

So it is not surprising that we are currently witnessing a renewed interest in femininity and an unabashed indulgence in feminine pursuits. Femininity serves to reassure men that women need them and care about them even when they are indulging in the decorative and the frivolous into its dote to the ur

to smooth over the fissures of conflict, femininity operates as a system of niceness, a code of thoughtfulness and sensitivity that in modern society is sadly in short supply.

EXPLORING IDEAS

1. Brownmiller says the little game of "setting the table" was "alive with meaning." Try to think of a ritual in your own family that was, or is, "alive with meaning." Describe it in such a way that you clarify that meaning.
2. Brownmiller identifies the knife and fork with men and the spoon with women. Think of some other common objects that might be used to distinguish men and women. Write a comic (or serious) comparison-contrast essay in which you clarify this difference.
3. Brownmiller says that lessons in the art of being feminine surrounded her. Brainstorm for an essay in which you discuss the books, games, television shows, and so forth that defined the difference between masculine and feminine for you when you were a child.
4. Why does Brownmiller call femininity an "esthetic"? How is femininity like that branch of philosophy that is concerned with what art is and how it is judged?
5. Brainstorm for an essay in which you discuss the basic irony of what Brownmiller calls femininity's competitive edge.
6. Brainstorm for an essay in which you agree or disagree with the following statement: "... conferring an extra portion of unearned gender distinction on men, an unchallenged space in which to breathe freely and feel stronger, wiser, more competent, is femininity's special gift."
7. Brownmiller says that unprecedented numbers of men are abandoning their sexual interest in women. Why does she say this? What support does she give for the statement? If this is true, what might be the cause?
8. Why does Brownmiller say there is "a renewed interest in femininity and an unabashed indulgence in feminine pursuits"?

EXPLORING RHETORIC

1. Discuss the effectiveness of Brownmiller's use of each of the following metaphors: "a challenge thrown down to the female sex"; "alternately feeding or being fed"; "the pinball machine had registered 'tilt'"; "she

walked in limbo"; "small bundle of resentments I carried around"; "place the mark on my own forehead."

2. Write a brief essay in which you develop Brownmiller's metaphor that although femininity hurries forward, it "trips on the ruffled petticoats and hoop-skirts of an era gone by."

3. Discuss Brownmiller's metaphor of the "rhapsodic symphony" and being "in the orchestra." What is the difference between the two? What is the difference between the two? What is the difference between the two?

4. Analyze Brownmiller's style: concrete, detailed, abstract, general, etc. How does her diction and sentence structure in this paragraph to support your analysis.

5. Discuss the logic of Brownmiller's argument about the difference between how masculinity and femininity please in paragraph 9.

6. How does Brownmiller know that a sociological fact of the 1980s is that female competition for men and jobs is especially fierce? How can you argue against this statement?

7. What is Brownmiller's point in the following sentence: "In its mandate to avoid direct confrontation and to smooth over the fissures of conflict, femininity operates as a value system of niceness, a code of thoughtfulness and sensitivity that in modern society is sadly in short supply"? Is she arguing for the values of femininity or against them?

Being a Man

PAUL THEROUX

Paul Theroux, born in 1941 in Medford, Massachusetts, was educated at the University of Maine, the University of Massachusetts, and Syracuse University. He spent ten years in the Peace Corps in Asia and Africa. A novelist, travel writer, poet, and essayist, his books include *The Great Railway Bazaar*, 1975; *The Old Patagonian Express*, 1979; *The Mosquito Coast*, 1982; *Riding the Iron Rooster*, 1988; and *Sunrise with Seamonsters: Travels and Discoveries, 1964-1984*, 1985, from which the following essay is taken.

In this blunt and unrelenting exposition on what it means to be masculine, Paul Theroux has nothing good to say about "manliness," the pursuit of which he calls "right-wing, puritanical, cowardly, neurotic and fueled largely by fear of women."

There is a pathetic sentence in the chapter "Fetishism" in Dr. Norman Cameron's book *Personality Development and Psychopathology*. It goes, "Fetishists are nearly always men; and their commonest fetish is a woman's shoe." I cannot read that sentence without thinking that it is

just one more awful thing about being a man—and perhaps it is an important thing to know about us.

I have always disliked being a man. The whole idea of manhood in America is pitiful, in my opinion. This version of masculinity is a little like having to wear an ill-fitting coat for one's entire life (by contrast, I imagine femininity to be an oppressive sense of nakedness). Even the expression "Be a man!" strikes me as insulting and abusive. It means: Be stupid, be unfeeling, obedient, soldierly and stop thinking. Man means "manly"—how can one think about men without considering the terrible ambition of manliness? And yet it is part of every man's life. It is a hideous and crippling lie; it not only insists on difference and connives at superiority, it is also by its very nature destructive—emotionally damaging and socially harmful.

