

April 2018

## A Failure of Femininity Within 'G.I. Jane'

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### Recommended Citation

Weaver, Maggie (2018) "A Failure of Femininity Within 'G.I. Jane'," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol4/iss2/10>

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## A Failure of Femininity Within 'G.I. Jane'

### **Writing Process**

This essay was wrote and edited throughout my ENG 200H course which featured the theme of women in the military. In preparation for the essay the class watched the film *G.I. Jane* directed by Ridley Scott. The assignment was to address and analyze one prominent theme within the film and after research and consideration I decided to examine how the film portrayed femininity. After identifying which aspects of the film I wanted to address in my paper I wrote my first draft. This original draft then underwent several edits both from my professor and the University of Dayton Write Place before submission.

### **Course**

ENG200H

### **Semester**

Fall

### **Year**

2017

# The Failure of Femininity in the Movie G.I. Jane

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*Maggie Weaver*

*G.I. Jane* (1997) directed by Ridley Scott presents a triumphant film for women striving to prove themselves as capable of performing all roles within our military. As Lieutenant Jordan O'Neil, the film's protagonist, toils under increasing pressure to succeed as the first woman in the Navy Seal's training program, her fight is one that viewers quickly rally behind. However, *G.I. Jane*, despite its intention of presenting itself as a film fighting for women's roles and rights in the military, contradicts itself. Significant scenes and decisions made in the film discredit the film's message of female empowerment. Ultimately, the film's key plot points and the director's stylistic choices serve to discredit traditionally feminine characteristics and, by extension, women warriors. The title of the film, the "haircut" scene, the disappearance of Lieutenant O'Neil's menstrual cycle, and O'Neil's rallying cry of "suck my dick" to the Master Chief during her most trying training moment all discredit feminine characteristics.

Femininity is simply described as the quality of being female. All attributes and roles generally accepted by society associated with the female sex are encompassed in the idea of femininity as a social construct. The feminine character has long been associated with weakness and inferiority principally due to historical perspectives of women being labelled as meant for the home and family caretaking, while men served as breadwinners and protectors. This is a viewpoint that is slowly shifting in society and is a stereotype that women fight every day to eliminate as they move into new roles. This flawed construction of femininity is carried over in *G.I. Jane*, representing an inherent weakness in the movie's well-intentioned and overt message of female strength and power. While attempting to show females as worthy and capable individuals within the military, *G.I. Jane* simultaneously portrays O'Neil's distinctive feminine qualities as

nuisances to be eliminated. The intention of *G.I. Jane* arguably contradicts the deeper messages that those stylistic choices seem to be sending the viewer subtle ways that allow the film to discredit the feminine qualities of womanhood.

The title of the film, *G.I. Jane*, is a significant stylistic choice that sets the stage for the entire film and yet, this title discredits those feminine qualities. The name “Jane” is traditionally feminine and one that has often made the top 100 of most popular girls names (Jane).. The title “*G.I. Jane*” is a play on the popular concept of *G.I. Joe* action figures, transposing “Joe” into a common feminine name. The movie’s title becomes questionable when considered in light of its main character, Lieutenant *Jordan* O’Neil. Jordan is considered a traditionally masculine name; its popularity has long been attributed to a much higher percentage of males than that of females. Throughout the years 1989-2007, the period of time during which the film was produced, only 25% of babies that were named Jordan were female. This begs the question of why exactly O’Neil’s character was given this particular name. While simply adopting “Jane” for the main character’s name may have been considered slightly too literal a transition, there are admittedly thousands of names more traditionally suited to females. However, “Jordan” was a choice that was especially interesting to consider in contrast to the feminine title of the movie. Perhaps, the idea of a proud and capable female warrior, “G.I. Jane,” could not be realistically developed with a name such as Emily, the most popular female name in the U.S in 1997, the year *G.I. Jane* was released (“Most Popular Baby Names”). This begs the question of just how the film really intended for a female warrior to be portrayed. The title reflects a rejection of feminine qualities, such as a simple as name, and as unsuited for the strong and capable character she sought to portray. Femininity and strength become disassociated. It is a concept that does a great disservice to the message of the empowerment of the female warrior.

