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English 112-44

Process Essay #1

Masculinity: Important Yet Disrespected

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, men are 3.7 times more likely than women to commit suicide, and yet they are often branded with blanket labels such as “privileged” or “oppressors;” it is obvious that something does not square up with that assessment. “The Men We Carry in Our Minds” is an essay by Scott Russell Sanders that speaks about how the concept of men has been perverted in the public eye to portray them as “privileged,” when there are many men who work hard for very little. “Those Winter Sundays,” a poem by Robert Hayden, details how hard the father works for his family, despite how thankless they are. The poem has a reflective or even a remorseful tone to it. Both works speak about fatherhood and the male experience. Sanders’s essay helps to expand upon Hayden’s poem through its discussion of the pressure men face, the work they are required to do, and the lack of appreciation they receive for their efforts.

Sanders’s argument about the nature of the masculine drive helps us realize why the father from “Those Winter Sundays” chooses to let his family sleep until the house is warm instead of waking them to help him in his labors. Speaking about the people he knew from back home, Sanders says, “Like menfolk, [the wives and daughters] fretted, they skimped and made do. But when the pay stopped coming in, they were not the ones who had failed. Nor did they have to go to war” (Sanders 29). He explains how there are different pressures on men than there are on women. The example given highlights a man’s drive to provide, his sense of duty to his

wife and children, and how when he gets laid off, he is stricken with guilt and he feels like a failure. In Hayden's poem, the narrator tells the audience about how the father worked alone for the sake of his family's comfort in the morning: "I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking. / When the rooms were warm, he'd call" (Hayden, Lines 6-7). The father does not call for his family to get up and help him, nor does he even wake them up until the house has been heated. He shirks his own discomfort and instead does what he needs to do for the well-being of his family. While many bitter people could dismiss this as merely a false sense of "machismo" or as the father's way of having some kind of leverage over the other members of the family, such points become hard to maintain after reading "The Men We Carry on Our Minds." Sanders's correct evaluation of the innate drive of men helps the reader to understand that the father's actions aren't out of pride, but rather out of selflessness and love.

Sanders's point about the more unenviable parts of manhood helps to further the reader's understanding of what exactly the father in "Those Winter Sundays" is willingly taking on and why. When confronted with the notion that men benefit from "privilege," Sanders thought of the men he knew all his life and how what he experienced and knew to be true could not substantiate the absurd claim being made to him: "What had [those men] stolen from their wives and daughters? The right to go five days a week, twelve months a year, for thirty or forty years to a steel mill or a coal mine? ... The right to feel every leak in the roof, every gap in the fence, every cough in the engine, as a wound they must mend? The right to feel, when the layoff comes or the plant shuts down, not only afraid but ashamed" (Sanders 29)? While Sanders is speaking about the men he knew while growing up, what he describes is a common experience for innumerable husbands and fathers around the world: men who set aside their own comforts to dutifully serve their families. Such deeds are neither acts of selfishness nor pride; rather, they are chivalrous

sacrifices made in love. The purpose of such sacrifices is not to restrict his wife and daughters, but rather to give them a freedom he cannot experience. He works to give them comforts and luxuries by giving up his own. In Hayden's poem, the narrator tells the audience about the grueling conditions the father endured for his family's comfort: "Sundays too my father got up early / and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold, / then with cracked hands that ached / from labor in the weekday weather made / banked fires blaze" (Hayden, Lines 1-5). Not only is the father getting up early to work on a Sunday, but he is also doing so "in the blueblack cold" with his hands still aching from the hard labor he had done all week; all of this to heat up the house so that his family could be spared the chill of Jack Frost's bite. He would wake up every morning and do what he needed to do for his family's comfort and safety. The father in the poem is just one example of a man embracing his role and seeking to provide for those he loves. The male instinct to provide for and give protection to his family extends even to the home itself. Fathers will feel every task of household maintenance "as a wound they must mend." Some will try to say this is an example of "fragile masculinity" and that these men are merely "overcompensating," but that does not make much sense. Would one say that a mother who soothes her son after he gets badly hurt is "overcompensating?" Of course not! She is properly fulfilling her role as a mother by empathizing with him. Whether it be fixing the family car in the hot summer sun or waking up in the predawn cold to warm the house, such acts of selfless service are examples of a father properly filling his role because of the love he holds for his family.

