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## "This Aggression Will Not Stand": The Coens on Masculinity

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“This Aggression Will Not Stand”: The Coens on Masculinity

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## INTRODUCTION

“Smokey, my friend, you are entering a world of pain. You mark that frame an 8, and you're entering a world of pain,” barks Walter Sobchak (John Goodman) as he draws his gun. Despite the Dude’s (Jeff Bridges) protestations – it is just a bowling match after all – Walter cannot abide by what he perceives to be an injustice in his world, so he takes violent action to get his way. So goes *The Big Lebowski*, the Coens’ 1998 cult classic centered on a slacker’s mission to avenge the destruction of his treasured rug. In this, as in most of the Coens’ films, a curious representation of masculinity emerges. Violent, yet ultimately powerless men act out and use others in ways that serve to bolster their own initial positioning, only to lose in the end.

Though the Coens consider themselves apolitical filmmakers<sup>1</sup>, it is rather naïve to believe that their collected filmography does not directly deal with gender politics. Such themes pervade their most significant works. To best explain the Coens’ representation of masculinity, I have identified four key themes which continue to reappear in their works: masculinity as performance, children and families as ego extensions, toxic masculinity personified, and redemption through rejection of hegemonic masculinity. My analysis concerns three primary texts: *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Fargo* (1996), and of course, *The Big Lebowski*. These three films were selected due to their foregrounding of gendered themes, as well as their reflection of one of the Coens’ most creatively fruitful career peaks. After careful review of these films with special attention to themes and representations of masculinity, we will gain a more complete understanding of the films of Joel and Ethan Coen which recast them as progressive filmmakers of the highest order, toy directly with politics, and prescribe “correct” masculine behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> Writing for *The Atlantic*, Noah Gittell makes a strong case for the Coens status as political filmmakers despite their seeming aversion political statements in his piece “The Coen Brothers’ Subtle Politics.”

## Masculinity as Performance

Our primary analysis rests on the notion that masculinity is performed. Implicitly, the Coens endorse this framework, enabling them to depict and critique the socially constructed nature of masculinity. Informing our understanding of this concept is a fundamental paradigm first proposed by Judith Butler. Butler explains, “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (1988). What Butler is saying is that gender is distinct from biological sex in that it is socially constructed as opposed to assigned at birth. The way in which gender is communicated is performative through the words we say, the actions we take, and the objects we utilize. It is unlikely (and actually impossible during the filming of *Raising Arizona*) that the Coens were well-versed in Butler’s scholarship. Yet, they seem to be onto something in their enacting of this theoretical framework, manifestations of which appear in several different ways throughout their films.

For illustration, we first look to *Fargo*. *Fargo* is the story of the hapless Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) who arranges to have his own wife kidnapped in order to extort money from his wealthy father in law, Wade Gustafson (Harve Presnell). Both Jerry and Wade seem to rehearse their masculine performance. After Jerry’s wife, Jeanne (Kristin Rudrud), is kidnapped, we hear a frantic Jerry relaying his story off-camera to the police. He stumbles over his words, repeating himself. The camera pans to reveal that he has not yet picked up the phone and is trying to nail the delivery of a concerned husband. He finally dials and is put on hold. In telling the operator he is willing to hold, the distress melts from Jerry’s voice revealing the entire emotionality to be fraudulent.

Jerry understands the role expectation he carries after the disappearance of his wife – caring husband. However, he is unable to authentically participate in that role. Thus, he must conjure up a gendered performance of the grieving husband. Otherwise, his masculine status as protector of his family would be questioned. Rather than run this risk, he orchestrates his performance, though his concern is only for his selfish plan as opposed to his wife’s very life. In this instance, masculinity is revealed to be a performative front which obscures Jerry’s true motivations and role within his wife’s kidnapping – a quite nefarious comment on the implications of gender performance, which will be investigated further shortly.

Jerry’s characterization does not exist in isolation. On the contrary, subsequent depictions of masculinity lead to similar conclusions. Wade rehearses his own speech when driving to meet up with the kidnappers and pay ransom. He speaks to himself, practicing the tough tone he is to take with the men who have abducted his daughter. Rather than let the genuine emotionality of losing his daughter pour out of him, he is bound to rehearse, as his specific gender expression (grieving male) is merely an act. Wade must repeat the act of a tough guy exterior because his status depends on it. Like Jerry, any power or perceived power he has is contingent upon his status as a male head of household. For Wade, his masculinity is a protective front – a shield which he hopes will ward off danger at the hands of an unknown adversary. This model of masculinity, too, is shot down symbolically with the literal shooting death of Wade at the hands of the kidnappers. Even though he feels compelled to perform a more stern masculinity, he still ends up in his grave.

In both instances, the men do not trust their genuine emotions to accurately portray the face they wish to exhibit to the world, but still falsely believe that they are in control. Jerry is not actually concerned for his wife’s safety because he does not believe she is in any actual peril. For

his scheme to work, however, he must present himself as the grieving husband. Wade similarly wants to put on a different face performatively. He desires to scare the kidnappers with his macho exterior. Masculinity is a performative tool used towards successful goal-oriented behavior as opposed to genuine self-expression. Both men need to perform their desired iterations of masculinity, calling attention to the performative nature of gender as a construct. Yet both are unsuccessful even aided by performative tactics. Woven into the very fabric of the narrative is a condemnation of the drive to alter true personality in order to enact masculine performance.

