

トニー・ホーグランドの詩における男性性の危機

The Crisis of Masculinity in the Poetry of Tony Hoagland

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In *Esquire* magazine in November 1958 historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. warned of a coming reckoning of men in his article “The Crisis of American Masculinity.” He wrote: “What has happened to the American male? For a long time he seemed utterly confident in his manhood, sure of his masculine role in society, easy and defiant in his sense of sexual identity. Today men are more and more conscious of maleness not as a fact but as a problem. The ways by which American men affirm their masculinity are uncertain and obscure. There are multiplying signs, indeed, that something has gone badly wrong with the American male's conception of himself.”¹

Half a century later, Schlesinger's observation of a crisis in manhood has manifested itself into an ever-increasing anxiety and state of confusion about traditional characteristics and identity of being a man. Having growing up within this “uncertain and obscure” period of masculinity, American poet Tony Hoagland writes poetry often depicting this uncertainty of masculinity. Readers are frequently confronted with commentary on the challenges men face while navigating masculinity in an age of fluid sexuality, non-binary identity and the ever-changing pretenses and expectations of traditional gender roles. Through Hoagland's poetry readers are guided through comic and human scenarios that articulate the complexities of how heterosexual men (and women) navigate such behavioral landmines as toxic masculinity, romantic relationships, or insecure identity.

Tony Hoagland (1953-2018) was an American award-winning poet and creative writing educator whose works include seven books of poetry and five collections of es-

¹ Arthur Schlesinger Jr. “The Crisis of American Masculinity,” *Esquire*, November 1958.

says on poetry. Hoagland was “a widely admired poet who could be both humorous and heartfelt, often in the same poem, and” he used “jarring juxtapositions, and he wasn’t afraid to throw pop-culture references into his poems or go for a laugh-out-loud response.”² Speaking on his craft of writing, he commented “I’m proud to be a funny poet. [...] Humor in poetry is even better than beauty. If you could have it all, you would, but humor is better than beauty because it doesn’t put people to sleep. It wakes them up and relaxes them at the same time.”³ Hoagland has a trusting relaxing poetic voice and humor is the vehicle he uses to pierce readers’ contempt for the manic, confused life we live. But often one theme threads through his years of writing: how did the poet become a man and what does that even mean to be a man? This theme entails looking at how a man exhibits, or does not exhibit, masculinity, or how adolescent boys are relentlessly goaded into male conformity through bullying and coercive language.

In his 1998 *Donkey Gospel*, Hoagland offers a collection of narrative poems that provide a glimpse into the making of men by exposing the duplicity of the training boys must undergo, if not “survive,” on the road to manhood. Often these poems are skeptical of pubescent rights of passage, intimate sexual encounters, and tests of manhood. Yet his poems are more than just observations of maleness, they are elegies written for a loss of self that heterosexual conformity requires to be a man. The poem “Becoming a Man” attempts to retrace this process of becoming while at the same time consoles those who have survived its isolating transition.

Remember teaching yourself to spell February?
You had to pronounce it in your head before writing it –
Feb – ru – ary; the *ru* is silent.

That’s how you learned to be a man.
You had to practice carefully

² Neil Genzlinger. *New York Times*, “Tony Hoagland, Poet With a Wry Outlook, Is Dead at 64.” Oct. 24, 2018.

³ Genzlinger, “Tony Hoagland.”

to pronounce no innerness.⁴

To pronounce “no innerness,” or the deadening of one’s self — a conscious neglect of part of one’s identity obscures identity to the public so that the self will not be a target of attention by others.

Becoming a man also requires conformity of language. In the poem “Dickhead,” boys learn to be something other than themselves for fear of not fitting in by learning to use the word “dickhead” as a bridge to manhood. For teenage boys in a locker room, the word is wielded like a “hammer, an object you [can] pick up in your hand and swing.”

To whomever taught me the word *dickhead*,
I owe debt of thanks
It gave me a way of being in the world of men
when I most needed one,

when I was pale and scrawny,
naked, goosefleshed
as a plucked chicken
In a supermarket cooler, a poor

forked thing stranded in the savage
universe of puberty, where wild

jockstraps flew across steamy
skies of locker rooms,
and everybody fell down laughing
at jokes I didn’t understand.

⁴ Tony Hoagland. “Recent Changes in Vernacular: Poems.” Espanola NM: Tres Chicas Books. 2017, 41.

But was a word as dumb
and democratic as a hammer, an object
you could pick up in your hand,
and swing...⁵

The language boys learn helps them assimilate, if not conform to the required behavior of men. Language becomes a means of protecting oneself without revealing an inner life. This sense of learning to be a man, first by learning to talk like one, emerges again in “The Replacement,” a poem that laments the “cooking” or socialization that boys must undergo in order to develop into men. The first step in this process includes an unhealthy bombardment of profane language.

