Independent Project, 15 Credits

Defining and Challenging Masculinity in the EFL Classroom

_Masculine Norms and Identity in Connection to Rick Moody’s “Boys”._

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Term: Fall 2023
Subject: English
Level: English II
Course code: 2ENÄ6E
Abstract

The aim with the following study is to define and analyse different types of masculinities in literature, present why they occur and how to work with them in the EFL classroom. The primary source used in this essay is Rick Moody’s short story “Boys”. This text follows two brothers growing up with masculine norms and how they affect them throughout life. In this essay, it is concluded that masculinity is a complex topic with many different versions that can be found in the primary source. Furthermore, this study also offers an explanation that masculinities emerge from society’s expectations and the adaption of grown-ups’ behaviour. In addition to this, it is also stated that working with texts about identity and gender expectations is a necessity in the EFL classroom. By introducing this text, the pupils are invited to explore their own identity and different ways of living, moving from masculinities with negative consequences to masculinities with good consequences.

Key words:

Gender studies, masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, traditional masculinity, healthy masculinity, caring masculinity, EFL classroom.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank my supervisor Anne Holm for the valuable feedback and support she has supplied me with throughout this essay. A special thanks also goes out to my peers who have offered me insightful comments and ideas for improvement.
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1. Introduction

“Boys will be boys” is a very common way to describe typical behaviour among young men. It could be a phrase that is used when boys are harassing girls, pulling pranks, or fighting each other. These conceptions and their meanings can be seen in political, historical, and societal contexts. One way to explore these conceptions is through gender studies. In *A Dictionary of Gender Studies*, this theory is described as a way to highlight these notions and how gender affects identity, self-conception, and societal stereotypes. Furthermore, gender studies often concentrate on women in order to bring their perspectives to light. Lately however, research on gender studies from the perspective of men has increased. This study will contribute to that area of research by exploring conceptions of masculinity and how to analyse them in literature. In *A Dictionary of Gender Studies*, masculinity is further defined as physical and biological appearance, but most commonly it is “considered as socially constructed and hence circumscribed by the norms applied to boys and men in a given culture”. It can be interpreted, by this definition, that masculinity is a type of category that men and boys are slotted into. However, masculinity is a bit more complex than that. According to Marja Peltola and Ann Phoenix, there is no single version of masculinity. Instead, there are several different types and versions that can change over time, depending on cultural and social aspects (Peltola and Phoenix 1). As an example, there is traditional masculinity (Ashley Rivera), hegemonic masculinity (Raewyn Connell), and healthy masculinity (Andrea Waling) and these will later be brought up in the theory section.

Some of these types can be explored in Rick Moody’s short story “Boys” (2000). In this literary text, the story focuses on two twin brothers from birth to grown men. During their childhood and growth, they seem to engage in typical boyish behaviour. Whether they feel like gagging the fat boy up the street, calling each other names like *retard* or *homo*, or
getting into fights, it is considered to be a normal conception of boys´ behaviour (Moody 1). To my knowledge, no prior research has been made on this specific story. The only reliable information found is the author´s own comments on the primary source, which were found on Youtube and uploaded by St. Francis College. In the video, he explains that his sister passed away, just like in the story, and that he was raised alongside four brothers. He indicates that most of the story is based on real life events, which is valuable information to bring into this essay.

One aim with this study is to argue for the usefulness of the primary source in the EFL classroom. The main reason why the short story is very applicable is because of its content. According to the curriculum, one of the main objectives for Swedish high schools is to develop pupils´ understanding about gender patterns in society. With this knowledge, the students should be able to develop an ability to criticise structures, norms and values that limit their interpretation of the world and society (National Agency for Education). By using “Boys” in the EFL classroom, it will serve as an introduction to the discussion about gender roles. These discussions will not only fulfil the requirements of the curriculum as it will also be beneficial for the students. Moreover, I believe that since it is a short story, it is very suitable to use in class. It is not too long and challenging and is therefore easy to administer. Furthermore, the story is presented in a very vague way, which is a strength in this case. It will make it easier to relate to the story, regardless of the pupils´ previous experience. “Boys” also offers scenarios where the pupils will be able to reflect about their own behaviour and identity. Questions like why boys call each other names and refuse to seek help when feeling down, can be discussed. It is important to explore these types of questions in an effort to avoid the negative outcomes of masculine norms. Talking about gender can be a part of gender training that aspires to raise awareness about stereotypical thinking and how to reduce the biases that people might possess, according to A Dictionary of Gender Studies.
Another reason why “Boys” is applicable is because the pupils should encounter different types of texts that are familiar and relatable, which is the case with this story. This is also something that is demanded by the Swedish curriculum (National Agency for Education).

A possible limitation with this essay is that it only focuses on masculinity. One can argue that a primary source that explores masculinity and femininity would be more suitable and relatable for all pupils. This is a valid input, however, there are multiple reasons why a sole focus on masculinity is beneficial for all genders. Many masculine norms will affect women as they are “subject to sexist behaviour, including abusive or violent treatment” (Peltola and Phoenix 2). Furthermore, women and girls are not only victims of masculine behaviour, but they are also a part of the structure (Peltola and Phoenix 5). According to Stefan Horlacher, understanding the concept of masculinity is a necessity to be able to work with it (11). Since girls also are a part of the structure, they also need to be involved in order to reduce the negative results of some types of masculinity. By introducing “Boys” in the EFL classroom, the pupils will be able to discuss gender expectations and receive a greater understanding about the concept. I believe that this will result in transparency between genders, paving the way for a more equal society.

An important part of the essay is to describe how to analyse masculinity within literary texts. One way of doing this is to highlight different types of masculinity, according to Alex Hobbs. When analysing masculinities such as hegemonic masculinity and traditional masculinity, it can be concluded that these can be found in “Boys”. Due to the brothers’ violent behaviour, language and reasoning, they fulfil some of the main requirements for these masculinities. The story also presents the result of their behaviour as they consume alcohol and illegal substances, drive while intoxicated and how they treat women, which are common outcomes of these masculine traits. Since many different types of masculinities are
presented in a very understandable way, I would argue that “Boys” is a very useful source in this essay. Due to its content regarding the brothers’ behaviour, language and reasoning, it can be used as a platform to illustrate masculine behaviour in boys’ lives. As a clarification, this essay argues that, in accordance with previous research and theories, different types of masculinities will be identified in “Boys”. Furthermore, how to analyse masculinity, explanations how masculinities emerge and their effects will also be made visible in relation to the primary source. It will also be argued that “Boys” is applicable in the EFL classroom due to its content regarding masculinity. By presenting ways to work with masculinity, this essay will contribute to the rising need for masculinity-studies and contribute to the area of research.

