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What a Man's Gotta Do

THE MASCULINE MYTH IN POPULAR CULTURE

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MASCULINE STYLE (1):

CLARITY

REVEALED: THE GUN PC

THE policeman whose gun killed a five-year-old boy was named yesterday as Pc Brian Chester.

And it was revealed that his past heroism had earned him a bravery award.

Last night the 34-year-old father-of-three was suspended on full pay following the week-long shooting of John Shorthouse.

The boy was shot in the chest as he lay asleep during a raid on his parents' home.

Yesterday John's mother, Mrs. Jacqui Shorthouse, vowed: "I will never forgive the man who killed my boy."

As she walked in a park with her two other sons, Danny, three, and Denis, two, she added: "I can't accept that it was a complete accident."

Pc Chester is staying at a secret address with his children and wife, who is expecting their fourth child.

His commanding officer, West Midlands Chief Constable Geoffrey Dear said: "The shooting has had a devastating effect on him."

Mr. Dear gave Pc Chester a glowing character reference, saying: "He is the very opposite of the gun-slinging macho image."

"He is everything I hope for in a policeman."

He added: "Not only did he win a bravery award, but he demonstrated his courage all the time."

"He volunteers to go on the sort of jobs when no policeman knows if the man on the other side of the door is armed with a gun."

The Daily Express, 29 August 1985

... everything in a clear, masculine style

John Dryden

By law, even in the smallest seaside town, an Italian has the choice of the following daily papers: *Il Popolo* (Christian Democrat); *Unità* (Communist); *Il Manifesto* (Communist left-splinter); *Avanti* (Socialist); *La Repubblica* (Republican); *Il Secolo d'Italia* (neo-fascist); *La Lotta Continua* (Trotskyist). This is in addition to five or six 'independents' such as *Il Tempo*. In Britain, because of a different tradition, the freedom of the press means a choice between: *The Guardian* (liberal); *The Daily Mirror* (Labour); *The Morning Star* (Communist); *The Financial Times* (realistic Tory); *The Times* (high Tory); *The Telegraph* (militarist Tory); *The Daily Mail* (servile Tory); *The Daily Express* (extreme Tory); and *The Sun* (rabid Tory). Despite these political differences, and despite the contrast between the high cultural press and the popular press, almost all of these papers are written in one mainstream style.

The style of the extract from a report in the *Daily Express* of 29 August 1985 doesn't seem much of a style at all. It looks as though the story of Jacqui Shorthouse and Brian Chester is reported quite objectively, just as it happened. In fact this mode of writing, the clear or transparent style, did not exist in the Middle Ages, and in England was mainly developed during the revolutionary period of the Civil War by writers determined to argue clearly about religious and political issues. After that it became the dominant style, cropping up everywhere, not just in documentary reporting but also, by the nineteenth century, in novels. What characterizes the style is that it tries to be styleless, a clear window on to reality that presents the truth nakedly and objectively as it is, without any subjective feeling or attitude getting in the way. Arguably this is a masculine style.

Deborah Cameron, in an excellent book on *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (1985), points out that language lets men and women say whatever they want and that there is no way one gender could control this. But within language there are different forms of style or discourse, and these can be contrasted as masculine and feminine. Mary Wibberley may have suggested one way to do this.

She has written a book, *To Writers with Love* (1985), which gives advice about how to write a romantic novel, with examples. One consists of the same sentence written in two different styles, and this is very useful because the meaning is more or less the same but the style is very different. Although she doesn't name it as a masculine style, she advises against plain and simple statement of fact. Instead of 'She didn't want to listen to him any more; she felt tired and weak – and tearful' the romantic novelist should write, 'She put her hands to her ears, tears of tiredness and weakness filling her eyes and spilling down her cheeks, and her soft golden hair tumbled about her face as she shook her head helplessly.' This calls attention to itself as a piece of style and clearly takes up an attitude to what it describes. The plain statement of fact pretends that it doesn't have a style and doesn't have an attitude to what it is saying.

