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Bachelor's Thesis

The representation of Viking Masculinity in Dreamwork's *How to Train Your Dragon*

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
How to Train Your Dragon	6
Viking Culture	5
Viking Masculinity	6
Chapter 2: Analysis of Berk	9
Vikings as seamen and craftsmen	10
Hiccup's name	11
Dragon education on Berk.....	12
Viking Masculinity on The Isle of Berk	14
Chapter 3 Character analysis	15
Stoick the Vast.....	15
Astrid Hofferson	18
Hiccup.....	21
Conclusion	25

Introduction

Beards, Muscles, horned helmets, boats, and big axes. When reading these words there is big chance that one might think of Vikings. Because this is how Vikings have been depicted by popular culture on television, in comics and in books (Trafford 58). This research paper will explore how contemporary popular culture makes use of certain traditional Viking concepts. More specifically, this paper will look at the representations of Viking masculinity within popular culture; particularly, the Viking themed film *How to Train Your Dragon*.

How to Train Your Dragon is an American animated fantasy film from 2010, created by DreamWorks Animation and distributed by Paramount Pictures. The film is loosely based on Cressida Cowell's book of the same name: *How to Train Your Dragon*. Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois directed the film, which was based on a script by Will Davies, Sanders, and DeBlois (IMDb). This thesis will not use the original story of the book but will analyse the story of the film. The stories differ to a great extent, except some character names, the village name, the Viking culture, and the presence of dragons. Albeit the dragon's function differs in the books, the dragons must be tamed as rite of passage and in the film the dragons have to be killed. However, the origin of Cowell's inspiration for the story will be examined. As she and the film directors worked together on the film's story. Cowell even stated, "while the portrayal is different, the heart of the story remained the same" (Rawat).

Before I look at the representation of Viking culture within *How to Train Your Dragon* and analyse the main characters, I will summarise the film and explain which literature I have used. Arguments about Viking masculinity will be based on studies of Viking culture and Viking heritage. To create an analysis about a movie where the Viking trope is being used one must first examine and research Viking Culture.

How to Train Your Dragon

Before I talk about Viking masculinity and Viking Culture within *How to Train Your Dragon*, I will first summarize the story to give an idea about Hiccup's struggle within a Viking society. *How to Train Your Dragon* takes place on the Isle of Berk. Here, a young Viking named Hiccup wants to join his town's battle against dragons. These dragons raid the Isle for livestock. However, Stoick the Vast, Hiccup's strong and big Viking father and village leader, will not allow his weak, awkward, son to join in combat. Hiccup might not be physically big or strong, but he is very inventive. To combat the dragons, Hiccup uses his inventions. In the opening scene, Hiccup goes into combat and uses his own bola launcher to defeat a mysterious Night Fury dragon. After finding the wounded dragon in the forest Hiccup can't bring himself to kill it. Instead, Hiccup and the dragon, whom he names Toothless, form the first¹ bond between human and dragon. Hiccup discovers that his people have misunderstood dragons for decades. Whilst Hiccup and Toothless take flight in their own unique ways, the two discover that they must battle the ignorance that plagues the Isle of Berk. Instead of killing dragons, Berk should live together with the dragons in harmony.

So, in short, the film *How to Train Your Dragon* is a coming-of-age story, where a boy who does not possess the typical masculine Viking traits is searching for acceptance from his peers, the other villagers, and mostly his dad. The film delves into the awkward bond between a masculine Viking father and a son who does not meet the father's expectations. However, when Hiccup makes his first friend, Toothless the dragon, he feels accepted for who he is. Hiccup starts believing in himself and finds his own strength and masculinity. By doing so, not only does he get accepted by his peers, the village and even his father, but Hiccup also helps the Isle of Berk prosper in a way that was not deemed possible before.

¹ In *How to Train You Dragon 2* we learn that Hiccup is not the first dragon rider.

Viking Culture

I will use the books written by Price and Brink as the main sources of information on Viking Culture and history (Brink; Price). These books help understand Viking tropes within the film *How to Train Your Dragon*. To understand my analysis about the film, Viking culture must be explained. In *The Children of Ash and Elm* Price explains that Viking in Old Norse víkingr meant to ‘pirate’ and defined an occupation or an activity (6). The Scandinavians of the eight to eleventh centuries did not think of themselves as Vikings and it was not an identity for their entire culture. Nowadays in Nordic languages the word vikingar or viker means “seaborne raider.” Price says in his book that in most other languages the term Viking is used for “anyone who had a nodding acquaintance with Scandinavia ‘in those days’” (7). The word “vikings” with a lower case is now used by some scholars to refer to the general populace, whilst “Vikings” is used to indicate to the pirating occupation. So, when talking about “Viking culture” this paper means not only the Scandinavian pirates, but also their history, lifestyle, and culture.

