The third wave of feminism in the late 2000s has illuminated the changing perceptions of masculinity and femininity based on social and cultural constructions of contemporary society. As a result, power structures are in flux with the myriad of representations. Scholars have emphasized that there is a crisis of masculinity with the rise of female emancipation from traditional roles. Gender role development will be the first focus of this essay, describing conflicting notions but then zeroing in on constructualist theory dominating over biological determinism. How we got to this third wave of feminism and what that means will follow, alongside the repercussions upon the representations of men. By using scholarly thought alongside cultural changes that are very much influenced by media messages, we will seek to understand what it means to be a man or woman in the 21st century.

The two main theories on gender role development are nature (chromosomal and hormonal) versus nurture (cultural influences and socialization). This debate has established important questions for researchers. Theories that have arisen include: cognitive development theory where a child’s thought process is active and imperative to their perception of gender; gender schematic processing theory where individuals reinforce their identity through learned and interpreted perceptions; and psychoanalytic theory which stems from Freudian theory of the Oedipus/Electra complex (Gauntlet 34-36). Sociologists have since attacked concepts of biological determinism because of much of its unscientific base (Macnamara 25).

Immanuel Kant is acknowledged for his biologically associated views on gender, claiming women to be ethically inferior, subject to hysteria and too emotional to hold positions of authority. Kant’s views seem unfathomable in today’s society, but for centuries biology caused the formation of strong gender roles. Men hunted because of their muscular strength; women stayed at home because of their reproductive capabilities. Men were rational and logical; women were emotional and empathetic (Macnamara 22). Alternatively, pro-feminist writer Bob
Connell wrote on gender, “Masculinities are neither programmed in our genes, nor fixed by social structure, prior to social interaction. They come into existence as people act. They are actively produced…” The shift from essentialist (biological) to constructualist has much to do with the late 20th century poststructuralist theory and many researchers have banded together that gender roles are open to negotiation (26).

Marxism also has a strong influence within the traditional belief system (patriarchy) because human power in history was viewed to be based upon productivity; the economic structures dictated whether a society would rise or fall. With men in a superordinate position, their duty was to ensure acceptable growth that women were considered incapable of controlling (Colin 10). Feminism wanted to subvert the patriarchal system because it meant 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” (12)

Feminism has not been a homogenous movement, rather as Guye Tuchman notes, there has been a shift from one set of stereotypes for another, and there is question whether genuine progress has been made about female identity (Ross 3, 32). The second wave of feminism in the late 20th century related to power and thinkers of the time rejected dated understandings of gender because much of it was far too simplistic and universal. The Marxist concept that men hold power over women was rejected by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida as noted, “Power is not possessed, given, seized, captured, relinquished or exchanged. Rather it is exercised. It exists only in actions.” This perspective also energized points of resistance for feminist activity ensuring productive change over time (Macnamara 34).

Foucault and Derrida both questioned psychoanalytic theory which had permeated much feminist thinking and literature. Mansbridge saw feminism as the “commitment to end male domination”, which wasn’t far from the truth given the circumstances (Macnamara 34). Laura
Mulvey may be one of the most famous thinkers in feminist film theory because of her application of psychoanalytic concepts and assumptions. Her focus was upon *scopophilia* (a voyeuristic theory including the “male gaze” and “narcissistic voyeurism”) John Berger described scopophilia as, “Men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at.” The active male versus the passive female understanding of gender relations considered women as exhibitionists and men situating their phantasy onto the woman figure (Macnamara 37-39). Mulvey’s theory though, does not work today because our societal structure is more complex and less stereotyped (Gauntlet 90).

The 1950s were a low point for aspirational women, but the 1960s were sprinkled with seeds of change (Gauntlet 51). The “Cosmo-factor” is a term based on the release of *Cosmopolitan magazine* that empowered women to be confident, sexy and single (think *Sex and the City* women). More women at this time were going to college and often taking the pill ensuring control over their own destiny. The typical Cosmo article challenged popular men’s magazines like *Playboy* with articles titled *How to get a man into bed*. Sexual pleasure was now important for female power (Gauntlet 53-54). Macnamara so rightfully describes the third wave of feminism as accepting “sex-positive attitudes, the celebration of previously taboo areas such as sexual attractiveness, fashion and pro-capitalist ideologies; perhaps partly inspired by role models such as Madonna” (35).

