

"I Finally Got Everything I Wanted, and I'm Wearing Tights":
The Construction of Steve Rogers' Masculinity in Marvel Studios' *Captain America: The First
Avenger*

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Abstract

This thesis studies the construction of Steve Rogers' masculinity in the 2011 Marvel Studios' film *Captain America: The First Avenger*. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is one of the largest media franchises of today, and thus a significant part of popular culture. Over the years, starting with *Iron Man* in 2008, Marvel Studios has released over 20 superhero films that are based on Marvel Comics. Each of these films have received praise and critical acclaim from a global audience. Both resonating with and reproducing contemporary cultural ideas, the representations of gender in the films have also been under scrutiny. The male protagonists and their representations of masculinity have often been dubbed stereotypical, even monotonous. Studying these representations will give a deeper insight into the ideals predominantly valued within our culture today.

Utilizing theories on men and masculinities, the analysis in the thesis will focus on how the masculinity of the main character Steve Rogers/Captain America is constructed in *The First Avenger* (2011). The aim is to identify the ways masculinity is formulated, and whether it is in line with hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Additionally, the roles of other, more subordinate forms of masculinity are also acknowledged in this construction. Negotiations between these multiple forms of masculinity, relationality, and certain (in)actions are key in the construction of Rogers' masculinity and masculine position.

Tiivistelmä

Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastelen Marvel Studiosin vuonna 2011 julkaiseman elokuvan *Captain America: The First Avenger* päähenkilön Steve Rogersin maskuliinisuuden rakentumista. Marvel Cinematic Universe on yksi aikamme suurimpia mediasarjoja, ja merkittävä osa nykypäivän populaarikulttuuria. Marvel Studiosin vuonna 2008 julkaisema *Iron Man*-elokuva oli ensimmäinen mediasarjassa, ja sen jälkeen yhtiö on julkaissut yli 20 Marvelin sarjakuviiin perustuvaa supersankarielokuvaa. Jokainen elokuva on saanut osakseen maailmanlaajuiselta yleisöltä kehuja ja ylistystä. Elokuvat ovat kuitenkin olleet myös kritiikin kohteena erityisesti sukupuolen representaatioiden suhteen, sillä elokuvat sekä imitoivat että tuottavat nykykulttuurin ihanteita. Miespäähenkilöitä ja heidän maskuliinisuutensa representaatioita on pidetty stereotyyppisinä ja

yksipuolisina. Näiden representaatioiden tarkastelu antaa paremman kuvan niistä ihanteista, joita nykypäivän kulttuurissa vaalitaan.

Mies- ja maskuliinisuudentutkimuksen teorioita ja käsitteitä hyödyntäen keskityn tutkielmassani päähenkilön Steve Rogersin/Kapteeni Amerikan maskuliinisuuden rakentumiseen. Tutkielmani tavoite on maskuliinisuuden rakentumisen lisäksi havaita, onko tämä representaatio hegemonisen, dominantin maskuliinisuuden ihanteen mukainen. Lisäksi otan analyysissä huomioon myös muut maskuliinisuuden muodot, joita voi ilmetä. Maskuliinisuuden monimuotoisuus, suhteellisuus sekä erilaiset toiminnot ja toimimatta jättäminen ovat avainasemassa Steve Rogersin maskuliinisuuden ja maskuliinisen aseman rakentumisessa.

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1. Introduction

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), one of the largest-crossing media franchises of today, has produced several films and series focusing on superheroes from the Marvel Comics. The first film belonging to the MCU, *Iron Man*, was released in 2008, and from that point on the film adaptations of the comics have evoked global excitement, the audience – consisting of both children and adults - constantly growing. Following *Iron Man* (2008), Marvel Studios brought *Thor* and *Captain America* to the big screens. Out of the three, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) was the only film set not in the modern times but during the Second World War, thus chronologically being the first superhero of the cinematic universe. Marvel Studios have since released over 20 films and many series focusing on different superheroes from the comics.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe has been a significant part of popular culture for almost 15 years, and it certainly resonates with recent day culture and ideals. The franchise both imitates and reproduces the culturally accepted ideas about gender, especially in the binary of men and women, masculinity and femininity. As the interest in the franchise is ever-expanding, these ideals are easily accepted as norms in our society: in Anthony Easthope's words, "as a social force popular culture cannot be escaped" (2). Throughout the years, the male protagonists have been under scrutiny for their seemingly monotonous and stereotypical representations of (white) masculinity; Jeffrey A. Brown has even suggested that they embody, more than ever before, the ideas of the traditional, dominant form of masculinity (131). Thus, examining and analysing of the types of masculinities these representations value and prioritize gives us a deeper understanding of today's production of gender in culture, an inclination towards what we hold as self-evident and desirable.

In this thesis, I have decided to focus on the first *Captain America* film, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). *Captain America* is chronologically the first superhero in the MCU, and though in the context of the Second World War, it offers us some perspective into what is valued regarding masculinity today as well. Utilizing theories from scholars and masculinity theorists such as Jeffrey A. Brown, R.W. Connell, Michael S. Kimmel, and Roger Horrocks, this thesis will focus on the construction of Steve Rogers' (*Captain America*) masculinity. Masculinity here is understood as something unstable, performed and often associated with the male gender. Moreover, the construction appears especially in relations with other people, both through comparison and similarities.

The thesis will start off explaining the key terms, such as hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, and performance, in more detail. Relying on ideas presented by masculinity researchers and theorists, the thesis moves on to analyse the construction of masculinity in the film. The aim of this thesis is to explore the masculinities portrayed in the film *Captain America: The First Avenger*, especially in terms of how the protagonist's masculinity is formulated. The representation of masculinity is studied not only from the point of view of hegemony, but ways hegemony is challenged and negotiated are also acknowledged. In other words, less obvious and "underhanded" masculinities will be recognized alongside the self-evident ideal masculinities. Moreover, the relational aspect of masculinity is threaded throughout the analysis, as masculinity does not exist independently from other men or women.

2. The Marvel Franchise: From Comics to Films

As mentioned above, The Marvel Cinematic Universe films and their characters are based on the Marvel Comics. Starting around the turn of the 1940s, the comics introduced to the world the superheroes appearing on big screens today, including Captain America. Reoccurring themes in the comics were the stereotyping of good and evil, as well as gender. While initially targeted at children, the comics began to design the stories for adult audiences as well, incorporating darker and more mature themes into the storylines. However, stereotyping gender and juxtaposing good and evil remained central to the comics, and these themes can be detected in the modern adaptations into film as well.

Captain America: The First Avenger (2011) follows the origin story of Captain America. Like the original comics, the film has themes that attract both younger and adult audiences. The origin story of Captain America begins in the time of World War II, and the name character's name "Captain America" itself insinuates that the standpoint to these themes is American, encompassed with Western ideals. The first Captain America film is later followed by two sequels, which are set in the 2010s.

2.1. Captain America: The First Avenger (2011)

Captain America: The First Avenger is the fifth film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and the first one of the three Captain America films. The film is set, mostly, in the time of World War II, and follows Steve Rogers and his transformation from a chronically ill and physically weak man into the superhero Captain America. At the time of World War II, Rogers attempts to enlist in the military and join the Allies. It is implied that he has, illegally, tried this several times before; however, due to his health issues he has been rejected every time. When Rogers is on a double date at a science fair, a scientist named Abraham Erskine overhears Rogers' having a vehement discussion with his best friend James "Bucky" Barnes and recognises Rogers' potential and willingness to be a soldier and help in the war. Consequently, Doctor Erskine allows Rogers to enlist, and offers him a chance to be part of a special super-soldier experiment in the Strategic Scientific Reserve, which Rogers immediately accepts. At the army base he is supervised by Doctor Erskine, Agent Peggy Carter, and Colonel Chester Phillips, who does not believe in Rogers' suitability to become a super-soldier because of his poor health and physical weakness. Ultimately, after proving his bravery and willingness to sacrifice himself for others, Rogers is chosen for the procedure, undergoing it with

success. However, despite Rogers' new superhuman strength and abilities that could be utilized in the war, Colonel Phillips does not allow him on the battlefield; rather, Rogers is sent to tour the nation to promote war bonds in extravagant shows as "Captain America", which ultimately sets him as a subject for ridicule among soldiers and officers, which frustrates Rogers immensely.

