

## "I Don't Feel Anything Emotionally But Rage": Masculinity in 21st Century Children's Media

Formulaic writing for children's programming is a common complaint. However, formulizing applies to more than the plot. What we assume is masculine behavior can be traced to a specific formula created in the nineteenth century. Tami Bereska's "The Changing Boys' World in the 20th Century: Reality and 'Fiction'" notes that the "classic" narrative of a boy besting his peers and winning a heterosexual love interest has been repeated since the 1890s (168), creating a narrative that seems immutable rather than a social construct. This trend has become crueler over time, spreading to newer mediums available to boys. Kristen Myers's "'Cowboy Up!': Non-Hegemonic Representations of Masculinity in Children's Television Programming" outlines how twenty-first century programs present male characters who are sensitive, non-aggressive, or not popular with women, as jokes (Myers 140). Late twentieth/ twenty-first century programming for boys furthered masculinity's toxicity. Jeffrey A. Brown's "The Superhero Film Parody and Hegemonic Masculinity" also analyzes twenty-first century masculinity in pop culture, noting that after 9/11 the masculinized superhero fantasy gained popularity, even though its formula is a social construction (132-3). Even as time progresses, pop culture has mostly stuck to a narrow formula for masculinity.

However, a survey of current animation programs – the oldest example is from 2016 – reflect a possible shift in how Western writers present male characters. This survey includes varied examples of animation in the twenty-first century: traditional broadcast animation (*DuckTales* [2017- ]), animation on streaming services (*Voltron: Legendary Defender* [2016-2018]), and film animation (*The Lego Batman Movie* [2017]). While these examples differ in format and style, they are all established Western children's animation franchises. Each franchise initially

showcased men defined by their anger (Donald Duck, Batman), or by their power/heterosexual romances (Commander Keith). But in their newest incarnations, these men are now reimagined through care ethics. Maureen Sander-Staudt outlines care ethics as emphasizing nurturing of others to promote social behavior (*IEP*) and subvert patriarchal norms. Of course, nurturing men have appeared in previous animated programs. Examples include Steven in *Steven Universe* (2013-) and Aang in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2003-2008). Amy M. Davis also notes in *Handsome Heroes and Vile Villains: Masculinity in Disney's Feature Films* that many Disney films showcase gentle-hearted men, like *Johnny Appleseed* (1948) and *The Rescuer's* (1977) Bernard (87). In "Post-Princess Models of Gender: the New Man in Disney/Pixar," Ken Gillam and Shannon R. Wooden highlight the trend in recent Disney/Pixar animation to feature male protagonists that unlearn toxic masculinity (2). Gillam and Wooden are correct that the influx of male characters learning empathy reflects a trend to accepting nurturing men (3), but the nature of animation franchises that have been rebooted must be considered as well.

While Steven and Aang are original characters, Johnny Appleseed and Aladdin's stories reside in the realms of folk and fairy tales (Davis 90, 110), vague enough that a writer who wants to create a gentler male protagonist can do so without worrying too much about the character's past baggage. Donald Duck, however, has a pre-set personality due to his commercial legacy, as opposed to a legacy in folklore or a fairy tale: audiences have seen his temper before in past films and/or comics, so they expect to see it in sequels and reboots as well (Blitz 6). Thus, when Donald is revised to become caring, it demonstrates "innate" masculinity's artificiality. These men are not the first animated characters to subvert Bereska's

outline for traditionally masculine characters, but revising the masculine hallmarks of animation into nurturing characters represents a significant trend in how audiences are reinterpreting masculinity.

