

Masculinity of a Major Female Character in Joel Coen's *The Big Lebowski*

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ABSTRACT

In its early emergence, the theories of masculinity are often associated with men, then female masculinity theories established and shifted the traditional notion of masculinity concept. This paper is intended to scrutinize the portrayal of masculinity in a major female character in a Joel Coen's 1998 film entitled *The Big Lebowski*. Female masculinity is chosen as the main topic considering the shift of gender notions in these past few years using the theory proposed by Judith Halberstam (1998). In order to determine whether the characterization of the main object of this paper portrays masculinity, masculinity characteristics theory presented by Levant (1995) and film theory advanced by Amy Villarejo (2007) are also employed in this study. Using the theories mentioned previously, this paper used the dialogues, a number of mise en scene aspects, namely properties, costumes, hair do and makeup, and also cinematography aspects such as camera shots, angles and frames. The data were collected by taking notes on the character's masculinity traits throughout the film. It is found that the focused character is depicted to have some masculinity traits through her confidence, emotions hiding, the absence of intimacy in sex. Self-reliant, strength, aggression, power, and domination. Thus, this paper proves that masculinity can also be performed with an absence of male body form.

Keywords: *Female Masculinity, masculinity, masculinity traits, The Big Lebowski.*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of masculinity is often exclusively associated with men, until the emergence of new concept called feminine masculinity that broke the early notion of masculinity and also challenged the idea of traditional masculinity. One of the most well-known and utilized theories of feminine masculinity is the one proposed by Judith Halberstam in 1998. In her book entitled *Female Masculinity* (1998), Halberstam proposed a new theory called feminine masculinity. The theory propounds that masculinity is not chained with male bodies, instead, masculinity can also be found in women. According to her, studying feminine masculinity is one of the many ways to fully understand the conception of masculinity itself.

Halberstam's prominent theory about feminine masculinity has inspired numerous studies regarding the analysis of masculinity found in women, especially in literature field. In 2017, four studies concerning feminine masculinity were published. Silfiyah (2017) and

Ulinuha (2017) examined the masculinity of female characters in literature works by showing their masculine traits. Silfiyah (2017) established that the focused character in her paper shows her masculine traits through the character's doings and deeds, while Ulinuha found that the masculine traits showed by the female character she analyzed are assertiveness, confined emotions, independence, and status and happiness pursuit. In Parvathi's paper (2017), respecting feminine masculinity in *Hunger Games* series books by Suzzane Collins, masculine traits showed by the major female characters in the series novels give the characters power that linked to the masculinity.

The same theory of feminine masculinity employed by the previous studies is used as the main instrument to conduct this research regarding feminine masculinity in Maude Lebowski character in *The Big Lebowski* Movie by Joel Coen.

The Big Lebowski is a 1998 film directed by Joel Coen. This film's plot revolves around an

unemployed man named Jeffrey Lebowski (Jeff Bridges) who insists to be called The Dude. The conflicts in the movie starts when the dude experiences a few misfortunes due to the mistaken identity between him and a billionaire named also Jeffrey Lebowski (David Huddleston). Maude Lebowski (Julianne Moore), the main focus of this research, is the only daughter of the wealthy Jeffrey Lebowski, who throws herself into the middle of the conflicts between The Dude and her father.

In the movie, Maude Lebowski is portrayed as a quirky character. She is one of the shareholders in the Lebowski Company, and also an artist who already made several vaginal themed art works. In the film, Maude is showed as an expressionless, assertive and sophisticated woman. Most importantly, in the ocean of masculine male characters, Maude is not shown to be any less masculine than any other male characters.

Considered as one of the American cult films of the 1990s (Comentale, 2009), Joel Coen's *The*

Big Lebowski was not expected to be the director's big success until it gradually drew the audiences' notice, together with a number of scholars. With a handful of its peculiar characters, this 1998 film has already become the highlight of numerous research. Ashton (2009), investigated the connection between the cult of the film and the issue that is depicted in this film, the Iraq war. This research concludes that the attachment to the growth of this film's cult is the effect of the attachment to the morale of that certain time. Klinger (2010) wrote an article focusing on the journey of The Big Lebowski from receiving many negative reviews until it becomes an American Classic cult movie. As claimed by Shaun Ann Tangney (2012), *The Big Lebowski* remarks the nature of American dreams conception from the director and the script writer, Ethan and Joel Coen.

