Marlboro Man and Migrant Mother

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When Clarence Hailey Long, a ranch foreman from Texas, was photographed by Life Magazine in 1949, no one could have predicted that he would become an icon. Long’s skin, hardened by the elements and prematurely wrinkled with worry, attests to the hardships of his profession, but there is a twinkle in his eye and maybe even the hint of a smile upon his lips. Long’s image inspired advertisers at cigarette manufacturer Phillip Morris to create the “Marlboro Man,” an archetypical gruff individualist who became the face of a cigarette brand that originally targeted women (“Clarence Hailey Long”). The Marlboro Man image rebranded Marlboro as a man’s cigarette and transformed the cowboy into the paragon of American masculinity. Yet when writer Gretel Ehrlich sees Marlboro ads in the subway, they “remind [her] of no one [she] knew” when she lived in Wyoming and spent her days with real ranchers and cowboys (703). In her essay “About Men,” Ehrlich demonstrates that by accepting the Marlboro Man image and romanticizing the cowboy, we have actually “disesteemed his true character” (703). But our admiration for the cowboy as a model of masculinity also reveals the shortcomings and ironies of our common beliefs about gender norms and ideals.

According to Ehrlich, mainstream society associates the cowboy with the “strong and silent” image of masculinity seen in Marlboro cigarette ads and Hollywood westerns, but this representation is misguided and inaccurate. Cowboys, she asserts, possess an “androgy nous . . . core” that society is either unaware of or ignores; they are not superficial stock characters but instead perform a “balancing act between male and female, manliness and femininity” (704). Cowboys do not really uphold a pure masculine ideal; in fact, they often exhibit a stereotypically feminine gentleness toward the animals in their care. Ehrlich does not dispute cowboys’ “masculine” strength, but she argues that such strength “has nothing to do with conquests [or] displays of power.” It resides instead in their ability to “tough it out,” in their “resilience, patience, and . . . instinct for survival.” Their courage is not about “facing dan-
ger”; rather, it is “selfless, a form of compassion,” an act to save an animal or fellow cowboy (703, 704). Ehrlich claims that the cowboy’s physical toughness is in fact “greatly underplayed,” both in the media and by cowboys themselves, which suggests that society associates manliness and masculinity more with the cowboy’s stoicism than with his strength (704). But this stoic demeanor does not represent a cowboy’s manliness in Ehrlich’s view; in fact, it represents his lack of it.

According to Ehrlich, cowboys are silent because they don’t know how to adequately express themselves or interact in a sophisticated manner due to the “social isolation” inherent in their line of work (704). It’s not that they don’t want to express themselves, she explains; it’s that they are unable to. Ehrlich claims that the cowboy experiences emotions as intensely as anyone else, but keeps these “explosive emotions pent up inside.” These emotions, though they are not expressed verbally, are evident in the tenderness, maternal compassion, and self-sacrificing courage that cowboys demonstrate toward the animals whose welfare they must protect. These expressions of “impulse, passion, and intuition” reveal the feminine side of the “androgy nous core” that Ehrlich describes. But if these cowboys can display emotion through their work, their inability to do so in their interactions with other human beings bespeaks not a total incapacity but an undeveloped ability to express themselves. Pent-up emotions and the struggle to express suggest juvenility, a kind of moody adolescence that Ehrlich herself reinforces, citing the cowboys’ “adolescent dependency” on their wives (704). Nevertheless, that Ehrlich’s cowboys have complex emotions, that they can nurture as well as kill, shows a tenderness that underlies stoicism, reveals a level of development surpassing that of the Marlboro Man, the ideal image of a cowboy. Their feminine qualities make them more mature than their make-believe counterpart.

Yet while the cowboy’s feminine qualities might make him seem more developed and mature, femininity is not synonymous with maturity. Sarah Brownmiller, in her essay “Femininity,” tells us that femininity is stereotypically characterized by “whimsy” and by “thinking and behaviors that are dominated by emotion” (207). This description recalls the “impulse [and] passion” trapped within Ehrlich’s cowboys (704); Brownmiller further tells us that femininity is composed of “vulnerability, the need for protection . . . in short, an appeal of dependence and good will” (207). But these qualities are not the only ones that “feminine” women possess. Brownmiller claims that when women in society attempt to achieve the feminine ideal, they do so to gain “the competitive edge that femininity seems to promise in the unending
struggle to survive” (206). This competitiveness calls to mind what Ehrlich called the Marlboro Man’s “conquests and displays of power” (703). In theory, femininity includes all the ideals of dependence and vulnerability that Brownmiller describes, but when theory becomes practice, femininity takes on a more aggressive, “masculine” element. Brownmiller’s feminine women seem to possess a dormant, intrinsic masculinity in the same way Ehrlich’s cowboys harbor femininity, and both masculinity and femininity seem to take on qualities of the opposite ideal when they move from theory or image to a real person.

