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4. Fatherhood in the Wilderness: Postfeminism and Masculinity in *Leave No Trace* (2018)

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of fatherhood and masculinity in *Leave No Trace* (2018) within the framework of postfeminist discourse. By focusing on the evolving father-daughter relationship, the film challenges both traditional paternal roles and the postfeminist construction of the new father. Will, the protagonist, embodies a masculinity that oscillates between hegemonic ideals of strength and the postfeminist emphasis on emotional engagement and caregiving. However, his repeated failures to protect and provide for his daughter problematize the idealized construction of postfeminist fatherhood. The paper explores how the film engages with the notion of postfeminist fatherhood, which, as scholars such as Hannah Hamad argue, reconfigures traditional masculinity rather than dismantling patriarchal norms. Additionally, the wilderness setting serves as both a site of refuge and a space of tension, reinforcing Will's isolation while simultaneously enabling his daughter, Tom, to develop independence. As a "wise-beyond-her-years daughter" (Hamad 111), Tom's character plays a pivotal role in reversing traditional power dynamics between father and child. The film subverts the conventional fatherhood narrative by emphasizing Tom's growth into an authoritative figure, ultimately disrupting the presumed stability of postfeminist masculinity. This shift challenges cinematic conventions that typically position the father as the central figure of transformation, offering instead a narrative in which the daughter emerges as the agent of change. Drawing on theories of postfeminism, hegemonic masculinity, and cinematic fatherhood, this paper argues that *Leave No Trace* resists the redemptive narrative typically found in postfeminist fatherhood films, instead presenting an unresolved tension between fatherly authority and the daughter's emerging agency. By positioning Will as an angst-ridden figure whose masculinity fails to conform to either traditional or postfeminist ideals, the film critically engages with contemporary gender discourses, highlighting the complexities and contradictions inherent in modern representations of fatherhood.

Keywords

Postfeminism, fatherhood, masculinity, father-daughter relationship, *Leave No Trace*

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, feminist movements – particularly first-wave (late nineteenth–early twentieth century), second-wave (1960s–1970s), and third-wave feminism (1990s–2010s) – challenged traditional gender norms, though in different ways: the first wave focused on legal rights, the second on social and economic equality, and the third on intersectionality and the diverse experiences and identities of race, sexuality, and class (see Cott; Friedan; hooks). In this regard, the feminist movements have influenced mass culture in multiple ways, contributing to the cultural shifts that some scholars characterize as the era of postfeminism – often with negative connotations (see McRobbie; Modleski; Tasker and Negra). Regardless of debates over the success of feminist movements in achieving full gender equality, it is clear that they have transformed perceptions of gender, influencing not only notions of femininity and masculinity but also challenging binary understandings of gender. However, this does not necessarily indicate that these changes have resulted in a completely egalitarian society. Accordingly, Timothy Shary, who thinks that true gender equality has not been achieved yet, states the opportunity for reexamining masculinity as follows:

Given the escalating developments within the gendered milieu of men in U.S. culture as well as the ongoing evolution of male roles (domestic, professional, performative) and the concerns that these vicissitudes presented to the patriarchal norm, a logical opportunity to reexamine masculinity at the turn of the millennium arises. (4)

Reflecting and contributing to the changes in society, contemporary US cinema has undergone a significant transformation in the portrayal of masculinity, femininity, and gender roles in recent years. As films are part of visual culture, it is expected that they represent changes in the understanding of gender roles. The changing representation in cinema might take more time than the actual change in culture and society compared to other media and arts. This is due to the long production processes of the films. There are multiple approaches to examining gender norms in films, including the representation of masculinities, femininities, and the dynamics of parental roles, each of which can reveal distinct cultural and ideological shifts.

This paper investigates three central aspects of *Leave No Trace* (2018): how the film challenges traditional gender roles with a focus on the father-daughter relationship, how it engages with postfeminist conceptions of the “new father” and “new hegemonic masculinity,” and how the wilderness setting is utilized to explore the complexities of the father-daughter dynamic. I argue that *Leave No Trace* offers a complex portrayal of masculinity and the father-daughter relationship, resisting straightforward categorization and capturing the fluid and often contradictory nature of contemporary masculinities. The film challenges traditional gender roles, understood here as the historically dominant, binary expectations that position men as only protectors, providers, and figures of authority, while casting women as nurturing, passive, and dependent. These roles have been reinforced by cultural norms and

patriarchal structures that assign distinct and hierarchical responsibilities based on gender. By depicting a “wise-beyond-her-years daughter” (Hamad 111) and a father who oscillates between sensitivity and the traditional expectation of strength, the film contributes to the postfeminist discourse while simultaneously pushing beyond it and interrogating its limitations. While examining the evolving conceptions of masculinity and fatherhood in postfeminist US cinema, this paper does not ignore the fact that the shifting gender roles are inherently political, shaped by ideologies and power dynamics.

