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Yellowstone and Hegemonic Masculinity- John and Beth Dutton

Introduction/Program Information

It seems that Western films and television have been on the backburner for some time now. We think of the classic stars like John Wayne and young Clint Eastwood, however, as of recent these shows have begun to make an appearance once again with a new generation of viewership. One of these shows is “Yellowstone” starring Kevin Costner. Costner’s character, John Dutton, is a rancher in the state of Montana.

However, he is no ordinary rancher. He is the owner of the largest ranch in the United States and that attracts the attention of many. Rotten Tomatoes describes this interaction as “He operates in a corrupt world where politicians are compromised by influential oil and lumber corporations and land grabs make developers billions.”

He can not do this on his own, however. He uses the labor of his ranchers and the smarts of his children, Kayce, Beth and Jamie to do some of his dirty work. With the shifting climate that is Montana he must do what he can to save his ranch from the influx of people moving to Montana and the development that ensues.

The show involves many different day to day activities. One part of the show you must understand the operations of the ranch. The ranch has workers that live on the ranch full time and carry out many of the duties that John once did himself. There are people that are just ranch hands, that may stay and go as they please as they are just using the ranch as a job. On the other hand, there are individuals that work on the ranch that are “branded”. Once you are branded with the Yellowstone brand you are not free to leave as you choose, you are now a part of the ranch.

These people often come from troubled backgrounds and John takes them in and shows them purpose in life. These people that are branded are there not only to work the ranch, but are also around to do John's dirty work behind the scenes (Betts, 2020).

The other aspect of the show that you must understand is the political and business aspect. These duties are mostly done by John's children, who are educated at a much higher level than the ranch workers. Jamie is a lawyer and handles much of the political and legal interactions. Beth is a business woman that works in Salt Lake City, but comes home when the ranch needs her the most. The ranch is a space that new land developers are trying to get their hands on. They also have a Native American Reservation that borders the ranch. The show shows the interaction between the new Chief on the Reservation and his want to take back that land that he sees as rightfully his. John is also the Livestock Commissioner of the State of Montana and has a very close relationship with the Governor of Montana. The fact that John is so caught up in so many different aspects of the state of Montana, ranching, politics and business, makes him wear many different hats at different times, and they often times get intermingled with each other, sometimes causing a conflict of interests between his private life, his business life and his political role as the Livestock Commissioner. In many ways John Dutton is the man in charge of many different people and many different things, which makes the show able to speak to many different audiences at the same time.

One person that John relies on heavily is his only daughter, Beth. With the work that these two do on a daily basis it will be looking at how both John and Beth have traits of Hegemonic Masculinity. I will analyze to see if the two of them better the plot and story with these traits, along with looking at how both of them are written to maintain the status quo. I will

also discuss how Beth differs from John and if it is a good thing that she is developing these characteristics as a woman, rather than looking at this lens from the bird's eye view of a male.

Lens/Description of Approach

Hegemonic Masculinity has been used by media and gender scholars for years. The intent of the lens is to show how dominant social positions are represented and characterized, typically from a strong male role model that viewers are supposed to look up to and see as a higher power of sorts. The intent is also to emphasize toughness and competitiveness, along with marginalizing women and non-straight men (Trujillo, 1991). When looking at hegemonic masculinity one must look at it from 5 criteria. These criteria are (1) physical force and control, (2), Occupational Achievement, (3) Familial patriarchy, (4) Frontiersmanship and (5) Heterosexuality.

The first criteria of hegemonic masculinity is physical force and control. According to Trujillo (1991) “force and competence are translations into the language of the body of the social relation which define men as holders of power, women as subordinate and this is one of the main ways in which the superiority of men becomes ‘naturalized.’” Here we can look and see the physical power of a male when it comes to anything that could be deemed physical in nature. This could be speed, toughness and it winds up looking like dominance of the situation that the male is in.

The second criteria of hegemonic masculinity is Occupational Achievement. According to Trujillo (1991) “the social definition of tasks as either ‘men’s work’ or ‘women’s work’ and the definition of some kinds of work as more masculine than others.” Here we look at what an individual has done professionally to make themselves look powerful. This could be physical, but does not have to be. In this category we often talk about money being made and the power

and influence that an individual has over a group of people. It is also easy to look into stereotypes of what a man should be doing for work and what a woman should be doing for work.