Viking Masculinity

With the rise of terms such as “Toxic Masculinity” and “Male supremacy” in the late 20th century, some say an attack on masculinity has started. From a societal viewpoint, masculine traits are often looked down upon and masculine representation is something men must feel ashamed of (Harrington 346). Raw masculine emotions and feelings are often compared to barbaric and are reminiscent of uncultured times. Times where men, albeit rich and white, used to be on top of the (dominance) hierarchy. As Christina Hoff Sommers says in her book *The War Against Boys*, “But, increasingly, in our schools and in our homes, everyday boyishness is seen as aberrational, toxic—a pathology in need of a cure” (28). Of course, extreme “masculine behaviour”, like all other kinds of behaviour, can lead to problems. To say however that masculinity is toxic is an unwarranted generalisation. To counter against the discourse on

masculinity from social studies, feminists, or even social justice warriors, I will sketch a more positive outlook on masculinity. Thus, this paper will help to create a better understanding of masculinity or masculine traits, through highlighting Viking culture and Viking masculinity depicted in the film *How to Train Your Dragon*.

To help my analysis of the film *How to Train Your Dragon*, I want to examine what masculinity might have meant for Vikings. To understand ideas about masculinity the book *Masculinites* by R. W. Connell will be used. Connell talks in her book about the concept of hegemonic masculinity (xviii). Hegemonic masculinity is the configuration of gender practice that represents the currently accepted answer to the problem of patriarchy's legitimacy. Which guarantees, or is assumed to guarantee, men's dominance and women's submission (77). Because, of the male dominance, hegemonic masculinity can be seen as a form of toxic masculinity.

Furthermore, to help understand how Vikings viewed masculinity I compared different essays on Viking masculinity and upbringing and what role women fulfilled in Viking Culture. Hadley speaks in his essay, "Warriors, Heroes and Companions: Negotiating Masculinity in Viking-Age England," about the fact that in the popular culture, the real Vikings are irredeemably male (Hadley 270). To support this idea, Raffield says that there is good evidence for a culture of hegemonic masculinity among Viking Age societies (Raffield 819). This leads to the Viking Age communities having a "one sex" gender orientation that associated masculinity with power rather than polarizing femininity and masculinity. As a result, masculine expressions were praised and highlighted (820). Or as Jensen said it, Viking age communities made public images that praised intelligent men and their use of violence. Women could not achieve this, according to the same images. Instead, old mythological texts showed that women's aggressive schemes were likely to succeed, however these schemes would not benefit them or society (218).

These essays show the requisite of violence and aggression in Viking culture. Showing that mostly men played roles in violent behaviour. So, Viking masculinity at first glance is a hegemonic masculinity based on aggression and oppression. However, *How to Train Your Dragon* can help put the male aggression in perspective in a less polarizing way. Furthermore, the essays help put the created Viking culture from the Isle of Berk in a more cultural perspective. And lastly, with the analysis of the characters within the film I want to show that hegemonic masculinity can give room to other types of masculinity and is not always oppressive.

Thus, this thesis will answer the question: How is masculinity represented in Dreamwork's *How to Train Your Dragon* and which elements from Viking culture does it mobilize to achieve this representation? To support this research question, it is important to look at how the film depicts Viking masculinity. Thus, how are the different views on masculinity represented in the characters of *How to Train Your Dragon*? And how does the depicted masculinity from the characters function in the Viking society?

Chapter 2: Analysis of Berk

To start the analysis of the film *How to Train Your Dragon* I will first analyse Hiccup's place within the village. I will also analyse how the culture within the village overlaps with real historical Viking culture. By doing this I want to show how Viking masculinity functions in the *How to Train Your Dragon's* Viking society.

The Island, where Hiccup and the other Vikings live, is called the Isle of Berk and is referred to as Berk. To sketch an idea of the Isle of Berk and the residing Viking culture, Hiccup narrates the voice over in the opening scene. With Hiccup narrating this scene, the distance between him and his village and between him and the other Vikings is established. By making Hiccup the narrator in the opening scene, the plot moves along and distributes story information in order to achieve specific affects (Bordwell et al 88). The feeling of distance is furthermore enhanced by Hiccup's narrative. In his opening statement it becomes clear how he really feels about the Isle of Berk: "This is Berk. It's twelve days north of Hopeless, and a few degrees south of Freezing to Death" ("*Hiccup*" 00:27:00).

In the opening scene, that Hiccup is narrating, the camera approaches Berk across an ocean covered with a thick layer of mist. According to the author Cressida Cowell, who originally wrote the books which inspired the film *How to Train Your Dragon*, the Isle of Berk "is based on a real uninhabited island near Staffa, of the Inner Hebrides in Argyll and Bute, in Scotland" (Akundi). Cowell also explains that on these Islands the Vikings first arrived when they invaded the United Kingdom, as well as the last place they left (Akundi). Furthermore, two big Viking statues, with flames in their mouth, are placed at the entrance of the haven. Berk itself is a small island. It does, however, have a variety of geological formations, including stone arches and cliffs, beaches, waterfalls, streams, and numerous big woods. Because Berk is surrounded by vast oceans, the villagers cannot leave the main island. The only solution to explore and extend territory is on ships.

