“A Man After God’s Own Heart”: Biblical, Hegemonic and Toxic Masculinities in *As Meat Loves Salt*

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Abstract

Maria McCann paints a dark picture of masculinity and its effects in her novel *As Meat Loves Salt* (2001). The violent Jacob Cullen struggles with his masculinity as he faces the intricacies of religion, sexuality and politics in the midst of the English Civil War where he falls in love with fellow soldier Christopher Ferris. By using R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt’s framework for the hierarchy of masculinities, I explore masculinities on local, regional and global levels and emphasized femininity in a close reading of McCann’s novel. My aim is not only to analyse the masculinities of the novel but also to use the framework to redefine toxic masculinity in order to make it a useable concept when analysing masculinities in literature. I redefine toxic masculinity because it lacks a clear definition anchored in an established framework used to study masculinity that does not see masculinity as inherently toxic. I believe that anchoring it to Connell and Messerschmidt’s framework will make it a useable concept. Due to the novel’s relationship to the Bible, I will use masculinity studies done on David and Jesus from the Bible to compare and reveal similarities with the masculinities in the novel, how they appear on the local, regional and global levels in the novel and its effects. I draw parallels between the love story in *As Meat Loves Salt* to the love story of David and Jonathan in the Bible by using queer readings of David and Jonathan in order to explore how masculinity affects the relationships and how the novel uses these two love stories as a study of toxic masculinity and how it relates it to hegemonic masculinity.

Keyword(s): masculinity studies, toxic masculinity, LGBT studies, As Meat Loves Salt, Maria McCann, biblical studies
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Comparing yourself to others is an act of violence against your authentic self.

- Iyanla Vanzant

Introduction
Maria McCann’s novel As Meat Loves Salt (2001) portrays the tumultuous time of the English Civil War and the endeavours of the violent Jacob Cullen on his quest to become a man after God’s own heart. On this quest, Jacob is faced with intricacies of religion, sexuality and politics that pose threats to his idea of masculinity. He falls in love with a fellow soldier, the charismatic and pacifist Christopher Ferris, who saves Jacob from a life in the New Model Army. It is a story with rich allusions to the Bible, with everything from the symbolic and amorous relationship between David and Jonathan, intrigues and violence, to David’s undying loyalty to God. Through the course of this essay I will study the various ways in which Jacob deals with the threats to his masculinity, how he builds his masculinity according to local, regional and global hegemonic masculinities in the novel, how these hegemonic masculinities relate to toxic masculinity and ultimately, how these masculinities relate to the masculinities and values presented in the biblical story of David and the character of Jesus. Jacob’s masculinity will be contrasted to Ferris’ masculinity and Ferris’ representation of Jesus’ masculinity and values. I will do this by using the framework presented by R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt in “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” and by using earlier research done on the masculinity of the biblical David and Jesus by David J.A. Clines and Stephen D. Moore and queer readings of David’s rise to power by Theodore Jennings and Anthony Heacock in my close reading of As Meat Loves Salt. In doing this analysis, I hope to give a clear definition of toxic masculinity by anchoring it to an established framework used in masculinity studies in order to make it a useable concept for literary analysis, to contribute to LGBT1 studies by highlighting connections to queer readings of David

1 Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual.
and Jonathan in the First and Second Book of Samuel in the close reading of *As Meat Loves Salt*, and to encourage further literary analyses of the novel.

The Hierarchy of Masculinities and the Definition of Toxic Masculinity

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was popularized by R.W. Connell in the late 1980s and was reformulated, expanded and given a framework with the help of James Messerschmidt almost two decades later. Hegemonic masculinity is understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allows men’s dominance over women to continue (832). It refers to the ascendant ideal of masculinity in a given context and seeks to explain the ways that this gender ideal produces differential relationships between men, and men and women (Lisa Arellano 133-34). Hegemonic masculinity is distinguished from other masculinities such as complicit masculinities, which is the most common form of masculinity. The men that enact complicit masculinity support the hierarchy by striving for hegemonic masculinity, and they reap the benefits from its dominant position in the patriarchal order. Then there are subordinate masculinities, which are the kinds of masculinities that are considered effeminate to differing degrees. Masculinity enacted by gay men is subordinate because hegemonic masculinities in Western societies have obligatory heterosexuality built into male-dominated kinship systems for the sake of maintenance of a patriarchy (Sedgwick 3-4). The relevance of heterosexuality is prevalent in readings and interpretations of the biblical story of David where his relationship with Jonathan is explained as a strictly political and strategic relationship, thus denying queer readings of David in order to have him represent a hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is not only a practice that allows for men’s dominance over women to continue, but also a way of dominating men who fail to enact a hegemonic masculinity.

The framework divides hegemonic masculinities into three levels: local, regional and global. The hegemonic masculinity on the local level is constructed in the arenas of face-to-face interaction of families, organizations, and immediate communities such as the interaction between father and son, and between brothers. The hegemonic masculinity on the regional level is constructed at the level of culture or the nation-state such as idols and athletes. The hegemonic masculinity on the global level is constructed in global arenas such as world politics, world business and
media such as religion (Connell and Messerschmidt 849). Men usually compromise between different masculinities. There are various reasons for this; one is that certain masculinities that are hegemonic on one level do not translate well to other levels. A regional hegemonic masculinity that includes overt violence may be frowned upon if enacted on a local level. Furthermore, Connell mentions that one of the most effective ways of “being a man” in certain local contexts may be to demonstrate one’s distance from a regional hegemonic masculinity (840); this is called conflicting masculinity. What these certain local contexts are exactly, differ greatly and distancing oneself from a hegemonic regional masculinity may not always have the desired effect.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been criticized by various sources for failing to account for the slippage and dissonance inherent to all gendered subjectivities (Arellano 135). The call for complexity may be valid, but Arellano argues that “Connell’s schematic understanding of masculinities remains quite useful in analysing static gendered archetypes within representational forms” (135). This has made the framework useful in other similar analyses within media (see Elizabeth Hatfield and Thomas Linneman). I argue, however, that the concept of hegemonic masculinity can be made more diverse and complex to account for the slippage and dissonance Arellano mentions by expanding on it. Attempts have already been made with Mimi Schippers’ concept of hegemonic femininity, for example. I want to add to the expansion of Connell and Messerschmidt’s framework by using it to redefine toxic masculinity in a way that coheres with their idea of masculinity. This will make the framework more complex, albeit by little. By redefining toxic masculinity and expanding on the framework, I believe that the it can be used to analyse literary works in a more nuanced way.

