

Specialist Writing Option C: Film Criticism
Whiplash, Men & Masculinity

Tom Beasley, The Popcorn Muncher.com, January 2015

Much was made in the media about the noticeable maleness of the Academy Awards this year. Not a single woman was nominated for either Best Director or Screenplay. But more than that, the Oscars 2015 was dominated by films *about* men and *about* masculinity itself.

Damien Chazelle's exhilarating drama *Whiplash* tells the story of Andrew (Miles Teller) as he struggles to become the lead drummer in his music school's decorated jazz band, run by tyrannical musician Fletcher (JK Simmons). Andrew practises hard and knows he's pretty good, but he needs to be validated. His mother left when he was young, so Andrew has been brought up without a female figure in his life. He craves approval, but has a somewhat sterile relationship with his father, who doesn't seem to understand what Andrew is doing. **The notion of being approved by Fletcher – a recognised alpha male – excites Andrew to the degree that he is prepared to do just about anything.**

Fletcher represents everything that Andrew idealises. He's a whirlwind of acid-tongued testosterone and is 100% sure of his talent. Fletcher doesn't need validation from anyone because he sits at the top of the food chain – both in terms of music and masculinity. **Even Fletcher's appearance is one of masculine performance. He is stripped down, in terms of his shaven head and his plain black clothing, with no sort of flourish upon his body. For Fletcher, there's no need for the kind of style-conscious appearance so favoured by the modern "metrosexual" man. Notably, Andrew is a baby faced youngster who seems unkempt in appearance. He doesn't have the same focus as Fletcher.**

Andrew's acceptance into Fletcher's band early on in *Whiplash* marks, in his view, his seat at the table of masculinity. **It is significant that merely being a member of the band transforms Andrew from a distant loner to the arrogant man who immediately attempts to enter into a relationship with Nicole (Melissa Benoist).** Andrew believes that being in a relationship is a part of his duty as a man and so he simply asks for a date from the only girl he ever meets – the box office girl at the cinema he regularly visits.

Nicole is nothing but lovely to Andrew. However, he decides to give her the chop when he realises that she impedes his path to success. **For Andrew, his first real female connection is nothing more than a distraction from his work at winning the approval of the uber-macho Fletcher.** When he realises that his relationship with Nicole is an inessential part of his masculine performance, he sees no reason to keep it going. For Andrew, it was never about love – or even lust.

Critics have bemoaned the underwritten nature of Nicole's role in *Whiplash* and it is irksome in such a male-dominated awards year, but her character in the film is a reflection of how the protagonist sees her. For Andrew, just like every other kind of human connection, she's barely a human being and merely a utility on his path to masculine utopia.

Masculinity becomes a performance and a competition between two figures battling to out-alpha the other in the film's finale. In an attempt at revenge for Andrew making a complaint about Fletcher's treatment, the latter sets him up for a fall at an important concert. After initially fleeing the stage, Andrew returns and defiantly leads the band himself, defying

Fletcher's authority and indeed his masculinity. The final sequence focuses on how masculine conflict can turn abruptly into magic - the two men go from full-blooded war to grudging respect in the space of a single scene. Andrew finally succeeds in earning the respect of Fletcher by beating him at his own game. **He proves that he can hold his own in a masculine arena by taking on the alpha. In that scene, Andrew finally succeeds in achieving his own personal masculine utopia.**

Acknowledgement

Whiplash <http://www.thepopcornmuncher.com/2015/03/09/analysis-whiplash-foxcatcher-machismo/> thepopcornmuncher@gmail.com
review