Sanders's point about the nonsensical envy of men shows that the thanklessness described in "Those Winter Sundays" is an expression of an all-too-common cultural occurrence. Sanders recalls when he went to college and was confronted by young women, whose fathers had

cushy well-paying jobs, who were complaining about the so-called “privileges” of manhood: “I was baffled when the women at college accused me and my sex of having cornered the world’s pleasures. ... When the women I met at college thought about the joys and privileges of men, they did not carry in their minds the sort of men I had known in my childhood. They thought of their fathers” (Sanders 30). There are plenty of men who hold cushy jobs, though it should be said that such men have their own fair share of stresses and strains that they willingly undergo to support their families. While the toils and sacrifices of white-collar men are often less backbreaking than those of blue-collar men, their struggles often go entirely unrecognized because they are far less obvious. Those women, who think men have some sort of kind of mystical “privilege,” only see the upsides to being a man and, either wittingly or unwittingly, they neglect to recognize the drawbacks. When one only sees the positive aspects of something, it does not take long for scorn and jealousy to rear their ugly heads. In Hayden’s poem, he minces no words about the hard work the father does and the lack of appreciation he receives from his family: “No one ever thanked him. ... Speaking indifferently to him, / who had driven out the cold / and polished my good shoes as well” (Hayden, Lines 5 & 10-12). The narrator of the poem admits to treating the father rudely, despite all the things he does for those who live in under his roof. Not only did the father drive “out the cold” after working all week, but he also took the time to polish their shoes. To make matters worse, the narrator is not the only one who treats the father this way; it is admitted that “no one ever thanked him.” Neither the mother nor the siblings of the narrator showed any gratitude for everything the father had done for them. In short, everyone in that house took the father’s toils for granted. Sanders makes the point that those spiteful daughters of wealthy fathers believe they are being held back by some nebulous “patriarchy” because they did not know the same kinds of men that he did while growing up: the

men that toil day in and day out, wracking their bodies from the strains of manual labor or the men who signed up to risk their lives for their nation and fellow countrymen. While this may contribute to their venomous vitriol, this does not explain the situation presented in “Those Winter Sundays.” By Sanders’s logic, the family in that poem should have been showing at least some speck of respect for the father, but his works remained unappreciated. This would indicate that such disregard for the efforts and sacrifices of fathers is not a matter of socio-economic status, but rather it appears to be a ubiquitous phenomenon. No father, neither rich nor poor, is safe from receiving the frigid cold shoulder from the family for whom he toils endlessly.

Sanders’s essay provides excellent periphery information regarding the stresses men are under, the hard work they are expected to do, and the lack of thanks they receive for it, allowing a reader to understand the message of Hayden’s poem regarding the harsh reality of fatherhood. In a culture that tells men to resist their natural role, chastising them with phrases like “toxic masculinity,” it’s no surprise that such a message would ring out like an alarm bell to those willing to listen. Academia and other such cultural influences insist that the natural masculine drive experienced by boys is something to be repressed or even killed entirely for the “betterment” of society. This will have the opposite effect; one need only look to a stable to understand why. A stallion is a powerful and majestic creature, though very difficult to control; he is “born to be wild” as the saying goes. However, some feel uneasy with the thought of not having control over something so potent and powerful, and thus they seek to subdue it. A gelding, a neutered male horse, is easy to lead by the nose, and he’ll do as he is told; however, he can’t create a foal with a mare. When turning a noble stallion into a lowly gelding, he is stripped of the very strength that made him so formidable in the first place. It is the same way with men; especially, young men. Boys will naturally want to grow up into brave, strong, heroic men, but,

all too often, the culture catches these boys and beats them with the notion that such traditionally masculine desires are “toxic” until they are mentally and spiritually neutered. While this attack on masculinity certainly harms men, women also suffer. Both sexes have been sold the lie that a gentleman is a male who should be repentant for the sin of being born as such. By confounding weakness with gentlemanliness in this way, men have been given an unhealthy standard to strive for and women have been led to seek unhealthy relationships. However, when properly understood, a true gentleman is a man who will do deeds for a lady – not to feel superior but rather to show her how much she means to him. Which man would make a better son, husband, and father: A man who will not hold the door for a lady out of fear of being called a chauvinist or a man who will wake up early on a frigid Sunday morning to warm the house for his family?

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