Although many studies have been conducted to scrutinize the cultural aspects in the film as well as the plot, there has been no specific research centered on Maude Lebowski character. On this account,

the author of this paper will examine Maude Lebowski on her masculine performance in the entire film.

To complete this study, a film theory by Amy Villarejo in her 2007 book entitled *Film Studies: The Basics* will be used alongside Judith Halberstam's feminine masculinity theory. According to Villarejo, there are two significant aspects in breaking down a scene from a film, which are mise en scene and cinematography. Cinematography in film points the elements of the frame such as the frame compositions, camera shots, angles, movements, etc. while mise en scene focuses on the elements contained in the frames of the film regarding the visuals of the settings, costumes, makeups and hair do, lightings and the characters' figure. In this case, this study will limit the analysis only to several aspects of cinematography and mise en scene. Frame compositions, camera shots and camera angle from cinematography as well as the visual of the settings, costumes, makeup and hair do regarding the focused character in this study will be

analyzed using the film theory proposed by Villarejo (2007). Several studies regarding the guide to interpret color will also be used in this paper. By doing this research, the author expects to contribute new insights in the field of literature, especially in film and gender related issues analysis, more specifically in feminine masculinity studies.

METHODOLOGY

This paper used the dialogues, several elements of mise en scenes and also cinematography in Maude scenes throughout the whole film as its main data. A numerous aspects of mise en scene used in this paper are limited only to wardrobes, properties, hairdo and makeup. While in cinematography, the aspects that were selected to scrutinize Maude character were limited to camera angles, shots, and frames. Maude's dialogue, mise en scene and cinematography in her scenes were selected because of the object of this study is a character from a motion picture. Moreover, the dialogues and mise en scenes in this film were

collected by watching the film and taking notes on Maude's masculinity traits that were shown in the movie.

After the notes were taken, and all the data were assembled; the data were examined with the help of female masculinity notions from Halberstam (1998) with the addition of mise en scene film theory by Villarejo (2007). Maude's dialogue and action are examined by using Levant's (1995) and Connel's (1995) theory of masculinity traits. Afterwards, the mise en scene and cinematography aspects of Maude's scene were analyzed using the theories of mise en scene and cinematography by Mamer (2008), color interpretation theories by Cerrato (2012) and Hallock (2003). Jacobs and Šlaus (2012). theory about power was also used to strengthen the findings of this paper.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

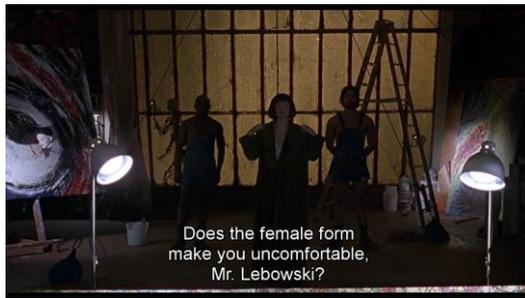
The analysis of Maude Lebowski character in *The Big Lebowski* film using Halberstam (1998) theory of feminine masculinity and the concept

of masculine traits proposed by Connel (1995) and Ronald F Levant (1995) shows that the focused character in this paper portrays a number of masculine traits according to the standard of being masculine as stated by Connel (1995) and Levant (1995). Furthermore, the discussion of how Maude character depicts some of the masculine traits in the entire film will be explained in the following paragraphs.

Confidence

In the film, Maude Lebowski is portrayed as a confident and expressionless, wealthy woman who leads one of the parts in her parents' big company. In this scene where she first appears in the movie, Maude meets The Dude with no clothes on. In the scene, Maude is not shy to show her naked body to a man that she meets for the first time in front of two of her assistants.





