

The gender binary in boys dont cry creative writing examples

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The 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*, directed by Kimberly Peirce, tells the story of transgendered man Brandon Teena (Hilary Swank, in an Oscar-winning performance), who was born Teena Brandon, a woman. In his attempts to ingratiate himself with his male friends and pursue a relationship with a girl named Lana (Chloe Sevigny), his anatomical differences are discovered, and he is raped and murdered by those same male friends. The film examines the concepts of homosexuality, transgender issues, and identity in a way that few major studio films typically do. However, *Boys Don't Cry* presents a remarkably gender-binary worldview for its subject matter, as Brandon (and the film) refuses to accept the possibility of a transgender or intersex view of his sexuality, preferring to paint him as a straight male in a crossdressing woman's body. In this paper, the film will be evaluated based on concepts of feminist theory, black criticism, and queer theory, all in an attempt to demonstrate the failings of the film to present a true account of Brandon Teena's life and death for the sake, in parts, of straightforward lesbian eroticism.

Brandon's journey, despite being mostly that of discovering one's transgenderism and seeking the freedom to interact as a masculine male, demonstrates different viewpoints of masculinity, especially when compared with John. According to Cooper, "The story of Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry* offers media critics the opportunity to explore such struggles by considering how film depictions of female masculinity may work to subvert heteromascularity's privileged position" (2002, pp. 48-49).

Near the beginning of the film, Brandon gets into a bar fight, where he is then bailed out by John Lotter (Peter Sarsgaard). This scene demonstrates a masculine drive to fight, cementing Brandon's desire to act and behave as a man, especially one stereotypical of small-town Nebraska.

John's heteronormative masculinity is clear-cut from the moment that he is introduced; he is a young, troubled, 20-something man with a small criminal record and anger issues (Hird, p. 436). This is dramatically compared to Brandon's more chivalrous, sensitive portrayal of masculinity in a variety of ways. He and his friend Tom (Brandon Sexton III) make frequent references to sex with women, and make disparaging remarks about women, to which Brandon remains silent. Tom and John both brag about being able to perform difficult and dangerous physical feats, like cutting themselves with knives and holding their hand over fire; to their hegemonic masculinity, this proves their power and their manhood. Brandon merely replies, " I guess I'm just a pussy compared to you;" this demonstrates his attempts to disarm the situation without having to confront his very different ideas about what it is like to be a man.

Brandon's more appealing and likable brand of masculinity is furthered when he pursues a relationship with Lana. Brandon's love scene with Lana demonstrates a long, extended scene of cunnilingus; Lana's face is shown in complete ecstasy, one which is almost as surprising to her as to anyone else. This scene demonstrates Brandon's ability to please a woman as much (if not more) than a man; this showcases Pierce's intent to make Brandon

emotionally and identity-wise a man, as well as advocate for the more sensitive, chivalrous strain of masculinity that Brandon embodies.

Brandon's assuming of a strictly male identity speaks to issues of female empowerment, as well as female masculinity. Heteromascularity is portrayed as problematic throughout the film, while Brandon's attempts at being a strong masculine woman are lauded. Essentially, when comparing John's version of masculinity to Brandon's, Brandon's masculinity is far preferred, both by the audience, the filmmakers and the female characters of the film. Brandon, when first chased away by his first girlfriend, states that they say he was "the best boyfriend they've ever had," taking pride in that claim. His ability to provide sexual satisfaction to Lana is further evidence of his version of masculinity being better (Hird, p. 436).

The core problem that John and Tom, and the rest of society, has towards Brandon once his identity is discovered is their own discomfort with the 'schedule' of his masculinity. The fact that he can pass as a real man, despite being a transsexual, is threatening to them, as it separates sex and gender in a way they are not accustomed to and are threatened by. The men of the town resist Brandon because they do not like the idea of a woman being a better man than they are.

Much like Brandon's first girlfriends, Lana is absolutely smitten and sexually satisfied by Brandon, which John and Tom are fine with, provided he is biologically male; however, since he is biologically female, it provides a strangeness, an alien-ness that they simply cannot handle. John and Tom

know that their bad behavior is unappealing to women, but they do not care; they think they still have the power because of their physical possession of male genitalia. The idea that Brandon, someone without a penis, could satisfy women better than they could shakes their core beliefs and makes them feel inadequate. Therefore, their status as dominant, virile creatures is threatened by the presence of an ambiguous, transsexual man who draws women to him without having a penis. John's and Tom's leverage over women to do what they want is no longer valid; in their minds, women could just get with another nice woman like Brandon, who would still satisfy them without making them feel like crap.

