity in relation to hegemony—that is, in viewing the construction and maintenance of masculinities relationally, and as a part of a historic process inseparable from other historic processes, such as the processes of the marketplace, but that is in fact thoroughly imbricated in them. In so doing, "How to Be a Man" concludes that the market is a place in which the discourse of masculinity is contested, and that the prose and fiction of American authors contributes to, and shapes, that very discourse.

URI

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