

Analysis of the artwork *Murder* by Jared French in the context of Christianity, Masculinity and Homosexuality

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Abstract. This paper aims to explore the dilemma society imposed on the queer community by analyzing the artwork *Murder* by Jared French and exploring the connection between Christianity, homosexuality, and masculinity. *Murder* is one of the paintings displayed in *The Young and Evil*, a collection of artworks created by artists during 1930-the 1940s. The analysis is based on a review of relative materials and literature. The purpose of the review is to give an insight into the dilemma that queer community faced in the context of the era, thereby promoting people with queer identities to pursue equal rights and opportunities. This essay provided an in-depth overview of the art piece *Murder*. It concluded that this painting could be interpreted in two ways: The newborn, homoerotic Jesus murdered the Jesus that had been re-masculinized from the 1920s, and the subordinated masculinity murdered the hegemonic masculinity. This essay therefore suggests that while *Murder* exemplified the pursuit of renaissance techniques and homoeroticism other artists displayed in the exhibition, the artwork also encouraged the queer community to embrace their identity and not be confined by the restrictions from authorities.

Keywords: Jared French; *Murder*; Homosexuality; Christianity; Masculinity.

1. Introduction

This paper aims at analyzing the cultural production artwork *Murder* by Jared French in 1942, collected by the art exhibition *The Young and Evil*--in the aspects of Christianity, masculinity, and homosexuality. While the painting itself reflects the theme of Queer Modernism, which is the typical ideal artist Jared French expressed in his artworks, the details of this artwork combined with a close, contextual examination of this work endows it with a more holistic and profound meaning and influence.

The *Young and Evil* exhibition is a collection of works by a group of artists who devoted themselves into Renaissance techniques, combined with erotic expressions and queer modernism, in order to depict the lives of queer communities. Analysis of the works in this exhibition can provide new insight for understanding the discriminations society imposes on queer communities and the attempt by the artists to rebel against such discrimination conveyed through artworks. The research on this topic can complement the research gap of acknowledging the dilemma, desire or even daily routine of the marginalized queer community.

This article, adopting the methodology of reviewing related literature and resources, is going to analyze *Murder* by Jared French by depicting the content of the work and relating the choice of color by the artist to the resurrection and re-masculinization of Jesus, which can be further linked to Easter and the article *Big Boy* by David Sedaris. The paper is also going to interpret the background of creation based on the death of French's friend, George Tichenor (the lover of George Platt Lynes, a photographer whose work was also being included in *The Young and Evil*). Finally, the symbolization of *Murder* is going to be conclude by discovering the relation between Christianity, World War II, and the discrimination hegemonic masculinity cast on homosexuality.

In Jared French's statements of his art, which was presented by Wechsler Jeffrey, he expressed his insights about the nature of art and its relationship to society "It has been asserted that art at present has become only marginal activity. If this is so, the artist can hardly be held to account. The artist presents. Society decides what it wants to accept; and whether it wants art near the center of its world." [1]. Based on his statement, it is easy to conclude that Jared French's work was created based on his

observation, interpretation, and reflection of the world; however, due to the expression of freedom, especially the freedom of expressing homosexuality, was restricted by the society, he and his tiny coterie of painters can only present their courage and determination to come out of the closet in academic painting as their refuge [2]. Still, French and his company's work raised a worldwide artistic impact due to the explicit homosexual, homoerotic and queer-themed representation.

In summary, this passage provides the argument that the painting *Murder* can be interpreted in two ways: The newborn, homoerotic Jesus murdered the Jesus that had been re-masculinized from the 1920s, and the subordinated masculinity murdered the hegemonic masculinity. The triumphed man attained resurrection, represented the redemption of the queer modern artists, and fortified the desire for those artists and the queer, subordinated masculine community to pursue their rights and freedom. Henceforth, the goal of this research is to analyze the queer-marginalization in the context of era, homosexuality, masculinity and Christianity and to promote equality among sexualities through the analysis.

