

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the portrayal of masculinity in 21st Century New York City through the television series *Suits* written by Aaron Korsh. This is done through close analysis of characters' interactions with both male and female characters, as well as their interests, struggles and how they cope with their inner demons. R W Connell's theory of masculinity will be applied in this paper in order to analyse the portrayal of masculinity in the series.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Suits is a legal drama written by Aaron Korsh, set in twenty-first century New York City.

This paper seeks to examine the masculine ideal set forth by Korsh in *Suits* that urges society to be more accepting of traditional masculine traits. This is especially of great importance in a post-feminist world, where misconceptions of feminism have often resulted in men being punished for the way society as a whole has raised them to be. Three characters - Mike, Harvey and Louis, and their relationship with each other will be placed at the forefront of analysis to discover this masculine ideal. While these three characters all exhibit different

character traits, all three are still portrayed as masculine, suggesting that men can be masculine despite exhibiting many various character traits.

1.2 Rationale

This study counters the narrative of previous studies, such as those done by Eric Anderson, and hence add a novel perspective to the field of study by suggesting traditionally masculine traits remain desirable for men in a post-feminist world which has incited men to increasingly portray more traditionally feminine traits, whether to conform to society's development or as a genuine expression of one's identity. This study will also counter the perspectives and themes put forth by recent literary works, such as Walter Dean Myers' *Monster*, which reflect as well as influence the opinions of the general public.

1.3 Research Questions

How does *Suits* bring across its themes on masculinity?

How are male characters presented as masculine in their own unique ways?

1.4 Thesis Statement

Suits does not present a consistent view on masculinity and portrays masculinity in both a hegemonic and liberal manner. Korsh tries to subvert the essentialized gender norms of masculinity in *Suits*, but due to the large number of directors and the propagation of hegemonically masculine traits, it is understandable but regrettable that he fails.

1.5 Scope of Research

Landmark seasons of seasons 1, 5 and 8 will be forefronted to discover Korsh's portrayal of masculinity in his writing. Season 1 was chosen as it is the premiere season. Season 5 was chosen as it marks a landmark change in plot and direction, with Mark being sent to prison.

Season 8 was chosen as it marks a landmark change in cast, with Meghan Markle and Patrick J. Adams both leaving the cast, giving way to Dule Hill and Katherine Heigl. Other seasons, while still containing sometimes hegemonic expressions of masculinity such as violence,

1.6 Significance of Research

This paper serves firstly as to push against the notion that cisgender males, often perceived as a whole group rather than individuals in a post-feminist world with increasingly radical feminist movements and ideas, should be punished for the acts of their ancestors and for the way society has brought them up to be. At the same time, this paper also serves to remind society to see people as individuals rather than representatives of their gender, through *Suits* message that all men are different, but still can all be considered masculine.

1.7 Limitations

The assumption must be made that the themes in *Suits* are relevant to our modern day context. This is in light of the assumption that literature both reflects and instigates change in the current state of society.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Inclusive Masculinity

According to Eric Anderson's book *Inclusive Masculinity*, Anderson finds that a decline in homophobia over the past 20 years from his time of writing has resulted in a broader range of acceptable masculine behaviours. (Anderson, 2011) Anderson writes that men are now accepting a greater range of behaviours as less compromising to their masculinities, and find that men continue to hold on to masculine social capital despite engaging in traditionally feminine activities, such as cheerleading and sexualised dancing. Intimate touches such as

hugs, ubiquitous in men's rugby teams, Anderson finds, also shows a society more accepting of emotional expression and expressions of love between men, a traditionally feminine action. Anderson further expounds on this in his follow up research *Inclusive masculinities of university soccer players in the American Midwest*, where he finds that even in a Catholic soccer team in rural America, homophobic tendencies were not evident, with players stating that "if someone were homophobic, I think they'd be to ashamed to admit it", "God made people gay. I'm not one to question what God does" and two stating that they supported same sex marriage. (Anderson, 2011)

Anderson's study of inclusive masculinity will provide me with the tools required to analyse masculinity in *Suits*. I will be utilising his theory of inclusive masculinity, as well as his findings that traditionally feminine traits are acceptable and becoming more common.

