

Ain't You Supposed to Be...?

Authors use writing as a method to convey a message, be it blatant or vague. As writing has evolved, the messages provided therein have also evolved into something different by genre. For example, often novels contain different types of messages – and different forms of expression – than essays do. Many works of “literary merit” are thus called because they expound upon ideas or practices in the culture surrounding them. For example, the two texts I will be looking at: the novel *The Summer We Got Free* and the short story *Cabins*. Both exhibit an exploration of feminist ideas such as the concept of “toxic masculinity” through the use of grand narrative.

Grand narrative can be defined by Philip Eubanks as, “Stories that pervade, shape, and, it is often asserted, delude cultures” (Eubanks 35). For example, the plotline for the father figure in *The Summer We Got Free* by Mia McKenzie should serve as a grand narrative for most fathers in our American culture. On surface level, George is a strong father who does his best to maintain his idea of a healthy and morally right atmosphere in his household. He is stubborn in his opinions and has the final say on most issues. He does his best to appear as though he abides by heterosexual conventions. A similar course goes for the narrator in *Cabins* by Christopher Merkner. The narrator goes out with his guy friends to places like hookah bars and the basketball court. They drink beer together and their conversations never verge on the edge of anything emotional. When a potentially touchy subject arises, it is treated with the utmost casualness and promptly dismissed. These are manly men. This is what manhood means, right?

Wrong. Merkner and McKenzie both show us through the text and the context of the pieces that these “grand narratives” of the male characters are disillusioned. George Sr. in *The Summer We Got Free* is unhappy. He has been trapped all his life by the secret of his sexuality and hides the scars from his own toxic upbringing – poorly hides them, I might add.

Let us first turn our attention to McKenzie's *The Summer We Got Free*. According to The Good Men project, "Toxic masculinity is a narrow and repressive description of manhood, designating manhood as defined by violence, sex, status and aggression" This means that our culture tends to expect men to be strong in those traits that follow the aforementioned characteristics. For example, a man who has a lot of sex is a "Casanova" – which has positive connotations – but a woman is shamed for the same thing. Men are expected to be strong and tough and to participate in hobbies that follow "manly" characteristics. George Sr. has a lot of characteristics that differ from this expectation – namely his sexuality – which cause him great shame and sadness. For example, there is a moment described in the text where Ava, George's daughter, draws him as a bird in a too-small cage. When he sees the drawing, he becomes defensive and irritable. He asks Ava, "Ain't you supposed to be painting horsies and kitties anyhow? Ain't you supposed to be nine?" (McKenzie 110). This sentence in itself is telling of another important grand narrative: that of toxic femininity (also known as the expectations women face to be considered feminine). But more importantly, George Sr. does not deny that the drawing represents him. He could claim that Ava is just being a silly child by imagining her father as a trapped bird. Instead, he becomes irritable because he recognizes that Ava sees through him and gets defensive about her prying. George Sr. has lived his whole life as only a shadow of his potential, caught up in the expectations others had for him.

This theme of masculinity pervades George Sr.'s life, as we see in flashbacks to his past. McKenzie expands upon George's upbringing, "His father had argued with [George's mother] constantly, saying that a boy ought to learn what a man needed to know, but his mother always got her way" (McKenzie 81). It is a commonly-held belief among those who condemn homosexuality that the cause at root is a poor – possibly even too-womanly – upbringing. It is likely that George blames his mother, for coddling him as a child, for his sexuality now. There is also a flashback in

which George Sr. – at the time a child – is caught by his father while being intimate with another boy. George’s father neglects him after that, as though punishing him for his sexuality.

