

ARCHIVES—Killing the Female: The Psychology of the Hunt

By Merritt Clifton | September 1990

✘ MY FORMER NEIGHBOR Lynn didn't shoot a deer last fall, the only male of his family who didn't. Photos of Lynn's elder brother, his son, and his nephew appeared on the display board at the country store that serves as local buck pool headquarters, each standing or kneeling beside an entry in the annual competition, whose winner (the person who kills the biggest buck) takes home a few hundred dollars. As president of the local rod and gun club, and as a multi-time buck pool winner in past years, Lynn seemed conspicuously absent from the long list of buck pool entrants – over 150, in a rural district whose total population is under 1,500.

Sipping a beer in a living room packed with mounted heads and a whole stuffed bear he now regrets killing, Lynn seems unperturbed by his failure to kill this time. "I was out there in the woods every day," he says, "same as usual, but I just didn't see a deer I wanted to kill. I helped Sonny and Bubba get theirs, but you know, I don't have to kill a deer every year any more. I've been hunting since I was nine, and I'm 49 now, and it's kind of to the point where I don't want to shoot anything any more unless it's something worth having. Don't get me wrong. I love to go deer hunting. It's my favorite thing to do. But it's not like when I was one of these guys who's always in a hurry to get out and be the first one in town to get his buck and be first one back to the weighing station and then it's all over with until next year. I like to go out in the woods, take my time, enjoy the whole ten days or two weeks or whatever they give us to do it in. If I see the buck I want, I'll shoot it, but if I don't, I've shot plenty of deer in my time and I can kind of psychologically feed off the one I killed last year or the

year before.”

In fact, Lynn has not killed a deer in three years. A construction worker with a high school education, Lynn is markedly more relaxed now than he was then. With the aid of his priest, he is controlling the alcohol problem that has raged in his family for three generations. Thirty years of a difficult and sometimes violent shotgun marriage have settled down into a comfortable truce: he hasn't hit his wife in four or five years. He is ignoring old stories that he might be homosexual, rumors that probably began in grade school when other children decided he had “a girl's name.”

Developing an internal sense of self-worth, Lynn may have become one of the growing number of licensed hunters – as many as 20 percent – who rarely if ever fire their guns, for whom hunting is mainly “armed nature walking,” as sociologist Thomas Heberlein of the University of Wisconsin puts it. They still carry weapons because they learned young that men who don't may be thought effeminate. Imbued with the work ethic, they still pretend that they are hunting for meat, because this provides an economic rationale for their activity (though as Lynn admits, “You could live on filet mignon for what shooting a deer costs,” in license fees, equipment, ammunition, and time).

Vulnerable to peer pressure, they vocally support hunting and gun ownership. But they are only one “jail break” away – in self-confidence and self-understanding – from teaching a lesson to their sons and grandsons slightly different from the one they learned themselves, from passing along their love of the woods and knowledge of wood-lore without punctuating it all with a baptism in blood.

Gerry, around the corner and ten years younger, is another story. Though of semi-rural background, Gerry holds a dead-end white-collar job in a nearby town. His wife hates hunting. His two sons take after her. Hindered by an old knee injury,

he'd pretty much given up hunting, until, as domestic and professional frustrations mounted, he found refuge at a deer camp one autumn with old buddies. He shot an undersized deer, was nabbed by the warden, and became the butt of considerable rough humor – about his limp and his marital troubles, as well as “buck fever,” the hunter’s term for what nonhunters call being “trigger-happy.” Gerry’s now out there every deer season, hoping to regain lost standing with “the boys,” who by now mostly consider him slightly dangerous.

Deer hunters similar to Lynn and Gerry make up 85 percent of the U.S. hunting population, according to the National Shooting Sports Foundation. The next most popular targets are rabbits (71 percent) and squirrels (60 percent), followed by quail (48 percent), pheasants (45 percent), turkeys (26 percent), and geese (24 percent).

But both Lynn and Gerry also fall into categories defined in 1977 by Robert Jackson and Robert Norton of the University of Wisconsin, who in a study done for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service discovered hunters typically pass through five phases of outlook and behavior that roughly correspond with stages of maturity. Interviewing 1,600 licensed deer and waterfowl hunters, Jackson found that in phase one, the Shooter stage, hunters are principally concerned with exercising their firepower; they don’t much care what they hit. Such hunters tend to be young. As actor Richard Kiley recalled, speaking out against mountain lion hunting in California in the 1980s, “When I was a boy on my uncle’s farm in Michigan, I killed everything that moved. Birds, rabbits, woodpeckers, squirrels. It was a wonderful game. I loved guns – the feel, the smell, the power of them. And I remember the moment it stopped,” the moment Kiley broke a squirrel’s back without killing it outright, and felt, watching it struggle, “as though a door opened in my head and a bright light flooded in,” carrying “an overwhelming burden of sorrow and shame and compassion and regret.”