Postfeminism refers to the understanding of the “pastness” of feminism according to Tasker and Negra (1). They argue that “postfeminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism” (Tasker and Negra 2), which can be interpreted as that it is based on feminist values and gains of second-wave feminism. However, postfeminism usually ignores the intersectionality of oppression and discrimination. Tasker and Negra state that “postfeminism is white and middle class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self” (2). Thus, the inability and deficiency of postfeminism to offer a broader account of equality must be noted. Another criticism that needs to be mentioned is the argument of Angela McRobbie that postfeminism, in fact, undermines the feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s while it appears to be in support of feminism (McRobbie 27). Therefore, I agree with Hamad’s statement that there is a “continuing need for feminist criticism of postfeminist culture, especially its formations of masculinity” (11). This paper does not intend to join the discussions of postfeminism *per se* but rather tries to explore the reflections of postfeminist discourse in visual representation, while also critically engaging with postfeminist culture and its formations of masculinity.

Before discussing the theoretical background and analysis, a brief synopsis of the film is provided. *Leave No Trace* (2018), directed by Debra Granik and distributed by Bleecker Street, tells the story of a father (Will, played by Ben Foster) and his thirteen-year-old daughter (Tom, played by Thomasin McKenzie) who live off the grid in the forests of Portland, Oregon. They have a close and loving relationship, but their unconventional lifestyle is disrupted when they are discovered by the authorities and forced to integrate into mainstream society. As they struggle to adapt, tensions arise between Will’s desire for independence and Tom’s growing sense of belonging to a community. Ultimately, the film explores themes of fatherhood, masculinity, and the father-daughter relationship, as well as the meaning of family and human connection.

Renegotiated Fatherhood in Films

Tropes of Postfeminist Fatherhood and the “New Father”

Contemporary US films have frequently featured the theme of fatherhood, which can be interpreted as being part of the postfeminist discourse. According to Podnieks, “fatherhood moved to the foreground in discourses of masculinity, a fact registered by the sudden plethora of narratives about fathers in film and on television” (15). Some scholars, including Tania Modleski and Hannah Hamad (1991, 2014), have discussed masculinity in films through the lens of fatherhood narratives. Modleski states that “a whole host of comedies are participating in the trend [...] of redeeming and celebrating fatherhood” (76). Hamad, in particular, explores the fusion of postfeminism and fatherhood and defines it as the “new hegemonic masculinity” (1). She argues that popular cinema increasingly portrays fatherhood as the ideal masculinity and notes that “fatherhood has become the dominant paradigm of masculinity across the spectrum of mainstream U.S. cinema” (Hamad 1). Barnett similarly observes that “fatherhood has become the ‘ideal masculinity’ of post-feminism” and notes that discussions of fatherhood in contemporary cinema have largely centered on the construction of a “domesticated ‘new man’ masculinity” (11). To understand this shift, it is important to consider how the representation of fatherhood has evolved from traditional, patriarchal models of masculinity to the more emotionally engaged and domesticated figures associated with postfeminist discourse. Despite the varying characteristics depending on narrative and genre, Hamad defines the tropes of postfeminist fatherhood as follows:

[D]ominant iterations tend toward a model of fatherhood that is (or becomes) emotionally articulate, domestically competent, skilled in managing the quotidian practicalities of parenthood and adept at negotiating a balance and/or discursive confluence of private sphere fatherhood and public sphere paternalism. Furthermore, hegemonic formations of postfeminist fatherhood configure this model at little cost to the legibility of fathers’ more traditionally masculine traits. Fatherhood is thence dually articulated through a mutually constitutive binary of strong–sensitive, patriarchal–postfeminist masculinity, with a correspondingly circuitous relationship to feminism. (2)

