

Masculinity in Crisis: An Interpretation of Signoles Failure in *A Coward* by Guy De Maupassant

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Abstract

This study aims to reveal masculinity that appears in the *A Coward* by Guy De Maupassant, and to deepen knowledge how the crisis of masculinity happen to main character. The study focuses on the main character's failure, Viscount Gontran-Joseph De Signoles, when he tries to confront his fears. Signoles failure leads him to face the crisis of masculinity. Theory uses in this study is the masculinity concept proposed by Janet Saltzman Chafetz. In this concept, Chafetz proposed seven areas or characteristics of masculinity such as physical area, function of men, sexual aggression, intellectual, emotional, interpersonal, and personal areas. This study utilized a qualitative method. The analysis is based on close reading of the text and identification of relevant passages and dialogs. This study finds that Signoles portrays masculinity characteristics at the beginning of the story in the physical, function of men, sexually aggressive, intellectual, and interpersonal areas. Signoles also experiences crisis masculinity at the end of the story in physical, intellectual, emotional, interpersonal, and personal areas.

INTRODUCTION

Masculinity has complex definition. As stated by Whitehead & Barrett (2001, p.12), masculinity is associated with several things, such as how men should do, how men should behave which society approves. Other definitions of masculinity are a concept that encompasses speaking, behaviors, and how men act (Rosida et al., 2022, p.67). Therefore, it means masculinity is constructed by society, and that masculinity is shaped by cultural and social influences. For example, a study states that the masculine has high dominance, curiosity, and responsibility. Therefore, masculine always encourages to explore something new (Furnham & Treglown, 2023, p.3). From that study, we can conclude that masculinity has some characteristics, such as dominance and responsibility.

Not only that, masculinity is also defined by dominance and aggressiveness (Connell, 1995, p.166). In this case, the first characteristic, dominance, refers to men's ability to control others to show their powers. Men who can show their power to others indeed have good logical thinking and the ability to make their own decisions. Therefore, dominance is often associated with leadership qualities (De Mascia, 2015, p.2). The second characteristic, aggressiveness, refers to men's relationship with the opposite sex (Coates, 2004, p.177). Men are expected to make the first move towards women in the relationship. From the explanation above, characteristics of masculinity include dominance, responsibility, and aggressiveness.

However, not all works raise the depiction of masculinity itself, but some of those literary works also raise issues of masculinity, such as the crisis of masculinity. In this case, the crisis of masculinity refers to a drastic change experienced by the masculine in a work. The change usually focuses on emotions such as fear or doubt experienced by the masculine in the work (Armengol, 2019, p.67).

The issue of the crisis of masculinity like this inspires authors to put forth their criticism in their literary works. A work that raises this issue is a short story entitled *A Coward* by Guy De Maupassant (Maupassant, 1883). This short story raises the theme of social expectations and gender roles. This short story, written by Maupassant in 1882, focuses on a main character, Viscount Gontran-Joseph De Signoles. Signoles is a man who has to face problems with himself because of his rash decision to challenge a stranger to a duel. The way the main character solves his problems is very much in the spotlight of this short story, which, of course, reveals the issues of the main character's masculinity. Therefore, this short story has interesting issues to study, such as the depiction of

masculinity at the story's beginning and the crisis of masculinity experienced by the main character.

One previous study have been conducted to examine the short story *A Coward*. The *Men's Tears Also Matter: A Study on the Patriarchal Oppression of Men in Literature* study by Waruni Tennakoon (Tennakoon & Tennakoon, 2021) focuses on gender studies that identifying some literary works. One of the literary works used in that study is the short story *A Coward* by Maupassant. This study investigates masculinity oppression, patriarchal systems, and gender stereotypes.

From the explanation above, this research examines masculinity standards contained in the main character of *A Coward*, and the crisis of masculinity using masculinity concept proposed by Janet Saltzman Chafetz. Researchers selected this literary work because it presents an interesting issue to discuss. Researchers hope that readers will gain insight into masculinity as depicted by Signoles as a main character and the crisis of masculinity that is also portrayed by the main character itself.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Masculinity refers to how men behave, speak, and interact with others (Malonda-Vidal et al., 2021, p.9). While, according to Chafetz, masculinity has several characteristics in seven areas. These areas are physical and encompass the functions of men, sexual aggressiveness, emotion, intellectual, interpersonal, and personal characteristics (Saltzman Chafetz, 2006). The first is masculinity in terms of Physical area. According to Chafetz, men who has an athletic body, a masculine body tone, also masculine features can be considered as masculine. Second, function of men aspect. The function of men in question is the function of men toward their family. For example, being responsible for providing food for his family (supporting) and providing necessities for his family. Third, sexual aggressiveness aspect that refers to men who initiate movement toward the opposite sex in a relationship that is considered masculine. Fourth is emotion aspect. Men always refrain from expressing their emotions, especially in public and show little expression of their emotions. Fifth is intellectual aspect. Men describe using logic rather than emotion. Therefore, men are expected to use their logic, deciding something using reason and rational reasons rather than emotion. Men who fulfill these requirements (using logic and reasonableness) are recognized as masculine. Sixth, interpersonal aspect that refers to men must be independent and possess good leadership qualities. Chafetz also mentioned several