From this premise, we surmise a number of conclusions. If men like Wade and Jerry are not inherently masculine, that is to say, if their masculine traits owe as much to repetitive performativity as biology, then what is the institutional legitimacy of structures which prop up the patriarchy? The patriarchy is frequently justified through arguments predicated on natural male superiority. Men are “supposed” to be strong, capable, and in control. *Fargo* pulls back the curtain and reveals that this is all an act. Masculinity is performed, meaning male superiority is constructed, not innate. Men like Jerry and Wade lack legitimate right to societal power. If anything, this posturing makes performative men less fit to reign. Specifically in the contexts of this film, the realms of business and crime, both traditionally thought of as male spaces, come under fire. The Coens argue that masculine arenas based upon flimsy performativity are unstable, encouraging instead a more authentic course of gender expression.

*The Big Lebowski* also reflects the idea that masculinity is performed, though in a very different way. Within *The Big Lebowski*, the Coens expand upon masculine performativity as a means of discrediting patriarchal structures. On his quest to recover his beloved rug, the Dude becomes entangled in a web of deceit, Nihilists, and adult film actors. Through the film, the

Dude can be heard parroting back dialogue that other characters have said to him earlier in the film. It is as if he is piecing together his identity from the words of others instead of being organically himself. The line imitation serves as his means of performing his own gender identity - the equivalent of the line rehearsal in *Fargo*. First, when the Dude is shopping during the film's opening passage, he glances up at a television set to see President George H. W. Bush delivering a speech regarding the Gulf War. Bush declares that the aggression (of Iraq) against Kuwait will not stand. Later, when describing the incident in which two goons broke into his apartment and urinated on his treasured rug, he defiantly exclaims, "this aggression will not stand." He has observed the performance of stern masculinity and imitates it for himself, but not to the exact same effect. By lifting the words of President Bush from their serious context and dropping them into the Dude's more outlandish context, the Coens highlight the absurdity of that school of thought. Later, when the Dude converses with Maude, he adopts her more sophisticated way of speaking, introducing words and phrases such as "coitus" and "the parlance of our times" into his vernacular. Since it is a woman who he is emulating through these repetitions, these instances are conspicuous.

The character of the Dude functions as a blank slate that serves as a conduit for the audience to negotiate different representations of performed masculinity. Yes, the Dude's mimicry of Maude is effectively out of place enough to generate humor, but it serves a more important function. The Coens are suggesting that even masculine gender performance incorporates elements of both masculinity and femininity. After all, our blank slate (the Dude) is naturally drawn to mimic all those in his environment. With no inherent prejudice to limit his experimental masculine expression, he repeats Maude's lines just as easily as he does President Bush's. This further frustrates patriarchal gender narratives. Not only is masculinity a

performance, but part of that performance is learned through observation of women. This demands a socially equal society – a drastic departure from the modern patriarchy.

Finally, I must mention the specter of gender performance is much less prevalent in *Raising Arizona*, but not entirely abandoned. *Raising Arizona* depicts the lives of HI (Nicholas Cage) and Edwina “Ed” McDunnough (Holly Hunter) a newlywed couple struggling with fertility issues whose desire to start a family motivates their kidnapping of a newborn baby. When Ed and HI prepare to host HI’s boss (Sam McMurray) and his wife (Frances McDormand), the camera gives us access to HI getting ready, lingering on him slipping on his shoes with a shoehorn. This shot serves no purpose of narrative or character development. Rather, it is included to show HI adorning the costume (respectable clothing and footwear) required to perform sophisticated masculinity. The performance here is separate from HI’s actual class. Class is closely related to, but technically distinct from wealth. His wardrobe does not change his place in the socioeconomic structure, but he seeks to construct himself as higher class. Here, we get a glimpse at the performative overlap between gender and class. It is not enough that HI perform masculine roles as in the case in *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*. Instead, he is forced to also conform to class norms, creating further strain for his character. This performative pressure places emotional stress on HI which fuels additional criminal behavior later in the film.

The only other notable sequence comes just after HI’s criminal friends Gail (John Goodman) and Evelle (William Forsythe) escape from prison. Before they shower or even change out of their prison clothes, the first thing they do is fix their hair with pomade. Upon reclaiming their identities as free men, they are immediately compelled to alter their appearance. Again, the only logical purpose for the Coens showing the audience this action is to reinforce the



performative nature of masculinity. This becomes especially salient when we consider the exact modality of this performative transformation. Gail and Evelle are attempting to capture the appearance of masculinity associated with the 1950s. The 1950s were an abundantly socially conservative time. In fact, it is the decade that Ronald Reagan and his fellow conservative politicians sought to emulate<sup>2</sup>. In trying to capture this spirit of masculinity, Gail and Evelle come to embody it. This revelation becomes crucial to our understanding of their function in the narrative. The duo serve as a corrupting influence on HI. They continuously try to pull him back to a life of crime, even after he has settled into family life and “gone straight.” Still, they persuasively entice HI to indulge his dormant criminal impulses. Much of the strain pushing HI toward negative decisions is directly resultant of the influence from an outdated, yet resurgent form of masculinity. Gail and Evelle strive for the personal economic control, albeit through crime, consistent with conservative masculinity. In encouraging HI to follow them, to embrace their conservative masculinity themselves, they nudge him farther away from the life he desires.

It is no accident that the characters coded as representing conservative-era masculinity are the ones who edge HI toward ruin. The Coens treatment of this character dynamic reflects their views on the nature of conservative masculinity. Just as HI is corrupted by this performed version of masculinity, so are new generations of susceptible young men lured into poor decisions by outmoded masculine models. The message is subtle, but clear: conservative masculinity as symbolized by Gail and Evelle is corrupting, rather than intuitive.