2. Theory: Definitions and previous research

As previously mentioned in the introduction, masculinity is a complex notion with many different subcategories and definitions. This part of the essay is dedicated to present different takes on masculinity and how to analyse them in literature. Moreover, this study will also explain the reasons why masculinities exist and how to work with gender questions in the EFL classroom.

2.1 Masculinities

According to Peltola and Phoenix, research about masculinity has increased rapidly in the last couple of years. Through their empirical and theoretical studies of boys in Helsinki, they conclude that the main reason for this is the declining welfare among people of the male gender in association to masculine norms. Boys disengage from schoolwork, commit violent acts, disrespect women, and tend to live in a form of hierarchical power system. This type of research has revealed a clear interlink between this type of behaviour and masculine norms.
Many boys are influenced by what they consider “real” boys and men should act and behave like (Peltola and Phoenix 4). This is also something that aligns with Raewyn Connell’s statements as she describes that masculinity is a very complex notion and there is not one universal way of describing it (Connell 208). Connell is a highly influential scholar in the field. Peltola and Phoenix have summarised Connell’s research about stereotypical male behaviour and different versions of masculinity. The following paragraph is Connell’s findings but presented through Peltola and Phoenix. The reason why this source is used is because the authors write about masculinity in direct connection to schools in Helsinki. They have further summarised the information in an understandable way, thus making the source suitable for this essay. Peltola and Phoenix write that Connell concludes in several studies about stereotypical male behaviour that there are four types of masculinities. *Hegemonic masculinity* is the ideal to strive for as men, often labelled as toxic masculinity. A man in this category is powerful, heterosexual, competitive, violent, authorial and considers homosexuals as lesser persons (Peltola and Phoenix 5). This version of masculinity is further described by John Scott in *A Dictionary of Sociology* as a representation of masculine ideals that results in a patriarchy where men, who fulfil these traits, are at the top of the hierarchy. Below them are women and other people who do not fulfil the criteria previously presented by Peltola and Phoenix. Scott continues by stating that in order to achieve and maintain the subordination of others, these men often use violence or abusive language to assert dominance.

The second type of masculinity, according to Peltola and Phoenix, contains men that fulfil some of these requirements but lack factors like economical and institutional power that is a necessity to belong in the hegemonic norm. These men are considered to be a part of *marginal masculinity* (5). The third conception of masculinity is *complicit masculinity*, which is the description of a vast number of men that do not belong to the hegemonic masculinity but do nothing to challenge it. The fourth and final type of masculinity, according to Peltola
and Phoenix, is *subordinate masculinity*. Here are the “lesser” people, like homosexuals for example (5).

Even though Connell has had a massive impact in gender studies about masculinity, her research can not be seen as absolute science. There are several different versions depending on cultural and social context, as mentioned previously. A study conducted in a school in Oslo, by Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg, found a group of boys that were very dominant (Peltola and Phoenix 6). However, in contrast to Connell´s statements, it was not through hegemonic conceptions but through intellect and inclusiveness that they were so popular in school. Similar results were found in other studies which relate to the term *inclusive masculinity*. This means that men are more including in their behaviour and reluctant of using homophobic expressions (Peltola and Phoenix 6). Some might argue that this is a good masculine aspect that should be strived for to a greater extent. However, many researchers have questioned this concept. One of these is Sam de Boise who explains that inclusive masculinity is just another type of hegemonic masculinity (324). He argues that as a consequence of a society that preaches inclusiveness and equality, men have adapted their behaviour in order to maintain and perpetuate control.

This opinion by de Boise and others, only furthers the complexity of masculinity as it can be fluid and changing. Due to this notion, there is another take on masculinity called *hybrid masculinity*. The meaning of this concept is a renounced take on inclusive masculinity and a continuing aspiration to reach hegemonic masculinity (Peltola and Phoenix 7). It can be further explained as: “the concept of hybrid masculinities therefore focuses on the flexibility of, and changes in, hegemonic masculinity rather than suggesting that masculine hegemony in itself is challenged by men” (Peltola and Phoenix 7). As a clarification, this quote indicates that men who have taken steps away from hegemonic masculinity only did so to perpetuate power.
As a response to this, another term about masculinity was coined. *Caring masculinity*, proposed by Karla Elliott, instead focuses on incorporating positive values in masculinity and rejecting domination and relational hierarchies. Men who allow themselves to care, feel emotions and fight for equal rights should be met with embrace and not with doubt (Karla Elliott). Elliot further suggests that: “supporting such values would help to decrease the costs of masculinity for both men and women, and advance gender equality”. This quote offers an explanation how masculinity can be worked with by showing support instead of doubt.

Another type of masculinity is the *traditional masculinity*. This version can be defined as “a toxic influence on men and boys” and has many similarities with hegemonic masculinity (Rivera). They both believe that men are supposed to be tough, violent and impenetrable. The main difference between hegemonic masculinity and traditional masculinity, according to Rivera, is that this version focuses on masculinity as a broader concept. Traditional masculinity focuses on masculinity as a rooted system and how norms and expectations affect the male behaviour. Hegemonic masculinity focuses mainly on men’s domination over women and “lesser people”. Other than that, they share a lot of common ground (Rivera). Hegemonic masculinity could therefore be considered as a subcategory to the traditional masculinity. The traditional masculinity is built on societal norms and gender socialisations that are rooted in the society. In order to fully understand the concept of traditional masculinity, and other versions, Rivera offers different theories to explain why men act the way they do. These theories will be presented in the next section.