traits such as being disciplined, independent, dominant, and able to make his own decisions. Last aspect is personal characteristics. Men are expected to be aggressive, success oriented, ambitious, trustworthy, and competitive.

RESEARCH METHODS

In this research, researchers use qualitative descriptive analysis to explore and analyze data by finding detailed information and evidence that portrays masculinity in the book. As stated by Dawson (2019), the qualitative method explores attitude, behavior, and experiences through such methods. Therefore, the analysis is based on close reading of the text and identification of relevant passages and dialogs. Therefore, in this study, the primary data used is the short story *A Coward*. This is observed through Signoles behavior, his interaction and how he portray masculinity. Further analysis was also carried out by searching information via the internet to find information about the author, her literary work, and the theory that researchers used in this research. This approach uses the theory of masculinity with Chafetz's masculinity approach, especially regarding how the author explores and portrays masculinity in *A Coward*.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Depiction of Masculinity by Signoles

Masculine Features

According to Chafetz's theory, masculinity has several standards, such as physical area, which includes masculine features. In the physical area, Viscount Gontran-Joseph de Signoles, at the beginning of the story, is described as a man with a good appearance. The first sentence demonstrates this in the narrative: "Society called him handsome Signoles." This narrative shows that Signoles is recognized by society as a handsome man. Also, through the following narrative, "he had a good figure and good carriage ... a gallant moustache and an eloquent eye, attributes which women like." This also proves that Signoles meets the standards of masculinity. For example, Signoles is described as having a dashing mustache and attributes that reflect masculinity, which women like.

Dominance Nature

The narrative in the second paragraph also proves that Signoles can be considered masculine. It can be seen through the narrative that Signoles demonstrates his dominance over men through a firing duel. This is reinforced by Signoles words, "I shall choose pistols. With that weapon, I'm sure of killing my man." In addition, Signoles is well known among

men as a skilled shooter. Therefore, he always shows dominance toward another man in the shooting aspect.

Signoles dominance also can be seen through the narrative: “He could not permit this stranger to spoil an ice of his giving” when he hears that one of his female friends said she is being looked at by a strange man named Lamil. He wants to show his power and dominant character toward Lamil by reprimanding the man for politely referring to his female friend by saying, "You have a way of looking at those ladies, sir, which I cannot stomach. Please be so good as to set a limit to your persistence." It does not stop there when Signoles does not get a good response from the man, again, Signoles shows his strength and dominance by hitting Lamil and inviting him to a duel. According to Chafetz, the standard of interpersonal masculinity in male interactions with others entails possessing dominance and showing his power. Therefore, through several things that have been mentioned, Signoles can be considered masculine.

Sexually Aggressive

The next aspect addressed by Chafetz is sexual aggressiveness. In this regard, men considered masculine must move toward the opposite sex. Through the narrative “He had been suspected of several love-affairs” Signoles is described as a man who often makes the first move on some women, which can be an example of his aggressive character. Therefore, this also proves that Signoles can be considered masculine.

Logical Thinking

In the second paragraph, Signoles is described as someone who is well-being of body and mind. The sentence "... in the complete well-being of body and mind" shows that Signoles is handsome and intelligent. The intellectual aspect explained by Chafetz shows that Signoles can be considered masculine. Logical thinking and extensive knowledge are masculine characteristics.

Breadwinner

Last, the depiction of masculinity found in Signoles is a function of men's aspect. In the 4th paragraph, after going to the theater with two of his female friends and one of his friends' husbands, Signoles invites them to Tortoni's to drink ice together. It shows that Signoles can be a provider by paying his friends to drink ice with him. Therefore, Signoles fulfills the function of men aspect when he acts like a provider.

