

Nurturing Talent: Exploring femininity in *This is England*

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This paper explores the portrayals of femininity in This is England and the ways in which these characterizations affect the child protagonist, Shaun. The words “nurturing” and “talent” will be understood, respectively, in terms of their historical contexts of “to nourish” and “inclination, will, desire, balance.” The standard female archetypes of the Mother, the Maiden and the Whore/hag are recognisable tropes in the film, but the female characters do not always adhere to one version of these archetypes, indeed there are times when these boundaries are blurred. In exploring the topic, I will analyse how femininity has been portrayed in the film and the ways in which this affects Shaun’s development. I will also reflect on how rigid interpretations of gender ultimately lead to the tragic consequences of the film, forcing us to question their validity in a wider social context.

A rich man’s wife became sick, and when she felt that her end was drawing near, she called her only daughter to her bedside and said, “Dear child, remain pious and good, and then our dear God will always protect you, and I will look down on you from heaven and be near you.” With this she closed her eyes and died.

Cinderella, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

No mother is ever, completely, a child's idea of what a mother should be.

A Handmaid’s Tale, Margaret Attwood

*There's no second spring for a woman. None.
She can't recall it, nobody wants her.*

Lysistrata, Aristophanes

CREON: No woman shall be the master while I live.

Antigone, Sophocles

Down from the waist they are centaurs, though woman all above. But to the girdle do the gods inherit; beneath is all the fiends.

King Lear, Shakespeare

A woman should soften, not weaken, a man.

Sigmund Freud

The modern British male is useless... Something must be found, first, to restore women’s desire to be married. That means addressing the feebleness of the modern Briton, his reluctance or inability to

take control of his woman and be head of the household.

In families on lower incomes the women have absolutely no choice but to work, often with adverse consequences for family life and society as a whole – in that unloved and undisciplined children are more likely to become hoodies...and mug you on the street corner.

Boris Johnson

INTRODUCTION

Dead mothers make brief, but frequent, appearances in fairy tales. This is not surprising. Their role as mother becomes fixed in the narrative of memory and having been removed from the action, they conveniently adhere to those feminine qualities that are both simple and desirable: passivity, spirituality and immutability. The struggle, or perhaps refusal, to accept a complex conception of femininity can be seen through the archetypes so commonly used in cultural representations of women. To be knowledgeable, powerful, old, sexually active, childless, is seen as transgressive- not in keeping with expectations of femininity. Women who display those traits are dangerous and suspicious. They are the whores and hags: Pandora, Jezebel, femme fatales, witches, wicked stepmothers. To be passive, self-sacrificing, modest and innocent is seen as righteous. Women who display those traits are protected and trustworthy. They are the maidens and mothers: Mary (mother of Jesus), Persephone, Snow White, damsels in distress in need of rescuing by strong male heroes. Though it is overly simplistic to suggest that all representations of femininity adhere to these archetypes, the difficulty in appreciating that these traits may be blurred or erroneous is seen even in modern culture and discourse. The difficulty in seeing femininity as complex underpins what, in Freudian terms, is called the Madonna-Whore complex in which “women are chaste and all good or seductive and all bad” (Slipp, 1995) Though *This is England* focuses heavily on the racial tensions that dominated much of the of the 1980’s, its exploration is heavily grounded in ideas of identity and belonging, but that sense of belonging is very much rooted in an idea of masculine identity. The role that femininity plays in nurturing the development of Shaun’s identity and talent is the focus of this essay. I understand “talent” in terms of its wider historical meaning of “will” or “inclination” as well as “aptitude” or “desire.” I also take on board the etymological root of the word “nurture,” which comes from the Latin “nutrire,” meaning “to nourish.” The film is a bildungsroman, in which we follow the story’s protagonist Shaun over the school holidays in the summer of 1983. It contrasts the identities of two gangs led by the divergent characters of Woody and Combo. Although the film is heavily male-orientated, Meadows does employ the female archetypes of the mother, the maiden and the whore/hag but they are perhaps not as rigid in their presentation as tradition would dictate.