Hegemonic masculinities cannot be studied without also looking at emphasized femininity, which is an important aspect of Connell and Messerschmidt’s framework in the sense that emphasized femininity is oriented to accommodate the interests and needs of men by female bodies. This accommodation can be summed up as the subjugation of female bodies and the feminine, which makes hegemonic masculinities possible because emphasized femininity helps maintaining it. Emphasized femininity works in correlation with complicit and subordinated masculinities. Examples of emphasized femininity can be seen in mother figures who encourage their sons to be “big and strong”, not to cry and to always see interaction with female bodies as possibly sexual or romantic but never platonic. Emphasized
femininity is not something all women enact, there are also non-conforming categorizations of femininity, but that is another framework and not something I will be analysing in this essay.

Hegemonic masculinity functions as an ideal, an identity to aspire to, and the closer to the ideal one gets the more of a “real man” one becomes. A man cannot decide that he is enacting a hegemonic masculinity, it is a validation given to him by subaltern groups that support and consent to the hierarchy to differing degrees. Few men manage to enact a hegemonic masculinity and in the pursuit of it, they might evolve violent tendencies. Hegemonic masculinities have been linked to patterns of aggression “not as a mechanical effect for which hegemonic masculinity was a cause, but through the pursuit of hegemony” (Connell and Messerschmidt 834). This is where toxic masculinity comes into play. Toxic masculinity as a concept has not been well defined and is currently an umbrella term for various types of harmful behaviour linked to masculinity. Most definitions rely on the assumption that masculinity is inherently toxic and that there is either only one masculinity or only different kinds of toxic masculinities. Following definitions are not from the field of literary studies and my intention is not to criticise the field-specific research of each work or even use their field-specific ideas in my analysis, but highlight why these definitions of toxic masculinity cannot be anchored in Connell and Messerschmidt’s framework, which is the one I believe is broad enough to be used in various kinds of literary analyses and that takes into account different kinds of masculinities.

The term toxic masculinity was first defined by men’s movements in the early 1990s, most prominently, perhaps, by Frank Pittman who claims that toxic masculinity is a venerated and exaggerated masculinity caused by absent fathers and overbearing mothers. He continues his argument with the claim that the most masculine thing a man can do is be a father, assuming, amongst many things, that fathers somehow inherently teach and inspire healthy and “real” masculinity in their sons (122-45, 271). Pittman bases his understanding of toxic masculinity solely on the local level, making the assumption that the father’s masculinity is the only important source of masculinity. This idea does not work with Connell and Messerschmidt’s framework where there are several masculinities all of which influence each other to various degrees. It is also a limited definition that lacks a supporting framework for a broader literary analysis.
Toxic masculinity is also a term that has been defined and used in psychological studies done on inmates in the USA and was defined within the field of psychology by Terry Kupers in the article “Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison” in relation to Connell and Messerschmidt’s framework. Toxic masculinity is defined as “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (714). The problem with this definition is how Kupers relates it to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Kupers claims that toxic masculinity is an integral part of an overarching hegemonic masculinity by saying that toxic masculinity “delineates those aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are socially destructive” (716) and that toxic masculinity is essentially an exaggerated version of the “unspoken male code on the outside” (original italics, 718). Simultaneously, Kupers lists groups of men who, according to him, do not enact the one overarching hegemonic masculinity he refers to and that they are thus exempt from toxic masculinity (718) because to Kupers, toxic masculinity equals hegemonic masculinity. This is an aspect of Kupers’ definition I very much disagree with as all men are capable of enacting a toxic masculinity due to the ability to shift between masculinities depending on the social context as argued by Connell and Messerschmidt (836). This idea of one overarching hegemonic masculinity goes against their framework where there are various masculinities and at least three hegemonic masculinities which are replaceable, dynamic, and not inherently toxic because “[toxic] characteristics may mean domination but hardly would constitute hegemony – an idea that embeds certain notions of consent and participation by the subaltern groups” (841). Furthermore, Connell and Messerschmidt openly reject “those usages [of hegemonic masculinity] that imply a fixed character type, or an assemblage of toxic traits” (854). Kupers cannot seem to pinpoint wherefrom toxic masculinity arises, only that toxic masculinity is an integral part of, and not a side-effect caused by, hegemonic masculinity, which clearly goes against Connell and Messerschmidt’s framework, and is, like Pittman’s definition, limited and perhaps even incorrect.

In *Men’s Violence Against Women: Theory, Research and Activism*, Christopher Kilmartin and Julie Allison define toxic masculinity as “[c]haracteristics of masculinity that create vulnerabilities in males toward unhealthy behaviours, depression, and violence against themselves and/or others” (246). This definition
works within the scope of their research but is not anchored in an established framework used for masculinity studies in which masculinity is not discussed as inherently toxic. Furthermore, this definition, like Kupers’, does not explicitly take into account the source of toxic masculinity or why it emerges. Due to the reduction of toxic masculinity to “characteristics of masculinity” and its lack of anchoring to an established framework, it does not lend itself as a concept for analysing literary works.

In my research for this essay, I have been unable to find a satisfactory definition of toxic masculinity that can be used within an established framework used in masculinity studies. My intention is therefore to redefine toxic masculinity by highlighting the source of it in relation to the concept of hegemonic masculinity and not point out specific characteristics of toxic masculinity. It is the source that then manifests in the various characteristics that have been attributed to toxic masculinity. I will do this to make toxic masculinity a useable concept when analysing masculinity in literature, by anchoring it to an established framework used in masculinity studies.

