

MALE SUPERIORITY REPRESENTED THROUGH P.T. BARNUM CHARACTER SCENE IN *THE GREATEST SHOWMAN* (2017) FILM

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Received: 2024-10-10

Accepted: 2024-10-25

Published: 2024-11-30

Abstract

This study examines the depiction of male superiority in *The Greatest Showman* (2017) through the character of P.T. Barnum, utilizing Connell's (2005) framework of hegemonic masculinity to analyze the character of P.T. Barnum. The film serves as a contemporary lens through which to explore the societal constructs of male dominance, ambition, and emotional vulnerability. Despite extensive scholarship on gender dynamics, there remains a notable gap in the cinematic analysis of male superiority, particularly in Western biographical musicals. This study identifies these gaps, specifically in the portrayal of male characters' internal conflicts and the intersection of personal and professional relationships. Employing a thematic analysis of both dialogue and visual elements, the research elucidates how Barnum's actions reflect traditional masculine ideals while simultaneously challenging them through moments of vulnerability. By examining key dialogues and visual symbols, the findings reveal the complexities of Barnum's character as both an embodiment of ambition and a critique of rigid masculinity. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on gender studies and cinematic analysis, offering insights into how *The Greatest Showman* both reinforces and complicates contemporary views on masculinity and its implications for societal structures and personal relationships.

Keywords: *cinematic narratives; gender representation; hegemonic masculinity; leadership; male superiority*

1. Introduction

Male superiority is often portrayed as a social construct that places men in dominant roles across various sectors, including economic, political, and social spheres (Nurchayani, Irawati & Saleh, 2021; Chabibi, 2021). This construct not only perpetuates gender inequality but also exerts pressure on men to conform to traditional masculine norms, such as strength and assertiveness, which can adversely impact their mental health (Connell, 2005; Mahalik et al., 2003). These expectations of masculinity are further reinforced by patriarchal systems that marginalize emotional expression, associating it with weakness, thereby making it difficult for men to form healthy relationships (Kimmel, 2000).

In many contexts, male superiority is justified by physical strength and the notion that men are naturally better suited for certain roles in society. This idea extends to men's participation in shaping social structures through large cooperative organizations, which reinforce male dominance (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). However, this expectation of maintaining an assertive image without displaying any perceived feminine traits leads to stress, social isolation, and strained personal relationships (Vandello et al., 2008; Mahalik et al., 2003). To prove their masculinity, some men engage in risky behaviors, further damaging their well-being.

The Greatest Showman (2017), written by Jenny Bicks and Bill Condon, follows the story of P.T. Barnum, a man driven by ambition and the desire for societal approval. Barnum's journey, characterized by professional success and personal struggles, provides a platform for examining male superiority in contemporary media. Throughout the film, Barnum embodies traditional masculinity courage, ambition, and assertiveness all central to the theory of male superiority. His pursuit of public recognition, particularly through his partnership with opera singer Jenny Lind, highlights internal and external conflicts related to societal expectations of men.

This study seeks to answer the question: How does P.T. Barnum expose male superiority in *The Greatest Showman* (2017)? It aims to explore the depiction of male superiority in the film, particularly how Barnum's character aligns with traditional masculine ideals and how this portrayal reflects contemporary views on gender roles. By analyzing Barnum's actions, the research will provide new insights into evolving norms of masculinity and gender representation in film.

Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity serves as the framework for this analysis, which examines how characters conform to or challenge traditional gender norms, revealing underlying power dynamics. The study will also draw on Kimmel's (2000) and Vandello et al.'s (2008) insights on the consequences of adhering to rigid masculine roles. Through this lens, *The Greatest Showman* offers a case study in the ongoing societal conversation about masculinity and male dominance. By synthesizing existing literature, this research fills gaps in the discourse on male superiority in film and contributes to a deeper understanding of its implications on societal structures and personal relationships.

