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Honors Program First Prize Essay

THE GENDERING OF OLIVER TATE

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Joe Dunthorne plays the line for laughs: “Treat ‘em mean, keep ‘em keen.” He intends the audience to laugh as they recognize Oliver’s inexperience and foolishness in believing this advice given to him by his equally inexperienced friend Chips. *Oh, silly Oliver Tate*, we are meant to say, laughing along at both the youthful innocence and ridiculousness of this character who thinks he knows everything. But this line joins a canon of other common adages, phrases we have culturally come to accept as normal, even expected from young men: “She’s a ten;” “you run like a girl;” “boys will be boys;” and, of course, the infamous “locker room talk.” These phrases stand as vestiges of a patriarchal system and reflect how, even after the suffragettes, the women’s movement, and the sexual revolution, boys are still socialized from a young age to adopt a harmful form of masculinity. In Joe Dunthorne’s novel *Submarine*, the narrator, a young teenage boy by the name of Oliver Tate, navigates the world of late-nineties Welsh adolescence armed with only his wit, shaky internet connection, and a learned set of gender norms that colors his view on sex and relationships. The learning of gender, sociologists report, most strongly occurs during childhood and adolescence and continues to impact how a person views themselves and others through his life. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Oliver Tate*, whose early experiences and influences on gender have led him to exhibit examples of patriarchy and masculinity in his close personal relationships.

Even before Freud burst onto the scene, people, almost universally, assumed the masculine to be the dominant and default gender identity. From the days of hunter-gatherer societies, in which women played a critical role as nurturers and providers, still the male groups of hunters and warriors took priority and control over the women and land (Forisha 44). Through the Middle Ages, the Industrial Revolution, the Victorian Era, and beyond, men retained political, social, and economic power over women as they ascended to the forefront of society as the assumed “natural” breadwinners, fighters, and leaders (Forisha 46-49). Social norms regarding “proper” male and female attitudes and actions grew into rigid gender roles to which people were expected to conform or risk social alienation and discrimination. Gender roles became ingrained in society, pervading the majority of thought surrounding identity and gender, ultimately becoming institutionalized in schools, the family, and the government (Romer 19 & 37). For centuries, these gender roles when largely unchallenged. The assignment of appropriate masculine and feminine activities were, after all, a fact of life; women were simply—biologically, inherently—gentle, fragile caregivers, and men were just aggressive go-getters responsible for bringing home the bacon.

One of the most prominent theories that changed the perception of gender was Judith Butler’s notion of performative gender. Butler postulates that the notion of gender develops not from unchangeable, biological fact, but from the repetition of unrelated acts, which only after repetition become characterized as “masculine” or “feminine.” Gender, therefore, is nothing more than “[a] constructed identity...which the mundane social audience...[comes] to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler 520). Butler’s ideas, inspired by feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, completely discarded the idea that gender was something biological, definite, and unchangeable. Researcher Joseph Pleck takes this idea a step further with his model of gender identity, arguing that these transient gender roles get passed on to children through their environment. Pleck asserts that children, in their early years, grow aware of gender and learn what is acceptable expression for men and women based on the child’s social environment. Upon learning from parents, friends, and authority figures the “rules” of a gender, a child tries to force himself and others to fit the appropriate gender role. Ultimately, Pleck theorizes, chil-

dren should begin to understand the ability to exhibit both “masculine” and “feminine” qualities sometime in their adolescence and recognize the necessity to exhibit both as a functioning adult (Davidson & Gordon 15-16). Pleck’s work, combined with that of Walter Mischel, John Money and Anke Ehrhardt, and Lawrence Kohlberg, emphasizes that a person’s understanding of gender comes from the environment and influences he experiences in his formative years (Davidson & Gordon 13-14). Children, having been exposed to a variety of gender-stereotyped roles in their families, schools, social groups, and media, begin to censor themselves in order to adhere to the “correct” behaviors for their genders (Parsons 32-33). In this manner, gender roles and stereotypes persist despite a changing landscape of sexual freedom. Thus, children and young teenagers like Oliver Tate still express notions of antiquated gender roles. Despite the knowledge that gender roles and stereotypes are not as rigid and genetic as previously thought, decades of compounded cultural norms exposed to the child through both informal personal channels and formal institutions during his or her formative years result in children and teenagers—particularly young men—who perpetuate sexist ideas of gender and sexuality well into adolescence and beyond.