Toxic masculinity is an identity built on violence. Violence has been defined as the infliction of “emotional, psychological, sexual, physical and/or material damage” (Stanko 14). Violence may be verbal, cognitive, emotional, or representational (Hatty 46). It also includes the “creation of conditions of violence, potential violence, threat and/or neglect… [and] can be dramatic, subtle, occasional or continuous” (Hearn 43). These given definitions will be how violence is defined in this essay. The violence I am referring to is that which occurs within the hierarchy of masculinities in order to be able to use Hans Toch’s definitions of good and bad violence. Good violence is deployed for a perceived just cause, such as restoring order and balance to the social system (Hatty 58) whereas bad violence lacks justification within the hierarchy and is disruptive. In this definition of toxic masculinity, I focus on the “bad violence” within the hierarchy of masculinities, that is to say the non-accepted violence that is used by male bodies as a shortcut to hegemonic masculinity, which is usually frowned upon by those enacting other sorts of masculinities, as “bad violence” disrupts the order of the hierarchy. In enacting toxic masculinity, it is difficult to extract the aspect of violence from one’s identity in social interactions and even in interactions with oneself. I argue that the violence arises in the pursuit of hegemony as a means of a shortcut to it. The anxiety caused by the pressure, internal or external, to pursue hegemonic masculinity is the reason for the violence that
permeates toxic masculinity. The enactor wants the power and privileges that come with a hegemonic masculinity at whatever cost and cannot seem to find legitimate ways of achieving it and/or is unaware that hegemonic masculinity is an idealized concept few manage to enact. The person enacting a toxic masculinity is destructive to varying degrees and harmful not only to others but to himself as well. This can, for example, be seen in hypermasculine men that are quick to anger and eager to solve conflicts with psychological and physical violence thus making it difficult, and even impossible, to maintain healthy relationships. In Masculinities and Crime, Messerschmidt argues that crimes committed by men can be understood as attempts to accomplish a form of hegemonic masculinity when other means of demonstrating their manliness is not possible for them. Thus they enact a toxic masculinity, confounding it with a hegemonic masculinity due to the power they believe they have in making others fear them. Therefore, I suggest that the definition of toxic masculinity should include all harmful and violent behaviour (be it physical or psychological, directed at oneself or others) performed in the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity.

The Masculinities of David and Jesus in the Bible

For the comparison of the masculinities presented in As Meat Loves Salt with the masculinities in the story of David and in the story of Jesus, I have chosen two articles by David J.A. Clines concerning the masculinities of David and Jesus as presented in the Bible. In the analysis of the story of David, Clines concludes that there are prevalent and set traits in David that make him a “real man”: “strength, violence, bonding, womanlessness\(^2\), solitariness, musicality, beauty, persuasive speech, honour, binary thinking, objectifying” (354) as well as heterosexuality. These traits are what make hegemonic masculinity within the biblical story of David, the traits that make “a man after God’s own heart”\(^3\) (English Standard Version 1 Sam 13:22).

In Clines’ analysis of Jesus’ masculinity, he opts for a similar framework of dividing Jesus’ masculinity into prominent and telling traits. Clines claims that Jesus was a traditional man, but Stephen Moore points out that Jesus does not live up to the criteria of a “traditional male” because Jesus does not have all those traits (7-9). Jesus

\(^{2}\) Womanlessness means that he does not need women. He does not mind women, but can do without them.

\(^{3}\) This is an expression that God uses to express that David is devoted to him whole-heartedly. David is what God wants him to be, thus raising the question if David ever is himself.
was strong, Clines argues, but also mentions that Jesus’ physical strength was never explicitly alluded to in the Bible. The first mention of Jesus is in regards to his strength but the strength is never said to be that of a physical nature, unlike David’s whose was very much physical prowess. Clines claims that Jesus was violent, but the examples of violence, while falling under the given definitions of violence in this essay, do not compare to the violence enacted in the story of David. Jesus damaged material things in his outburst at the temple, a violent act, but he had the goal to restore order at the temple by scaring away the vendors. As it was not a shortcut to hegemonic masculinity, I argue that this was not “bad violence.” In other aspects, Jesus shares certain traits with David, such as the ability to persuade through speech. Jesus is also meant to rule as king of Israel, “[h]e shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:32) but Jesus never makes it that far. He is mocked and executed for being a threat to the established religious order, which, incidentally, also happens to be patriarchal. Jesus is not womanless in the same way as David, although he surrounds himself with mostly male bodies. Jesus’ relationship to women is healthier in that he does not rape women and he does not think himself inherently above women either. It is safe to suggest then that Jesus, in this reading and compared to the reading of David, represents a healthier masculinity to aspire to while David’s masculinity is destructive.

Theodore Jennings brings forth important points in his reading of the story of David in Jacob’s Wound where he analyses the role of God as well as the relationship of David and Jonathan. Jennings argues that God is the driving force in the story and sets the rules for what a man ought to be by following a pattern in his choosing of prophets. God has a prevalent masculinity in the story of David; he is the ultimate war-chief and lays the groundwork for how human kings and generals interact with their peers and subordinates. More importantly, he creates a master list of traits he seeks in those he holds in favour, most of which Clines identified as well. The most important trait is beauty. Saul is described as a man so handsome there was no one like him in Israel (1 Sam 9:1-2). When choosing David, God claims that he does not choose based on appearance but based on the heart (will) of the person, yet when he

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4 Clines argues that the word used for strong in relation to Jesus is “almost the same” as the word used to describe Samson and John the Baptist, but that there is uncertainty as to how the word used in the Hebrew Bible should be translated, thus we cannot know whether Jesus exerted any physical power like that of Samson and John the Baptist or if it was mental strength (2).
chooses David, the first description of him is “[n]ow he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome” (1 Sam 16:12). Even when he chooses Absolom and Adonijah, it is because of their beauty (Jennings 9-10). Furthermore, God values strength and obedience, as can be read in Psalm 18, which is used in *As Meat Loves Salt*, and where beautiful David lists the ways in which he managed to live up to God’s standards.