Looking at the bigger picture takeaways from considering masculine performance within these three films, the foundation is laid for the base of the Coens views on masculinity. The Coens see masculinity as a performed gender role. Enacting this performance when it violates

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<sup>2</sup> The influence of Ronald Reagan on masculinity will be expanded upon at greater length shortly.

true individual desires holds negative consequences. While it may seem blatantly obvious now, this school of thought was not endorsed by mainstream society for years (it even faces opposition in more conservative circles today). The crux of what the Coens have to say about masculinity is predicated on the assumption that how we express our gender to others is not predetermined or biologically scripted, but rather the result of continuously made and repeated performative choices. Often, too, these choices distance men from their true selves in service of upholding the patriarchy. In the face of all the negative consequences associated with masculine performance, many men still choose to perform, rather than misstep and compromise their positions of privilege. Insight such as this clues us in to specific ways in which men manipulate their environments to augment their performance, including using their own children and families.

### **Children and Families as Ego Extensions**

Within their body of work, the Coens frequently depict children and young adults. However the children rarely, if ever, reveal themselves to be legitimately dynamic, three-dimensional characters. The audience is never given even the slightest glimpse of the youthful character's motivations, dreams, desires, or goals. Rather, they most commonly serve as pawns for adults in accomplishing their own goals and desires. Shallow treatment is also given to the families of protagonists. This leads us to examine the use of children and families as ego extensions. Ego extensions are objects that communicate some sort of status about their owner. As Marian W. Smith writes, ego extensions are ways in "which the ego is conceived to extend beyond the organism to the surrounding world" (1952). When it comes to enhancing performance, ego extensions can become a valuable tool. They can communicate status and impact the behavioral expectation of others, among other functions. Sad as it may appear, this choice is central to the Coens views on masculinity.

*Raising Arizona* is the most obvious illustration of the use of children and families as ego extensions. Smith elaborates that ego extensions are inherently linked to the culture in which they appear (1952). Likewise, we must incorporate surrounding culture into our analysis. The film is framed against the backdrop of the Reagan era. During Reagan's 1980s, the country saw a return to traditional "family values." Reagan pushed for the strengthening of traditional families at the expense of those who did not fit the classic mode. As such, masculinity was redefined in relation to paternal status. We can see resulting anxieties played out in the film. First, if there was every any confusion as to the ideology on trial, HI monologues, "I tried to stand up and fly straight, but it wasn't easy with that sumbitch Reagan in the White House. I dunno. They say he's a decent man, so maybe his advisors are confused." From the outset, we are shown the profound impact of the Reagan administration on HI's behavior. Striving to be the ideal man without the economic structures to enable the legitimate means to do so, HI turns to a life of crime. In prison, this family-oriented ideology is further conferred upon him by a counselor during a group session. HI is told that most men his age would be unsatisfied by criminal enterprise as the life of a criminal is incompatible with successful fatherhood. Every facet of society appears to push HI toward the paternal masculinity glorified by Reaganites.

Upon his final release from prison, HI marries the police officer who booked him, Ed<sup>3</sup>. The two attempt to conceive a child, but tests reveal that Ed is infertile. Denied by adoption agencies due to HI's criminal past, the two are forlorn until they see a local news story regaling the birth of quintuplets to the prominent Arizona family. Ed and HI hatch a devious plot to

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<sup>3</sup> It is tangential, but consequential here to get into a brief discussion of Ed. Comparatively, Ed is a rather masculinized woman. For starters, her name is one traditionally reserved for a man. Her dress when we meet her is in a fully masculine coded police officer's garb. Her uniform obscures her feminine figure and the traditional cop hat hides her long hair. While this paper is concerned with masculinity, Ed is an interesting example of how the Coens work through similar gender-bending ideology via femininity.

kidnap one of the babies. Finally nabbing Nathan Junior, the pair must live carefully to avoid suspicion which would trigger the revocation of their coveted parental statuses. Upon absconding with the newborn baby and realizing they are finally parents, Ed breaks down into overwrought tears to express her joy. Though not as outward in his emotion, we are lead to believe that HI experiences similar positive emotion. In Reagan's America, having a child means access to elevated status and official approval from the "family values" administration.

The development of the child as an ego extension begins when HI is in prison. A clergyman tells him that at his age, most men would be settling down and starting a family, not whiling away the time in prison. Here, the child and family are prescribed to give HI the status of an adult, as opposed to any altruistic reasons such as love. The goal of a child is just a means of extending his masculine ego beyond himself and into his environment. Becoming a father will mark HI as a mature adult man which he views as his ticket to economic advancement and a rightful place in the prosperity the Reagan administration guaranteed to those who followed such a doctrine. He has little legitimate interest in a child, but a great deal of interest in the life he perceives the child will bring him.

When HI and Ed cannot obtain a child legally, they go to ludicrously extreme measures to get one. Their desperation to fulfill their prescribed roles as parents drives them to crime. They do not consider the realities of their actions or the responsibilities that accompany them such as the need to provide their new child with stimulation, food, and medical care. The pressures of striving to achieve the ideal family in Reagan's America are too great. Here, exaggeration is the Coens' weapon of social critique. The utter ludicrousness of Ed and HI's actions satirize the absurdity of expecting every family in America to adhere to the same set of gender and paternal roles. Consider the impact it has on HI. In order to provide diapers for the child, he robs a local

convenience store, a woman's stocking used humorously in place of a ski mask. A bystander to the robbery remarks, "Son, you've got a panty on your head," drawing the audience's attention to the witty symbolism of an article of gendered clothing used to mask identity. This sardonic statement clearly impugns the notion that masculine worth is determined by parental status.

HI is not the only one using Nathan Junior as an ego extension. Nathan Senior's (Trey Wilson) treatment of the baby illuminates the same type of behavior. He demands that his missing child be returned to him, yet when asked which one is missing, he cautiously replies, "Nathan Junior... I think." He does not show the care to even confidently differentiate his children, but he still demands to get the youngster back. Here, the child is nothing more than an extension of Arizona's masculinity – property that was rightfully his and unlawfully taken. This is another comment on masculinity. When driven to fulfill masculine status above all else, it has a dehumanizing effect on children who are treated no better than property. Within *Raising Arizona*, a comedy, the audience is encouraged to laugh at this. We laugh because when spelled out in the manner the Coens have, we recognize the folly of this sequence of gender expression. We are not to act like Nathan Senior.