FALLEN HEROES

The film opens with a montage of iconic symbols of 1980’s Britain: from cultural references of Roland Rat, Knight Rider and Space Invaders, to the politics of Thatcher’s Britain, exemplified by violent protests and impoverished council estates. It concludes by showing footage of dead soldiers being returned from the Falklands War. A long fade to black on this final image then

transitions to a fade in, focusing our attention on a photograph of Shaun's dead father, who remains forever iconised and idolised by the young protagonist's bedside. Dressed in formal army attire and with a peaked cap that obscures his eyes, we do not see his whole face. Our focus is drawn to the uniform, thus identifying him first and foremost as a soldier. As the camera pulls back, great shafts of almost-heavenly light pour in from the window above, illuminating the photo even more and the polished gold and wood frame serve to further illustrate the extent to which he is exalted. The crisp, smart lines of the service dress are in stark contrast to Shaun's baggy Y-fronts (underpants) and the meticulously maintained order of the outfit juxtaposes sharply with the peeling walls of the young boy's bedroom that serve as the picture's back drop. The photo is a potent image of the archetypal hero of which Combo speaks later on in the film: a proud warrior who is prepared to sacrifice his life for his country.

The inversion of the dead-mother backstory that so frequently serves as an expository device in fairy tales alludes to the film's role as a means of exploring the archetypes we find in such stories. It also firmly establishes Shaun as the film's protagonist and point-of-view character. The portrayal of Shaun's father as a "fallen" soldier not only casts him in the roles of martyr and protector, but the image of his perfectly fitted uniform suggests how neatly he conformed to "an epitome of British male citizenship" (Fitzgerald and Godfrey, 2013, p. 165). Shaun's struggle to find his own place and inclination is symbolised through the contrary motif of ill-fitting clothes: the underpants that hang all around him; the trousers that are too big and cause him to suffer the taunting jibes of a school bully (ironically bought by his father); and the Dr Martens boots (a fundamental part of skinhead attire) that only come in adult sizes. The unsuitability of Shaun's clothes are sources of conflict for him and his mother, Cynthia. Having been "picked on three times [that day]" because of his trousers, he directs his anger and frustration towards his mother and grows even more irritated when she, either unaware or having forgotten that the last day of term was non-school-uniform day, suggests he could have worn his school trousers. In a similar act of misjudgement, she tries to encourage Shaun to buy the boots that are "from London," rather than the Dr Martens that he really wants.

CUTTING THE CORD: THE JOURNEY INTO MANHOOD

Shaun's resistance to his mother's suggestions about the clothes he wears is significant. Clothes are symbolic of identity and single mothers of male children have long been cast as threats to both the masculine maturation of those boys and the patriarchal social structures that they are intended to uphold. Though such attitudes pre-date Freud, Freudian analytical theory nevertheless exemplifies them:

For a boy to achieve a masculine gender identity, he needs to distance himself from [the] initial internalization of the mother and to identify with the father and other male figures. (Slipp, 1995, p. 48)

Shaun's loss of his father, at a critical point in his development, is therefore more than a personal tragedy. Without male attachment, Shaun runs the risk of failing to "protect himself from engulfment by the all-powerful preoedipal mother" (ibid.), that is to say that he might not be able to repress or project those feelings that would serve to threaten his masculine identity, namely "dependency, helplessness and emotionality" (ibid.), feelings typically associated with

women. From a Freudian perspective, then, Cynthia's relative passivity (she is absent from large chunks of the film) is not something to be reprimanded but celebrated; she is conforming to the expectations of both her sex and her role as mother. As a widow who courts no male attention and receives no visitors of her own, she also observes the traits of modesty and chastity. Though we see Cynthia engage in conflict over Shaun's behaviour (she clips him around the ear for swearing and admonishes Lol for cutting his hair) she nevertheless allows him to continue spending time with Woody and Combo. The fear of the omnipotent mother, a fundamental tenet of psychoanalytic theory, is something that children need to overcome in order to develop into healthy adulthood: "it is more likely the reality of an excessively controlling and intrusive mother in the postoedipal period of development that perpetuates the child's rage and interferes with the normal integration of ambivalence" (Slipp, 1995, p.35). According to Freud then, a truly nurturing mother, is one who knows when to step away.

