

Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Gender Inequality* (*But Were Afraid to Ask Harry Crews)

I was eleven, maybe twelve, when I snuck out of my room, as I often did, and hid behind the couch while my parents were watching an adult film. Now, I don't mean adult in the pornographic sense; rather, these were movies they deemed inappropriate for a child my age. The movie was Spielberg's *The Color Purple*, and I lasted in my concealed space long enough to witness Albert's treatment of Celie—the physical and sexual abuse, and the overall dominance of her—before I was shuffled off to bed. I wasn't old enough to understand the themes of racism or of the poverty involved, and truly I wasn't capable of understanding exactly what sexism meant. Instead, I saw an improperly balanced relationship, a man controlling a woman.

Before then, I wasn't aware of such an imbalance as my only real indication of how men and women interacted was a product of watching my parents, how they treated one another and how neither of their desires were emphasized more so than those of the other.

I was born in a military hospital outside of Los Angeles, California to a career flight engineer father and an insurance agent mother. Our lives, the choices ranging from what city or state we lived to what meal would be on the table in the evenings, was not dictated by one parent more than the other. The choices were made by government orders and by my mother's taxing nine-to-five schedule. The decisions regarding my rearing were also not dominated by either parent, but by a product of both my mother and father. My manners, my education, the sort of man I would eventually become was shaped equally by a man *and* a woman.

Further, our familial triad had little to no contact with any extended family, be they blood related or the sort found within the Lord's house. Besides the majors, Christmas and Easter, my family followed no specific religion or doctrine that could impose an imbalance between the male or female in our house. My mother shared the head of household title with my father, neither being subservient, submissive to the other. What my father taught me, besides how to shave and such, was how the woman in the relationship should be treated—equal.

I didn't know imbalance, because I wasn't privy, first hand, to the notion that such an imbalance existed.

So, my first indication of gender inequality, and it was an extreme example, came with Danny Glover and Whoopi Goldberg. But why was I drawn to this film and eventually literature that either touched on or made this imbalance the focal point? It wasn't that I enjoyed reading about these

inequalities; rather, it was because it represented characters and a way of life I was wholly unfamiliar with. Readers, like myself, are drawn to material like this—it affords us the opportunity to live within an experience that we may not agree with but are drawn to because it is unlike our own, something new. And isn't this the goal of all writing, to take the reader to an unfamiliar place, and more specifically, within the minds of human beings, genetically similar to the reader, with flesh and blood and lungs and a beating heart, but with a drastically different view of other human beings, a view very different from the reader's?

And therein lies the difficulty. How can a story, a novel, a movie, be not only compelling, but believable and even in the face of this imbalance, still compel the reader to go on? Readers, like myself, will often shut the book and return it to the shelf unless the imbalance serves the story. Since first experiencing the degrading, slanted relationship of Albert and Celia, there have been many books I've read that tackle this issue, but none with the ferocity, the authority and the command of *The Color Purple*. That is, until I discovered Harry Crews.

Harry Crews, in his novels, provides his readers with a stark, yet compelling rendering of this imbalance within the American South. His work is visceral, dark, strangely comic and, at times—like *The Color Purple*—quite difficult to read. Moreover, the worlds he creates are, in large part, foreign to readers who don't hail from this certain uniquely Southern and sometimes desperately poor subculture, yet Crews' work is engaging because of the attention he pays to a very real issue of the human condition unencumbered by state lines—the most basic being the imbalance between men and women.

Through the close reading of *All We Need of Hell*, *Car*, *A Feast of Snakes*, and *Body*, I will be looking at how Crews creates this imbalance and the effect this has for the reader—how his dominant male protagonists, submissive female characters, and the sex between them reinforce the inequality and ultimately show that Crews' work isn't a reflection of his own character, but rather a representation of an very real issue in our world and, more specifically, within the relationships of men and women.

The Men

How Male Characters are Presented as Dominant Through Point of View and Language

The men in Crews' work have a jaded, cynical point of view. They are selfish, their outlook narrow and most likely not shared by the average reader but Crews writes with a matter-of-fact, take-it-or-leave-it voice. Crews' stories are told from a very close third person perspective that only allows the reader, most often, into the mind of a male protagonist. So, rather than get a clear, unbiased picture of the small world in which the character lives, the reader receives the protagonist's *interpretation* of the world.