As can be seen, Hamad emphasizes the fusion of traditional masculinity and postfeminist masculinity through a combination of emotional sensitivity, domestic competence, and strength and authority. The fact that fathers have become more involved in the private sphere (household) does not mean the abolishment of the hegemonic and paternal traits both in public and private spheres. While the father’s involvement in childrearing and performing a ‘mothering’ role can blur the boundaries between these spheres, it can also reinforce the very division it seeks to dismantle. The renegotiation of fatherhood, and parenting in general, under second-wave feminism, has led to a new understanding in which both parents should be involved equally in both spheres (i.e. private and public, childrearing and breadwinning). However, the postfeminist discourse and the reconfiguration of fatherhood

in US cinema represent fatherhood as the ideal masculinity which “simultaneously evokes and rejects” feminism (Tasker and Negra 21). Therefore, questioning or being skeptical of the characteristics of postfeminism and the tropes of postfeminist fatherhood is necessary to achieve a better understanding of what it offers and what it tries to achieve. Accordingly, Hamad claims that “[t]he recentralization of masculinity through postfeminist fatherhood is thus negotiated, offering little challenge to the status quo, while tacitly accounting for itself in disingenuously feminist terms” (11).

Although the new concept of masculinity in postfeminist fatherhood in contemporary US cinema promotes a more equal partnership between parents than previous understandings of parenting, it still perpetuates a conservative cultural belief in paternal protectionism. To move beyond binary understandings and conservative norms, it is important to question the binary thinking and traditional parenting roles assigned to fathers and mothers. Otherwise, the discussion may only focus on role reversal, in which fathers take on traditionally feminine/mother roles while retaining their hegemonic masculine traits, or mothers take on hegemonic masculine traits.

Overall, postfeminist fatherhood in popular cinema is characterized by a fusion of traditionally hegemonic masculinity and more emotionally engaged, nurturing traits, establishing a link between feminism and fatherhood. This reconfiguration of fatherhood, presented as an ideal model, combines traditionally masculine roles like protecting and providing with more nurturing, sensitive, and emotionally engaged qualities. It is a model that functions “in the guise of a feminist ideal of masculinity” (Hamad 135), positioning fathers as figures who embody both caregiving and strength. The father is portrayed as a capable parent in the private sphere while retaining his hegemonical ties to the public sphere.

Lupton and Barclay refer to this evolving representation as “the archetype of the new father” (Podnieks 2). They claim that contemporary fatherhood is shaped by paradoxes and tensions that influence how men perceive and practice their roles as fathers. On one hand, fathers are increasingly depicted as nurturing, emotionally engaged, and actively involved in parenting and domestic responsibilities. The new father is seen as transforming family life and challenging traditional notions of masculinity. On the other hand, men are still expected to participate fully in the economic sphere and sustain their identities as masculine subjects, reinforcing elements of traditional masculinity (2). This tension between caregiving and economic provision defines postfeminist representations of fatherhood, reflecting both progress and continuity in gendered expectations.

Masculinities

As Tina Miller argues, “fatherhood, then, like motherhood, is a socially constructed category which is shaped by and through an amalgam of political, social, cultural and historical antecedents and contemporary concerns” (6). In line with this, representations of fatherhood in media also evolve in response to broader societal shifts. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Barnett observes that Hollywood redefined fatherhood as “a powerful tool able to save the men that, as the world changed around them, were struggling to make sense of a modern masculine identity” (2). This transformation underscores how fatherhood became a stabilizing force amidst anxieties about shifting gender roles, reinforcing its cultural significance as both a personal and ideological construct.

Accordingly, masculinity is not a singular, fixed concept but rather a plurality of masculinities, as suggested by the title of this chapter. These various forms of masculinity are shaped by historical, cultural, and social antecedents, with significant variations evident within American and broader Western contexts. Hegemonic masculinity is “the most traditional and overarching form of masculinity,” representing the cultural ideal of how men should act and be (Podnieks 13). The concept of hegemony originates in the work of Antonio Gramsci and refers to the exercise of power by a social group through both domination and intellectual and moral leadership, allowing it to maintain control over others in social life (Gramsci 57-58). Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). However, hegemonic masculinity is not only about the subordination of women; it also involves the domination over and subordination of other masculinities, including homosexual, effeminate, working-class, and Black masculinities – what Connell terms “marginalized masculinities” (81). Barnett expands on this idea, stating that “hegemonic masculinity describes the normative, dominant construction of masculinity underpinned by ideological power, against which femininities and subordinate masculinities are measured; inevitably, the parameters of hegemonic masculinity, as with any gender constructions, shift over time” (5-6). This shifting nature of masculinity underscores its socially constructed and performative dimensions, rather than being an inherent or static trait.