2. Literature Review

Film analysis involves a comprehensive exploration of narrative, visual elements, and cinematic techniques to uncover underlying meanings and cultural implications (Rosenstone, 2018). In this context, examining how male superiority is depicted in *The Greatest Showman* offers insights into the evolving representation of gender roles in contemporary popular media. Character analysis becomes particularly valuable, as it reveals how male figures, such as P.T. Barnum, are portrayed in ways that reflect societal perceptions of power, ambition, and dominance (Buchbinder, 2013). This focus on male representation contributes to a broader understanding of gender dynamics in film, enriching discussions on cinematic masculinity and societal expectations (Lehman, 2007).

Representation approaches are crucial for analyzing how subjects are depicted in media, including films, books, and television. These approaches help researchers understand how representations of gender, identity, and power are constructed and disseminated through popular culture. Gil (2019), for example, examined gender representations on television, revealing how media can both reinforce and challenge

societal norms. Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation is especially relevant, as it offers a framework for understanding how meanings are constructed through media. Hall distinguishes between reflective, intentional, and constructionist forms of representation, each providing different lenses for interpreting the portrayal of male superiority in film. The constructionist perspective is particularly useful for this study, as it emphasizes how meaning is actively created through the language and symbols within the film.

This research fills a gap in the analysis of male superiority within Western biographical musical films, particularly in the character of P.T. Barnum in *The Greatest Showman*. Unlike previous studies that explored male dominance in broader cultural contexts, this study focuses on how male superiority is depicted through the professional ambition, leadership, and societal power of Barnum's character. For instance, studies on male superiority in Indonesian fairy tales (Hidayat et al., 2021) and South Korean politics (Soh, 2001) provide valuable insights into cultural narratives but lack direct relevance to the cinematic analysis of Western films. Similarly, Busthomy and Khotimah's (2023) analysis of male dominance in literature focuses on physical and professional superiority but does not address how these themes are visually represented in film.

By focusing on *The Greatest Showman*, this study aims to explore how male superiority is intertwined with the themes of success, ambition, and entertainment in American culture. P.T. Barnum serves as a key figure through which the film constructs notions of male dominance, positioning him as both a visionary leader and a representation of power within the entertainment industry. The examination of this character offers a significant opportunity to deepen the understanding of how male superiority is portrayed in biographical cinema, filling a notable gap in existing literature on gender representation in film.

3. Research Method

In this study, the researchers employed a qualitative method to explore the behavior, experiences, and relationships of the main characters in *The Greatest Showman*. Specifically, a thematic analysis was utilized to systematically examine recurring themes related to male superiority and character development in the film. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how emotional conflicts and environmental factors influenced the behavior of the main character, P.T. Barnum.

Data collection included analyzing both dialogue and visual imagery. The dialogue analysis focused on key conversations that reveal Barnum's ambition, internal conflict, and leadership qualities. For instance, the researchers analyzed dialogues between Barnum and his wife, as well as interactions with his business associates, which serve as critical moments for understanding his drive and ethical dilemmas.

In addition to verbal communication, visual analysis was conducted on elements like costumes and symbolism. Costumes were examined to understand how they reflected Barnum's evolving status and ambitions throughout the film, while visual symbols were assessed to explore how these elements contributed to the film's portrayal of male superiority. For example, the use of specific color schemes or symbolic objects in key scenes was carefully analyzed to uncover deeper meanings related to Barnum's rise in power and control.

Drawing on Gracia's (2020) framework, which emphasizes the importance of both verbal and visual elements in character-driven narratives, this study aligns with

that methodology to offer a holistic understanding of P.T. Barnum's journey. By incorporating both the thematic analysis of dialogue and a systematic review of visual elements, this research provides a comprehensive interpretation of male superiority as depicted in *The Greatest Showman*.

4. Discussion

This study focuses on the movie *The Greatest Showman* which centers around Barnum, a businessman and circus owner, who faces the challenge of keeping his business afloat amidst financial ruin. Throughout the film, Barnum exhibits traditional traits associated with male dominance, such as control, ambition, and leadership. However, his character also reveals moments of vulnerability that subvert these norms, challenging traditional masculine roles. The discussion will explore Barnum’s embodiment of male superiority through visionary leadership, charisma, ambition, entrepreneurial spirit, romantic dedication, and cultural impact, while also examining the complexities of his character as a reflection of evolving masculinity.