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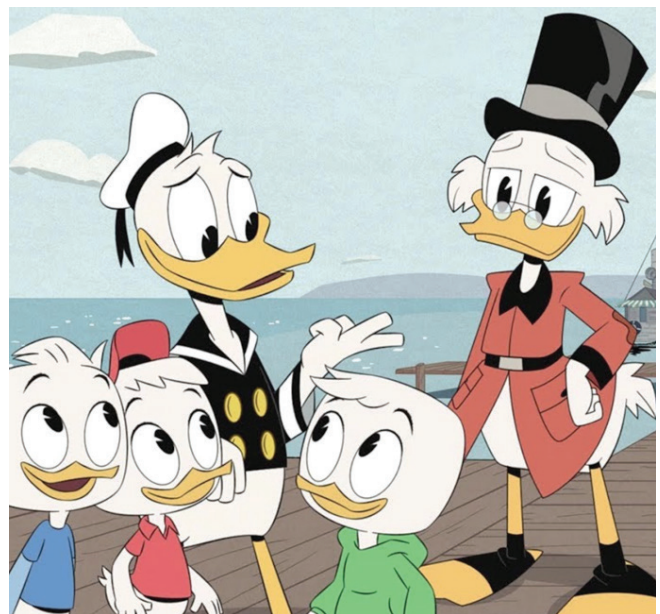
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Donald Duck is famous in Disney media as Mickey's aggressive foil, with his more adventurous streak delegated to comics. While the 1987 *DuckTales* is one of the few Duck-related Disney programs where Donald was not a major character, he is re-introduced in the 2017 reboot series. He is also reinterpreted as a nurturer, rather than a negative counterpart to the kinder characters in the Disney canon. Marcia Blitz notes in the *Donald Duck* biography that Donald's anger was his first defining trait to set him apart from the gentle Mickey (Blitz 6, 7). Mickey Mouse cannot get angry – but that is the one of the few accepted emotions male characters are allowed to express (Bereska 165), creating a dull protagonist in need of an angry counterpart. There have been attempts to expand Donald's character in the past. The most famous example is Carl Barks's *Donald Duck* comic books. In interviews, Barks explains how he gave Donald Duck an adventurous streak, often aiding his wealthy Uncle Scrooge, but kept the negative aspects as well, since he believed children wanted to see the adult figure get his comeuppance (Barks 100). In some ways, Barks's Donald is even more hegemonic: his action-packed adventures compound his masculinized temper. While Donald Duck changed as a character through the various media appearances, he still embodied a form of masculinity defined by anger.

The first major change in Donald's personality comes in the 2017 *DuckTales* reboot. After Huey, Dewey and Louie's mother Della Duck disappears, Donald assumes responsibility as their uncle/surrogate father figure. "Uncle Donald" is a fixture of Duck canon, but showrunners Francisco Angones and Matthew Youngberg ground their reimagining of Donald as a stressed father figure in the character's

adventurous background, wanting to shield his nephews from the horrors of the outside world (Hill). Angones and Youngberg articulate their ethos in the series premiere, *Woo-oo*. Said premiere involves Donald not getting in fights, but warning Huey not to touch a hot stove, and telling the triplets the importance of sacrifice ("Woo-oo!"). This revision in Donald's ethos reflects care ethics: he sees taking care of his boys as more important than his own pride (Sander-Staudt). This is not a rewrite of the character – Donald will still fight when necessary – but the impetus always involves protecting his children. When the Beagle Boys kidnap the triplets, Donald flies into a fit, but his last line before he is overwhelmed by emotion is "Give me back my boys!" ("Daytrip of Doom!"). His tantrum comes from a place of caring, rather than anger or cruelty. Anger is not removed from Donald's psyche, but the nurturing streak creates a more positive ethical system.

Indeed, Donald's love for his nephews helps them to unlearn toxic masculinity as well. In "House of the Lucky Gander!" his nephews, especially Louie, prefer the company of the witty, wealthy Gladstone Gander, unlike the frumpier Donald and his insistence that "family helps family" ("House of the Lucky Gander!"). Gladstone bests Donald in wit and charm, establishing a powerful dynamic over Donald. His perceived power leads to Louie preferring Gladstone – at least until Gladstone brushes Louie aside when he is no longer useful in trying to manipulate Donald. When Louie experiences Gladstone's lack of familial care, he realizes that Donald loves him unconditionally. Louie realizes that Gladstone's hierarchal ethos has no place for children/family, which allows him to understand



the importance of Donald's care ethics. This is later manifested when Louie cheers Donald on when he has to fight for his family. Thanks to Louie's caring encouragement, rather than a focus on competition, Donald saves his family. Donald's caring ethos is presented as preferred, creating a broader spectrum of emotions for boys.