Vikings as seamen and craftsmen

When Stoick the Vast, the village chief and Hiccup's father, and the other Vikings leave to hunt for the dragon's nest they leave in Viking longships. These longships have big wooden dragon heads at the far end. In historical Viking culture ships were of utmost importance. As Bill explains in his essay "Viking Ships and the sea", throughout history, geography has made shipbuilding and seafaring crucial for Vikings. Boats and ships were essential tools for survival and societal progress in a terrain where the waterways provided far more easy communication connections than most of the inland (Brink 170). Real life Vikings historically had dragon heads on their ships. These heads of the mythological creatures were typically found in the bows of Viking longships held by monarchs and chieftains, providing protection against sea monsters, mankind, bad weather, and raids. Aside from its magical purpose of protection, the head was a symbol of wealth and might, and the more ornate and stunning the head, the more powerful the owner (Erikson 266).

The dragon heads in *How to Train Your Dragon* are not only a reference to real Viking history. As the long ships make way on the vast waters surrounding the Isle of Berk, the dragon heads are an allusion of the conquering and killing of dragons. These dragon heads at the far end of the long ships refer to the cut of heads of the dragons. As Hiccup explains in an anecdote about his father, Stoick the Vast, "They say that when he was a baby, he popped a dragon's head clean off of its shoulders" ("*Hiccup*" 00:01:50). Hiccup himself had a chance to kill a dragon, after he found a wounded and trapped Nightfury that he shot down, in the forest. Hiccup, however, did not dare to kill the dragon and let the Nightfury go.

Thus, for the Vikings of Berk killing dragons is all that matters for survival. The dragons raid the Island for the Sheep and when doing so open attack on Berk. These sheep are not only used by the people of Berk for their meat, but they also provide milk, skins, leather, bone, and wool. Just as real historical Vikings were master craftsmen (Woodhouse 21), for the Vikings of Berk crafting is also a substantial part of their livelihoods. That's why Hiccup is an

apprentice blacksmith of Gobber. Hiccup lacks combat skills, however, as a blacksmith he can still contribute to Berk's Viking society. Gobber himself is a renowned dragon fighter and teaches dragon class for the newer generation of Vikings on Berk.

In Dragon class Gobber talks about the importance of battle equipment. "Shields! Go! Your most important piece of equipment is your shield!" ("Gobber" 00:18:30) However, if shields really were the most important piece of equipment for real life Vikings is not sure. As Anne Pederson says in her essay on "Viking Weaponry", there are not all of shields found in Viking graves because they were made of wood. However, shields were important pieces of equipment and every man, on board of a leading ship, was required to carry a shield (Brink 207). In the beginning of the fight scene in dragon class, Hiccup is seen struggling with the use of a shield. Here, Gobber needs to pick up Hiccup's shield.

Before Hiccup finds Toothless, he desperately wants to kill a dragon. However, he got put on a blacksmith's job just so he would not fight dragons. Furthermore, Hiccup's physical stature does not help him in combat, he cannot even lift a shield by himself. Hiccup's skills make him an outlier within Berk's Viking Culture.

Hiccup's name

For both the men and women of Berk strength, muscles, and courage is needed to fight dragons. For the Vikings of Berk this is the only way they know how to combat dragons. The first time we see Hiccup fight a dragon, the dragon launches a fireball at him. He does not fight the dragon head on, but instead hides behind a door. Here, we see that Hiccup is not a particular big or masculine looking, he lacks any facial hair and muscle. And without his knowledge about dragon habits, which he is yet to acquire, he cannot join combat. The other Vikings in the village make fun of Hiccup and tell him not join the battle and get inside. Hiccup's peers, the newer generation of Vikings, all participate in the defense against the dragons. Hiccup, however, is

helping in the smithery and is not allowed outside. By not joining his peers Hiccup is the misfit, he does not have the muscles, strength, or courage to fight against dragons.

Even Hiccup's name contributes to his non-Viking demeanor. Or has Hiccup himself explains:

My name's Hiccup. Great name, I know. But it's not the worst. Parents believe a hideous name will frighten off gnomes and trolls. Like our charming Viking demeanor wouldn't do that (*"Hiccup"* 00:01:26).

As the other Vikings have names such as Astrid Hofferson, which means Godly Strength in ancient Norse, and Stoick the Vast where the name reflects a strong-willed personality. Hiccup's name and demeanor are the opposite of the Viking culture within the film. Hiccup's name is explained by Viking Culture, as the runt of the litter is called a Hiccup (History). To support this idea, it is shown that Hiccup is born premature and because he was small and frail, his parents called him Hiccup.²

Dragon education on Berk

When Stoick the Vast and the other Vikings leave to look for the dragon's nest, Gobber comes up with the idea to put Hiccup in dragon training class. This is where the newer generation of Vikings is educated on dragons and where they learn how to fight the dragons. In the conversation between Stoick and Gobber another Viking trait comes forward. Stoick says:

My father told me to bang my head against a rock, and I did it. I thought it was crazy. but I didn't question him. And you know what happened? That rock split in two, it

² This is knowledge gained by watching *How to Train your Dragon 2*

taught me what a Viking could do, Gobber. He could – He could crush mountains, level forests, tame seas! Even as a boy, I knew what I was, what I had to become.