A further step towards Shaun breaking with his maternal influences and thus fulfilling his masculine identity can be seen through the "hunting" scene. The "hunt" is a trope seen in a number of boys' adventure stories from Western literature. It is an opportunity for the young male to exert his physical strength and dominance. Dressed in ridiculous outfits, including snorkels and a camouflage umbrella hat, and armed with childlike weaponry, it is clear that this is a romanticised, "innocent" version of the archetypal male rite of passage. The scene partly serves as a means to juxtapose the innocuous, juvenile disorder of the group under Woody's leadership with the horrific explosion of carnage we witness under Combo's, but what is telling is that the "hunt" primarily takes place indoors and involves demolishing parts of derelict houses. We see the boys destroy kitchens, living rooms and bathrooms—all symbols of domesticity. Once this purge has taken place, Woody unites the group and there is a sense they have all bonded. The deserted nature of the landscape, together with the film's setting on a coastal town in Britain, alludes to a tradition of island narratives that often serve as coming-of-age stories for adolescent boys: *Treasure Island*, *Coral Island* and *Lord of the Flies*, to name but a few. As is the case with *This is England*, these stories focus on the dynamics of all-male groups whose development involves negotiating roles within hierarchical structures. Indeed, in Meadows' film the hunt scene concludes with Gadget and Shaun reconciling a conflict that is triggered as a result of Gadget feeling that he has "gone down in the ranks" since Shaun arrived. The engagement in the "hunt" allows the group to restore a sense of equilibrium as the newest member is initiated into its practices. The almost romantic image of them returning home through a corn field, with Shaun riding on Woody's shoulders, signals the cementing of Shaun's transition from boy dependent on his mother to young man taken under the wing of an avuncular role model.

Despite participating in the symbolic rite of passage, it is not until Shaun is given a new image that he is fully inculcated into the group. And where the "hunt" is an all-male pursuit, the final transformation into a Skinhead is dependent on a female figure, Lol, whose identity as Woody's "other half" casts her into a maternal role. In a scene that comprises a culminating progression of activities that see Shaun at his happiest, Lol is instrumental in that she shaves his head and helps to dress him in his new garb, thus casting doubt on the idea that exclusively male influences are advantageous. The sequence acts as a counterpoint to the conflict of the previous scene in the shoe shop: conflict and obstruction are contrasted with consent and permission. A

wide view of the shoe shop establishes the scene where we see the proprietor closing the door moments before Shaun and Cynthia's arrival. The camera then switches to an interior point of view where we see, through a barred window, the pair arguing over the appropriateness of the Dr Martens boots. Once they are inside, the assistant struggles to find shoes for Shaun, "pull[ing] a shoulder" in the process. We see a moment of excitement in Shaun's face as the shoe box is opened, which is followed by great disappointment when they are not the ones he wants. A tableau in which Shaun is in the middle of his mother and the proprietor trying to convince him to go with the shoes "from London" comes to an abrupt end in the middle of the argument, giving a sense of dissatisfaction and unresolved conflict. The action immediately cuts to the hair-shaving scene, which also starts with an exterior establishing shot, but this time Shaun has already gained admittance to the house, where Lol is ready, with clippers in hand, to cut his hair. There is an inverse moment of disappointment rising to excitement when Woody tells him he'll have to "come back next week" when he has the right shirt, only to reveal that he already has one for him. As in the previous scene, the reversal of emotions is followed by a tableau, but this time Lol is joined by two other girls who, without speaking, dress Shaun, in an image that is almost reminiscent of handmaidens tending to a prince. Where Cynthia struggles to enable Shaun to dress as he wants, Lol is successful; not only does she give him a "sterling" haircut, but she picks out the shirt which, unlike his other clothes, is "a good fit." Shaun's identity is affirmed in the succeeding montage, in which we see him confidently strutting through the streets with the males of the group, an image that cross fades to the females walking in a similar manner. Perhaps, then, Shaun's contentment is not only as a result of being accepted as a Skinhead, but in having his gender clearly defined; a contentment he attests by declaring "it's been the best day of [his] life" and we get the impression that if the action were to stop there, his might be a "happily ever after" story. That Lol is instrumental to this and the fact that Cynthia ultimately approves of Woody and his gang, suggest that an outright rejection of the maternal is not only undesirable but unfulfilling.