In terms of black criticism, the biggest crime of the film *Boys Don't Cry* is its selectiveness in theme when adapting the real murder of Brandon Teena to the screen. In the real incident, Phillip De Vine was a black man who was at the scene of the murder, and was also murdered; he was dating Lisa Lambert at the time, who is replaced by the character Candace in the film. During the real murder, De Vine was killed along with Brandon; in the Pierce film, however, he is suspiciously absent. His absence, and the absence of any other significant black character in the film, places this film squarely in the realm of investigation of 'white' problems. Despite the intentions of the filmmakers, the excision of Philip De Vine is a problematic whitewashing of a real event that occurred for the sake of thematic simplicity.

Whether it is at the roller rink, or the bar, or any of the few other scenes that take place in public, there are few if any black people; no African-Americans are to be seen. Kimberly Pierce's intention, seemingly, was to avoid

confusion of civil rights issues by making Brandon's transvestitism the only one required to focus on. The murder of an African-American man along with the transgendered Brandon would draw the sympathy of an audience away from Brandon, who was the protagonist of the film. According to Brody (2002), the inclusion of De Vine threatened to form a hierarchy of oppression within the film; audiences would have to decide whose oppression is worse, De Vine's race-related murder or Brandon's gender-related murder. Brandon's death was related to a triple homicide with multiple targets, targeted for multiple reasons; portraying the event as is in the film would likely have taken away from Brandon's story, making him no longer the focus of the film's climax.

However, this brings to light the difficult choice that Peirce had to make in the course of creating this film; the choice between queerness and race. Without the presence of De Vine, the Nebraska small town is presented as a white microcosm, one in which few if any black people exist; therefore, the one abnormal person is Brandon. By excising a black presence in the film, it makes it easier to relate to and take pity on Brandon as a supremely unfortunate being who is unfairly persecuted and forced to hide. Given the presence of De Vine, questions of relative persecution would have come up; it would have been difficult to paint Brandon as a persecuted, tragic figure if he was murdered alongside a black, disabled man whose execution was clearly motivated by racism and white supremacy (Brody, 2002).

Boys Don't Cry is a white-leaning film, given the large prevalence of white characters to the exclusion of all black characters. In the real event, there

was a black handicapped victim along with Brandon Teena, but he was excised in the film in order to simplify the thrust of the movie towards queer subjectivity. It also creates a confusing message, wherein from a narrative standpoint Brandon needed to be white in order to focus on his transgendered nature being the single, solitary thing for which John and Tom punish him. If they had cast a black actress as Brandon, it would have taken substantial creative license; however, given the excision of Philip De Vine, that was already in the realm of possibility for the filmmakers - they were not attempting a wholly accurate docudrama. Still, had Brandon been played by a black actress, it is possible that the message of his persecution based on his gender identity would have been muddled amongst deep-seated and implicit notions of white supremacy and racism-motivated violence. In short, the audience would have to decide why Brandon was killed - because he was actually a woman, or because he was black.

Instead of advocating for the truth of Brandon Teena's transgender identity, as something in between man and woman, the film and Peirce effectively show Brandon's identity as strictly a crossdressing lesbian; this furthers the gender binary and downplays any alternative viewpoints. In the first scene with Brandon, he has his gay friend cut his hair short to look like a man, and he dresses himself, complete with sock in the pants to simulate a penis. The friend even says, " So you're a boy... now what?" This is all done to give the appearance of him being a man, so that he can go on his first date with a woman at a roller rink. The scene is filmed in a very surreal style, with a three shot sequence reminiscent of the transition to Oz in The Wizard of Oz.

This was meant to showcase the transition between womanhood to manhood, effectively downplaying any other sort of identity. Brandon in the film goes from woman to man; there is no other identity considered by either him or the rest of the characters in the film.

Transvestitism is portrayed as a bit of a spectacle; from a metafictional standpoint, Brandon calls far more attention to himself as a crossdressing woman than is intended in the attempt to 'fit in' with the boys, which is exactly the kind of 'brave, challenging' spectacle that provided Hilary Swank with the Oscar for Best Actress. The spectator (the audience of the film) is always aware of Brandon's transvestitism, making it all the more sensationalist, as well as providing a substantial source of tension and suspense within the spectator. The audience recognizes the ticking clock nature of Brandon's disguise, knowing it is just a matter of time before he is found out. This paints transvestitism and transgendered people as spectacles, adding to the 'freakshow' nature of Brandon's experience (Aaron, p. 93).