Arizona further bolsters this appearance by concluding his press conference with a plug for his furniture store. It seems hard to believe that a man legitimately grief stricken over the abduction of his valued son would have the audacity to turn a plea for mercy into an advertisement for unpainted furniture. Instead, the missing child is again used for personal gain. Extending his ego into his environment, Nathan Senior attempts to translate personal loss into financial gain. The character is creatively employing masculine performance to capitalistic ends. Again, against the backdrop of Reagan-era masculinity, this becomes a scathing takedown of the

importance placed on family, the masculinity associated with it, and the true motivations behind that agenda.

When the lone biker, Leonard Smalls (Randall Tex Cobb), offers to track and return Nathan Junior, Nathan the elder balks at the price he demands. Rather than expressing joy at the prospect of his son's return, he haggles with Smalls and does not respond to the threat of having Nathan Junior auctioned on the black market. Even when the baby is returned unharmed by HI and Ed, he still attempts to offer them store credit in lieu of a cash reward. He expresses no true gratitude for their help, he displays only the contentedness of a man whose property is once again completely under his own control. Once the extension of his masculine performance is returned to him, he feels no need to display the gratitude or charity one would expect in such a situation. Arizona reverts to domineering masculine performance, the restoration of which was the underlying motivation to get Nathan Junior back in the first place.

Another particularly revealing scene occurs when HI's boss Glen and his wife Dot come to visit. Glen mentions to HI that he and Dot are in the market for another child via adoption. He seems unconcerned with actually loving the child. Instead, he states that his motivation is driven by his wife's claim that their current children are "getting too big to cuddle." The children do not count as individuals – they exist only as extensions of and tools for their parents. For Glen and Dot, their progeny are simply marks upon which they can enact the gendered behavior approved by dominant society (i.e. cuddling, or performatively enacting parenthood) in hopes the appearance of their performance will grant them access to the promised rewards of participation within that dominant society.

All of these narrative fragments coalesce to suggest something about the message of *Raising Arizona*. During an era when the family was so revered by mainstream society, the only

children shown in the film are pawns for their parents and other adults. The Coens are likely making a veiled shot at Reagan's family values administration. The resultant wave of conservatism was effective at keeping Republicans in power, but distracted from broader economic mistakes by the administration, as well as psychological conflict for those who do not fit Reagan's ideology. *Raising Arizona* suggests that imposing a doctrine of family values does little to actually aid women and children. Rather, it serves only to reinforce the power and status of adult men. The Reagan family values doctrine is construed as a smokescreen. It justifies the patriarchy by framing men as loving, benevolent fathers who know what is best for their children and families and have the passion to act on it. In reality, men use this justification as grounds to uphold the dominant status they have always enjoyed in society. Based on the representations of masculinity in *Raising Arizona*, the logic behind this ideology is deeply flawed, reiterating the need to spurn patriarchal masculinity.

Progressing from the 1980s to the 1990s, we still find children being used as ego extensions within *The Big Lebowski*. When the Dude (whose birth name is Jeffrey Lebowski) first visits the other (big) Jeffrey Lebowski (David Huddleston) to inquire as to the possibility of reimbursement for his soiled rug, Lebowski's assistant, Brandt (Philip Seymour Hoffman), shows the Dude around the premises. We see a picture of the ostensibly wealthy Big Lebowski surrounded by a group of racially diverse children. Brandt explains the group is the Little Lebowski Urban Achievers, a cadre of at-risk youths with whom the Big Lebowski is philanthropically affiliated. Besides the silent Larry Summers<sup>4</sup>, the Urban Achievers are the only children shown on screen. Even so, they are ultimately just ego extensions.

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<sup>4</sup> I feel the need to include a note about the only other underage character within *The Big Lebowski*. Larry is a teen suspected of stealing a great sum of money from The Dude and his associate Walter. When the pair head to Larry's house to confront him, Larry stonewalls them, refusing to speak a single word. The Coens symbolically

When the Dude later meets the Big Lebowski's daughter, Maude (Julianne Moore), he references the Urban Achievers. She scoffs, reciting as if from memory, "Little Lebowski Urban Achievers, yes and proud we are of all of them." From Moore's flippant performance, we ascertain these children are not actual humans, just fodder for her family's charity. She recites the line deliberately, the exhaustion in her voice communicating that she is sick of talking about the children. She takes no joy in their achievements. The only reason why she deigns to interact with them is to maintain a philanthropic face. This point is supported narratively when it is ultimately revealed that the Big Lebowski himself does not possess the wealth he claims. His only responsibility is to manage the funds for the Urban Achievers. Quite literally, these children are used solely by him to bolster his own identity and ego by giving him an arena to act as the dominant male. This is another way of saying he uses them to extend beyond himself into his environment, projecting the image of power, affluence, and control. Ergo, he uses them as ego extensions. His entire status as a man who has control over his surroundings hinges on maintaining the illusion of financial paternity over the Urban Achievers.

