



The Mask You Live In Discussion Guide

Director: Jennifer Siebel Newsom

Year: 2015

Time: 97 min

You might know this director from:
Miss Representation (2011)

FILM SUMMARY

Growing up is never easy. There are so many codes of cultural context to learn, societal rulebooks to adhere to, and accepted norms to understand. Hardest part of it all? It's thrown at us in fragmented bits and pieces, in seemingly flippant phrases and at off-hand moments. Arguably the core typecasting role we are all handed from birth is based on gender and the norms that surround it, the overbearing classifier that never leaves our side.

Director Siebel Newsom is no newcomer to gender issues. With 2011's "Miss Representation," a study of the detrimental effects of mainstream media on women and girls, she addressed the commonly accepted underdog gender in an inspiring manner. Through this process, she was repeatedly asked, "but what about our boys?" THE MASK YOU LIVE IN is 2015's in-depth offering, a thorough response to that question.

Calling upon an impressive cast of neurologists, psychologists, academics, child advocates, and philosophers, THE MASK YOU LIVE IN dissects the concept of masculinity, peeling back layer upon layer of expectations and pressures. Put on us by whom? Society, that invisible construct in which we all live. The source of our belief systems. The place where boys are taught to exclude themselves from their tender humanity and "man up."

Ever wonder why men are more associated with violent behavior than women? Ever question the machismo that is equated with masculinity? Why boys don't cry? Why the tough guy image is so perpetuated? THE MASK YOU LIVE IN presents facts, statistics, and first-hand accounts of boys and young men ensnared in an emotionally discouraging trap. As former NFL player Joe Ehrmann puts it, "In a win-at-all-costs culture, it's strictly about the win at the expense of character development." For Siebel Newsom and the entire cast of THE MASK YOU LIVE IN, it's high time to right these wrongs and save not only our boys but society at large.

FILM THEMES

What makes an innocent young boy turn into a violent, angry, emotionally troubled man? A barrage of stereotypes and aggressive masculine typecasting is damaging not only men, but society at large.

DEFINING MASCULINITY

“‘Be a man’ is one of the most destructive phrases in this culture,” states former NFL player Joe Ehrmann. Why so? What’s wrong with being a man? The answer lies in the definition. American culture classifies masculinity as a hardened, strong, domineering, powerful, and controlling state of being. To “man up,” therefore, is to exercise power over others while remaining toughened to oneself. Ehrmann goes on to state that masculinity is rated on a three-pronged scale of athletic ability, economic success, and sexual conquest. A hierarchy is formed out of a male’s ability to perform on these three levels, and any man seen to fail in one of these areas fails as a man. Where’s the room for softened humanity and compassionate understanding in this?

LEARNED BEHAVIOR

“Sex is a biological term. It refers to what chromosomes you have... Gender is a social construct,” explains neuroscientist Lise Eliot, who goes on to add, “Things a child spends time on, that’s what they’re going to be good at.” Bearing this in mind, parents, teachers, and caregivers have incredible power to shape future generations. By connecting with the sexual gender of children and nurturing those contrived concepts, we are loopholing boys into being the tough, edgy, blue-wearing, hyper-aggressive individuals we encounter as they mature. The brain connections we nourish and nurture through the stimulus we present define their path to the future, and the social characteristics currently fed to boys have a way of secluding them from their true feelings.

RESULTING EMOTIONS FEED VIOLENCE

Almost every boy interviewed in the film mentioned loneliness as an overriding emotion. Why such isolation and solitude? These are not societal outcasts. These are boys and young men who are surrounded by peers who are as equally lonely, depressed, and desperate for human intimacy. Embedded in societal teachings of manhood is a code of allegiance to toughness. Virility is defined as maintaining an emotional silence, remaining deadpan and unmoved by emotional pain. Tears are for women to shed. With so much pent-up, unresolved feelings coursing through a young man’s chest, the most natural human outlet is through violence. Quite often at the cost of others.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

“Every boy measures his masculinity, at the deepest level, against his dad,” states Dr. Michael Thompson. What an incredible power to have. In the absence of healthy father figures, society assumes that role, in which case the message spoken must be examined. Through the media, the role models we praise, the norms we accept, and the words we use. It is our responsibility to rewrite the rulebook, redefine masculinity, and ensure a safe passage for all boys into a healthy manhood.

“Masculinity is not organic. It’s reactive. It’s not something that just happens. It’s a rejection of everything that is feminine.”

Dr. Caroline Heldman

“The way boys are brought up makes them hide all their natural, vulnerable, empathic feelings behind a mask of masculinity. When they’re most in pain, they can’t reach out and ask for help because they’re not allowed to.”