The final version of masculinity that will be brought up is the counterpart to hegemonic masculinity. According to Andrea Waling, *healthy masculinity* attempts to encourage men to adapt good traits such as inclusiveness, rejection of violence and fighting gender inequalities (367). In addition to this, there is also a focus on encouraging men to engage with their emotions instead of ignoring them (367). Even though this might be a good
step forward, some might argue that it is not enough. Waling continues by describing that by constantly changing types of masculinity, depending on situations, society and researchers embody men in a masculine cocoon. This sends a message that other values are not as good or legitimate ways of expression (Waling 363). Instead of making up different types of masculinities to suit a scenario, focus should be on using good existing values from feminist traits. By doing this, the gap between men and women will reduce, thus increasing gender equality (Waling 363). To summarise the information above, it can be concluded that there are many different conceptions of masculinities, and they are ever changing depending on societies and culture. Some of them focus on bad traits while others focus on the good ones. The reason why it is necessary to define and explain these notions is to receive a greater understanding of the concept. By doing so, it is easier to work with masculinity and identify the different instances of the concept in “Boys”.

2.2 How masculinities emerge

The aim with the following subchapter is to present different suggestions explaining how masculinities emerge and why they are being upheld in society.

One way to describe how masculinities emerge is through the *sustainable male theory*. Just like hegemonic and traditional masculinity, this theory explains that men are supposed to be hard, impenetrable, and violent as means to achieve domination, according to Rivera. She continues by offering a biological approach to male behaviour by comparing men and animals, as this theory is applicable among them as well. The man with the best look, determination, strength, and toughness is the one that leads the pack and becomes the alpha. The reason why so many men strive for these characteristics is because people with these qualities have been idolised throughout time. Abraham Lincoln and Pablo Escobar are just two examples as they were brave, powerful, and cunning men that stood out from other men
Another reason why these qualities are strived for is because of the way boys are incited against each other at an early stage. Through football, MMA, games or business, men are constantly competing in order to achieve dominance. According to Rivera, these challenges result in hyperaggressive behaviour that affects men’s thoughts and behaviour. She continues by claiming that masculine behaviour is a result of the way boys are treated from an early age.

Even though Rivera’s statements seem to be legitimate, there are some aspects that she fails to consider. Her conclusions raise questions about why women are excluded from the equation, since they are also exposed to the same type of behaviour and expectations as boys. Girls play football and compete amongst each other in order to become the best. Furthermore, she does not explain why only men aspire to achieve the same characteristics as prominent persons like Abraham Lincoln. One way to reply to these questions is that men embrace masculine ideas through gender socialization. Rivera explains that even before childbirth, boys are presented the path that they are supposed to walk on for the rest of their lives. This idea is further implemented by how grown-ups behave in the immediate surrounding of the child as it grows. These thoughts and acts become a model behaviour that boys try to strive for (Rivera).

Similar ideas are presented through a research study regarding young men, norms and their behaviour, conducted by V. Paul Poteat et al. This essay presents that masculinity can be assessed and conceptualised based on gender normative beliefs and gender role orientation (Poteat et al. 434). Gender normative beliefs are described as what it is that society expects of men. The gender role orientation is quite similar but instead focuses on the endorsement of behaviours and traits associated with masculinity and femininity (Poteat et al. 434). Through these notions, research shows that there is a connection between masculine beliefs and how men behave. Men who show masculine traits are more likely to engage in violent and
homophobic behaviour (Poteat et al. 435). Moreover, the article argues that there are also examples of hostility and defensiveness when it comes to how men treat women as masculine men feel a need protect them (Poteat et al. 435). The reason why men adapt these traits, according to Poteat et al., is that men believe that this is what is expected of them. The study continues by describing why men use homophobic and sexist discourse:

It is a means of promoting male bonding that underscores commitment to common gender norms and increases the sense of in-group membership and cohesion. As a result, male adolescents have expressed a perceived pressure to conform to normative masculine behavior, such as acting confident and tough, and to avoid normative feminine behavior (435).

The previous quote indicates that males embrace masculine traits in order to conform to a perceived norm in order to be accepted. Worth mentioning about this study is that the specific masculinities in his connections are not presented. However, after reading the definitions in previous subchapter, it can be assumed that he implies masculinities such as hegemonic or traditional. Even though many aspects are similar with what Rivera states, this article is still of use. Poteat et al´s. research both strengthens Rivera´s statements and offers additional insight on masculine norms and how some men can reason when it comes to women.

Rivera continues by presenting three main social expectations on men that affect them, and society, in a negative way. Men are supposed to “(1) seek power, (2) suppress emotions, and (3) conform to social norms” (Rivera). The constant pursuit of being the best, and fear of failing, is something that affects the male psyche to believe that happiness is measured in external success rather than what feels good. This hunt for success can have fatal consequences in terms of psychological and physical outcomes, according to Rivera. She writes that among the top 15 causes of death, 8 are preventable diseases. Out of these 8, there
is only one disease that has an equal death ratio among men and women, which is stroke. The other 7 are overrepresented by men with diseases like hypertension, heart problems and liver diseases. In addition to this, a great amount of men suffer from mental illness but refuse to seek help as they are scared to be considered weak (Rivera).

Rivera continues by stating that men adapt to masculine notions because the alternative can be much worse. If boys or men fail to conform to masculine norms by being shy, artistic, unathletic or sensitive, they can be excluded and bullied. This can create a sense of pain, helplessness and desperation among the people who fail to abide the guideline, which can be taken out on other people (Rivera). Women and girls may be especially affected in men´s attempt to feel masculine by controlling and being dominant. This behaviour is often converted to violence when the authority is questioned by women or children (Rivera).

As a summary of this subchapter, it is explained that masculinity can be maintained through caretakers´ behaviour and societal expectations. It is also a possibility that many men strive to become an alpha to reach success, surpass competition and be praised like other people with the same characteristics. In addition to this, they could adapt to masculine norms in fear of being bullied and excluded if they do not. Since “Boys” follows two boys throughout life, these explanations can be used to define the society that shapes the two brothers.