While on tour, Rogers hears that Barnes has gone missing in action alongside his unit in a battle in Italy. When Colonel Phillips' decides that rescuing the unit is not worth risking more soldiers, Rogers leaves on a solitary rescue mission with the help of Agent Carter and engineer Howard Stark. On the mission, Rogers infiltrates a fortress of Hydra, a Nazi division led by officer Johann Schmidt, who had also injected himself with the super-soldier serum in the past. However, unlike Rogers, the procedure altered his complexion, leaving him with a red skull, over which he has to wear a mask. The serum also amplified his evil side and conquering the world as the leader of Hydra has become his ultimate goal. Schmidt manages to escape amidst the battle at the fortress, but Rogers returns to the army base with the freed soldiers, including his best friend Barnes. Soon after, Rogers, now as Captain America, is allowed to assemble a team of soldiers, with whom he successfully sabotages several Hydra bases and operations. On one of those missions, they capture Schmidt's accomplice Doctor Arnim Zola, but the encounter results in Barnes falling to his death. Despite his grief, Rogers prepares his team to attack the last Hydra base, which they are able to locate with the information provided by Doctor Zola. Rogers confronts Schmidt on his aircraft, and after a struggle, emerges victorious. However, the badly damaged aircraft carries weapons of mass destruction targeted at the United States; to stop the attack, the only option is for Rogers to crash the aircraft into the Arctic. Nothing more is heard from him, and despite Agent Carter and Stark's intense searching, Rogers and the aircraft are not found until nearly 70 years later. The film ends with Rogers waking up in a hospital room, confused and distressed. He escapes and finds himself standing in the middle of present-day Times Square, as hordes of agents surround him.

After this film, Captain America is seen on Marvel's *The Avengers* (2012). *The First Avenger* is followed later by two sequels: *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). Unlike the first Captain America- film, all these other films are set in the 2010s, continuing the Marvel franchise in contemporary times.

3. Hegemonic Masculinities

This section explains the key theories and terms regarding masculinities. These concepts will be threaded into the analysis of the construction of Rogers' masculinity in the film.

3.1. Theorising Masculinities

The term 'masculinity' in itself is a complex one, and it is hard to give a specific definition for it due to its instability and unfixed nature. As this thesis will show, there are many different kinds of masculinities, and yet not all ways of being male are equally valued. Popular culture becomes popular precisely because it resonates to ongoing perceptions of the world. The popularity of the Marvel Franchise indicates that the views it expresses are appreciated by a large section of the population. Uncovering the various ways in which masculinities are expressed in this literature thus provides insight into current views of masculinity which are circulating along with the movie.

Despite the ambiguity of masculinity, certain roles, traits, and attributes are often associated with it. For instance, fearlessness, the ability to think logically, and not showing emotions are considered masculine. Additionally, certain expressions of gender are considered more masculine than others: expressions of heterosexuality are regarded as acceptably masculine. Kimmel has argued that a dichotomy between genders is upheld through the binary opposition of masculinity with femininity in what is described as the "repudiation of femininity" (126). Furthermore, Roger Horrocks has observed that gender, as well as masculinity, can be understood as containing "a set of myths" and "collective fantasies" that are socially constructed through images and discourses, and then accepted as norm that shape our reality and dictate how people think men should act and be (16-17). For example, masculinity myths include the assertion of toughness and courage, which distinguish it from women and the feminine (Horrocks 18).

Many researchers have established that these supposedly masculine traits are not innately connected to men. By associating such traits with the male gender, masculinity can be understood as a social construct rather than something innate and connected to biological sex. It is recognised as an opposite of femininity, which in turn relates to females; these two concepts do not exist except in contrast with each other, making the concept of masculinity relational (Connell 68). However, as masculinity is best defined by its unfixed, changeable nature, there is no one way of being masculine. The masculine

position can be negotiated, challenged, and changed, through different actions, in relational practices with women as well as -or even more importantly- other men.

3.2. Hegemonic and Subordinate Masculinities

Several theories on men and masculinities have established that due to the varied and unfixed nature of masculinity, it would be more inclusive to discuss masculinities in plural instead of considering it as a single, complete essence. In the 1980s, Raewyn Connell introduced the models of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, which have since been used widely in gender studies across a variety of academic fields. According to Connell and Messerschmidt, hegemonic masculinity embodies the “currently most honored way of being a man”, a pattern of practice that distinguishes it from other forms of masculinities (832). The aspects that define hegemonic masculinity can vary in different eras and time periods, and they are strongly related to the surrounding culture; however, those who seem to embody hegemonic masculinity are often viewed as the most respectable. Additionally, the practices pertaining to hegemonic masculinity allow it the dominance both in the hierarchy of masculinities as well as over women (Connell & Messerschmidt 832). Lastly, hegemonic masculinity is understood to set the standard in relation to which all men and masculinities position themselves, be it in compliance or in defiance of it. Military masculinity, for example, can be considered one of the idealised hegemonic forms of masculinity. David J. H. Morgan has argued that the military is an exemplary form of an environment where masculinity is most directly produced and displayed, and in which the connection between power and masculinity becomes prominent (165).

Very few men, however, enact hegemonic masculinity rigorously. The dominant position of hegemonic masculinity is not maintained merely by men who follow the model, but rather, as Connell has noted, they work alongside “complicit masculinities” that enjoy the benefits of the patriarchal society without actively practicing the hegemonic model (79). Furthermore, although masculinity is always tied to power, hegemonic manhood benefits from it the most; in contrast, the subordinate masculinities that are not able to, or do not want to live by the model of hegemonic masculinity, are faced with oppression as well as unequal experiences of power (Connell; Kimmel; Kaufman). Mostly, subordination in the hierarchy of masculinities has been associated with homosexual masculinities, but Connell has argued that some heterosexual masculinities with enough qualities assimilated with femininity can, too, be “expelled from the circle of legitimacy” of hegemonic masculinity (79). For instance, those who do not play sports or consistently participate in physical activities can be cast outside.

However, hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed position. Rather, it is a mobile concept that can be contested and altered over time by other forms of masculinities, as well as femininities. In addition, as all masculinities are positioned relational to hegemonic masculinity, those positions can be negotiated and sometimes overturned through different practices. These practices are almost always relational, intertwined with connections to other people.

4. Masculinity as a Relational Practice

The construction of masculinity is not independent, but as evidenced, relies on other people. In *The First Avenger*, Steve Rogers' masculinity is constantly contrasted to both women and men, and these practices pose a significant aspect in establishing his masculine positions throughout the film. Starting off with examining the comparison to women and children, this section then moves to study the construction of masculinity in different relationships with other men. The military context is especially important, as the military man is deemed as the most idealized form of masculinity during the time of the war.

4.1. Contrasts with Women and Children

The definition of manhood, as Kimmel has proposed, is constructed “in opposition to a set of ‘others’”, a set that includes femininity, homosexuality, and other aspects that do not fit into the culturally accepted meaning of manhood (120). The dichotomy between masculinity and femininity becomes relevant, as ideally, the male body shies away from anything effeminising, such as passivity and powerlessness: rather, it should exert power and direct (masculine) action. In the beginning of *The First Avenger*, instead of affiliating Rogers with a group of males practicing traditional masculinity, his body is placed outside what Kimmel has dubbed “the realm of manhood”, as it is deemed suitable only for performing tasks with women and children instead of enlisting (128). This is exhibited in the scene in which Rogers is having a heated discussion with his friend Barnes about Rogers' attempts at enlisting in the army the day before Barnes is being shipped out. It is revealed that, due to Rogers' lack of physical health and prowess, his only possible roles in the war at present are to collect scrap metal alongside children and women, or factory work. These roles can be deemed as effeminising and a threat to Rogers' masculinity, as Rogers' male peers, the “able-bodied [young men]” are effectively serving their country, whereas Rogers' role in the war is passive (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Moreover, the powerless feeling this situation evokes in Rogers is made clear.

By implying, in this scene, that the only proper role for a man during this time would be that of the soldier, and subsequently placing himself in the same category as women and children due to his possible roles, Rogers appears to acknowledge the subordinate position of his masculinity and body compared to other men. However, his words affirm that he feels he should have access to the same masculine role as other men, despite his physical shortcomings: “There are men laying down their

lives. I got no right to do any less than them” (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Here Rogers vehemently voices his stance on the role assigned to him, clearly suggesting that the “rightful” thing for him to do would be joining the men on the front lines. However, he has no choice but to join the other end of the binary, which consists of women and children. He has to accept the feminine traits others have placed on him: weakness and uselessness in tasks that require durability of the body. This further contributes to the sense of powerlessness, both in helping win the war, as well as in changing the situation of his subordinate masculinity. Moreover, contributing to his subordinate position as a man, Rogers is clearly juxtaposed with Agent Carter before he receives the super-soldier serum. Carter is a high-ranking agent in a position of power, and her overall actions can be considered masculine, whereas Rogers has not been accepted into the military due to his ailments. Initially, Rogers can thus be coded as feminine, whereas Agent Carter is more masculine. This hinders the actualization of the relationship at this point, despite some indications of interest being exhibited prior to the transformation.

However, though Rogers clearly despises the rather degrading roles assigned to him, it is made clear that he is not worried of the opinions women might have of him. Rather, he is worried about how other men find him, and his willingness to repudiate from the femininity is not because he wants to appease and attract women, but because he needs to be seen and recognized by other men. This need for recognition and acceptance from other men will be discussed in the following section.

