



**The English Boy Among
the Derry Girls:
Marginalised Masculinities
in *Derry Girls***

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Abstract

In the 1990s, migration from England to Northern Ireland would carry real and, at times, negative implications for a young man, an experience depicted in the television series *Derry Girls* through the character of James Maguire. James portrays issues of masculinities within the show relating to the experience of migrant men as well as representing the marginalised experience of a young man whose key cohort is made up of strong women. This article examines James in comparison to other male characters to highlight the show's understanding of the migrant English male experience in Derry using Connell's key framework of hegemonic masculinities within the environmental context of the show. Additionally, the challenges faced by men who grow up in a female-dominated environment such as emasculation are examined.

Key words

Migration; Masculinities; Heteronormativity; Hegemonic masculinity; Northern Ireland

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Introduction

"Lads aren't going to make friends with you, James! Lads make friends with other lads!"

- Michelle Mallon, ("Across the Barricade", 04:44)

Taking the world by storm in 2018, the television series *Derry Girls*, with its political backdrop of the 1990s in Derry, Northern Ireland during the Troubles, has been praised by feminist scholars for its refreshing portrayal and representation of young female characters. Unlike past portrayals of women from Northern Ireland as victims of a political system or oppressed by the Catholic Church, the series' characters are vivacious, nuanced, and unapologetically true to the real-life experience of teenage girls of the time. The show's creator and Derry native, Lisa McGee, has expressed that her goal was to create a show centred around the strong women she grew up with, who were oftentimes the breadwinners of the family during the 1990s ("Teenager's life during The Troubles" 2016). McGee states that: "Anything set during the Troubles tends to be a bit grim and bleak, but that just wasn't my experience of Derry as a child and a teenager, it was a joyful place. (...) I'd like to celebrate that. It was also hugely matriarchal, so I was keen we have a large and varied cast of female characters" ("Teenager's life during The Troubles" 2016).

While navigating teenage life during the Troubles, McGee does not solely focus on the female experience but illustrates issues of masculinities of the time through her male characters, particularly through the three main male characters: the patriarchal figure of the house and Derry man, Granda Joe, the hard-working father originally from the Republic of Ireland, Gerry Quinn, and the honorary "Derry Girl" and English-born teenager, James Maguire. Through the depiction of generational divides and different cultural identities during a time of cultural and political tension, each of these characters represents juxtaposing ideas of masculinities. The character of James is particularly interesting, as his development centres around his marginalisation for being an English, migrant man in an unwelcoming environment. He is constantly mistaken for being homosexual or effeminate, seen as "one of the girls" despite his refutes. I believe James portrays issues of masculinities within the show relating to the experience of migrant men as well as representing the marginalised experience of the man whose key cohort is made up of strong women who don't recognise him as a "real man" or a "lad". This paper will focus on the portrayal of James in comparison to other male characters to highlight the show's understanding of the migrant English male experience in Derry and the challenges faced by men who grow up in a female-dominated environment. I will focus on key examples from the second season of the series to refine my argument and to prioritise the issues involving masculinities that the series encounters after James has been established as part of the titular group of "Derry Girls" for a year.

Marginalisation of an Englishman in Derry

Born to a Catholic woman from Derry, James was raised in London, a fact most notable by his accent and dialect. James is sent to live with his aunt Deirdre and cousin Michelle in Derry where he becomes the only male enrolled in an all-girls school, a choice made for his safety for fear of other boys' potentially violent response to James's "Englishness". When we take sociologist R.W. Connell's original framework of hegemonic masculinities and apply it to the environmental context of *Derry Girls*, James's identity is at a social and political disadvantage by being English in Northern Ireland at a time of conflict between nationalists and unionists. Connell emphasises that culture is an important and influential factor in masculinities, arguing that masculinity is

a place in gender relations, the practices through which women and men engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture" (Connell 1995, p. 71)

This point is reiterated by Harry Ferguson in "Men and Masculinities in Late and Modern Ireland" in which he claims that "gender interacts with class and race" and that "the study of masculinity needs to be historical, as well as alert to social relations with respect to ethnicity and class and the global order" (2001, p. 119). When the importance of historical and social context that define hegemonic masculinities is noted and applied to the setting of *Derry Girls* and the Irish perspective of the protagonists, the hierarchy of masculinities portrayed favours the Irishman, particularly the Derry native, over the Englishman. In this context, James's identity is marginalised as he is portrayed as an outsider not fitting within the norm and becomes literally segregated from other men.

