

GREEN MAN

Luke Blackham explores how the Green Man can bring out caring masculinities in outdoor spaces

Meet the author

Luke Blackham is a fully trained Professional Youth Worker, qualified counsellor and Forest School Leader with a master's degree in Child Welfare and Wellbeing. His own project Wild N' Well Outdoors combines all the skills and knowledge he has acquired over the years to support children and young people, using the outdoors as a partner in his work.

Folkways, fairytales and the Green Man

As a child, I was always drawn to folktales. I liked my folk creatures to look a little creepy, otherworldly and to be powerful tricksters. I guess I had a fascination with the darker side of folktales, rather than their brightly-coloured, family friendly Disney counterparts.

As an adult, my love for folktales has continued to grow alongside my interest in the pre-Christian beliefs of Pagan Britain, which these folktales and lore fit nicely beside. One figure I am fascinated with is the Green Man and what he represents in contemporary culture. In current times, the Green Man is seen in many ways as a champion for environmental concerns and a symbol of rebirth and growth. In Jason Mankey's excellent book *The Horned God of the Witches*, he explores both the Green Man's historic and modern interpretations and the complexity of his ever-evolving mythos very well. The Green Man has been brought to life through varied media depictions, such as Tree

Beard in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* or in the classic folk horror *The Wickerman*, and can often be found hiding in plain sight around churches, cathedrals, pubs and restaurants.

While the Green Man's roots can be found in ancient myths and legends, he is more modern than we may initially think having been given new life as a neo-pagan deity. And perhaps this is apt for the Green Man as each year at the end of the growth cycle he dies and returns to the earth, ready for renewed beginnings in spring. With climate change continuing to threaten the globe and impact all life forms, the Green Man in the modern era reminds us of the importance of caring for the natural world.

The Green Man and masculinities

The Green Man is not a singular God who exists as an omnipotent entity, but rather represents masculine energies. His counterpart, the Triple Goddess, represents the divine feminine and reflects different but complimentary aspects of life. With this in mind, I would argue that modern masculinities and femininities are inextricably linked and therefore are best looked upon as a partnership rather than as competitors.

This, for me, is where the idea of masculinities comes in. I used the term masculinities rather than masculinity here as, like JJ Bola (1), I see the value in the understanding that masculinity can be represented, depicted or related to in many different ways - as with the Green Man. Indeed, Connel (2), like Bola, suggests that it is more common to recognise multi-masculinities that can be defined by culture, race and even class.

For some time now, masculinity as a holistic concept has often been referred to as 'toxic'. Yet, it is equally important to recognise that positive masculinities do exist. But, in order for boys and young men to access and develop such alternative masculine identities, opportunities for such development must be put in place.

As an archetype, the Green Man offers a grounding in the natural world which boys and men can look to for guidance on how to be in the natural world. For the outdoor practitioner, the Green Man fits well as a symbol of masculinity which is caring, nurturing, resilient and offers a connection to a positive and balanced masculinity. Rather than boys or men seeking to control and dominate, the Green Man invites the idea of working with the natural world as a partner rather than an adversary - it is these ways of knowing that can be translated into other areas of life.

How nature-based practice can support positive attributes in boys and young men

If we consider positive masculinities as informed by the environment, then outdoor interventions are in good standing to support boys and men develop positive attributes in their masculine identities. Outdoor spaces which are transformed into places by both facilitators and participants provide opportunities for reflection and personal growth both physically and mentally. I purposefully use the term ‘place’ here as a sense of place is different to space - Cresswell (3) noted that space becomes place when meaning is attached to it.

Very recently I saw this in action with a group of boys who worked together to remake their school’s campfire pit, communicating with each other, setting out tasks and seeing them to completion. As this was going on, they would check in with each other and support each other’s needs. Once the main task was complete, they set out to make drinks for everyone, not seeing this as a task beneath them but a key part of the process. This simple act was a challenge to some gender norms in society (4) and move away from hegemonic masculine ideals (i.e. men do not need support or support each other) towards a community-centric approach to living.

Other male groups I’ve worked with have often begun to focus on the wider site, noting any new mushrooms to be careful of in autumn, or identifying risks such as bramble across the path and managing them. These point to participants seeing the space as their place and taking responsibility for its maintenance - a far cry from masculine archetypes of dominance, power and control. Instead, they were taking the role of custodians of the natural space, embodying the Green Man without even being conscious of it.



Conclusion

I see the Green Man often in my sessions with boys and young men. I see him in the good deeds taken to keep our natural place safe, I see him when boys look after each other and I see him when they come together and talk about the challenges of life. To borrow from Gandalf the Grey - “Some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. I’ve found it is the small things, everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Simple acts of kindness and love”. For me, this is the measure of positive masculinities - those consistent little actions of good that make great men and I believe that our nature-based approaches can support the growth of such qualities. As this is the winter issue of Horizons, the Green Man currently sleeps, awaiting the spring. I wonder if you will see him in the foliage when the leaves begin to blossom or feel his presence strengthen with the sun and longer days △

References

1. Bola, JJ. (2019), Mask Off: Masculinity Redefined. Pluto Press: Outspoken Series. London.

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3. Cresswell, T. (2015). Place an introduction. West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell Publishing.

4. Cerrato, J., & Cifre, E. (2018). Gender Inequality in Household Chores and Work-Family Conflict. Frontiers in psychology, 9, 1330. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01330>

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