

In the wake of the various feminist movements of the twentieth century in America, we have become increasingly aware of what it means to be a woman, and the ways in which societal expectations shape the expression of femininity. What such discussions often leave out—or at least gloss over—is a corresponding critical examination of what societal expectations are for men, and what the implications of these expectations may be. A brief comparison of three vastly different essays—Gretel Ehrlich’s “About Men,” Dave Barry’s “Guys vs. Men,” and Paul Theroux’s “Being a Man”—offers us a useful framework for thinking about the social construction of masculinity, particularly in terms of its limitations.

Underlying all three essays is a sense of masculinity as prescriptive—and limiting. All three acknowledge, at least tacitly, that society often valorizes masculinity as aggressive, unfeeling, and powerful. Although Barry glosses over manhood on his way to defining “guys,” he acknowledges that masculine behavior “can produce unfortunate results such as violent crime, war, spitting, and ice hockey” (361). Ehrlich acknowledges the negative limits of manhood by taking pains to establish the androgyny (primarily through proofs of emotional sensitivity and vulnerability) of what is typically considered one of the most “manly” occupations—the cowboy. Theroux, of the three authors, is the most explicit about the negative limits of masculinity, and the ways that expectations about masculine behavior damage our society—both by the resulting misogyny and by the limits masculinity puts on cultural and emotional expression of men.