This effect can be seen at work in the story about PC Chester. It appears to be simply a record, a statement of a number of facts. Though it treats these as if they were simply *there*, the story constructs its interpretation of what is really the truth and in a hidden way takes up a firm attitude towards it. It does this by giving two versions and then inviting us to discard one and retain the other as the truth.

In this respect the passage is rather like a court of law in which the prosecution and defence each gives their version but the judge and jury decide the truth. Here a man and a mother have different stories about what happened when the boy was killed. In one there was an accident, and the boy was killed not so much by a person as by a gun ('whose gun killed a five-year-old boy'); the man holding the gun is a hero with a bravery award, and also a family man whose wife 'is expecting their fourth child'. In an opposed version the mother says what happened wasn't 'a complete accident' and she can 'never forgive the man'. At this point a father figure emerges, Chief Constable Geoffrey Dear, whose words firmly decide between the two stories and in favour of the man, who is sensitive – the shooting has had a 'devastating effect on him' – not 'gun-slinging' but everything one hopes for 'in a policeman', having even won a bravery award.

Although the report in the part I've not quoted goes on to repeat

more of what the mother has to say it weakens it by the way it is phrased – 'she believed', 'she claimed'. In contrast Chief Constable Dear 'said' the shooting had had a devastating effect, gave a reference and 'added' something else. The headline confirms his version, for it says 'Revealed: The Gun Pc' and there is also a photograph of the man smiling confidently at the camera with his hands folded behind himself over the caption 'Constable Brian Chester: A heroism award'. The report encourages the reader to dismiss the woman's version as partial and inadequate, and treat the other accordingly as the revelation of the truth behind or underneath it ('Revealed: The Gun Pc'). The effect is augmented by the contrast of two stereotypes, the hysterical mother and the brave hero. And we are encouraged to accept the truth behind the appearance because it is one often repeated in the British press, that despite everything the British police are wonderful.

There is no question of conscious manipulation about this effect of passing from a partial to a final truth. It is just part of normal, everyday journalism. But it does depend on treating the truth as simply *there* to be seen through a style which pretends to be completely transparent.

Truth as a Fetish

A style of apparently plain statement of truth without obvious personal bias is a masculine style because it goes along with the masculine ego and its desire for mastery. Truth in this style is presented as something to be fully known, seen in complete detail. Once again the idea of vision is central to the masculine ego. This masculine style is supposedly as 'clear' as water, as 'transparent' as glass. The point can be understood another way, in terms of disavowal and fetishism. It is a rather strange story, but one that will be needed again for later sections.

Almost always male, fetishists are people who find sexual pleasure in fetishistic objects such as elaborate corsets with lots of suspenders, furry knickers, black rubber. Freud treated a young man who could only be sexually aroused by a woman with a 'shine on the nose' (*Glanz auf der Nase*). This was his fetish, and Freud analysed it first by arguing that it really meant a look or *glance* at the nose. This look at the nose was a substitute set up in place of

the mother's phallus that the little boy once believed in but did not want to give up. It was as though the boy discovered castration when he saw the mother did not have the phallus. But his look travels on up her body and makes looking at the nose a fetish, a substitute object for what he imagines she's got missing. Fetishism works through disavowal. The fetishist knows about the mother's castration but disavows it by pretending she isn't castrated, that the mother has the phallus in spite of everything. (The inevitable question is: *why does the fetishist, typically male, assume in the first place that the mother has the phallus?* It is a question that goes to the heart of patriarchy and will be taken up in a later section.)

Such disavowal of something in the outside world forms part of the defence system of the masculine ego, but defence working in terms of signs and meanings. All language, including the language of the *Daily Express* and its front page, has two separate aspects, sounds and meanings (what linguistics calls signifiers and signifieds). Because we have got so used to reading silently to ourselves we tend to forget that you can only get at the meaning of a word via its sound or a printed representation of its sound. And the transparent masculine style likes to encourage a reader to ignore the sounds from which we derive meaning. Just as the fetishist disavows castration, so the masculine style disavows the sounds of the words it depends on by treating itself as invisible, not really a style at all. In this way the clear style makes a fetish of meaning, presenting it as fixed, free-standing, closed round on itself. Truth is presented as objective and impersonal, something revealed once and for all and so there to be mastered and known. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, as they say.