The first season finale for *DuckTales* concludes with Donald's love for his family becoming the driving force in saving his estranged Uncle Scrooge's life. Donald blames Scrooge for his sister Della's disappearance. While he allows his boys to adventure with Scrooge, he metaphorically exiles himself to his houseboat in Scrooge's pool. Readers may expect him to rejoice when his nephews find out Scrooge's role in their mother Della's disappearance. The nephews become disillusioned, wanting to move away from the mansion. Instead, Donald reminds his boys that Scrooge is family, and they cannot forsake that bond in a misplaced attempt at emotional revenge ("The Shadow War!"). After remembering how Scrooge nearly lost his fortune while trying to find Della, Donald understands that despite his flaws, Scrooge cared for Della. This leads to him not only forgiving Scrooge, but caring for him in return. Anger and adventure are still components of Donald's personality, but this shift to care ethics subverts the idea that a male character can only feel anger, creating a more positive role model for children's media.

Hegemonic masculinity is found in older action adventure shows as well. The *Voltron* franchise offers a classic example in its protagonist, Commander Keith from the 1984 Americanized anime, *Voltron: Defender of the Universe*. Level-headed, Keith exemplified hierarchical and heterosexual values, rescuing Princess Allura from various dangerous scenarios while reprimanding rebellious subordinates – especially novice pilot Allura. One example involves Allura explaining why she stole the Black Lion in "Give Me Your Princess": if the team leaves her planet, only she will remain to protect her people. Thus, she must learn to pilot the lead lion as well. While unwise, her choice is rooted in care ethics (she sees her people's safety/care as valuable). However, Keith reinforces the importance of hierarchy when he berates Allura for acting independently, emphasizing that the team structure must remain static and hierarchal ("Give Me Your Princess"). While not as overtly negative as Donald Duck and his temper, 1984 Keith embodies a static/narrow masculine concept.

Initially in the 2016 reboot, *Voltron: Legendary Defender*, leader Takashi "Shiro" Shirogane seemingly

embodies traditional masculinity. Shiro is tall and muscular, and the team refers to him as leader or mentor throughout the series. His mysterious past as an alien captive involves winning several gladiatorial matches. For the first six seasons, he possesses a weaponized prosthetic arm, incorporating symbolic violence in his character design. Everything about Shiro's premise suggests that he is the new hegemonic leader of Voltron. And perhaps he would be, if there were not countless scenes of Shiro in overdramatized distress. The series opens with Shiro fleeing danger, and then attempting moral suasion (unsuccessfully) with his captors. This scene alerts audiences that Shiro, despite his masculine design/status, is not a traditionally masculine hero.

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This subversion is furthered as Shiro is bound to a bed by his superiors at the Galaxy Garrison to examine him after he flees his captors. Again, most heroes in action-adventure animation do not spend a large portion of the series premiere needing rescue. This trend has continued throughout the series as Shiro has been murdered, kidnapped, brainwashed, attacked by needles and tentacles – with all the phallic implications those images suggest. Additionally, he was told by Coran to shut up and put on a tight shirt in order to win supporters through his sex appeal for the sake of intergalactic peace rather than give the speech he had prepared ("The Voltron Show!"). Of course, a hero experiencing violence is hardly new in a masculinized narrative. However, Shiro's misadventures are never romanticized or ridiculed (Myers 140). The violent moments in Shiro's arc are presented as horrific, not heroic. In "Some Assembly Required," the violent trauma from his past affects Shiro so severely that he freezes up in a training exercise, leaving Keith to save him from an attack bot ("Some Assembly Required").

Shiro also subverts hierarchal masculinity through demonstrating the sympathy 1984's Commander

Keith lacks. 1984 Keith, in contrast, refused to look at Princess Allura after she makes a mistake, even though he knew she regretted her actions. Shiro, despite his status, reminds his team that they are just that, a team (“The Rise of Voltron”). Showrunner Lauren Montgomery has referred to Shiro as the



ultimate team player, prioritizing the team over his previous status as Black Paladin (Agard), and offering hugs to characters needing support, including Keith (reimagined as Shiro’s second-in-command). He also defers his hierarchal authority to other characters, remaining in the background after encouraging Pidge to discover her own greatness by finding her Lion unassisted (“The Rise of Voltron”). His desire to care for and help Pidge negates the constructed masculinity needed to be the most powerful character in every episode. This emphasis on care over hierarchy is framed by the series as a fault in Shiro: when Pidge wants to leave the team to look for her family, Shiro allows her, placing her needs over the team’s mission (“Fall of the Castle of Lions”). This newfound emphasis on feminized distress and teamwork disrupts the hierarchal component of hegemonic masculinity.