4.1 Visionary Leadership

Visionary leadership is often linked to masculinity, suggesting men are more suited for leadership due to their assertiveness and ability to inspire change. It can be seen from the dialogue and scene below:

Figure 1. Barnum is reflecting on his dream as a circus owner.		(Data 1: Dialogue on 00:00:35 to 00:02:58)
		Barnum: It's, everything you ever want, It's everything you ever need, And it's here right in front of you., This is where you wanna be.

In the data 1 (Dialogue on 00:00:35 to 00:02:58), P.T. Barnum passionately introduces his ambitious vision for the extraordinary show he envisioned, setting the stage for his role as a visionary leader. As he confidently states his dream of creating a show that has uniqueness and diversity, Barnum not only shows his entrepreneurial spirit, but also demonstrates his determination to reimagine the world of entertainment he dreamed of. This opening scene establishes him as a man who is ambitious by big ideas, willing to push society's standards and challenge societal norms to achieve his goals.

Here, Barnum's assertiveness and charisma shine, embodying traits typically associated with masculine leadership. His bold vision, centered on inclusivity and diversity, positions him as a dominant figure who defies societal expectations to create something new and unique.

Connell’s (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity is evident as Barnum positions himself as a dominant figure in a patriarchal society. His leadership is portrayed not just as a demonstration of power but as a vehicle for societal change, reflecting both the traditional male role as a visionary and the shifting expectations of masculinity where leadership is used to empower marginalized groups.

4.2. Entrepreneurial Spirit

Entrepreneurial spirit in men is often framed as courage, ambition, and the ability to take risks. It can be seen from the dialogue and scene below:

Figure 2. Barnum shows the old museum space that he just bought.	(Data 2: Dialogue on 00:17:16 to 00:17:45)
	Barnum: A place where people can see things they've never seen before.

In the data 2 (Dialogue on 00:17:16 to 00:17:45), Phineas Taylor Barnum or often called P.T. Barnum, in this film began his career life as an office worker and then he was fired because of the bankruptcy of the company where he worked, and all workers including Barnum became unemployed. His encounter with the circus group was not easy, starting from Barnum's idea to buy an old museum, but the museum ticket sales were not successful, Barnum who got the idea after talking with his son and wife, resulting in the idea to turn his museum into a circus show that is unique, more lively and has never been in any circus. The purpose of his actions was Barnum's ambition to be seen as someone who had the ability to fight in business and high ambition in a career in the midst of his unstable financial condition.

Barnum's decision exemplifies traditional masculine attributes such as risk-taking and control over financial decisions, aligning with Connell's framework of male dominance in both public and private spheres. However, his vulnerability—losing his job and facing potential failure—reveals cracks in the hegemonic narrative, suggesting that contemporary masculinity also embraces moments of uncertainty and emotional openness.

4.3. Ambition

Ambition is a driving force behind Barnum's character and reflects the societal expectation for men to achieve dominance in their careers and social standing. It can be seen from the dialogue and scene below:

Figure 3. Barnum came to visit a man's house to recruit the small man in front of him.	(Data 3: Dialogue on 00:21:35 to 00:22:23)
	Barnum: I see a soldier. No, a general riding across the stage with a sword and a gun and the most beautiful uniform ever made. People will come from all over the world.

In the data 3 (Dialogue on 00:21:35 to 00:22:23), showing his ambition to be successful, as a man Barnum gets a big idea after talking to his family, realizing it by buying a circus and making new innovations by recruiting people with unique

individual talents and appearances, often referred to as “freaks.” The researchers observe a clear display of male superiority in the control and emotional support present in Barnum's character. Barnum's decision to seek out and dominate the lives of these disenfranchised people demonstrates his power and superiority. Starting with recruiting the small man he saw at the loan, continuing with the search for individuals who he thought were unique, he not only determines the skills of who will be recruited by him, but also influences how the audience who will be the judge in how they will view these circus workers. Barnum asserted his leadership as the most important person by portraying himself as having strong ambitions and targets.

Barnum's ambition to create a successful show pushes him to pursue individuals considered "freaks" by society, showcasing his drive to redefine entertainment while maintaining control over those under his leadership.