Mastery and Fictional Truth

Our culture tends to make too much of truth. In the Western tradition, certainly since the Renaissance and to some extent stretching back to the Greeks, truth is treated as absolute, a be-all and end-all. This entails the disadvantage that we are likely to forget about the style and language in which truth is presented and the effect these have on a reader.

The styleless style of the *Daily Express* story treats truth as

simply there and so treats the reader as one who masters this truth. The reader is implicitly masculine and has a number of positions to identify with. In terms of his masculinity he may identify with the man, the Pc, but in terms of his femininity he may feel sympathy with the figure of the mother. Overriding these, no doubt, is identification with the all-knowing father, the Chief Constable, and probably, if this is not too subtle, with the *position* of complete knowledge offered by the whole presentation, the style, the narrative, and the characters in it. Now I'm fairly sure the facts as reported by the newspaper are true, though with the popular press one can't be certain. But one can ask how much difference it would make if this story of crime and detection were not fact but fiction?

If this were a story in a crime novel, it would be fictional. Nevertheless, much of the effect produced by the invisible style and mastery of what is narrated would still be generated. As fictional truths detective novels are written in exactly this way to try to give the masculine ego the pleasure of mastery, certainty, seeing it all clearly laid out in the end. In fact classic country house stories on the Agatha Christie model are told twice, once as they happen to baffle all but the most perceptive reader, and then a second time at the end when the detective *retells* the story so that we can all follow it. Such forms of narrative give narcissistic pleasure to the masculine ego.

They give this pleasure in another way as well, through the kind of identification they allow to the reader. Any narrative, whether fact or fiction, can provide this, though it is easier to understand in the case of fiction. For psychoanalysis the pleasure of art comes about because the human animal by nature seeks pleasure and avoids what is unpleasurable. Unfortunately, the quest for pleasure has to come to terms with reality. Children cope with this in one way by playing games of 'let's pretend'. However, in our society adults are not supposed to do this, though in other societies, such as that of the Trobriand Islanders, or for us in the Middle Ages, adult games of pretending were allowed. So instead of playing, adults have daydreams that conform to the principle of pleasure by acting out a wish. Not surprisingly these wishes are invariably selfish or erotic or both, and almost everyone would be ashamed to

repeat them in public or even to a close friend. Art has a unique capacity to get round this difficulty. It provides the pleasure of wish-fulfilment, as do daydreams, but has a special power to disguise what it is doing. Instead of finding its fantasies boring or embarrassingly personal, we accept and share the chance art offers us to imagine the fulfilment of our wishes.

Probably art and fiction do a lot more than this. But the account points up one particularly masculine effect in many narratives – the presentation of a hero. If the story is realistic, if, that is, the fact that it is just a film or novel is carefully concealed, then the viewer or reader is invited to identify strongly with the hero. In films such as *Red River*, *The Deer Hunter* and *Dallas North Forty* the hero is central and the main point of identification. Such heroes not only do apparently exciting things and triumph over all kinds of threats, they also survive right the way through the narrative (if they don't it is a special genre called tragedy). So, for example, in the traditional Hollywood war film we know who's going to survive (heroes) and who won't (losers). From very early on in *The Deer Hunter* we guess that Mike is a hero and Nick is a loser, and are encouraged to place our bets accordingly. If we identify with Mike, then the working out of the narrative fulfils a strongly narcissistic wish, the wish that 'Nothing can happen to me'. Once again the masculine ego has things its own way.

But this can't happen unless a fiction puts forward its narrative as truth. It must hide the fact that it is made up if a viewer is to identify with the hero. Hiding that fact – trying to hide it rather – means using the transparent style, whether in novels, films, or television programmes. And something of the same masculine pleasure is offered to the viewer or reader even when the narratives are about fact, not fiction, as in the *Daily Express* story.

Of course, someone might well point out that, according to this account and definition of the clear style, this present book is written in a masculine style. Once again it seems that the structures of mastery associated with the masculine ego cannot be avoided in our culture. And certainly this book does try to be as clear as it can. At the same time there are two factors at least which call its truth into question, leaving its meaning open to debate rather than trying to close it on to something absolute and fixed, out there.