Within *Fargo*, both Jerry Lundegaard and Wade Gustafson treat their progeny as simply ego extensions. We will begin with Jerry. Jerry seems only to mention his son, Scotty (Tony Denman), as a ploy to enrich himself. When asking for a loan from Wade, he invokes Scotty's name as justification. Wade responds by telling him that Scotty never need fear financial security. However, Jerry continues with his ludicrous money-making scheme by having his wife kidnapped. Clearly, he does not fear for Scotty's actual well-being, otherwise he would not resort to such desperate measures despite his son's assured safety and security. After the kidnapping

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refuse to give him a voice. In the grand scheme of things, Larry is really just a red herring – no money was ever stolen. While not used as an ego extension within the diegesis of the film, Larry is still being used as a tool, this time by the Coens themselves as a means of advancing their story without developing the dimensions of his character.



occurs, our suspicions are confirmed. Stan Grossman (Larry Brandenburg) asks Jerry how Scotty has responded to the news of his mother's disappearance. Macy's performance illuminates Jerry's inner thoughts. The look of shock which crosses over his face indicates that he has given no thought whatsoever to his son. Still, he acts in his own self-interest. The shock he experiences is more likely due to the sizeable hole in his plan he has just discovered than genuine empathy for his frightened son. Scotty is nothing more than an ego extension.

However, Wade is no saint in this manner. He treats his daughter (Jerry's wife) Jean similarly to how Jerry acts toward Scotty. Wade loves to be the proverbial quarterback calling the shots and emasculate Jerry by pointing out that he is a better provider for Jean than Jerry is. However, once Jean is ransomed, Wade balks at the sum of money the kidnappers demand. If Wade were truly concerned for his daughter, then he would pay any amount demanded of him, especially given his considerable wealth. Yet, he would rather angle for control of the situation over the kidnappers than ensure his daughter's return home. Just like Jerry, Wade values his own masculinity over the safety of his family. It is more important for him to uphold the performative appearance of his control than to complete the necessary steps to save Jean. Jean's value to Wade ends with her utility as an ego extension. Again in the familial decision-making process, collective well-being is subservient to individual masculine control.

In summation, across all these films, the treatment of children and families remains consistent. Appealing to familial well-being serves the ultimate purpose of elevating the status of the dominant male characters. It is as if the Coens have internalized Reagan's initial push for a conservative family values doctrine and explored its lasting impact on society. Often, these lofty ideals amount to nothing more than a justification for further masculine self-aggrandizement. Through the repeated use of children and families as ego extensions, the Coens encourage us to

be weary of those in power justifying policy with concerns about family and youth. Buttressing this conclusion is additional exploration of the type of masculinity fueling such behavior: toxic masculinity.

### **Toxic Masculinity Personified**

Toxic masculinity is a concept which goes by many names. Some scholars, including sociologist James W. Messerschmidt, refer to it simply as hegemonic masculinity. Messerschmidt explains, "...hegemonic masculinity is defined through... the subordination of women, heterosexism, and the driven uncontrollable sexuality of men" (1993). He continues, "Hegemonic masculinity emphasizes practices toward authority, control, competitive individualism, independence, aggressiveness, and the capacity for violence" (Messerschmidt, 1993). Others offer a more narrow definition. Psychologist Terry A. Kupers defines, "toxic masculinity is the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence" (2005). In other words, we can generally assume the phrase toxic masculinity to mean, the aspects of hegemonic or dominant masculinity which contribute to emotional turmoil and interpersonal destruction, including violent control-seeking behavior, inability to express emotion, and glorification of violent ideals.

An interesting commonality between all three films profiled is their inclusion of one character who embodies key facets of toxic masculinity. I have chosen to refer to each respective character as Toxic Masculinity Personified. This is first apparent in *Raising Arizona*. The lone biker, Lenny Smalls, represents a number of facets of traditional hegemonic masculinity. Smalls

rides a motorcycle and has a tattoo<sup>5</sup>. He is irredeemably cruel, especially to small helpless animals. He is seen shooting multiple animals over the course of the film, enacting the violent, control-seeking behavior of our definition. Overall, the Coens construct him as a ruthless man no one wants to cross. He embodies the toxically masculine. It becomes critical to recognize his treatment. By so definitively marking Smalls as toxically masculine, the Coens signal to the viewer that his outcomes mirror their desired outcomes for his model of masculinity.

HI eventually defeats the lone biker by killing him with his own grenade. The mode of death here is obviously symbolic. Carrying the grenade marks Smalls as tough and bloodthirsty. These exact qualities result in his death, and a gruesome death at that. The grenade completely destroys his body. In essence, the Coens are expressing their desire to “blow up” or eliminate that form of toxic masculinity. Instead of hoping the form of masculinity goes away, its representation is actively and irreparably destroyed. The Coens here suggest that enacting forms of toxic masculinity ultimately unravel to the downfall of the toxically masculine.

We must also consider how the biker enters the narrative. He emerges from a dream that HI has the night after his theft of the baby. The toxic masculinity is immediately derived from HI’s attempt to enact the paternal masculinity of the Reagan era. This suggests that all of the turmoil HI experiences in the film can be traced back to this fateful decision, which is so densely wrapped in that specific element of gender performance. When confronting the biker, HI is really confronting a part of himself, a fact visually accentuated with the shared tattoo. Symbolically, the Coens give HI (and by extension, the viewer) an arena to see the conflict with toxic masculinity played out physically as HI does battle with Smalls. Smalls serves as toxic

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<sup>5</sup> The tattoo on the biker is identical to the tattoo sported by HI, linking the two visually. This means that the biker represents a part of HI which is prone toward toxically masculine behavior. Soon, we will explore implications of this fact.

masculinity personified to give the viewer a representation of HI's internal struggle with and ultimate rejection of toxically masculine ideals.

*Fargo* foregrounds different aspects of toxic masculinity, yet is no less critical. Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare), one of the kidnappers, demonstrates toxic masculinity personified. Grimsrud talks sparingly. Returning to our definition, refusing to show emotion or inner depth is a hallmark of toxic masculinity as it is perceived as a sign of weakness or femininity. As we know, toxic masculinity is manifested in strength, power, and control over one's environment and circumstances. Emoting is tantamount to revealing a lack of this control. The proper course of behavior is to bottle everything up, which Grimsrud does.