The third criteria of hegemonic masculinity is familial patriarchy. According to Trujillo (1991) “masculinity is also hegemonic as patriarchy– ‘the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general.’” This will often fit under the stereotype that in a traditional family the man will be the breadwinner and the woman will stay home and take care of the children. The man also takes the role as the final decision maker, no matter what the opinion of the rest of the family might be. This also creates the role of the man to be a protector of the family, while the women are just “housewives.”

The forth criteria of hegemonic masculinity is Frontiersmanship. According to Trujillo (1991) “masculinity is hegemonic as symbolized by the daring, romantic frontiersman of yesteryear and of the present-day outdoorsman” and elaborates to say “the cowboy is a white male with working class values.” This does not mean that the male has to be a cowboy in an old western movie, but it does mean that the individual has to be powerful and on top of something new. For example, this could be seen in modern day with an individual that has come out with a new technology that someone has not been able to get done before.

The fifth and final criteria of hegemonic masculinity is Heterosexuality. According to Trujillo (1991) “masculinity is hegemonic when hetersecually defined... refers to the ‘sec hierarchy’ and predictably, the type of sexuality that riles is ‘good’, ‘normal’ and ‘natural.’” You can see the representation of what heterosexuality means to some. A straight man may not be a “sissy” like others that do not identify as being straight.

Analysis/Interpretation

Analysis: Physical force and control

To analyze Beth and John Dutton we must remember what Trujillo (1991) says about physical force and control. He proclaims “force and competence are translations into the language of the body of the social relation which define men as holders of power, women as subordinate and this is one of the main ways in which the superiority of men becomes ‘naturalized.’”

First, when we look at John this is easy to understand and analyze. He is in fact a holder of power. He holds power of the largest ranch in the United States, he has power over his ranch employees and his children, and he also has power over his bureaucrats and agents at the Livestock Commission (Western-Series Fandom). It is interesting to look at his work and it is mostly in a male dominated workforce. He is a powerful figure on this right, but mostly he is bossing around male subordinates, on the ranch or in the office. He is also battling an illness which makes him seem weaker, yet he will still handle physical business if need be.

Beth is very interested in this lens. Beth does show physical force and control. First off, she doesn't care about the language that she uses and what setting it may be in, and will stand up to anyone that is in the way of her goals. On multiple occasions she has dropped what she is doing to help with the day-to-day physical operations of the ranch, even though that is not her role. The most jurassic showing of physical force is when she is being robbed and raped. The criminals expected her to take the horrific act, but in turn she was able to physically fight them off and harm them.

Analysis: Occupational achievement

To analyze Beth and John Dutton we must remember what Trujillo (1991) says about Occupational achievement. He says “the social definition of tasks as either ‘men’s work’ or ‘women’s work’ and the definition of some kinds of work as more masculine than others.”

John does engage in so-called “men’s work.” First and foremost, he is the owner of a ranch. When we look at what they do on the ranch day-to-day it is all “men’s work” as it involves physical labor. He also holds a political office. Traditionally, we would think that a man would hold a public office, as all our presidents have been male and many of other possessions in government are held by men.

Beth also engages in so-called “men’s work.” As stated above, she has had times where she does engage in physical labor on the ranch working with the ranch hands, one being her husband, Rip. The thing that stands out the most is her position in business. She works in Salt Lake City before she comes home, and many of the men in her company would call her into meetings in order to close deals. She was the number two in her company and was much younger than the number one. She also engages in business endeavors to ensure the safety of the ranch. She is successful in making sure that no one takes the Dutton’s land.

Analysis: Familial patriarchy

To analyze Beth and John Dutton we must remember what Trujillo (1991) says about Familial patriarchy. He explains “masculinity is also hegemonic as patriarchy– ‘the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general.’” For John this is very hard to judge when it comes to his wife, as she died when the kids were young, leaving it to John to raise the kids by himself. On the other hand, he does engage in a dominance over his children. He

gave them the opportunity to leave the ranch and obtain a better education, yet when he needs them, he calls upon them and makes them do the dirty work that he does not want to do.

Beth is also very interesting to look at from this lens. She is unable to have children biologically in the show, therefore for most of the start of the show she doesn't show interest in starting a family with her long love, Rip Wheeler. However, her mind changes and eventually does marry Rip in later seasons. They have the understanding that they will not have kids, but one day Beth brings home a homeless child. His father had just passed away from an overdose and she brought him in. Rip doesn't want the child around, but Beth makes the final choice to let the child stay, making her the final decision maker over the household.