4.2. Masculinity as a Homosocial Enactment

The required recognition from other men in order to gain access to manhood indicates that masculinity is constructed through interaction with others, as the practices and performances are given meaning, coherence, and even credibility in repetition and interpretation. Especially the approval of other males is deemed important, and thus masculinity can be seen as a “homosocial enactment”; to quote Michael S. Kimmel, “it is other men that evaluate the performance” and only through them is the individual granted acceptance into manhood (128). The suggestion of masculinity as a ‘homosocial enactment’ exposes the underlying power relations related to masculinity: the subordination and exclusion of women, as well as the dominance of some masculinities over others.

Masculinity is not always innately and biologically male; however, masculinity is often understood as being intrinsically connected to the male body, especially in terms of the culturally constructed meanings the body is given, as well as the discourse surrounding it (Reeser 91). In addition, Raewyn

Connell has stated that “the physical sense of maleness” is imperative in the interpretation of gender and masculinity; for example, certain movements, postures, and sexual possibilities are associated with the male gender specifically, whereas others are attributed to femininity, and therefore are not compatible with ideas of the male body (52-53). Certainly, this idea can be understood as both enabling and limiting for the male body and the actions it can take, as deviation from the normative male physicality may not be valued in the homosocial enactment that is masculinity. These theories of the male body and manhood are evidenced and supported in various scenes in *Captain America: The First Avenger*. In terms of constructing Rogers’ masculinity, the most important comparison made in the entirety of the film is the one with other men. While Rogers’ manhood is, in some scenes, effeminated by highlighting the attributes perceived as feminine and thus contrasted with women, his relations to other men and their view of Rogers are the ones that most define his masculine position in the hierarchy. His masculinity is defined in comparison to other men in what Reeser has dubbed a “corporal dialogue”: a relational practice which can take place between two male bodies, where the experiences of masculinity define masculinity for both participants (100).

The ideal image of the male body often reflects the model of hegemonic masculinity, and thus, other masculine bodies position themselves in relation to the currently normative and most valued form of the male body (Connell; Connell & Messerschmidt). However, individuals are able to position their bodies in relation to the hegemonic one not only by attempting to meet those standards, but also by rejecting the model altogether or defining the image of the ideal masculine body anew. As Connell states, the construction of masculinity through bodily performance renders gender vulnerable, both in terms of compliance and resistance to hegemonic standards (54-55). In *The First Avenger*, the ideal male body is the military male body, which is embodied by most of the other men shown in the film. Both before and after his transformation into the super-soldier, Rogers’s body and manhood are constantly compared to this ideal. Through various (in)actions, he has to prove himself as a man, and gain access to the “inner circle” of homosocial enactment. In the context of The Second World War, the military poses the inner circle to which Rogers’ desires to belong.

4.3. Contrast with Military Masculinities

Especially in times or societies where the military is currently relevant and pervasive, the “militaristic forms of masculinity” are, or become, hegemonic and form the dominant images of ideal masculinities (Morgan 169-170). Thus, examining the role of the military environment is important in terms of studying how Rogers’ masculinity is constructed and what it promotes. According to

David J. H. Morgan, the soldier is “a key symbol of masculinity”, represented in various forms of culture as a figure that, through specific appearance and practices, evokes certain visions about a “generalized and timeless” masculinity (166). This is exhibited in the military uniform, as well as the soldier’s facial expressions and stances: they conjure images of courage, aggression, and a willingness to sacrifice an individual’s life for a greater purpose. Military men’s bodies exemplify aspects of desired and idealized physicality, and they are able to perform the disciplinary tasks of both military life and war.

As evidenced from the beginning of the film, Rogers’ body is not an adequate realization of the ideal military male body and masculinity, which is the reason for many of his struggles. Before the impressive effects of the super-serum, Rogers’ body is not seen as the embodiment of traditional masculinity due to its small size and the considerable number of ailments it harbours. Consequently, Rogers’ inadequacy is foregrounded by the homosocial and highly regulated environment of the army, as during the era of World War II, the military dictate the dominant discourses regarding the male body. In Morgan’s words, while the military separate men from women, this experience “bind[s] men to men”. In other words, in such an environment, masculinity is constructed in relation to other men, rather than to women, which is often the most pervasive way of regarding gender. Masculinity depends on this comparison, and the military men who embody the hegemonic ideal of masculinity are the ones respected and accepted “inside” manhood. In *The First Avenger*, the positioning of Rogers’ body against those that represent the ideal military male physicality creates a corporal dialogue in which Rogers’ body is usually asserted as subordinate in relation to other men and their bodies, despite some qualities indicating that he could also represent complicit masculinity.

Rogers is shown, for the first time in the film, during the process of trying to enlist in the military. At the enrolment facility, several men are sitting on benches and waiting for their turn to the health examination. All of them appear to be of average build and height, with very little variation between their appearances: in other words, they seem to exemplify the ideal male body that is healthy and useful in the war. One man is reading a newspaper that discusses the high death rates of the war. Next to him, Rogers, tiny as he is, stands out clearly among the other recruits. However, a short conversation with the recruit reading the paper immediately establishes Rogers’ resoluteness: as the other man suggests that the death rates make one “think twice about enlisting”, Rogers firmly denies this claim (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). He stands up as his name is called for the examination, looking as tall as he can make himself. However, his petite body clearly evokes sceptical stares in the other men around the room. Furthermore, despite Rogers’ determined pleadings for a

chance to join the army, the doctor declares him ineligible due to the long list of Rogers' health issues. As Rogers asks the doctor if there was anything he could do for Rogers, the doctor replies with "I'm doing it. I'm saving your life" (*Captain America: The First Avenger*).

While this scene functions to prove Rogers' tenacity, which could arguably be read as a sign indicating hegemonic masculinity, it also clearly establishes the significance of mental strength as secondary to physical qualities. In other words, in the hierarchy of corporal masculinities, against the normalized and idealized military bodies, Rogers' body is a reject. Initially, Rogers and his physicality are a parodic portrayal of the male body and masculinity: in an environment where the ideal male body is strong, obedient, and even heroic, a small and weak body desperately attempting to enact the model of hegemonic masculinity only appears to highlight Rogers' masculinity as a "failure" and thus, an object for ridicule (Brown 148).

As shown, the military discourse provides the male body very little possibilities for variation in terms of appearance as well as practices. Reeser suggest that this limiting gives both the male body and masculinity a stable meaning (93). Value is placed on athleticism and tough bodily performances that can lead to triumph, and consequently on those who are able to perform accordingly. As only certain kinds of bodies are able to perform the practices required in these environments, those who cannot certainly stand out among the group as ones that somehow have failed to obtain access to Kimmel's realm of manhood. In the film, Rogers is miraculously recruited for the army by Doctor Abraham Erskine, who sees something extraordinary in Rogers and wants him to be part of the program. The inadequacy of Rogers' body and its inability to engage properly in the required exercises is constantly underlined in the training camp. He is, for instance, shown to greatly fall behind the other recruits when they are running or doing push-ups. While the other recruits are shown to perform the training with strength and finesse, Rogers' lack of control over his body is juxtaposed against the others as an example of what a military man cannot look like. During the era of World War II and the military environment, where the dominant discourses on masculinity and the body are focused on the ability to perform certain tasks and look a certain way, Rogers' lacking body sets him apart as other, and in the hierarchy of masculinities Rogers' is placed on the bottom.

However, although the construction of military masculinity is seemingly irreversibly tied to power that is accorded to it both through discourse and individual experience, a certain powerlessness is also present in the performance: individuality is absorbed by the idealization of military bodies as a collective whole, and the institution requires of its soldiers both subordination and acceptance of the

military's construct. This, as Reeser argues, results in masculinity being located in between empowerment and docility (97). In general, military masculinity appears to follow the model of hegemonic masculinity and embodies an honourable form of manhood, but in its ideal state, it necessitates the ability to both recognise and subjugate to authorities, as well as to the "occasional mortification of the body" (Morgan 167). This kind of docility is often, in terms of gendered features, in accordance with femininity rather than normative masculinity.

The balancing between power and powerlessness in military life offers, in *The First Avenger*, a space for Rogers to negotiate the positioning of his masculinity as compared to those who represent desired masculinity in the training camp. The focal point of the other recruits appears to be their docile and durable bodies, as expected from military men; in contrast, Rogers' strong-headedness and quick thinking are highlighted as compensation for his lack of physical strength. At the halfway point of one running exercise, the sergeant leading the group orders the recruits to retrieve a flag from the top of a high pole. While the other men eagerly take on the task and attempt to climb the pole, competing each other, Rogers is catching his breath. Assessing the situation for a short while, however, just as the other recruits are giving up on retrieving the flag, Rogers goes to pull out a pin at the bottom of the pole. This causes it to fall over and give him access to the flag, and consequently, a ride in the car back to the camp while the others run.