Jennings also argues that the story of David is one of a love triangle where jealousy and violence abounds, but that also paints the gay relationship between David and Jonathan as that of equals, thus subverting the hierarchical order these relationships are otherwise inscribed (Jennings 29). Jennings claims that David is first involved with Saul, but is driven away by Saul’s paranoia and jealousy into the arms of Jonathan. Jonathan protects David and is not threatened by David’s ascendance to power. Unlike Saul, Jonathan is willing to accept David as a co-ruler, or even step down as the heir to the throne to give it to David (28-29). Anthony Heacock notes in his reading that David’s reluctance to act outside of hegemonic norms of masculinity makes David unable to be open with other men (146). David struggles to maintain hegemonic masculinity in his own story, and the only way for him to achieve it is to do what God tells him to do. David is reluctant to accept Jonathan’s open displays of affection and loyalty. It is not until Jonathan dies that David expresses his feelings in a lament. The heterosexual imperative keeps David from being honest about his own feelings and he is thus only able to acknowledge his appreciation for Jonathan’s love (149). By Psalm 18, David has achieved the hegemonic masculinity set for him by God. Both Heacock and Jennings agree that David and Jonathan were, despite their troublesome relationship, friends and perhaps even lovers, two halves of a whole, and these are the interpretations I will use in my essay.

With the help of the analyses presented by Clines, Moore, Jennings, and Heacock, I will compare the masculinities in *As Meat Loves Salt* with that of David’s and Jesus’ masculinities to show the destructiveness that can come from the pursuit of hegemony as well as show the parallels between the characters. I will also show how the novel uses the story of David and Jonathan and Jacob and Ferris as a study of toxic masculinity, its effects and how it relates to hegemonic masculinity.
Close Reading *As Meat Loves Salt*

There are many factors involved in the creation of masculinities. In this section I will discuss Jacob’s masculinity and how it is influenced by the hegemonic masculinities on the local, regional and global level within the novel. In determining the hegemonic masculinity of each level, I will make mention of complicit masculinities. I will discuss Ferris’ conflicting masculinity that opposes all masculinities that I mention in my close reading. I will analyse emphasized femininity and how the most important woman in the novel contributes to maintaining the hierarchy of masculinities by being immersed in her role of femininity. Finally, I will discuss the toxic masculinity exerted by Jacob in his pursuit of hegemonic masculinity.

First is the local level of hegemonic masculinity. Jacob has three main sources of influence on his masculinity: his father Elias, his older brother Isaiah, and his younger brother Zeb. Out of these three influences, Elias is the one with hegemonic masculinity and is the man Jacob tries to live up to. Jacob describes his father as a strict and pious man who knew how to raise boys and make men out of them, thus inadvertently recognizing that masculinity is a social construct. Masculinity is a role forced on him by his father and supported by those around him both implicitly and explicitly and Jacob wants to excel in that role.

The complicit masculinities on this level are pivotal in Jacob’s construction of his identity, therefore I will analyse the two strongest complicit masculinities on the local level before I analyse Elias’ masculinity. The first complicit masculinity is that of Jacob’s brother Zeb. Jacob wants to see Zeb’s masculinity as complicit but fears it could be hegemonic and searches for evidence to belittle Zeb. The way Jacob compares himself to Zeb, who was young when their father died, is telling of how Jacob makes distinctions between men. Zeb is carefree, kind, indulges himself whenever he can, and is the most beautiful man around. Beauty is important to Jacob, so much so that he actively envies Zeb for being more beautiful than he is (*As Meat Loves Salt* 8, 23, 54, 324). Jacob considers the reasons for why Zeb is the way he is in order to compare himself to him:

> Thus I again thwarted Patience by my self-command. Self-command was the unknown word to my brother, and could have put no brake on his doings. Foolish indulgence had ruined Zebedee. He was only four when Father died, and missed a guiding hand all the more in that his beauty tempted our mother to spoil him. (16)
Jacob finds comfort in Zeb’s lack of self-control. It is the result of his mother’s inability to raise a boy and make him a man, which is essentially what Jacob thinks sets him apart from Zeb and makes him more of a man.

His brother Isaiah has a similar role and is the second complicit masculinity with a strong influence in how Jacob constructs his masculine identity. Isaiah is a kind and understanding man who Jacob holds in high esteem. He refers to Isaiah as his childhood protector, goes to him for advice and to hear a voice of reason. Despite these positive qualities, Jacob does not see Isaiah as a “real man.” Isaiah does not have the same good looks as Jacob and Zeb and has thus difficulties attracting women, or so Jacob thinks. Isaiah is still in love with Caro, a maidservant, at the time Jacob begins to court her, but Jacob, despite his jealous tendencies, knows that Isaiah is not a threat. Isaiah has had the same teachings as Jacob and turns to the Bible for comfort every bit as much as one can expect from a pious man. Isaiah plays a grand role in strengthening their father’s notion that obedience to God is an important and pivotal aspect of a man. After Elias dies, Jacob and his brothers are put to work in Sir John’s fields. Jacob despises the hard work on the fields and cries many times when he stands hidden in towering crops. Isaiah tells Jacob on one of those occasions, “[a] man’s value lies in his obedience to God’s will. … We are as precious to him as ever we were” (25). Little does Isaiah know that Jacob’s understanding of this obedience differs greatly from his. Isaiah’s aim is to follow the teachings of the New Testament; Jacob’s aim is to become David, which can be seen in their everyday actions such as Isaiah teaching Caro to read and keeping Jacob out of trouble whereas Jacob constantly seeks the approval of others to show that he is a better man than Zeb, amongst others.

