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In a Dangerous Defense of the Masculine

Having close ties within the humanity field, psychological themes are habitually experimented with in short literature to showcase the emotional and mental effects of various situations on a person, often situations of severe stress and of a "life-or-death" nature. One of the oft-portrayed results of psychological stress on the human mind is the frequency of induced psychological defense mechanisms, which are "a crucial component of our capacity to maintain emotional homeostasis" (Bowins 1), but what oftentimes goes without illustration is the external, underlying causes of these defense mechanisms outside of the specific harrowing situation itself—*why* characters and humans alike feel the need to defend themselves from daunting situations. Is it simply because the situations are so terrifying? Some authors of short stories featuring male protagonists under duress seem to imply reacting with protectiveness to frightening circumstances is an intrinsic masculine tendency to deny their panic and weakness in favor of seeming "manly," even if that stubborn denial leads men to their downfalls. In stories such as Jorge Borges' "The South," Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," and Jack London's "To Build a Fire," it is exemplified how gender conflict can lead to the employment of psychological defense mechanisms to preserve a coveted masculinity, even at the risk of loss of life or self.

The link between defense mechanisms and the protection of masculinity is anything but a new concept, even if it is often difficult to identify in literature unless one is looking for it.

Brad Bowins describes defense mechanisms as “serv[ing] an important function by attenuating negative emotions to maintain or restore a more healthy state of mind” (Bowins 2) and that without them, “the conscious mind would be much more vulnerable to negatively charged emotional input, such as that pertaining to anxiety and sadness” (1). Putting it simply, a defense mechanism is any mental process—such as denial, repression, or a dissociative state—that safeguards the mind against unpleasant emotions. These are normally employed in times of minor to extreme stress, which every protagonist in the aforementioned short stories experiences regardless, but also are sometimes the result of a specific emotional state or ideal being threatened—something less exemplified in literature. In the case of masculine identity, men have the ideal of complying with gender expectations: “social constructions created from the expectations of social forces” (Mahalik 247) that teach boys “what are acceptable and unacceptable masculine behaviors…values, attitudes, and behaviors that emphasize that men be emotionally stoic and dominate others” (247). When men cannot live up to these stoic ideals, their emotional state becomes threatened, which these short stories emulate. And a threatened emotional state is a key cause for mental defenses—as “a man experiences any particular facet of the self that he considers feminine with great conflict and anxiety, because he believes it threatens his manhood” (248). Thus, many men put up defense mechanisms to attempt to wrestle away this anxiety and feel “manly” again—even in times of life-or-death. Being afraid of a situation would mean foregoing traditional masculinity, so men, including the characters of these three short stories, often dissociate from the fear altogether. However, this often creates more issue and dangers than it is worth.

It may be obvious when a short story protagonist is utilizing defense mechanisms to escape stress, but the undertones of gender-related causes are often hard to spot, as in the case of

Jorge Borges' "The South," where masculine conflict becomes a possible cause of protagonist Juan Dahlmann's dissociative state throughout the text. After recovering from a sudden onslaught of illness in which "he hated every inch of himself; he hated his identity, his bodily needs, his humiliation" (Borges 138), it only makes sense for Dahlmann to want to detach himself from such humiliation—which he does, using a type of defense mechanism called a "cognitive distortion." Cognitive distortions "refer to the tendency of people to place a self-enhancing spin on experience and alter the perception of unfavorable events in a positive way to lessen the impact" (Bowins 7), which is precisely what Dahlmann does when his long-awaited journey home from recovering is interrupted by a couple of men picking a fight with him at a saloon. Not wanting to be further humiliated by his previous weakness, Dahlmann accepts their challenge with "no fear" (Borges 141) even though he is fully aware "his knowledge of knife fighting went no further than…vague recollection[s]" (141) and he is likely walking to his death. Instead, he distorts the situation in his mind, telling himself "had he been able to choose or dream his death…this is the death he would have dreamed or chosen" (141) and equating this knife fight to something noble and expected of a proud Southern man. Dahlmann's dissociation with his plight shows the unfortunate consequences of defense mechanisms in action.

