
Toxic Masculinity With Children's Literature in Hate That Cat And Diary Of A Wimpy Kid

As early reading literature was created as a stepping stone for children to be able to read and enjoy books themselves, some writing can be seen as toxic for the reader which can ultimately impact the overall well being of individuals within their society. Specifically, these toxic issues seem to occur within stories that feature a young boy and their status around friends and loved ones. In Sharon Creech's *Hate That Cat*, we see our main character Jack and his struggles to convey his emotions to his uncle in a fashion that he expresses greater interest in, and in Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* our main character Greg struggles to survive in his middle school life when all he wants is to gain connections with others within his class and get the approval from his dad and brother. Common themes and standards, such as masculinity, are prevalent in society as well as literature, yet these standards seem to demoralize those and that should be noted. We are able to see the connections as the characters within our children's stories are both falling into and breaking out of these expectations of toxic masculinity based on their day to day lives and interactions.

In order to make connections with our characters regarding the topic of toxic masculinity, it is important to define the term so we are able to understand what we are looking for. Connecting with others increases happiness, but in close proximity, people routinely ignore each other. At a young age, most men were told the same thing, 'act like a man.' You were in charge of helping yourself, and the message of needing others was showing a sign of weakness. However, these misguided notions of masculinity at such a young age can create a phenomenon of health problems as well as loneliness, which can ultimately spiral into worse situations. Living in a society that focuses so much on how they believe you should act starts the process for an individual to crave what is in their self-conscious mind. According to Niobe Way, a New York University psychology professor in an NPR broadcast, 'These are human beings with unbelievable emotional and social capacity. And we as a culture just completely try to zip it out of them.' The older we get, we are finding people are becoming trapped in what they believe society wants them to be. Similar to anthropologist Emile Durkheim and his study of social behavior; in saying the right to make one's will appear at a certain phase of history offers a fairly exact clue to the particular stage of social evolution. These men are supposed to act to a certain length simply because other men around them are acting another way that is deemed more appropriate and the norm towards society. To provide a positive social interaction we think that we need to act a certain way around set groups of people, and if not it will only cause this social behavior to result in conflict and coercion. These concepts and ideas of toxic masculinity define the norms, values, and structures of society and ultimately can be seen as the destruction of individuals as well as society.

Within both *Hate That Cat* as well as *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, our main characters are ultimately affected by the older men in their lives. For each of our main characters Jack and Greg, these older men both appear to be direct descent from their families - for Jack, it is his uncle and Greg is both his dad and his older brother Rodrick. Jack's uncle and Greg's father and brother can be seen as characters who have fallen into this toxic masculinity and are trying to impact the overall decisions of both Jack and Greg. Similarly to Arjun Shankar's article "Masculinity, Toxicity, Value, and Film," masculinity can a lot of the times be expressed in the most toxic

manner affecting most importantly men but as well as the people who are surrounding them. Men begin to embrace these toxicities which get pushed onto others continuing this cycle. Jack loves to write poetry the way he develops it, however, Jack's uncle insists that "the words that he writes were NOT poems" (Creech 6). It is seen that Jack's uncle has been engineered to believe that only poetry that rhymes is the poetry that would be accepted by anyone, as opposed to Jack's poetry which simply conveys emotion from the words on the pages. Jack's uncle continues to count only his poetry as 'real writing' defining the norm he believes exists and tries to mold Jack to represent himself in only one way - "and that a poem has to rhyme" (Creech 6). Putting down Jack's passion is ultimately going to result in these toxicities of one's true self, resulting in those ideas of conflict and coercion.

As well, the actions of Greg's father and brother are a result of those embraced toxicities which often are tried to be thrown on to Greg himself. Actions that can be seen as belittling and open ideas of conflict are what Greg's father and brother believe are the only way 'boys should act.' On Halloween, Greg's father enjoys the holiday but for a different reason - "while all the other parents are handing out candy, Dad is hiding in the bushes with a big trash can full of water. And if any teenagers pass by our driveway, he drenches them" (Kinney 49). Greg himself enjoys the true nature behind Halloween such as dressing up and going trick or treating but is surrounded by this behavior of how his family believes boys should act on the holiday. As for his brother Rodrick, toxicities come from the fact that he is always trying to put Greg down for the things that he does although Greg should not be ashamed of the choices he makes on his own. When Greg was performing in his school's play any confidence he had was diminished as soon as Rodrick was going to record him. He had known that if "Rodrick recorded it, he would keep the tape forever and use it to humiliate me for the rest of his life" (Kinney 110). The pictures on page 110 showing the smirking look of Rodrick's face also allow the reader to show what lengths it takes for Rodrick to do anything to humiliate his brother Greg. Any opportunity that Greg had to express interest in certain things no longer could exist due to the negative social interactions that are a constant in his life. When the loved ones in young men's lives start to push these toxic masculinities onto them in everyday life it will ultimately continue onto others surrounding them.