2. Analysis of *Murder*

2.1 Content Description

Murder by Jared French is a 17*14 1/2 inches rectangular-shaped painting, and it was painted in egg tempera on a gessoed panel. The painting, overall, expresses an unsettling and weird queerness. The color of the background is Morandi-styled, gradually changing from dark blue to light yellow, making the painting moody and oppressive. Two temples, with bird-like heads, are placed slightly to the right from the center of the painting, calling extra attention to the standing man. Starting from the upper middle part, the color of the two temples turns red, resonating with the standing man's bloody hands, stressing the violence depicted in the frame. The two temples are facing each other, and behind each temple stand four men made of mud in descending position from the frame of the painting to the center of the painting. The eight men and the two temples are all standing on a platform made of mud. All eight men stand in a position that resembles Egyptian statues; The four men on the left side all raise their hands, staring straight at the other four men. The four men on their opposite side, on the contrary, turn their heads to somewhere remote. A man with bloody hands stands in the middle-left of the frame, with one foot stepping across an ashen cadaver. The facial expression of the man is in-between smile brimmed with triumph and seriousness. His eyes are dark yet empty, and the color of his nude body is slightly over-saturated. Lying on the dark, gray ground is a corpse with a color that did not resemble human beings. Rather, the color of the cadaver, according to Carroll, "resembles the pastel hues found on Easter eggs or Bazooka Bumble Gum" [3]. All of the male's genitals are represented overtly in the painting.

The relatively non-abstract part of the painting is the relationship between the man and the corpse. Referring to the title of the painting--*Murder*, it is rational to assume that the man murdered the corpse, given the dominant physical position of the man, his blooded hands, his eerie smile, and the corpse's wounded penis and shocking facial expression. The story tells a simple murder thriller. However, there would be a bunch of details illustrated in the previous paragraph being left out if this artwork was simply being interpreted as a murder. The following part of this essay is going to further examine the choice of the color in the style of the Easter egg and its relationship to the confession of homosexuality reflected in the article "*Big Boy*" by David Sedaris and the double-sided effect of resurrection of Jesus and Christianity--the resurrection can be both seemed as the redemption of homosexuality and the reborn of hegemonic masculinity given that Jesus had been re-masculinized in the 1920s. The Egyptian background can be reckoned as the allusion to French's friend George Tichenor and the accusation of the War, to the need for hegemonic masculinity and the harm behind it. Henceforth, the work *Murder* is the declaration of Queer Modernism and the revolution of Homosexuality and Subordinated Masculinity.

2.2 Color Choice and Christianity

One of the noticeable features of the painting is the dehumanized color choice of the cadaver and the standing man. The resemblance of the color with the pastel hues found on Easter eggs and the literary, symbolic, and Christian meaning of the standing position of the man can be connected to the article “*Big Boy*” by David Sedaris. Superficially, the story talks about a boy being invited to his friend’s house for Easter dinner. [4] During dinner he excused himself to the bathroom and found a big piece of human feces, which was being referred to as “Big Boy” in the passage, lying in the toilet.[4] He kept trying to flush it down, but it kept coming back again [4]. In the end, he grabbed the plunger and broke the feces into pieces, and successfully flushed it down the toilet [4]. However, it is a ubiquitous acknowledgment that David Sedaris is a humorist featuring works examining Christianity and Homosexuality as mundane subjects. Chicago Tribune complimented David by stating that “Sedaris’s droll assessment of the mundane and the eccentrics who inhabit the world’s crevices make him one of the greatest humorists writing today.” [5]. In this story, the human feces that can’t be flushed down can be interpreted in two ways: The resurrection of Jesus and Homosexuality.

The background of this story is Easter, the day when Jesus completed his resurrection three days after his death. The human excreta was endowed with the male gender and the name “Big Boy”, which is an informal nickname for one’s son. Jesus is the son of Yahweh. Henceforth, it is reasonable to reckon that the “Big Boy” that can’t be flushed is the symbolization of Jesus. The influence of Jesus’s ascension can be divided into three aspects: The narrative of resurrection answers the need of disciples to experience Jesus alive; The sheer force of Jesus being altered the very image of God, and made God everlastingly entered human; most importantly, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus endow disciples with spiritual power to make them become the inner entelechy of their souls [6]. Thus, the Easter egg was created to memorize and celebrate the divine meaning of Jesus’s resurrection.