This scene supports Horrocks' theory about physical power and intelligence often being juxtaposed in the male body. Desiring and emphasizing physical prowess of the men can ascribe an image of anti-intellectuality to their bodies (151). Foregrounding other soldiers' bodies rather than their intelligence is an advantage to the negotiation of Rogers' masculine subject position and his attempt to claim power and recognition. Additionally, the incident with the flag attracts Agent Carter's attention to Rogers and his deviance from the other men; this attention seems to signify the dawning sexual attraction between the two, and therefore exemplifies Rogers' ability to follow the hegemonic code as a heterosexually desirable man, which shifts the position of his masculinity in the hierarchy, although only slightly. The corporal body is still the most important marker of masculinity in the environment: to look like he could perform the physical training, as well as the ability to do it rather than use his head, would be more appreciated by Colonel Phillips and the other recruits.

Ultimately Rogers is the one chosen for the super-soldier experiment despite his clearly disadvantaged position in the hierarchy of masculinities. In fact, it appears that Doctor Erskine chooses him specifically for this reason: he is "looking for qualities beyond the physical", placing

value on Rogers' intellectual and emotional qualities rather than the ideal physicality and ability to follow orders, which the other recruits embody (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Colonel Phillips tries to advocate for recruit Hodge, saying "he's big, he's fast, he obeys orders. He's a soldier", which functions to point out that Rogers is everything but (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Doctor Erskine, however, stands behind his decision to choose Rogers, as he sees him as a good *man*. In fact, this is one of the few instances where Rogers is recognised and declared, out loud, to be part of the group of men. Erskine, however, is not enough to validate Rogers' masculinity. An esteemed scientist, Doctor Erskine is also Jewish; in other words, in terms of hegemonic masculinity, which in this context is a representation of American military masculinity, Erskine is in a subordinate position in the hierarchy of masculinities as well. Thus, in order to be recognized, Rogers needs the acceptance of the soldiers and other military authorities more than the one he gets from Erskine.

As Rogers' is taken to the room where the procedure is done, he once again receives suspicious stares due to his looks. Upon seeing Rogers' half-naked, starved-looking body, an unnamed man following the procedure even suggests to "get [the] kid a sandwich", a response which further suggests that not many men hold Rogers' masculinity or body in high regard, and that his natural build is more childlike than an adult man should be in the eyes of his peers. In the procedure, Rogers is infused with the super-soldier serum and subsequently exposed to Vita-Rays in a closed pod. At one point, Rogers begins to scream from pain: while the doctors and scientists attempt to stop the procedure, Rogers shows a glimpse of hegemonic masculinity that he has carried in his strong-headedness. He shouts that he can pull through, despite the pain, and ultimately does emerge from the pod as a new man. This transformation, quoting Brown, represents "a ritualized presentation of masculinization", as the less-than-average man turns into an extraordinary one in terms of his body and masculinity (134).

However, a body that appears to be a textbook representation of the ideal male physicality is not enough to validate a shift in Rogers' masculine position; rather, the quest to prove himself through bodily practices continues after Rogers' transformation into the super-soldier Captain America. Immediately after the procedure, a Hydra agent sets off a bomb in the procedure room and steals the rest of the super-soldier serum. Rogers runs after him to retrieve the serum, showcasing the durability, strongness and fastness of his new body. He manages to catch the Hydra agent, and his heroic chase even makes the newspapers, which seems to celebrate Rogers' actions. However, instead of being proud of Rogers, Colonel Phillips disregards him as an "experiment" and "not enough" to join the forces on any mission (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). He does not see Rogers as a worthy military man, as innately, Rogers was a wimp who could not perform properly during the training;

moreover, Colonel Phillips seems to promote the idea that a man is born a man or he is made into a man in a constitution, not artificially created in a laboratory. Kaufman argues that “the price” of embodying hegemonic masculinity is a suppression of emotions and needs (148). Colonel Phillips’ initial reaction to Rogers clearly suggests that despite the bodily transformation, Rogers has not, and in Phillips’ mind possibly never will, pay this price that would grant him access to the inner circle of homosocial enactment of manhood.

Instead of being taken along to a dangerous mission on the front lines, Rogers is assigned the work of selling war bonds in front of audiences in different states. Whereas Rogers expected to be accepted as a soldier due to his new powers and physicality, he ends up as a showman, touring America in blue and red tights, playing “Captain America”. The outfit includes a mask, which effaces him and the outfit further distances him from the ideal military masculinity. Although the audiences consisting of women, children and the elderly coming to his tour love the show, when Rogers performs in a military base, he faces degrading language and actions towards him. The ridicule and effeminizing nicknames such as “sweetheart” from soldiers that represent hegemonic masculinity is enough to discourage Rogers (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). After the show Rogers talks to Carter about his dreams of serving the country on the front lines, but his performance and the costume is not how he had imagined doing it. His words make this clear: “You know for the longest time, I dreamed about coming overseas and being on the front lines, serving my country. I finally got everything I wanted, and I’m wearing tights.” (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Rogers thus inevitably positions his way of serving the country, and his costume, as inadequate and effeminate in comparison to the soldiers.

According to Lynne Segal, the military represents an institution that is committed to transforming young men into men of power; this kind of a society “needs a symbolic deviant”, who might not be subordinate in terms of sexuality or race, but who is still treated with the same disrespect for failure or inadequacy in traditional masculinity (121). Rogers could be interpreted as such a deviant, for his body and masculinity before the serum were weak, and in the new super-soldier body he has not yet performed convincing masculine acts that would allow the other men to create space for him in terms of power. Rather, in this scene the soldiers and military authorities treat him as a showgirl, which creates tension for Rogers: with his new body he should, in theory, partake in war like the other men do, but he is not granted the position to do so. Instead, his costume and status as a showman contribute to him being perceived as effeminate and as an outsider.

Furthermore, it is especially Colonel Phillips that Rogers needs to convince and gain approval from to claim a higher status in the hierarchy of military masculinities. Only after completely disregarding Colonel Phillips' orders by leaving for a solitary mission to save hundreds of men from behind enemy lines and coming back victorious, does the colonel and the other soldiers recognize Rogers as a fellow military man, and allow him to ascend in the hierarchy of masculinities. This recognition comes from Rogers' disobedient act, which insinuates that while taking his place in the circle of manhood, he is also negotiating the standards of acceptable military masculinity: good soldiers are obedient and follow orders. After the rescue mission, Captain America is assigned as the leader of an elite combat unit named The Howling Commandos, evidence that Rogers has proved his proficiency to dominant men and claimed the power associated with hegemony. The lack of obedience required for ideal military masculinities is overlooked in favour of acknowledging that Rogers has finally managed to "accumulate [the] cultural symbols that denote manhood", such as courage and triumph (Kimmel 125). Further, Rogers turns the formerly ridiculed Captain America- outfit to his advantage from the rescue mission onwards. He makes the suit his trademark, giving it a new meaning: after proving himself through masculine action, he now has the power and position to turn the effeminising tights into a symbol of hegemonic (hyper)masculinity. The suit now represents individuality and power, and not only did Rogers gain access to recognised manhood, he is now deemed suitable to represent American military masculinity on the front lines.

The corporal dialogues, which have taken place between Rogers and other men, have functioned, especially before Rogers' transformation into the hyper-masculine super-soldier, to highlight the differences between Rogers' body and other male bodies. The dialogue has worked in favour of the other male bodies and masculinities, especially before the transformation: compared to Rogers, the other men have been examples of the idealized military masculinities which at the time were most honoured. However, according to Reeser, bodily experience of masculinity can happen both internally and externally, as an individual experiences masculinity in relation to their own body, as well as to other bodies. Thus, in order to further understand how Rogers' masculinity is constructed, the internal experience of masculinity is an important aspect to examine as well.

4.4. Masculine Self-Image

Rogers' experience of embodied masculinity appears to be in dissonance with his image of it: the culturally dominant ideas about the male body are unattainable for Rogers, despite his best attempts to follow and conform to the hegemonic model of military masculinity. The ability to claim control

and negotiate the position of the body indicates that the construction of the male body is not only subject to culturally dominant discourses and their inscriptions; the individual's personal experiences, as well as the way they imagine and perceive their masculine bodies, also construct the corporal body.

Reeser, for instance, has argued that men project images of their own masculinity onto their bodies, which means that the body can be more about psyche than merely an "objective reality in flesh and blood" (99). In this "perception-driven" approach to embodied masculinity, where the psyche has a significant role in constructing masculinity, it is the physical body that operates as the "true subject of experience" (Reeser 100).

In *The First Avenger*, the roles of the psyche and personal experiences are highlighted in the construction of Rogers' masculinity in terms of how Rogers attempts to negotiate the position of his body and masculinity through various (in)actions. Additionally, the way he places himself into the homosocial environment of masculinity both before and after the transformation of his body is significant to the reading of his psyche and experience of bodily masculinity. For instance, while the reasons for Rogers' eagerness to join the army initially appear as altruistic, as proposed in his speeches to Barnes as well as to the doctors, some of his actions can be attributed to his desire to banish the dissonance between his experience of embodied masculinity and his image of what he "should" look like. During the discussion with Barnes, for example, Rogers claims that his numerous illegal attempts to enlist with fake identities stem merely from his willingness to serve the country alongside other men. However, Barnes seems to disagree, stating sarcastically that Rogers clearly has "nothing to prove" (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). The endeavours to escape the effeminacy ascribed to Rogers' body by both peers and authorities continue for most of the film, and he is constantly shown to have the need to establish his worth through bodily practices that either challenge or appeal to those who embody the ideal masculinity. Moreover, these valiant acts of trying to prove himself and his masculinity reflect Kimmel's idea of Western masculinity as a "relentless test", a never-ending attempt to measure up to other, more dominant men and avoid feminine qualities (126).