Jacob’s father Elias is the man with the hegemonic masculinity on the local level, even after his death. It is Elias whom Jacob attempts to emulate on this level. It is made clear by the narrative that Elias was abusive despite Jacob’s glossing over it. Elias took Jacob to the hanging of “sodomites” when Jacob was a child, and there is no mention that Isaiah had been there too, which makes it seem that Elias thought only Jacob needed a sobering lesson on what happens to gay men. After a fight in which Jacob is beaten unconscious, he wakes up with a “sticky eye”, a headache and broken ribs, and thinks he is back home and that his father has punished him before he realizes where he is (274). Elias’ impact on Jacob cannot be overestimated because even after Elias’ death, Jacob can hear his voice prominently. The Voice, as Elias
becomes known, has the same abusive tendencies in that it taunts Jacob when his masculinity is being questioned, which makes an already unstable Jacob react violently. When Caro rejects Jacob after finding out that he has killed a man, the Voice reminds Jacob that Caro, as his wife, is his for the taking, and Jacob rapes her to regain the control he thinks he is entitled to have. After the rape, Jacob starts to think of the Voice as a bad influence, but does not actively start blaming it for making him lose control until it attempts to taunt him into hurting Ferris (260-61). Jacob stops referring to the Voice as his father at this point. He starts calling it “the Voice of the Evil One” and concludes that all it says are lies (229, 261). It is not until Jacob starts to doubt Ferris’ love for him that the Voice gains strength again, and by then it is no longer the voice of the Evil One. Jacob obeys it and believes what it says, which urges him to want to gain control when he feels he has none. Hearing the Voice has an emotional and physical impact on Jacob. He describes it as a shaking of the flesh on his bones, and something he feels as a pounding in the back of his head and hears in his breast all at once (50). The first thing the Voice says in the story is a quote from Psalm 18, “I have pursued mine enemies, and destroyed them; and turned not again until I had consumed them” (original italics, 50). Psalm 18 is an ode written by David to God. It is a passionate thanksgiving and a testament to David’s obedience to God’s will and the ways in which God rewarded him for his loyalty. It is also a retelling of David’s most glorious moments in battle, the way in which he crushed his enemies, how God made him a weapon and how he anointed David as his favourite and helped him to the throne of Israel. It is this kind of obedience that Elias has instilled in Jacob and he continues to encourage a Davidic masculinity after his death, his voice taking on a similar role as God’s in the story of David to make Jacob a man after Elias’ own heart.

Of the three masculinities on the local level, Elias himself is an approximation of the Davidic hegemonic masculinity, and the shortcomings he had are glossed over by Jacob. Elias was strong, beautiful (57) and persuasive (23-25). Jacob strives to be pious in the way Elias taught him to be. This can be seen in the way Jacob compares himself to his brothers, the importance of beauty, of strength and physical build has to him, and his need to be in control. The relationship between Elias and Jacob is destructive. Everything Elias instilled in Jacob gets in the way of any possibility of stability as Jacob inadvertently isolates himself by being violent and by choosing to abide by the Voice in moments of doubt. A parallel can be drawn to Jennings’ reading
of the story of David and how David, ultimately, only has God as his companion after losing Saul and, most importantly, Jonathan.

On the regional level, there are four main sources that influence Jacob’s masculinity: Oliver Cromwell, Thomas Fairfax, King Charles I and Prince Rupert. These four historical characters existed in the real world within the historical context of the English Civil War, but I am solely focusing on their characterization in the novel. Out of these four men, Oliver Cromwell is representative of the hegemonic masculinity on the regional level whereas the others are complicit. Because the complicit masculinities do not further my reading, I will not analyse them as I did on the local level. Cromwell is the head of the New Model Army and is leading parliament to a victory against King Charles’ army. Rumours have spread that God is with Cromwell and the New Model Army in battle. God is fighting along their side to not only quench the royalist but the Roman-Catholics as well for their supposedly wrongful interpretations of the Bible. Cromwell is a pious man and he persuades his men through inspiring speeches before battle, convincing them that God is indeed on their side and that the battle they are fighting is a righteous one. Out on the battlefield Cromwell is eight of the twelve things that made David a man; he is strong, violent, womanless, bonds with his men, persuasive, honourable, thinks in binaries, objectifying, and heterosexual. Furthermore, he is battling men who belittle the word of God, and thus functions as a hero. As a lieutenant-general of the New Model Army and with his strong religious conviction, Cromwell is as close to a David in the flesh as Jacob will ever see. Despite this, he is still only an approximation of David but enacts a hegemonic masculinity nonetheless due to the validation he receives from the majority of people in subaltern groups, such as Jacob. Jacob pursues the kind of masculinity Cromwell exerts and wishes to bask in the glory of it on his one-time chance to see Cromwell face-to-face. Jacob stands there, blushing, his heart beating fast in his chest once he gets to meet Cromwell (153-54). Jacob’s reaction to Cromwell is that of a little boy getting to meet his hero, and what little boy does not aspire to be like his hero?

On the global level in the novel, there are three influential masculinities on the balance for the role of hegemonic masculinity. Those three are David, Jesus and God. Out of the three, David’s masculinity is the hegemonic one. He is a man of flesh and blood, willing to obey God and put all of his trust in him. God loves David like no other. His powerful relationship with David “will be recalled as the paradigm and the
motive of [God’s] relation to Israel” and “[t]he steadfastness of [God’s] love for David is taken to be the model for [God’s] love for Israel” (Jennings 62). This is the kind of man that is needed in the civil war, an Elect, a man chosen by God, or that is what seems to be Jacob’s conviction. On an early morning, while the rest of the household is still asleep, Jacob goes downstairs and prays. He feels himself touched by a higher power and thinks he has been touched by Grace and that he is an Elect, someone chosen by God for salvation just like David was (As Meat Loves Salt 245). Furthermore, Jacob allows his father to define him, just as David allows God to define him, thinking that it is the right way to be someone of worth. The difference is that David, as king, can enact a different masculinity, the global hegemonic masculinity in which there is justified violence built-in that does not exist on the local level, especially not for someone like Jacob who essentially enacts a complicit masculinity at best and a toxic masculinity at worst. David’s influence can be seen on all three levels of masculinities. The Voice reminds Jacob of David on the local level and Cromwell, on the regional level, also tries to emulate David as a general fighting a religious fight. Globally, David is regarded as a strong and exemplary king whom God loves most of all.

