Embodiments of Power in Arrow
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Embodiments of Power in *Arrow* Season Two

by Samantha Lazenby

In the year 2016, popular culture is riddled with questions about American society's' obsession with masculinity. Women watch television shows geared towards men and ask "why is this picture of masculinity so fragile?" *Arrow* is an excellent example of a show that exhibits fragile masculinity in crisis. For my final research project we will be analyzing embodiments of power in the television show *Arrow* and how they evolve over the course of season two. I will analyze the main three characters, since the two of those characters belong to different minority and socioeconomic than our main character- there are a variety of messages passed from person to person that focus on traditional gender and caste roles and how they are constantly evolving. I will also analyze the way the main male characters interact with one another to establish dominance and power roles. In light of the current sociopolitical climate of our nation, the way that major production companies showcase masculinity matters. Young men and women watch these portrayals and pick up cues about how to interact, as well as who should act what way.

I will pull data from six episodes of the second season of the Warner Bros Television and DC Comics show *Arrow. Arrow* primarily captures men from the 18 to 49 age range, as well as in the 12 to 25 range; however, women in the 18 to 49 range are gaining more interest in the show due to its growing representation of female characters. This season of *Arrow* is currently streaming on Netflix and is easily accessible to not only me, but the public. It is also worth noting that season two was the highest rated season of the series to date. One can infer based on

that knowledge that the illustrations and portrayal of masculinity, gender roles, and privilege are spread to a wide and diverse audience. I watched each episode no less than two times. The first time watching the episode I looked for overt displays of power and who displayed this power. Generally, there were three main themes; masculinity in crisis, feminine masculinity, and anti-heroism, which will be discussed in my analysis. The second pass through the episodes, I paid attention to how these themes affected the supporting characters; do they blindly accept these roles imposed on them by the power figure?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How are embodiments of power portrayed through the three main characters in season two of *Arrow?*

2. How do these portrayals change over the course of the season?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS OF ANALYSIS

Previous research into the topic of hegemonic white masculine privilege reveals common themes of the "crisis of masculinity," the evolution about what it is that makes masculinity masculine, in other words (Roblou, 2012), and themes of extreme alienation due to hyper-masculinity and the rise of feminine masculinity (Franco, 2008). This theme of masculinity in crisis is revisited throughout the second season of *Arrow* in four of the main characters creating a common theme of redemption as a means of proving one's masculinity. This theme is relevant to *Arrow* from the very beginning of season two when Oliver retreats to the deserted island of Lian Yu to escape from the reality that his life was falling apart back home after the wake of the destruction caused by his mother in season one. Right away in the season premiere we see John

Diggle (Oliver Queen's personal bodyguard) and Felicity Smoak (Queen's secretary) fly to the remote island to evoke a sense of purpose in Oliver in attempt to coax him back to Starling City (S02E01 "City of Angels," *Arrow*). Oliver's escapism and general selfishness in reaction to the situation illustrates a clear picture of masculinity in crisis. That picture's message is this; even though Oliver must return to his home to repair the damage that his family's legacy has left, he cannot do so because of the crippling guilt he carries by being associated with the family who killed hundreds (S02, E01). Yet, in juxtaposition to these images Diggle and Felicity argue that the only way he can be the man he wants to be is to fight that guilt and walk the path of redemption and away from his crisis (Roblou, 2012).

During these periods where the men walk this road to redemption the female characters are following their own path of feminine masculinity. This form of masculinity calls into question the very nature of what it means to be masculine and creates a paradox of expectations (Franco, 2008). Felicity is a great example of this "double burden" placed on strong characters; she is intelligent and beautiful, but physically weak (Franco, 2008). She immediately walks onto a literal land mine about thirty seconds after their arrival on Lian Yu and Oliver and Diggle must combine their expertise to save her (S02, E01). This image is repeated over again during season two, reiterating an imagery consistent with the gender standard that women should be both beautiful and strong, but not too strong so that the men must still rescue her to assert their own dominance and power positions (Tragos, 2009).

Oliver Queen is the main character of *Arrow*, and represents the hegemonic white male in the show through his portrayal of a handsome, rich, playboy turned vigilante. He works with a diverse team that includes a well-educated, white, female computer programmer (Felicity

Smoak) and a black, male, ex-special forces operative (John Diggle). Oliver must adjust over time from his stoic leadership role into that of a team player who relies on his partners in times of uncertainty, despite his ego or desire to remain in a power position. This imagery is well displayed in the sixth episode of season two entitled: "Keep Your Enemies Close." In this episode, Diggle's ex-wife, Lyla, is abducted and to rescue her he must work with a questionable organization. When Oliver catches wind of this he volunteers himself for the mission. This show of selflessness and sacrifice let Diggle know that just as he is Oliver's body guard, Oliver will also be his. This height of devotion is a significant evolution from the beginning of the season where Oliver was too caught up in his own journey to care about outside forces. This evolution in depictions of teamwork and power between Oliver and his team metaphorically stands for white male's broadening perspectives as they begin to consider and empathize with other ways of thinking, and for the shattering of glass ceilings by minority groups.