Another layer of indication of the story *Big Boy* is homosexuality. The main body of the story took place in the bathroom. The bathroom has another name--water closet. As the story proceeds, while the boy was trying his best to make the feces disappear, the door of the bathroom was knocked on three times. For the first two times, the boy answered “Just a minute”, with an ascending tone of irritation and anxiety. For the third time, the boy’s answer changed to “I’ll be out in a minute!” [4]. The combination of the setting of the water closet and the aforementioned answer resulted in the fabulous allusion by Sedaris that the boy is afraid to “come out of the closet”, which is to reveal his homosexuality.

Henceforth, the “unflushable” feces can be indicated as the resurrected Jesus and Jesus’s oppression and intimidation of the boy’s recognition of his homosexuality. The indication mentioned above imposed another layer of symbolization of Jesus or Christianity--Homophobia. It is commonly acknowledged that in the Old and New Testaments, whether homosexuality is being reckoned as sinful, Christianity would not advocate any sexual behavior that would not promote procreation. Thus, the Easter festival, which celebrates the resurrection of Jesus, can also be reckoned as a festival that celebrates homophobia. Based on the usage of color that resembles the Easter egg, the corpse, and the newborn man in *Murder*, it is reliable to conclude that the standing man represented the resurrected Jesus, yet the title *Murder*, the man’s bloody hand, and the man’s evil smile all suggest that this painting merely depicted a story of ascension. Instead, the fact that the physical outlook of the man and the corpse is identical provides a new insight that the newborn man may have murdered the corpse for resurrection. The answer to the motif behind this murder can be explained in the historical and religious background of the loathe toward homosexuality from Christianity, the shift of the figure of Jesus from femininity to hegemonic masculinity due to the War, and the fact that the artist himself was a member of the queer community.

2.3 The background of creation

In the Content Description section, this paper illustrated that the Egyptian elements in the painting--the temples and the eight mud-made men--are another striking feature of this artwork. The presentation of the temples and the eight mud men are divided into opposing sides, indicating the war-like conflict between the two sides. Philip Eliasoph illustrated in his article that “French’s painting *Murder* (1942) is possibly an eerie eulogy to his friend George Tichenor (a lover of George Platt Lynes, whose photographs are also included in “The Young and Evil”). A volunteer ambulance driver, “Tich” was killed in a Luftwaffe strafing attack at El Alamein in 1942. French stages the entombment of this martyr amid the cliffs of the Egyptian desert. The depictions of statuesque, muscular men standing around the body seem transferred from an ancient Greek vase.” [2].

World War II lasted from 1941 to 1945. In this period, there is a startling requirement for masculinity, especially hegemonic masculinity in the country. Henceforth, homosexual males were categorized as subordinated masculinity and were not required, or even abandoned by the country at that time [7]. French’s friend died because of the War, or, according to the conflicts in existence between homosexuality and hegemonic masculinity, died because of homophobia. In the following sections, this essay is going to illustrate the reasons and the manners of enhancing masculinity during the War, the physical and mental damage bring on men by hegemonic masculinity, and the symbolic meaning of the work *Murder*.

3. The implication of elements in *Murder*

In previous sections, this essay provides arguments that the artwork *Murder* represents the newborn Jesus who murdered the original Jesus to attain the resurrection. So why did Jesus has to murder himself? What did Jesus represent at that time? Why the original representation of Jesus violates the right of the standpoint of the artist that the artist turned him into a corpse? Starting from this chapter, the passage aims at answering the aforementioned questions and exploring the need for masculinity during World War I, the re-masculinization of Jesus, and the homophobia of Christianity.