Sexual confidence became synonymous with empowerment and the new femininity was far off from emulating victimization. Women began celebrating and emphasizing parts of their body that was noticeably not male (like cleavage) and chased their wildest desires. Ross cites, “It makes us feel as though we are all Tarzan now, or at least we are all pretending to be” (28-29). This was an outright rejection of tradition when:

> Women’s sexual subordination was institutionalized in the earliest law codes and enforced by the full power of the state. Women’s cooperation in the system
was secured by various means: force, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges bestowed upon conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and the artificially created division of women into respectable and not-respectable women.

Lerner 1986 (Colin 12)

This perception was something of a triumph for the media to proliferate the message for women to enter the “boys-club” to find their own power (Gauntlet 54). By analysing raunch culture (interest in strip clubs and pornography), Ross determined that the new gender identity for women was to buy into the myth/lie of sexual liberation (29). He says, “History twisted and crashed power with pornography to produce an emancipated woman.” The question is whether women appropriating the objectification of their own bodies – rather than men doing it – is actually empowering (30)? This may return to the fixation of biological determinism though by reducing women’s power to sexuality (as Tuchman indicated: a new type of stereotype) (Ross 4).

In film studies, Sharon Smith saw women almost always revolving in relation to men through physical attraction and mating games (Gauntlet 48). Has this changed?

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan drew on Freudian theory and argued that the phallus was a symbol and object of patriarchy (Ross 33). But the undermining and “control” of the phallic system with sexually free women has seemed to have created a crisis of masculinity. Before the mass media, the lure by “bad women” was seen as destructive to men. The ‘opposition of the virgin and the vamp’ and the temptation of sinful play was established long before women hijacked it for their own power. The three types of women were the party girl, the vamp, and the scheming beauty (gold-digging heart-breaker). The vamp in particular meant revenge for 1915 silent film actress Theda Bara. She declared, men “take everything from women – love, devotion, beauty, youth – and give nothing in return! V stands for vampire and it stands for Vengeance, too. The vampire that I play is the vengeance of my sex upon its exploiters.” Women at the time were either good or bad, with a thin line between prostitute or
not. Bara’s angst and sexuality was in contrast to the sweet and innocent actresses Mary Pickford and Lillian Gish (Kitch 57-60).

Hegemonic masculinity (like femininity) is a socially manufactured and constructed ideal that boys and men strive towards as standards (Moss 1-2). Historical archetypes serve as a point of reference for males to define and think of themselves such as the warrior (especially after WWII), the cowboy or the adventurer. Compensatory consumption is the process of using products post-emasculation to enhance a particular representation, such as the Harley Davidson motorcycle (Moss 4-5). Advertising directed at men, just like for women, plays on these insecurities. Permission is granted for men to care about their looks when advertising shows famous men like David Beckham concerned with stubble rash (Ross 19). Scholars explain that the masculinity crisis is due to men no longer seeing their place in the world as women were finding themselves in positions of authority and independence – women no longer were even in need of men for the biological action of reproduction (because of artificial insemination). This destabilization has resulted in looking to other men to determine success or failure. Men’s magazines use features on financial and social successes along with male celebrities in order to gauge their masculinity in comparison (Ross 14).

Hyper-masculinization is one of the key traits of this crisis, “hyping up the Neanderthal as a face-saving strategy to preserve the illusion of male superiority” (Ross 21). Masculinity group movements have been formed against the feminist movement including the Promise Keepers, the Mythopoetics, the Million Man March and Justice for Fathers. The Promise Keepers are a Christian Religious movement trying to revive “godly manhood” seeking patriarchy once again in the home, attempting to reverse the effects of the past 40 years. Ross says, “PK is overwhelmingly made up of ordinary men trying to figure out their place in a changing society, where work roles, family relations and personal identity are all in flux” (22-
The Mythopoetics are a group of predominately white men believing in their inner “wild man”. They claim that men are searching for their identity, in need of returning to “biological categories” and are posed as victims of oppression (Ross 24). The Million Man March of October 16, 1995 was a large spectacle to the media specific to African American manhood. In 2003, Matt O’Connor established Fathers for Justice as a movement against women tending to win custody battles (Ross 26-27).