Moreover, despite the disadvantages his body poses before the super-soldier serum, Rogers evidently gets into a lot of physical fights, as he is not willing to stand down or run away: he dislikes "bullies" (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). These practices can be interpreted as "critical [negotiations] with normative masculinity", as Rogers and his body are not representations of hegemonic masculinity before the serum (Requena-Pelegrí 13). Consequently, these negotiations by fighting can be understood as one of Rogers' ways of attempting to escape the cultural meanings inscribed to his

weak body, and to demonstrate manhood and claim power without completely reconstructing his masculine identity to conform to hegemonic norms. Moreover, Rogers' affinity to violence is an important aspect to note regarding the construction of his masculinity, as despite the small size of his body and its subordinate position, he is more than determined to take part in the war, which is brutal and wild by nature. Although not automatically tied to men or masculinity, violence is an aspect often associated with the male gender. As Connell has noted, this violence often takes place in "transactions among men", such as a fight, and can be used as a means of "claiming or asserting masculinity" (83). Although Rogers insists this willingness to join the war stems from honour and not from the want to kill people, his actions expose the underlying aggression that is often associated with the performance of traditional masculinity. Thus, although the altercation serves to display both Rogers' body and masculinity as subordinate, his decision to fight back is, once more, a way of negotiating his masculine subject position between hegemony and subordination.

In situations where Rogers' inclination towards violence is evident, for example in his confrontation of other men in fistfights, Rogers "exemplifies the honour of the masculine hegemonic code" despite representing subordinate masculinity with a body that other men often regard as parodic (Reguena-Pelegri 27). Alongside violence, bravery is an integral part of hegemonic masculinity, especially in the context of the military and war. Rogers' actions of fighting back against the bullies also exemplifies his courage, thus further supporting the idea of negotiating his position in the hierarchy of masculinities anew. However, the bravery Rogers displays is not recognised as valid, but rather as a dangerous characteristic for a man of his size, as implied by Barnes as well as military authorities. Displaying hegemonic qualities such as bravery, and further acting on it, thus suggests that Rogers acknowledges the significance of performing ideal manhood: however, in this context, the character is not enough for gaining recognition as a man. The military and war require a certain physicality for their men, and Rogers lacking that, is not enough to be recognised as a man, even less as a soldier.

In situations such as above, Rogers' best friend Barnes often comes to Rogers' rescue, as Rogers is usually the underdog in the face of men much bigger than him: one of these instances is also shown in the film. As Rogers unsuccessfully attempts to fight with another man, Barnes appears to drive the nameless man away, telling him to "pick on someone [his] own size", once again accentuating the subordinate position of Rogers' body in relation to both Barnes and the man who Rogers was fighting with (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). The whole exchange functions to emphasize, once again, the low status of Rogers' masculinity as well as how his mind and body are in conflict: the mind is ready to stand up for everything Rogers thinks is right, but the body cannot support the actions

required. Moreover, the situation sheds light into the power dynamics between the two friends; where Rogers' appearance is bloodied and dishevelled in his losing battle, Barnes appears as strong and collected in his military uniform, body able to perform heroic, and thus masculine, acts. Barnes presented not only as a best friend for Rogers, but also as his protector, has an effeminising effect on Rogers; he needs another man to physically defend him, as his own body lacks the required strength and agility for that purpose.

Before getting the super-soldier serum, Rogers' body is presented as lacking and an object of ridicule, a body to which the surrounding culture and discourses, collectively, place certain meanings regarding its masculinity. Although Rogers' own perception of his body and masculinity may not always be in accordance with the image outsiders place on him, as evidenced his willingness to negotiate his masculine position both physically and mentally, this individual experience is outweighed by the cultural norms and expectations. As Reeser has argued, this discordance between what the culture imagines and expects the male body to be, and what it is, can raise tension and anxiety about the corporal body. These anxieties, then, can be assuaged through projecting them onto the female body in order to separate corporality from masculinity altogether (Reeser 106). The relevance of this in the analysis of Rogers' masculinity is revealed in what Reeser has next said about the juxtaposition of masculinity as non-corporal and femininity as corporal: this idea reflects the notion that the male body cannot be objectified as a body, like the female body is (Reeser 110).

Thus, the continuous display and intense focus on corporal masculinity, especially Rogers' body after the serum, is enough to unsettle the notion of traditional masculinity as unmarked and impenetrable. For instance, Rogers' partially naked, glistening body after the transformation invites the gaze to admire his considerable muscle and height and renders him as the one to be perceived instead of being the one behind the gaze. While not every portrayal of the male body indicate objectification, Reeser has noted that other characters reacting "to the body as a body" would shift the perspective; thus, Agent Carter immediately reaching out towards Rogers' naked chest can be interpreted as an action that renders the body erotically coded and the object of the penetrating gaze (Reeser 111). According to Reeser, women are usually the objects the male gaze, and therefore the role-reversal can be read as a slight emasculation, as Rogers' body is on the receiving end of the invasive watching, although here it can be understood as a reworking of the corporal boundaries. Further, an interesting notion is that Rogers does not appear to be concerned with the fixed boundaries of the male body being shaken: the casualness with which he reacts, or rather the lack of reaction, when other people respond to his super-soldier body or its practices with touch and comments suggests that he accepts, even embraces,

the corporality of his masculinity. Despite the evident hegemonic masculinity his new body represents, there has always been a certain fluidity to Rogers' body and its borders that do not completely disappear even after the transformation, indicating that the definition of his masculinity, even after the transformation and a new, hyper-masculine body, is not as fixed as initially proposed.

Once established after his one-man saving mission, his newly found high status in homosocial relations and the hierarchy of masculinities is continuously maintained by daredevilish and heroic practices in the war, as well as by ascertaining heterosexual desirability and relations with, for instance, Agent Carter. Additionally, the muscular, costumed body of the hero Captain America is repeatedly foregrounded to inspire awe and mark his physicality as "spectacularly different" from other men, turning him into a representation of hypermasculinity (Brown 142).

Whereas the petite and sickly body of Steve Rogers before the serum predominantly represents a subordinate masculinity, the body of the super-soldier Captain America is, at first glance, the perfect display of hegemonic embodied masculinity. However, even Rogers' super-soldier body does not always perform accordingly, and features aspects that do not follow the hegemonic code. For example, at times he has no control over his emotions, and bases his actions merely on sentiment. Rogers' decision to go on the rescue mission does not stem only from his need to prove his manhood; ultimately the word that Barnes is among the men trapped behind enemy lines appears to be the incentive for his disobedience and unruly actions. Moreover, the tears that Rogers later sheds for his fallen best friend is a signifier for the loss of control over his body, and thus, the loss of power equated with manhood, in terms of Kimmel's theory. However, it is important to note that from the perspective of masculinity in the military and war, the notion of emotional distress over a fallen soldier and lost comrade is not to be "read in any way as 'unmanly'" (Eberwein 13). Rather, it is regarded as an evident part of being a man in war, as are the wounds that signify courage rather than softness (Eberwein). Thus, different masculinities and manhood are negotiating their positions constantly, even in one's own body.

4.5. Homosocial Bonding and Sexuality

Rogers' masculinity is not defined only through comparison in *Captain America: The First Avenger*; another meaningful aspect in the construction of his masculinity is evident in his negotiations of friendship and sexuality, especially in his relationships with Barnes and Agent Carter. The military context in which these relationships are portrayed produces tensions and opportunities for displaying

masculinity which differ from peacetime. The main purpose of these relationships is – through various (in)actions – to affirm Rogers’ heterosexuality and heterosexual virility, as well as to eliminate the possibility that his behaviours could be interpreted as being homosexual. This is achieved through a nuanced negotiation of the performance of masculinity, where a line is drawn between male friendship and attraction through various (in)actions, and also by highlighting the scenes with heterosexual tension. This section begins by examining Rogers’ close friendship with Barnes, and then examining his friendships with a group of men: his Howling Commandos- unit. It concludes with a discussion of the romantic relationship with Agent Carter, which ends before the couple’s first date.

4.5.1. Don’t Win the War ‘Till I Get There: Rogers and Barnes’ Friendship

Although masculinity is a “form of alienation” from women and other men, and the fear of homosexuality and homoeroticism appears to be deeply rooted in the construction of hegemonic masculinity. In such “sexually segregated” institutions, such as the army, definitions of traditional masculinity appear somewhat self-contradictory (Kimmel 150 & Segal 120). Kimmel has noted that in everyday life, men seldom share “complete trust and intimacy” in their relationships with other men, as the masculine norm demands emotional and physical distance; this experience is associated with the friendships between women (150). However, the nature of war requires men to be unified in ways that over-ride these expectations. The institution trains the men to master seamless teamwork to improve their chances of victory. The environment thus allows, even requires, deep connections to form between men, and circumstances in the battlefield can expose the unconditional devotion between brothers-in-arms.