(00:43:18 – 00:43:50)



(00:44:00 – 00:44:13)

After one of her male assistants handed Maude's robe, she approaches The Dude and asks how the female body form makes The Dude uncomfortable. Based on her expression seen in the frame, Maude does not show any expression or utters something about how she is not comfortable to be naked in front of all the men in the room. Other than that, the question she proposes to the Dude

does not sound like just a question, but more likely to be a challenging question for him, which indicates her confidence over her body and the notion about nudity. Here, Maude shows her confidence, the first masculine essential quality stated by Levant (1995). Maude is not only being confident about her body form, but she is also confident about her bizarre artworks by showing it to a stranger she barely knows.

Her masculinity in this scene is also supported by the straight eye contact she makes with the Dude shot in close up. According to Mamer (2008), the close up helps and forces the audience to put their focus on the character's details in the frame. Within this close up scene, it is vividly seen that Maude is looking straight to the eyes of the person whom she is talking to concerning a sensitive content. Hence, Maude's confidence is even clearer through the supporting framing techniques as screened in this scene.

Ability to Hiding Her Emotions

The next masculine trait portrayed in Maude character is good at hiding emotions. From the next dialogue Maude has with The Dude, she tells The Dude that she knows that The Dude is taking one of the rugs from her father's house. The rug turns out to be the one that Maude gave to her birth mother before her mother passed away.



(00:44:016 – 00:44:26)

Maude is upset and does not want her mother's rug to become anyone else's property. When she tells the Dude about the rug, she does not show any expression that represents her anger or sadness when she is talking about her late mother;

instead, she tells the Dude with a straight facial expression. Slightly after that she calmly commands the Dude to return the rug. Here, Maude shows one of the masculine characteristics proposed by Ronald F Levant (1995), which is good at hiding emotions.

In the second picture frame composition's, Maude's position is in the left of the frame, which according to Mamer (2008) this unbalanced composition technique is often used in films from the 60s and 70s. Mamer (2008) further explains that this construction proposition demonstrates that an event will occur, in order to load the audience's expectation of what might happen next. While Maude tells the Dude about the history of the rug, Maude is expected to show her anger or disappointment; instead, Maude talks calmly with a flat expression during the whole conversation.

Self-Reliance

Another masculine essential stated by Levant (1995), besides confident and good at hiding

emotions, is good at solving the problems that her family is facing on her own. In the film, Maude knows about the abduction of her step mother and is determined to help her father and the Dude to get the money her father is about to give to the kidnappers, because she believes that the kidnappers are lying about having her step mother. Because Maude believes so, she offers a good amount of money to the Dude if he can get her father's money back from the kidnappers.



(00:47:20 – 00:47:40)

In the middle of the complicated problems that her family is facing, Maude offers a deal to solve the problem to a stranger who is neither the member of her family nor the member of her family's company. She chooses to solve the problem in her own way so her family's and company's name will not have a bad reputation raised to the media. Here, she makes a good solution to the big problem in a clean way for her family and company, so it makes her a character who is good at solving problems by herself. The fact that she is also offer a huge amount of money to the Dude with promising statements makes the Dude trust her and alsomakes her a reliable character that other characters can rely on.

In this scene, her masculinity is also shown through the properties in the setting of the scene, starting

from the colors of her costumes, makeup and the properties in the frame that are mostly shady in colors. Maude is wearing a dark green robe, and brown lipstick and eye shadow. Her properties in this scene is also dominated with a shady and black tinted colors, which according to Hallock (2003), are mostly preferred by men.

Sex without Intimacy and The Pursuit of Happiness

To always pursue ones happiness is one of the traits of masculinity proposed by Levant (1995). Here, Maude is content with her own self and her own wealth, but there is another thing that she wants in her life, a child. In order to get what she wants, Maude tricks The Dude to do medical test to see if he is having a sex transmitted disease then later seduces the Dude to have sex with her so she will have a child from a man who is not related to her but has the same family name with her. From the scenes below, it can be seen that Maude will do anything to get what she wants and to pursue her happiness.