One is that the writing does not try to conceal the ideas and concepts by which it gets to its meaning. The other is that from the outset the argument has followed a political purpose – to unmask masculinity – that is openly avowed. Because that aim is explicit it can easily be argued against.

MASCULINE STYLE (2):

BANTER



Photo from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*,
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Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, directed by George Roy Hill (1969)

Butch Cassidy (Paul Newman) and the Sundance Kid (Robert Redford) lead the Hole-in-the-Wall gang. After defeating a challenge to his leadership, Cassidy persuades the others to hold up a train, 'The Flyer', then to blast open with dynamite the boxcar containing the safe. Cassidy recuperates in a brothel; Sundance goes in search of a teacher, Etta Place (Katherine Ross). They hide out in a ranch where Cassidy takes Etta for a ride on a bicycle (while 'Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head' is sung on the soundtrack). They rob 'The Flyer' again, encountering the same recalcitrant bank guard, again using dynamite to get at the money. But this time Butch and Sundance are pursued by a posse, return to the brothel, are raided but escape. During further pursuit across the mountains, Cassidy keeps asking 'Who are those guys?' and suspects they are headed by a famous lawman, Joe Lefors. Cornered on a cliff-side they jump suicidally into the torrent, survive, return for Etta and the three of them take off for Bolivia.

There, despite Cassidy's faltering command of Spanish, they rob a number of banks. Deciding to go straight, they become payroll guards, but are themselves held up by bandits. Cassidy kills for the first time; Etta returns home. Surprised by soldiers in a village cantina, Sundance and Cassidy are gunned down.

*Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word*

Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*

Banter or repartee is not an exclusively masculine style. It is used between friends and between lovers. But it is used so much and so often as a form of male exchange, it is so widespread and powerful, both in life and its fictional representation, that it must be considered an example of masculine style. As such it can be analysed into three features: one governs its mode of operation, the other two its content. As humour or comedy, banter makes use of every kind of irony, sarcasm, pun, clichéd reply, and so is an example of the joke (this is discussed later in another section). The content of banter has a double

function. Outwardly banter is aggressive, a form in which the masculine ego asserts itself. Inwardly, however, banter depends on a close, intimate and personal understanding of the person who is the butt of the attack. It thus works as a way of affirming the bond of love between men while appearing to deny it. The analysis is straightforward, but repartee figures so largely in masculine style it needs to be looked at in detail. There are two examples here: one of the elder/younger brother relationship, another of father and son.

When *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* came out in 1969 the free-floating life style it celebrated could not but signal the values of the counterculture, just as the frequently expressed unwillingness of its heroes to join the army made them sound like college kids escaping the Vietnam war. Drawing on Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962) and borrowing its ending from *Viva Zapata!* (1951), the movie has a sketchy plot which is really not more than an occasion to dramatise a classic buddy relationship. Women in it are treated as marginal, objects in exchange between the two men.

Following a confessional scene in the brothel during which the two men tell each their real names, a prostitute puts her arms round Cassidy. A trifle disconsolately his partner says he's going off to find a woman who is beautiful, gentle, refined. He goes to Etta, the 'teacher-lady'. When they wake up in bed they hear Butch cycling round the house saying in a melodramatic voice, 'You're mine'. He takes Etta off on his bike.

SUNDANCE: What're you doing?

CASSIDY: Stealing your woman.

SUNDANCE: Take her.

CASSIDY: You're a romantic bastard, I'll give you that.

Their banter covers the aggression towards Etta who, of course, threatens their own love for each other. After a surly invitation for her to come with them to Bolivia, Sundance warns 'if you whine or make a nuisance, I'm dumping you flat' to which Cassidy responds, 'Don't sugar-coat it like that, Kid, tell her straight.'

Unlike the situation in *Jules et Jim*, Etta doesn't make love with Cassidy as well as Sundance, but she matters only a little more to them than the bar-girls they meet. Once when they are hiding in a brothel,

Cassidy is making love with a woman on the bed while his buddy watches out for the posse. Cassidy objects that it puts him off for the other to be 'staring out the window like that', and Sundance says, with only slight conviction, 'Don't ask me to stay.'