Crisis of Masculinity

In the dictionary, the definition of crisis is often associated with a change in something significant. A crisis of masculinity is defined as a change in emotionally significant or very radical change that affects a person's masculinity (Lenders, 2018, p.2). This crisis of masculinity is usually marked by fear and masculine doubt in solving problems or facing themselves (Lenders, 2018, p.2). After analyzing several forms of masculinity found in Signoles characters, researchers discovered several crises in Signoles after he challenged his opponent, Lamil, to a duel. Some of the masculinity crises that have been analyzed include:

Loss of Physical and Appearance

At the story's beginning, Signoles is described as a handsome guy with masculine features such as eloquent eyes and a gallant mustache. In the middle of the story, Signoles begins to feel afraid, and he experiences a change in his physical appearance. It is stated directly in the narrative: "... His eyes looked to him enormous, and he was pale ...". Signoles, described initially as arrogant and confident through his handsomeness recognized by society, experiences a change and no longer looks firm or attractive. So, Signoles also experiences a crisis of masculinity in terms of his physical appearance. As mentioned by Chafetz, a masculine person must have features that indicate masculinity, such as an athletic body or a firm face. However, Signoles does not show a firm face; he looks pale because of the fear he experiences continuously.

Logical Thinking Impaired

One of the masculinity crises experienced by Signoles is impaired logical thinking. As a masculine, good logical thinking is one of the standards. A standard of masculinity conveyed by Chafetz is the intellectual aspect, which includes the ability of men to think logically and reason. Masculine men are expected to prioritize logic rather than emotion, so if men do not possess good logical thinking, they can be considered to have a crisis of masculinity. For example, when Signoles is alone in his room, he begins to fear his death, so he is also afraid of his bed. This is explained through the narrative: "At that, he was afraid of his bed, and get rid of the sight of it ...". Signoles, who relied only on his emotions (fear), began to experience impaired logical thinking. In addition, the impaired logical thinking experienced by Signoles is described through the narrative: "His brain whirled, his troubled thoughts became elusive, transitory, and gloomy ..." What Signoles experienced

made it clear that he had lost the ability that should be possessed by a masculine, namely the ability to think logically.

Not only that, evidence that the Signoles is experiencing a crisis of masculinity and impaired logical thinking is proven at the end of the story. The narrative in the last paragraph, "...opening his mouth wide, he thrust in the barrel of his pistol ..." Signoles is described as unable to think correctly, and his mind is in turmoil, so he presses the lever of his pistol into his mouth. However, it turns out that the pistol contains bullets in it, so Signoles dies covered in blood because he shot himself. This explains that Signoles does not meet the standards of masculinity by Chafetz because he is unable to think logically; instead of trying or practicing to win the duel challenge he throws, Signoles prefers to end his fear by killing himself.

Loss of Emotional Control

At moments after challenging Lamil to a duel, Signoles was horrified. He was afraid of losing because he did not understand Lamil's background. This made Signoles lose emotional control. "The day after to-morrow, at this very hour, I may be dead... I shall be lying in that bed, dead, my eyes closed..." said Signoles. Signoles was drowning in fear, so he imagined his death. Meanwhile, according to Chafetz's theory, a man can be considered masculine if he prioritizes his logic over his feelings. Signoles was more dominant in using his feelings at that time, even though he had good shooting skills, which may have brought him victory. If examined further, at the story's beginning, it is stated that "He was known to be a fine swordsman and a still finer shot with the pistol." Of course, society also recognizes Signoles ability to shoot. However, because Signoles logical thinking ability was disturbed, he also lost control of his emotions.

Interpersonal Skill Deteriorate

Not only some aspects, such as physical, logical thinking, and emotional control, Signoles also experiences a crisis in interpersonal aspects. Chafetz mentioned that a masculine must have several traits that reflect his good interpersonal skills, such as making his own decisions. However, Signoles statement, "What shall I do? What is to become of me?" shows that Signoles can no longer meet these standards. Signoles cannot make his own decisions and solve his problems well because he is afraid and cannot think reasonably. At the end of the story, when Signoles is approached by his two friends who will ask for help in arranging a duel, Signoles cannot even decide the answer to his friend's question about whether the duel will continue or be canceled.

Competitive Nature Compromised

The last aspect that describes the crisis of masculinity experienced by the main character in this short story is the personal aspect. Chafetz explains that masculinity must have several personal traits that reflect a person's masculinity, such as being trustworthy, ambitious, and competitive. At the end of the story, Signoles says, "It's impossible. I cannot fight in this state," which illustrates that he cannot compete against Lamil in the duel. If we look back, at the beginning of the conflict, Signoles was competitive by inviting Lamil to a duel. He is also the one who decides on the form of the duel using a gun, but at the end of the story, Signoles experiences a crisis of masculinity because he can no longer fulfill his desire to duel and compete.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data above regarding masculinity in this short story by Maupassant, some depictions of masculinity are portrayed in Signoles characters—for example, physical, interpersonal, intellectual, and function of men. In addition, researchers also found several masculinity crises experienced by Signoles at the end of the story, such as loss of physical appearance, impaired logical thinking, loss of emotional control, impaired interpersonal skills, and decreased competitive nature.

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