The deep devotion and unconditionality in these male bonds, however, often reveal the underlying possibility of homosexuality in relations between men. The risk of homoeroticism in this “extreme male bonding” is addressed and then eliminated by encouraging and boasting about heterosexuality, according to Segal (120). Despite the contradictions about masculinity created in the environment of the military, dominant military masculinities rarely display features that might imply homosexuality. The line between profound platonic connection and homosexual intimacy is constantly redrawn by the aforementioned practices that assert heterosexuality, for anything effeminate in masculinity is regarded as “proof of physical or emotional ‘inadequacy’”, and therefore indicate failure of manliness (Segal 120). Moreover, often any feature that does not follow the hegemonic code can be read as effeminacy, no

matter the sexual orientation of the man; even complicit masculinities can be marked as deviant.

As made clear from the beginning of the film, Rogers shares a tight friendship with Barnes that started in their childhood. This friendship and male bond are highlighted, throughout the film, in a way that differs from the one between Rogers and his Howling Commandos. Barnes is shown in the film, for the first time, when Rogers attempts to fight off a man twice his size in a back alley. Barnes comes to Rogers' rescue just in time, saving him from being beaten up and driving the other man away. In this scene, the initial status quo between the two is established: Barnes represents ideal, hegemonic military masculinity, powerful enough to defeat any opponent. In contrast, Rogers is weak, subordinate and needs to be saved, both from the other man as well as from himself, as he states to the bully that he would go on taking blows from him "all day" (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Even the appearances of the two contrast each other in this scene, with Barnes in his sharp military uniform, whereas Rogers' clothing is dishevelled and muddy from the unsuccessful fight. The big brother-little brother- dynamic between the two is made clearer, as Barnes scolds Rogers when he sees that he has lied on his enlistment form, again.

Rogers and Barnes' relationship is portrayed as a more intimate one than those between other men, for instance through the displays of physical affection: Rogers and Barnes hug each other the night before Barnes is shipped out and Rogers is left behind. Such an exchange of physical intimacy, however, is desexualized by the banter between the two. This banter, which marks the relationship throughout the film, is another signifier of intimacy: Easthope has coded banter as a masculine way of communication, but one which also reveals the underlying intimacy between those who take part in it, that parallels the intimacy of lovers (89). While Rogers and Barnes hug, they call each other "punk" and "jerk", Rogers saying that Barnes is taking all the stupid with him to the war, leaving nothing for Rogers to act upon (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). As the two are at a science fair, not in the military environment or the battlefield, such gentle displays of affection are emasculating, even between best friends. A certain masculine ideal and status quo is upheld by humour and joking, even if gentle emotions would seem plausible in a situation where one is sending their best friend off to war. Moreover, in this scene, as Rogers has not yet undergone the procedure, the brotherly dynamic is still in place. Barnes' concerns about Rogers' safety are read as those a big brother would have for his little brother. Additionally, the presence of their female dates helps to

affirm their heterosexual orientations and downplay the possibility of homosexuality. Barnes goes to dance with the women, while Rogers turns away to try his luck at enlisting again.

Before Rogers' transformation, the power dynamics between him and Barnes refute the idea of desire between the two men, as Barnes is one who often protects and takes care of Rogers. However, after Rogers gains the hyper-masculine body and acknowledgment from other men, the brotherly dynamic between the two is threatened. While Barnes has always seen Rogers as a man despite his appearances, the two have been far from equals in terms of masculinity: Barnes has represented the ideal hegemonic masculinity, while Rogers could have only dreamed of embodying such a position in the hierarchy. The sudden shift in the relationship, as Rogers is the one now saving Barnes from the Hydra base and making sure he is all right, disturbs the status quo and thus introduces now, more than ever, the possibility of homoeroticism and desire into the relationship. Before, the caring and nurturing was familial: now, caring and nurturing take on a new meaning as the two men are equal, Rogers' hypermasculinity overpowering Barnes' representation of hegemonic masculinity at times. Rogers' one-man-mission behind the enemy lines may be read as stemming from the willingness to prove himself to other men, but the notion of unconditional devotion and commitment to Barnes is also an important aspect to note. The thought of losing Barnes disturbed Rogers enough for him to disobey direct orders from Colonel Phillips and go to the Hydra fortress alone, suggesting that the devotion runs deep enough to face either death or authorial punishment. This willingness to die for another man, although disguised as a willingness to gain access to manhood, can be read as homoerotic. And homoeroticism and homosexuality are the most emasculating, feared qualities in terms of masculinity. Heterosexuality and homophobia are the defining qualities of (hegemonic) masculinity, and thus, anything threatening that normativity should be eliminated.

Such is the case in *The First Avenger* as well. To avoid falling to the side of non-platonic and their masculinity being marginalized, Barnes and Rogers' heterosexuality is affirmed throughout the film in various scenes. In the beginning of the film, Rogers is hardly a ladies' man: his date at the science fair ignores him and her expression even shows slight disgust when Rogers tries to offer her a snack. This emasculation is contrasted by Barnes, whose sexual prowess and attraction to women is firmly established: his date is hanging on his arm or otherwise in physical contact, and Rogers' date seems to be more interested in Barnes than in Rogers. Rogers' lack of success with women is further proven by the conversation he has

with Agent Carter as they are on their way to the procedure: he stumbles over his words and calls Agent Carter a “dame” (Captain America: The First Avenger). This exchange invites Agent Carter to claim that Rogers has clearly no idea how to talk to a woman, to which Rogers only agrees. He even says that asking a woman to dance is a “terrifying” concept, which implies that instead of dominating women, he fears them, further giving away his masculine power (Captain America: The First Avenger). After the procedure, as Rogers turns into a super-soldier and is accepted as someone who represents hegemonic masculinity, there are more openings for him to affirm his heterosexuality through action, and thus denote the idea of homoeroticism in his intimacy with Barnes. His desirability is proven, for instance, in the scene where he goes to meet Stark for a new suit and weapons. Private Lorraine, a woman, approaches Rogers and flirts with him, ending up backing him into a corner and kissing him passionately. Agent Carter witnesses this event which creates further tension, as she gets mad at Rogers for kissing another woman. Not only is Rogers now exemplifying hegemonic masculinity through heterosexual desirability, but he is also shown to be desired by many women, like Barnes.

However, while the attention Rogers now receives from Agent Carter and other women confirms Rogers’ heterosexual desirability, it also puts Rogers and Barnes in positions where their intimacy can be read through the lens of homoeroticism, even if this was not intended. The intimate bond between them can no longer be explained as merely brotherly with unequal power dynamics. Additionally, as others have noticed Rogers’ new representation of ideal masculinity and masculine body, so has Barnes. He comments on Rogers’ bigger size at the Hydra facility, and at the bar after the rescue mission, he suggests that Rogers should keep the tight Captain America- outfit (Captain America: The First Avenger). While before, the comments on Rogers’ appearance would have passed as familial, and even now hidden in the folds of their usual way of banter, they risk the idea of desire for the other man, a concept which needs to be eliminated to uphold the idea of hegemonic masculinity.

During the same scene at the bar, Agent Carter arrives and greets Rogers and Barnes. This is Carter and Barnes’ first encounter, and Barnes attempts to flirt with her, but she does not even glance at him, as she only has eyes for Rogers. After Carter leaves, without sparing any attention to Barnes, he jokes to Rogers: “I’m invisible. I’m turning into you. It’s like a horrible dream” while Rogers appeases him by saying that “maybe [Carter’s] got a friend” (Captain America: The First Avenger). The two men are set up against each other as they both attempt

to court the same woman and show their desire towards her, creating a love triangle. Reeser has discussed love triangles, where two men desire the same woman, as a model which tells the reader more about the unstable relationship between the two men rather than either of the men's relationships with the woman (60-61). To safely eliminate the threat of repressed homosexual desire towards each other, the "entire question of desire" is placed onto the men's relationship with the woman, making it about heterosexuality rather than homosexuality (Reeser 61). In this model, the triangulation effectively allows masculinity to "safely desire another man with the safeguard of a mutual female object of desire" (Reeser 68): Barnes showing similar sexual interest towards Carter as Rogers does draws attention away from the intimate relationship between the men and towards competition and rivalry, which allows no room for homoeroticism. However, as Reeser points out, this model is not always built to last, and is prone to transformation. Agent Carter is, in this case, not a passive object passed between the men, but has her own subjectivity and shows that her interest lies solely with Rogers. Moreover, the triangular relationship does not last for long: Barnes quickly realizes that Carter cares only for Rogers, he does not attempt to court her during the rest of the film.