Thus enters young Oliver Tate into the narrative. At the start of *Submarine*, Oliver, at fourteen years old, struggles to find his place in his family, his friend group, his Welsh high school, and his world. From the first few pages of the novel, Dunthorne marks Oliver as a rather unusual, very observant boy. “What [my parents] don’t seem to understand is that their problems are already my problems,” Oliver remarks, immediately identifying one of the biggest influences on a child’s socialization (Dunthorne 6). Yet Oliver, despite his startlingly sharp social observations, remains a perpetuator of gender stereotypes. How Oliver relates to Jordana, his parents, and Zoe all follow a pattern of casual sexism; when the woman in these relationships exerts her power, Oliver feels threatened and acts out in retaliation. This problem is not an individual one; such actions are not isolated, one-off experiences that can be ascribed simply as results of Oliver’s well-documented eccentricities. Rather, Oliver’s aggressive masculinity and latent misogyny are products of the society in which he was raised and the culture found throughout the halls of high school. Even young men not nearly as absurd as Oliver act in similar ways, suggesting a larger cultural, rather than individual, problem. Oliver learned his sexist tendencies from somewhere, and the society and which he raised taught him.

The kind of company Oliver keeps explains a great deal about his socialization regarding gender and sex. Though a child’s first and most formative introduction to gender roles may come from the parents, once the child enters adolescence, the strongest influence on a person’s ideas of gender and sexuality comes from the child’s friends and peers (Romer 64). Throughout the novel, Oliver frequently cites his friend Chips’ advice as it pertains to sex and relationships, particularly those with women. Several times, when faced with a difficult emotional situation, Oliver recalls one of Chips’ favorite phrases, “Treat ‘em mean, keep ‘em keen” (Dunthorne 166). The phrase refers to the idea that ignoring a woman’s emotional needs will keep her interested, and Oliver follows this advice wholeheartedly. Chips’ advice is not only inaccurate, but reeks with the vestiges of outdated gender norms. Chips’s advice follows the stereotype that men should not express emotions, and that expressing signs of affection is womanly and shameful (Romer 66). Furthermore, the phrase “treat ‘em mean, keep ‘em keen” expects that the man holds the position of power in a relationship. By shrugging off a woman’s advances, the man both maintains his appearance of aloofness and keeps the woman in the dark, depriving her of the power that comes with knowledge and forcing her to continue trying to please the man. As a result of Chips’ advice, Oliver pays special attention to the dynamic of power in his relationship with Jordana. After Jordana emails him, Oliver notes, “It strikes me that the recipient of the e-mail is the one in a position of power in the relationship” (Dunthorne 166). Chips’ influence has taught Oliver to take pride in having the upper hand in a relationship. From the details Oliver mentions, it is clear that Chips, along with having a rebellious streak, harbors a

lust for power and control, and not just in sexual relationships: he attempts to frame his father for possession of child pornography, and, in his torment of Zoe, Oliver remarks that Chips would want to “see his name immortalized” in her diary (Dunthorne 32 & 135). As a teenager’s peers become his strongest influences regarding sexuality and gender as he enters adolescence, it comes as no surprise that Oliver has adopted some of Chips’ toxic socialization.

Chips also instills in Oliver problematic ideas about sex. Given that teenagers cite their peers as their major source of information regarding sex, Chips’ toxic influence strongly socializes Oliver in a way that teaches him to view women as sexual objects (Zellman & Goodchilds 54). In one instance, Oliver, musing about the future, wonders:

“I wonder whether [Chips and I] will get together when we are forty and go through his porn magazines, just like old times, and I’ll have to keep saying, ‘Oh my fuck!’ and ‘Look at her minge!’ and so on, just like I do at the moment.” (Dunthorne 137)