At this point, it is also necessary to consider Steven Cohan’s definition of masculinity, which builds on Judith Butler’s concept of gender as performance. Cohan asserts that “‘masculinity’ does not refer to a male nature but instead imitates a dominant regulatory fiction authorizing the continued representation of certain types of gender performances for men (like the breadwinner), marginalizing others (like the mamma’s boy)” (qtd. in Baker viii). This perspective aligns with Connell’s

discussion of hegemonic masculinity by emphasizing how particular models of masculinity are upheld as normative, while others are rendered subordinate or deviant. What is particularly significant in Connell's definition is the idea of "the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (77). In the present era, this answer appears to be postfeminist masculinity constructed through fatherhood – a model that integrates caregiving and emotional engagement while still maintaining structures of male dominance. Understanding masculinity as performative allows for a more complex examination of how postfeminist fatherhood functions as both an evolution of and a reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity.

As discussed so far, despite the emergence of the "new father" or the "new man," postfeminist fatherhood retains some traditional masculinity traits. Thus, one needs to identify those traits in order to distinguish between the persistence of traditional masculinity and the supposedly progressive ideals of postfeminist fatherhood. The tropes of hegemonic and traditional masculinity are being strong, capable of many things, powerful, and independent, as well as retaining the provider and protector role in the context of family. Podnieks argues that the "'new man' is, in the end, a 'redefinition of masculinity in men's favour' such that he continues to exert his influence over women and other subordinate (nonhegemonic) men" (14). Thus, the emergence of the "new man" and the fact that fatherhood has become the new hegemonic masculinity refers not to a radical change in favor of feminist and egalitarian values, but rather to a reconfiguration that incorporates certain values traditionally seen as antithetical to it. In other words, traits that previously would have been considered anti-hegemonic are now assimilated into contemporary hegemonic masculinity. Aligning with Hamad's claim that postfeminist fatherhood represents the new hegemonic masculinity, Beynon also asserts that "many elements of a generalized new man-ism (men as more caring, sensitive, domesticated and expressive) now feature in contemporary versions of hegemonic masculinity" (17).

The Mother's Place in (Postfeminist) Fatherhood Films

The renegotiation of fatherhood and the prioritization of male protagonists as ideal fathers require the absence of the mother according to some scholars (Dole, Hamad). This means that the single/widowed father figure has become prominent in contemporary US cinema. I believe this might have several reasons. One reason might be to give more space to the father to showcase his involved and nurturing qualities in parenting with the help of the absence of the mother. Without the mother, the father is forced to provide the child with everything on his own, assuming that he is represented as the ideal father. Another reason might be that the single father can do so even without depreciating and marginalizing the woman's position in parenting. Dole, similarly, argues that "[f]eminist critics have long been concerned about the ways in which fathers might become more involved in childcare

and the ways women's longstanding contributions might be devalued. Some have found this fear confirmed in media representations of fatherhood" (141). This makes films a safe space to renegotiate fatherhood within the framework of post-feminism, or, as Villamarín-Freire puts it, "mothers are often removed from these narratives so that paternally signified masculinity can be placed at the center" (330). Hamad, too, claims in the same manner:

[T]he preferred paradigm for the discursive elision of the mother is to kill her off prior to the narrative's timeframe. This conveniently sidesteps the problem of representing motherhood in scenarios contrived to foreground fatherhood, enables postfeminist fatherhood to be articulated through a melancholic affective register, and accounts for the otherwise unlikely proliferation of male melodramas and tragi-comedies of widowed single fatherhood. (19)

Hamad also points out the melancholic and melodramatic effects caused by the absence of the mother/wife in the fatherhood films. Thus, the father figure is given a double advantage in terms of ideal portrayal.

These characteristics can be identified as the recurring elements in postfeminist fatherhood films. In the case of *Leave No Trace*, the death or absence of the mother is implied, as she is briefly mentioned once in a conversation between the father and daughter. This aligns with Hamad's observation that the mother is figuratively "killed" prior to the film's beginning. Furthermore, one could argue that this contributes to the melancholic and melodramatic portrayal of the father, Will, who also grapples with the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As Will assumes the sole responsibility of raising and caring for his daughter, Tom, he faces not only physical challenges but also emotional and psychological burdens. This engenders empathy within the viewer, fostering a positive perception of the ideal father figure. Consequently, the absence of the mother serves to reinforce the favorable depiction of fatherhood while avoiding any portrayal of women that could be construed as conflicting with this ideal father image.