“Fatherhood has always been more than a biological relation; the authority of the father over his family has traditionally been a validating symbol of all the larger social forms of authority, of law, society and religion. And this authority in its very essence is a male,” French argued (Haywood 195). When the identity of what was specifically for men has been compensated, the threat of women in the 21st century places anxieties. A fascinating twist has been how the phallus has been undermined by women. Fay Weldon advises for women, “If you are happy and generous minded, you will fake it [orgasm] … faking it is kind to male partners … otherwise they too may become anxious and so less be able to perform” (Ross 15). In a 2008 study, an interview was found stating, “If you allow your wife to freely talk about sex, she will express her sexual demands and preferences. This can threaten one’s sexual life because one may fail to fulfill his partner’s demand.” (Rauyajin 41). The phallus, the penis, is situated at the core of masculinity, as indicated with psychoanalytic/Freudian theory, but the power is a negotiated system (46). Another interview in the study found:

Men stated that ‘sex power’ was the most potent asset in men’s lives. Money is necessary. However, monetary achievements become valueless if men are sexually incapable. Sex power cannot be achieved like money, education or a job. Rather, ‘good sexual power’ was a divine capital and a blessing of human life. Sex, described as the way to demonstrate ‘male performance’, was especially needed to ‘win’ women.

(Rauyajin 39)

Looking at how our society has become reconstructed with the third wave of feminism, questions have arisen whether Adorno and Horkheimer’s view of power being constructed by
mass media messages, or whether Fiske’s view of the audience holding the most power still is not answered (Gauntlet 19-24). The system is incredibly complex and constantly changing with a number of representations. Gender is about power, patriarchy and culture, and the media is about influence, hegemony and institutions (Ross 1). Gender and media together demonstrates so many intersections and parallels that the answer cannot be simply stated. The best understanding would be Foucault’s “points of resistance” propelling power relations. This apparent “gender identity crisis” is a paradox between Neanderthal man and super vixen (38). Women’s power seems to be slowly progressing, but focus on sexualisation poses conflicting negotiations of power. As Ross points out, real power is not in being a sexual magnet, but it is in the senate and the Fortune 500 – how were there only 10 women as CEOs in 2006? (37) In an unpublished interview, Katherine Rake explains that many of the third wave feminist views are based on older concerns:

I think a lot of younger women are into issues around personal safety, around body image, around the saturation of pornography in society, which are all actually old issues but I think that they have got a special urgency given what’s happening, given the Internet, media and all the rest of that that gives it a special push at the moment.

(Dean 340)

The postmodern influence makes a lot of apparent female emancipation “self-absorbed and politically bankrupt” – such as this “slut-saint dichotomy.” One of the strongest characteristics of postmodernism is the obsession with the self, so as with sex, “anything goes if we are enjoying ourselves” (Ross 7). Acting as individuals will not mobilize a productive collective movement. Gallager has said,

“Women’s representation in the media will not be improved by increasing the number of women journalists, or by getting rid of the worst excesses of sexism in advertising. What it actually requires is a wide-scale social and political transformation, in which women’s rights to communicate – are truly understood, respected and implemented both in society and at large by the media.”

(8)
The next area that requires further examination is this men’s movement as they adapt and face a changing society. Haywood writes of current gender conflicts:

They include: the changing structure of work... the rise of feminist and gay/lesbian movements, emotional illiteracy, higher rates of suicide among men than women, particularly among young men, men's health problems and shorter life-span than women's, high levels of divorce and fathers' absence from their children, boys' underachievement and young men's over-representation in crime statistics.

(195)

Some attention should be paid to the interactions between men and women as a collective. The recent “protest” against People magazine of the “Sexiest Man Alive” has brought both genders reckoning Ryan Gosling the worthy winner, not Bradley Cooper. Representations of sexy, rich, famous and successful are all attached to these men, serving as an indicator of masculinity for others, and absolute desire for women. The media’s chosen man has taken time out of these individuals’ days. What motivation exists for each gender to “fight” for Gosling’s frivolous title and what does that speak to about our contemporary society?