Barnum's ambition mirrors Kimmel's (2004) description of male superiority, where men are often seen as power-driven figures. However, his willingness to embrace individuals marginalized by society subverts the traditional power dynamic. This shift aligns with evolving masculinities, where ambition includes a level of inclusivity and acceptance of diversity, rather than pure dominance.

4.4 Charismatic Persona

Charisma is another trait often associated with male dominance, and Barnum uses it to persuade others to join his vision. His charm, however, is also a tool of vulnerability and negotiation, revealing a softer side of masculinity. It can be seen from the dialogue and scene below:

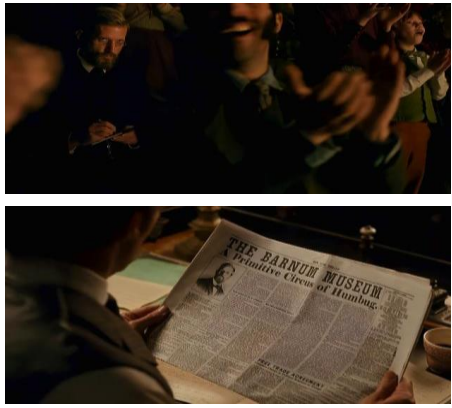
Figure 4. Barnum persuades Phillip Carlyle to join him, showcasing his self-confidence and assertiveness.	(Data 4: Dialogue on 00:35:35 to 00:40:10)
	Barnum: Come join our circus. You might find yourself a free man

In the data 4 (Dialogue on 00:35:35 to 00:40:10), where P.T. Barnum seduces Phillip Carlyle to join his efforts, Barnum's courage and strategic thinking in this scene need to be highlighted. This should be focused on because it illustrates how male superiority works in professional relationships, especially through the influence of power and subtle persuasion. Barnum's ability to charm and convince Carlyle highlights traditional masculine leadership roles, but it also reveals his dependence on others for success, challenging the notion of men as entirely self-reliant figures.

Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) hegemonic masculinity theory applies here, where men assert influence over others. However, Barnum's subtle persuasion and emotional appeal show a shift towards a more collaborative and less authoritarian style of male leadership, reflecting contemporary ideas of masculinity that value emotional intelligence and cooperation.

4.5 Cultural Impact

Men are often seen as cultural pioneers, and Barnum's circus transforms societal norms about entertainment and inclusion, positioning him as a key figure in shaping cultural narratives. It can be seen from the dialogue and scene below:

Figure 5. Media critics are judging Barnum's circus performance for his newspaper.	(Data 5: Dialogue on 00:30:50 to 00:31:55)
	Bennet: Tell me Mr. Barnum does it bother you that everything you're selling is fake? Barnum: Do the smile is fake? It doesn't matter where they come from, The joy is real.

In the data 5 (Dialogue on 00:30:50 to 00:31:55), Barnum confronts famous a theater critics and the media they publish in newspapers, his passionate defense of his shows and his circus workers highlighting his ambition towards his vision and the work he puts into his shows. Barnum's insistence on defying societal norms and society's high standards rejects the abnormal norms of entertainment. This scene underscores Barnum's desire to challenge upper-class notions of entertainment, pushing for a more inclusive and diverse representation in popular culture.

Barnum's cultural impact aligns with Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity, where men are seen as key figures in shaping societal norms. However, Barnum's challenge to elitist ideals also subverts traditional power structures, suggesting that men's roles in culture can evolve from reinforcing to challenging established hierarchies.

4.6 Resilience and Determination

Barnum's resilience is showcased in moments of crisis, reflecting traditional masculine ideals of perseverance. Yet, these moments also highlight his emotional vulnerabilities. It can be seen from the dialogue and scene below:

Figure 6. fire at the P.T. Barnum circus.	(Data 6: Dialogue on 01:23:50 to 01:27:50)
	Barnum: The crazy speed of always needing more, but when I stop, and see you here, I remember who all this was for, and from now on, these eyes will not be blinded by the lights.