The Father-Daughter Relationship in *Leave No Trace*

Will: Fatherhood and Masculinity

As previously indicated, *Leave No Trace* offers a complex portrayal of masculinity and fatherhood. Will serves as a prime example of this intricate portrayal. While he mostly retains – or tries to retain – the traditional roles such as the protector and provider, he also exhibits some traits emblematic of the "new father" archetype. However, it is important to note that Will's attempts to uphold these traditional roles are often unsuccessful, particularly in his capacity to safeguard and provide for his daughter. A notable instance highlighting this failure occurs early in the film when the father-daughter dyad is discovered living illegally in the forests of Portland, Oregon (00:19:40). The park rangers see Tom one day and they discover their small

camp eventually. Although Will becomes aware of the approaching police, affording them an opportunity to escape and hide, he fails to protect himself and his daughter from getting caught by the police.

Notably, in this scene, the police locate Will before locating Tom, despite the film's earlier suggestion that Tom lacks the skills to remain hidden and leave no trace yet. The film employs a clever twist by initially withholding the identity of the individual who is found, thereby challenging viewers to confront their own biases and preconceptions in terms of power and gender relations. Even though the police do not detect Tom and do not even know if there are other people with Will, he calls out to Tom and wants her to come out. This scene is an important turning point in the film which suggests that the daughter is more self-reliant and competent than initially expected while it shows the failure of the father. It leads to the separation of them in the end.

Another instance highlighting Will's failure occurs following their escape from the farm where they have been placed by the social workers after getting caught. Will struggles to adapt to communal living and grows increasingly restless. After running away from the camp, the pair end up in the forests of Washington State, where they spend a bitterly cold night. Will's actions in the face of this dangerous situation put their lives at risk, as they narrowly avoid succumbing to the extreme cold. Fortunately, he manages to cover Tom and himself in branches and they survive this terrible night, finding a small vacant cabin the next morning. However, an important instance occurs after this. Will leaves Tom in the cabin and goes to buy some groceries, but he never comes back. Tom spends the rest of the day and the night alone, eventually finding her father injured and unconscious in the forest the next day. In trying to provide his daughter with food and safety, Will fails once more. This scene marks a significant role reversal between father and daughter where Tom undertakes the role of protector and rescues her father, foreshadowing a more pronounced shift in dynamics as the film progresses (01:15:40).

All of these instances, despite Will's failures and unsuccessful endeavors, indicate his adherence to traditional expectations of fatherhood. He remains committed to protecting and supporting his daughter, even in challenging circumstances and at great personal risk. However, his inability to fully embody the ideals of traditional fatherhood positions his character as a challenge to conventional gender roles. In doing so, the film also complicates the new hegemonic masculinity associated with postfeminist fatherhood. As Pleck asserts, "the most important aspect of the father's role throughout American history has been his role as provider and protector" (52) – a role in which Will ultimately fails.

The archetype of the new father does not entirely overcome traditional fatherhood norms. Instead, it redefines them to encompass a more nurturing fatherhood. Will exemplifies this archetype, as he embodies both the traditional expectations

discussed earlier and exhibits a nurturing and sensitive demeanor. He assumes the role of an educator to his daughter, teaching survival skills as well as playing chess and studying encyclopedias. However, it can be argued that he assumes these responsibilities out of necessity, as the absence of the mother leaves him as the sole caregiver. He is compelled to fulfill both traditionally divided parental roles, acting as both mother and father figures. Failing to do so would result in him becoming a neglectful father, which does not align with the idealized representation of fatherhood in contemporary postfeminist cinema. Moreover, one can also discuss whether Will is idealized as a father figure or not, or to what extent his characterization represents an idealized form of both traditional and postfeminist masculinity. Considering all of these aspects, he occupies a position somewhere in between: his depiction resists simplistic categorization, existing at the intersection of traditional and progressive fatherhood.

Complicating this portrayal further is the impact of Will's PTSD, which manifests in scenes that reveal his psychological distress (00:10:10, 00:43:00). Although the exact origins of his trauma are not explicitly disclosed, it is implied that it stems from his wartime experiences. This trauma shapes his parenting and relationship with Tom, as his decision to live in isolation can be understood as an attempt to exert control over his environment. Yet, as Tom grows increasingly independent, she begins to reject the limitations imposed by his trauma-driven choices.