In *All We Need of Hell*, a novel following Duffy Deeter, a lawyer from Gainesville dealing with his crumbling family, Crews writes, "Nothing centers a man like pain" (*Hell* 8). This statement comes in the midst of the protagonist's inner thought process and Crews does not personalize the sentence by beginning with "For Duffy," or "For him," nor does he insinuate that something other than pain, like love or lust or fear, could center a person. In this world, pain *is* the only centering force, and Duffy's point of view is the only viable lens through which to see it.

A Feast of Snakes also deals with themes of dysfunctional familial relations and adultery, and the reader is again presented with a male protagonist who relates the world only through his own eyes. When Joe Lon Mackey's high school sweetheart returns to Mystic, Georgia, she brings her new boyfriend with her and Joe Lon immediately passes a personalized judgment about him. Joe Lon states, "He'd seen guys dressed like that before and never liked one of them: double-knit tangerine trousers, fuzzy bright-yellow sweater..." (*Feast* 60). The reader is immediately aware that their protagonist makes observations, then assumptions about others based on their appearance. Jon Lon goes on to state that he has never heard of a "debating team" and that such a team is "Probably some fag foreign sport like soccer" (*Feast* 61). With such a sentiment, the reader knows that this world is presented through a skewed lens, one of ignorance, judgement, and undoubtedly of fear rather than with a holistic point of view—*This* is how Joe Lon Mackey sees the world.

With the point of view established, we must look at the character of Crews' protagonists. Men that are at once loathsome, misogynistic and compelling. And these are bottom of the barrel men, trapped men. They are selfish men looking for escape through being in control—being on the heavier side of the scale in their relationships—and willing to do whatever they must in order to achieve that goal.

In *A Feast of Snakes*, Joe Lon Mackey is an ex high school football star who has taken over his father's business, cleaning and shipping Port-a-Pottys and selling bootleg moonshine. When his ex-girlfriend Berenice returns for a visit from college, she "reminded [him] of everything he had been trying not to think about" (*Feast* 19). "Everything" in this case being any success outside of the cesspool of his own existence. Herman Mack, the central protagonist of *Car*, is a man working at his

father's junkyard, a dead-end job facilitating a dead-end life. He says, "I'm thirty years old, never had anything, nothing. We been squatting out there on those mountains of rust and it ain't coming to nothing" (*Car* 27). In the world of bodybuilding, Russell the Muscle, protagonist of *Body*, passed his prime without achieving much success and has put everything into Shereel, his from-scratch female contender. She was "his chance to make it big. His final chance...if she lost, he lost too" (*Body* 174). Russell has nothing else besides this title, he's hit the bottom rung and if she fails, Russell loses his reputation and "everything he'd given his life to" (*Body* 174). In *All We Need of Hell*, the reader meets Duffy Deeter, a man whose law practice is falling apart, his partner is having an affair with Duffy's wife who in turn rarely listens to or even looks at him, and his son seems hell-bent on ignoring Duffy and taking his life on a direction polar opposite from his father's. Crews writes, "There had been a time when he was at one with his family. The balance was there...how had he become so separated" (*Hell* 23). But rather than find the source of that question -- and this is also true of Crews' other men -- Duffy searches for an escape, for something in his life that he *can* feel in control of.

The wording Crews' employs for his male protagonists is always strong and particularly charged. In *All We Need of Hell*, Duffy Deeter, when reflecting on sex with his wife, remembers, "when he saw that strange, wondrous pad of hair, he had to have it for his own. He was like that" (*Hell* 24). By saying, "have it for his own," Crews shows that Duffy considers women not as equals, but as property, something for him to own, to control. By "owning" it, Duffy guarantees himself control. Then, while looking upon the sweaty, breathless Marvella, the coed Duffy is having an affair with, Crews writes that Duffy "had killed her where he rode her" (2). "Killed," in this case, is a reference to Duffy defeating, overpowering Marvella at the act of sex while the imagery of Marvella being ridden shows Duffy's dominance and Marvella's submission while conjuring the representation of a broken horse, a tamed animal. One party, the male party in the relationship is shown as stronger, more in control of the other.