Considering that most characters are devout to the New Testament and its teachings at the time taking place in the novel, it would be fair to assume that Jesus would be the one whose masculinity and values have the strongest influence. Their aspiration should be to practice what Jesus teaches, which is not outright peace but is, at the very least, understanding and non-physical violence. Jesus is mentally strong, opposes the establishment, dies for what he believes in and does not force his doctrines through physical force. Jesus’ masculinity is not one fit for times of war where most men usually feel like they must pull together under one banner and a fearless leader willing to crush the enemy. Jesus’ masculinity is, in the bigger scheme of things, a conflicting masculinity, that is to say a masculinity that opposes the hegemonic one, and unfavourable given the violent conditions of the war setting in the novel. Ferris is the only character representative of Jesus’ values and masculinity.

Ferris stands in opposition to Jacob’s masculinity and the idea that David is the ultimate representation of hegemonic masculinity; Ferris is much more representative of the conflicting masculinity Jesus exerts. Ferris’ opposition is made clear with his stance on religion. Religion is a prominent and important aspect of masculinity to the male bodies in As Meat Loves Salt and is particularly pivotal for
complicit and hegemonic masculinities. Ferris is an atheist and believes that humans are the only ones who can hold themselves responsible for their actions. It is a liberating notion for him to know that he can only answer for himself, which is why he tries his best to stay true to his own heart. His dream and goal in life is to move away from London and set up a colony he calls “The New Jerusalem.” It is a symbolic name on two different levels; it alludes to religion in order to appeal to possible colonists and it takes a stance against the existing Jerusalem, David’s city. Ferris’ aim is to rebuild Jerusalem, free it from the grasp of religion and make certain its citizens know that they live by their own hands and that they have no masters, that they are all equal. Ferris is mentally but not physically strong (91-93, 129-32) and he is persuasive. He despises violence, with rape being amongst the worst acts a man can possibly commit (104, 108, 114, 205). Jacob never describes Ferris as outright beautiful, which is not surprising considering that he only seems to describe men as beautiful for comparison and competition, as he does with his brother Zeb. Jacob is attracted to Ferris for who he is as a person first and foremost (114, 297). Ferris is not womanless like the men mentioned so far. The most important person in his life is his Aunt Sarah who, along with her husband Joseph Snapman, adopted Ferris when his parents died of the plague. Ferris’ deceased wife Joanna played a grand part in Ferris finally distancing himself from religion. Ferris is an opposite to the hegemonic masculinities presented on near all points with persuasive speech being the only trait he possesses of those considered hegemonic. His values are close to what Jesus preaches and his idea of what God should be is completely different from what Jacob’s is:

“What has Hugh Peter ever done to you?”
“To me, nothing. He exults too much over the fallen.” [Ferris replies].
“But this is God’s work. You said so yourself. If God’s foes fall, we should exult.”
“Ah yes,” Ferris sang out. “God’s foes! … Well, at any rate I don’t force my doctrines with fists. I leave that to Hugh Peter and those like him.”
“Not force doctrines! You are in the army!”
“I know it,” he snapped.
“Don’t you put your hand to God’s work any more?”
“O yes. I can put your hand to it, too,” and he took my hand and laid it on his cheek. The skin was hot, and crusted with dry pus and blood. “Lovely, eh? Tomorrow I’ll do God’s work on someone else. … God’s work,” Ferris said, “is living in peace, manuring the land, working by persuasion.” (155)
Hugh Peter is Cromwell’s chamberlain, a holy minister and a man Jacob considers to “carry the seeds of greatness in him” (154). Before battle, Cromwell urges his soldiers to read the violent Psalm 115 on the behest of Hugh Peter. Jacob goes to Ferris to ask him for his Bible so that he can read the psalm. Annoyed, Ferris wonders if Hugh Peters directs Jacob’s devotions now, which prompts the dialogue above. Ferris is evidently tired of the war, and moreover, he is tired and disgusted by the doings of the soldiers who are all fighting under the guise of God’s blessing. The God they are all fighting for is the God in the story of David and not the God Ferris might have come to know through the story of Jesus. Ferris rejects the idea of God as a war-chieftain, should there even be a god. He also indirectly criticizes Jacob for allowing himself to be a pawn of Hugh Peter’s readings and for lending himself to the senseless violence that is war. But most of all Ferris is upset with himself for being there, for playing the role of a soldier when he is against all of it and for knowing that when time comes for battle, he will have to hurt someone. In this passage, Ferris rejects the notion of God’s will, of violence against others, of war. He does not want to be the man all other men strive to be; he wants freedom and there is no freedom with God. Ferris attempts to rebel against established norms in everything he does, by reaching out to people in his immediate vicinity, by showing kindness where he can, much like Jesus did.

There is, however, a limit to how far he will go to rebel. At a point in the story, Ferris and Jacob run a risk of being discovered, but what worries Ferris does not seem to be the looming threat of a death sentence, but what his Aunt Sarah will think of him when and if she finds out:

“I think Aunt knows.” [says Jacob]
“Not like this. O God, God.”
So he too could scald with shame, and even forget that he denied God. (327)