In the data 6 (Dialogue on 01:23:50 to 01:27:50), A fire that completely destroys Barnum circus. In this pivotal scene, he gathers his cast, demoralized by the destruction, and delivers an impassioned speech to inspire them to rebuild and keep the show alive. Despite having lost everything, Barnum's unyielding determination shines through, as he quickly strategizes on how to rise from the ashes and reclaim success. His determination to recover from the devastation reflects a deep-rooted masculine trait perseverance. However, Barnum's moment of self-reflection reveals an internal struggle, subverting the narrative of the infallible male leader.

This scene echoes Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, where men are expected to endure and lead in times of adversity. Yet, Barnum's vulnerability acknowledging his mistakes and shifting priorities offers a nuanced portrayal of masculinity that embraces failure as part of personal growth.

4.7 Romantic Dedication

Romantic dedication often requires men to take on roles of protector and provider. Barnum's relationship with Charity, however, reveals his emotional vulnerabilities, challenging the traditional masculine script. It can be seen from the dialogue and scene below:

Figure 7. Charity leaves Barnum in their home.		(Data 7: Dialogue on 01:29:14 to 01:31:55)
		Barnum: I have hardship on you and our family. You warned me and I wouldn't listen. I just ... I wanted to be more than I was.

In the data 7 Dialogue on 01:29:14 to 01:31:55), Charity and they children leave Barnum, and the house they live in and return to her father's house, Charity feels disappointed with Barnum after reading the newspaper that there is a husband scandal with Jenny Lind, Charity assumes that Barnum ignores her feelings and her role as a wife. after being left by his children and wife, Barnum, realizing the price that must be paid for his relentless ambition to achieve success, makes a sincere effort to reconnect with his wife, Charity. This meeting occurs after an emotional split in their relationship, where his ambition has created distance between Barnum and his wife. To mend their relationship, Barnum again puts his love and dedication into convincing his wife and Charity's father to bring her back to their family home, in this moment of warmth as he recognizes the importance of his family, especially Charity, above the fame and fortune he once prioritized. Barnum's admission of guilt and his effort to repair the relationship reflect his emotional depth, deviating from the traditional male role of emotional detachment.

This scene illustrates Connell's concept of benevolent patriarchy, where men are expected to show strength and responsibility in both public and private spheres. However, Barnum's emotional openness subverts traditional masculinity by portraying

vulnerability as an essential part of romantic dedication, suggesting that masculinity in relationships can be both strong and emotionally expressive.

Barnum's character in *The Greatest Showman* encapsulates various aspects of masculinity, from visionary leadership and ambition to emotional vulnerability. While he embodies many traditional traits associated with male superiority, such as control and dominance, his moments of introspection and failure challenge these norms. Barnum's character reflects an evolving concept of masculinity, one that integrates traditional power with vulnerability and emotional intelligence, suggesting that male superiority in the modern world is no longer defined solely by dominance but also by the ability to adapt and embrace change.

5. Conclusion

In *The Greatest Showman*, the character of P.T. Barnum is depicted as a multifaceted figure who embodies both the positive traits and complexities of traditional masculinity. His visionary leadership, charisma, toughness, entrepreneurial spirit, ambition, advocacy for individuality, romantic dedication, and cultural impact contribute to a narrative that simultaneously celebrates and critiques dominant masculine traits. Each scene not only highlights his admirable qualities but also emphasizes the complicity of male dominance in both personal and societal contexts. Barnum's success and influence are frequently framed through the lens of male power, reinforcing the problematic gender dynamics that persist in contemporary culture. This portrayal encourages a deeper critique of the societal implications inherent in such representations. While Barnum is celebrated for his accomplishments, it is essential to recognize that these traits can perpetuate a narrative that prioritizes male success over the contributions and value of others. The film thus reflects broader discussions surrounding modern masculinity, prompting viewers to consider how these ideals shape our perceptions of gender roles and leadership today. In conclusion, the film not only invites viewers to reconsider narratives surrounding gender and leadership but also urges them to critically engage with how these portrayals reflect and influence societal norms and expectations regarding masculinity. Such engagement is crucial for fostering a more equitable understanding of gender dynamics in contemporary society.

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