While Kiley gave up hunting as a result of his flash of insight, most hunters merely progress to phase two. As Kiley theorized, they are not evil but asleep: "A portion of their awareness is obscured." They go from random killing to the Limiting-Out stage, where satisfaction still comes from firing the gun, but success – and social status – comes from "bagging the limit." At this stage, Lewiston, Maine *Morning Tribune* editor Bill Hall offered recently, "They hunt for the bragging rights on what they kill."

When killing in volume no longer wins the desired amount of acclaim, hunters pass to phase three, the Trophy stage. Now winning the buck pool becomes a paramount objective. Hunters begin passing up shots, trying instead for the heaviest weight and biggest rack of antlers. Trophy stage hunters are typically in their mid-thirties or early forties, at about the same point in life where basic economic needs have been satisfied and community status is being established. The car and house have been bought and mostly paid for. Raising status through obtaining a newer car and a bigger house are the major economic concerns for this age bracket; killing a bigger buck is an abstraction of the same objective.

By phase four, the Method stage, the hunter – like Lynn – has already won the buck pool. He now takes maximum pride in his ability to kill animals by more difficult means, e.g. bowhunting and with muzzleloaders, and in his ability to use woodcraft (luring and tracking) rather than relying on sheer firepower. Killing the target animal has become the climactic part of a quest.

Then comes phase five. After years of hunting and a few years of not killing, for various reasons that translate into no longer wanting to, the hunter acknowledges that killing simply isn't necessary, that nature can be most fully enjoyed by simply sharing in the life of the woods. As Jackson and Norton summarized, the phase five hunter "seemed to be more fully mature as a person and as a hunter, and no longer

needed to measure his worth, or control his world, by the taking of game. Instead he talked of hunter satisfaction in terms of total appreciation of nature or the companionship of partners or family.”

Many an animal defender has found friendship and even emotional kinship with elderly ex-hunters, some of whom become volunteer wardens or in other ways seek to protect the animals they once would have killed. “I consider it a successful hunt if we just see deer,” 63-year-old Cecil Smitherman told Bob Sexter and Tracy Shryer of the *Los Angeles Times* last fall.

But between the anti-hunting animal defender and the gentle old man who delights in describing animals he’s seen alive, there’s an army of often hostile, aggressive younger men with rifles and shotguns blazing – and as many as 200 million animals die each year in a journey toward self-understanding many hunters never complete.

HUNTING MANHOOD

According to the NSSF, the average hunter starts at age 15, just past puberty, at about the same age he begins seeking such other symbolic transitions as learning to drive and gaining his first sexual experience. “It’s a big thing when you get to go deer hunting,” Smitherman’s grandson Todd Dennis told the *Los Angeles Times* reporters. “It’s like a *bar mitzvah*. When you go deer hunting, they start to look at you as a man and you feel like a man.”

“There’s something addictive about deer hunting,” Dave Petersen opined in the *Mother Earth News* “Beginner’s Guide to Deer Hunting,” and then suggested why: “Consider that the term *venison*, for the meat of the deer, is derived from the name of Venus, the Roman goddess of love. *Venerary* means both ‘the art of hunting’ and ‘the pursuit of sexual pleasure.’”

Subliminal confusion of hunting with sexual pursuit and

achievement of manhood gushes through hunting terminology, from the ritual of "first blood" to technical discussions of the penetration power of ammunition to the frequent, casual, unconscious use of "her" (as in "I shot her right there") to describe male animals.

When symbolically represented, the hunter's effort to assert sexual supremacy often looks transparently silly, e.g. Texas gubernatorial candidate Clayton Williams' rumored "honey hunts."

"In one version of the story," *Newsweek* recently recounted, "Williams and his chums strip to their underwear and shoot water pistols at nymphs dancing in the nude. Another version has Williams inviting prostitutes to tag along at deer hunts and cattle roundups. A third sends Williams to Africa on safari with hookers in tow."