The most obvious subversion of hegemonic masculinity in *Voltron: Legendary Defender* is that Shiro is gay, revealed in the series’ seventh season premiere (“A Little Adventure”). His existence becomes a rejection of the assumed heterosexuality of male protagonists that is common in children’s media (Myers 134). However, the subversion goes further than that. “A Little Adventure” reveals that Shiro is also chronically ill, which leads to his superiors and even his boyfriend, Adam (who breaks up with him in the same episode) to see him as incapable of piloting anymore. His disease creates a limitation in their minds – or a vulnerability that traditional masculinity will not permit. Since he no longer fits their idea of

a masculine pilot, they wish to remove him from that sphere. When Shiro tells Keith that he will go on the mission regardless, he becomes a character that is vulnerable, but still heroic.

*Voltron: Legendry Defender* also subverts heterosexuality through focusing on Shiro and Keith’s friendship instead of giving either character a female love interest. The 1984 cartoon framed Keith and Allura’s mutual attraction through the knight/princess dynamic. This emphasis presented Keith as a powerful, heterosexual symbol of traditional masculinity. In the 2016 reboot, however, Keith’s first moments involve rescuing Shiro. He rescues Shiro roughly seven times over the course of the series, to the point where Shiro comments on it in the show, asking how many times Keith will have to save him. Keith responds, “As many times as it takes” (“Trailing a Comet”). Humour aside, Keith’s devotion to Shiro over a heterosexual romance parallels Sander-Staudt’s definition of care ethics. Shiro supports Keith in his pilot training, even intervening when Keith is nearly expelled for fighting. He promises Keith that he will never “give up on [Keith]” (“A Little Adventure”), which founds Keith’s devotion to Shiro. Instead of reverting to hierarchal masculinity and assuming leadership when Shiro is presumed dead like a traditional masculine protagonist, Keith values the care/positive emotions Shiro provides him, and does his best to reciprocate. After Shiro’s disappearance, Keith initially refuses replacing Shiro, swearing he will find the one man who never abandoned him (“Changing of the Guard”). Keith not only appreciates Shiro’s care, but also sees the values in caring for Shiro, reflecting his own caring ethos. His actions are rooted in wanting to return the care Shiro gave him in the past (Sander-Staudt).

Season six appears to force Keith into leadership in a masculinized way: Shiro is brainwashed by the villain Haggar, and Keith must fight Shiro in order to stop her schemes. However, the episode ends not with Keith defeating Shiro, but remaining with Shiro in his final moments rather than abandoning Shiro to save himself (“The Black Paladins”). A moment that should have affirmed Keith as Voltron’s new leader in an appropriately masculine way after Shiro fails, instead reinforces that for Keith, Shiro always comes first. This climax affirms Sander-Staudt, and also Daryl Koehn’s survey of care ethics in *Rethinking Feminist Ethics: Care, Trust and Empathy* as Keith sacrifices himself, linking his destiny with Shiro’s (27). Koehn sees this risk factor as problematic (39), but Keith’s care for Shiro leads to Shiro’s spirit helping Keith



rescue his friends, and later, the universe. He provides the solution to Koehn's concern that care ethics may not provide strategies to combat danger in a disruptive, caring way. His care for clone Shiro leads to Shiro's spirit (trapped in the Black Lion) rescuing Keith, guiding him to his imperiled teammates ("All Good Things"). *Voltron: Legendary Defender* is imperfect in its implementation of their friendship in its concluding seasons: while Shiro's onscreen marriage obviously subverts heterosexuality ("The End is the Beginning"), his relationship with Keith cools – aside from one scene in the final season, they spend little time together. Nevertheless, Shiro and Keith's arcs demonstrate how the hierarchal aspects of masculinity can be combatted through valuing each other over status.