Even if the toxically masculine mind experiences emotion, showing this emotion violates face, or the performative front constructed for the public. Violation creates cognitive dissonance, leading to psychological discomfort which exacerbates the negative emotional experience. On another, primal level, communicating emotionality signifies vulnerability – an undesirable state to the toxically masculine as it jeopardizes individual security and liberty. Positive aspects of emotional communication such as facilitation of help from others are ignored. Toxic masculinity is about control and the ability to free oneself from the need of aid, providing a satisfactory explanation of Grimsrud's motivations.

Eventually, however, all of this pent up emotion must release itself in the form of violent aggression. Grimsrud falls victim to the destructive nature of toxic masculinity. After taking Jean, Grimsrud and his partner in crime, Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi), drive to their predetermined hideout. On the way, they are stopped due to an issue with their car's license. Immediately, Grimsrud jumps to violent action. He shoots the police officer who stopped them and two other innocent bystanders. Violent behavior does not end there for Grimsrud. By the end

of the film, he proceeds to kill Jean and Showalter, gruesomely disposing of the latter's corpse in a wood chipper – one of the film's most enduringly iconic images. However, in enacting this brutal, toxically-masculine coded assertion of dominance, Grimsrud leaves himself vulnerable to apprehension by the police. Precisely the qualities that mark him as toxically masculine are the ones that lead to his downfall. Joel and Ethan Coen are once again utilizing narrative outcomes as a sly way to comment on the text. The message is clear – brutally asserting dominance and exacting vengeance may earn respect and control in the short term, but overall, emulation of toxic masculinity is a dead end.

*The Big Lebowski* proffers the most unique example of Toxic Masculinity Personified in the character of Walter. Walter embodies most of the stereotypic traits of the toxically masculine. He flies off the handle easily when he is denied control of a situation, even to the point of harming his relationship with the Dude (the interpersonal destruction previously mentioned). He glorifies violent, heroic masculinity with his constant references to the Vietnam War<sup>6</sup>. Walter is so vigorous in his defense of personal property that he initiates violent conflict in order to avoid handing over a few dollars to petty criminals. However, we are also presented a starkly different portrait of Walter beneath all of the profanity yelling and gun brandishing: Walter is utterly controlled by his ex-wife, Cynthia (even though she never makes an onscreen appearance). He converted to Judaism for her when they got married and still follows the strictest Jewish law even after their separation. When Cynthia comes up in conversation, he is immediately protective and on edge. He even agrees to board Cynthia's dog when she and her new lover go out of town, going so far as to take it to the bowling alley with him as not to inconvenience her.

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<sup>6</sup> The Vietnam War reference is a fitting symbol as it represents the failure of toxic masculinity when it attempts to involve itself in external affairs.

Embedded within the character of Walter we find the Coens' most humorous and scathing critique of toxic masculinity yet. All of Walter's brutal braggadocio is overcompensation for the fact that he has been effectively neutered by his ex-wife. He goes on tirades about trivial issues in public spaces because he is projecting his frustrations about his failures as a man. These failures stem from his inability to fulfill the ideal of masculinity – control over one's life – within his interactions with Cynthia. As much as Walter manipulates and controls his bowling chums, Donny (Steve Buscemi) and the Dude, he can never truly get a handle on his own complex emasculation at the hands of Cynthia. He lashes out with his toxically masculine performance because he hopes it will help him regain the control he has ceded to his ex-wife.

Walter is unique from both Smalls and Grimsrud in the depth of characterization with which we are presented. Neither of the other two men have true depth of character. We understand them only through their violent actions and avaricious motivations. Contrastingly, Walter is crucially central to the plot of *The Big Lebowski*. For the first time, the Coens have decided to investigate more richly the root causes of toxic masculinity. Grimsrud and Smalls are consequentially violent, but Walter relies more on threats than physical conflict. The other two are merciless where Walter is bumbling. Walter is also the most comedic of the toxically masculine trio, making it extremely striking that the Coens choose to give him the most depth. This choice highlights the foolishness cutting to the heart of toxically masculine behavior. We have come to comprehend humor as perhaps the Coens' most valued asset in communicating their politics. In their lighthearted construction of Walter, the Coens lampoon the performance of toxic masculinity. When viewed in the periphery, the toxically masculine is brutal and scary. When we peel back the layers of performance and understand the characters on a more

sophisticated level, as we do with Walter, we comprehend just how counterintuitive toxic masculinity is in practice. Toxic masculinity is not an organic avenue for fruitful living; it is a last resort for men who feel powerless and cling feebly to the last bastion of possibility they will get that power back.

Through our reading, we have established that the Coens view masculinity as performed. We have also come to understand that one mode of masculine performance is that of the toxically masculine. Covertly, the Coens have made it clear that this performance is destructive and ought to be phased out. For their era, this is a fairly radical take on gender politics. While not the only goal of these films, it seems the Coen Brothers are really striving to give depth to the intellectual argument for the end of destructive masculine performance.

### **Redemption through Rejection of Hegemonic Masculinity**

To finally strengthen this view on the Coens' work, we need look no farther than the way they themselves choose to end their films. By each film's conclusion, we see our central male characters experience some type of metamorphosis. The pattern holds (mostly) true across all three films: characters are redeemed only through rejection of previously-attempted hegemonic masculine performance. As the characters learn to discard inefficient expressions of masculinity, the audience is able to draw the same conclusions.

In *Raising Arizona*, HI spends the balance of the film scrambling to fulfill his socially prescribed role of father. To recap, he feels inadequate as a man without a child to complete their "ideal" family. However, after defeating the rogue biker, he and Ed return Nathan Junior to his biological parents. Literally and symbolically, HI rejects the notion that he must be a father at all costs to properly perform his masculinity. Though Reagan-era hegemony dictates he must

perform paternity to correctly enact his gender role, HI roundly disagrees. Upon the child's safe return, Nathan Senior shockingly does not seek punitive measures, nor does he even lose his temper. In an act of uncommon grace, Ed and HI are allowed to leave. When HI falls asleep that night, he dreams of a future in which he and Ed have resolved their differences and obtained a big, happy family.