But the symbolic representation can also turn sinister. In his teens, Marc Lepine of Montreal massacred pigeons with a BB gun. On December 6, 1989, he donned hunting fatigues, declared his intention to massacre "feminists" and killed 14 female students at the *Universite de Montreal* with a semiautomatic rifle and a buck knife.

Whether or not hunters shoot deer to demonstrate sexual potency or out of sexual frustration, in symbolic lieu of raping and killing women, there can be little doubt that as a social ritual, much hunting is all about killing the feminine in the hunter's own self. Not only are the targets male animals with the stereotypical female traits of grace and beauty, but the pursuit itself involves – nay requires – sequestering the hunters, the men, away from female influence. Deer camp is an all-male world. Instead of cleansing themselves as women require, as prelude to sexual contact, deer hunters cover themselves with "scent lures," a polite name for urine and feces. They don't wash because detergent residues reflect ultraviolet light that deer can

see, making camouflage useless. They wear boots indoors, curse, play poker, drink from the bottle and eat from the can – and many never actually hunt at all, getting no closer to a deer than viewing a so-called stag video. “I went with five other guys,” ostensible hunter Steve Costello told a *New York Times* correspondent last fall. They didn’t even take weapons. Admitted Costello, “We never even left camp.”

A 1974 study by James Kennedy for the Wildlife Society found that 75 percent of the hunters surveyed would prefer hunting with their buddies in an area with only a 10 percent chance of killing a deer to hunting alone with a 50 percent chance of making the kill. Seeking the kill is only the pretext for the various other rituals that “separate the men from the boys,” determining “who’s a pussy.”

This, not the supposed difficulty of shooting a deer, probably best explains why approximately 70 percent of all licensed hunters don’t get one – while those for whom the kill is the paramount experience tend to “get their deer” year after year, perennially bagging the limit and/or placing high in the buck pool.

The deer camp atmosphere of exaggerated masculinity is not unlike the atmosphere of “leather trade” gay bars; one must wonder, ultimately, how sexually secure any of the posturing denizens are. “You can take my word for it,” snorted former hunting guide Douglas Townsend some years ago. Having escorted hundreds of big game hunters, he concluded, “This hunting habit is anything but an expression of manhood.”

Gregory Hemingway, son of author Ernest Hemingway, would probably concur. Trying to impress his macho father, a living symbol of hunters and hunting to a whole generation, Gregory at age 11 won the World Life Pigeon Shooting Championship. At 19 he was arrested for transvestitism. Trying to regain his father’s respect, he next slaughtered 18 elephants on a single African safari. But he remained an

unhappy transvestite, who spent, he admitted in a 1987 interview, “hundreds of thousands of dollars” trying to overcome the habit. He was never a homosexual, just insecure – like his father, who likewise spent his whole life trying to prove masculinity that no one else ever seriously called into question.

TRAUMATIZING CHILDREN

Literally killing the female, Cameron Robert Kocher of Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, nearly ten years old, said he was only “playing hunter” on March 6, 1989, when he fatally shot Jessica Ann Carr, age seven, with his father’s rifle. Observing subsequent legal proceedings, Cleveland State University law professor Victor L. Streib unequivocally blamed the killing on Kocher’s exposure to guns and hunting. “All he has done,” Streib summarized, “is kill the wrong animal.”

For Vietnam veteran Dave Goff, as for tens of thousands of others who have gone almost straight from hunting to combat, human beings become the right animal. “I was brought up on a dairy farm,” he recently explained to syndicated veterans’ affairs columnist Laura Palmer. “I used to shoot woodchucks all the time. It got to the point where I would flash it through my head that it was just another woodchuck and it didn’t mean anything. It was just a job,” Goff, still in his teens, was assigned to killing civilians as part of the CIA’s infamous Operation Phoenix. He then went through 13 years of breakdowns and alcohol abuse, trying to deprogram himself from having been a killer, trying to find his way into becoming a caring, responsible human being.

“My objection to deer hunting,” syndicated columnist Sydney Harris wrote a few years ago, “is not so much to what is done to the deer as to what is done to the boy,” who witnesses a hunt for the first time. “For one thing, it desensitizes him to cruelty; for another, it justifies whatever is done to win your antlers (the symbols of manhood); and for another,

it turns killing into a casual, thoughtless act.”

Townsend made a similar observation almost a decade earlier. “I am convinced,” he said, “that there is a relationship between the obsession with guns and hunting and mounting violence and crime.”

