A Praise of Masculinity Through the Films Shane and Brokeback Mountain

Masculinity and Hollywood

*, Yahoo Contributor Network
May 27, 2006

MORE: Masculinity Gender Role Brokeback Mountain Gunfighter

Flag Post a comment

12

Gender role has been an issue discussed through Hollywood since the beginning of film. The shifting dimensions of masculinity have provided many films with a dynamic central theme. The genre of the Western has been a prime playing field for the portrayal of strong masculine roles. In *Shane*(1953), a gunslinger rides into town and ends up in the middle of an ongoing dispute between the homesteaders and a group of range cattlemen. Shane settles with the Starrett family and through his interaction with Joe and Marian as well as their son Joey, the film makes a statement about masculinity in the 1950's as well as calling for a change in the male role. The 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain* also makes a statement about gender role in the 21st century as well as calling for a social change in the realm of masculinity. The love story in the film between cowboys Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar discusses masculinity and questions its definition and characteristics. Both Shane and Brokeback Mountain have at the forefront of their storylines the question of masculinity; and while the explicit issues of their plots discuss a seemingly more progressive social change, it is the more generalized statements about masculinity that hold centrality in the themes of these films.

The 1950's film *Shane* connects the male role of the '50s with the western setting of the movie. The bond between Joe and his wife and the family dynamics with a "homemaker wife, work-involved father, and only child" provide for the link between the "strenuous living" of the West and the "companionate provider" lifestyle of the 1950s. The film sustains this '50s masculinity through the character of Joe. Joe is the classic 1950s father. He is a family-oriented provider for his wife and son. Joe is a man of character and a strong leader; and thus the film does not seek to portray the masculinity of the '50s in a negative light. It does however seek to maintain the importance of the nuclear family while introducing a stronger masculinity into society. The figure of this strong masculinity is in the form of Shane. Shane is a gunfighter, independent and strong. It is through the education of Joey in the lesson of masculinity that the film is able to introduce the stronger male role into the nuclear family of the '50s. Joey admires and idolizes Shane's masculinity and desires to learn to be like him. Shane accommodates Joey's admiration while also teaching him to control this masculinity. While masculinity is strength and pride and toughness, it is also, just as importantly, compassion and cooperation. This lesson is most vividly displayed in the bar fight scene when Shane stands up for his pride by fighting Chris but then allows himself to be brutalized so that Joey will understand that it is not the "fight" that is honorable. This lesson is also visualized in the way Shane teaches Joey to use a gun. He teaches him that a gun is a tool not a weapon and thus the strength of Shane's masculinity is not meant to harm but to help. The film's incorporation of Shane into the family of the 1950s maintains an environment for the preservation of the nuclear family while encouraging the father figure to grasp a stronger masculinity that will compliment such a family unit.

Brokeback Mountain (2005) also incorporates the same idea of dynamic masculinity into its plot. Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist are two straight men that meet and fall in love while working as shepherds in the harsh highlands of Wyoming. The love that grows between them questions the very essence of their masculinity, especially for Ennis. Although the film has been praised as a

Related Content

Brokeback Mountain Breeds Trouble for Teacher
What to See and Do While Visiting Hollywood
How Hollywood Takes to the Skies: Aero Mockups and the Movies
Ten of Classic Hollywood's Best Child Actors

Takeaways | Did You Know

What aspects (if any) of today's traditional idea of masculinity need to be altered?

How do the progressive plots of these films allow for their ideas about masculinity to be discussed?

Should Hollywood's ideas about culture have such an impact on society?

breakthrough gay love story it in fact "bring[s] to vivid cinematic life what is in essence a paean to masculinity" (Leavitt). Ennis' struggle between his connection with Jack and his conventional masculinity provides the life of this story. The rough way in which he handles his relationship with Jack offers a visualization of his inner struggle and this struggle lends to his need to "prove" his masculinity. The film cleverly associates Ennis' homosexual experiences with anger and violence. More than once in the film we see him lash out at Jack, fighting him both verbally and physically. This show of aggression makes Ennis aware of his masculinity. Ennis' struggle is rooted in the conventional masculinity of the Western. This is a masculinity that cherishes strength, aggression, and pride; and rejects conventional feminine characteristics such as nurturing, compassion, and gentleness. The death of Jack Twist allows Ennis to finally reconcile his masculinity struggle by allowing dynamic change to be made to his masculine identity. He is able to accept compassion and gentleness as a part of the strength of his masculinity. Through Ennis' transformation, the film is able to call for a change in societal ideas of masculinity. It calls for a renewed definition of masculinity; one that rather than labeling men who are nurturing and compassionate and gentle as feminine, instead praises these characteristics as a better masculinity, a masculinity that is even stronger than the conventional prideful aggressive masculine role.

Shane and *Brokeback Mountain* both praise masculinity and seek to break the mold of the conventional male roles of the time in which each film was created. *Shane* praises the male role in the '50s family unit while calling for a stronger masculinity that will be a tool to help and prosper the nuclear family. *Brokeback Mountain* extols the acceptance of conventionally feminine characteristics into culture but seeks an incorporation of these traits into the masculine role to better masculinity as a whole. These films allow changing masculinity to be discussed under the guise of their progressive plots; however, the importance of their ideas for masculinity is vivid and liberated for culture to facilitate.

Bibliography:
"Men in Love", David Leavitt, http://www.slate.com/id/2131865/

Published by *
I am a 20 year old college student at Florida State University working on a bachelors degree in Religion with a minor in English. I am passionate about writing, religious studies, political issues, and... s... View profile

AWF: Actors, Writers and Filmmak...

Hollywood Effects - FreeSpace 2...

The Oscars 2010: Donnie 'Hollywo...

0 Comments

Sign in to Comment

http://ads.yahoo.com/st?ad_type=ifran