Whether or not the dream is truly prophetic, it represents the internal happiness that HI has achieved once he lets go of the need to be a father. The legitimate outcome of HI's life is unimportant for our analysis. However, the outcome of the film's narrative dictates our reading. Contrary to what dominant society has told him, HI receives his happy ending only after he has accepted his relatively deviant status as childless. We are not sure whether or not Ed and HI will remain together, but HI's true resolution is the sense of peace he feels within his dream, as it contrasts so starkly with the terror he feels after his first dream which gives birth to Leonard Smalls. This second dream sequence is not actually about the relational fate of our heroes. Rather, it is a reflection of the overarching emotion of the piece: the relief and happiness that accompanies rejection of hegemonic masculinity.

Based on this interpretation, consideration of narrative resolution is critical. HI returns the stolen baby. He gives up on his quest to fulfill his paternal gender role. He then receives the reward of his pleasant dream. The dream is a representation of the implied author signifying that the text endorses his choice to reject hegemonic masculinity. Paternity is not an inherently necessary part of masculine performance. Dogmatically accepting prescribed hegemonic gender roles is as foolish as kidnapping a baby on a whim. This holds two implications. First, it delegitimizes policy arguments predicated on family values. Time and time again, "family values" has been exposed as a code phrase allowing for unchecked masculine power grabs.



Being a man does not require participation in a family unit, so prioritizing the family above all else is not sound leadership. Second, and more broadly, it emphasizes the importance of choice in gender performance. The film leaves the viewer with the hint that HI still does want to be a father, but only in the future when he is ready. Preserving this choice in performative self-expression, not imposing a one-size-fits-all model, is the best path to personal well-being.

*Fargo* arrives at a complementary conclusion through a different vehicle. Rather than narratively rewarding a character who has changed, the film's happy ending is awarded to the man who has stood out from his introduction. That character is the husband of our hero, Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand), Norm Gunderson (John Carroll Lynch). Norm's characterization is drastically different from the other male characters in the cast. He is shown to have genuine care and feeling. He reciprocates the support shown by Marge in her detective work. When his artwork is selected to be displayed on a stamp of lower denomination than the contest winner, he is visibly upset (until Marge steps in to reassure him). Interestingly, Norm is on at least two occasions shown bringing Marge food. When Norm is introduced, he insists on waking early to prepare Marge a nutritious breakfast. Later, he takes time out of his day to deliver much less nutritious fast food to her at her place of work. Food preparation is coded as a feminine duty: traditionally, men provide and women tend to domestic issues such as cooking. Norm is characterized as a feminized man, but a man nonetheless.

Nearly every other adult male in the film meets with an unfavorable end. Carl and Wade are both killed due to their masculine posturing. Grimsrud and Jerry both end up in custody for their role in the heinous crimes. Even Stan Grossman is implied to be left in the lurch – his business partner killed and his own ending is uncomfortably incomplete. Yet, Marge's faithful husband Norm is blessed in the film's conclusion. Despite all the carnage depicted, his

supportive wife and future child have made it out unscathed. The final lasting image of *Fargo* is not gruesome or bloody; Marge and Norm rest peacefully in bed. Cutting through the film's ironic tone is the notion that Norm's behavior is favorable and therefore rewarded.

By repeatedly reinforcing the image of Norm as a sensitive, artistic, food-bringing man, the Coens are effectively de-masculinizing him, separating him from the follies of his more aggressive counterparts. By the end of the film, it is not the "strong" men who hit their personal targets. In fact, the endorsed concept of success is fundamentally different from the thrilling monetary gain sought by characters like Grimsrud and Showalter. It is the definition held by the almost effeminate Norm. For Norm, success lies in security and the ability to live comfortably. Masculine attempts to achieve success that deviates from this general model are ultimately doomed. The Coens here articulate the most productive mode of masculinity clings not to hegemonically determined norms and roles. Again, it is performative choice which reigns supreme. Norm is shown as choosing his model of masculine performance. Though Norm does embody a somewhat more conservative masculinity, as is idealized in *Raising Arizona*, he is far more agentic. He could hardly be more different than his film's other male characters. Masculinity in the *Fargo* universe is self-centered and violent. Norm deviates, ultimately emerging as the supported masculine performer.

I would be remiss if I did not address the film's polarizing ending. Though it is radically different from the brutal violence constituting much of the film's runtime, it is par for the course in its depiction of Norm and Marge's relationship. With the Coens choosing to end on this loving, relational note, the implied author again peeks through to endorse the model of masculinity Norm represents. In making him the embodiment of positive masculinity, the Coens make a progressive argument about gender. Norm is a man, yes, but his characterization

incorporates several positive elements associated with femininity as well. Gender performance need not be binary. Rather, fruitful masculine performance must be universal. That is to say, in order to live best, men can perform acts traditionally associated with both masculinity and femininity, as Norm does.

*The Big Lebowski* presents another such conclusion. Recall that masculinity in the era of the film is defined as a violent defense of self (be it person, property, or ideology) encapsulated by both the words of George H. W. Bush, “this aggression against Kuwait will not stand,” and Walter, “what’s mine is mine.” The Dude begins the film as a blank slate, desiring only to smoke marijuana and bowl. However, during the course of events, his “Dudeness” is corrupted by the toxically masculine Walter. Under the direction of Walter, he briefly abandons his slacker ways in favor of a more traditional, dominant view of masculine action. When the opportunity presents itself to make what he assumes will be easy money, he readily goes along on a wild goose chase to recover purportedly stolen ransom money for the Big Lebowski. After working his way all around town, he still has not replaced his rug or grown any closer to learning the truth of his situation, yet conflict with a group of nihilists results in the death of his friend, Donny. Pursuing the performance of hegemonic masculinity only leads to ruin.