Analysis: Frontiersmanship

To analyze Beth and John Dutton we must remember what Trujillo (1991) says about Frontiersmanship. He proclaims “masculinity is hegemonic as symbolized by the daring, romantic frontiersman of yesteryear and of the present-day outdoorsman” and elaborates to say “the cowboy is a white male with working class values.” This is very easy to analyze because both Beth and John literally live on a ranch out westward and engage in “cowboy activities.” They are both white, with very working class values of hard work, the only difference is that Beth is a woman, rather than the typical man role like John.

Analysis: Heterosexuality.

To analyze Beth and John Dutton we must remember what Trujillo (1991) says about Heterosexuality. He says “masculinity is hegemonic when heterosexually defined... refers to the ‘sec hierarchy’ and predictably, the type of sexuality that rules is ‘good’, ‘normal’ and ‘natural.’” Again this is also an easy analysis. John is straight and engages in a sexual relation with the Governor of Montana, who is a woman. Beth is also straight as she is married and engages in a

sexual relation with Rip. With both of them, and the rest of the characters in the show bring straight, it does seem to normalize and make it look natural.

Evaluation

The lens of Hegemonic Masculinity is perfect to look at the text “Yellowstone.” It makes us look at a very old school and traditional way of thinking about things and place it into a new place, where the genre is very old school, but also is changing and adapting to the times that we are living in today.

First, I will evaluate John Dutton with the ideas of Hegemonic Masculinity in mind. For the most part John Dutton does maintain the status quo when it comes to the portrayal of masculinity in media. However, this is not always in a positive light. He does hit all the points that we referred to, being (1) physical force and control, (2), Occupational Achievement, (3) Familial patriarchy, (4) Frontiersmanship and (5) Heterosexuality. As explained above, he does demonstrate all of these characteristics and traits. When watching the show you most likely will cheer for the Dutton family, however you might not always cheer for John. I think that he does maintain the status quo with his character, yet he also does show the shift in our society when it comes to these traits. When you are cheering against John Dutton he is still demonstrating these traits, and the fact that we can take a step forward and not always cheer for the masculine “savior” shows that maybe we are moving in the right direction.

The story of “Yellowstone” often revolves around John and his actions, but personally I think that the real story is in Beth Dutton. As we talked about above Beth does engage in (1) physical force and control, (2), Occupational Achievement, (3) Familial patriarchy, (4) Frontiersmanship and (5) Heterosexuality. However, this opens up a new conversation, is it a positive or a negative to have a woman possess these traits in media.

I think the best thing that we can do is break it down one section at a time for Beth.

(1) Physical force and control

I believe that when you show a woman with physical force and control it is a positive. Here we are making steps to show that women are not just these soft, stay at home wives, but they can really do anything that they put their minds to, here showing physical presents and control.

(2) Occupational Achievement

I believe that when you show a woman with Occupational Achievement it is positive. Again, this can be the proof that women can be successful, they are just stuck to a man, they are able to go out and do great things. They can change the world just as any other person can do.

(3) Familial patriarchy

I believe that when you show a woman with Familial patriarchy it is a positive. Again, it shows individual independence, as the woman wants to have a family, and also wants to be the head of the family. It yet again shows that a woman can be independent of a male figure in their life.

(4) Frontiersmanship

I believe that when you show a woman with Frontiersmanship it is a positive. Here we are hearing the same ideas. A woman shown as an independent innovator that is starting something new is also a positive. It also opens the door for new inclusion in Frontiersmanship. If a woman can do it, why does it just have to be a white male? It opens doors for others.

(5) Heterosexuality

I believe that when you show a woman with Heterosexuality it makes no difference. Here we do not see any more representation of the LGBTQ community and we maintain a status quo.

Overall, I believe that we see something interesting in this show. You see the old school way of thinking with John Dutton, along with the new way of life with Beth Dutton. The show “Yellowstone” does maintain some status quos, yet it also does good work to shift these status quos on their heads to show the empowerment of women, as the show looks to show that Beth can do anything John can do.

Conclusion

The show “Yellowstone” was perfect to analyze under the lens of hegemonic masculinity. We looked at the topics (1) physical force and control, (2), Occupational Achievement, (3) Familial patriarchy, (4) Frontiersmanship and (5) Heterosexuality and came to the conclusion that the show does both, maintain the status quo and challenge the status quo. I believe that in the future it would be interesting to look through this lens when looking at different father and daughter relationships in media to look and see if we are moving in the right direction by getting women involved in most significant roles.

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