Hiccup is not that boy. (*“Stoick”* 00:11:06)

For Stoick, Viking culture is engraved into him from his childhood. Not only the Vikings of Berk experienced violence and warfare from a young age. Raffield concludes that in historical Viking culture the norms and attitudes, that were communicated via ordinary parts of childhood, appear to have affected enculturation to violence and warfare (826). So, when Stoick saw that his younger son Hiccup was not the typical Viking child, he lost his faith. Or as Stoick said: “Hiccup has always been different, Listen, you know what he’s like. Form the time he could crawl he’s been... different” (*“Hiccup”* 10:02:00).

In the first lessons of dragon class Hiccup is not accepted by his peers. This is because Hiccup lacks the physical strength and the courage to fight the dragons. In class, strength, and the ability to defeat a dragon is highly valued. That’s why Hiccup is the outsider, he does not possess physical abilities to fight a dragon. When Gobber asks the group, “Where did Hiccup go wrong?”. The twins Ruffnut and Tuffnut respond with: “Uh, he showed up?” and “He didn’t get eaten” (*“Ruffnut;Tuffnut”* 00:21:15) However, once Hiccup learns about weaknesses that dragons have, Hiccup studied Toothless and learned about dragon’s behaviour, he can successfully conquer the dragons in class. This immediately gives Hiccup status amongst his classmates, and he slowly becomes friends with them. On top of this, after graduating as a top student from the classes, Hiccup gets appointed to kill his first dragon in the arena. Killing a dragon in front of the other villagers is the highest honour for a young Viking in Berk. To further explain Hiccup’s place within the village, I want to look at the elements of Viking masculinity in play.

Viking Masculinity on The Isle of Berk

Fighting and killing dragons is what Vikings do on Berk. These aggressive Viking traits are associated with Viking masculinity (Jensen 218). As Stoick the Vast said, after deciding to hunt for the dragons breeding nest: “We’re Vikings! It’s an occupational hazard! Now who’s with me?” (“*Stoick*” 00:09:43). So, in a Viking village where killing a dragon is part of everyday livelihood, how does one live there without being able to kill dragons? “One day, I’ll get out there. Because killing a dragon is everything around here” (*Hiccup* 00:04:15).

To be a Viking on the Isle of Berk is that both men and women must be big, strong, muscular, and courageous enough to fight and kill a dragon. Both men and women must be able to fend off dragons. Only then is one seen as a real Viking of Berk. I want to explain Viking Masculinity in the fictional world of Berk as follows: a stubborn individual, both male or female, with a strong body who has the courage and physical ability to fight dragons. If you don’t possess these qualities, you are not considered to be a real Viking on Berk. This can be connected to Connell’s idea on Hegemonic masculinities, in which the focus is on how societies frequently legitimise a dominant kind of masculinity to which few men are permitted to, and which serves to marginalize or subjugate other masculinities and femininities (Hadley 270). In Berk, even though there is a dominant kind of masculinity, I will argue in chapter 3 that this kind of masculinity has nothing to do with marginalising or subjugating. This form of Viking masculinity is a way to survive for both the men and women of Berk.

Hiccup is not the typical masculine Viking of Berk; however, his different form of masculinity will be accepted during the film. And in the end Hiccup’s choices make Berk prosper. Instead of killing dragons, the Vikings of Berk live together with dragons. I will talk more about Hiccup’s masculinity in the next chapter, where I also analyse Hiccup’s character, and here I will compare Hiccup’s masculinity to the Viking masculinity present in Berk.

Chapter 3 Character analysis

I have shown that Hiccup does not fit the Masculine Viking norm on Berk. He is not the typical big, muscled Viking, with long hair and a big beard. Because of this, Hiccup is considered an outsider. What is it then to say that Hiccup's masculinity is not oppressed by the overruling dominant masculinity: hegemonic Viking masculinity? In this chapter, I want to show the more complicated sides of hegemonic masculinity in Viking culture, by analysing Stoick the Vast, Hiccup's love interest Astrid Hofferson and by analysing Hiccup.

Stoick the Vast

In chapter 2, I already explained that Stoick the Vast is Hiccup's father as well as the chieftain of Berk. Stoick is a big Viking who stands 206cm tall. He has long braided red hair and a long-braided beard. With his big stature he towers over most other Vikings and his physique helps him fight dragons and rule over Berk. As chief, Stoick has a strong feeling of responsibility and pride in his position. Keeping Berk safe and secure is of utmost importance to him. However, as a chief, he followed certain Viking standards. Stoick's main idea is that the needs of the many outweigh the demands of the few, and he ruled with firmness but fairness. "Can you not see that I have bigger problems? Winter's almost here and I have an entire village to feed!" (*"Stoick"* 00:07:30).