Aligned with Hamad's conceptualization of fatherhood in contemporary US cinema, *Leave No Trace* constructs Will's fatherhood characterized through a juxtaposition of seemingly contradictory masculinities – strong yet vulnerable, patriarchal yet postfeminist. Will embodies this duality of being both strong and sensitive. In terms of the patriarchal-postfeminist binary, Will's decision to lead an isolated life with Tom in the forest reflects patriarchal masculinity. He forces his daughter to live like him. It is only when Tom experiences communal living that she begins to recognize and question this dynamic. However, his eventual reliance on Tom gestures toward a more reciprocal, postfeminist dynamic. This underscores the film's central tension: Will is neither wholly traditional nor entirely progressive but instead occupies a transitional space between these masculinities.

Will's character can also be understood through the lens of male angst, as his struggle to adhere to conventional masculinity while simultaneously failing to conform to postfeminist fatherhood places him in a state of crisis. His inability to successfully fulfill the roles of protector and provider unsettles the dominant ideology of masculinity, demonstrating how his character resists both traditional and postfeminist paradigms. As Peberdy asserts, "images of angst-ridden men immediately challenge the idea of a 'true' masculinity or 'dominant masculine', no more so than when their narratives fail to be resolved or, if resolved, fail to re-establish gender binaries that reinforce male power and domination" (173). Will's narrative does not offer such a

resolution; rather than reclaiming control or restoring his authority as a father, he ultimately relinquishes his influence over Tom. In doing so, *Leave No Trace* subverts the traditional trajectory of male redemption, rejecting the postfeminist model in which fatherhood serves as a saving mechanism for troubled men. Instead, the film exposes the fragility of masculinity by portraying Will's downward trajectory as he fails to meet both the traditional and newly constructed standards of fatherhood. His angst is not merely an expression of individual suffering but a broader critique of the expectations placed upon men. As Peberdy observes: "[I]t is only in attaining a particular standard of maleness that they can be considered successful 'men'. Their failure to achieve such a standard can be seen as the crux of their downfall; the men who realise the myth of 'true' masculinity move closer to rejecting the restrictive model to which they aspire" (173). Will's recognition that Tom no longer needs or wants to follow his way of life suggests such a rejection – an implicit acknowledgment of the constructed and unattainable nature of the postfeminist ideal of masculinity imposed on him. By centering Will's struggle and eventual failure to conform to any single model of fatherhood, *Leave No Trace* presents a complex critique of both traditional and postfeminist masculinities, positioning Will as an angst-ridden figure caught in the tensions between these competing ideologies.

Tom: Challenging, Confronting, and Becoming Her Own Agent

Tom embodies the "wise-beyond-her-years daughter" figure as described by Hamad (111). As Dole (142) observes, this characterization, compared to earlier depictions, has evolved in 2010s films to reflect even greater wisdom and insight. Tom's characterization aligns with this evolution in the representation of daughter figures, as demonstrated through key moments in the film. In the scene where she evades the police (00:19:40), she demonstrates that she is more capable than expected by hiding better than her father, while in another, she comes to his rescue (01:15:40). More significantly, Tom's wisdom and insight hold implications for the shifting balance of their relationship, as she assumes the role of an educator for her father. Although her encounter with communal living introduces her to a different way of life that she finds preferable, she chooses not to abandon her father and join the community right away. Instead, she empathizes with her father's traumas and the experiences that led to their isolated lifestyle, attempting to teach and persuade him to embrace community living. Gradually, she starts to challenge both her father and their established way of life.

Tom's emotional intelligence and effectiveness as an educator are further demonstrated in the film. Particularly noteworthy is a pivotal scene in which Tom shows her father how to take care of a beehive (01:31:04). This moment serves as both a practical lesson and a metaphor for the importance of community, reinforcing her efforts to integrate her father into a social environment. A comprehensive shot-by-

shot analysis of this scene follows in the next chapter. The fact that their relationship is based on love, respect, and mutual understanding is beneficial for Tom's attempts to transform her father and relieve him from the burdens of his traumas.

The father-daughter relationship in the film involves several conflicts and confrontations, with Tom challenging her father on multiple occasions. A major turning point occurs when they are relocated to a farm, exposing Tom to a more communal lifestyle and enabling her to form new connections. One night, she returns home late after spending time with a boy and his rabbit, prompting her to question their current lifestyle. Expressing her discontent, she confronts her father saying, "I liked it there," and asking, "Did you even try?" (00:53:24), after Will makes them run away from the farm. This marks the first instance where she directly challenges her father and patriarchal masculinity since she is obliged to follow him. While Will does not embody a traditionally dominant paternal figure, Tom's initial dependency on him constrains her autonomy. However, as she gradually gains confidence and asserts her own desires, the balance of their relationship shifts, ultimately leading to their separation.

