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, successfully peddled 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 led to the seemingly widespread Victorian sexual decadence and the open-secret of male homosexuality (Adut 2005).

• 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 heroics 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 to sustain the moral condemnation of the enemy, and thus legitimizing the war (Sanders and Taylor 14).

• German propaganda began in a more populist way, “letters to the editor…teachers, university professors,” and pamphlets: speeches; or war-themed merchandising all existed as self-motivated forms of propaganda from the propagandist’s citizenry (Ther).

• 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 metaphor of larger events in society, Erich Maria Remarque’s novel, published in German in 1928, introduced an entirely new genre to the world—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.

• In the novel’s structure, the protagonist, and the interior monologue that takes place in his head when he realizes he has lost his entire face and all four limbs.

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

• America’s use of gendered and hypermasculine propaganda gets reflected by Joe’s observations as well: “And when they couldn’t block the little guys into fighting for liberty or freedom or democracy or independence or decency or honor they tried the women” (Trumbo 113).

• 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 resistant voices,” designated to never speak the truth he knows (Blackmore).

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-hypermascularity, 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 unbeatable soldier/hero (Whalen).

• Remarque, like Trumbo, accuses nations 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/dissembling actions in an attempt to save their sanity.

• The boys act toward each other like family and pseudo-mothers (Remarque 29), they recreate scenes of domestic home life (Remarque 231), and they 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 propaganda based on an unflinching 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 increasing use of propaganda for recruitment, produced somber horrors and unimaginated deaths for the nation; Owen and Sassoon’s poetry was thus written with the sole intention of public consumption to provide a counter-propaganda, dissident 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 (Pivodic 163).

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

• After the war, Sassoon went on to a prolific writing career that never strayed from a focus on the Great War and speaking about the horror caused by it, including his belief in pacifism and his imprisonment for the Big Parade (Dollar 235).

• Both poets use themes of the ghastly 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 unseemly destruction, essentially hollow concepts of heroism and national duty, and forceful masculinist propaganda.

Works Cited


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