What’s more, both Brownmiller’s and Ehrlich’s models of gender involve an undeveloped, juvenile quality. Just as the cowboy’s “masculine” stoicism is simplistic and undeveloped, and his ability to express immaturity, Brownmiller claims that ideal “feminine” qualities reflect a certain juvenility as well. Femininity, she suggests, is ultimately a nostalgic attempt to preserve “the virginal innocence that is replaced by knowledge” and “the dewy cheek that is coarsened by age” (206). Psychological maturity and sexual “knowledge,” signs that a woman has progressed from adolescence to adulthood, rob her of her femininity. Ironically, though sexual maturity seems to undermine femininity, it is a prerequisite for maternity, an intrinsically feminine concept. Brownmiller further argues that women must make “compromises,” “accepting restrictions” to gain the “competitive edge” (206-07). These feminine compromises begin to resemble compliance, and finally childlike obedience, rendering male counterparts more adult, competent, and “manly” by contrast.

Masculinity and femininity coexisting within one person, then, are not contradictory but complementary. The iconic documentary photograph “Migrant Mother,” by Dorothea Lange, depicts both qualities exemplified in one person. Lange photographed Florence Owens Thompson, a mother of seven, in a poverty-stricken pea pickers’ camp in California during the Great Depression. “Migrant Mother,” which gave a human face to the Great Depression, became one of the most recognized and reproduced photos in American history. This woman possesses both stereotypically masculine and stereotypically feminine qualities, and, instead of being at odds, these qualities balance each other. In several senses, Thompson appears masculine: she resembles a pillar, a rock that her children can lean against, a symbol of stability, consistency, resilience, and strength. She also possesses the “weathered skin, calloused hands, [and] squint in the eye” that society has “interpreted as toughness” in cowboys (Ehrlich 704). Brownmiller might also claim that since the “dewy cheek” of Thompson’s childhood has been “coarsened by
age,” she has lost her femininity—in short, that her appearance is the determining factor that places her in the realm of masculinity (206).

But Thompson was only thirty-two when this photo was taken. Her cheek is coarsened not by age but by the harshness of nature, the struggle against poverty, and the burden of motherhood. Her appearance alone might seem masculine to some, but this masculine appearance might simply “mask the tenderness inside,” as Ehrlich suggests it does for the cowboys (704). Thompson’s face is hardened from knowledge and experience, yes, but it is also wrinkled in an expression of acute, exquisite emotion, something that both Ehrlich and Brownmiller associate with femininity. There is nothing demonstrably feminine about the way she gazes into the distance, seemingly unaware of—but in reality simply indifferent to—the photographer snapping her picture; but the way her children lean upon her and cling to her for reassurance suggests that she is actually a vessel of tenderness, compassion, and, ultimately, motherhood. Maternity, beginning with what Brownmiller might call the “compromise” of a woman’s own body, is a systematic deference, a habit of sacrifice for another being—the same habit of sacrifice that Ehrlich sees in cowboys, what distinguishes them from the “Marlboro Man” stereotype. In this respect, her two children, the baby in her lap, and her wrinkled shirt, still half unbuttoned from nursing, make her appear radiantly feminine. Ultimately, Thompson projects neither femininity nor masculinity, but she possesses them both. The title “Migrant Mother” emphasizes her role, not her gender: the title is not “Migrant Woman.” Because of the balance of masculine and feminine within her, we see her as a person, not as her sex or as her gender.

“Migrant Mother” is a compelling photograph in itself, but the resemblance between Florence Owens Thompson and the cowboy Clarence Hailey Long is striking. Both have prematurely aged skin, both squint in the face of sun or perhaps wind, and both seem burdened by the weight of obligation; in light of Gretel Ehrlich’s characterization of cowboys, we see or perhaps imagine the same sort of tenderness and compassion behind Long’s eyes that we do in Thompson’s. We might imagine, thanks to Ehrlich, that Long and Thompson each possess a similar duality of masculine and feminine. But why were these two photos received in such different manners? “Migrant Mother” is revered as a valuable historical document and as a work of art; Thompson never became an icon of idealized femininity like June Cleaver or Marilyn Monroe. The photo of Long, though, inspired corporate America to transform his image into a more superficial masculine idea than the photo suggests. Not only that, but the American public bought it—the Marlboro Man
was an important part of Marlboro’s ad campaigns for decades. Arguably, the Marlboro Man is more popular and recognizable than the Migrant Mother; his popularity tells us that, for some reason, we continue to cling to simplistic gender ideals, even when we know they are incomplete. Perhaps the simplicity of these ideals makes them endearing to us. Perhaps they seem easier to attain and understand when they can be taken, in their entirety, at face value. And perhaps cardstock gender types in the media and in advertising need not be detrimental, if we stop to consider the person behind the image; the real danger arises when we look at flesh-and-blood people superficially, forgetting the complexities that lie beneath the surface.

Fig. 1. Clarence Hailey Long, 1949 by Leonard McCombe.

Fig. 2. Migrant Mother by Dorothea Lange.

WORKS CITED