2.3 Masculinity in literature

The aim with this part of the essay is to present ways to analyse masculinity in literature. As mentioned previously, masculinity studies is a rather new way of analysing literature. According to Axel Hobbs, the focus with this perspective is to present damaging parts of patriarchy and present masculine ideals to strive for through a description of male protagonists (384). This type of research has been questioned because many believe that men
have received too much attention in literature. Hobbs responds to this by presenting that many of those stories often depict men who have done something great within politics or war. There is however a sincere lack of studies focusing on males’ daily life (385). As a complement, he describes that: “literary masculinity studies concentrates on the depiction of private or semi-public not public arenas, and the way masculine stereotypes can restrict a character’s experience or expression” (Hobbs 390). This quote indicates that masculine studies aim to present males’ everyday life, which is very relevant to “Boys”. Hobbs also presents a lack of research regarding how aging affects men and masculine behaviour (389). This can be an interesting aspect to include in the analysis as the brothers age continuously throughout the story. Hobbs further describes how men are portrayed in literature and fiction. Men in movies can be depicted as strong, independent and be considered as a type of macho-masculine person. Examples of these are Terminator, Rocky or Rambo (387). Literary masculinity however chooses to bring focus to another type of protagonist. Examples from this perspective are men who are the opposite of these types of masculine heroes (Hobbs 387).

Hobbs continues his description of masculinity in literature by presenting the importance of identifying and explaining stereotypes and replacing them. He writes that:

One of the leading principles of literary masculinity studies is to isolate alternative masculine examples for a better understanding of the male experience, surely an important place to understand this is within children’s literature. Though masculinity and literature, and boys and education have been studied to some extent, there are few studies of children’s literature from a masculinity studies perspective (389).
Hobbs stresses the importance of highlighting masculine notions in literature. He continues by presenting an argument by Jane Stephens. Stephens argues that through literature, especially children’s literature, masculinity can be either sustained or challenged. She also states that it is applicable with both girls and boys but most necessary for boys (Hobbs 389). Hobbs states that it therefore is important to be considerate about what type of literature to present to children to challenge negative masculine norms. This is also concurred by Manning Marable who states that “it is imperative that stereotypes are broken down and alternative representations celebrated” (Hobbs 388). Similar ideas are also shared by Todd W Reeser who writes that masculinities must be made visible by presenting a quote from Anthony Easthope claiming that “Social change is necessary and a precondition of such change is an attempt to understand masculinity, to make it visible.” (Reeser 16). Both Marable and Reeser stress the importance of highlighting masculinity in order to work with it. Hobbs concludes this by adding that it is also essential to identify how these norms occur and what positive implications a neglect of these norms might result in (387).

2.4 Masculinities in the EFL classroom

So far, there have been explanations about different versions of masculinity and why they are being emphasised by men. In this subchapter, this information will be connected to the EFL classroom in order to show why it is important to talk about masculinity with students. As previously mentioned, masculinity can have a negative impact on males’ psychological inner and their behaviour. In the United States, 90% of homicides are committed by men and 77% of the casualties are also men. In addition to this, men are also expected to die approximately 5 years earlier than women and are 3.5 times more likely to commit suicide. Not only men suffer, as masculine ideals also affect women and children when males’ authority is questioned, according to Stephanie Pappas (34). When it comes to
consumption of alcohol, men are also overrepresented in this notion. This is also established by Claire Sloan who writes that men binge drink, exceed guidelines and die more often than women due to alcohol related accidents like DUI (785). Since men are overrepresented with mental health issues, it is not surprising that they also overconsume alcohol. According to Mary and Scott Steen, there is a connection between mental health and alcohol consumption. People who are suffering from mental issues tend to turn to the bottle to ease their pain.

Not only do men drink alcohol as a substitute for help, but they also drink because consuming alcohol is heavily linked to masculine norms. In the article “´Man-ing´ up and Getting Drunk: The Role of Masculine Norms, Alcohol Intoxication and Alcohol-related Problems Among College Men”, masculine norms can further explain why men engage in intoxication and alcohol consumption. In the U.S, where the study takes place, alcohol consumption is a “cultural symbol of manliness” hence further explains why men overconsume alcohol (Iwamoto et a 906). This article also presents additional rules that men are expected to follow in order to prove manliness. Some of these are being risk-taking, sexual prowess and emotional control (906).

Since masculinity can have such a negative impact, it can be argued that it should be worked with in order to avoid all the consequences above. One way to do this, according to Rivera, is to involve children in gender equity at an early stage in their life. Instead of maintaining traditional norms, grown-ups need to break the vicious circle and present a different way of living with new standards and norms. The new thinking should encourage emotional vulnerability and neglect traditional masculine values in order to combat the previously mentioned aspects and a great way to start is in schools (Rivera). Pappas concurs with these statements as she discusses the male psychology in an article for American Psychological Association. She states that understanding masculinity is an important part to be able to work with it. Furthermore, this understanding should be implemented in the
educational system to try to steer male students from traditional masculine behaviour into a better way of living. This will help them stay in school, behave better and live better lives (Pappas).

How this can be done is further explained by Kathleen Elliott as she describes how schools should convert to challenge sexual and gender inequality (17-19). Elliott states that the educational system played an important role in the development of women´s rights. Since it worked with women, schools should also be able to serve as a platform for change for men and expand their roles in society:

Finding ways to promote healthy masculinity early and to teach boys and young men to recognize, reject and challenge simplified, toxic masculinity is essential for creating cultural change. Educators of all types can and should be involved in this work, which includes simple steps that educators across disciplines can engage daily in their schools (19).

Kathleen Elliott stresses the need to challenge masculinity in classes. She also brings up healthy masculinity, previously described by Waling, as a masculinity to strive for. One way to reach gender equality, and reduce masculine norms, is to include powerful women in the curriculum. By doing this, teachers are forced to place focus on successful women throughout history, shifting the focus from men (19). According to Elliott, this will result in boys being more likely to realise that women are intelligent and can be great leaders. It can also help female students to engage more orally in class, as they are statistically underrepresented in that area, further resulting in equality (19-20).

Other things that teachers could do, according to Kathleen Elliott, is modelling. If teachers, most importantly male teachers, model vulnerability, express emotion and accept all genders and sexualities, it will affect the pupils as well (20). Moreover, Elliott argues that
grown-ups and teachers should also challenge instances when sexist speech or behaviour occurs (20). For many pupils, using sexist or homophobic language is just a normal way of communicating and they are unaware of their meaning. However, instead of letting these types of comments and actions slip, they should be confronted. As a result, it can be taught that comments like “that is so gay” or “you are a pussy” are not tolerated in the society we aim to reach (Kathleen Elliott, 20-21). In addition to this, teachers should also encourage students to challenge each other to fully reduce masculine behaviour (Kathleen Elliott 21). By fulfilling all of the presented suggestions, society should be able to take steps towards equality and reduce negative aspects of masculinity.