But even deeper under the surface of simply defending his mind from the terror of being put up against his death, it can be inferred that Dahlmann's deployment of cognitive distortion was due to a subconscious thirst to protect his "damaged" masculinity. Succumbing to a "humiliating" disease had already damaged his self-esteem; backing down from a challenge by the masculine "rough-looking young men" (140) would have completely turned against "society's external standards, expectations, and norms about masculine…behavior" (Mahalik 247). That is why his mental defenses went up, why he deemed himself "committed to fight"

(Borges 140)—to combat the anxiety and fear associated with the loss of his “manly” Southern image, the disappointment he might be to the “bearded, inexpressive” men of his “lineage” (137) if he cannot defend himself and his manhood against any possible threat, especially after being weakened by his previous illness. Dahlmann’s distorted mental state allows him to discard his preservation of life in favor of his preservation of male dignity, which is frighteningly more important to him—illuminating the pressure men feel under preconceived gender expectations and stereotypes, and how their fragile mental state will go to any measure to protect itself, even distorting reality’s odds to the point where a probable death is not the failure men seek to escape, but probable social failure.

Peyton Farquhar of Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” is equally as guilty and exemplary of dissociative defense mechanisms protecting a male figure from the shame of the loss of perceived masculinity, though his situation calls for different mental measures. The way Farquhar protects himself from the situation at hand—being hanged for war crimes against the North during the Civil War—is a type of defense mechanism called absorption, an “imaginative involvement consist[ing] of shifting attention away from a stressful source to a more pleasing external or internal focus” (Bowins 3). Farquhar does this by distracting his thoughts from the noose encircling his neck and instead contemplating an alternate reality in which he escapes, which becomes the narrative of the story. When he plunges downward to his death, his mind avoids it, pretending instead, “the rope had broken and he had fallen into the stream” (Bierce 129) and he is now floating toward a beautiful forest teeming with “prismatic colors” and “audible music” (129) as opposed to being suffocated as a hanged man. Reality cannot penetrate his mind when its attention is completely drowned in a more pleasing fantasy, demonstrating the use and negative effects of defense mechanisms like absorption, as no

amount of distraction could have changed Farquhar's death, or his shame and disgrace at it, and no amount of human mental defenses can change any circumstances—or expectations.

Clearly, with these illusions, Farquhar's mind is refusing to deny the traumatic situation of his untimely death—but it is hinted at that this defense is put up, once more, due to the humiliating circumstances of an un-masculine death. Another take on absorption suggests it "creates an illusion of mastery…protecting a man's sense of well-being" (Mahalik 253), which is exactly what Farquhar was doing that got him into this death-sentence misfortune in the first place. Unable to join the Confederate army, he was "longing for the release of his energies, the larger life of the soldier, the opportunity for distinction" (Bierce 127), all traditionally "masculine" ideals he cannot reach. So when he lashes out, tries to "get the better of the [Northern] sentinel" (128), and ends up caught and sentenced to death, it only makes sense he would dissociate his mind from the embarrassing notion of being hanged in front of his enemies, failed in his attempts to "be a man"—a Southern man just like Dahlmann. Farquhar denies his death, denies his crimes, denies his failures, as accepting their weight would mean his acceptance of a loss of masculinity as well. So he "falsifies…perceived threats" (Mahalik 253) and proclaims his death "is not fair" (Bierce 129), all the while protecting his masculine pride, his desperation to become the soldier he never was, going so far as to disown the situation altogether and display man's desperation to preserve his dignity, to hide from shame—even if it takes dangerous delusions to do it. Farquhar is a particularly perilous example of how far men may be willing to go to maintain their pride and image due to the sexist, unrealistic standards of what is "masculine" and what is "feminine" and therefore "shameful."

