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

Samuel Hersh, Kent State University
Research Advisor: Kevin Floyd, Ph.D.

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 late 19th century saw the proliferation of discourses concerned with sex, producing an open debate and anxiety over what was sexually normal (Foucault 18).
- Psychoanalysis 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 1995).
- The Oscar Wilde Trials of 1895 hit him to the seemingly widespread Victorian sexual decadence and the open-secret of male homosexuality (Adut 2005).

WWI’s Radicalization of Masculinity

While it is clear that the United States, Germany, and Britain all reified similar definitions of manhood for the new 20th century, a definition built on heroism and self-sacrifice, 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 thus legitimizing the war (Sanders and Taylor 142).
- Germany’s propaganda began in a more populist way, “letters to the editor…teachers’, university professors’, and pastors’ speeches; or war-themed merchandise” all existed as self-motivated forms of propaganda from the front to the home front (Ther).
- Through 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, using it 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 corporeal consequences of the war and its propaganda.

- “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 held out much longer; our humour becomes more bitter every month.” —Erich Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front

All Quiet on the Western Front—1929

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.

- Once at the frontline, the protagonist Paul Baumer and his fellow soldiers see how useless a hypermasculinity is in the face of bombs, and so they enact feminine/dissenting actions in an attempt to save their humanity.
- “We fight the boys toward each other like family and pseudo-mothers (Remarque 29), they retrace scenes of domestic life here (Remarque 231), and form intimate bonds that mirror the romantic connections of back home (Remarque 94-95).
- Despite the boys’ efforts, they all die in the end, caught up as pawns in a larger war that trapped them with hypermasculine lies and propagandas based on an unattainable military ideal.

Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon—1920

Britain’s heavy involvement in World War One, reflected by their leadership in the Allied Powers and their increasingly use of propaganda for recruitment, produced sanitised 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-propaganda, dissenting voice.

- “‘We’re none of us the same!’ the bops reply. ‘For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s insane blind; Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and like to die. And Herb’s gone’splitic; you’ll not find A chap who’s served that hasn’t found some change.” —Siegfried Sassoon, “THey”