Ferris’ fear becomes even more apparent when he asks Jacob “[w]ill you brave it with me?” and they go downstairs, thinking that the maidservant has told Aunt Sarah everything, but just as they get downstairs, Aunt Sarah comes home and “Ferris almost fell down the stairs, so desperate was he to get to her before she could converse with the maid” (328). Ferris yearns for acceptance and unconditional love, just like Jacob, but he is also aware that such things may require conformance to norms he is not willing to accept, which is why he wants to recreate Jerusalem, and start anew.
Ferris stands, in grand part, alone in his acts of rebellion and is generally perceived as a madman by those who know him from afar. There is an anxiety in getting Ferris to act like a man and an heir, and Aunt Sarah takes on the task to help Ferris enact an acceptable masculinity through emphasized femininity. She knows that friends and neighbours look at Ferris and wonder why he cannot be like her deceased husband, a successful and pious businessman with a proper wife at his side. She firmly opposes Ferris’ idea of starting a colony and does everything she can to stop him from leaving, eventually asking Jacob to talk Ferris out of it when she sees how attached Ferris is to him. Aunt Sarah sees Jacob as a “real man” who can talk sense into Ferris in a way she cannot. Her plan is to get Jacob to marry her maidservant Rebecca in order to anchor him in London. She thinks that if Jacob stays, Ferris will stay as well. To convince Jacob, she appeals to his masculinity by establishing a hierarchy where Jacob can feel superior to Ferris. She does this by first appealing to Jacob’s vanity to get his attention, then mentions that Jacob learned how to use the printing press much faster than Ferris did and that Jacob could do well for himself in London, ending it on a note about how difficult it has been to find another wife for Ferris considering that everyone thinks he is mad. Her plan fails and Jacob chooses Ferris over a comfortable life in London. The failure is only temporary, however, because the damage is already done. There is a hierarchy between Jacob and Ferris now and Jacob knows he is not the only one who can see it. Aunt Sarah, immersed in her role of femininity in a highly patriarchal society, tries to stop Ferris’ act of rebellion in order to make him step into a role of a proper man and to make him enact an acceptable masculinity. Her immediate action failed but she managed to plant a poisonous seed in Jacob’s already toxic mind.

Toxic masculinity, as defined earlier, is a masculinity in which violence is the prime aspect and which is enacted as either a shortcut to hegemonic masculinity or as a wrongfully perceived substitute for hegemonic masculinity. It is caused by the anxiety of being forced or pressured into the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity. Jacob enacts toxic masculinity in his desperate attempts to maintain his performance of a “real man”. His toxic masculinity comes through in various ways such as an excess of physical violence, his insecurity in his role as a man, misogyny, and aggressiveness. In the following analysis, I will examine how toxic masculinity is ultimately destructive.
Jacob exerts violence to maintain the illusion of control and to be an authority like his father, Oliver Cromwell or the biblical David. He also exerts violence when he thinks his masculinity has been questioned. That is to say, Jacob’s use of violence is connected to his insecurity in his role as a man in the sense that he fears he is enacting a complicit, and even a subordinate, masculinity when he wants to enact a hegemonic one. This becomes evident in Jacob’s interaction with Roger Rowly, who is part of the first group of colonists Ferris has managed to gather. Jacob dislikes Rowly immediately because Rowly makes light of the task of working the fields, thus underestimating Jacob’s strength. Rowly is a weak-looking man according to Jacob, and he has no redeeming qualities that would make Jacob respect him as a man. In their first meeting, they get to talking about wives, and thinking about Caro and of what he did, Jacob has to leave the room as to not cry in front of the company. At their second meeting, Rowly makes fun of Jacob for having cried and Jacob warns him to not bring it up again, following it up with:

“… But just hold you there.” I rolled up my sleeve and showed him the arm which had carried an eighteen-foot pike.
“See that?”
Rowly looked at the muscles and raised his eyes back to mine. I could see fear in them now behind the mockery, and I pursued, “Want to lay your arm alongside it?”
He lowered his gaze. I made a sudden feint at him with my fist, and watched him flinch.
“Well,” I went on, “this arm says I can put you out with one hand and hold off Ferris with the other. So remember.” I let him squeeze past, leaving just enough room for him if he pressed up against me, and he went through meekly, head lowered and body folded together. A warmth spread through me until I remembered that I was supposed to be furthering God’s will. But perhaps God’s will was that I should protect my friend from such twopenny jacks. (269)

Three things happen in this exchange: Jacob instates himself as a dominant and forceful man with the threat of violence, he forces Rowly down the hierarchy of masculinities despite Rowly’s higher status as a merchant and as an older friend of Ferris’ by being physically stronger, and Jacob inadvertently makes a distinction between “God’s will” when he was on David’s path and “God’s will” now that he is on Jesus’ path. He should not take delight in violence when he is on the more peaceful path, yet he finds a way to twist it to fit it into old habits. Jacob still thinks he can enact the same masculinity David enacted. Later that same evening, Rowly is drunk and starts to gossip about Ferris’ wife Joanna with Jacob, and he thinks “[t]his, had I
but known, was my last chance to move away, but my evil angel whispered me to stay and hear it out” (272). Jacob is referring to the Voice, which is the voice of his father who encourages the hegemonic masculinity of David. Jacob warns Rowly again, but he does not listen, and with the encouragement of the Voice, Jacob beats Rowly near senseless to “defend [Ferris’] name” (273). The reason for Jacob’s lashing out is important, considering that his aim is to further God’s will; Ferris is now symbolic of that will and Jacob reverts to the use of violence in order to protect the integrity of Ferris’ conflicting masculinity that Jacob is trying to accept as a new hegemonic masculinity. The example of Rowly gossiping about Joanna also highlights Jacob’s misogyny. He is not bothered by Rowly speaking ill of Joanna as a woman. Jacob is upset because Rowly is using Ferris’ wife, who serves as a sign of Ferris’ masculinity, as a way to take away from it by saying that Ferris married a woman who “wasn’t right” and had “been tasted before she was bought” (272). The whole incident is indicative of the toxic masculinity Jacob is representative of, and it also shows that even when he is actively trying to distance himself from the idea he has of what a man should be, he cannot, because the idea and habits are ingrained in him and he is reminded of them in his interaction with others, be it on the local, regional or global level.