While psychologists have long theorized from case studies that early and intense exposure to hunting can desensitize young people, making killing unnaturally easy, University of New Hampshire director of Family Research Murray Strauss in 1987 sought objective proof. Strauss used indicators including the audience for violent TV shows, football player production per capita, National Guard enrollment, and sale of hunting licenses to determine which states most seemed to condone violence. Strauss found that the states most culturally predisposed toward violence had the highest rates of homicide by teenagers, with Alaska leading the list and several western states with strong levels of hunting participation ranking high. Unfortunately Strauss’ analysis was so complex that quantifying an exact relationship between hunting and homicide statistics was impossible.

DEMOGRAPHICS

According to Heberlein, who in 1985 assembled a demographic profile of U.S. hunters, “most [like Lynn and Gerry] grew up in rural areas and were taught to hunt at an early age by their fathers.” Over 99 percent were male; only two percent of all American women hunted, most of whom were the firstborn or only children of avid male hunters. The greatest number of hunters were aged 18 to 34, which was then also the largest segment of the U.S. male population. The next greatest number were aged 35 to 44, the second largest male population group. The NSSF simultaneously pegged the average age of hunters at 38, six years older than the average U.S. male.

“Over the age of 45,” Heberlein found, “there is a

substantial decline in the proportion who hunt.” While Heberlein suggested that this may be due to “the strenuous nature of hunting,” the decline could also reflect the number of one-time hunters who have passed through the fifth phase of maturity and laid down their weapons. (Ten percent of licensed hunters are over 60, though many of these apparently buy licenses primarily because they believe the money supports genuine conservation programs.) The Heberlein and NSSF data together indicated that as the general population aged, the number of hunters would decline even more sharply. That’s exactly what has happened, continuing a trend already well underway even then.

Nationally, the licensed hunting population has decreased from 17.9 million in 1975 to barely 15 million today. The annual dropout rate is roughly 6.3 percent, against annual recruitment of about five percent. Hunting is declining even faster in California, where pro-animal attitudes have become so strong that in June the electorate permanently banned mountain lion hunting, the first-ever major electoral defeat for the well-financed and well-organized hunting lobby. While California sold 750,000 hunting licenses in 1970, sales this year are expected to fall under 400,000 – even though the state population has more than doubled over the same period.

Noting that hunting participation is lowest among teenagers, and that hunters are most likely to begin hunting in their early teens, the California Department of Fish and Game has vigorously stepped up youth hunting promotions. Seeing their traditional revenue base vanishing with decreasing license sales, most other state game bureaus are doing likewise. But, beginning to recognize that hunting is a dying pursuit, California officials are also experimenting with “nonconsumptive use permits,” a means of raising money from people who visit state lands for purposes other than killing.

If this strategy succeeds, the department will have to acknowledge a whole new constituency – if not voluntarily,

then as result of lawsuits based on the principle of no taxation without representation, the principle upon which the U.S. seceded from Great Britain back in 1776. Already four bills to restructure the California Game Commission and Department of Fish and Wildlife to give representation to non-hunters are before the state legislature, while in Massachusetts a lawsuit filed by the Fund for Animals and the Animal Legal Defense Fund seeks to set a precedent for obliging state wildlife bureaus to acknowledge non-hunters under the representation principle.

A hard corps of hunters still hopes to perpetuate the status quo, or even to turn back the clock to frontier days. Indeed, one stated purpose of the recent Nucla, Colorado prairie dog shooting contest was to encourage more hunters to move in, and to scare off anti-hunters. Political organizer David Keene has assembled the American Hunting Rights Action Committee in hopes of placing a pro-hunting plank into the national conservative platform. But the number of active hunters continues to drop at both ends of the age range. A 1977 study by James Applegate showed that in New Jersey, at least, there are already over twice as many ex-hunters as actives.

This is a very promising sign for the future. Just as disillusioned Vietnam veterans became the moral backbone of the peace movement some 20 years ago, ex-hunters who know the woods and love nature could well become the backbone of the effort to save habitat, shouldering aside pro-hunting groups who claim to save habitat but in fact save only habitat for preferred targets. As Margaux Hemingway, granddaughter of the author, explained on a recent promotional visit to the Peninsula Humane Society, in San Mateo, California, "Hunters are the greatest lovers of nature and wildlife. If you can just reeducate them, they'll be a real force.

Like Ernest and Gregory, Margaux also hunted and fished, and even modeled furs until "about two years ago I woke up."

Stepping out of her grandfather's shadow, she now speaks out against hunting and the fur trade, at last freely expressing the love of animals two generations of men in her family felt, but could only express with gun in hand.

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