3.1 Christianity and Re-masculinization of Jesus

According to *Manhood in America* by Michael Kimmel, the figurative representation of Jesus experienced a re-masculinization during 1914--the 1930s, which is the period between World War I [7]. Before further exploring the re-masculinization of Jesus, there is one concept need to be clarified: People will select certain figure as their icon at a certain time [7]. Thus, the re-masculinization of Jesus can be reckoned as echoing the need of people, especially men, at the time [7]. Originally, the figure of Jesus is feminine--pale skin, lack of muscle, and long-red hair. During the war, religion is used for assembling people and henceforth preparing them for certain conditions. Men need masculinity to win the war, and masculinity can be reproduced through various rituals in homosocial environments. Thus, given the desire to make men more masculine to win the War and the importance of religion for socializing activities, Jesus has to be re-masculinized to give men a sense of belonging, comfort, and security.

The change of figure of Jesus sure did provide sanctuary for men lacking security for the irreversibility of masculinity, yet the re-masculinization of Jesus violates the right of homosexuality. The reformed Jesus promoted the growth of hegemonic masculinity, which is the type of ideal and hitherto the most welcomed masculinity. Men who are categorized to be hegemonic have to be white, straight, and middle-classed. The masculinity of men who failed to fulfill those three standards will be placed into other divisions. For men who have a non-straight sexual orientation, the type of their masculinity was defined as subordinated masculinity since their masculinity was not pure--the party of hegemonic masculinity believed that there are elements of femininity hidden in the masculinity of non-straight men. Besides, Christianity, until the second half of the twentieth Century, believes that every type of sexual intercourse that didn’t provide help to procreation was sinful. The combination of fore-stated two phenomena became the reason for homophobia. Becoming increasingly terrified

about the invasion of femininity into hegemonic masculinity, the white, straight, middle-classed men put more endeavors to reinforce the exclusivity of hegemonic masculinity and impose more physical and mental pressure on women and non-straight men.

3.2 World War II and the emphasis on masculinity

To fully grasp the gist of this artwork, it is important to closely examine the historical background when the work was born. It is a well-known fact that World War II lasted from 1939 to 1945, initiated by the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany on September 1st, 1939 [8]. In the studies of war, scholars would inevitably link war to masculinity, especially hegemonic masculinity. The relationship of war and masculinity, as Hutchings put forward in his essay *Making Sense of Masculinity and War* "...war is linked to masculinity because the formal, relational properties of masculinity as a concept provide a framework through which war can be rendered both intelligible and acceptable as a social practice and institution" [9]. In other words, masculinity can be both the underlying cause of war and the social practice that can reproduce and enhance men's masculinity [10,11]. However, even though masculinity can be reproduced, due to the shift of era and definition of war, the relationship between war and masculinity would be altered through a continuum of varied and sometimes mutually contradictory values [9]. Thus, hegemonic masculinity is in desperate need of a manner to ensure their self-identity. The solution is the enactment of hierarchy and hegemonic-centralism. In the context of war, as illustrated by Enloe, masculinity in the context of the military operates as a kind of intersection of hierarchies, in which a dominant hierarchical distinction between masculine and feminine sustains other hierarchies within and between men and women in different categories of military life [12]. Hartsock also argued that the meaning of the existence of masculinity reflected the particular interest of men in elite groups across time [10]. The embodiment of hegemonic-centralism is by, as demonstrated by Hutchings, performing another way of doing masculinity--denigrating feminine other (represented by homosexual men and women). The definition of feminization has two layers of meaning, which can both be served as the explanation for the eagerness of heterosexual, military-engaged men to reinforce their masculinity. Van Creveld analyzed that on one hand, feminization refers to the fact that there are now many more women in the professional militaries of advanced industrial societies; on the other hand, feminization refers to a process of decline in the capacity to engage in the so-called real war [13]. Kimmel claimed in *Manhood in America* that when soldiers were traumatized by PTSD yet lack of studying it and were pressured by the rise of feminism [7]. Resulted of the prevailing misogyny in society, men have to try every avenue to prove that they can enter the real war, be real men, and out win women in any situation. Given the fact that both femininity and masculinity were built on the opposition of each other, hegemonic masculinity regards everything feminine, which includes homosexuality, as needing to be repressed and exiled. Henceforth, homophobia was born, precluded by the action of the Nazi Party, banning gay organizations and scholarly books about homosexuality in 1933. At the same time, reports of the murder of homosexuals within the Nazi Party are published. Looking back to the artwork itself, based on the fact that Jared French himself is gay, and the illustration in section 2.3. The background of creation that Jared may have created this work to commemorate his gay friend George Tichenor. The painting can be interpreted as the standing man representing the righteousness of homosexuality, subordinated masculinity and femininity murdered the corpse representing the dominant and autocratic hegemonic masculinity.