Another example of the charged language Crews uses for his male protagonists is found in *A Feast of Snakes*. While bedding Berenice on the high school football field, in a pit of snakes, Joe Lon is describes as being "above her, beautiful and powerful with the moonlight splintering against his back, casting his face in solid shadow" (*Feast* 31). Crews asserts Joe Lon's dominance in this sentence by saying that he is both "above her" and "powerful." While being above Berenice could simply define the position in which they are having sex, it also carries with it the connotation of him being in a position of authority or of dominance and noting that he is "powerful" reminds the reader of his control.

Berenice, in this same scene, responds, “I found him...the Boss Snake of all snakes,” (32) which, essentially, is her recognizing Joe Lon’s power, his authority over her. Using “boss” to describe him is tantamount to calling him master. Berenice, by vocalizing her view of Joe Lon, is accepting her submissive role. She is acknowledging the imbalance between them.

It is interesting to note that in each of the above quotations, Crews uses both “shadow” and “snake” when referring to Joe Lon, two terms that often imply a sinister nature. While Crews is reaffirming his male protagonist’s dominance, he is also hinting at the negativity of such inequality between the sexes.

The Women

How Crews Presents Female Characters as Submissive Through Language and Action

As the desires, the goals of Crews’ male protagonists are of the upmost priority, the other characters, mainly the female characters, become merely obstacles for the men to overcome. Just as Crews’ specific and intentional language speaks to the characteristics of the male protagonists, so does the language defining the females in their lives. Crews’ word choices reinforce “roles for women that are secondary and male focused” (Bledsoe 85), and reaffirm the imbalance between the sexes.

Crews’ female characters are often presented or thought of by the male protagonist as being one-dimensional. In *Car*, when Herman meets Margo, the hotel’s resident prostitute, she tells him that the men she had always desired were so because of the cars they drove—her first love, the fullback “didn’t get [her], the Vette did” (56) and she sticks with her pimp because he “drives a Jaguar” (56). This implies that Margo lacks the depth to desire a connection from anywhere below the superficial. Later, when Herman asks why she wanted him to sleep with her, Margo says “it was all she had” (*Car* 140). There is more to her than sex, yet she sees herself as only the sum of her sexual organs, a product no doubt of being born into a culture with an imbalance between men and women.

Margo tells Herman, “I’m always free to you,” (56). Using the term “free” carries with it the implication that her sexuality is, at least to the central male protagonist, without worth. And being in the position of a sex worker where her productivity is based upon paying customers, circumventing Herman’s necessity to pay for her “services” makes him special, in a position of power. The time she could be spending with a another john would produce money for both her and her pimp, yet she

engages in sex with Herman even if the lack of payment could elicit reprisal from her pimp. Thus, the most dominant male figure in Margo's life, her pimp, is replaced by Herman.

In *All We Need of Hell*, Crews writes that Marvella, Duffy Deeter's mistress, is a "Woodrow Wilson Fellow in the Philosophy Department...had the single most brilliant graduate record in the history of the department" (4), thus attempting to show an element of depth, of intelligence; yet later in the novel, Duffy states that he sees her as "absolutely without substance." (68). This shows that no matter the accomplishment, the male protagonist still sees the female as the mysterious *other* and thus, an entity whose purpose lies solely at the whim of the man. Both Margo and Marvella consider themselves and are considered by the male protagonists as being of service to men, the "service" being a game in which the men can assert dominance.

