

The Tragic Fate of the American Man:
Perceived Masculinity in Benjamin Percy's "Refresh, Refresh"

STUDENT

Harvard University Extension School

Dr. Elisabeth McKetta

Proseminar: Elements of the Writer's Craft

October 20, 2017

The Tragic Fate of the American Man:

Perceived Masculinity in Benjamin Percy's "Refresh, Refresh"

In the short story "Refresh, Refresh" by Benjamin Percy, a tensely woven first-person narrative unfolds from the protagonist's point-of-view. The narrative choice does not merely thrive because the story "happens" to the protagonist, but also because the protagonist is trying to both understand and defy the world he inhabits. Josh, the protagonist, reveals his world to the unnamed audience by contrasting an overarching exposition of perceived masculinity in America with highly intense scenes hinged on aggression. Within these revelations, Josh is also attempting to understand his world and his role within the world. This dynamic creates compelling, multi-layered revelations for both the audience and the narrator. Josh is a vulnerable teenage boy from a lower socioeconomic class, hailing from a small town that is bordered by a military base—creating a feeling of constant encroachment upon the lives of the townspeople. A military recruiter targets "people who [are] angry and dissatisfied and poor" (Percy 2), amid the tension of the Iraq war. The answer to problems—from having a disagreement to one's father dying—is to meet them with aggression. Yet, Josh toys with escaping his fate—from riding his dirt bike out of town, to the ocean or through the woods, and away from the pull of his seemingly set path as an American man. However, Josh is lured back to a metaphorical and literal center of gravity—Hole in the Ground. To Josh, the crater is "a reminder of how close to oblivion" (1) he lives. A meteor crashing into the Earth draws parallels to war: violence, destruction and a sense of helplessness that cannot be defended. At the end of the story, the recruiter informs Josh that his father has been killed in Iraq. Not only does Josh meet the news with aggression, but he enlists in the military—following in his father's footsteps despite his own abhorrence of the recruiter and war. While Josh is inaudibly aware of the deterioration that hyper-masculinity,

patriarchy and war create, he is unable to resist his fate. Foreshadowing his fate at the outset of the story, Josh states, “We didn’t fully understand the reason our fathers were fighting. We only understood that they *had* to fight” (1). Perceived masculinity tugs at the threads of Josh’s already tattered world, yet he surrenders to the imposing doctrine of “what it is to be a man”—a composition of vengeance, aggression and dominance. In this way, the narrative reveals how boys are tragically brought up in an American culture wrought with hyper-masculinity, glorifications of war and aggression, and the shaming of feminine qualities such as verbal communicativeness and diplomacy.

The narration of the story is driven by a contrasting rhythm of specific scenes and wider observations. Clusters of paragraphs detail scenes wrought with tension, but then the narration deviates from a narrow focus to clusters of paragraphs filled with panoramic exposition on familial, sociocultural and environmental constructs. For example, the first two paragraphs at the outset of the story are finely honed in on Josh and his friend, Gordon, fighting in his backyard afterschool. Then, the third paragraph shifts to a wider perspective with exposition on why the boys are fighting—to seek revenge upon a football player who beat up Gordon. Josh ends the first section, and third paragraph, by widening the narrative lens and providing a segue into the second section: “And if he went down, he would go down swinging as he was sure his father would. This is what we wanted: to please our fathers, to make them proud, even though they had left us” (1). The second and third sections provide wider exposition on the town, the marine base, the boys’ fathers and the war. Yet, Percy never lets his narrator stray into generalized observations as Josh’s narration volleys between highly focused and broadly descriptive stances.

Josh speckles his exposition with authentically crafted and specific adjectival detail, from the Dairy Queen and BP gas station in town (1), to the “one-story cinder-block buildings

interrupted by cheat grass and sagebrush” (1) on the marine base, to the “Coors-drinking, baseball-throwing, crotch-scratching, Aqua Velva-smelling fathers” (1). Following the wider perspectives of the second and third section (paragraphs four through eight), Josh then narrows the dilation again to expound upon what he feels and sees while riding his dirt bike (paragraphs nine through fifteen), before broadening his narration to describe his father and their relationship in the next section (paragraphs sixteen through twenty). This narrative ebb and flow allows Josh to not only consciously explain the scenes and settings to the audience while subconsciously processing his past and present, but to also pace the story between past and present without employing such contrived literary devices as flashbacks or memory recalls. The narrative contrasts of specificity and broadness make for a highly engaging story that never grows stale with its shifting perspectives.

While contrasting perspectives, propelling tension, looming tragedy and linear narration drive the story forward, Josh also effortlessly interweaves the more distant past to provide foundational context without losing momentum. The narration is told entirely in the past tense, yet there is a present gravity to the story that begins with Josh and Gordon fighting when “school let out” (1) and phrases such as, “This was in October” (2), “In November” (3), “Winter came” (4) and “Mid-afternoon and it was already full dark” (5). The seminal moments of change happen in these past tense scenes that are told with the weight and tension of uncertainty of a present tense narrative voice—from Gordon and Josh seeking revenge upon the bully who beat up Gordon, to the death of Josh’s father and the violence inflicted upon the recruiter. The past not only lays psychological and historical foundations for the story to build upon, but also acts as gravitational momentum does when speeding a bolder down a mountain, bringing the story to an exceedingly violent then hushed crescendo.