This paper will contradict Anderson by showing through *Suits* how heteronormative behaviours are still very much held in value, although men have indeed become more accepting of a greater range of traits as masculine. Characters in *Suits* also show a reluctance to engage in non-traditionally heteronormative behaviours such as intimate physical contact, which contradicts Anderson's findings.

2.2 The Bromance

One of the ways that inclusive masculinity is reflected in modern society is the presence and gradual acceptance of the bromance. According to Elizabeth Chen, bromances fill in the gap between the boundary of sexual and non-sexual relationships, providing a space for male intimacy and for the other parties to act as a confidant, which contrast other traditional forms of male friendship which often do not provide a similar space for emotional sharing and intimacy, especially physical. (Chen, 2012) This allows men to experience an intimate

relationship without sex, and provides a contrast to traditional male friendship which often constitutes spending time together without the expectation of intimacy (Greif, 2009).

Chen also argues that the bromance mimics the dynamics of a marriage by privileging the exclusivity and the dyadic relationship, as well as due to its monogamous and intimate characteristics. Chen argues that bromances harm men through the boundaries placed on friendship by placing men in a position of privilege that is also a source of subordination. By privileging one form of relationship among men, bromances subordinate the other forms of friendship among men that exist outside of those boundaries, rendering any relationship outside these boundaries nameless and hence of less perceived value. While bromances privilege one form of relationship among men, society neglects and belittles all forms of women's friendships by not giving them names to imbue them with a place of privilege, impacting these relationships in comparison to the bromance. (Chen, 2012) Strikwerda and May also show that men do not traditionally develop and express their emotions and thoughts, (Strikwerda and May, 1992) and Chen uses this to argue that if the bromance is used as the outlet for the process of sharing, a man's female significant other may be neglected from this process as a result. Chen concludes here that society should not limit the type of friendships that men can get into due to the benefits of such relationships, as well as the potential fallouts that can occur with the limiting of friendships.

In addition, the bromance also allows for heteronormative behaviours under the guise of masculinity. Chen puts forth the argument that as the law "demands that men not be women and not gay", the bromance allows these individuals who desire the traits the law shuns a safe space to express themselves and yet be active functioning members of society. Chen argues that male intimacy stems from the fear of being thought of as gay, which causes the

requirement of heterosexuality in a bromance to arise, as well as that homophobia is not only the rejection of the homosexual, but the fear of being thought as homosexual. (Chen, 2012)

Geoffrey Greif also similarly writes that “Fear holds men back...showing affection raises fears that a man might be gay” (Greif, 2009)

Chen’s work provides me with the classic characteristics of the bromance and her opinion of its impact on society. Using Chen’s work, I will show how her opinion that bromances harm men are unfounded, and how bromances provide men with emotional support rarely found in society for men in the modern era, in the light of May and Strikwerda’s work. In addition, Greif’s work will add to my analysis of Mike and Harvey’s relationships in *Suits*, and how the two men express their affection for each other by adding the explanation for the way they act.

This paper supports the idea of the bromance, as well as Chen and Greif’s arguments that “fear hold men back” as men fear being thought of as homosexual. This is seen through the reluctance of male characters to express physical intimacy to each other at times.

2.3 Hegemonic Masculinity

However, at the same time the idea of inclusive masculinity is still fairly new, and is subverted by prominent hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is sometimes encouraged and even enforced, seen in some shocking events in our modern day society.¹

Hegemonic masculinity, particularly as it appears in the works of Carrigan, Connell, and Lee. Chapman, Cockburn, Connell, Lichterman, Messner, and Rutherford, involves a specific strategy for the subordination of women. In their view, hegemonic masculinity concerns the dread of and the flight from women. A culturally idealized form, it is both a personal and a

¹ Huffington Post reported on 8th May 2010 of a 17 month old boy that was beaten to death by his father. His father justified this action by saying “I was trying to make him act like a boy instead of a little girl”

collective project, and is the common sense about breadwinning and manhood. It is exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal, and violent. It is pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich, and socially sustained. While centrally connected with the institutions of male dominance, not all men practice it, though most benefit from it. It is a lived experience, and an economic and cultural force, and dependent on social arrangements. It is constructed through difficult negotiation over a life-time. Fragile it may be, but it constructs the most dangerous things we live with.