In their characters the two men form a pair of opposites. Cassidy is reason, ideas, quick talk, sociability, the pleasure principle; Sundance is body, action, not given to words, isolated, the reality principle. Unfailingly optimistic, Cassidy has a touch of cowardice in his scheming; Sundance, though he hides it well, is stupid. While Cassidy represents the older brother, in terms of the dominant myth he is less Butch than his name supposes – when he complains at length 'I don't like jungles, I don't like snakes', Sundance cuts him short with 'Bitch, bitch, bitch.' Yet they are willing to die for each other, as in the end they do. Challenged to a fight by Harvey, Cassidy whispers 'If when it's done, I'm dead – kill him', and Sundance replies 'Love to.' Their sublimated love for each other comes out not only in their lingering exchange of looks but in continual banter which reveals close sympathy for each other's weaknesses. Mainly in the film this is a matter of dialogue exposing Cassidy's brave pretensions:

SUNDANCE: What's your idea this time?

CASSIDY: Bolivia.

SUNDANCE: What's Bolivia?

CASSIDY: That's a country stupid – Central or South America, one or the other.

During the second raid on 'The Flyer' Cassidy lays the dynamite with the words 'That oughter do it'; after a large explosion, with dollar bills drifting through the air, Sundance asks with a smile, 'Think you used enough dynamite then, Butch?' Pursued, Cassidy explains 'They can't track us over rock' – Sundance snipes back, 'Tell *them* that.' Sundance always expects the worst because he cannot think through the consequences of his actions. As Cassidy sneers, 'For a gunman, you're one hell of a pessimist.' When the Kid won't jump into the torrent because he can't swim it's left to his partner to point out: 'Are you crazy? The fall will probably kill you!'

Both are doomed: partly by the changing West in which banks get harder to rob, mainly by their refusal to grow up, submit to the symbolic

father and accede to adult heterosexuality. This is why most of the movie consists of them being chased by an indistinct figure, the lawman Lefors. In Bolivia, Cassidy's fantasy kingdom, the law of the father catches up with them. Holed up in the cantina, Cassidy says, 'Bet it's just one guy'; when the hat he throws out the door is immediately shot to pieces in a fusillade of bullets, Sundance's rejoinder is 'Don't you get sick of being right all the time?' Their ammunition is across the square on a mule. Sundance says he'll go; Cassidy replies, 'This is no time for bravery, I'll let you.' But after a long exchange of looks he points out the logic of the situation: 'Hell, I'm the one that has to go . . . I could never give you cover, you can cover me.' He runs for the bandoleer and could escape, but comes back to his friend; both are wounded:

- CASSIDY: Is that what you call giving cover?
 SUNDANCE: Is that what you call running? If I knew you were going to stroll . . .
 CASSIDY: You never could shoot, not from the very beginning.
 SUNDANCE: And you were all mouth.

To the end they cannot admit their love for each other except through attack. In banter explicit antagonism between two masculine egos covers the implicit male bond. Personal criticism like this would never be allowed to an outsider for it depends on a disavowed but fond awareness of 'how like you that is'. And much of the viewer's pleasure arises from appreciating this.

Banter between Father and Son

Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, directed by Steven Spielberg (1989), is the third of the 'Indiana Jones' series and follows its hero from the United States to Venice, Salzburg, Berlin and the Middle East in search of the Holy Grail, which is able to confer immortality on its bearer. In the narrative Sean Connery and Harrison Ford are father and son, but they are also father and son in the genre because this movie marks Indiana Jones's claim to take over the role of prime popular hero from James Bond.

As British posters for the movie claimed, 'The Man with the Hat is Back - and This Time He's Bringing his Dad': for psychoanalysis the

hat may symbolise the phallus. If so, the assonance which links 'hat' and 'dad' is no accident, because what is at issue between father and son is the phallus, as can be seen in the poster for the film, epitomising the look of the father. There is the son in the foreground confidently engaging the look of the viewer ('Yes, I *know* I've got it'), while the father seeks to dominate him from behind. The father's beady sidelong stare perfectly mingles self-regarding pride ('my son, chip



off the old block') and suspicion ('if he thinks he's got it, he may use it against me').