And across the country, I know
they are replacing my brother's brain
with the brain of a man:
one gesture, one word, one neuron at a time
with a surgical precision
they are teaching him to hook his thumbs
into his belt, to iron his mouth as
as the horizon, and make his
reflective as a piece of tin.
it is a kind of cooking
the male child undergoes:
to toughen him, he is dipped repeatedly
in insult—*peckerhead, shitbag, faggot,*
pussy, dicksucker--until spear points
will break against his epidermis
until he is impossible to disappoint⁶

⁵ Hoagland, “Donkey,” 10.

⁶ Hoagland, “Donkey,” 41.

If this process of assimilation fails, or is in some way incomplete, it produces a man that will “stumble through his life/ like a broken shoelace.” Hoagland does not praise this guidance. For him, how men are fastened together produces a thing that “even [he] can’t love,” a “beautiful ugliness” that destroys the youthful innocence that Hoagland often longs for as represented in his poetry. The tragedy then lies in Hoagland’s question: “What else is there for him to be/ except a man?”

The inescapable binary choice boys become trapped within is tragic and harmful. They either conform their language and behavior or receive physical abuse until they do. “Most of the kids who are targeted manage to cope; they’re resilient enough or have enough emotional resources to survive reasonably intact. Many try valiantly, and often vainly, to fit in, to conform to these impossible standards that others set for them. Some carry psychological or even physical scars for the rest of their lives.”⁷

Yet boys are under attack from many directions: if boys exhibit behavior that has traditionally been associated with manliness even if socially constructed such as physical courage, competitiveness, aggressiveness then they become targets of something equally inescapable. Psychologist Gad Saad in his article “Is Toxic Masculinity a Valid Concept? On the dangers of pathologizing manhood” in *Psychology Today* March 18, 2018 wrote: “there has been a relentless ideological attack on masculinity, stemming from radical feminism, the most recent example of which is the bogus term “toxic masculinity.” It literally seeks to pathologize masculinity in ways that are profoundly harmful to the existential sense of self of young men.”⁸

Many of Hoagland’s poems attempt to articulate this existential limbo that the modern male has had to adjust. The internal boyhood dialogues and language conformity Hoagland examines illuminates, at least to a degree, the internalized, hidden process men undergo by bringing it into the public sphere.

However, the debate of gender behavioral traits is also deeply rooted in the archetypal Adam and Eve, and Hoagland exploits this point of inflection again to make us

⁷ Kimmel. *Manhood in America*. 2012, 271.

⁸ Gad Saad. “Is Toxic Masculinity a Valid Concept? On the Dangers of Pathologizing Manhood,” *Psychology Today*, March 18, 2018.

look at this crisis of masculinity. Hoagland frames readers' common understanding of perceived gender characteristics of the first man and woman as he asks poignant and central questions about masculinity in his poem "Adam and Eve."

Is a man just an animal, and is a woman not an animal?

Is the name of the animal power?

Is it true that the man wishes to see the woman

hurt with her own pleasure

and the woman wishes to see the expression on the man's face

of someone falling from great height,

that the woman thrills with the power of her weakness

and the man is astonished by the weakness of his power?

Is the sexual chase a hunt where the animal inside

drags the human down

into a jungle made of vowels,

hormonal undergrowth of sweat and hair,

or is this an obsolete idea

lodged like a fossil

in the brain of the ape

who lives inside the man?⁹

The evolutionary and psychological explanations of the caveman mentality are many. Here Adam is depicted as more primitive than an ideal human, and Hoagland's plays with the uncertainty embedded in our jumbled, aphoristic understanding of gender differences within the mythic tale of the first couple. Is Adam's lust for Eve rooted

⁹ Hoagland. "Donkey," 63.

in the theory that men are biologically programmed to behave aggressively, that is seize power, in order to gain access to female reproduction, in this case Eve's?¹⁰ The "obsolete idea" being that men have not evolved a more egalitarian view of the procreation of men and women, as the poem suggests, has existed far into the present and Hoagland makes us look into the male psyche at this persistent source of anxiety. The poem is an exploration of inner questioning: is a man preordained biologically to act in a way beyond his conscious mind, or is he able to surpass such basic, and outdated understandings of male behavior? In the end, the poem suggests that desire is at the root of this crisis.

Until we say the truth, there can be no tenderness.

As long as there is desire, we will not be safe.