(Donaldson, 1993)

The idea of hegemonic masculinity contains the constituents of “toxic masculinity” as discussed in this paper. Donaldson’s work will provide me with the necessary vocabulary in order to explore the idea of toxic masculinity in *Suits*, as well as the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity.

This paper will show how *Suits* shows that hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily related to traditional masculinity. In *Suits*, there is no “dread of” and “flight” from women, yet the characters exhibit traditionally masculine traits. However at the same time, the series at times presents masculinity in a surprisingly progressive manner. This has resulted in an extremely mixed message put forth by the series, which has resulted from the nature of the medium which causes rapid and frequent changes in directorship due to the long running nature of the series.

2.4 Current Societal Perception of Masculinity

Understanding the current societal perception of masculinity is paramount to showing the value this paper holds. Fleming, Lee and Dworkin in their analysis on Man Up Monday entitled Men Don’t find that masculinity is portrayed in society as being courageous and strong willed. In addition, they also find that men often lose social capital and standing as a

result of non-conformity of highly valued traits of traditional, hegemonic masculinity. They also found that other traits traditionally desired included being rugged and hip. (Fleming, Lee & Dworkin, 2014)

Research in the twenty-first century, however, shows how the situation has changed in the West; particularly among youth. Research shows that millennials in almost all locations studied in the West, homophobia has transitioned from a necessary part of youth masculinities to a stigmatized social attitude. Recent laws and legislation passed around the globe have resulted in decreased the fear of being homosexual among young people. (Anderson, 2017) Anderson also suggests that young men are now able to express themselves through more traditionally feminine behaviours and can still be accepted by society.

Markedly, this includes the ability for young heterosexual males to kiss, cuddle and express love for one another, to wear tight trousers, have pink possessions, and to partake in careers traditionally dominated by women, thereby expanding their notions of heterosexuality.

In this paper, I will show through *Suits* how the work of Fleming et al does not hold true in our modern day, and that while men do still gravitate towards traditional masculine traits, those who take on other traits do not necessarily lose social capital amongst their straight male peers. I will also go against Anderson's findings, showing how in *Suits*, men are reluctant to express love for one another in physical ways, and still do have masculine characteristics and possess masculine objects. However, men do still desire these shows of affection, but are reluctant to express them as they fear it will lower their masculinity.

2.5 Portrayal of Masculinity in Modern Day Literature

The portrayal of masculinity in modern day literature must be understood to act as a contrast to the content of this paper. Bean and Harper in their discourse *Understanding Men*

Differently analyse three separate young adult novels in their depiction of masculinity. Bean and Harper found that firstly, Zusak in his novel *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* goes against the traditional view of masculinity by suggesting that it is perfectly acceptable for boys to express their emotions to each other. However, this is only done in private, and in public they still do keep up a traditional “macho” front. There is hence a clear demarcation between public and private lives (Bean and Harper, 2007) Most markedly, Bean and Harper find that Zusak provides a safe place where the two main characters are vulnerable with each other, and interestingly, even share feelings of fear with one another. Zusak makes clear his intention in these areas through using a cursive font, while in other portions where the characters are not in this safe space, a regular manuscript font.

In Myer’s *Monster*, Bean and Harper find that similarly, masculinity means to put on a front in public, while in private and in a safe space, it is acceptable to be vulnerable with one’s thoughts and emotions. Myer’s, similar to Zusak, does this through font changes as well. Bean and Harper however posit that these novels fail to offer the counter to masculinity, hence bringing in Ellis’s *The Breadwinner*.

In *The Breadwinner*, Bean and Harper find that Ellis portrays masculinity as being unmarked and insignificant, to just be another face in the crowd. In addition, Ellis adds a dichotomy between the “good” and the “bad”, portraying the good through a Western educated man and the bad through the Taliban man. Ellis portrays “good” masculine traits as allowing women and girls to have equal rights as men, and being educated, while “bad” masculine traits are the tendency for violence, unpredictability and illiteracy.

