

Dear Students,

At the start of our last class session, we reviewed the broad themes of *Chapter Nine: Sex, Subjectivity and Representation*. These included: (1) the similarities and differences among first, second, and third-wave feminist movements, (2) the similarities and differences among the assumptions that support “liberal,” “socialist (Marxist),” and “difference (radical)” feminism, and (3) the philosophical distinctions between *essentialism* and *anti-essentialism* which support different views of feminism.

Following on this review, we introduced the distinction between the “images of women” and “politics of representation” perspectives. “For cultural studies the key idea is that the representation of women is a politics where what matters is how women are represented and with what consequences rather than the truth or accuracy of representation” (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 378). The same perspective is applicable for the representation of any identity-based group.

Additional issues and perspectives to consider that were detailed in the chapter include (1) the relationships among sex, gender and identity, (2) the effects of language, discourse and media technology on subjectivity, and (3) queer theory.

Considering that the overwhelming majority of the chapter was concerned with feminist approaches to sex, gender, and identity, I chose to present you with the opening of John Milius’ 1982 blockbuster film, *Conan the Barbarian*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. The first thirty minutes of the film follows the growth and development of the Conan character into *manhood*. This journey does not simply imply that he has grown up; rather it treats manhood as an elusive and mystical ideal that must be earned or won. In what follows, I will present a semiotic analysis of Conan’s emergence into manhood. We haven’t spoken specifically about semiotic analysis, but for our purposes I will define it as the process of uncovering the connotative symbolic meanings of narrative elements within the media text. Most commonly, these include characters, events, and objects.

Semiotic Analysis of Conan the Barbarian

Omniscient Narrative

“Between the times when the ocean drank Atlantis and the rise of the sons of Aryas, there was an age undreamed of and unto this, Conan, destined to bear the jeweled crown of Aquilonia upon a troubled brow. It is I, his chronicler, who alone can tell you of his saga. Let me tell you of the days of high adventure.”

- The voice over describes Conan’s destiny. It is his “destiny” to become a king. This sense of destiny also metaphorically governs a traditional notion of masculinity wherein manhood that must be won. Destiny provides the uninitiated boy with a sense of courage and reassurance about the struggle that is to come.

Forging Father's Sword

Conan's father forges a sword.

- Forging the sword symbolically refers to Conan's development into manhood. The sword must be tempered through heat and hammering, and so must Conan undergo hardship to become a man.
- Father does all of the blacksmithing while Conan's mother does detail work such as wrapping the hilt in leather, and Conan simply looks on in wonder. This clearly references the classic gender-based division of labor and indicates that the family unit is constituted by and contingent upon the phallus as signified by the imagery of the sword.

Fatherly Wisdom

Conan's father says to him: "Fire and wind come from the sky, from the gods of the sky, but Crom is your god, Crom, and he lives in the earth. Once giants lived in the earth, Conan, and, in the darkness of chaos, they fooled Crom, and they took from him the enigma of steel. Crom was angered and he was shook. Fire and wind struck down these giants, and they threw their bodies into the waters. But in their rage, the gods forgot the secret of steel and left it on the battlefield. And we who found it are just men, not gods, not giants, just men. The secret of steel has always carried with it a mystery. You must learn its riddle Conan, you must learn its discipline. For no one, no one in this world can you trust, not men, not women, not beasts... this you can trust." (he indicates the newly forged sword in his hand).

- Conan's father passes on "manly advice" to him. The message is obviously one of self-reliance. Other people, especially women and animals are unreliable. You can only trust your own power, signified through the object of the sword.

Village Invasion

Conan's village is invaded and destroyed by a tribe of Vanir (red-haired warriors from the north) led by Thulsa Doom (played by James Earl Jones). Conan's father is first wounded and then devoured by a pack of attack dogs.

- The invasion of the village (the home) signifies the Oedipal threat. Conan is threatened by an external force that rends him from his home and parents, setting him on the course to manhood.

Death of Mother

When the battle is over, Thulsa Doom faces young Conan and his protective mother. She grips her son's hand in one of hers and, with the other, she holds a sword threateningly. Thulsa Doom is presented with the sword of Conan's dead father and, turning around, he lashes out, severing Conan's mother's head in a single clean blow. She falls and dramatically releases her son's hand.

- The symbolic importance of this scene to Conan's transformation into a man cannot be overstated. Separation from mother is essential to the development of masculine independence, which is an absolute prerequisite to manhood status.

Slavery

Conan is taken as a slave and led north with the Vanir. There he is bound to a mill wheel and pushes at it until he's physically grown.

- Conan's labor at the mill wheel represents the innumerable struggles of youth and the forced acquiescence of the "pleasure principle" to the oppressive "reality principle."

Gladiator

Conan is sold to fight as a gladiator in dirt pits.

- This montage symbolizes the traditional masculine orientations toward aggression and competition. It isn't enough just to be strong, you must use your strength to achieve victory over others.

The Study of War, Poetry, & Philosophy

Conan is taken to the east where he learns from the "war masters" and studies poetry and philosophy.

- Having separated from mother, grown strong, and fought for survival, Conan refines his powers through strategy and philosophy.

The Pleasures of Women

Conan "comes to know the pleasures of women as he is bred to the finest stock."

- Conan is valued for the essential characteristics of his genes. The act of "breeding" Conan also places men squarely at the center of the reproductive process, as breeding is arranged and supervised by Conan's handlers and performed to reproduce Conan's essence. The woman in this scene is completely incidental and reduced to a reproductive tool.

What is Best in Life?

Sitting among a gathering of eastern warlords, Conan responds to the leader's question "what is best in life?" with the following: "To crush your enemies, to see them driven before you, and to hear the lamentation of their women."

- This expression summarizes the "will to power" that is central to the rhetoric of the film. This moment in the film also serves as the culminating point where Conan enters the adult social order of men. He is no longer suffering silently or learning from others. He's mastered his lessons and dispenses a crude form of wisdom based on his own experience.

Encounter with Crom

Conan is freed from slavery. He runs from wolves and finds safety in a cave. Within the cave he discovers the skeleton of a king gripping a dusty sword cocooned by cobwebs. He takes the sword and cleans it. Turning to the skeleton, he says "Crom!"

- This represents Conan's spiritual discovery of his own autonomy. The sword is a signifier of Conan's identity, especially as juxtaposed with his father's sword, which was stolen by Thulsa Doom. At the same time, the sword is stolen from a dead king whom Conan calls by the name of his own god, "Crom." Conan has thus symbolically achieved a mythical all-encompassing symbol of manhood inscribed as something physical that he can possess. His journey to manhood is complete.