The previous information aligns with what is demanded in the curriculum and syllabus. According to the National Agency for Education, schools must focus on important aspects like equality between men and women. Moreover, it should also develop an ability among students to be understanding and compassionate towards other human beings. Discrimination, violence and sexist behaviour should actively be challenged in schools with knowledge and appropriate actions, according to the National Agency for Education. Furthermore, it also offers clear directions on how to work with concepts like sexuality, equality, and gender. In the EFL classroom, this can be done through different texts that involve emotions, identity and gender norms (National Agency for Education). These texts should raise awareness about inequalities and how to express emotions. Since “Boys” is a story with many instances of masculinity connectable to gender, I would argue that it is a suitable story to read in class. It will help with creating a discussion about masculine ideas that can reduce norms and make the boys aware that they can show weakness and vulnerability.

Furthermore, introducing masculinity through literature is a very good way of presenting the concept. Paintings, films, and art are other ways to work with masculine ideas,
but literature offers a unique view that is a necessity in order to fully understand and work with masculinity (Horlacher 11). In conclusion, “Boys” is very applicable in the EFL classroom, as its content is very relevant as a means to fulfil some demands of the curriculum. By introducing masculinity, the pupils can explore the concept and start thinking about their own part in society. Are they contributing to toxic behaviour or are they opposing it to try to reach gender equality?

3. Analysis: Masculinity in “Boys” and how to work with it

The aim with the following sequence is to connect the definitions of masculinity and theories behind them, with the primary source “Boys”. First, there will be an identification of masculine stereotypes in “Boys” with evidence from the text. The second part will discuss how masculinities take form in the story in relation to the theory section. The two parts will also be integrated with the presented research regarding analysing masculinity in literature. The third part will focus on how to work with “Boys” in the EFL classroom.

3.1 Masculinities and their effects

This part aims to identify textual examples where masculinity occurs in the brothers’ behaviour. As been mentioned throughout this study, masculinity is a complex topic with many definitions and interpretations. However, after clarifying some of the most common types of masculinity, it will be easier to analyse the boys’ behaviour in terms of masculinity.

Starting with Connell’s description of hegemonic masculinity, it can be concluded that there are many occurrences of this concept. Since this definition also shared many similarities with traditional masculinity, it is evident that there are many instances of this as well. Features such as violence, language and behaviour are shared between the two versions. Due to this, textual examples that can be connected to both hegemonic and traditional
masculinity will be brought up at the same. The first situation, where this behaviour occurs, is very early in the story. The brothers are two years old, and one has struck the other with a rubberized hot dog. In the following sentence, Moody writes that “Two boys, one of them striking the other with a willow switch about the head and shoulders, the other crying, enter the house” (1). Even at a very young age, the boys show violent behaviour which is stereotypical for the hegemonic and traditional masculinity (Connell 208, Rivera). The next situation where this notion occurs is when the brothers are contemplating about “shooting at the neighbor’s dog with a pump-action BB gun and gagging the fat boy up the street with a bandanna and showing their shriveled boy-penis to their younger sister” (1). This type of reasoning is very connectable to traditional and hegemonic masculinity. Since these definitions argue that men are supposed to show dominance and suppress individuals who they deem lesser, it can be very relatable to this reasoning (Connell 208, Rivera). If they were to shoot a dog with a bb-gun, bully the less athletic boy and harass their sister, it could be the case that they create a hierarchy where they are at the top and their “victims” are below.

Violent actions and thinking continue throughout the story as one of the brothers comes home with a black eye. However, it is not concluded that he has been a part of a violent altercation, but it can be assumed since violence is typical boyish behaviour, according to the traditional and hegemonic masculinity (Connell 208, Rivera). Even though “Boys” is a rather short story, there are many examples where violent contemplating occurs. However, it is difficult to say with a certainty which masculinity to apply, since there is a limited amount of information. It could be that the brothers behave in a specific way due to social norms connected to traditional masculinity or because they actively try to achieve dominance in accordance with the hegemonic masculinity.

Another characteristic that can be associated with hegemonic and traditional masculinity is the way the brothers speak with each other. It can be threatening, violent and
offensive when they communicate and there are many examples from “Boys” where this happens. At one point in the story, the brothers “call each other Retard, Homo, Geek, and, later, Neckless Thug, Theater Fag, and enter the house exchanging further epithets” (Moody 2). In another section, one brother “threatens to beat the living shit out of the other, refuses creme brulee, though it is created by his mother in order to keep the peace” (Moody 3). These sentences show that boys can be violent orally and not just physical. The fact that they try to offend each other by calling the other names like “homo” or “geek” concurs with Connell’s and Scott’s statements about hegemonic and subordinate masculinity. As mentioned before, hegemonic masculinity is at the top of the hierarchy and subordinates are at the bottom. People from the subordinate category, like homosexuals, are considered as lesser valued people (Peltola and Phoenix 5). By calling each other “gay”, it could be that they try to assert dominance by being hegemonic and subordinating the other. In contrast to what Connell and Scott argue, I do not concur completely with their statements. I agree that calling each other names is not a very nice behaviour. However, I do not believe that boys or men do this in order to assert domination or because they deem homosexuals or mentally disabled people as lesser people. I would argue that it is just a natural way of communicating for them and that they are not aware of the meaning of the words. It could be that they have adapted social norms, in accordance with the traditional masculinity, and believe that it is a normal way of communicating. This also connects to Kathleen Elliott’s ideas about sexist and homophobic speech. She claims that it is just a natural way of speaking and that students are not aware that they are discriminatory.