"I LIKED IT BETTER WHEN WE WAS WITH DAD": RESPONDING TO CHANGE SECTION TITLE OF THE SECOND SECTION

Cynthia's antithesis- someone who is certainly portrayed as controlling and intrusive- is arguably Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister in power at the time the film is set. The film draws on connotations of the hag in her portrayal, mirroring certain social depictions both at the time and in the years since. Two epithets for which she is perhaps best known are "The Iron Lady" and the "Milk Snatcher"; both of which portray her in terms of her harsh lack of compassion. The fairy-tail-villain nickname "Milk Snatcher" came about when, in 1971, Thatcher brought an end to free school milk for children aged seven to eleven. I do not intend to cast judgement on her politics, but what is interesting is that this was, arguably, a continuation of a policy implemented by the previous Labour government, something that did not earn the male politician responsible an equivalent title. The image of a woman taking milk, a primal symbol of nourishment, away from children was perhaps too aberrant for the British media. It is an image that upholds and perpetuates the hag archetype: an older woman who is fearful, not only because of her power, but because she lacks the characteristics expected of a female of her age, namely those associated with the nurturing mother. In the film, this hag-like imagery can hardly

be more potent. Towards the close of the opening montage, archive footage of her addressing rows of servicemen and smiling towards the camera having just fired artillery equipment immediately cuts to an image of a dead soldier being placed on the ground and another being rushed out of frame having had his leg blown off. The first spoken words we hear are from her, via Shaun's clock radio, the resting place for the photo of his dead father; the hero/villain dichotomy thus being quite clearly established in the opening tableau. Perhaps even more pointedly, we hear a snippet of her speech in which she addresses the Wembley Youth Rally, a meeting of the official youth wing of the political party for which she was leader. Though it is likely that Meadows' criticism of Thatcher resided in her policies, rather than her gender, the significance of her addressing a youth group cannot be overlooked. The hag is invariably a danger to the young. It feels pertinent to mention that this is not intended to read as any sort of vindication of or support for Thatcher or her policies, but the film's portrayal of her is in keeping with an attitude that sees women leaders of men as monstrous, an attitude that fuses with the racist worldview advocated by Combo and the National Front.

With Britain under the rule of a female Prime Minister for the first time in its history and a rising participation of women in the public sphere, anxiety over lost male identity was a common trope throughout the 80's and 90's. As Godfrey (2013) states:

Within a British context, claims that masculinity was in crisis were evidenced by a wealth of empirical data which covered questions ranging from the underperformance of boys in schools to the root causes of domestic violence and other expressions of male alienation...Alongside the sweeping economic changes which had brought the once vital industrial heartlands of the Midlands and Northern England to the brink of extinction came concomitant discursive shifts around men's social and domestic roles.

In keeping with a number of Meadows' films, *This is England* explores such themes. With the action taking place at the start of the holidays in early summer, the temporal context for the film mirrors Shaun's own time of life: it is a time of potential, a time one would expect to be filled with activity and the forging and strengthening of relationships. Instead, we see the start of Shaun's holiday marked out by a series of tragic images of his isolated existence. He washes a car for pocket money, (like a good child of Thatcher) before exploring the deserted landmarks that act as ghostly reminders of the life that once flourished: a derelict warehouse, a crumbling fishing boat, an empty beach. All underscored by the melancholic music of Gravenhurst's *Nicole*, an instrumental version of a song that is arranged with such sparsity that it feels like an accompaniment missing its vocals. The weight of emptiness is so great that it can hardly be viewed as simply a reflection of Shaun's sadness; it is equally a symbol of the male isolation and alienation of which Godfrey (2013) speaks. Combo and Shaun bond over their absent fathers and the theme of fatherhood is an important one in Meadows' work (Fradley and Kingston, 2013). But the theme is not restricted to tales of personal tragedy. The opening montage, with its seemingly disordered sequence of images that cut from protests to keep-fit classes to people playing arcade games not only speaks to a loss of cohesive structures but compels us to join together the personal with the social in a way that the socio-political climate of the 80's appeared to be rejecting; nationalised industries were privatised, communities that had been built around the processes of manufacture were dwindling and social housing was sold as part of

an ideological drive to place focus on individual responsibility to improve economic status. But set against the backdrop of conflict, deprivation and dilapidated housing, the image of 80's England is one of a neglected society in need of care. The lamentations of Shaun and Combo over their lost fathers take on a much wider resonance, therefore: a mourning for clearly defined communities with male leaders.