In a historical and sociological context, these themes of comic book masculinity and white privilege have been consistently reinforced in Hollywood and shown to demographically diverse groups of people, thus enforcing hegemonic ideas of white masculinity in our society. Masculinity is as complex as it is exaggerated (Aro, 2016); it is "overwhelmingly non-feminine, straight, and white" by the standards of Lynn Segal's definition of masculinity as presented in Roblou's article, all of which project negative imagery regarding feminine roles in conjunctions of masculinity (2012:77). However, over time a depiction masculine heroes reaching breaking points emotionally and physically suggests that their hyper-masculine personas negatively impacted their greater purposes by allowing guilt to manifest from "moral quandaries despite obvious courage, integrity, selflessness, and determination… [they are] obsessed with finding the

bad in whatever good [they do]," implying a darker side to maintaining the facade of hegemonic non-feminine masculinity (2012:82). These questionable situations, like the abduction of Felicity in episode twenty-three, arise due to Oliver's masculine complex of guilt contribute to themes of "anti-heroism" which he battles throughout the second season (Wayne, 2014). In this episode, Diggle and Oliver must go against their no-kill creed to rescue her. They must become anti-heroes to, in fact, be heroes (S02, E23). Anti-heroic themes are representative of a larger theme of social unrest and rebellion, which is generally attributed to crisis masculinity as the hegemony experiences opposition from more feminine groups or characters. The larger social context for these themes frame a tone social unrest for gendered inequalities that bleed into the small screen media such as literal representation of various genders, and how their demographic groups are portrayed (Bunker and Bryson, 2016). Using the Bem Sex Role Inventory as well as in depth qualitative interviews, and pre- and post- activity surveys Bunker and Bryson were able to assess the perceived representation of genders in media and found that the attitudes about male representation were largely in agreement with the negative impact of the expectation of maintaining extreme portrayals of masculinity, while simultaneously developing critical opinions about how the men interacted with the feminine characters on television (2016). These messages create a dissonance in interpretation about what it means to be a masculine character and about femininity as it relates to masculinity (Roblou, 2012).

Expanding on the perceived definitions of comic heroes (in the case of this study we are looking at the television portrayal of the comic hero *Green Arrow*) are simultaneously expected to show a "sensitive" side "essentially creating a double burden for both the male and female characters" per Peter Tragos in 2009. This "double burden" forces masculine characters to

evolve as their female counterparts gain feminine masculinity along the journey to become

stronger as a result of that double burden (Tragos, 2009). These burdens are illustrated in the

portrayal of Felicity Smoak in relation of Oliver Queen in *Arrow* season two. In episode

fourteen, Felicity must come to terms with giving up her token female role as Sara moves into a

femininely masculine position of power after her return from Lian Yu (S02, E14, "Time of

Death"). Felicity gets herself shot because of her jealousy over Sara's prowess and power, and

because she feels like she must prove her strength by going rogue to defeat a combatant. Diggle,

Oliver and Sara step in to save her, once again. This reckless endangerment of herself sparks a

conversation in the team about her role and strengths. As she develops confidence in her abilities

and becomes physically, mentally, and emotionally stronger because of threats associated with

the vigilantism; Oliver and Diggle, therefore, must adjust to her new power role in the group by

learning to deal with situations with sensitivity and tact instead of brute force and torture.

These evolutions of Oliver's masculine portrayal point to an obvious gap in the existing

research, which largely suggests that masculinity is historically the absence of femininity

(Roblou, 2012), as he welcomes the duality of the "double burden" and embraces elements of

feminine masculinity as opposed to hegemonic white masculine privilege (Tragos, 2009). In the

future, seeing more research on the evolution of masculinity and the fluidity of what it means to

be masculine could majorly contribute to the area of study by exposing the different ways men

are masculine. Portrayals in *Arrow* of Oliver Queen as a hegemonically masculine leader, and

John Diggle as the critically masculine (arguably femininely masculine) supporting role evolving

and sharing ideals without total and mutual destruction on the way to redemption, as talked about

in Franco's 2008 study of masculine redemption in comic hero stories, brings to light the

nonstatic nature of masculinity outside of a hegemonic reality and gives the incredibly demographically diverse audience of *Arrow* positive portrayals of intersectional masculinity (Roblou , 2012). For example, Diggle often uses intimidation over violence, like in episode twenty-one "City of Blood," to retrieve intel on Oliver's location after he is abducted. This is also an inherently masculine move; however, it is decidedly non-violent and therefore, femininely masculine in nature (Roblou, 2012). Yet Diggle is not immune to the traditional hegemonically masculine tropes; in episode seven of season two, "State vs Queen," Diggle falls ill. Diggle refuses to acknowledge the severity of his illness and works himself to collapse. He is inherently uncomfortable showing any signs of weakness.

Presented over and over again throughout the season are images of masculinity in crisis. We have images of Oliver and Diggle literally punishing themselves in order to regain their heroic status and, therefore, their right to be called masculine. Even after Felicity's rise into a new level of strength and power when she learns to display femininely masculine qualities, Oliver and Diggle's hyper-masculine aspirations cause turmoil for the group. These displays are problematic in the virtue that they are inherently self-destructive, and rejecting any notion of femininity. These notions of feminine masculinity, such as knowing when to use strength of mind over body, when to exercise self-care, and how to be diplomatic could have saved time and resources, not to mention lives, along the way. Furthermore, depictions of masculinity in crisis have the power to influence the way young men and boys learn to be masculine. From the images presented, it would seem that *Arrow* has made it a point to show the double standards of masculinity as a problematic facet of society as Oliver and Diggle continuously fall short of their goals when they behave in hyper-masculine manners.

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Episode 01, "City of Heroes"

Episode 06, "Keep Your Enemies Closer"

Episode 07, "State Vs Queen"

Episode 14, "Time of Death"

Episode 21, "City of Blood"

Episode 23, "Unthinkable"