While all of these selected works demonstrate revised masculinity through care ethics, *The Lego Batman Movie* is the most transparent in its mission. This emphasis is partly because of its parodic genre, even as the film reimagines what Batman is and is not. Brown argues that the superhero parody genre stresses the masculine hero's artificiality (132), and Batman's early gleeful destruction confirms this. However, *The Lego Batman Movie* provides a fuller subversion of Batman's masculinity than audiences may expect. The film incorporates Batman's multiple predecessors in their mocking, taking advantage of how Batman has saturated the cinematic scene to implement their revisions. Thus, viewers realize that Batman's violent, anger-fueled quest for revenge has been repeated for decades. While Batman declares rage is part of his identity, in response Alfred outlines Batmans in reverse chronology from 2016 to the 1960s, noting that Batman's refusal to deviate from expressing only negative emotions has led to a stagnant character.

Alfred serves two purposes in the film. He becomes a parental figure to Batman – an idea that the film confirms with Alfred learning to curtail Batman's bad behavior from reading a book about disciplining unruly children. Also, his reference to

Batman experiencing cycles of anger/vengeance over the decades emphasizes how boys' media repeats Bereska's narrow formula for masculinity – and lets the audience know that this formula is a construction through its repetition in both Alfred's speech and the imagery of past Batmans (invoking movie posters and/or iconic moments in past films, reinforcing Batman's artificial ethos). Alfred also reflects care ethics, noting that Batman's anger is not innate, but because he does not want to feel the pain of familial loss again. As a father figure, Alfred suggests that Batman create a new family – and makes him raise his adopted son, Robin. Alfred's insistence that Batman should show the orphaned Robin the warmth Alfred showed the orphaned Bruce Wayne in his youth presents a way for care ethics to be inherited through the generations.

Batman's stagnation is contrasted to Gotham police commissioner Barbara Gordon, who infuses her own ethical system with compassion, and notes that Batman's ethos of dressing up and hitting poor people has not stopped any criminals. She does not want to stop Batman, but rather incorporate him into her compassionate ethical system. Batman, who will not allow himself to feel anything but anger, cannot tolerate this idea. His inability to understand care ethics leads to his breaking the law, and his own arrest. But Batman learns the value of care ethics through his surrogate son, Robin. Unlike the majority of other *Batman* adaptations, Bruce Wayne (accidentally) adopts Robin, making him Batman's legal son. This father-son link is furthered as Robin calls him "Dad," providing Batman the familial care and positive emotions that he was denied when his parents were murdered.

Batman's ethos shifts from anger to nurturing when he realizes that his masculine ethical system has placed Robin in mortal danger, after Batman is imprisoned in the Phantom Zone, leaving his allies to defend Gotham. After internalizing Batman's destructive ethos, Robin decides the best way to save the city/his father is to "not listen to anyone else. Be mean to people. Destroy as much property as possible. Talk in a really low, gravelly voice, and go it alone" (*The Lego Batman Movie*). Batman is horrified as he watches his son embody masculinized ethos, and the dangers that Dick's choice involves. His plea with Dick to not emulate his behavior is a far cry from the movie's beginning, when Batman sings about his violent adventures. Batman's paternal concern for Robin leads him to sacrifice himself physically – agreeing to enter the Phantom Zone, an interdimensional jail – and emotionally, admitting

his hate for the Joker, and saving Gotham. Batman's embracing of care ethos leads to his own freedom at the film's end, and prevents Robin from internalizing the narrow/violent masculinity of the franchise's past.

The formula for masculinity in children's entertainment has remained stagnant for over a century, reinforcing the notion that male characters are supposed to be angry, heterosexual, and obsessed with gaining power over others. But recent developments in societal and cultural values of masculinity have emerged in children's animations. Reboots and sequels have become a way to reinterpret formulaic writing to reimagine gender roles for twenty-first century audiences. Characters that once represented traditional masculinity now show boys and men that expressing vulnerability and love is permissible. This reversal of gender roles is not exclusive to men – as male characters are reimagined as gentler, female characters have gained more agency. As Keith, Batman, and Donald Duck have accepted roles beyond anger and violence, their female counterparts (Allura, Barbara Gordon, Webby Vanderquack) can now assume more assertive roles in their respective programs. While the implementation is sometimes imperfect, reimagining male characters as nurturers creates a more inclusive sphere for the characters and their audiences.

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