Though there is clearly an anxiety about the impact of absent fathers, the corresponding change of the face of motherhood and an underlying fear of a lack of nurture is also present. Under female governance, the country is not only bereft of its patriarch, but in portraying Thatcher as a hag, it is also left without a mother. Freud espouses the disastrous impact of a controlling mother, but a mother who is absent or neglectful is even more so as "insufficient nurturance and security...produces deprivation and rage when the child's needs are ignored" (Slipp, 1995, p. 35). Combo is often depicted as childish, and he inhabits a world where females are absent or unwelcome: he has just returned from prison and the nationalist groups which he so admires are all male. This overtly masculinised enclave is portrayed through motifs that suggest a lack of nourishment. In contrast to Woody's group, who meet and eat in a café, Combo's world is a place of hunger. At the run-down pub where they congregate to hear a speaker from the National Front, a voice is heard asking "shouldn't there be a barbecue or something?" The flat where Combo lives has evidence of alcohol on the premises, but little to eat and the scene in which they commit a racially-motivated armed raid on Shaun's local shop, Gadget loads himself down with huge jars of sweets-food that is universally popular with children but nutritionally void. The disgusting nature of the act is exemplified by Meggy's attempt to defecate on the floor but the group, like giggling schoolboys, finds it hilarious. Combo's arrival is marked by playing a terrifying prank on the group, in which sends his machete-wielding prison mate, Banjo, into the house where they are partying. Just at the point where they are all desperately fearful for their lives, he appears in fits of laughter. It is a horrifying example of his undeveloped sense of empathy and compassion. He goes on to describe, with bitter hatred, his violent confrontation with a "filthy black" prisoner who kept "stealing his pudding." The action and reaction are both so juvenile, it could easily descend into farce, were it not for the disturbing rage with which Stephen Graham performs the lines. The makeshift football pitch which was previously the site of a friendly match between the girls and boys when Woody was in charge become the place of a frightening act of intimidation when Combo instructs a group of young Muslim boys to leave, threatening to "slash" them if he sees them on his streets again. Combo's outbursts and behaviours are the stuff of playground bullies and Shaun has gone from being their victim to their ally. The male need to proclaim dominance is indivisible from an inability to move beyond the practices of childhood.

Combo's insecure adult status manifests itself both through his noxious drive to assert his national identity and his masculinity. He glorifies Britain's history in terms of "proud fucking warriors" who stood in defence of "this little tiny island," which has been "raped and pillaged" by those who wanted to get "a piece of it." The feminisation of a nation and its representation as a vulnerable victim in need of protecting from the foreign phalluses that would seek to violate it is well-trodden territory that allows racism and misogyny to flourish side by side. It also evokes the maiden archetype, that treasured trope of femininity that gives rise to male heroes. The neo-Nazi ideology that Combo spouts in this speech is a direct descendent of the original

dogma that ravaged Europe two generations before it:

Nazi propaganda...conjured up an Arcadian vision of lost innocence...women were purer, content to be mothers, without perverse social or political ambitions...it combined anti-Semitism with violent, pornographic depictions of helpless German maidens being raped by demon-like Jews. (Holland, 2006).

As well as extolling the “virtues” of the vulnerable virgin and the mild mother, Nationalism tends to vilify any symbol of female autonomy, especially sexuality, denigrating it as whoredom. This is clearly shown when Combo and his mob are spray-painting racist slurs on the walls of a subway tunnel. Two girls run through and shout at the gang. It isn’t clear what they say but the group hurls paint cans at them, and Combo shouts “you fucking little whore.” That we don’t hear the women’s words is significant- it underlines the fact that what provokes male anger is not what a woman says, but rather the act of speaking out at all.