The youth who is subverted, as most are, into believing in the masculine ideal is effectively separated from women and he spends the rest of his life finding women a riddle and a nuisance. Of course, there is a female version of this male affliction. It begins with mothers encouraging little girls to say (to other adults) "Do you like my new dress?" In a sense, little girls are traditionally urged to please adults with a kind of coquettishness, while boys are enjoined to behave like monkeys towards each other. The nine-year-old coquette proceeds to become womanish in a subtle power game in which she learns to be sexually indispensable, socially decorative and always alert to a man's sense of inadequacy.

Femininity—being lady-like—implies needing a man as witness and seducer; but masculinity celebrates the exclusive company of men. That is why it is so grotesque; and that is also why there is no manliness without inadequacy—because it denies men the natural friendship of women.

It is very hard to imagine any concept of manliness that does not belittle women, and it begins very early. At an age when I wanted to meet girls—let's say the treacherous years of thirteen to sixteen—I was told to take up a sport, get more fresh air, join the Boy Scouts, and I was urged not to read so much. It was the 1950s and if you asked too many questions about sex you were sent to camp—boy's camp, of course: the nightmare. Nothing is more unnatural or prison-like than a boy's camp, but if it were not for them we would have no Elks' Lodges, no pool rooms, no boxing matches, no Marines.

And perhaps no sports as we know them. Everyone is aware of how few in number are the athletes who behave like gentlemen. Just as high school basketball teaches you how to be a poor loser, the manly attitude towards sports seems to be little more than a recipe for creating bad marriages, social misfits, moral degenerates, sadists, latent rapists and just plain louts. I regard high school sports as a drug far worse than marijuana, and it is the reason that the average tennis champion, say, is a pathetic oaf.

Any objective study would find the quest for manliness essentially right-wing, puritanical, cowardly, neurotic and fueled largely by a fear of women. It is also certainly philistine. There is no book-hater like a Little League coach. But indeed all the creative arts are obnoxious to the manly ideal, because at their best the arts are pursued by uncompetitive and essentially solitary people. It makes it very hard for a creative youngster, for any boy who expresses the desire to be alone seems to be saying that there is something wrong with him.

It ought to be clear by now that I have something of an objection to the way we turn boys into men. It does not surprise me that when the President of the United States [Ronald Reagan] has his customary weekend off he dresses like a cowboy—it is both a measure of his insecurity and his willingness to please. In many ways, American culture does little more for a man than prepare him for modeling clothes in the L. L. Bean catalogue. I take this as a personal insult because for many years I found it impossible to admit to myself that I wanted to be a writer. It was my guilty secret, because being a writer was incompatible with being a man.

There are people who might deny this, but that is because the American writer, typically, has been so at pains to prove his manliness that we have come to see literariness and manliness as mingled qualities. But first there was a fear that writing was not a manly profession—indeed, not a profession at all. (The paradox in American letters is that it has always been easier for a woman to write and for a man to be published.) Growing up, I had thought of sports as wasteful and humiliating, and the idea of manliness was a bore. My wanting to become a writer was not a flight from that oppressive role-playing, but I quickly saw that it was at odds with it. Everything in stereotyped manliness goes against the life of the mind. The Hemingway personality is too tedious to go into here, and in any case his exertions are well-known, but certainly it was not until this aberrant behavior was examined by feminists in the 1960s that any male writer dared question the pugnacity in Hemingway's fiction. All the bullfighting and arm wrestling and elephant shooting diminished Hemingway as a writer, but it is consistent with a prevailing attitude in American writing: one cannot be a male writer without first proving that one is a man.

It is normal in America for a man to be dismissive or even somewhat apologetic about being a writer. Various factors make it easier. There is a heartiness about journalism that makes it acceptable—journalism is the manliest form of American writing and, therefore, the profession the most independent-minded women seek (yes, it is an illusion, but that is my point). Fiction-writing is equated with a kind of dispirited failure and is only manly when it produces wealth—money is masculinity. So is drinking. Being a drunkard is another assertion, if misplaced, of manliness. The American male writer is traditionally proud of his heavy

drinking. But we are also a very literal-minded people. A man proves his manhood in America in old-fashioned ways. He kills lions, like Hemingway; or he hunts ducks, like Nathanael West; or he makes pronouncements like, "A man should carry enough knife to defend himself with," as James Jones once said to a *Life* interviewer. Or he says he can drink you under the table. But even tiny drunken William Faulkner loved to mount a horse and go fox hunting, and Jack Kerouac roistered up and down Manhattan in a lumberjack shirt (and spent every night of *The Subterraneans* with his mother in Queens). And we are familiar with the lengths to which Norman Mailer is prepared, in his endearing way, to prove that he is just as much a monster as the next man.