Bean and Harper’s study will be important to this paper as it will show how representative *Suits* is in its portrayal of modern masculinity. While the medium used is different, the ideas

and portrayal of masculinity stay the same throughout, showing a consistency in the portrayal and opinions of modern writers.

This paper will go against the literary works analysed by Bean and Harper. *Suits* goes against the notion that it is acceptable for men to show emotion, especially insecurity, to each other. *Suits* also suggest that far from being another face in the crowd, the epitome of masculinity is to stand out, to “get [your] name on the wall” and to be the best, to be unbeaten, for everyone in the city to know one’s name.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The masculine theory will be used to carry out this research. Masculine theory emphasizes difference by intervening and disrupting taken-for-granted, essentialized gender norms that have produced traditional masculine identity (Dutro, 2003). Masculine theory, like feminist theory, opens up the possibility of examining how gender is scripted in text and in life, with the hope of transforming social scripts and their enactments. The theory encompasses a number of key elements as described by Dutro (2003): Masculinity relates to performative social practices acted out based on social norms, such as partaking in sports, and to the body and what bodies matter. This relates to social hierarchy. In the context of a school this may mean the jocks, geeks and nerds. In the case of the study of *Suits*, the categories are not as clearly defined, but the characters studied, in this case Harvey and Mike, fit into the traditional social norm of masculinity in that they are good at and enjoy sports, are independent, and in Harvey’s case, has a tendency for violence. Both also are visibly sexually attracted to attractive women and make bold efforts to build relationships between themselves and the woman.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Interpretation

4.1 Labour

Sexual division of labour is seen to be more traditional, with women taking on the role of secretaries. This is seen where all the secretaries in the show are women, in the forms of Donna, Norma and Gretchen.

At the same time however, Korsh also subverts the traditional sexual division of labour by placing Jessica at the head of the firm, a position of power traditionally held by men. Even when Harvey achieves the position of name partner, Jessica still remains as managing partner

Korsh also subverts the traditional role of the “secretary” as simply eye candy, but as the power behind the throne. Donna for example plays a pivotal role in Harvey’s success, both in his work as well as his life, giving him advice whenever necessary.

4.2 Power

Korsh overturns the classic idea of dominance of men by placing a woman, Jessica Pearson, at the head of Pearson Hardman. Jessica acts as a mentor and confidante to Harvey, overturning the traditional idea of the man being superior to the woman. Harvey, instead of brushing Jessica’s opinions aside, respects and treats Jessica as a respected senior and superior, and does not exhibit signs of disrespect at the idea that a woman could occupy a position higher than himself. While he may disagree with Jessica at times, ultimately he holds Jessica in extremely high regard and is extremely loyal and caring towards her. For example, Harvey has to remove Jessica’s name from the wall and denounce her reign as Managing Partner as a “disgraceful chapter in the firm’s history” after Jessica took responsibility for Mike’s fraud, which was discovered by the authorities in Season 5. Harvey throughout this process faces a deep internal struggle with the disrespect he must show to his mentor and constantly refuses to take Jessica’s name from the wall, until Jessica herself steps in and tells

Harvey that it is the best thing to do for the firm. Harvey with great reluctance then takes her name from the wall and releases a statement denouncing Jessica. Here Harvey's reluctance to denounce Jessica and publicly put her down shows his immense respect for Jessica. Harvey gives up his own agency and only listens to Jessica in this matter, going against the traditional idea that men are cowardly if they fail to make choices on their own. Harvey's respect for Jessica here goes so far as to undermine his own agency, something he holds dear to himself, which shows that level of respect Harvey has for Jessica is immensely high.

The relationship between Harvey and Donna, Harvey's secretary, is similarly seen to be one where they work alongside each other and support each other, rather than Donna being subversive to Harvey. Harvey treats Donna as an equal and a partner, and often even goes to her for advice on relationships as well as work related issues. For example, after Harvey punches Louis in Season 5, Donna acts as the mediator and gives Harvey advice on how to mend the relationship and keep their firm running despite the tensions. Harvey takes Donna's advice seriously and eventually decides to reconcile with Louis over his own emotions, showing his respect for Donna's opinions and Donna as a person. The series hence suggests that ideal masculinity is respect for others and the placing of others and the greater good above one's own selfish desires and interests. Harvey again gives up his own agency for the greater good and respects Donna's opinions, understanding that her advice is often what he should listen to.