Other instances where dominance can be interpreted is in the boys’ behaviour towards their sister. Throughout the story, they continue to harass her in different ways. They dig down her dolls in the backyard, try to lure her to eat a mixture including things like lighter fluid, calamine lotion, melted plastic and ants. Furthermore, the brothers squeeze pimples in
front of her, and chase her around the house “threatening to depilate her eyebrows. She cries” (Moody 2). As mentioned previously by Rivera, if men are unable to reach the alpha role, they belong to marginal or complicit masculinity. Since they aspire to have control but are unable to reach it among men, there is a risk that they turn on women or children. This could be the case in this story and explain why the brothers act this towards their sister. It is not until they become aware that she is terminally ill that they start conforming and treating her in an including way. They unsuccessfully try to relocate the dolls they dug down in the past in an attempt to comfort her. They skip school to be at her side and tell her jokes in order to cheer her up. This behaviour can be linked to Karla Elliott’s caring masculinity as the brothers show emotions and their behaviour changes. They start taking care of their sister instead of teasing and treating her badly. The scenario can also be connected to healthy masculinity as the brothers show signs of worry and engage with their emotions (Waling 367).

As a result of their sister’s disease and eventual death, the brothers start to behave differently. In order to ease the pain, they turn to alcohol and other substances to ease the pain:

Boys enter the house carrying cases of beer. Boys enter the house, very worried now, didn't know more worry was possible. Boys enter the house carrying controlled substances, neither having told the other that he is carrying a controlled substance, though an intoxicated posture seems appropriate under the circumstances. Boys enter the house weeping and hear weeping around them. Boys enter the house embarrassed, silent, anguished, keening, afflicted, angry, woeful, grief-stricken (2).

In this quote, the brothers are very worried and concerned about their sister. Instead of talking with each other or receiving professional help, it seems as if they try to ease the pain by doing
drugs or consuming alcohol. From the moment the sister died, she is not mentioned again throughout the story. The only indication that she existed is when one brother is described as “distant and withdrawn, preferring to talk late into the night about family members gone from this world” (Moody 3). This behaviour is very relatable to what Rivera described as societal expectation on men through gender socialisation and traditional masculinity. They are not supposed to engage in emotions but instead suppress them to avoid being considered as weak. The brother who talks late into the night about family members is evidence of this. It can be interpreted as he wants to talk about his deceased sister but does not have the courage or strength to do it in a concrete way. Instead, he talks about gone family members in general to not seem weak. It seems as the brothers are unable to talk about their feelings due to masculine norms and as a result, they start drinking beer and doing drugs as a supplement. As Mary and Scott Steen previously presented, there is a clear link between mental issues and alcohol consumption. Instead of seeking help and opening up about their emotions, they decide to keep it all inside and ease their pain through substances.

Mourning their sister is not the only time consumption of alcohol occurs. Later in the story, both brothers returned home for a mutual friend’s wedding. After attending the wedding, they continued partying until “One boy enters the house, carried by friends, having been arrested (after the wedding) for driving while intoxicated, complexion ashen; the other boy tries to keep his mouth shut: the car is on its side in a ditch, the car has the top half of a tree broken over its bonnet, the car has struck another car, which has in turn struck a third” (Moody 3). As mentioned previously, men are overrepresented when it comes to overconsumption of alcohol and one contributing factor is masculine norms (Iwamoto et al. 906). As a result, they are also at greater risk of getting injured or die due to alcohol related causes like DUI (Sloan 785). Since the brothers in this story overconsume alcohol and take
other substances to suppress emotions, masculine norms and traditional masculinity affect them in a negative way.

Other indicators of masculinity can be found in the brothers’ younger years. Peltola and Phoenix wrote that one negative aspect associated with masculinity is the disengagement from school. In order to reach masculine behaviour, boys should ignore schoolwork as it is not considered manly enough (4). As it happens, both brothers seem to have received low scores in school as they do their best to hide their grades from their parents: “Boys enter the house at the end of term carrying report cards, sneak around the house like spies of foreign nationality, looking for a place to hide the report cards for the time being (under a toaster? in a medicine cabinet?)” (Moody 1). Since the brothers go through so much trouble to hide their scores, it can be assumed that they have underperformed. Even though it can not be concluded that it is due to masculine notions the boys are not performing well at school, it is a reasonable assumption. The reason for this is because all of the other masculine behaviour they have engaged in regarding things like violence, bullying, and dominance. As a result, this can be considered to be yet another example where masculinity has a negative impact on the brothers.

When analysing literature from a masculine perspective, there are some things that should be brought to light. One important aspect of this is to place focus on the protagonist in a story (Hobbs 384). Through the main character, damaging parts of patriarchy for both men and women should be presented. The previous part of the analysis brought up many scenarios where masculinities affect both men and women in a negative way. The brothers do violent things, call each other names, suppress emotions, consume alcohol and harass their sister. By bringing these things to light, one part of the literary analysis has been made. Furthermore, masculine ideals to strive for should also be brought to light (Hobbs 384, Horlacher 16).
Healthy and caring masculinity were identified as they cared for their sister, which also is an important aspect when analysing masculinity.

Another main feature, when analysing masculinity in literature, is to analyse which traits the protagonists have and how the story is structured (Hobbs 387). Unlike Rambo and Rocky, the brothers are very normal in that sense. They play, they fight, they succeed, they fail, just like everyone of us. Without sounding too critical, there is nothing special about them. According to Hobbs, masculine studies aim to present normal things in men’s lives with a focus on normal people (390). This is the case with “Boys” as it is a representation of normal boys’ upbringing and ageing. Regarding ageing, Hobbs also stated that there was a lack of research about how age affects masculinity (389). While analysing “Boys”, it became more challenging to identify masculinity when the brothers were older. This could be to the fact that the brothers moved out and their behaviour was not described as detailed as before. It could also be the case that they grew up and with that, they outgrew some of the masculine norms. I believe that it is a combination of the two as they engaged in masculine behaviour the times they came home. They stopped calling each other names like “retard” or “geek” although at the same time, one brother threatened the other one and one of them drove while intoxicated. It could be the case that age affects masculinity but as Hobbs writes, it is something that needs to be studied further.