(01:30:39 – 01:31:09)

The absence of intimacy in this scene is depicted through what Maude and Dude do after the intercourse. After the sex, they cuddle and talk about the Dude's past for a short time but then leave each other's

side slightly after that and change the subject of the conversation. This indicates that both Maude and the Dude do not have interest in each other, and the sexual intercourse, mainly for Maude, is nothing more than a tool to provide her the one thing that she wants, which is a descendant.

Strength and Aggression

Another the traditional masculinity norm proposed by Levant (1995) that can be observed in the character Maude is showing strength and aggression. In her first appearance in the film, Maude comes to the Dude with two hitmen and she orders the hitmen to beat the Dude by gives a single glance to one of them.



(00:29:46)

Here, Maude shows her aggression to those who intrude her comfort, which is explained later that the rug the Dude took previously from her father's residence is the rug that

she bought for her late mother before she passed away. Another aspect of masculinity that Maude shows in this scene is strength (Levant, 1995), power, and violence as part of domination (Connel 1995). By hiring two hitmen, Maude is showing the Dude what her wealth can buy her, which are strength and power, and also the ability to violate others.

Maude's power and aggression in this scene is also strengthened by the angle of the camera. Low camera angle is used by shooting Maude and her two hitmen from below. This approach explicates a menacing, powerful and frightening character or situation, (Levant, 1995). This explanation of the angle applied in this scene supports Maude's domination and power to harm the Dude.

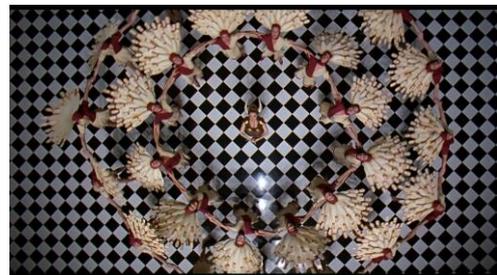
Another aspect that supports the idea of Maude's wealth is the wardrobe she wears. In this scene, Maude wears dark green clothing, which according to Cerrato in his book entitled *The Meaning of Colors* (2003), is often associated with money and wealth. As explained by

Jacobs and Šlaus (2012), two of the many functions of money is as a basis of military strength and source of people's political power. In the movie, Maude is portrayed as a wealthy woman who owns a huge amount of money, which instantly gives her power. Here, Maude manages to use her wealth as her strength to be more powerful than others and do things as she desires.

Power and Domination

The last masculine trait observed in Maude is her power and domination which can be seen in the Dude's dream scene. In this scene, Maude appears standing in the middle of many female dancers. As the dancers dance, they make a circular formation while bowing several times to Maude as she is standing in the middle of them wearing a gold Viking costume while holding a spear. The spear Maude holds in this scene has a similar shape with the trident of Poseidon, the sea god from ancient Greek mythology. After breaking the circle shaped formation of the dancers, they stand behind Maude forming a one line formation, and as

she turns and walks to the opposite direction the dancers open the formation to give Maude space to walk.



(01:21:47 – 01:23:12)

In one of the shots in this scene, Maude is shot from above her head, which is called the high angle

technique. In Mamer's (2008) explanation, this particular approach

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, even though Maude Lebowski is a female character, she portrays some masculine characteristics proposed by Levant (1995) and Connel (1995). Based on the findings, Maude shows her masculinity essence through her power, domination, strength, aggression, reliability, and ability to hide her emotions as well as performing sex without any intimacy. The masculine traits are mostly portrayed through the elements of characterization in the film, namely actions, utterances, physical appearance and surroundings. According to Rimmon-Keenan (2002), those elements approve that the film *The Big Lebowski* reveals

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Maude's characterization through indirect characterization. With the help of the mise en scene elements proposed by Villarejo (2007) and the interpretation of its several elements' interpretation stated by Mamer (2013), Maude's masculinity traits are also strengthened by the camera angle, shots, makeup, and wardrobe. Even though most of the mise en scene supports Maude's masculinity, there is also one shot in the film that negates the meaning of its mise en scene as proposed by Mamer (2008). Based on the findings that are collected with the help of masculinity theory, mise en scene and characterization theories, Maude can be said to successfully exhibit her masculinity. Thus, the findings confirm Halberstam's notion of feminine masculinity, that masculinity can also be performed by female.

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