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### Lack of Feminism in *City of Thieves*

From a feminist perspective, ‘the male gaze’ in literature, art, and media is the act of depicting women through a heterosexual, masculine point of view where women are presented as sexual objects to be gazed at for the pleasure of the male gazer. Many films and novels from the point of view of a man that were written by a man fall victim to ‘the male gaze,’ where they portray female characters in demeaning and harmful ways while uplifting and empowering the male characters—*City of Thieves* is one of them. Written by David Benioff and published in 2008, *City of Thieves* is a semi-biographical story centering around 17-year-old Lev Beniov (the author’s grandfather) and his experiences during WWII in the siege of Leningrad. It follows Lev (a Russian Jew) and Kolya (an ex-Red Army soldier) as they are sent on a mission to retrieve a dozen eggs in a city where no food is left. In the middle of a brutal winter, Lev and Kolya try to survive as they venture past enemy lines and evade the Nazis that want to kill them. During their adventure, Kolya acts as a sort of mentor to Lev, informing the virgin about what women want, teaching him how to please a girl, and encouraging him to have confidence in himself. The novel explores themes of masculinity, sexuality, and survival, and expertly depicts the devastation and futility of war. The novel does not depict, however, positive femininity and representation of strong female characters. There is no central female character, and any women Lev and Kolya encounter throughout the story are only considered for their beauty and what they can offer men. From a feminist perspective, *City of Thieves* does not portray women in a positive light.

The female characters in this novel are written and depicted in a negative and sexist manner. Both the protagonist Lev and the deuteragonist Kolya think and talk about women in overtly and unnecessarily sexual ways. When Lev and Kolya are at the farmhouse preparing to save the four Russian girls that a team of Nazis keep as sex slaves, the Einsatzgruppen are suddenly gunned down and all killed. The boys exit the farmhouse and come face to face with a group of Russian partisans who did the job. At first the leader doesn't take lightly to them, and Lev describes him as having a growing beard and a rifle on his shoulder. When meeting the sniper of the group, Lev describes his small stature, his eyes and fringe, and the smirk on his face. Once the sniper is revealed to be a girl, however, Lev immediately wonders "what her body looked like beneath those winter camouflage coveralls" (Benioff 148). Every encounter this narrator has with a man in this novel, he describes their physical features, such as a scar or a thick neck, and what he thinks about their personality. Every one of his encounters with a woman, though, consists of not only descriptions of her appearance, but also comments on whether she is attractive or not, debates of whether he would be interested in having sex with her, and fantasies of her naked body. In the same moment, Kolya asks the lead partisan, "Is she yours?" (Benioff 148) in reference to whether the girl and the leader are in a relationship—as if women are objects that belong to men and are unable to speak for themselves. Kolya displays this type of attitude toward females countless times throughout the novel, bragging about and describing his many sexual exploits, and attempting to teach Lev how to please a woman by stating that, as a man, he knows all about what women want. These are harmful and degrading ways to portray women in literature, as girls are so much more than pieces of meat, and have so much more to offer the world than their bodies.

Works Cited

Benioff, David. *City of Thieves: A Novel*. Penguin Group, 2008.