4. Homosexual Rights, Masculinity & Murder

4.1 The Symbolic meaning of *Murder*

In this section, this passage is going to examine the symbolic meaning of *Murder* in the context of the resurrection of Jesus, war, masculinity, and Homosexual Rights.

Referring to section 2 and section 3, the relationship between the standing man in the painting and the corpse can be interpreted as follows: French applied the allusion to the resurrection of Jesus to

indicate that the purpose of murder is to attain a new level of realization. Relating to the re-masculinization of Jesus from the 1920s to and beyond the period this painting was created, the Easter then did not merely celebrate the ascension of Jesus but also celebrate the resurrection of hegemonic masculinity, which will cast great pressure on homosexuality. Henceforth, to fortify the right of homosexuality and the effectiveness of queer modernism, the French created this painting to redefine the figurative substantiality of Jesus into a homosexualized Jesus by applying the homoerotic artistic technique to depicting the standing man. *Murder* can also be reckoned as the accusation of war and the attached requirement of hegemonic masculinity that not only underestimated the potential of women but also impose discrimination against subordinated masculinity represented by homosexuality. Therefore, this artwork, expressing the murder of discrimination against homosexuality by queerness, is the challenge from queerness to homophobia, toxic hegemonic masculinity, and misogyny by tarnishing the masculinized Jesus, posing provocation on the community of hegemonic masculinity to maintain their masculinity, and expressing the belief that people should liberate themselves from the toxic criteria enacted by hegemonic masculinity and embrace their own identity of sexuality and gender. This art piece also aims at questioning the rationality of placing a hierarchy on masculinity, which would only deteriorate the progress of feminism and homosexual rights by promoting the domination of white, middle-classed, straight men and excluding women from participating in society and earning themselves equality with men. Such an ideal was particularly peculiar and bold based on the period of the creation of this artwork, which, in turn, echoed the topic of the art exhibition that presented this artifact--The Young and Evil.

5. Conclusion

Non-Straight sexuality has always been put at the center of controversy. In the patriarchal society, people, especially men with non-straight sexuality, will be categorized as inferior to men with hegemonic masculinity. Not only did the fact that hegemonic masculinity was authorized will suppress other men who have different types of masculinity, but the hegemonic masculinity also symbolized misogyny that would oppress women. Men with non-straight sexuality will then be categorized into men with subordinated masculinity. Patriarchal society would utilize every kind of authorized discipline to regulate non-straight men and women--Christianity and its homophobia are one of the ways of regulation. Henceforth, women's and non-straight men's pursuit of rights and opportunity are being oppressed and restricted. In order to rebel against the oppression of a patriarchal society, the pursuit of freedom and equality is conveyed through art by artists. Undoubtedly, Jared French's work *Murder* achieved the goal of rebellion--the central idea of murder can be interpreted as the newborn, homoerotic Jesus murdering the original Jesus and as subordinated masculinity murdering hegemonic masculinity. The purpose of choosing this art piece as the topic of analysis is to fully comprehend the spirit of encouraging queer communities to admit their identity and to foster communities in modern society that are oppressed by patriarchy to pursue their freedom. However, the constraint of this essay is the neglect of the effect of the progression of the era and how much progression might shift people's perception of queer communities and the extent of oppression queer communities suffered. Future research can focus on comparing artwork in different time eras and conclude the trait of expression of the queer community, which would foster the progress of future research.

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