Another significant confrontation arises after Will's injury, when a family offers them temporary shelter in a trailer. Tom develops a sense of belonging, "which leads to a clash between the desires of the two characters" (Martausová 141). While Will plans to depart as soon as his foot is healed, Tom secretly pays to extend their stay without her father's knowledge, expressing her desire to remain in the community. Surprisingly, Will initially responds with approval, stating that "that was the right thing to do" (01:32:41). However, his internal conflict soon compels him to revert to his instinct for isolation. When Tom discovers him preparing to leave, she confronts him, possibly for the final time, asserting that "the same thing that's wrong with you isn't wrong with me" (01:35:44). This pivotal moment in the film showcases Tom's significant character development and her assertion of independence from her father, as well as her journey to become the agent of her own life.

As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that Tom's perspective takes precedence over Will's. Thus, *Leave No Trace* aligns with Dole's notion that the daughter's perspective is emphasized more than the father's. Dole argues that in the fatherhood narratives of the 2010s, "the fathers are more fully on their own but the dominant perspective in the film is the daughter's [...] the traditional dominance of the father is more equitably balanced by the wisdom of female characters" (142). Through her actions of protecting, rescuing, and teaching her father, Tom undergoes a significant development to become an adult and an agent of her own life over the course of the film. Eventually, it becomes clear that the protagonist of the film is the child rather than the parent.

This trajectory culminates in the film's final scene (01:36:40). Despite her continued love and understanding for her father, Tom ultimately chooses a different path.

Though she initially follows Will, she soon turns back, choosing to remain within the community while he continues his isolated existence. This moment signifies her full transition into adulthood – she is now capable of making independent decisions, not out of defiance but from a deep comprehension of her father’s limitations. Her final words, “Dad, I know you would have stayed if you could” (01:37:21), underscore the emotional depth of their relationship, which is rooted not in authority and submission but in love, respect, and mutual recognition of their differences.

The Beehive Scene

The climactic scene near the end of the film represents a crucial moment for Tom, as she assumes the role of her father’s emotional guide and displays her emotional wisdom, as suggested by Dole’s observations that such wisdom “[is] the province of women and daughters” (142). The scene unfolds with a long shot capturing Will’s laborious attempt to walk with a stick (01:30:46). Subsequently, a medium shot focuses on his lower body, highlighting his injury and the challenges he faces in walking. The following long shot includes Tom as well as Will walking towards the hive which will be the central object of the scene. Tom leads Will and is given more space in the frame. The camera follows her and focuses on her. She talks while Will only makes gestures. She is clearly the authority figure now.

The following sequence comprises a series of medium shots, including shot-reverse shots that constantly switch back and forth between Tom and Will and over-the-shoulder shots showcasing their face-to-face interaction next to the hive. Both of them wear special clothing to protect themselves from the bees. Tom grasps the hive, lifting it to show her father while remarking, “It’s cool, huh? You put your hand over it. You can feel the warmth of the hive” (01:31:24). They both put their hands over the beehive and feel the warmth while we witness it with an over-the-shoulder medium shot at first, then a close-up focusing on Will’s hands, thus emphasizing Will’s experience of the warmth and the underlying message of the scene that Tom tries to give to him. Then, Tom proceeds to remove her protective clothing, urging Will to close his eyes, and we are presented with extreme close-up shots, revealing fragments of Tom’s hand covered in bees and honey. Will’s astonishment is captured in a close-up of his face upon opening his eyes. The scene further unfolds, featuring close-ups of Tom’s face and hands surrounded by bees, ending in an extreme close-up shot that vividly displays the intricate details of her honey and bee-coated fingers. These shots signify how fearless and brave Tom is while also showing she knows what she is doing.

This intricate scene captures the significant transformation within Tom’s relationship with her father and the broader impact on her life. Through the skillful use of close-up shots and shot-reverse shots, the scene emphasizes the importance of community over isolation, using the beehive as a powerful metaphor. Notably, the

incorporation of camera rotation and rack focus strategically directs the viewer's gaze from Tom's face to her hands and the swarm of bees, intensifying the visual impact and symbolism within the scene. This meticulous attention to cinematographic techniques amplifies the scene's sentimental resonance and highlights Tom's growth, self-reliance, and authority within the narrative.