To summarise, there are many instances of masculinity in “Boys”. They show negative traits as they use homophobic language, engage in violence and supress emotions, which can be connected to notions such as hegemonic and traditional masculinity. They also show some traits of caring and healthy masculinity as they take care of their sister as she falls ill. By focusing on the brothers’ daily life and paying attention to masculine norms, a vital part of the masculine analysis has been completed.
3.2 How and why masculinities emerge

This part of the analysis aims to describe why the brothers behave and think the way they do in connection to what has been presented in the theory section. Offering explanations why masculine norms occur also aligns with what Hobbs describes as an important feature while analysing masculinity in literature (387). As mentioned in the theory section, there are several explanations how masculine norms emerge. There is also evidence throughout “Boys” that indicates that these explanations are relevant in the creation of masculinity in the story as well. At the very beginning, the newborn babies enter the house for the very first time and with them “the ideas of boys” (Moody 1). This is something that aligns with Rivera’s article as she concludes that there is a pre-destined path that men are supposed to walk throughout life. It also concurs with Poteat et al, who write about gender normative beliefs (434). Just like Rivera, he argues that there are certain societal expectations on men that will affect their behaviour throughout life. This idea seems to be shared with Moody as well as he insinuates that boys have certain expectations on them that shape their behaviour and actions.

Other instances that evolve the masculine concept, according to Rivera, is competition through sports. In “Boys”, the two brothers grow up and compete in different types of physical activities. During their upbringing, they both engage in baseball, football, skateboarding, and lacrosse. However, one of the brothers chooses to wear jeans and shirts instead of his brother, who started playing basketball. In the very next sentence, the brother who conducts sports enters the house and is “bleeding profusely and is taken out to get stitches, the other watches” (Moody 1). It can be assumed that the brother who bled profusely is the same brother that later received a black eye. This competitiveness and violent engagement in sports concurs with Rivera’s statements. According to her, boys develop masculine characteristics and hyperaggressive behaviour because they are incited against each other from an early age. Since sports are a way to achieve dominance, it develops a
behaviour that boys take with them in other parts of their lives (Rivera). The aspects are also found in the research study by Poteat et al. where it explains that violent behaviour and domination are linked to masculinity and expectations on men (435).

Rivera also claims that boys are heavily influenced by the people surrounding them. Evidence of this can also found in the primary source as the boys are idolising their father. At a young age, the brothers are “trailing after their father like he is the Second Goddamned Coming of Christ Goddamned Almighty, enter the house, repair to the basement to watch baseball”. In this sentence, there is evidence that the brothers look up to their father and by doing so, also are likely to try to mimic his behaviour and interests. Later in the story, while their sister is sick, they use alcohol and controlled substances. When they describe the usage of these things, “an intoxicated posture seems appropriate under the circumstances” (Moody 2). No more information is presented but it is reasonable to assume that their father and possibly the mother also consumed alcohol or other substances to ease their pain. It could be that the boys are only mimicking their parents´ behaviour as it seemed appropriate.

Other textual evidence that aligns with theories behind masculinity can be found in the brothers´ self-perception. According to Rivera and Poteat et al, there are many different expectations on men that must be fulfilled in order for them to feel successful (435). The constant pursuit of power, outdoing peers, being dominant and keeping feeling supressed affect the male psychology. As a result, many boys might suffer mentally if they are unable to achieve all of these expectations. Feelings of failure can be seen in “Boys” as they are unable to reach their aims. Even though it is not specified what causes these feelings, the brothers “enter the house, go to their rooms, remove sexually explicit magazines from hidden stashes, put on loud music, feel despair. Boys enter the house worried; they argue. The boys are ugly, they are failures, they will never be loved, they enter the house” (Moody 2). The fear of failure and not being loved due to their unsuccessfulness can be related to the information
presented by Rivera and Poteat et al. about external pressure from society and a fear of not fulfilling expectations (345). The quote can also be connected to Connell’s discussion about hegemonic masculinity. It is possible to assume that the brothers belong to the “lesser” versions of masculinity like marginal or complicit, which result in a sense of failure even though there could be other reasons.

Other examples how societal expectations affect men’s behaviour can be seen in how they interact with women. As presented earlier by Iwamoto et al, being sexually active and a playboy is considered as a masculine trait (906). Somewhere around puberty, the brothers start taking notice of girls: “Boys attempt to induce girls to whom they would not have spoken only six or eight months prior to enter the house with them. Boys enter the house with girls efflorescent and homely and attempt to induce girls to sneak into their bedroom, as they still share a single bedroom; girls refuse” (Moody 2). This quote describes the brothers as cunning and calculating, in order to lure girls into their rooms. As mentioned, they would not have taken any notice to these girls a couple of months ago. Perhaps, due to the social expectations that were presented by Iwamoto et al (906) they feel the need to engage with women. By doing so, they achieve some of the masculine traits that could make them feel better and thereby coming closer to a hegemonic masculinity. Another example involving girls is when a girlfriend to one of the brothers is going to spend the night. Moody writes: “one boy brings home a sweetheart but throws a tantrum when it is suggested that the sweetheart will have to retire on the folding bed in the basement” (3). This quote gives an insight in the brother’s behaviour and thinking. I would argue that he feels the need to protect his girlfriend and make sure that she will be able to sleep in a proper room. When it was suggested that she could sleep in the basement, he is the one that becomes angry, even though he is not the one that is affected. In my opinion, a possible reason for this can be because his dominance is questioned. According to Connell, being authoritarian over women is a
hegemonic trait. It could be that the brother’s authority is questioned when his girlfriend, who he believes he is responsible for, could sleep on a folding bed in the basement. Rivera also writes that when male authorities are questioned, they can be violent. In this case, the brother’s authority was questioned, and he throws a tantrum in response. This can also be connected to what the research study by Poteat et al. write about hostility and defensiveness (435). Due to society’s expectations, some men believe that they need to protect “their” women. It could be that the brother marks that he protects and defends his girlfriend by throwing a tantrum.

As a summary of this subchapter, there are many instances that concur with previous research about underlying masculine factors. Moody writes about the idea of boys, how they are shaped by their surroundings and how that affects them. Furthermore, they engage in violence and suppress emotions, possibly due to societal expectations. In addition to this, social expectations could also affect the way they interpret themselves and how they treat women. By highlighting explanations why masculinities emerge, another part of the literary analysis from a masculine perspective has been completed (Hobbs 387).