4.3 Cathexis

Harvey first and foremost is seen to be a violent man, and when his mind fails to outwit his opponents, he uses his fists to solve the problem, and more often than not Korsh and his fellow directors portray his violence as sexy. This can be seen in Season 5 Episode 7, where Harvey gets into a fight with Louis after Louis says "Because he's so messed up from

whatever goddamn thing happened to him - in his pathetic childhood-". As he does this upbeat music plays in the background, creating an atmosphere of glory and tension one would feel in a Roman gladiator battle. This glorification of violence and a subconscious "sexy" feel perhaps shows how the series subconsciously condones and even encourages violence by glorifying it and portraying it as a defense of one's honour. In addition, the tendency of men to violence perhaps is a suggestion by the series that masculinity is inherently destructive, and men are given the burden or perhaps even the entitlement to destroy, both physically and emotionally through their fists and their words.

Harvey is seen to be a gambler, and an impulsive one. His "skill" at poker however is portrayed by Korsh as sexy and desirable, and Harvey often uses poker as a way to solve his problems. Harvey is portrayed as a "all or nothing" character when gambling, and is often seen to go all in whenever he plays poker. This is further accentuated by one of the life mottos Harvey puts forward – "You wanna lose small, I wanna win big". Korsh here perpetuates the idea of gambling and impulsiveness as an idealistic trait, as well as the idea of having metaphorical "balls" in order to be an ideal man. This dangerous ideal perpetuated by Korsh may influence more young men to take up gambling and even use gambling, like Harvey, to solve their problems. Gambling has often been portrayed as a surrender of the will as it is a giving up of free choice, or even the perverse idea of enjoying the loss of free choice and control. Here Korsh puts forward masculinity as destructive, perhaps subconsciously so, destroying the notion of free choice.

Harvey is also portrayed as a womanizer, and this tendency to constantly change significant others and have one night stands is glorified and portrayed as a desirable trait. His "smooth" skills at bars and clubs as well as his success with women is glorified and portrayed as sexy and something to be idealised in men. Perhaps this is the series' commentary on masculinity

that masculinity is to have the courage to exercise one's agency, to take a chance and take a bold step.

Harvey is also portrayed as a man who drinks alcohol regularly and often turns to alcohol when he has a tough problem, keeping a bottle of scotch in his office to drink when he faces an especially tough problem or has an emotional burden. This glorifies the use of alcohol as an escape from one's problems. Mike is similarly seen to be a casual user of marijuana, and this is glorified as well. It is later revealed that even Harvey and Jessica use marijuana recreationally, despite Louis giving Mike a drug test on the first day that he joined Pearson Hardman. Here the series glorifies substance abuse as acceptable and masculine and something to be celebrated.

Lastly Harvey is also portrayed as a destructive force to the relationships he gets himself into, perhaps subconsciously. Harvey cannot let go of past flames, specifically Donna, and this subconscious love for Donna intrudes into every relationship he attempts to kindle. This is particularly seen in his relationship with Paula Agard, his former therapist. Paula gives Harvey an ultimatum, saying that she would not continue a relationship with Harvey unless Donna left the firm, as Donna had kissed Harvey on impulse while he was in a relationship with Paula. Harvey then rejects Donna's resignation letter and breaks up with Paula, going to Donna's apartment and tearing her resignation letter. Here, Harvey actively destroys his relationship with Paula and is the instigator of the destruction as well as the catalyst. The series hence suggests that masculinity means being destructive to relationships, and that Harvey has the burden to destroy or save the relationship as he is the one to decide the ultimatum. Hence the series perhaps suggests that masculinity is the burden to destroy and is inherently destructive, and idealises such a form of masculinity.