While "The South" and "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" may highlight the defense of Southern male pride, Jack London's "To Build a Fire" takes us instead to the northern

wilderness of Alaska, where stubborn denial of supposedly "feminine" weakness and dependence leads the protagonist to a downfall that could have been easily avoided, if not for the internalized stress of gender expectations and the deployment of a pounding series of mental defenses. This unnamed protagonist's defense of choice is repression, which "involves the expulsion or withholding of a distressing idea from consciousness" (Bowins 9), something that comes largely into play when the man finds himself trapped somewhere in the Yukon wilderness with temperatures slumping to a deadly minus-forty degrees Fahrenheit. The narrator continuously represses "his frailty as a creature of temperature and man's frailty in general" (London 850), as it is stated over and over again that ideas like "the absence of sun…did not worry the man" (850). The further the story progresses, the more pervasively this man denies the dangers of his solo journey, expelling concern and replacing it with placating thoughts, such as that "he would eat lunch at the forks and at six o' clock he would be in camp with the boys" (852) and that "if he ran on, his feet would thaw out; and anyway, if he ran far enough, he would reach camp and the boys" (859). He exemplifies repression in a way that is almost delusional like Peyton Farquhar's mental process, pushing forward "fixed, false beliefs rigidly adhered to despite contradictory evidence" (Bowins 13) to assure himself he is safe, instead of facing the truth and protecting his body, not his mind—a mistake that costs the narrator his life. If he hadn't been so fixated on his independence and meeting up with "the boys" despite the foolishness of his journey, he would have survived. That is the reality of defense mechanisms structured to shield fragile independent pride of any sort—they end up destroying, not defending.

Likewise to the other stories and following scientific basis, the narrator's mental conflict and repression in "To Build a Fire" is likely a result of aversion to fear, the sort of fear that arises from the inability to align with the respected cultural perception of masculinity. As

"many boys are required to block their feelings and restrict the expression of their vulnerable emotions" (Mahalik 248), they likewise "learn to conceal emotions, especially those indicating weakness and femininity" (248). This is precisely the model the story's protagonist follows, as the second "he [becomes] a bit frightened" (London 854), he ignores it, ignores any advice he has been previously given about traveling through the wilderness, and keeps repeating over and over that "he [is] safe" (854), refusing to think weak thoughts, refusing to do anything but maintain his blunt fixation on meeting up with the boys, the other men, those who will validate his masculinity in turn. He views the old-timers who caution against "brave" solo travel as "rather womanish" (858) and believes "any man who was a man could travel alone" (856); therefore, when he himself begins to fail in his quest and his numerous attempts to build a fire, he must "struggle for calmness" (858) in any way he can, or else become one of these "womanish" figures himself, which is a horrifying idea to him. Thus, the man's repression and omnipresent application of defense mechanisms becomes an expression of the "oppressive" (859) fear before him, the fear he must deny in order to negate "feelings such as anxiety and shame related to all things feminine" (Mahalik 247), and to maintain his image as a strong, proud man afraid of no snow and deterred by no danger. However, it is this exact attitude and these exact repressive thoughts that are the real danger, as they keep the man from slowing down or asking for help or a travel partner in the first place—proving the dastardly effects of gender expectations on men, if their "masculine" egos are frail enough to keep them from surviving simply because caution and aid-seeking have a supposedly negative, "feminine" connotation.

All in all, the characters portrayed in the three short stories give an insight into the inner workings of men's minds as they struggle with the outdated and bigoted idea that emotions are feminine, and femininity is synonymous with weakness. If Dahlmann, Farquhar, and Jack

London's narrator—and perhaps men in general—weren't so pressured by society into keeping their "macho" appearances up, their minds wouldn't automatically jump into defense-mechanism mode at the first sign of emotional duress or inability. Doing so is not only an unhealthy conformation to gender stereotypes that should not exist, but only creates a larger issue, as is shown by the resulting deaths of all three protagonists in the stories. For these men and many more outside of literary spheres, psychological defense mechanisms are employed to help "manage the painful affect they experience [from] gender role inductions" (Mahalik 250), to build a shell around the fragile, supposedly-valuable core of masculinity and keep it from seeming a failure, and it is these very defense mechanisms that leave only more failure in their wake.

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