3.3 Connection to the EFL classroom

This final section of the analysis will present why “Boys” is useful in the EFL classroom and how to work with it. Murder, assault, suicide, accidents and prevented fatal diseases are all different things that men are overrepresented in. As pointed out by both Pappas and Sloan, men are often both at the receiving and giving end. Due to their upbringing and society’s expectations, they embrace different types of masculinities that could result in aforementioned consequences. It can therefore be concluded that men are both suffering and cause a lot of suffering. Whether they shoot or bully other men, kill and abuse their wives or commit suicide, this type of behaviour affects the whole society in a negative way. One way
of working with gender and equality, in order to change this spiral of negative effects, is through literature, according to Horlacher (11). It is also explained that masculinity must be visible in order to work with it (Horlacher 16). By discussing scenarios such as homophobic and sexist language or violent behaviour, different types of masculinities are being brought to light. Introducing “Boys” in the EFL classroom will therefore result in initial steps to reduce the negative effects of masculinity.

The National Agency for Education offers a document called “Sexualitet, Samtycke och Relationer i Undervisningen” with guidelines on how to work with masculinity. In this part, it is stated that all subjects should work with gender norms, sexuality and equality. In English, this can be done through different texts that involve aspects as identity and gender. “Boys” invites the reader to a journey about what it is like being a boy and how they affect their surroundings. Through this story, questions can be asked about how they handle grief, alcohol, love and life in general, just like the National Agency for Education suggests. I would argue that “Boys” can be of great use in order to discuss young males´ self-perception and highlight typical masculine behaviour and what it results in. Questions like “Why do the brothers consume alcohol and other substances when their sister passes?” can be used to discuss masculinity and what the brothers instead could have done. Together in groups, they can discuss about alternative solutions, moving away from the negative traits of masculinity.

When discussing these types of questions, it is important that the teacher takes a clear stand against the negative aspects of the masculine traits. Rivera, Pappas and Kathleen Elliot all agree that grown-ups are an important part in shaping younger people´s behaviour. Elliot takes it one step further by presenting ways that teachers in particular should behave like. She argues that school staff must try to express emotions, accept all genders, and confront pupils who use comments like “retard” or “gay” in a negative way. Since the brothers in “Boys” use similar comments (Moody 2), it offers the teacher a great opportunity to confront this
behaviour. The pupils can be asked questions why boys tend to call each other names, letting
them reflect on their own behaviour. By *modelling* a good behaviour as a teacher and
emphasising healthy and caring masculinity, the pupils will be more likely to adapt and
conform to better norms, according to Kathleen Elliott.

Healthy masculinity was previously described by Waling as a response to
masculinities with opposing and toxic traits. Instead of hegemonic behaviour, it focuses on
inclusiveness, resisting violence and equality (367). Since these traits are to prefer instead of
violent conduct, segregation and inequality, many would argue that it should actively be
worked towards. I believe that there is a great chance of making this a reality by introducing
“Boys” with appropriate questions and modelling. If a teacher asks questions that make the
boys think about their own identity, there will be an opportunity for self-reflection.
Hopefully, they will reflect on their own behaviour and open up for new ideas. If the teacher
also emphasises good values through modelling, the pupils will be more likely to adapt. This
also aligns with the study conducted by Hobbs about presenting new types of masculinities
that are more beneficial (388). As a result, there will be a first step of moving from masculine
norm with negative aspects to others with more healthy aspects. In addition to this, the
National Agency for Education states that pupils in the EFL classroom should also come in
contact with different types of texts. Through these, they should engage with vocabulary,
structures and grammatical aspects to improve and develop their skills. It can therefore be
concluded that “Boys” is a suitable story to use both for its representation of masculinity and
for its content in general.
4. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify and analyse different types of masculinity, how they emerge and how to work with them in the EFL classroom. The findings were then explained in relation to Rick Moody’s “Boys” in order to argue for its usefulness during English lessons.

The first part of the essay was dedicated to describing different types of masculinity. These findings were later used to analyse the brothers’ behaviour and acts in “Boys”. As an example, the brothers showed hegemonic traits as they were involved in violent altercations and calling each other names like “retard” and “homo”. The next part of the essay focused on how to analyse masculinity in literature. Hobbs and Horlacher presented that masculinities must be made visible and that stories should focus on normal people’s every day life. This was later followed by a presentation about masculine norms and theories that implement male actions. According to researchers like Rivera, Poteat et al, and Iwamoto et al, masculinities emerge and are embraced due to societies’ expectations on men and how grown-ups behave.

Through the sustainable male theory, gender socialisation, normative beliefs and gender role orientation, Rivera and Poteat et al, explain that there are presumptions about men that they are supposed to be hard, violent, dominant, successful and not show emotions. This constant pursuit of success and adapting norms results in an overrepresentation in statistics such as suicides, premature deaths, and alcohol consumption.

The final part of the essay is dedicated to how and why “Boys” could be of use in the EFL classroom. It is stated in National Agency for Education - Sexualitet, Samtycke och Relationer i Undervisningen, that schools should actively work to reduce discrimination, sexist behaviour, and violence. Since “Boys” is a literary text that includes male stereotypes and their consequences, it will be of great use when introduced in the EFL classroom.

Furthermore, this essay also concluded, by researchers such as Kathleen Elliot, that grown-
ups, especially teachers, have a major part to play when it comes to shaping students.

Through modelling, teachers can challenge negative aspects of masculine traits (Elliott).

Through all of these implementations, schools will reduce the negative aspects of masculine norms, steering the boys away from a path of premature death, suicide and violence. In addition to this, “Boys” is beneficial to use in the EFL classroom because the pupils will get to read, which is a criterion in the National Agency for Education.

A possible limitation with this essay might be, as mentioned in the introduction, that it appears to have a sole focus on men. This could be considered to be a weakness as women are briefly mentioned throughout the essay. I could have implemented more research about men’s violence against women or used a primary source where hegemonic masculinity against women is more apparent. There are several explanations for my decision to reduce the female inclusion in this essay. First, if I were to include a feminist perspective, the workload and word count would surpass the limitations of this essay. Secondly, males are overrepresented in many areas such as violence, murder and other things that affect society as a whole in a negative way. Masculine norms are a contributing factor to this behaviour. By focusing on males, masculinity and how to work with it, it will be beneficial for all genders, which is the strength of this essay. However, including how women are depicted in “Boys” along with a feminist perspective would be a good take for future research.
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