The Connection of As Meat Loves Salt to the Love Story of David and Jonathan

The story of Jacob and Ferris is a retelling of David and Jonathan’s story and, in a sense, an attempt at an explanation as to why there could not be a happy ending for David and Jonathan within the realm of possibilities that exists at the time of their story. A happy ending in this case would be an acknowledgement of their feelings for each other and the possibility to lead as comfortable a life together as possible. Ferris, like Jonathan, is from a higher social class, about to create a new Jerusalem and willing to share his power and wealth. Jacob, like David, is violent, a warrior, a man’s man and chosen by God. Both Jacob and Ferris are committed to their relationship; Jacob is inspired by Ferris to the point that he is willing to change the idea he has of God’s will, and Ferris loves Jacob wholeheartedly and is willing to give Jacob a prominent place in his life. Ferris sees Jacob struggling with who he is and what he has done. He tries to be the support Jacob needs to get him to break away from his toxic masculinity. Ferris is not afraid to point out Jacob’s harmful behaviour and set
up clear boundaries. In correspondence between them after the incident with Rowly, in which Jacob claims he did it for love, Ferris writes, “[v]iolent love eats up what it does love, and is mere appetite” (277). It is a recurring conversation between them. Ferris tries to get Jacob to realize the extent of his violent behaviour and make him see that there are other ways to deal with conflicts, such as communication, which is something David struggles with as well in his relationship with Jonathan (Heacock 146). In Ferris’ confession letter he writes, “[s]peak to me, Jacob. Don’t play the tyrant. Speak to me.” Jacob does and, in the light of their love confession, thinks he will never have a reason to fight anyone again (308). Despite this, there are issues that make a relatively comfortable life together impossible. Religion is one of the main issues and plays almost as big a part in the novel as it does in the story of David and Jonathan. The pressure from a religious society and the pressure they put on themselves is too strong. Aside from living under the threat of death penalty for being in a same-sex relationship, Jacob is reminded of the hegemonic masculinity he is striving for in just about every interaction he has. He is also constantly reminded of the laws of the Bible either by others or by himself. Ferris struggles with his own sense of masculinity in that he desperately needs to succeed with his colony to make up for all other masculine qualities others think he should have and that he knows he does not enact. He also isolates himself to certain extent because he cannot stand hearing about religion and the ideas of masculinity that come with it all the time. The anxiety caused by not being able to perform their roles in a satisfactory way is what ultimately causes a rift between them. Jacob tries to retake control through violence when he starts to doubt Ferris’ love for him. The Voice gets the upper hand as Jacob starts to listen to it again, and Ferris, alone in his act of rebellion, falls victim for Jacob’s toxic masculinity and for the hegemonic masculinities in the society presented in the novel. David and Jonathan live in a presumably homophobic society that consider men in the position of women to be abominations and an insult to God. David struggles to maintain his hegemonic masculinity and fulfil the prophecy of becoming king while Jonathan tries to play his role as son, heir and soldier to perfection to not let his father down or the people of Israel who, more likely than not, expect Jonathan to act in a certain way.

The reason for their tragic denouement is in their gender performance and the patriarchal structures that are created by God and Elias and strengthened by the men that strive to please them by pursuing near unattainable hegemonic masculinities.
Jacob chooses to listen and abide by the Voice just like David listens and abides by God. They both ultimately end up alone with only disembodied voices for company yet with their masculinities intact. The difference between them is that David accomplishes a hegemonic masculinity while Jacob is only left with the idea that he can still attempt to enact one, that is to say, he is back to where he began.

Conclusion

Using Connell and Messerschmidt’s framework for the hierarchy of masculinities, I identified hegemonic, complicit and conflicting masculinities as well as emphasized femininity in As Meat Loves Salt and which characters were most representative of them. I redefined toxic masculinity as all harmful and violent behaviour (be it physical or psychological, directed at oneself or others) performed in the pursuit of hegemonic masculinity, and anchored it to Connell and Messerschmidt’s established framework to make it a usable concept when analysing literature. Understanding how toxic masculinity relates to hegemonic masculinity and how it arises, helps putting toxic masculinity in perspective and makes it easier to not reduce it to a few set qualities that read as negative. Instead toxic masculinity can be understood as a behaviour caused by anxiety and/or pressure, external or internal, to enact a hegemonic masculinity which in turn manifests in various types of violent acts. Toxic masculinity can be analysed on different levels with other masculinities, which can reveal how they relate to each other, where they differ, and what effects it has on the character enacting toxic masculinity, other characters, the plot etc. I also compared McCann’s novel to readings of the biblical David and Jesus to contrast and highlight similarities in both masculinities and how masculinities tie into the main characters’ relationships in As Meat Loves Salt and the Bible. By identifying and comparing masculinities, I could discuss and label Jacob’s masculinity as toxic. In my close reading of As Meat Loves Salt, I discovered that David’s masculinity was not the only relevant aspect of the biblical story; the novel is also a retelling of David and Jonathan’s story. Through this finding I managed to not only highlight and make use of queer readings of David but also to contrast those readings with a contemporary novel with gay/bisexual themes that bears social critique against a heteronormative society. There are various similarities between the two, such as the story of two men from different social classes falling in love without feeling threatened by each other; there is “an abolition of male rivalry on the basis of love” (Jennings 28). One of the
differences is that Jacob and Ferris had male rivalry forced upon them, which David and Jonathan had not. *As Meat Loves Salt* also highlights the damaging qualities of religion and the role it has played in constructing masculinity and an anti-gay sentiment.

Jacob’s aim was to enact the masculinity of David, to be a “real man”, to be a man after God’s own heart at all costs. Ferris opposes David’s hegemonic masculinity and stands in contrast to Jacob’s masculinity. He represents the values of Jesus, a conflicting masculinity where physical prowess and violence are not central to his identity; Ferris, like Jesus, is a rebel who attempts to reshape the norms of society. In attempting to play their roles flawlessly, they both end up giving up a life they want; Ferris falls victim to Jacob’s behaviour which he exerts in his attempt at hegemonic masculinity. Aunt Sarah inadvertently harmed both Jacob and Ferris by enacting her complicit role of emphasized femininity to have Ferris act the man. The main characters in both stories, David and Jacob, were led to their demise by following the orders of disembodied voices, be it God or older generations, shaping the idea of what it is to be a man and thus forcing male bodies to move away from who they could be in healthy conditions and into templates where they have to bend over backwards and cut away pieces of themselves to fit in. Should one ask why both couples faced such tragic endings, the answer would be the pressure to pursue hegemonic masculinity because Jacob, like David, tries to live up to archaic norms of masculinity at the cost of everything else, and Ferris, like Jesus and Jonathan, is punished for attempting to distance himself from that pursuit.
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