Marvella says, "Daddy, please daddy" (1) during sex with Duffy. By using "daddy," a tone is established—in this world, at least through Duffy's eyes, Marvella thinks of him as an authority figure much like a child considers their parent to be. For the onset of the novel, the reader has the impression that Marvella considers Duffy to be dominant over her, in control of her. Later, Duffy notes that Marvella "did what he told her to do without complaint." (110). Whatever the request, however sick or dangerous, Marvella would do it because Duffy is the authority, the dominant party. This subservience continues the child-parent imagery in Crews' work, the weaker person doing what they're told because they trust in the stronger person's authority or, like many of the female characters, they do so rather than risk reprisal from the dominant parties if they don't comply. This same imbalance is imagined in *Body* when, while Shereel has sex with him in order to lose weight, Russell "handled her as easily as if she had been a child" (14). Comparing Shereel to a child early in the novel, and with her already in the position of taking orders from Russell, her trainer, the roles are in place: the male protagonist is dominant and the female character is submissive.

In this same vein, female characters are often rendered as acting like or being compared to animals, beings that can be conquered, dominated or *used* to garner their counterpart's success, like with horseback riding or show competitions. In *All We Need of Hell*, while Marvella has sex, "her eyes were tranquil, her face calm, as though she had been grazing there on her hands and knees." (*Hell* 61). In one sentence, the reader is given two images. The terms "tranquil" and "calm" present Marvella as peaceful during the act, in spite of her treatment. No matter the degradation or lack of passion, she is accepting of what is happening. It can be argued that this is so in response to continual treatment of this sort—in her culture, *this is the way its always been and always will be*, so to speak. The sentence also compares her to a cow or some other pastoral animal, species that have always been dominated, been

kept in service of mankind and are, at times, used in fairs and contests to win medals. In other words, Marvella's comparison is to an entity that exists solely for the productivity and benefit of their owners as well as being a vessel for the facilitation of success.

In *A Feast of Snakes*, Crews uses this sort of image again, while Joe Lon has sex with Berenice, though in this case, Crews goes so far as to name the specific animal: "she sucked like a calf at its mother" (*Feast* 121). Berenice is compared, literally, to the submissive cow and at the same time, the implication is that Berenice is dependent upon another, her very survival resting on the dominant, authoritative being to which her lips touch. The effect here, is the sense that while the protagonist is using the act of sex as a sport to win, the female character involved uses sex to "survive," to remain viable, which harkens back to Margo's assertion that sex is all she was worth.

Then, while Joe Lon has sex with his wife, Elfie, Crews' language again casts the female character in a weaker position. Crews writes, "it had been poor old Elf, caught unawares and sleeping, her sore flapping breasts vulnerable to his hard square hands," (*Feast* 56). Here, Crews uses the term "vulnerable" when referring to body parts of the female juxtaposed to "hard" when referring to the male. Vulnerability supposes that the character is weak, easily manipulated and able to be dominated whereas the protagonist having hard hands provides an unflinching stance, steadfast—the hard has control over the vulnerable. The stronger male is in control of the weaker female, which reaffirms the tipped scale between men and women.

The Sex

The Reinforcement of Gender Inequality Through the Imagery and Language of Sex

All of Crews' men engage in activities that remove them from the harsh, desperate (self imposed or not) realities of their lives—working out, racing cars, and, most of all, sex. These are all activities they can *control*. They control speed of the vehicle—in *Feast*, Joe Lon confiscates a weaker man's Porsche and tops out the speed even though he was "stamping the accelerator and pumping the steering wheel with both hands" (*Feast* 100). They control the amount of weight on the Universal machine—in *All We Need of Hell*, Duffy states "there *is* a man in that machine" and to conquer him, to be better, all you had to do was "Stare him in the eye" (*Hell* 38). And the speed, force and outcome of sex, in their minds, *can* be controlled, the imbalance maintained.

Early in the novel *Body*, a work about a man grooming his secretary to be the next world champion female body builder, the protagonist Russell the Muscle states that “Fucking is just another workout” (14). From Russell’s point of view, sex is simply another way to shed pounds and the reader must accept that in Russell’s vision, whatever emotions, whatever pleasures could be derived from having sex is irrelevant, and getting Shereel, his “creation” to the optimal weight of 124 pounds in order to win his title, is.