The Wilderness Setting

Nature vs. culture emerges as a prominent theme within the film, highlighting the dichotomy between the wilderness setting and societal norms. The wilderness serves as a space of liberation for the father-daughter dyad, allowing them to live off the grid beyond society's constraints. In this way, Will's retreat into nature reflects what Martausová describes as an "alternative American Dream that is transcendental and freed from all material and monetary considerations" (145). However, this freedom comes into conflict with his paternal instinct to protect Tom and ensure her well-being. While Will's decision to abandon traditional domestic and professional spheres may signal a rejection of conventional masculinity, his attempt to protect Tom from the hardships of survival and provide stability aligns with the very paternal responsibilities he seeks to escape. The film thus complicates the mythic notion that the forest "cleans and heals the fathers of the wounds inflicted by society" (Martausová 145), instead portraying nature as both a space of refuge and a source of tension that challenges Will's ability to reconcile his ideals with his daughter's evolving needs.

Considering the broader implications, the wilderness setting offers a space to reexamine traditional gender norms and expectations. Martausová discusses the wilderness setting in the film "as a refuge from society" (132) and "as a form of environment that motivates and shapes the representation of the postmillennial father" (131). The wilderness provides an unbounded space where societal pressures and constraints are absent. However, it also leads to Will's struggle to maintain his identity as a father in an environment that is both a refuge and a challenge. It serves to underline Will's outsider status. His retreat into the wild is not just a rejection of society but a manifestation of trauma. His wartime experiences and subsequent PTSD further isolate him from society's norms and expectations. By challenging norms surrounding fatherhood and masculinity, Will remains an outsider, rejecting conventional roles yet unable to escape their influence entirely.

Overall, the wilderness in *Leave No Trace* serves as a transformative space that both challenges and reinforces traditional gender expectations. It allows the father-daughter relationship to develop outside urban family life while simultaneously highlighting Will's isolation and internal conflict. Through its exploration of nature vs. culture, the film prompts reflection on the complexities of gender, parenthood, and human connection in non-traditional wilderness settings.

Conclusion

Leave No Trace presents a compelling and multifaceted portrayal of the father-daughter relationship within the framework of contemporary cinema's prevailing fatherhood narrative. In doing so, it defies traditional gender roles and offers a complex examination of masculinity. Rather than featuring a dominant father figure, the film establishes a more egalitarian power dynamic between Will and Tom, prompting us to critically question the notions of hegemonic masculinity and fatherhood. What I mean here by hegemonic masculinity is both the new hegemonic masculinity of postfeminist fatherhood and the traditional ideology of a masculinity that remains embedded within this redefined paternal role.

In this way, *Leave No Trace* not only contributes to the postfeminist discourse to a certain extent but also challenges and pushes its boundaries, inviting viewers to engage in deeper contemplation and reflection on the complexities of gender and familial relationships. The film disrupts the idealized portrayal of postfeminist fatherhood through Will, who does not fully embody the postfeminist father figure. While he exhibits traits associated with the "new father," such as emotional sensitivity and engagement, his repeated failures to fulfill the traditional paternal roles of protector and provider problematize this representation. In doing so, the film challenges the presumed stability of postfeminist fatherhood, highlighting the tensions and contradictions within contemporary constructions of masculinity and caregiving.

The film portrays Will's failure to integrate into a community, to adequately care for his daughter, and to find personal fulfillment. This stands in contrast to other postfeminist fatherhood films, which often conclude with the father successfully reconciling his vulnerabilities and reclaiming his role as both caregiver and provider. Such a resolution would require the father figure to undergo a transformation, ultimately embodying the ideal postfeminist father – simultaneously nurturing, breadwinning, and emotionally sensitive. However, *Leave No Trace* resists this trajectory, leaving Will's struggle unresolved and exposing the limitations of postfeminist fatherhood ideals. Thus, the film goes beyond the established postfeminist fatherhood narrative.

Another intriguing aspect of the film is Tom's journey toward self-sufficiency and independence, which questions traditional assumptions about gender and power dynamics. As the narrative unfolds, Tom emerges as a self-reliant individual who is no longer dependent on her father's support. This departure from conventional gender norms signifies a progressive shift in the portrayal of father-daughter relationships on screen. While Will tries to maintain his role as a protector and provider, Tom gradually assumes the position of her father's protector and educator, asserting agency over her own life. Through her actions, Tom exemplifies the figure of a "wise-beyond-her-years daughter," embarking on a transformative journey toward maturity. As the film draws to a close, it becomes evident that Tom's growth extends beyond personal development. Her newfound wisdom and understanding of her

father's experiences contribute to her role as an authority figure, guiding him toward emotional growth and self-discovery.

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