In *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* the feminine side of masculinity is associated with books and scholarship, the masculine side, as so often, with physical aggression. Jones Junior partakes of both since he is the scholarly gent with glasses and no hat who turns into the violently active hero with fedora hat and bullwhip. Relatively, in terms of behaviour, Jones Senior is femininized, an eccentric academic, an archaeologist over-concerned with books, fragile with age, wearing granny glasses, whose voice occasionally breaks up an octave. Yet he is still capable of masculinized action in his own way; at one point he raises his umbrella to frighten a flock of seagulls into the path of an attacking Messerschmitt.

The love between them cannot speak its name. When a brief lull in the action leaves them drinking together in a bar, Indiana tells his father 'You never talked to me'; Jones replies, 'OK, let's talk' – but they can't find anything to say. Their love is expressed through the action; father sometimes saves son, but mostly the son saves his father. In fact, Indiana finally risks life and limb to get hold of the Grail so he can heal the old man's wound. It is also negotiated by their banter, especially in the way Jones Senior keeps calling his son 'Junior'. He therefore refuses to accord him a name and place of his own (Indiana) by insisting he is only a qualified repetition of himself.

The intensity of their relationship leaves little room for Indiana's heterosexual desires. After he has proved his masculinity with 'the girl' (Alison Doody, androgynously named in the film as 'Dr Schneider'), she turns out to be a Nazi, and falls to her death trying to get hold of the Grail for herself. She is not much more than an object in exchange and joke between the two men. When the father warns the son against 'the girl' because she's a Nazi, Indiana asks 'How do you know?' and is told 'She talks in her sleep.'

Banter or repartee as a masculine style is effective by operating a double bluff. Because it is comic and relies on the joke form it seems to be genial, permissive and open. It is not in fact genial because it actually supports the aggression of the masculine ego. And it is not open because it sets out to protect the male bond – sublimated homosexual desire – and exclude women.

MASCULINE STYLE (3): OBSCENITY

Will Darnell in 'Christine', directed by John Carpenter (1983)

Arnold Cunningham, a bespectacled teenager, buys a dusty and neglected 1958 Plymouth 'Fury' called Christine. He cleans her up in a huge garage owned by Will Darnell. Later in the film Christine starts to show a will of her own, becomes enamoured of Arnie and kills people who threaten him.

Will Darnell is unshaven, balding and has a double chin; he chews gum and spits; he wears a loose collar and tie and a dirty green jerkin over a fat belly. When Arnie first brings the car into his garage he calls it a 'piece of shit' and a 'mechanical arsehole'. He also recalls that he knew someone who was killed in Christine, adding that 'the son of a bitch was so mean if you'd put boiling water down his throat he would have pissed ice-cubes.' He lets Arnie keep the car in his garage but warns him, 'you screw around with me one time, I throw you out on your arse.' Then he shambles off, scratching his bottom as he goes.

Later, watching Arnie cleaning Christine, Will comments to his father that Arnie has been doing 'all this shit' for three weeks and has even got 'fucking brand-new windshield wipers' for the car. The father says Arnie has got good hands, to which Will replies that he's got bad taste in cars, adding mournfully, 'You know, poppa, you can't polish a turd.' He tells Arnie off for taking spare parts from a junkyard at the back, saying, 'Don't think you got the gold key to the crapper', and reminding him that without his good will it would cost 'a whole shitpile full of dough to put this heap together'. He then softens, noting 'you ain't exactly got money falling out of your arsehole', and offers him work picking things up round the place, 'Shit like that'. Arnie says he'll think about it and Darnell concludes with, 'Don't think about it too long, I'll throw you out on your fucking arse.'

Later, when Christine goes on the rampage, Will Darnell goes after her with his shotgun. He climbs inside and is squeezed to death against the steering wheel when his seat unaccountably moves forward as Christine's radio blares a hit from the 'fifties, 'Bony Moronie'.