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–late 19th century saw the “professionalization of discourse concerned with sex,” producing an open debate and anxiety over what was sexually normal (Foucault 18).

• Psychopathia Sexualis, published by Richard Freidrich 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 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 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 to “sustain the moral condemnation of the enemy,” and thus legitimizing the war (Sanders and Taylor 142).

• German propaganda began in a more populist way, “letters to editor .. teachers, university professors, and pamphlets .. speeches; or war-themed merchandising” all existed as self-motivated forms of propaganda from the nation’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 menace to society, in Europe the works treated the war as an expression of intense guilt over the long-standing history of war and aggression. For France, the novel of the war is a story of modern man, 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 promoting 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 hook 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...unthanked by resistant voices,” destined to never speak the truth he knows (Blackmore).

“‘He could tell all these high-talking murdering sonbitches who screamed for blood just hawwing they were. He could tell them mister there’s nothing worth dying for I know because I’m dead. There’s no word for daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes; Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts—And soon he was drafted out with drums and cheers.”

—Dalton Trumbo, Johnny Got His Gun

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 pre-war belief in martial-hypermasculinity, because of this, Erich Remarque’s novel serves to illustrate what happens in an overtly 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 Bauer and his fellow soldiers see what useless a hypermasculine identity is in the face of bombs, and so they enact feminine/dissenting 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 unattainable military ideal.

“‘But we do not forget. It’s all rot that they put in the war-news about the good spirits of the troops, how they are arranging dances almost before they are out of the front-lime. We don’t act like that because we are in good humour: we are in a good humour because otherwise we should go to pieces. Even so we cannot hold out much longer; our humour becomes more bitter every month.’

—Erich Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front

Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon—1919

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 astounding 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 outbreak 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 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.

“‘He asked to join. He didn’t have to beg; Smiling they wrote his lie; aged nineteen years. Germans he scarcely thought of; all their guilt, And Austria’s, didn’t move him. And no tears Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts—For daggers in plaid socks, of smart salutes; And care of arms, and lance; and pay arsenals, Espoir de Corps; and hints for young recruits. And soon he was drafted out with drums and cheers.”

—Siegfried Sassoon, “They”

“‘We’re none of us the same!’ the boys reply. ‘For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s stone blind; Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and lies to die. And Bert’s gone phthisical: you’ll not find A chap who’s served that hasn’t found some change.’

And the bishop said: ‘The ways of God are strange!’

—Wilfred Owen, “Dulce”

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 manliness.

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 (Fehn 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 emasculation 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” (Matta 35).

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

Works Cited


International Encyclopedia of the First World War. Image credits:

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