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A Hierarchy of Power and its Ripple Effect in *Whale Talk*

In *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher, T.J. Jones creates a swim team that consists of unlikely athletes. It is a novel that centers on friendship and camaraderie between teammates. However, these friendships are very male centered. There is also the issue of sports having a major presence at Cutter High School, yet this space is not inclusive to women. The lack of representation and abuse of power by the Wolverines Too conveys how abuse of power in society may negatively affect life at home. Accordingly, *Whale Talk* creates a distinction between social and domestic spheres, where the social sphere refers to the space at school and in society, while the domestic sphere refers to the space at home. Overall, the novel explores unfair power dynamics between males and females in the social sphere and communicates how this imbalance creates harm in the domestic sphere.

*Whale Talk* establishes sports as a purely masculine space at Cutter High School. However, the toxicity comes from the group Wolverines Too. T.J. says Wolverines Too run the boys’ sports at the school “almost as much as [...] the athletic department, or by Mr. Morgan, the principal” (48, this and all other quotations in this paper are taken from *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher). The group is run by alumni yet has almost as much power as people directly hired by the school. The issue comes from the lack of women in Wolverines Too. T.J. observes that “not one former *female* athlete belongs to the group” (49), which results in a lack of fundraisers for girls’ sports. Because Wolverine Too consists of only men and most of the student athletes mentioned in the novel are males, the novel conveys a serious lack of female representation in this public sphere.

The lack of female voices in the athletics department is a major issue because sports have such an overwhelming importance in the community. The novel uses Barbour as a voice for the culture at Cutter High School, and the novel establishes early on that there is a social hierarchy because of sports. When Chris Coughlin insists on wearing his deceased brother’s letterman jacket, Barbour says Chris has to “earn one of these” because it is an “honor to wear these colors,” and justifies his actions by saying “in this school an athletic department rule is a school rule” (25). Combined with the later rejection of the swimming team, a hierarchy is established; a student with a letterman jacket is higher than a regular athlete, while all athletes are more important than non-athletes. Thus, not only are males essentially running the entire sports department, but the school also bestows an honor upon high performing athletes. However, the Wolverines Too underfund and neglect the girls’ sports. Although it is very possible that there are female athletes who have lettered in their respective sport, their lack of privilege and representation in the athletic space makes this achievement much more difficult. Overall, the mere fact that so many men hold positions of power in the athletics department conveys an unbalanced power dynamic that transcends the social sphere and creates harm in the domestic sphere.

*Whale Talk* uses Rich Marshall to create a metaphor for how unfair representation in public can lead to complete abuse in private. Rich, the head of the Wolverines Too and Heidi’s abusive stepdad, is both a prominent character inside and out of school. While Rich exerts power in the social sphere and hides behind his given position of authority, he outright abuses Alicia and Heidi in the domestic sphere. Since he cannot always hide behind toxic sports culture, his abuse at home is obvious. For example, at John Paul Jones’ funeral, Barbour tells T.J. that he “didn’t know” (291) Rich was capable of something so harmful. Though it may seem absurd that someone who spends so much time with Rich does not recognize his true personality, it is because Barbour is closely connected to Rich in the social sphere. So, while Barbour says he was not aware of Rich’s behavior, it is because this negative attitude is normalized by the hierarchy. Rich hides behind his power and popularity in public so he can uncover his true, malicious intentions in private.

Although Rich is a major example of how the imbalance between male and female representation in Cutter High School reflects on the domestic sphere, T.J. also exhibits signs of having privilege from this imbalance. T.J. is involved in both Rich’s public and domestic life and knows his differing personalities. Despite this, the issue of power seemingly escapes T.J., who does not understand the relationship between Alicia and Rich. He asks, “what could be inside a person that could allow an asshole like Rich Marshall to come along and take her kid apart?” to which Georgia says “it’s what *isn’t* inside a person” (102). Although T.J. is a very compassionate character, his inability to understand Alicia’s situation and inclination to place the blame on her signifies his privilege as a young, athletic male who insists on solving issues with violence. When Alicia says, “They say the only way I think I can get power is to let him hurt me so he’ll come crawling back, begging me not to leave” (210), T.J. admits that this way of thinking makes no sense to him, but this is because T.J.’s idea of power differs from Alicia’s. While Alicia thinks she gains power by enduring pain, T.J. believes that violence solves problems, something that is especially evident when John Paul Jones asks T.J. to practice forgiveness while he lay dying on the ground (282). Because he already holds social power through his male privilege, T.J. cannot understand why Alicia’s lack of it would make her behave this way, even though he recognizes that Rich is abusive.

Towards the end of the novel, the entire hierarchy falls apart. When Rich shoots at Heidi and kills John Paul Jones, the barrier that divides his social and domestic spheres disappears. Everyone sees his act of violence, so his abuse cannot be further ignored. When Rich’s true behavior is exposed, the unfair power dynamics are dismantled and though grieving, the characters in the novel can move forward. T.J. learns to forgive, Alicia and her kids live happily together, Icko is no longer homeless, and most of the Aquamen continue playing sports at Cutter High School. Despite the loss of John Paul Jones, life genuinely improves for most of the characters in the novel because the symbol of toxic masculinity has been removed from their sphere.

Socially, the novel communicates how there is a lack of female representation in sports while simultaneously creating a hierarchy that places high achieving athletes on a pedestal. The group Wolverines Too, led by Rich Marshall, upholds these unfair power dynamics, and the issue with gender leaks into the domestic sphere. People can start to enjoy life once the community in the novel removes the hierarchy. Overall, *Whale Talk* serves as a commentary on how attitudes in the social sphere can unveil harmful behavior in the domestic sphere, which creates an unhealthy situation for all people involved.