Oliver’s phrasing here suggests an indifference towards Chips’ pornography, but he goes along with Chips’ ogling anyway. In order to win the acceptance and respect of Chips, who Oliver envisions as the ideal of adolescent masculinity, Oliver passively participates in the active objectification of women. His comments both result from and contribute to a culture that considers women little more than exotic objects of sexual desire. Philosopher Simone de Beauvoir refers to this phenomenon as “Othering,” in which women are viewed only as that which is not male. This state of being subjects women to being viewed only through the lens of men, de Beauvoir states, wherein women are only valued for their worth as sexual objects (de Beauvoir 143 & 186). In this instance, Oliver, by going along with Chips’ lewd behavior, continues a sexist cultural tradition wherein men view women only for their sex appeal. In this mindset, women become reduced to sex objects, existing only for male gratification. The viewpoint robs women of the opportunity to be anything more than sex objects for men, denying them the ability to give or receive a fulfilling emotional relationship. The behavior is learned, of course; pervasive ideas about sex and gender, repeated over time, become considered established fact (Butler 522). But young people, particularly young men, continue to be socialized to accept antiquated gender roles. Chips’s advice perpetuates these sexist attitudes, strongly impacting Oliver’s socialization regarding gender and sex.

The effects of Oliver’s sexist socialization appear in several of his personal relationships. Most notably, Oliver acts jealous, controlling, and haughty both during and after his relationship with Jordana. In the early days of their relationship, Oliver seems steadfastly focused on having sex with Jordana, even going so far as to push the issue even after she initially denies him twice (Dunthorne 86). This aligns with the long historical tradition that the man should instigate sex, and the woman should submit to his will without question (McCormick & Jesser 80). But, after they sleep together, and Jordana discovers her mother has cancer, Oliver grows indifferent, distant toward her until she eventually leaves him. Yet Oliver will not accept this. He continues to pursue Jordan, even long after she has clearly told him to leave her alone. Oliver acts as if he owns Jordana, and acts appalled when she rebuffs him in the park: “Go away!” she yells at him for the third time, and he thinks, “I don’t have to say I’m sorry because she was the one who cheated on me and she was the one who dumped me” (Dunthorne 292). To Oliver, Jordana is the one in the wrong for leaving him, not himself for continuing to harass her even after she clearly expressed her discomfort. He views her as something to be owned, a piece of property he has lost to a rival. De Beauvoir writes, “for the lover the act of love is conquest,” expressing that, for men, a woman is viewed as a victory to be won or a triumph to be claimed (De Beauvoir 375). Oliver, in believing he has lost Jordana and growing shocked and defensive when she rebuffs him of her own accord, perpetuates the sexist belief that a man can conquer and own a woman, and that she cannot possibly refuse him of her own choosing.

The casual sexism Oliver experiences in his adolescence also contributes to his disdain towards his

parents' marriage. After hearing his mother discuss Graham on the phone, Oliver immediately grows suspicious, suspecting his mother of infidelity, and, by extent, betraying and shaming his father. As his mother's relationship with Graham progresses, Oliver grows increasingly angry. He begins imagining his father rescuing his mother from Graham in various heroic, dramatic situations: ripping off his vest and stealing his mother away; kicking down the door of a church and fighting Graham; shouting, "If you ever put your tree-loving hands on my wife again, I'll massage your face with my fists" (Dunthorne 121, 186, & 230). In these moments, it is clear Oliver has learned some of this behavior from media. The lines are obviously cliché, and the scenes he describes read like a 1920s silent film. Television and media programming has a strong impact on children, most of which includes passive, submissive women and aggressive, strong men (Romer 25-26). The consumption of gendered media in his early years has led Oliver to believe his father must assert his ownership over his wife and physically take action against Graham, his perceived rival. However, when his father does not, Oliver expresses frustration, even anger and disappointment, at his father. He vandalizes Graham's house himself and tries to orchestrate a confrontation between his mother and father. "What they need is a really good blowout," Oliver decides, acting out in his usual fashion in order to spark his father's temper (Dunthorne 242). Oliver's father, however, still does not express the anger Oliver believes the situation warrants. Oliver seems almost stunned; after all, he has been socialized by the media he has consumed and the friends he has made that a man must fight for his respect and his property, both of which Oliver's mother has damaged. Oliver falls into Pleck's model of gender identity development here, as he, still stuck in the second stage of development, attempts to try and force others to conform to the gender norms he has learned (Davidson & Gordon 15). To Oliver, the only correct "manly" response to his mother's infidelity is violence and anger, as he has been socialized to believe that real men solve their problems with aggression and do not tolerate their women evading their authority. Even outside of his own personal relationships, Oliver still exhibits a need to enforce proper gender roles. He cannot come to terms with the fact that his father does not act as a man "should" act, and so, in Oliver's mind, he must not be a "real" man.