Thus, as explained, Stoick is portrayed in the film as the ideal leader of the Viking tribe on Berk: powerful, huge, and headstrong. Unfortunately, Hiccup, his blundering son, is virtually the opposite. He frequently causes villagers distress when his desire to fight dragons, he wants to fit in with the other teens, gets the better of him. When Hiccup tries to fight a dragon, Stoick must jump in to prevent this Monstrous Nightmare from killing Hiccup. Furthermore, while attempting to take down the fearsome Night Fury, in the opening scene of the film, Hiccup's clumsiness helps the other dragons flee with the Vikings' livestock. Here Stoick shows his judgement of Hiccup. "Stop! Just... stop. Every time you step outside, disaster

follows” (“*Stoick*” 00:07:27). Stoick believes that Hiccup lacks the attributes of a genuine Viking like himself. Hiccup's failure to slay a dragon or even fight one was a major factor in Stoick's decision to leave Berk in quest of the dragon nest.

Stoick's intransigence and inflexibility inflicted the most harm to his relationship with Hiccup. His failure to adapt left Stoick unable to interact with Hiccup in a normal manner. He was unable to conduct a meaningful conversation with his out-of-the-ordinary kid, even though he cares deeply for Hiccup. Because Hiccup's mother and Stoick's wife got killed by a dragon³, Stoick became especially overprotective of his son. His patriotism often leads him to treat Hiccup in the same contemptuous manner as the rest of the villagers treat him, unconcerned for his feelings and uncaring of his viewpoint. The majority of their interactions consisted with Stoick talking and Hiccup attempting, but failing, to give his own viewpoints. “I've decided I don't want/ I think it's time you learn to fight dragons. What?” (“*Hiccup*”; “*Stoick*” 00:15:40). In this conversation Stoick wants Hiccup to fight dragons, but Hiccup gave up on this. However, Hiccup cannot get this across and ends up following dragon class anyway.

Clearly, Stoick is the leading and dominating male in Berk, his ideas and rules are the norm. Then what is it to say that the Hegemonic Viking masculinity does not oppress and dominate? I want to analyse two scenes where there is an interaction between Stoick and Hiccup. The first scene is when Stoick returns after the search for the dragon nest. Stoick heard that Hiccup became a successful dragon fighter in dragon class. He barges into Hiccup's workshop. Stoick wants to talk to Hiccup, because he finally feels that he is able to connect with him:

“You really had me going there, son! All those years of the worst Viking Berk has ever seen! Odin, it was rough! I almost gave up on you! And all the while, you were holding

³ In *HTTYD 2* it becomes clear she is still alive and lives with the dragons

out on me! OH, THOR ALMIGHTY! Ah. With you doing so well in the ring, we finally have something to talk about”. (*“Hiccup”* 00:48:48)

This scene shows that Stoick has been trying to connect with his son, but he never knew how. Now that Stoick thinks that Hiccup is a successful dragon fighter, he finally has something to talk about. However, in this scene it becomes blatantly clear that Stoick still cannot connect with Hiccup. To interrupt the awkward silence that has formed, Stoick reveals he brought a gift for Hiccup. He has a horned helmet that consists of the breastplate of his wife. “Matching set. Keeps her close, yknow?” (*“Hiccup”* 00:48:58) This shows that Stoick has a caring and soft side. Even though most helmets worn by Vikings in popular culture have horns, historically Vikings helmets did not contain horns (Fitzhugh 8).

After giving the helmet Stoick leaves. I want to argue that this scene shows Stoick’s true personality. He is not the dominating and angry masculine Viking that is led by aggression and hate for dragons. But he is a caring and loving father. All the choices Stoick made were made for the well-being of the village, but most importantly the well-being of Hiccup. He tried to keep Hiccup safe, by using the norms and values he learned from his father and from the Viking culture on Berk. He did however not see that he was not helping Hiccup and that Hiccup needed a different approach. However, when Stoick saw that Hiccup finally became triumphant in fighting dragon, Stoick thinks that Hiccup is becoming a real masculine Viking. He is happy and relieved. “And no one's more surprised...or more proud than I am. Today, my boy becomes a Viking. TODAY, HE BECOMES ONE OF US!” (*“Stoick”* 00:01:33).

So, through this scene I wanted to show how a big masculine Viking does not want to use his masculinity to oppress, but he wants to protect and care for his son. Furthermore, Stoick’s masculinity is used as a coping mechanism as he does not know how to show emotions and connect with his son. He thinks the conversation with his son went well, as he said “Good

talk. We should do this again” (“*Stoick*” 00:49:23). In a way his Viking Masculinity is shown to be fragile. A big man that fears no beast, cannot have a normal conversation with his son.