Dr. William Pollack

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Was there any one aspect or moment in **THE MASK YOU LIVE IN** that resounded the most within you? Were there any statements or facts that you found shocking? Which aspects of the film were you already familiar with?
2. What is your definition of masculinity? How has your present-day definition of this word been informed? Have you actively challenged societal concepts of masculinity, or do you feel you have taken a more passive approach and absorbed gender norms?
3. What is your definition of femininity? Regardless of your gender, do you think you are a more masculine or feminine individual, according to your definitions of both masculinity and femininity?
4. Did you play sports as a child? In what ways were concepts of masculinity intertwined with athletic ability in your upbringing?
5. How were you taught about sexuality as a child? Were your first intimate experiences informed by societal stereotypes in any way? Can you think of any examples of sexually charged imagery you have seen in the media lately, and how they inspire either negative or positive feelings around masculinity?
6. **THE MASK YOU LIVE IN** is a U.S.-centric film, delving into the concept of masculinity from a North American perspective. Do you have any experience of gender roles in other countries? Are there any stereotypes/concepts that can be applied to the global community? Any specific examples of how the U.S. differs from other societies when it comes to masculinity and how males are treated?
7. However you identify yourself gender-wise, do you consider yourself to be a strong or weak individual? Do you associate your answer with masculine/feminine stereotypes in any way? When you are feeling weak, do you feel more feminine, and vice versa?
8. What traits are valued in your community? How is a “good person” described by others? Are positive traits generally more masculine or feminine by nature?
9. Do you ever wear a metaphorical mask when facing the outside world? If so, describe this mask. What function does it have? Does it serve you well?
10. What is your idea of “healthy masculinity?” What active steps can you take today in order to encourage healthy attitudes around masculinity at all levels of society?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- THE MASK YOU LIVE IN had its world premiere at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival. Prior to that, it had its first screening in director Siebel Newsom's hometown San Francisco at Lucasfilm Theatre, home to "Star Wars" and "Indiana Jones," arguably examples of toxic masculinity.
- Siebel Newsom graduated from Stanford University's Graduate School of Business and went on to release "Miss Representation" in 2011, a documentary on the connection between mainstream media and the under-representation of women in positions of power. Due to the film's success, she launched The Representation Project, in order to inspire people to overcome gender stereotypes. As she traveled the world with "Miss Representation," she was constantly asked, "but what about our boys?" Pregnant with her son Hunter, she felt inspired to delve into the modern concept of masculinity.
- Siebel Newsom was awarded the Jury Prize for Best Achievement in Female Filmmaking for THE MASK YOU LIVE IN at the Las Vegas Film Festival.
- Joe Ehrmann, the former NFL player featured in the film, now works as a minister and motivational speaker. He has two sons, who both play sports at semi-professional levels.
- The word "masculine" is derived from the Latin "masculus," meaning male. The word was first associated with having the qualities of being manly, virile, and powerful in the 1620s.
- Between 2001 and 2012, 2,002 U.S. troops were killed in Afghanistan. Over the same period, 11,766 American women were killed by their boyfriends or husbands, a testament to the violence pervading the male U.S. psyche.
- As of 2014, males were four times more likely to commit suicide than their female counterparts, representing 79% of all U.S. suicides. Firearms are the most common suicide method amongst men, while females commonly use poisoning.
- According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, boys are 30% more likely to drop out of school than girls, with girls receiving higher grades than boys at all levels of education, from elementary to graduate school. Boys constitute 65% of special-ed students, are five times more likely to be labeled as hyperactive, and are four times more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD.
- There are many harmful, sexist phrases boys and men hear on a regular basis, which informs their view of themselves and the world in which they live and are derogatory to both men and women. Some include: man up, be a man, grow some balls, don't be a pussy, stop acting like a girl, wear the pants in your relationship, that's a man/woman's place, manpower. The list goes on.
- Out of the 12 million single-parent households in the U.S. in 2014, 83% were headed by single mothers, with 1 in 4 children—around 17.8 million in total—being raised without a father.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** THE MASK YOU LIVE IN with the women, men, boys, and girls in your life. Consider watching "[Miss Representation](#)," Jennifer Siebel Newsom's companion film analyzing society's misrepresentation of girls.
2. **Visit** The Representation Project website, which offers links to videos, articles, and further reading material.
3. **Read** a book about gender issues written by a member of THE MASK YOU LIVE IN cast. Try Lise Eliot's "Pink Brain, Blue Brain," Michael Kimmel's "Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era," Joe Ehrmann's "Season of Life: A Football Star, a Boy, a Journey to Manhood," or Niobe Way's "Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection."
4. **Sign up** to take the [Representation Project's Pledge](#): "I pledge to use my voice to challenge society's limiting representations of gender." You will receive weekly suggestions of practical tasks you can do to this effect.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.