These kinds of interactions between father and son are what teach young boys how to relate to other men. George Sr. was taught that homosexuality was a disgrace and something to be ashamed of. That belief shaped the way he treated his family when he became a father, “Kenny jumped on Geo, put him in a headlock. Geo put his arms around Kenny’s waist and lifted him off the floor. They were both laughing, their skinny, naked arms and chests pressing damply together. George felt a sudden rush of nausea and heat and he sprang up from his chair and grabbed Geo, prying him off Kenny. ‘Stop acting like a little faggot!’ he snarled, his teeth clenched, shaking the boy” (McKenzie 190). In this scene, Geo and Kenny are just wrestling, playing around. George Sr. sees them playing and becomes enraged to the point of abuse. After this outburst, Regina comes running in and George Sr. punches her. This is how he has been taught to run a family and assert his dominance – assert his manliness. George fears the failure of living up to the expectations taught to him.

What about Merkner’s *Cabins*, then? The same holds true. The narrator in *Cabins* does not abuse his wife, but the emotion is the same. *Cabins* discusses three different relationships between the narrator and three separate unnamed men. Each friend meets up with the narrator to tell him that they are getting a divorce. Through the exploration of these relationships it is revealed that these “friends” are hardly friends at all. There is almost no emotional depth, for example, with the friend at the hookah bar, “He said he was divorcing. Then he put the hose in his mouth again and closed his eyes” (Merkner 2). The narrator has no idea how to comfort his friend, so instead he tells him, “in detail what [the narrator] could remember about the catheter” from the narrator’s recent heart attack (Merkner 3). The lack of emotional depth continues with the other friends, as well. The third friend that is introduced holds a class at a prison nearby. The narrator meets up

with this friend and realizes, “We had very little in common, in fact, aside from our property lines” (Merkner 9). But the moment of greatest clarity for this story is when the author thinks about how his life would be if he got divorced. In his imagination, he would move somewhere far away; build a cabin in the woods where nobody can find him. He imagines himself drinking frequently and the choice of diction in these sections is powerfully lonely, “In my cabin, as in my entire life in divorce, she’s not anywhere to be found or heard or smelled... And I miss her. I am morose and I am broken without her in my cabin. If I cannot have her, I can have no one and nothing except my cabin and my boat” (Merkner 1). This depiction completely excludes friendships. Where women often depend on their friends to support them through difficult experiences, the narrator does not. He entirely expects his life, should his wife not be in it, to be painful and empty because he cannot lead an emotionally fulfilling life without his wife.

Toxic upbringing in this fashion has great effect on the psyche of a person. The American Psychological Association published a study in 2011 that found that men are more likely to be diagnosed with substance abuse and other antisocial disorders and women were found more likely to be diagnosed with anxiety or depression disorders. This study in itself proves the grand narrative of both texts and the ramifications of that grand narrative on the characters affected by it. George Sr. is abusive and hesitant to let people into his home. He has become most comfortable controlling his family’s every move and pretending his sexuality does not exist. In *Cabins* this is even more clear, as the narrator can easily imagine himself turning to alcohol to cope with his life should his wife not be in it.

Along with this, the narrator wholly relies on his wife for emotional support, “He said he was divorcing. Then he put the hose in his mouth again and closed his eyes. I fought the urge to call my wife. I had my hand on my phone” (Merkner 2). The narrator desperately needs his wife’s validation and sees a bit of himself in his friends. He watches as his friend “knocks his head against

the window” on the drive back home, but has no idea how to comfort him (Merkner 3). There are so many things the narrator could say and do to comfort his friends, but he clearly has no practice. He stands as the grand narrative for all men in America – who have been raised not to recognize their own inclination to comfort one another.

As Philip Eubanks so eloquently states in his *Poetics and Narrativity*, “The study of narrative is the study of culture” (36). To look at history is to look at the stories from the time period and uncover what the culture of the period was like. This includes gender roles, technology, education, circulating ideas and – most importantly – stories. Eubanks goes on to say that, “Storytelling is both a matter of consensus building and of what is lately called distributed cognition, cognitive frameworks that allow people to think and work together,” In essence, this means that stories provide a way for people to expect in advance how their relationships should play out. Based on the plot line of *Cabins*, a young man might expect to turn to smoking and hookah bars as an escape from an uncomfortable situation, such as the ending of a relationship. Or if a young gay boy were to look at the plot for George Sr. in *The Summer We Got Free*, he may actively try to avoid mirroring that behavior described in the book in favor of a more positive life experience.