This very same line, word for word, is thought by Duffy Deeter in *All We Need of Hell* while running through a mental list of sports he uses to improve himself (9). Sex is just another obstacle to overcome, another sport to win and the woman involved is only an object to facilitate this goal, thus making the female’s existence less important than the male’s. Crews writes, “Duffy would do anything to win, just as he had this morning with Marvella” (*Hell* 10). His aim is to not stop when she asks, to beat her at this “game” and to push himself past his own limits by picturing Nazi gas chambers and piles of eye balls in order to prolong his orgasm (1). This shows that the affair, the sex is not about Marvella at all, not about her pleasure but something for Duffy to win, something for him to conquer. For the reader, the notion is that whatever happens in the novel is contingent upon Duffy’s *perceived* level of success. In other words, the progression of this novel, just like Crews’ other works, is dependent upon the man’s desires, not the woman’s.

Sex in Crews’ work is experienced only through the eyes of his male protagonists. Sex is an act, or a sport, in which these men *can* succeed. The desires, hesitations, satisfactions, etc. of the other parties involved are never stated, except within snippets of dialogue. And these are either meek opposition to the protagonists’ goal, which the protagonist then ignores in service of themselves—in *All We Need of Hell* Marvella, during sex, tells Duffy, “You’re killing me,” to which Duffy thinks, “Yes, and by God he would” (1)— or submissive encouragement which only adds fuel to the protagonist’s fire—in *A Feast of Snakes*, Berenice tells Joe Lon mid-coitus that he can do what ever he wants to her but to go “easy, be easy darling,” yet Joe Lon “wasn’t easy at all because he knew she was about to talk of love” (121). The effect here is the firm establishment of the protagonist’s goal—seen through the eyes of the story’s only authority—and reaffirmation of the imbalance between the men who are seeking escape and the women who facilitate it.

In *Body*, when Russell has sex with Shereel, it is purely an attempt to get her to the correct weight in order to eventually win the title for himself. Russell extracts no pleasure from the intimate act, no closer connection to Shereel. Instead, his only hope is to be one step closer to his goal. When Shereel gets “on the scale she was one hundred and twenty-three pounds” (15), a pound under the limit

and thus able to enter the competition. Russell responds by telling her, “We’re where we need to be” (15). Russell uses the term *we*, yet it is apparent that Shereel, while maybe not overtly, does not share the same outlook. She notes that Russell didn’t kiss her during, and that she “had never been fucked and not kissed” (16). This is an indication that sex means more to her, enough that she notices the lack of passion, yet Russell makes no acknowledgment of this because the sex is just a device, a simple tool for Russell to succeed, an activity not unlike running laps or lifting weights. It is an act in which he is the dominant force.

For Herman Mack in *Car*, his ultimate success, his escape from the shortcomings of his life lies in the eating of a 1971 Ford Maverick, but this is only because he’s never had any luck with women. Crews writes, “Herman had always been shy with women, intimidated by them” (54) and because of his fear hadn’t “had a girlfriend since childhood” (54). Thus, in addition to the failures of all other aspects in his life, he doesn’t have the sport of sex to work at, and ultimately win. Instead, he focuses his attention on the consumption of a vehicle, which in and of itself, becomes a sexualized entity. Alone with the Ford Maverick, Herman’s “pink, lolling tongue lapped out of his mouth and touched metal” (50) and he “longed to have it in his mouth. To feel it in his throat” (51). While he is talking about consuming the vehicle, out of context, the passage has a sexual undertone. The sexuality that has been absent from Herman’s life has been transferred to automobiles and in turn, can be obtained if he goes straight to the source. The car, as a sexualized being, must be dominated. Only after Margo, the self-proclaimed “hotel whore” (52) shows interest, and sleeps with him—thus becoming his new object to dominate—does Herman give up on eating the car. His desire for success, the domination of an activity is transferred onto the woman and to the activity in which he is able to succeed.

Another important note is that while the women aren’t gaining pleasure from sex, neither are the protagonists; they are focused on winning. The act isn’t pleasurable; the goal, the finish line is. Sex, like any other activity these men engage in, is only a vessel to get to their level of satisfaction, to facilitate their escape, however fleeting. Having sex, like Crews’ protagonist Russell stated, is just another workout, an activity to dominate. And as one of the most simple, yet necessary acts of human interaction, sex strips away the emotionally protective masks of the men and women involved and allows the true nature, the intentions, and the desires of the engaged parties to be seen. For the reader, sex is simply another way Crews illuminates the imbalance between the sexes.