The problem with *Submarine*, despite what this essay might at first glance suggest, is not with Oliver Tate himself. It isn't even the sexist socialization Oliver experienced, though they are certainly nothing to be lauded. Rather, it is author Joe Dunthorne's handling of Oliver's sexism that makes *Submarine* such a problematic novel. Dunthorne makes a joke of Oliver's latent misogyny, playing lines like "treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen" for laughs. He instills the novel, even during the most startling instances of Oliver's sexist attitudes, with a lighthearted tone that suggests Oliver's actions should not be taken seriously. Oliver is written as an intentionally ridiculous character, yes; but, by invoking a silent laugh-track behind Oliver's absurd and sexist behavior, Dunthorne downplays the seriousness of sexism and normalizes Oliver's damaging behavior. The audience is, perhaps, meant to laugh at Oliver's sexism rather than with it; but, in doing so, Dunthorne and the audience trivialize an issue that negatively impacts young girls throughout society. Dunthorne employs the literary version of shrugging one's shoulders and saying, "Well, boys will be boys." By writing Oliver's sexism off a joke, a funny bit of boyish humor, Dunthorne marginalizes the issue of the casual misogyny that children learn and perpetuate. Oliver never sees the error of his ways. Dunthorne takes the audience merrily along through Oliver's bumbling adolescence, stopping to laugh at the universal awkwardness experienced in high school like entering your first relationship; discovering your parents are people; and refusing to respect your girlfriend's feelings, forcing her to come to the beach in the middle of the day, and continuing to pursue her even after she has expressly told you to leave her alone.

But, sadly, even this *is* a relatable experience. By shrugging off Oliver's behavior, by playing it as a joke, Dunthorne reinforces the idea that such behavior is acceptable. In this manner, young men are taught to

think that a woman who turns him down doesn't mean it, and young women are told that, if they must go out at night, it is safest to do so in large numbers. Dunthorne uses Oliver's sexism as the punchline of a joke, but the only people really getting hit are the generations of young people to come who will, like Oliver, be socialized by their media and their peers to think that such behavior is acceptable. And, frankly, until artists begin realizing the ways their own underlying socialization about gender and sexuality impacts their work, and how these themes might impact the larger cultural narrative as a whole, such behavior *is* acceptable. And it will continue to be, until we as individuals and as a society begin taking responsibility for our own roles in the grand schema of large-scale interpersonal relationships.

Submarine presents a tale of adolescence, that, though perhaps exaggerated, rings with a significant amount of accuracy. Oliver acts up and acts out, trying to assert his masculinity in his relationship with Jordana and attempting to impose upon his father the socially "correct" attitudes of manhood. As gender, most sociologists agree, is a learned concept, taught to children in their early years by their parents, their peers, and their media, it comes as no surprise that Chips' misogynistic attitudes have rubbed off on Oliver and contributed to his outdated notions regarding sexuality, gender, and power. Oliver perpetuates gender roles and sexist attitudes due to the culture in which he was brought up, attitudes which, in his youthful ignorance, he tries desperately to apply to a modern world. The attitudes Oliver expresses, though toxic, only become a real problem since Dunthorne treats his casual sexism as a joke. Though Oliver is understood to be an absurd character, Dunthorne, by having the audience laugh at his sexism rather than critically engage with the way young men—of whom Oliver, in his treatment of women, is no outlier—think and speak about women, perpetuates a passive sexism that is permitted to continue because our society, as a whole, is unwilling to engage with the insidious vestiges of "the way it's always been." Since Oliver learns almost nothing from his harmful behavior, Dunthorne, in effect, shrugs off Oliver's most deplorable attitudes, giving a generation of young boys a pass on their reprehensible behavior by allowing it go by unquestioned. In this manner, Oliver is very much the average teenage boy: he may treat women as he likes, and nobody will say anything about it.

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