The series displays James's feelings of isolation numerous times. A notable example is seen in the episode "Ms. De Brún and the Child of Prague" when a new English teacher exposes the rather telling title of his poetry assignment to the class: "An English Rose Among Thorns" (03:02). The camera cuts to James holding his hand up, his face expressing embarrassment. Ms. De Brún follows up by saying: "I can see why you might want to remain anonymous, alright" (03:08).

In "Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction", Cliff Cheng argues that a man's identity can be linked to either a dominant group or marginalised group depending on how it conforms to hegemony (1999, 300). Cheng writes that "the main reason marginalized masculinities are suppressed is that they are a threat to hegemonic masculinity. Any nonconformity, particularly regarding gender, which is supposedly natural, is a threat to hegemonic masculinity" (300). James's presentation of "Englishness" poses as somewhat of a threat to

the Irish male identity, especially among Catholic nationalist men who would've seen the English as having an oppressive position at the time. With distrust and general ambivalence towards English people shaping the values of the community of Derry, James finds himself in a marginalised position. One example of where the audience sees this distrust is at the beginning of the second season's third episode, where Granda Joe refers to the British boy band Take That as "dirty English bastards", following up by saying "no offense, son" to a shocked James beside him ("The Concert", 00:30). Compared to the other main male characters of the show, James is "othered" for his background, highlighting the issue of marginalisation of migrant English men in Northern Ireland at the time. I would also argue that, despite its setting of the 1990s, the success of the show in recent years highlights contemporary audience acknowledgment of the show's portrayal of distrust for English migrants and that they are possibly still viewed as "other" today.

Comparison to Other Marginalised Men in Ireland

To further emphasise the issues of marginalised masculinities in *Derry Girls*, the same episode, "The Concert", introduces a group of male characters from the Irish Traveller community, an ethnocultural group historically discriminated against and marginalised by mainstream Irish society. Bairbre Ní Fhloinn confirms this in her article "On the Edge: Portrayals of Travellers and Others in Irish Popular Tradition", when she states that "the idea of Travellers and other historically nomadic groups as representatives of the 'Other' in society has long been recognised by commentators from a number of academic disciplines and other backgrounds" (128). Upon being left behind by his all-female group of friends, James befriends the Traveller men, stating "they just get me" (17:55). Robinson Murphy notes the importance of this encounter by describing how James's constant isolation and craving to fit in is found within this marginalised group. Murphy states that "one of the lone social reprieves he enjoys is among a group of Irish Travellers, fellow in-betweeners who afford him a dignity he seldom knows otherwise in Northern Ireland" (60). This enforces the idea of James as marginalised by associating his experience in Derry with that of the Traveller community, and is the first time in the series the audience sees James comfortable and thriving within a group of men.

Returning to Connell's framework of masculinities being interconnected with cultural elements and her idea of gender interacting with race, class, nationality, and position in the world order (75), it could be argued that the Traveller men's masculinity is determined by their ethnocultural background. In a study published in 2014 aiming to engage Traveller men regarding their lifestyle and health, it was confirmed that, to a Traveller man, "his masculinity is central to his identity, as is his ethnicity. Traveller men are men for whom masculinity and ethnicity are intertwined in a

complex and mutually reinforcing manner” (Fox and Hodgins 2014, p. 226).

In the episode, the group of main characters, Erin, Clare, Michelle, Orla, and James first encounter the Irish Travelers when the men run after the friends to return a purse to Clare. In this instance, however, the gang presumes the worst of the men, assuming they mean to cause violence. An altercation ensues in which one of the men, Jonjo, offended by the assumption, exclaims sarcastically: “Alight I see. We’re travellers, which means we’re psychopaths” and “we’re travellers, so we’re obviously violent!” (09:44). The character Erin, to keep the peace, responds: “We have such respect for you and your people. You have such a strong sense of community and such wonderful traditional values” (09:58). This scene highlights the issue of marginalisation Traveller men face by emphasising a cultural difference between the groups with terms such as “you and your people”.

When James is later found enjoying the company of these men, much to the shock of the rest of the group, Jonjo points out that the way the girls treat James “is disgraceful” (“The Concert”, 17:46). What the storyline portrays is that James feels a kinship with the Traveller men and vice versa because of the treatment they both receive from society. They recognise each other as equals within the hierarchical structure of hegemony in the series’ setting which thus reaffirms James’s position as a marginalised male character.