The primary problem with the presentation of Brandon's transgendered nature in the film is that, with few exceptions, Brandon's character is presented merely as a crossdressing lesbian woman who impersonates a man in order to have sex with women. Brandon identifies as male, but does so without acknowledging his biological femaleness. Therefore, there is little to identify Brandon as someone who lives 'between' genders, but instead has picked a heteronormative picture of male sexuality with the burden of having a female body. This identity does fluctuate, however; there are scenes when,

after Lana learns that Brandon is biologically female, he asserts that he is a hermaphrodite, who will be getting a sex change soon. Other than that, a few cursory mentions about saving money for the procedures are given, without it having much bearing on the character. This results in a very minimized, whitewashed portrayal of a transsexual man in favor of emphasizing, for filmmaking purposes, the illicit eroticism of lesbianism.

This flagrant criticism of heteronormativity is present in unique ways. First, the idyllic heartland of America is challenged in the film's setting, small-town Nebraska. This area provides many images of the American Dream; peaceful country roads, good old boys living the simple life, and so on. It is meant to be the core of America, and yet it presents a constricting, oppressive world for Brandon (Cooper, p. 49). Due to its conservative atmosphere, and the family values that make her feminine masculinity so abhorrent, the idea of people like Brandon - genderqueer or transgenders - threatens their 'wholesome' way of life. However, the behavior of John, Tom and most other characters in the film reveals them as petty, bigoted and small-thinking individuals who want nothing beyond the county lines of their small town. The protagonists, Brandon and Lana, hope to go around to greater climes, Brandon hoping to manage Lana in a career as a karaoke singer.

Secondly, Brandon's own female masculinity is supported, as is his gender fluidity, by the healthy, accepting relationship he develops with Lana. Even after she suspects and knows that Brandon is a biological female, she still plans to have a life with him - she reacts to his attempt at an explanation with 'Shut up. That's your business. I don't care if you're half monkey or half

ape." By presenting such a supportive character in Lana, Brandon's own issues with gender identity are somewhat validated, as he is not the only one who agrees that he is, where it truly counts, a man.

Throughout the film, Brandon's impersonation of a male is often portrayed as a trick in order to date women, adding to the thought that Brandon may just be a lesbian woman who is forced to cross-dress in order to have female relationships with women who would otherwise not consider a relationship with a woman. The aforementioned scene where his gay friend dresses Brandon up and cuts his hair plays like the setup to a prank, complete with the friend attempting to get Brandon to back out at the last minute. This plays out as if Brandon knows he is a woman, but wishes to date a girl in a small, conservative town, and so is willing to play the part of a man to do so.

This is furthered most dramatically by the presentation of Brandon's body as female, and its subsequent exhibition as such. Brandon gets his period, and Lana views his cleavage, which tie sex characteristics to gender, at least in the minds of the other characters in the film. (Aaron, p. 94). During both the love scenes with Lana and the rape scene with John and Tom, Brandon is nude, with his chest tape removed to reveal his breasts; John and Tom both penetrate Brandon vaginally, engaging in heterosexual rape. Not only is the rape itself traumatic for its own reasons, it is doubly traumatic for Brandon as a reminder of his biological femaleness; Brandon spends most of the movie passing as a man, wishing he was a man, that having this unfortunate reminder to the contrary is a tremendous trauma. Brandon's body and identity are both raped at that point, as Brandon's transgendered viewpoint

is horrifyingly challenged by the gender binary that the Tom and John characters force upon him (that Brandon is a woman), and they 'teach' her that he is meant to have sex with a man, no matter how much he hates it, consent or no consent.

Boys Don't Cry is not a true transgender film; instead, it is a crossdressing film. This makes Brandon effectively a transvestite, instead of a transgendered. The 'otherness' of Brandon is not between different types of people, but merely Brandon and the rest of the film's characters. Brandon's transgenderism is painted in the film as straightforward lesbianism.

Brandon's body is presented as a 'true' woman, and so there is no genderqueer ambiguity anymore; it supports a gender binary of male OR female, nothing in between. Brandon's existence challenges typical notions of heteronormality and masculinity, as well as the idyllic nature of the American heartland, where genderqueer individuals are not welcome. The absence of Philip De Vine in the dramatized story of Brandon Teena was intended, for better or worse, to maintain the focus of the story on Brandon and his queerness, instead of muddling the story with mixed issues of race.

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