While this poem's narrative arc divulges a failed sexual conquest, the anxiety and indecisiveness of male behavior exposes a still potent problem. Again, the biological sexes are raised in his poem "Romantic Moment," where a couple sit together enjoying a warm evening out after watching a nature documentary. As the couple sit in the plaza of an art gallery the discussion turns to various ways in which animals demonstrate their desire to mate. The poem repeats a kind of reverse beguiling personification, "if I were a bull penguin right now I would lean over and vomit softly into the mouth of my beloved." This line of logic continues with equally surprising and interesting descriptions of animal mating rituals suggesting the romantic moment the couple is about to experience is an innate biological response.

... we sit awhile in silence, until
she remarks that in the relative context of tortoises and iguanas,
human males seem to be actually rather expressive.
And I say that female crocodiles really don't receive

¹⁰ Michael Kimmel. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. 2012, 258-260

enough credit for their gentleness.

Then she suggests that it is time for us to go

Do something personal, hidden, and human.¹¹

The human romantic act is a continuation of Hoagland's biological conceit but the final resolution of thought here elevates the man and woman's actions to "the personal, hidden, and human."

The relationships between man and woman expose other dimensions of the crisis of masculinity. The poem "I Have News for You," explores different examples of people overcoming psychological obstacles or preconceived ways of thinking and acting. Hoagland highlights the crisis men face by engaging in simple physical contact.

There are people who don't interpret the behavior
of a fly in a motel room as a mocking representation of their thought process.

There are people who don't walk past an empty swimming pool
and think about past pleasures unrecoverable

and then stand there blocking the sidewalk for other pedestrians.
I have read about a town somewhere in California where human beings

do not send their sinuous feeder roots
deep into the potting soil of others' emotional lives

as if they were greedy six-year-olds
sucking the last half-inch of milkshake up through a noisy straw;
and other persons in the Midwest who can kiss without

¹¹ Hoagland, "Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty: Poems," Minneapolis MN: Graywolf Press. 2010, 7.

debating the imperialist baggage of heterosexuality.¹²

Hoagland wants men to transcend their Troglodyte brains while at the same time not be made indecisive by the “imperialist baggage of heterosexuality” and the cacophonous debates that scrutinize men for historic, hegemonic oppression of women. In the poem “Ken, Don’t Go to Meet the Ex-girlfriend” Hoagland warns his friend not to be led in an confrontational ambush.

at the coffee shop in Montclair
that she referred to on the phone as “neutral territory”
Don’t go while your wound is still open and raw,

or with some misguided therapeutic notion
that you are going to “talk things through”
and “get some closure,” or do some “conscious uncoupling.”

...

So Ken, don't go meet her at the mall!
Don't agree to meet her at the Starbucks under the Cinzano umbrella!
which she suggested because as she has already told her friend Wanda,

she wants to be in a public place
in case you “try to make a scene”
as if you were a guy named Billy-bob with an Aryan tattoo¹³

The poem assumes a toxic masculine response to a break up with a perceived aggression directed at the woman is a hard-wired male response. The woman in the poem

¹² Hoagland, “Unincorporated,” 9.

¹³ Hoagland, “Recent Changes,” 19.

has an “already personified can of mace pointed at [the man’s] face.” Again the assumption being that male behavior is confrontational, irrational and is reduced to its most noxious terms. But the poem also reveals Ken might be a reflective guy who may be comforted by a leading feminist critic. The poet's advice is salient and non-toxic.

So Ken, be nobody now. Date nobody. Kiss nobody.
Walk nobody gently, nowhere, slow.
Stay home tonight and read Vivian Gornick essays about

the impossibility of modern relationship
and drink a glass of red wine and laugh
as you underline passage after brilliant passage.

Similarly like Ken who is trapped by preconceived notions of toxic masculinity, the couple in the poem “In Praise of Their Divorce” are trapped by social pressure to conform to marriage. Here he explores the complexity of heterosexual relationships, especially when things go awry.

Let us keep in mind the hidden forces
which had struggled underground for years

to push their way to the surface— and that finally did,
cracking the crust, moving the plates of earth apart,

releasing the pent-up energy required
for them to rent their own apartments,

for her to join the softball league for single mother
for him to read *George the Giraffe* over his speakerphone
at bedtime to the 6-year-old.