The second scene that I want to analyse is an argument between Stoick and Hiccup. Hiccup fights the dragon in the arena in front of the other villagers but fails and Toothless his dragon intervenes and saves Hiccup. However, the Vikings start attacking Toothless, as he is a dangerous night fury, and many Vikings get wounded. After this arena scene Stoick and Hiccup start their argument in the big hall. Stoick is angry, but mostly feels betrayed by Hiccup. Hiccup was never a fighter, but he used his with and brains to fight and conquer the dragons. For Stoick, who was finally relieved that his son could fight, it was a complete betrayal. “So, everything in the ring... A trick?! A lie?” (“*Stoick*” 01:04:54). This trickery in Norse Viking mythology is often connected to Loki. Loki is seen as intelligent and cunning (Wanner 214). And in some myths Loki clearly acts as a figure who employs drastic or questionable means (Wanner 229). I would argue that Stoick sees the questionable means that Hiccup uses as dangerous. Dangerous to Hiccup himself, but also to the Vikings of Berk. “They’ve killed HUNDREDS OF US!” (“*Stoick*” 01:05:08)

By distancing himself more from his own son, it becomes easier for Stoick to choose the wellbeing of the village over his own son. “You’ve thrown your lot in with them” (“*Stoick*” 01:05:16). I imagine Stoick’s masculinity to not only be aggressive and oppressive, but mostly emotionally fragile and just. By making difficult choices and ruling with an iron fist, Stoick can secure the safety of many. And if his own son is a liability, the difficult choice must be made. When Hiccup brought danger to the village, Stoick said “You’re not a Viking. You’re not my son” (“*Stoick*” 01:05:21)

Astrid Hofferson

The women of Berk are physically strong, fit, and courageous. They participate in battles against dragons and fight alongside Viking men. Women in real Viking history often raided

villages side by side with men. In Viking history many Viking women were in control of the households, here the women would often be praised for their intelligence and storytelling (Nikel; Hadley 281). This might explain why the village elder in Berk is an elderly woman. She makes choices for Berk, based on the experiences she had and the stories she knows. However, I will analyse the role of a different woman in Berk.

The Viking lady I want to talk about is Astrid Hofferson. Astrid is 15 years old⁴ and is slim and athletic looking. She has blonde hair tied back in a big messy braid and bangs that obscure her left eye. Astrid has been training ever since she was little. She's a very talented fighter who has proven herself on several occasions throughout the film. Astrid is a goal-oriented person who works hard to attain her objectives. That's why she is a devoted individual to the Viking ways of Berk and is devoted to becoming a strong warrior. To analysis a character such as Astrid, I will look at her purpose within the story and how it relates to Hiccup's masculinity.

Astrid is first introduced by Hiccup himself in the opening scene. The other Vikings teens and Astrid are fighting a dragon, whilst Hiccup watches them from afar. After a slow-motion shot from Hiccup's viewpoint, where he dreamily stares at Astrid, it becomes evident that Hiccup has a crush on Astrid. However, Astrid sees Hiccup more as a liability and a danger to himself and the crush is not mutual. The question that remains is, why does Hiccup fall in love with a person who is not interested in him?

Astrid is a very attractive character within the film. The other Viking women that are seen fighting the dragons in the opening scene are big and strong looking like the Viking men. Whilst Astrid is gracious and slim. However, Astrid's looks might not be the only thing that influences Hiccup's crush on her. Astrid embodies everything that Hiccup lacks. To Hiccup, she is the perfect Viking. Astrid is strong, fearless, furious, athletic, and capable of facing and

⁴ I describe her as she is in the first film of the franchise, *How to Train Your Dragon*

killing dragons at such a young age. Through her training and courage, she became an excellent fighter and is on her way to become a real Viking of Berk. "Their job is so much cooler" (*Hiccup* 00:02:47), Hiccup says right after introducing all the teens in the opening scene. However, this one-sided crush that Hiccup has, does end up being reciprocated by Astrid. Then, what does a high-achieving, hardworking, strong warrior see in an insecure, socially awkward, artistic blacksmith?

After Hiccup starts becoming more confident, because he starts being successful in class, Astrid becomes slightly jealous of him. Normally she is the top of her class. She even asks him: "I want to know what's going on. No one just gets as good as you do. Especially you. Start Talking! Are you training with someone?" (*Astrid* 00:51:16). This shows Astrid's work ethic, she always solves her problems by working and training so she can become a strong Viking. However, this jealousy slowly turns into curiosity halfway through the film Astrid follows Hiccup and finds out he has been training a dragon. At this point her whole world changes. In chapter 1, I said that in first glance, Viking masculinity is a hegemonic masculinity based on aggression and oppression. In Astrid's case she embodies this Viking masculinity. This is a crucial trait of Astrid as it undermines traditional Viking gender roles. As Jensen explains it, although historical Viking texts recognised women's physical and emotional capability, they also encouraged them to entrust physical and legal action to men (Jensen 219).

For Astrid, the strength to defeat dragons is all she needs and knows. However, after seeing Hiccup together with a dragon her world changes. This Viking masculinity that was haunting her starts changing. From her being a strong Viking who solves everything with fighting and aggressive behaviour. To her becoming more understanding towards Hiccup and supporting his visions and ideas. I would argue that her Viking Masculinity opened and let through some of her own femininity. Which in turns helped Hiccup find his own masculinity.