An integral scene is when O’Neil’s decided to shave her head as she progressed through her training. O’Neil had previously been exempted from shaving her head as per regulation due to gender-normalizing standards that had been established for her. These standards included not only an exemption from the regulation haircut, but included changes such as extra time allowances on physical fitness tests and other modified standards throughout her training. O’Neil was freed of the barriers of gender-normalizing throughout her training, but she sought to shave her head, fully integrating herself into the male ranks as just another face in the barracks. This scene served as a turning point in O’Neil’s

career. Why did the film director chose this specific action? Long hair was as an established attribute of femininity as described by archaeologist Elizabeth Bartman who attested to women their wearing longer hair than men did in the time of ancient Greece. Longer hair served as a traditional indicator of feminine qualities. Jordan's shaved head represented a rejection of her feminine characteristics as she began to change her outward self to match that of her male counterparts. The music overlaying this powerful scene was *The Pretenders* song "The Homecoming". As O'Neil's long hair falls to the ground, a significant factor in this powerful scene is the music in the background cries out the lyrics of "the bitch is gone." A film review, published in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, written by Marysia Zalewski described this moment as O'Neil's attempt to "get rid [herself] of the last vestige of her femininity" (479-81). When viewing O'Neil's actions in this scene as another rejection of her feminine self, and considering her subsequent accomplishments in training, it is not an unreasonable assumption to conclude that the film suggests an underlying idea that women must lose their femininity in order to successfully qualify for certain positions within the military.

O'Neil's rigorous training also causes the loss of her menstrual cycle as revealed in a later scene of the film. This is another stripping away of characteristics that are distinctly feminine. The presence of a menstrual cycle, and by extension, the ability to create life, has always been a hallmark of femininity. The ability to bear children is one attribute of women alone; as such, this is perhaps one of the largest losses. In Debbie Lisle's review, published in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, she examined the subtext of *G.I. Jane* and pointed out that in order to be taken seriously as a soldier, O'Neil must 'become male'"(477-79). This viewpoint is demonstrated by the disappearance of yet another aspect of femininity.

Early on, O'Neil rejected the presence of various gender-normalizing standards afforded to her as a female recruit especially the decision to move into an all-male barracks. This move was met with disbelief from many of the male recruits. One disapproving comment from a fellow recruit referenced objections to her bringing tampons into the barracks. This objection highlights just how unprepared the male recruits are to accept females into their company. The comment gains further significance as the loss of her menstrual cycle can be viewed as yet another instance of O'Neil's self-transitioning to accommodate her fellow male recruits.

In viewing O'Neil's journey as a progressive transformation of her character away from feminine aspects of self, her final conversion is present in her rallying cry towards the Master Chief. Weary and beaten down because of her harsh treatment, O'Neil adamantly yells "suck my dick" when challenged on her strength and competence. The seemingly innocuous mention of her vanished menstrual cycle is thus brought full circle as she metaphorically gains a new anatomical piece. This line most obviously depicts a transition towards the masculine for the film's protagonist. It is also these words that serve to fully break down barriers between her and her comrades as they begin to accept more fully her presence in the SEAL program. This extension of camaraderie is represented in the scene that features O'Neil joking and drinking with her peers at a bar. This scene highlights a typically masculine image of "drinks with the guys" and places O'Neil comfortably in the midst of this action. While this could be thought of as a positive development, as gender no longer seems to determine O'Neil's character and ability, it is necessary to recognize that this equality has not been earned through acceptance of females, but rather by way of O'Neil conforming to the expectations of masculinity. The subtle ideas that this sequence of scenes proposed are very disconcerting. The film appears to suggest that it was not necessarily the acceptance of women into the SEALs, but rather if a woman was able to successfully transform into the expectation that males require. Only then are they willingly accepted.

This dissipation of femininity was ultimately significant in the wider context of O'Neil's journey of success. Despite being discounted at every turn throughout her training, Lieutenant O'Neil does ultimately succeed in making it through the rigorous training. Every success of O'Neil's throughout her training is coupled with the loss of some aspect of her feminine self. This impact on her abilities negatively serves the film's overall message because it seems to imply that the feminine aspects of O'Neil are weak or holding her back from success and perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes of women representing a primarily weaker sex.

Gender stereotypes and the negative effect they have on female empowerment is a constant issue in society. Gender stereotyping has limited female opportunities to break down gender barriers and assert to themselves. *G.I. Jane*, proves detrimental to this fight in that its underlying message translates feminine qualities as weak. This message is especially contradictory in the obvious impression of O'Neil's journey throughout the film as a representation of female

ability and gender equality. The film highlights the necessity for greater understanding of gender stereotyping and exactly how to move beyond these messages. Eliminating the underlying ideal of the manly figure as the standard of success would have allowed *G.I. Jane* to gain more respect and relevance as a film of female empowerment.

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