After Donny’s funeral, Walter proposes they forget what has just happened and return to the bowling alley, benevolently encouraging the Dude to return to his “Dudeness.” The Dude drops his anger at Walter and relents. The film ends with the Dude happily collecting beer from the bar of the bowling alley while the in-universe narrator hints that our hero will find happiness and prosperity. The Coens again reinforce the notion that genuine representation of self (in this film represented by “Dudeness” and lack of ambition for power and money) is always preferable

to prescribed gendered behavior, though undoubtedly convoluted and refracted through an ironic tone.

Politically, due to its self-reflexive framing relative to the first Bush administration, *The Big Lebowski* is another critique of conservatism. Just as the Dude's quest is founded on shaky sand, justification for war with Iraq was based on performative masculinity as opposed to well-reasoned military logic. The United States did not allow the aggression against Kuwait to "stand," but they ultimately did more to destabilize the region, generating more problems than solutions. *The Big Lebowski* further attunes viewers to the messy relationship between performative masculinity and global leadership. As I mentioned earlier, the film also operates on a personal, psychological level. It instructs viewers to simply "abide" rather than get swept up in masculine performance.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Throughout our research, we have reached solidly defensible conclusions about the messages the Coens send regarding masculinity and gender. We examined the four themes of masculinity as performance, children and families as ego extensions, toxic masculinity personified, and redemption through rejection of hegemonic masculinity, and gleaned information pertinent to the larger subtextual meaning present in the Coens' films. We now have a heightened understanding of how masculinity operates within the world of these films.

Regrettably, my research did not have time to take an intersectional approach to the discussion of gender, though future scholars may find important discoveries with such a line of questioning. I touched on issues of class (Hi's performativity of classed masculinity) and femininity (Ed's fascinating gender performance), but both subject areas could benefit from

more directed investigation. Furthermore, I have intentionally avoided discussions of race. This is not to say that race is not addressed in the Coens' films. The relatively small character from *Fargo*, Mike Yanagita (Steve Park), presents an interesting case study as the only minority character in the entire film. Still, I maintain my research holds merit as a fundamental exploration of how masculinity operates within the Coens' work.

Fastidious review of representations of masculinity within *Raising Arizona*, *Fargo*, and *The Big Lebowski* reveals enlightening implications regarding the career of the Coen Brothers, the relationship between politics and gender, and guidelines for improved masculine performance. First, as previously stated, the Coens themselves would likely laugh off any serious attempt to find meaning in their films which examines and challenges social power dynamics. Our reading of these key texts plainly disproves this assertion. Either consciously or subconsciously, the Coens have engaged in refreshingly critical dialogues about masculinity and gender within their filmography. Not only is what's on screen political, but it's also noticeably progressive. The socially conservative 1980s produced a wealth of films which either reinforced dominant ideology or skirted politics altogether in favor of escapism. The Coens were arguably on the forefront of filmmakers addressing masculinity as a performative site. Without the benefit of Butler's work, the Coens were dealing with themes of gender performativity as early as 1987. Few of the Coens contemporaries can claim such an early start to this exploration. Films like *Raising Arizona* still resonate with modern audiences because they were ahead of their respective times.

Digging deeper beyond this revelation, the Coens' use of masculine representation critiques and challenges dominant patriarchal structures. In retrospect, part of what contributes to the Coens' lasting legacy is that rather than dryly reflect the hegemonic masculinity of their time,

they serve as a nuanced (and often side-splitting) challenge to gender norms and expectations. Great art which stands the test of time is rarely complacent to accept dominant ideology. Understanding the depth of the Coens' gender subversion justifies their status as auteurs.

Second, particularly in regards to *Raising Arizona* and *The Big Lebowski*, the works of the Coens communicate a link between masculine performance and political leadership. While some still claim gender is fixed based on biological sex and that gendered behavior is innate, the Coens take issue with that assumption. In directly linking masculine performance to influential politicians, they signal an indisputable correlation between Presidential rhetoric and masculine performance. The words of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush were not just words. The statements they made shaped masculine behavior and public policy in ways still felt today. Even without the benefit of hindsight, the Coens appreciated this significance. While never coming off as heavy-handed, the Coens take a light touch and gently remind their audiences that political rhetoric impacts our daily lives on a level as basic as our very gender expression.

Finally, our analysis may be able to answer the question the *Big Lebowski* poses to the Dude: "What makes a man, Mr. Lebowski?" When considering the films as we have, the answer is resoundingly clear. Being a man is not inherent or intuitive; it is a collection of conscious choices. Masculinity is a performance which relies on modelling behavior which can come from a variety of sources both productive (Norm, for example) and unproductive (a la Gail and Evelle). Productive masculine performance eschews the destructive, control-seeking behavior associated with hegemonic and toxic masculinity. The Coens repeatedly demonstrate the consequences of enacting these flawed masculine ideals. In doing so, we are reminded that film serves a number of functions. One such function is as a didactic example that offers models of positive social behavior. We have learned that within the films of Joel and Ethan Coen, the

behavioral suggestions are presented ironically, yet consistently. What makes a man is caring for others, expressing one's inner self genuinely, and when the situation calls for it, letting go and bowling.

Joel and Ethan Coen have gifted cinephiles with hours of rewarding entertainment. As their career stretches into its fourth decade, the duo shows no sign of slowing down. But the Coens have given us more than stories. Each of their movies is a valued text containing a unique cultural flavor and commentary on American life. Armed with a deeper understanding of the Coens' representations of masculinity, we can continue to enjoy the films on the complex level they deserve.

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