Manhood and War Making: The Literary Response to the Radicalization of Masculinity for the Purposes of WWI Propaganda

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The Fall of Victorian Masculinity

The Victorian Age saw the decline of the 19th century definition of masculinity because of its eventual association with effeminacy and the homosexual.

• The mid-to late-19th century saw the proliferation of discourses concerned with sex, producing an open debate over what was sexually normal (Foucault 18).

• Psychosexual Sexuality, published by Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing in 1886, enabled Germany to become the seat of homosexual research and the stirrings of early homosexual emancipation in the late-19th century—solidifying and disseminating the newly minted homosexual identity (Beachy 99).

• The Oscar Wilde Trials of 1895 led to the seemingly widespread Victorian sexual decadence and the open-secret of male homosexuality (Adut 205).

• This fluid interaction of German sexual/psychological focus on the male body, and the destruction of British Victorian standards, produced a widespread crisis of masculinity and male sexuality.

WWI’s Radicalization of Masculinity

While it is clear that the United States, Germany, and Britain all rebuilt similar definitions of manhood for the new 20th century, a definition built on heartiness of character and a solid muscular body, this code of manliness would be taken to an extreme when appropriated by all three countries for use in their war propaganda.

• Both the United States and Britain utilized the atrocity story technique, one meant to “sustain the moral condemnation of the enemy,” and vent the bloodlust of the home front.

• Germany’s propaganda began in a more populist way, “letters to the editor…teachers’, university professors’, and pastors’ speeches; or propaganda and essentially forcing young men to enlist; they were “the Iron Youth” of their nation (Remarque 39).

• Though all three countries used the war poster in their efforts, in turn linking correct masculine expressions with martial duty and the hypermasculine.

Johnny Got His Gun—1939

While most works appearing in the United States after the Great War treated the war as a symbol or theme in its own right, many began to emphasize the distinct break in the zeitgeist of the world pre- and post-WWI—Dalton Trumbo’s novel brings the war back to its physical reality, and depicts the corporal consequences of the war and its propaganda.

• Joe marks the widespread pressure for men to enlist, commenting that “churches and schools and newspapers and legislators and congresses” made promoting the idea of enlistment “their business” (Trumbo 115).

• The climax occurs when Joe finally makes contact with the outside world again, through typing Morse Code with his head, and asks to be toured around the country as a visual sign to warn against the realities of war (Trumbo 225-231).

• His efforts are thwarted when the establishment around him simply types back—“What you ask is against regulations” (Trumbo 234-235).

• Joe thus becomes the product of a “propaganda machine…unhindered by resisted voices,” designed to never speak the truth he knows (Blackmore).

All Quiet on the Western Front—1919

Germany, in the countries studied here, was the hardest hit nation in relation to its national psyche and fervent pro-war belief in martial-hypermasculinity, because of this, Erich Remarque’s novel serves to illustrate what happens in an overly gendered, martial, and hypermasculine culture.

• After the close of the Great War, Germany’s defeat was incredibly shameful for the nation, both in national prestige and because of the destruction to their national image of the unbreakable soldier hero (Whalen).

• Remarque, like Trumbo, accuses nation institutions and public rhetoric in furthering the state propaganda and essentially forcing young men to enlist; they were “the Iron Youth” of their nation (Remarque 18).

• Once at the frontline, the protagonist Paul Baumer and his fellow soldiers see how useless a hypermasculine identity is in the face of bombs, and so they enact feminine/dissenting actions in an attempt to save their humanity.

• The boys act toward each other like family and pseudo-mothers (Remarque 29), they recreate families like physical courage, loyalty, and self-sacrifice, or in other words, 19th century British war ideals (Pividori 163).

• After the war, the German audience was left with a code of masculinity that “celebrated a militaristic and robust hypermasculinity (Foucault 68).

Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon—1920

Britain’s heavy involvement in World War One, reflected by their leadership in the Allied Powers and their increasing use of propaganda for recruitment, produced sanitized horrors and unimaginable deaths for the nation; Owen and Sassoon’s poetry was thus written with the sole intention of public consumption to provide a counter-propagandist, dissenting voice.

• Before the onset of war, the impending Great War seemed like a timely “opportunity to exhibit virtues like physical courage, loyalty, and self-sacrifice,” or in other words, 19th century British war ideals (Pividori 163).

• Wilfred Owen’s poetry provided a subversion to the overarching compulsory martial hypermasculinity imposed on the soldiers of World War One through the conflation of the state, Britain’s cultural history, and harmful propaganda.

• Both poets use themes of the ghostly or ethereal, hyperrealist portrayals of the frontline and battle, and a focused attention to the body and the effects of war on the body and psyche.

• Through these poets, there exists an entire collection of postwar poetry that aims to heavily critique unnecessary destruction, essentially hollow concepts of heroism and national duty, and forceful masculinist propaganda.

The New Century’s Masculinity

With the collapse of Victorian masculinity, a new, harsher and heartier, sense of manhood developed in an attempt to counteract the ‘womanizing’ effects felt by the previous century’s code of masculinity.

The American Response:

• As the middle class became the community able to define social regulations, “turn-of-the-century manhood constructed bodily strength and social authority as identical” (Bederman 8).

• The rise of Theodore Roosevelt in the United States allowed Roosevelt to craft himself into the embodiment of the new masculinity—a man of hard body, hearty character, and solid patriotic interests (Fein 2005).

The German Response:

• Germany’s national-minded response immediately vilified its aristocratic and ruling class, seeing them as the seat and cause of “Wilhelmine decadence” (Domeier 738).

• The Eulenburg Scandal, “remembered today as the first major homosexual scandal of the twentieth century,” made homosexuality, and masculinity, a national issue (Domeier 737).

• The nation thus latched onto its army and the heroic/masculine ideal of the soldier, making the soldier/hero “a buoy in the... psychological and sexual discourses on masculinity” (Pividori 68).

The British Response:

• The nation dove into its renaissance of empire building, called New Imperialism—”empire for empire’s sake,” [an] aggressive competition for overseas territorial acquisitions (“British Empire”).

• Physical culture grew sharply in popularity in the country, paralleling the rise of Eugene Sandow, the “owner of a physical-culture empire with studios all over Britain” (Maiz 35).

• At the start of the 20th century, Britain is left with a code of masculinity that “celebrated a militaristic and robust hypermasculinity (Foucault 640).

Works Cited


Blackmore, Joanne. “‘Erich Remarque, Mr. Hollywood, the protagonist, and the interior monologue that takes place in his head when he realises he has lost his entire face and all four limbs.”

But we do not forget. It’s all rot that they put in the war-news about the good humour of the troops, how they are arranging dances almost before they are out of the front-line. We don’t act like that because we are not blind to the facts. We do not pretend. It is the same with the officers, their word is law, they must have things, they cannot even be told to sit down. We are trying to save our humanity.

Erich Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front.

―Erich Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front.

―Dalton Trumbo, Johnny Got His Gun

―Johnny Got His Gun—1939

―All Quiet on the Western Front—1919

―Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon—1920

―The New Century’s Masculinity

―The Fall of Victorian Masculinity

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―“Johnny Got His Gun.” Johnny Got His Gun. Directed by Lewis Milestone. Paramount Pictures, 1930. DVD. ""