Emasculation and Queer Masculinities

As well as portraying issues of marginalised masculinities, *Derry Girls* clearly illustrates issues associated with hegemonic and social expectations of young men in Northern Ireland by the way James is constantly emasculated and how he attempts to combat this emasculation. Being regularly referred to as a girl or homosexual and being isolated from developing any male peer relationships, James struggles to navigate his masculine identity, lost with no male guidance. An example of this isolation from the hegemonic male ideal of the environment is James’s comparison to other boys his own age, most notable in the first episode of series two, “Across the Barricade”. At the start of the episode, James expresses his excitement in meeting the all-boys Protestant school on a class trip, expressing his desire for male friendship. James states: “I’m really looking forward to making friends with some lads.” to which his cousin Michelle retorts: “Lads aren’t going to make friends with you, James. Lads make friends with other lads” (“Across the Barricade”, 04:42). James is met with dismissive scoffs from the four girls when he protests that he is, in fact, a “lad”. Another example of this emasculation in the same episode is found when Mary, Erin’s mother, is forewarning the group to not become sexually involved with the boys for

the other school for risk of pregnancy. James jokingly remarks that, in his case, that the probability of pregnancy would be low. Once again, it is Granda Joe, the patriarchal figure of the house, that discredits James's masculinity when he remarks "I wouldn't rule it out, son" ("Across the Barricade", 03:42).

The repeated dismissal of his heterosexual male identity highlights issues regarding the rigidity of heteronormative structures of masculinity that define manhood. James's personality, as well as his English background, challenges the hegemonic heteromasculine expectation of men in the series' environment. As well as being at a disadvantage for attending an all-girls school and thus having only female companions, James displays sensitive masculinity with effete mannerisms associated with his English upbringing that lead people to believe he is homosexual.

In his article "Queer Masculinities of Straight Men: A Typology", Robert Heasley categorises queer masculinities that are experienced by straight men to give legitimacy to forms of masculinities that are often overlooked as they disrupt the image of traditional, hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity (2005, p. 310). Comparing Heasley's identification of diverse representations of queer masculinities with James's persona, it is clear that James displays qualities of queer masculinities even though he is straight, which leads to his misidentification as gay throughout the series. A category of "queer-straight males" that Heasley proposes is that of the "straight sissy boy" (p. 315). Heasley describes this category, stating: "These males experience homophobic oppression for their apparent queerness, particularly as young males (...). They are likely to be isolated from straight male culture and/or choose to separate themselves from the dominant male culture. Straight sissy boy males may associate primarily with girls and women" (p. 315). Comparing this to the portrayal of James, it is apparent that James experiences emasculation and incorrect assumptions from others regarding his sexuality because he does not adhere to the strict hegemony of masculinities, thus highlighting the issue of rigid heteronormative structures that men must comply with.

This is further displayed when James attempts to bond with another boy by perpetuating stereotypical traits of a socially acceptable, heteronormative masculinity. James declares: "I love beer, and football and poker and, you know, tits" ("Across the Barricade", 14:55). When met with dismay, he adds: "I am a lad" (15:01). This scene portrays James's masculine overcompensation through performing a predilection for what he believes is acceptable for young men to bond over: activities heavily associated with rigid, hegemonic masculinity. It is clear to the audience that James is lying by his unnatural and awkward behaviour, further emphasising his disconnection from the hegemonic norm.

Conclusion

James portrays a complex set of issues around the topic of masculinities associated with cultural and national identity and queer masculinities in straight men. The character's marginalisation and endurance of constant ridicule highlights the societal values of masculinities in Northern Ireland. However, instead of simply instilling patriarchal values of what it means to be a man, the series allows the audience to empathise with James and displays a new type of masculinity which, although still with its challenges, disrupts the mainstream ideologies of acceptable "maleness".

In her article "Popular Culture: Media Masculinity", feminist theorist and author bell hooks writes about how mass media perpetuates the patriarchal ideologies to boys and men and that men unwilling to change their thinking and actions from an old patriarchal view were supported by mainstream media to assert their control and domination over women (2004, p. 127).

Mass media are a powerful vehicle for teaching the art of the possible. Enlightened men must claim it as the space of their public voice and create a progressive popular culture that will teach men how to connect with others, how to communicate, how to love" (hooks 2004, p. 134).

I believe *Derry Girls* successfully uses the character of James to depict issues of masculinities as well as offering a nuanced, likable example of queer-straight masculinity that proves even English boys can be Derry girls.

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