In the scene, after Hiccup had a big fight with his father and Toothless was imprisoned

by the villagers, Astrid was supporting Hiccup. They watched the Viking warriors sail away, they were off to fight against the dragon's nest, with Toothless imprisoned at the front of the ship. Even though Astrid was a ferocious dragon fighter, she shows compassion towards Toothless. In this dialogue between Hiccup and Astrid, Astrid makes Hiccup realise that his choice not to kill Toothless when he first met him was not a coward's move. "Oh, for the love of—I was a coward! I was weak! I wouldn't kill a dragon!" ("*Hiccup*" 01:08:10). She tells him, that he had the choice and he choose not to kill a dragon. His "failure" to slay Toothless was turned into a strength and he is the first Viking to ride a dragon.

Hiccup

Before I analyse Hiccup's personality, I will describe Hiccup's appearance⁵ to show the contrast between him and other more masculine Vikings. Hiccup, or his full name Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III, is the son of Valka⁶ and the son of chief Stoick the Vast. Hiccup is in comparison to the other male Vikings frail and short; he stands approximately at Astrid's height. He lacks physical strength⁷, struggling to wield a standard combat axe entrusted to him by his father. Hiccup has auburn hair that is parted to the right, freckles, and green eyes. He wears a long-sleeved light-green woolen tunic with brown leather lacing at the neck and arms, a dark brown fur vest that matches his boots, and dark greyish-green slacks with ankle lacing. He wears a beige smithing apron instead of his vest when works at the Blacksmith Shop.

The main message of *How to Train Your Dragon* is about a young Viking that is looking for acceptance from his father and his peers from within his village. Because Hiccup does not fit the narrative of the Viking culture in Berk, he is an outcast and an outsider. The Viking masculinity on Berk is something Hiccup does not possess, and he is constantly reminded about

⁵ As Hiccup is in the first movie

⁶ The name of his mother

⁷ In later films he gains more physical strength

this by his peers and the other villagers. Then if Hiccup is such an outsider and the Viking masculinity is the leading norm, how does Hiccup develop his own masculinity?

What Hiccup lacks in strength and physical prowess, he makes up for with his intelligence and ingenuity. When the dragons are raiding Berk, Hiccup joins the fight and aims a bola launcher at the dangerous Night Fury who is soaring through the sky. He desperately wants to be like the other Vikings and fight dragons, as the dialogue hints at multiple combat attempts in the past:

“It's not like the last few times, Dad! I mean, I really actually hit it! You guys were busy, and I had a very clear shot. It went down, just off Raven Point. Let's get a search party out there before it—”. (*Hiccup* 00:07:30)

Here it becomes clear that Hiccup wants to be taken seriously. He wants to show that his creativity and his own skills are just as valuable. However, Stoick does not recognize his son's abilities, because they are not the usual aggressive Viking ways of dealing with dragons.

Hiccup has a strong sense of compassion, which is one of his most noticeable characteristics. As a result, he saves Toothless and, in doing so, eternally alters the world of Vikings and dragons. This compassion also leads to Hiccup having his first real friend. When he finds the Night Fury, he is entrapped by Hiccup's bola. To prove that Hiccup is a real Viking he draws a knife and is about to kill the dragon. “I'm going to kill you, dragon. I'm gonna cut out your heart and take it to my father. I'm a Viking. I am a VIKING!” (*Hiccup* 00:13:38) Instead of killing the dragon he cuts the bola, and the dragon flees.

However, Hiccup finds the dragon stuck in a mountain valley and notices that the dragon is missing a tailfin and can no longer fly on his own. Out of curiosity Hiccup decides to observe the dragon. Hiccup notices that the dragon is hungry, and he feeds him fish. Here Hiccup finds out the dragon can retract his teeth on command and names him Toothless. The bond between

Hiccup and Toothless keeps on getting better and as a sign of trust Toothless lets Hiccup pet his head: a friendship is born. After building a harness and a new tailfin for Toothless, Hiccup mounts Toothless and together they soar through the sky. Not only did Hiccup get his first real friend, but he also gets accepted for who he is. After spending time with Toothless and other young dragons, Hiccup realises that the dragons were also misunderstood by the Vikings of Berk. “Everything we know about you guys is wrong” (“*Hiccup*” 00:47:00).

Astrid is the first one to find out Hiccup’s secret. Because Hiccup’s sudden rise to success in dragon class, she starts following him into the forest. Astrid finds Hiccup and Toothless together and she runs to tell the other Vikings. Toothless picks up Astrid and puts her on the far out end of a tree. She now must get on Toothless to get back down to the ground. Toothless has other plans and starts flying through the sky. Astrid closely holds on to Hiccup to not fall off. Toothless flies wildly through the sky and makes Astrid apologise. After Astrid apologises, he flies Astrid and Hiccup into a beautiful sunset. Astrid sees the wonders of the sky and moves closer to Hiccup.