The bible says, *be bountiful and multiply*
but is it not also fruitful to subtract and divide?¹⁴

How could a biological, evolutionary explanation of gender be included in our understanding of such complicated relationships when traditional roles of *wife* or *husband*, *mother* or *father* no longer fit into the paradigm inherited from previous generations? Modern masculinity is fraught with unrealistic expectations and contradictions, and exposing this duplicity is one of Hoagland's talents. Hoagland himself expressed the need to disclose these complexities of masculinity in his own writing: "The thing is, poems can coherently represent the emotional life of men, those moments of fear or rage or emotional asphyxiation or even the rejoicing in power. The more that inner life is made public, the more openly it is articulated in all its ambivalence and complexity, better for us all."¹⁵

Sociologist Clive Baldwin in *Anxious Men* tells of the complex, contradictory nature of masculinity in today's American society. He writes "the debate around the crisis in masculinity continues and indeed divisions have hardened in recent years. Issues relating to masculinity in the United States are framed within that culture wars – that's split between conservatives and liberals focused on half points such as abortion, gun control, feminism, family values, gay marriage, transgender rights and religion."¹⁶ That debate seems to have no end in sight, and the wisdom imparted through Hoagland's poetry foretells how we might begin understanding masculinity in the coming era.

For Hoagland men can represent diverse characteristics of masculinity. There are at once "good old....Neanderthals crouching by the fire," not very intelligent and mostly unaware of the actions they undertake, while they are members of a brotherhood from

¹⁴ Hoagland, "Unincorporated," 36.

¹⁵ Tony Hoagland and Max Fierst. "Tony Hoagland on Masculinity and Being an American Poet." *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, no. 32 (1999): 76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41807626>.

¹⁶ Clive Baldwin, 2020 . *Anxious Men: Masculinity in American Fiction of the Mid-Twentieth Century*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. p. 17.

which they cannot be expelled all the while being victims of ruthless coming of age rituals and practices perpetrated by other males. Men are culpable, too, and reluctant to isolate themselves from the group. For example, the poem “Muy Macho,” a poem documenting a drunken night at a cabin deep in the woods where tales of sex are recited like Homeric monologues, Hoagland reluctantly participates in a conversation about sex in order to fit in, or in his words to “remain inside this circle of conversation.” A man stays within the group because he “has no other choice.” For Hoagland, *this* is a part of being a man that “we can’t pull ourselves apart from.” And therein lies the tragedy of maleness. Hoagland explains: “I certainly don’t think of myself as a macho writer...any more than Adrienne Rich might think of herself as a feminine writer. I’m not advocating the hyped up brutal aspects of masculinity, though at moments, in some poems, I am putting the masculine on display or even employing its mannerisms, the better to talk and think about them. I feel great grief and compassion for the stoicism in isolation and submerged fear, helplessness and rage of men...the world is full of toxic versions of masculinity, behavior that makes masculinity look like a disease, but men are the victims of the values dictated by the macho— Think of all those boys crucified everyday on those values, their hearts broken and they’re character brutalized.”¹⁷

Hoagland’s poetry is just that— poetry that reflects the historic and cultural context of the poet’s life, of being a male raised in the second-half of the 20th century. His poems are not definitive social commentaries on masculinity or American society, but rather expressions of a part of humanity with all its comedy and tragedy. American philosopher and Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, Martha C. Nussbaum wrote in her essay “Cultivating Humanity” that “a central role of art is to challenge conventional wisdom and values. One way works engage in this Socratic enterprise is by asking us to confront— and for a time to be— those whom we do not usually like to meet. Offensiveness is not all by itself a sign of literary merit; but the offensiveness of a work may be part of its civic value.”¹⁸ Hoagland cre-

¹⁷ Hoagland and Fierst “Hoagland on Masculinity,” 76.

¹⁸ Martha C. Nussbaum.. “Cultivating humanity: a classical defense of reform in liberal education.” Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. 2005.

ates poetry that exposes men's internal thoughts and external behavior in this way, and the shrewd eye of the poet adds this civic value by nudging us a bit closer to a civil discourse of understanding what it means to be a man in the 21st century.

Hoagland's poems bring readers to the edge of not an abyss, but to a precipice overlooking the past landscape of being a man. A place where men's behavior is housed in arguments of preordained, biological confinement, and the brutal social conformity of boys in locker rooms. He unveils the internal anxieties of men, and their ironic targeting of being too much of a man or not enough. The Sociologist Michael Kimmel advocates a solution for the crisis of masculinity, which Hoagland might have approved. Kimmel writes we need "A democratic manhood [that] is a manhood of responsibility, tested, and finally proved, in the daily acts that give our lives meaning. It is an expansive manhood, capable of embracing different groups of men, whether by race, class, ethnicity, or sexuality— as we are already doing. It is an egalitarian manhood, accepting and even embracing the equality of women in our lives, by preparing our children for the lives they will surely live of greater gender and sexual equality."¹⁹

¹⁹ Michael Kimmel. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. 2012, 297.

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