Percy's inquiry into the large sociocultural matter of "what it means to be a man in America" is successful due to the crafting of elements on the smaller scale. The richly woven world of "Refresh, Refresh" diffuses from Percy's sentences, strewn with rich adjectival specificity, contributing to the strongly threaded Americana texture of the narrative. For instance, in the opening three paragraphs, he details a "pale-green garden house" (1) that demarcates the boundaries of a boxing ring, the boys' "gold-colored boxing gloves" (1), and post-fight swigs of "Coca-Colas" and drags of "Marlboros" (1). The boys' nemesis, a football player, is described as having "teeth like corn kernels and hands like T-bone steaks" (1). The small town of Crow could be Anytown, U.S.A., with its "Dairy Queen, a BP gas station... a bright-green football field irrigated by canal water, and your standard assortment of taverns and churches" (1). All of the fathers are described as "Coors-drinking, baseball-throwing, crotch scratching, Aqua Velva-smelling fathers" (1). Specifically, Josh's father wears "steel-toed boots, Carhartt jeans, and a T-shirt advertising some place he had traveled, maybe Yellowstone or Seattle... To hide his receding hairline he wore a John Deere cap that laid a shadow across his face" (2). Not only do such descriptions present the boys' and fathers' physicality but they also act as representations of what kind of men they want to be perceived as: rough around the edges, proud, manly, American.

The representation of the fathers by the boys acts as an inlet into the world of perceived masculinity in America. Gordon prefers to call his father a gunnery sergeant even though he is a "battalion mess-manager, a cook" (2). The feminine—a profession such as cooking—is met with contempt whereas the masculine is venerated. War is glorified, as the recruiter lures boys by asking them if they like "war movies" (3). The boys imagine their fathers by drawing upon "Hollywood and TV news to develop elaborate scenarios where maybe, at twilight, during a trek

through the mountains of northern Iraq, bearded insurgents ambushed [their] fathers with rocket launchers. [They] imagined them silhouetted by a fiery explosion” (2). The narrator not only touches on the glorification of war by the American consumption of violent films and television but also provides a distance from the brutality of war and interiority of emotions that is also threaded throughout the story. That is, as Josh’s father becomes more entrenched in the war, his communication via e-mail becomes sparser, representing the “suck it up, be a man” mentality of how boys and men are supposed to internalize their emotions during difficult times. There is a vast separation between the small town of Crow, Oregon, and the war-torn land of Iraq, between the son and the father, between the interiority of emotions and their verbal expression. The war is kept at a safe distance, relegated to the silver screen and television, similar to the repressive abyss that exists in the healthy processing and expression of emotions by males.

Noticeably absent from the story is extensive dialogue. The lack of dialogue is representative of the belief that men are fighters and women are talkers. That is, men resolve conflict through intimidation, aggression and war, while women employ such tactics as talking, diplomacy and compromise. The latter attributes of femininity are seen as weaknesses in a patriarchal society, such as the one Josh inhabits. For the first-third of the story, the only words that are not just solely spoken aloud, but also quoted as being spoken aloud, are: “eighteen hundred hours” (1), “Semper fi” (1) and “Damn” (2). The two former quotations refer to the fathers idolizing their roles as Marines and the latter quotation is a reaction from Gordon after being hit by Josh. The first true, albeit brief, dialogue happens on Page 3 of 5, when Josh and Gordon encounter the military recruiter outside of the mall. The boys playfully toy with him and watch as he tries to lure other boys to enlist in the military. The next dialogue takes place on the bottom of Page 3, when Josh and Gordon decide how to scare the football player who beat up

Gordon. And the last noticeable dialogue happens on the lower portion of Page 5—the final page—when Josh confronts the military recruiter with violence upon learning of his father’s death. Dialogue is employed minimally and only to make plans towards aggression, whether it’s to recruit boys to join the military, to act violently and scare another boy, or to beat then threaten a man with death. The lack of communication creates a pressurized world for the boys. They are relegated to processing emotions and inner thoughts within themselves. The repression of dialogue within the first few pages parallels the shaming of the verbalization of emotions that leads to repression within as boys and men.

Percy’s mastery of texturing the story with descriptive sentences and characterization is enhanced by the dilation of the aperture at specific moments, contrasted by wider panoramic descriptions of the terrain, the town, and ideology. For instance, the opening section (the first three paragraphs) hones in on a specific moment and what gave rise to that moment, while the next section is an exposition of the town and marine base. The contrast of paragraphs featuring specific scenes, and paragraphs that contain broader perspectives, creates a rhythm that deters the reader from monotony and enhances engagement and curiosity. As a writer, one can learn from Percy how to drive a narrative that is not “top heavy” in exposition and “bottom heavy” in action and plot, but rather fluidly interweaves setting, character and plot in textured sentences and volleying paragraphs.

Works Cited

Percy, Benjamin. "Refresh, Refresh." *The Paris Review*, vol. 175, 2005.

<https://www.theparisreview.org/fiction/5585/refresh-refresh-benjamin-percy>. Accessed
16 Sep. 2017.