Throughout both of our stories, we are introduced to several characters that seem to break out of these toxicities that are present within their society. Each of these supporting characters are able to inspire both Jack and Greg as they show it is okay to step out of the norm without having to fear judgment. Based on studies that were conducted within Rachel Grieve's article "Masculinity Might Be More Toxic than We Think: The Influence of Gender Roles on Trait Emotional Manipulation," it was determined that emotional manipulation could possibly be decreased if the norms of gender roles were switched/skewed. Such studies can be compared to both the characters Miss Strebber and Rowley as they are able to skew their thought past the norms people have given their society and express themselves in a way which they deem appropriate for them. Throughout each of the days Jack has made prompts in *Hate That Cat* we see different writing styles that he had learned while he was in Miss Strebber's class. Poems that Jack had been creating were inspired by various famous poets who each had their own unique style of poetry far from Uncle Bill's rhyme poems, as well as new literary tools to add texture to his writing. Miss Strebber was able to show Jack that famous poets such as Edgar Allan Poe, and literary ideas such as metaphors, alliterations, and onomatopoeia give much more success than any simple rhyme poems because each had its own uniqueness to it. As well within *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, Greg's best friend Rowley appeared much more happy than others as he did not focus on the norms of trying to fit in and continued to do whatever made

himself happy. Whenever Rowley is at school and sees Greg to ask “Want to come over to my house and play?,” (Kinney 18) Greg sees it as just another way to embarrass himself, but for Rowley, it is him just showing his gratitude that he has for his best friend. Throughout the entirety of the story, we see because of the way Rowley is and acts, it almost makes him more popular because he is not trying to mold with how people think it is appropriate to act. Each of these characters has a skewed mindest, setting them aside from the norms in society but not necessarily viewed in a bad way.

For each of our main characters Jack and Greg we are able to see that when they are surrounded by these toxicities in their everyday lives, the overall attitudes of each of them are changing in a negative manner. Within David Morris’ journal “Boys Will Be Boys: Power, Patriarchy, and Toxic Masculinity” he discusses how society has conditioned men to take on this role of “being a man,” and maintain this power. His feelings suggest that it is okay to express emotions such as sadness because it simply shows that they are humans. If you are unable to express these simple emotions, ideas of toxic masculinity will take over ultimately ruining any relationships that are formed or what could be. In *Hate That Cat*, all Jack wants to be able to do is express himself in the poetry that he has an interest in. It should never be a problem to express themselves how they want but there is a hindrance due to the things going on around him and the disapproval of his Uncle. Jack always wants to “punch him” (Creech 7) because his Uncle Bill is trying to maintain his power proving his way is better than Jack’s. Jack wants to express these emotions but since he is always judged by his uncle it is putting more of a negative connotation on their relationship rather than supporting each other. As for Greg, all of his surroundings make him out to have negative attitudes towards everything since he is so focused on the whole stigma of ‘being a man.’ He thinks so highly of what others think rather than the opinions of himself that these toxicities are starting to take over. At Greg’s birthday party, his younger brother Manny had a gift for him that was labeled “To Bubby!” (Kinney 22) Embarrassed of the sweet gestures from his baby brother and with thoughts of ridicule from his peers Greg throws away the gift ultimately creating a negative relationship between himself and his family. Both Jack and Greg’s relationships with their families are impacted due to the ideas of toxic masculinity that are present. Their attitudes are what is causing this disconnect because they are unable to break away from this idea.

It is clear to see that men are eager to make these connections and express their passions but are too nervous about the repercussions that would come along with it. It is crucial that we are willing to listen to those, as well as these men need to be willing to admit these feelings and interests to their loved ones. Some writings, such as *Hate that Cat* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* can be seen as toxic for the reader which can ultimately impact the overall well being of individuals within their society. We are able to see as the characters within our children’s stories are both falling into and breaking out of these expectations of toxic masculinity based on their day to day lives and interactions. If we are not cautious of these details in our everyday lives, we can find that people are becoming trapped in what they believe society wants them to be which can be carried over to our literature.