4.4 Disruption of Traditional Masculine Identity

Korsh portrays Louis Litt as an unconventional man, but still a man one should aspire to be nonetheless. Louis enjoys less traditionally masculine activities, such as the ballet. Louis is also an avid lover of cats, and is presented as almost borderline obsessed with them. Korsh however suggests that he is still no less of a man even if he enjoys these activities, seen where he is still good friends with Harvey and is still portrayed as desirable to women. Ballet is often a concrete representation of uniformity and precision, and despite ballet being traditionally feminine, these traits are reflected in Louis as well. Just as how ballet is uniform and precise, Louis is uniform and precise in his work and leadership, making him the financial specialist in the firm. Even Harvey, a usually arrogant character, admits that Louis is the “best man for the job”, showing his positive traits reflected in a supposedly “feminine” affair.

Korsh also portrays seeking help as a man to be a perfectly normal thing, and moves away from the traditional “independent man” trope. This is done through showing how both Harvey and Louis go for therapy to cope with their mental struggles, breaking the stereotype that men should be strong and independent, and the idea that therapy should be something shunned and done in shameful secret. Harvey and Louis exercise their own agency when they eventually decide to go for therapy and listen to the hard truths their therapists tell them. Harvey is seen in season 5 to have panic attacks, and the series suggests that the best course of action when faced with such a scenario is to share these burdens with those close to one, moving away from the idea that men should be tough, stoic, emotionless people who shouldn't show weakness even when fighting their own personal demons. In this process, the series suggests that going to a therapist and seeking help for oneself does not mean losing one's agency and therefore being emasculated. On the contrary, seeking help means one has

taken a first step and has exercised their own agency in order to feel better. The decision made hence continues to be a sign of agency and therefore the series suggests that seeking help does not undermine one's masculinity.

Korsh also shows how the ideal man cannot possibly work alone, and shows the importance of having loyal partners. This can be seen in Harvey's close relationship with Donna, who aids Harvey not only in his work, but gives him advice in his personal life as well. Harvey's reliance on Donna to achieve success brings across the close partnership they have and their interdependence on one another, breaking the expectation that a man must always be independent in order to be considered truly successful.

Korsh also portrays masculinity as taking the courage to face one's inner demons head on. This can be seen where Harvey finally gets the courage to visit his mother again, who he had never forgiven for cheating on his father. Harvey had previously cut all ties with his mother, but after much persuasion finally tackles this emotional burden head on in an attempt to relieve his emotional burden by

Korsh suggests that the bromance is a perfectly acceptable aspect of masculinity, and shows how physical and emotional affection between two heterosexual men should be perfectly acceptable and even encouraged and is a healthy part of a man's life. Harvey and Mike are seen to be extremely intimate both physically and emotionally, and often hug one another and share emotional burdens with one another. Korsh here suggests that such physical and emotional intimacy is perfectly acceptable, breaking the stereotype that men cannot be affectionate with one another for fear of being labelled "gay". This also suggests that friends should act as a support for each other in times of need, an important part of masculinity. Here, Korsh's views on success and independence are clear and Korsh pushes forward a

progressive view on male friendship, increasing the acceptance of the phenomenon of the bromance and rejecting the idea of “gayness” in friendships between men.

Korsh also very poignantly emphasizes loyalty as one of the epitomes of masculinity. This is seen in one of Harvey’s mottos “Loyalty is a two way street – if I expect it from you, you are getting it from me”. Korsh’s portrayal of masculinity as putting loyalty first is further seen not only in Harvey’s words, but in his actions as well. When Mike lands in prison after admitting to fraud and has his life in danger after having many poor encounters with an especially dangerous inmate, Frank Gallo, Harvey tries all ways and means to get Mike out of prison, or at least away from Frank, going so far as to collude with a head lawyer at the FCC, risking his law license and livelihood in order to ensure Mike’s safety. Korsh’s impressive idea of loyalty and sacrifice seen in Harvey’s risk taking for the sake of Mike is a clear example of what he thinks the ideal man should be.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In conclusion, Korsh suggests through *Suits* that any and every form and expression of masculinity is perfectly acceptable and should not be discriminated against or rejected by society. While putting forward a progressive view of masculinity that is commendable, at the same time the series condones toxic masculinity as well, condoning and idealizing alcoholism, gambling, promiscuous lifestyles and destructiveness, among others.

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