Although it takes attention away from the intimate male bond and establishes the heterosexuality for both Rogers and Barnes, this love triangle is not enough to eliminate the idea of male-male desire in *The First Avenger*. While the connection between the two is portrayed as acceptable and within the limits of ideal masculinity, the ultimate elimination of male-male desire happens by Barnes supposedly dying during a mission. During a fight with Hydra soldiers in a train, the side of the train is blown out and Barnes goes with it. While he manages to hang on to the blown-out wall for a little while, his grasp slips before Rogers reaches him, and they look each other into the eyes just as Barnes falls. Devastated that he could not save his best friend or even find the body, Rogers ends up mourning empty-handed. The execution of their bond is swift, and subsequent cancellation of the possibility of non-platonic relationship allows for hegemonic masculinity persist in its homophobia. In his study of masculinity in war films, Robert Eberwein has quoted Mark Simpson on his idea of male bonds: the death of a man often "protects one from the problem or suspicion of sexual interaction" (Eberwein 149). Certainly, in *The First Avenger*, Barnes' death removes any suspicion of inappropriate desire between him and Rogers. Further, Simpson has suggested that death makes boyish, platonic love between men eternal, as it is removed from the male body (In Eberwein 149). In contrast, the threat of queer love is buried on the battlefield along with the fallen man.

Barnes' body is never found, and thus Rogers is not able to bury his friend or give him a funeral, so he does not take part in this burial of queer love. He grieves the loss of his friend deeply and tries to drink his sorrows away. Although masculinity is concerned with alienating itself from feminine emotionality, the feelings of grief are treated as natural and acceptable due to the deep connections between men allowed in the military. However, he hides himself from others in this emotional state, and Agent Carter finds him in a bombed-down bar alone, trying to get drunk. Despite not being able to get intoxicated due to the super-soldier serum, this act of managing his sorrow with booze is in tune with the image of hegemonic masculinity, while also suggesting that losing Barnes was more akin to losing a partner rather than a friend. As Rogers seems to blame himself for Barnes' death, Agent Carter is there to soothe him and state that it was Barnes' choice born out of the thought that Rogers was worth it. Eberwein has noted that often in war film, and especially in triangular relationships, men are unable to articulate their feelings for each other. Carter is the mediator who analyses Rogers and Barnes' feelings for each other and gives voice to them, something that Rogers is not able to say or even understand (Eberwein 3). While initially, this brings to attention the relationship between Rogers and Carter, as she is there to soothe him as a woman "should", this ultimately reveals the things left unsaid between the two men, the gap that Barnes' death left in Rogers. This is evidenced, for instance, by the increased recklessness and murderous intent Rogers now has: while before, he stated to Doctor Erskine that he did not want to kill anyone, now he says to Carter that he is not going to stop "till all of Hydra is dead or captured" (Captain America: The First Avenger). His whole demeanour seems to change after Barnes' death, a change which is driven by emotions rather than rationality, and thus is not in accordance with the masculine ideal.

As this section shows, the military context is vital for maintaining the surface heterosexuality of the close friendship between Barnes and Rogers. The line between close friendship and the possibility of homosexual interpretation is balanced with nuanced actions that affirm heterosexuality and eliminate the prospect of homosexual desire, while maintaining a presentation of an intimate bond within military contexts. The group dynamics on the military unit also present homosocial bonding but these dynamics highlight how Rogers' masculine position shifts after the transformation, as he is now accepted into the 'inner circle' of masculinity.

4.5.2. The Howling Commandos: Friendships with Other Men

In *The First Avenger*, deeper connections between Rogers and other men are not highlighted before his transformation, except with Barnes. Due to his subordinate position, he is not recognised as part of the group and thus does not appear to have any other friends, male or female. Rather, almost every other man is displayed as competition: a competition which Rogers invariably loses. Only after his transformation into a super-soldier and having gained respect from other men with his rescue mission, is he shown to have access to a group of men he can call his friends. “The Howling Commandos” is a combat unit which Rogers forms from the men he saved from the Hydra base, including Barnes. Rogers is vehement about wanting specifically these men to join the group, and he asks them to join him on the mission to destroy Hydra. The men all seem to be of the opinion that the mission is almost suicidal but agree to go anyway. The men of The Howling Commandos, while having a variety of cultural backgrounds, represent the stereotypical war-winning masculinity.

In the context of American military during the World War II, The Howling Commandos is an unusually diverse group of men. Along with Rogers and Barnes, Timothy “Dum Dum” Dugan is the only soldier that looks like an ideal American military man. Jim Morita, although born in Fresno, California, is a Japanese American soldier, who looks Japanese. This anomaly of a Japanese-looking man amongst Americans is acknowledged when the men are being saved from the Hydra facility, as James Montgomery Falsworth, a British soldier with an overblown accent, voices his doubts on the fact that they are saving everybody, referring to Morita. Morita pulls out his dog tags, saying that he is “from Fresno, Ace”, with this commenting on Falsworth’s Britishness and how he is considered far less American than Morita. Jacques Dernier is a French soldier who does not speak English, and Gabe Jones is a man with an African American appearance. Further, Jones’s multilingualism is highlighted, as he is revealed to have studied both German and French and speaking both fluently alongside English.

Despite the unusual diversity in the group, the men in The Howling Commandos represent stereotypical war-winning masculinity. Many traditionally masculine and ideal aspects are covered: the men are brave, intellectual, and have an affinity for violence, which is required for triumph in the war. While portrayed as stereotypes, foregrounding and to some point individualising these men suggests that the types of masculinities that Rogers as Captain

America surrounds himself with are those who represent ideal military masculinities with hegemonic qualities. However, as most of them look different from the blond-haired, blue-eyed American masculinity, their masculinity can be considered somewhat subordinate. However, the underlying notion is that they still strongly exhibit attributes pertaining to hegemonic masculinity. Thus, having these men as friends both suggests that Rogers does not care for external qualities only, and that having these men by his side underlines the hypermasculinity that Rogers now represents.

They accept Rogers not only as an equal, but as a leader of the group, and down the line it is shown that their teamwork is seamless as a result of trust and a brothers-in-arms mentality. The environment allows this, as such a relationship between men is essential for triumph in the war. This sort of comradeship, which occurs between men during war, can be explained as the “sublimated intimacies of the male bond”, according to Anthony Easthope (63). He has suggested that the moments and images of comradeship are a crucial part of the structure of war, and further, masculinity in the war. The Howling Commandos most certainly share a bond that requires both trust and respect, and a montage of their fight against Hydra shows many moments of this aspect of their comradeship. For instance, as one of the Commandos attaches a bomb under a Hydra tank, blowing it up, the rest of the group anxiously watch over his safety and celebrate his consequential success.

In such an environment as in *The First Avenger*, those representing the dominant version of masculinity have the permission to “behave towards each other in ways that would not be allowed elsewhere” (Easthope 66). Emotionality and nurturing are typically associated with femininity and touching and holding another man is not permitted in any other circumstances in fear of effeminacy and the notion of homosexual desire. Even the dominant military masculinities shy away from such things, but in the battlefield, the limitations of masculinity and the body are reworked. While the Howling Commandos share an intimacy between them, very little reworking of the limits of masculinity takes place inside their unit. Physical affection is not shown, and although the unit is also a group of friends, the focus is mostly on their working relationship which highlights Rogers’ position as a hypermasculine leader.

4.5.3. Waiting for The Right Partner: Affirmations of Heterosexuality with Agent Carter

Lastly, this thesis will discuss the role of Rogers and Agent Carter's relationship in the construction of Rogers' masculinity. As mentioned, heterosexuality and affirming it through practices and inactions are a significant part of hegemonic masculinity and it allows no space for deviance. As Easthope has put it, "dominant version of masculinity treats masculinity as undivided" (111): any homosexual desire must be denied or excluded, and only heterosexual way of performing masculinity supports hegemony. Rogers' masculinity in *The First Avenger* is constructed in relational practices with women to confirm his heterosexuality. Before his transformation, his success with women was non-existent due to his dainty appearance and general awkwardness. Agent Carter, however, is established as a love interest for Rogers before Rogers' transformation into a representation of hypermasculinity. Especially after this transformation, the romance between the two is highlighted in various scenes, and thus it functions to both affirm the aspects of idealized masculinity, as well as to eliminate the possibility of sexual deviance.

Even though the focus is on the romantic relationship between Rogers and Carter especially after Rogers transforms, their interest towards each other is implicated in scenes where Rogers has not yet received the serum and represents subordinate masculinity. The two had a discussion in the car on the way to Rogers' procedure, and while Carter is shocked at Rogers' inability to talk to women appropriately, she clearly admires Rogers' willingness to stand up against men bigger than him. Moreover, as they discuss Rogers' unsuccessfulness with women, what draws Carter's attention is Rogers' confession that he is waiting for "the right partner" to dance with (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). Rogers' gentlemanly manners appeal to Carter, as he does not exemplify the hegemonic way of dominating women and treating them as objects: the subordinate position of his masculinity is an advantage in his relationship with Agent Carter, though with other women it was met with disdain.