During the flight Hiccup and Astrid discover the dragon’s nest on accident, only a dragon knows how to find the nest. After they return to Berk, Astrid immediately wants to tell the other Vikings where the nest is. However, Hiccup stops her. She asks, “Then what do we do”? (“*Astrid*” 00:59:02). Here it shows that Astrid trusts Hiccup’s judgment, she has complete faith in Hiccup. After this Astrid walks up to Hiccup and punches him: “That’s for kidnapping me” (“*Astrid*” 00:59:25) and afterwards she kisses him on the cheek “That’s for everything else” (“*Astrid*” 00:59:36). This is the first step to Hiccup finding his masculinity. He finally gets respected by someone. Astrid trusts Hiccup to make decisions, as he is the son of the chief this is a big step to Hiccup growing up. And from a hopeless boy he is becoming a worthy partner and love interest.

Stoick thinks that the solution for Hiccup being a good Viking is to not be himself. “This is serious, son! When you carry this axe, you carry all of us with you. Which means you walk like us. You talk like us. You think like us. No more of... this” (“*Stoick*” 00:16:21). However, to find his own masculinity Hiccup’s must grow into his own person and get accepted for who he is. After the fight that Stoick and Hiccup have, Stoick takes Toothless and binds him on his ship. He uses Toothless to find the dragon’s nest. To save Toothless and his father from the gigantic dragon living within the dragon’s nest, Hiccup tells his peers to join him in combat. He assigns the dragons, that he conquered during dragon class, to each one of them and he teaches them how to control them. Now, because of his knowledge and bravery Hiccup gets accepted as a leader by his peers and they fly to the nest together.

Once he arrives at the dragon’s nest, the Vikings of Berk and his dad are facing defeat. And Stoick sees that he led his fellow Vikings into a death trap and accepts his mistake. He turns to his son Hiccup for help. “Hiccup. I’m sorry... for—everything” (“*Stoick*” 01:19:16). And before he ventures of into battle, Stoick finally accepts his son. “I’m proud to call you my son” (“*Stoick*” 01:19:30). After Hiccup and Toothless work together to defeat the big dragon, Hiccup lost his leg, now Hiccup passes out and awakens in Berk. Hiccup is shocked as he now has a new wooden leg. Just as Toothless only has one tailfin Hiccup has one leg. Without each other they would both not have survived in this cruel Viking world. They saved each other. As Hiccup said, “I looked at him and saw myself” (“*Hiccup*” 01:09:01). Hiccup and Toothless just needed someone to believe in them. After Hiccup awakens, he sees that Berk is full of dragons. He finally did it, he made the stubborn Vikings of Berk change. Instead of fighting dragons, they now live in harmony together. All that was needed was not a big and strong Viking, but a compassionate and inventive individual. Or as Stoick said, while he points at Hiccup, “Turns out we needed just a little more of this” (“*Stoick*” 01:27:30).

Conclusion

By providing a cultural context for the Viking themed film *How to Train Your Dragon*, I wanted to create a comparison between Viking culture and masculinity within the film. The comparison showed that the Viking masculinity created by popular culture values not only the strong, bearded, and tattooed warrior, but that even within the “most masculine” culture of all, a smart minded, accepting, and progressive individual is valued. By using elements from Viking culture depicted in the film, *How to Train Your Dragon* was analysed to show that masculinity is a trait that might be rooted in culture. Thus, *How to Train Your Dragon* represents masculinity not as a toxic, but as complex and accepting.

I analysed the broken bond between a father and his son, hereby I showed the fragility and sensitivity of Viking masculinity. Stoick tried to connect through things that were normal for him: killing dragons. This pushed Hiccup away. Here, violence and aggression were not used to dominate and destroy, it was used to protect Hiccup and the inhabitants of Berk. However, after seeing that his son can be a strong Viking in his own way, by not following the standard Viking culture and masculinity of Berk, Stoick accepted Hiccup for who he is.

By analysing the Viking culture on Berk, I tried to define what Viking masculinity on Berk is. This is how I explained the Viking Masculinity in the fictional world of Berk: a stubborn individual, both male or female, with a strong body who has the courage and physical ability to fight dragons. I argued that Astrid, as a Viking woman, inhabited Viking masculinity. Hereby, proving that Astrid’s character showed that Viking masculinity is not only a trait inhabited by the male Vikings of Berk. But Viking masculinity is a trait that can be inhabited by the women of Berk as well, hereby concluding that this is a trait rooted in the Viking culture on Berk.

Hiccup desperately wanted to inhabit the Viking masculinity of Berk. However, after failing at being a good Viking, he finally got accepted for who he is, and he grew as a person and a Viking. Hiccup showed the qualities of a leader, he is compassionate, inventive and does

not resort to violence to solve his problems. Hiccup became a real Viking of Berk. He found his own masculinity.

Thus, this thesis answered the question: How is masculinity represented in Dreamwork's *How to Train Your Dragon* and which elements from Viking culture does it mobilize to achieve this representation? By showing that Viking culture rooted on Berk has historical Viking origins and that historical Viking masculinity was the hegemonic Viking masculinity. However, not born out of oppression but born out of necessity for protection of the people of Berk. And the masculinity of Berk gave place for the creativity and another form of masculinity from Hiccup. He changed Berk for the good and this made Berk prosper.

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