There is a difference in the approach each author takes to show their message. Jack Selzer says, “rhetorical analysis or rhetorical criticism can be understood as an effort to understand how people within specific social situations attempt to influence others through language” (Selzer 281). This includes the “logos, pathos, ethos” approach to analysis. Another possible approach could be an analysis of the word choice in a piece of writing with specific care taken to understand the connotations of important words. McKenzie’s approach to persuasion of her readers is through pathos. McKenzie uses strong imagery and emotionally gripping familial moments. She makes the reader care about the characters. Merkner uses a kind of opposite approach. The most striking thing

about his work is the feeling of awkwardness and void of emotion. Where in McKenzie's work there is a strong emotional undercurrent, in Merkner's there is an air of oddity – there is something missing. That missing piece is the emotional support men should provide to one another.

At first, Merkner's piece could appear as just a commentary. There is no place that he clearly claims a stance or even a suggested message. The truth lies in the overall feel of the story. Does it feel happy? Strong? Mournful? In questioning this, the message is revealed. There is no emotion. The only trace is that of the awkwardness of each encounter with the narrator's friends and the feeling of extreme loss when the narrator considers divorce. This serves as a grand narrative for men in that the default method of interaction is that of emotional distance. This also speaks to the identity of the author, as Merkner is a man.

McKenzie's approach speaks greatly as well to her identity. She is female and therefore sees relationships in an emotionally open state of mind. Where Merkner focuses on the man's point of view, McKenzie focuses on the aftermath of toxic masculinity in a family. Toxic masculinity – true to its name – creates an environment where men are expected to be violent, overly sexual, tough, and independent. This damages relationships and creates cycles of abuse and pain for men and women. It teaches children not to have feelings. It teaches society to hate those who embrace their true selves. It teaches boys that if they do not marry, or if they divorce, it is better to internalize their pain through unhealthy drug use and other self-abuse than to confide in their friends and support one another.

Another aspect that contributes to the meaning of the texts is the context in which they were written. *Cabins* came after the author experienced an awkward encounter with somebody he considered to be a friend. This friend detailed his divorce in such a way that made the author feel estranged – it was clear the author was not the first person to hear about the divorce.

The Summer We Got Free arose in a time of social upheaval regarding sexuality, gender identity, and race in America. The millennial generation is characterized by a more open dialogue regarding these issues, specifically a resurgence of the civil rights movement. McKenzie, sensing this upheaval, places her novel at the crux of historic movement toward equality.

There are a lot of underlying similarities between Merkner's *Cabins* and McKenzie's *The Summer We Got Free*. The narratives of the men described in the texts serve as grand narratives for our culture and also serve as warnings against the negative effects of our cultural practices on men and women. Although this essay focuses on the concept of toxic masculinity, feminism argues that the solution is a greater focus on women. The women in both novels are expected to maintain the aftermath of their male counterparts' emotional instabilities. This is just one way that women are shown to be oppressed throughout the texts. In general, the women do not have the autonomy or power to be allotted their own margin of error – they are not allowed to have their own emotional instability because they are constantly looking out for their husbands. Instead of teaching men to actually be emotionally independent, McKenzie and Merkner argue that men are taught to depend on women for their emotional stability. This pattern pervades our culture to the core and Merkner and McKenzie warn against falling into the same pattern. Instead, they urge readers to examine their lives for instances of toxic masculinity and to purge them, condemn them. Without recognition, there can be no solution. Our media and culture will tell us who to be and how to behave to project our predefined identities, but to truly live we must explore the possibility of deviating from the grand narratives that have been written for our lives. Ava's father asks her, "Ain't you supposed to be nine?" but age should not dictate the level of wisdom a person possesses (McKenzie 110). Ava's character lived freely, unafraid and almost unaware of the grand narratives set before her – because of this, she was Ava Duvernay. She was not just "nine", she was not just "black", and she was not just "female". Who are you supposed to be?

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