After Rogers' transformation into a super-soldier, the romantic relationship between him and Carter receives more attention. In the scene at the bar where Rogers recruits his Howling Commandos, Carter enters in a tight-fitting red dress and red lipstick. The whole bar goes silent at this entrance, but as Carter heads straight for Rogers and only talks to him, the romantic tension between the two is put on pedestal. Moreover, in this scene, Rogers is

wearing his new army captain's uniform, while Carter is in an evening dress: the outfits highlight Rogers' masculinity and Carter's femininity, aspects that before were reversed or not made clear. This functions to further affirm the heterosexuality of the characters and gives an implication of how the relationship would be if it were peacetime. Carter, without the pressure of war and position of authority, would be able to exemplify ideal femininity, which Rogers would complete with his performance of hegemonic masculinity, thus creating a 'perfect pair' in terms of heterosexual relations. Carter leaves after a short discussion with Rogers, making it clear that she was there for him only, which functions to prove Rogers' desirability.

When other women show interest in Rogers as well, one even seducing and kissing him, Carter exhibits jealousy. After she sees Rogers kissing with Private Lorraine, she shows her displeasure by shooting at Rogers' new shield after Rogers asks for her opinion on it. Moreover, she tells Rogers that now he is a soldier "just like all the rest", referring to him being untrustworthy and a ladies' man, just as she sees the rest of the soldiers who exemplify hegemonic masculinity (*Captain America: The First Avenger*). The rivalry over Rogers displays his newly found desirability and further support his masculine position as hegemonic: whereas before women did not spare a glance at Rogers, now several women want him. Even though Agent Carter makes it clear that she is not fighting with other women over Rogers, the element of competition between women is brought forth in this scene.

After the incident with Private Lorraine, Agent Carter keeps her distance and Rogers goes on his mission to destroy Hydra bases all over the world. This rupture between them, however, does not slow Rogers in his devotion to Carter. The perceived infidelity is treated as more of an adversity to their relationship than the separation due to missions. Rogers attempts to appease Carter by, for instance, carrying a picture of Carter in his compass, and making sure that it is captured on video so that Carter will see it. This sort of rupture and attempts to fix it are not unusual for romantic relationships, and this kind of trajectory further highlights the romance between Agent Carter and Rogers, and suggests that despite the wartime, the couple faces hardships that could be considered 'normal'.

Finally, Carter forgives Rogers and comforts him after Barnes dies. Additionally, she reminds Rogers that he is not alone in his fight, and now revenge, against Hydra. In the last fight against Hydra and Red Skull, Carter fights alongside Rogers, and with Colonel Phillips, they

give Rogers a last boost to get to the plane in which Red Skull is escaping. Before Rogers jumps, Carter kisses him, sealing their relationship physically as well: before, they had not touched each other in this way. This first and last kiss, however, though being the most prominent indicator of romance and heterosexual desire, is not enough to bring Rogers back from the plane to Carter. Despite Carter's pleas to not act haphazardly, in the name of saving New York, Rogers flies the plane into ice, taking himself with it.

Heterosexuality is one important aspect of ideal masculinities, and as this section has shown, the relationship with Agent Carter supports the construction of Rogers' masculinity as hegemonic, especially as the love affair came to life after the transformation. Though never actualized, in the sense that the love affair is portrayed as pure, the relationship confirms Rogers' heterosexual orientation and draws attention away from possibilities of deviance. Heterosexuality is one aspect of perfect hegemonic masculinities: in the last, concluding section, this is placed in the context of other masculinities.

5. Conclusion: Masculinities in Captain America: The First Avenger

As Horrocks puts it in his study of masculinity in popular culture, the usual assumption is that popular images tend to give us “a picture of ultra-machismo” (1). He suggests, however, that instead of a clear-cut picture of hypermasculinity, popular culture is, in fact, “filled with contradictory images that reflect the tensions and ambivalences of masculinity” (1). In this thesis I have studied the construction of masculinity in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), paying attention not only to the aspects of hegemonic masculinities, but examining the subordinate forms of masculinity as well. The focus has also been on how both hegemonic and subordinate masculine positions have been not only maintained but negotiated and challenged as well, especially in relational practices with others.

As demonstrated in the first section, according to researchers on men and masculinities, the nature of masculinity is unstable and unfixed. It is best defined relationally as opposite to femininity, and in relations with other men, and thus it is changeable through relational practices with both men and women. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as the most honoured way of being a man, to which other, hierarchically lower subordinate masculinities position themselves. In *The First Avenger*, military masculinity is the hegemonic form of masculinity. The nature of hegemonic masculinity is not, however, fixed: rather, like any other masculinities, it is brimming with the “tensions and ambivalences of masculinity” (Horrocks 1). Its definition and position can be negotiated and challenged by subordinate masculinities.

The analysis on the construction of Rogers’ masculinity in the film began with examining the contrasts made with women and children. Especially in the beginning of the film, Rogers is compared with women and children, left with the same tasks as them during the war, whereas other men joined the front lines as soldiers. As made clear, he was aware of this effeminising position, and made several attempts to challenge and negotiate the position assigned to him. This was not to impress women, which would be part of the hegemonic form of masculinity, but rather to not be expelled from the circle of manhood by other men. The following section thus focused on masculinity as a homosocial enactment. As Reeser and Kimmel, among other, have argued, masculinity is constructed especially in relations with other men, in what has been dubbed the corporal dialogue. As mentioned, in this case the most honoured form of manhood is the military man; this is the circle into which Rogers wishes to gain access, and from these men he wishes recognition as an equal.

As military men are idealised, Rogers' inadequacy is highlighted in several scenes, especially in terms of his slight and feminine body. However, the bodily transformation brought by the super-soldier serum is not enough. Even after becoming a physical symbol of hypermasculinity, he has to prove himself to Colonel Phillips to gain access to manhood. Only after dismissing the obedience idealised in military masculinities and performing a convincing "manhood act" (Shrock & Schwalbe) does he gain recognition and a place in the circle of manhood. Simultaneously, Rogers negotiates the standards of hegemonic military masculinity by disobeying direct orders from his superior officer.

The following section focused on the role of psyche and personal experience in constructing Rogers' masculinity. As evidenced, for example, by the instances where Rogers fights other men and goes against orders, the negotiation of his masculine position relies heavily on Rogers' experience of his masculinity. The small, sickly body is in dissonance with the mind ready to participate in acts deemed masculine, such as fighting in the war and doing heroic deeds. After the transformation into the super-soldier, it appears that Rogers' body finally matches the image of proper masculinity that he tried to display through various actions all along. This is evidenced by the lack of reaction to the now hypermasculine body, whereas many others seem to deem it spectacular.

Lastly, the analysis focused on the important relationships displayed in the film and their effect on the construction of masculinity. One important notion, in line with ideals of hegemonic masculinity, was the affirmation of heterosexuality through the relationship with Agent Carter. Though deep connections between men are allowed in the context of war and mourning is accounted for, certain relational distance is required to defuse the idea of homosexuality. Rogers and Barnes' bond, though brotherly and initially imbalanced, often flirts with the possibility of more than friendship through emotional and reckless actions taken in the name of the other. Especially after Rogers' transformation, the imbalance of power is reversed, and Barnes' role as protector and brother is diminished. As the possibility of "more" becomes more palpable, it is eliminated; Barnes falls to his death, leaving the focus on Rogers' relationship with Agent Carter. Though this relationship stays pure and is only actualized through a kiss before Rogers sacrifices himself, it is enough to maintain the idea of perfect hegemonic masculinity without any sexual deviance. Rogers' hypermasculinity is yet highlighted in his relationship with the Howling Commandos, where he is the leader figure, stronger and better than any of his companions, even though they represent aspects of idealized masculinity as well.

In conclusion, the construction of Rogers' masculinity consists of different acts of negotiating, challenging and ultimately maintaining his masculine position in the hierarchy of masculinities. Starting from a seemingly subordinate position and ending as an idealized, hegemonic, even

hypermasculine man, the stages are not as clear-cut as they may seem. This reflects the idea presented by Horrocks above: masculinity is teemed with tensions and ambivalences in all its forms, be it the subordinate position of the small and lithe man who tries to stand up for himself, or the hegemonic position of the man who leads his own specialized troops through war, while being at times commandeered by his emotions and reckless nature. Another quote from Horrocks seems fitting to the masculinity constructed in the film: “to be mucho hombre is not a birthright, but an accomplishment won and maintained with pain and difficulty” (18). The masculine position is never self-evident, but earned by various, continuous (in)actions.

Though the idea of the MCU presenting male protagonists that embody only hegemonic (and traditional) ideals of masculinity is somewhat supported by these findings, it is also made clear that the masculinity is constructed in nuanced ways that require some examination. However, generally these nuances and ambivalences might not be evident enough for the audiences to detect, and the reproduction of stereotypical masculinity might be more obvious. A deeper analysis focusing on the following Captain America films, as well as the 2021 Disney+ series *Falcon & The Winter Soldier* would provide more insight into the masculinity of Captain America, and how it adapts to the 21st century from the times of the Second World War.

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