The film’s distressing climax sees Combo perpetrate an unprovoked and frenzied assault on Milky and demonstrates, with visceral horror, the way in which misogyny and racism are connected. Towards the end of the film, Combo asks to talk to Lol and it is revealed that they had a sexual relationship. He claims that he hasn’t been able to stop thinking about her since and offers a gift of a home-made box as a token of his affection. She rejects it and him, saying that she’s been trying to forget about that night as she was drunk and only sixteen, the subtext being that their sexual encounter was non-consensual. Female rejection of males is often viewed as a trigger for male violence (Landau et al., 2006; Glicke and Fiske, 2001) and we see this not only in Combo’s immediate reaction, where he punches the inside of the car, but through the scene’s proximity to the film’s climax. The next time we see Combo, he is waiting for Milky and although on the surface it appears as if he simply wishes to buy weed, the strong implication is that he wants to lure him back to the flat, where he can purge himself of his feelings of rage and impotence. The structural link between the two scenes demonstrates the connection between instances of female assertions of autonomy and male expressions of violence.

Having brutally attacked Milky, Combo turns on all the other members of the group, dispelling the myth that he’s a leader to be respected. On seeing Milky’s bloodied face, both Shaun and Combo weep in despair, with Combo asking Shaun “what am I going to do?,” thus bringing to light the dangerous volatility of archetypal masculine traits, which time and again are portrayed as the tantrums of little boys armed with the bodies of grown men. As Fradley and Kingston (2013) state:

With his unsteady fluctuations between violent rage, dope-fuelled camaraderie, authoritarian polemic and childish tears, Combo’s behaviour in *This is England* typifies the deeply troubled and psychologically divided terrain of masculinity in Meadows’ work. Consistently emphasising the fragmentations of a post-industrial neoliberal Britain, Meadows’ tales of beset menfolk register the psychosocial continuum between social deprivation, poverty and mental instability.

The ways in which gender roles and identities were changing in the 80’s is perhaps mostly clearly shown through the character of Smell and her questionable relationship with Shaun. Everything about her is ambiguous. Dressed in the glam-rock fashions characteristic of the New

Romantics, Smell's costume aligns her with a cultural movement known for its androgynous image. Even her nickname is ambiguous: "Smell" could encompass anything from delicious aroma to revolting stench. We first see her at Shaun's school cheering as Shaun fights, but it is not clear whether she is supporting him, the bully or simply enjoying the spectacle. She gets together with Shaun and the significant height difference between them (she being much taller than him) inverts the stereotypical image of the male being taller than the female. It is unclear how old she is (although she is unlikely to be older than 16 as she is still at school) but her make-up, together with the fact that she towers above Shaun, makes her look much older and the image of them walking hand-in-hand is more reminiscent of an older sister than a girlfriend. The repeated invitations for Shaun to "suck [her] tits" in order to bring them closer together evokes an image that blurs the maternal with the sexual, adds further allusions to Freudian interpretations. The ambivalence of her character is perhaps epitomised through her own lack of understanding of her nickname, an identity that has been given to her. She doesn't really know why people call her Smell, other than "it sort of rhymes" with Michelle. Of course, her lack of certainty is understandable in terms of her youth, but where Shaun and Combo's uncertainty give rise to the film's plot and tragic outcome, Smell's is an unobtrusive side-line whose impact is not to be taken too seriously and who does not demand a great deal of attention.

CONCLUSION

Though Meadows makes use of archetypal female figures, the younger generation do not adhere to them as strictly as the older; we see versions of the archetypes more clearly defined in Cynthia and Thatcher than we do in Lol and Smell. The film has a cyclical structure, illustrated by a further montage of archive war footage and Shaun looking again at the picture of his father in the falling action. However, we are not left feeling that things have simply gone back to the way they were. We see Cynthia enter Shaun's room, a move in which she actively seeks him out in order to talk, rather than waiting passively for him to return home as she had done previously. For the first time we see them holding hands, which the camera focuses on as the scene cross-fades to the last scene of the film. There is not only a sense of reconciliation between mother and son, but a lessening of the anxiety over the absent father. The final image of Shaun throwing the St. George's cross into the sea not only indicates his rejection of Combo, who gave it to him, but all it represents: limited identities, exclusionary attitudes, stock narratives. The film closes with Shaun looking directly at the camera and in breaking the fourth wall, our role instantly switches from observer to participant. The sudden engagement suggests an invitation to respond and react and we ask ourselves to what extent we feel that Shaun is really going to be "ok" and how are we best placed to nurture the talent of the next generation?

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