11 When the novelist John Irving was revealed as a wrestler, people took him to be a very serious writer; and even a bubble reputation like Eric (*Love Story*) Segal's was enhanced by the news that he ran the marathon in a respectable time. How surprised we would be if Joyce Carol Oates were revealed as a sumo wrestler or Joan Didion active in pumping iron. "Lives in New York City with her three children" is the typical woman writer's biographical note, for just as the male writer must prove he has achieved a sort of muscular manhood, the woman writer—or rather her publicists—must prove her motherhood.

12 There would be no point in saying any of this if it were not generally accepted that to be a man is somehow—even now in feminist-influenced America—a privilege. It is on the contrary an unmerciful and punishing burden. Being a man is bad enough; being manly is appalling (in this sense, women's lib has done much more for men than for women). It is the sinister silliness of men's fashions, and a clubby attitude in the arts. It is the subversion of good students. It is the so-called "Dress Code" of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Boston, and it is the institutionalized cheating in college sports. It is the most primitive insecurity.

13 And this is also why men often object to feminism but are afraid to explain why: of course women have a justified grievance, but most men believe—and with reason—that their lives are just as bad.

EXPLORING IDEAS

1. Write an essay in which you refute Theroux's claim that the expression "Be a man" means: "Be stupid, be unfeeling, obedient, soldierly and stop thinking."
2. Why does Theroux call "manliness" a "terrible ambition" and a "hideous and crippling lie"? Is this language a bit extreme, or is Theroux justified? Discuss your answer.
3. Do men generally think that women are a "riddle" and a "nuisance"? Brainstorm the causes and manifestations of such an attitude. Brainstorm examples from your own experience, as well as from books, films, television, and other examples of popular culture.

4. Write an essay in which you explain why it is difficult for men and women to be friends with each other. Is this difficulty all the fault of men, or are women partly to blame?

5. Use the following sentence as the thesis statement of an essay: "Nothing is more unnatural or prison-like than a boy's camp, but if it were not for them we would have no Elks' Lodges, no pool rooms, no boxing matches, no Marines."

6. Theroux says it is hard to imagine any concept of manliness that does not belittle women. This statement sounds extreme. Can you argue against it?

7. Brainstorm for an essay in which you disagree with Theroux's assessment of high school sports as a drug worse than marijuana. Is it possible to write an essay that supports sports without sounding corny and using clichés?

8. Write an essay in which you agree or disagree with Theroux's statement that the creative arts are "obnoxious to the manly ideal." Read Amy Gross's essay on the appeal of the androgynous man (the previous selection in this book) for a discussion of this issue.

9. Why is writing not considered a masculine activity in America?

10. Brainstorm why being a man in America is a burden or a privilege. Write an essay in which you suggest that it is both.

EXPLORING RHETORIC

1. Discuss the example Theroux uses to open his essay. Do you think he is serious when he says that the shoe fetishist adds to his list of how awful it is to be a man, or do you think he chose the example for its rhetorical effect? How can you determine which reason is true?
2. Discuss the effectiveness of Theroux's metaphor of masculinity as being like wearing an ill-fitting coat and of femininity as an oppressive sense of nakedness. Write an essay contrasting the implications of the two metaphors.
3. Why does Theroux say he was urged not to read so much during the "treacherous years" of thirteen to sixteen? Why are these years called "dangerous"?
4. Is Theroux engaging in extreme shock statements when he says that athletes are not gentlemen, basketball teaches how to be a poor loser, and the average tennis champion is a pathetic oaf? Is he stereotyping, or is there enough truth in these statements to make them believable?
5. Comment on the following statement: "Any objective study would find the quest for manliness essentially right-wing, puritanical, cowardly, neurotic and fueled largely by a fear of women." Can this opinion be supported? How does Theroux know that any objective study would find this to be true?
6. How do you respond to Theroux's statement that when he was growing up, he found sports wasteful and humiliating and the idea of manliness a bore? What image of his childhood does he create? How does this image affect his argument or the reader's response to it?
7. What does Theroux mean by the parenthetical statement ("yes, it is an illusion, but that is my point")?