The Misogynist?

Addressing the Character of the Author and the Lasting Impression on the Reader

So, how can the reader feel justified in continuing on with a story where the balance between men and women is so thoroughly distorted? How can I, a man who grew up without this imbalance in my childhood home or within the home I've now built for myself, remain engaged with material like Albert's repeated beating of Celie or Crews' male protagonist's continual degradation and domination of women.

Why? Because we, again, are drawn to lives unlike our own. Most of us haven't robbed a convenience store at gunpoint or killed the neighbor's dog, but that doesn't mean our heart doesn't skip a beat, then fire faster as we read about fictional characters doing so. But it has to serve the story, it has to reveal something deeper, something more complex than the horrific action. Which poses the most important question: Is Crews a misogynist? Is anyone who has the gall to write so blatantly, so unapologetically about gender inequality a sexist? Or is the imbalance serving the story?

In his memoir, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*, Crews writes, "The mystery of little girls stood at dead even with the mystery of God...And as well as being unpleasant, the whole thing was scary" (167). It is apparent that Crews himself, from an early age, was unsure about the true nature of women, so rather than have his male protagonists attempt to guess in his novels, he keeps the female characters subdued, quiet, out of the reader's reach. The inner thoughts of women are rarely, if ever, stated and remain largely a mystery to both the reader and to the male characters.

Women become the indistinguishable *other*, peripheral characters that are, according to Elsie S. Lake in her essay *Having a Hard Time of It: Women in the Novels of Harry Crews*, "catalysts for male actions and passive victims" (Bledsoe 85). The male protagonists consider female characters in a fashion that reflects this indefinable nature, often associating them with imagery and language similar to unthinking, objection-less beings, from animals to cadavers. And while much of this could label Crews again a misogynist, upon deeper inspection, the sex and roles of the parties involved can be argued as men's inability to understand the mystery of women as well as an exploration of the inequality Crews has experienced throughout his own life. As stated by Lake, Crews is "merely a chronicler of misogyny in the contemporary American South" (Bledsoe 85), rather than a misogynist himself. Such an imbalance has permeated his life and rather than craft stories in which the sexes are equal, Crews is simply writing realistically—art, essentially, is *truly* a reflection of life.

I am inclined to agree. Crews is not glamorizing these men, their behavior or the inequality itself. When the reader reaches the final pages of his novels, the male protagonists are the same sad, desperate souls or often worse off than before. Russell, in *Body*, loses the competition and when Shereel kills herself, loses the one person even remotely close to him. His actions, the imbalance he imposes ultimately, leads to his undoing. Joe Lon, in *Feast*, melts down and goes on a shooting spree, killing his ex-girlfriend, her boyfriend (the one he'd been judging throughout the whole novel) and many other townspeople—many of whom had no bearing on his life whatsoever—and eventually kills himself. Berenice, his ex, is obviously succeeding, doing better than Joe Lon, thus tipping the scale in her direction, and Joe Lon can't handle it. His need for dominance eventually leads him to destroy anything and everything he can't understand as well as himself.

And there is no way for the reader to experience Crews' fabricated world other than following along with someone wholly unlike themselves. Therein lies the hook. The reader is comforted by Crews' commitment to his protagonists, that is, comforted that Crews makes no excuses for their behaviors, their treatment of women, etc, because these men aren't who we are, this imbalance is not present in our own lives (at least, I hope that's the case with other readers).

Crews does not lead the reader to loathe these men by writing with charged, negative language about their behavior, nor does Crews imply that this imbalance is the correct way to live, that such domination is acceptable. The stories, while tough to stomach, are unbiased—the behavior, the inequality just *is*. And the takeaway, what the reader can glean from his work, is that perpetuating such an imbalance is the reason these men haven't and most likely, never will rise from the holes they've dug for themselves. In his own way, Crews is denouncing the inequality without actually writing it. And that, right there, is the effect every writer must strive for in their work.