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Representations of Masculinity in the Novels of Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and Tim O'Brien

Doctoral Dissertation

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I officially declare that this dissertation is my own work except where otherwise stated. Several passages were published in two articles of mine, namely in "Utrpení bílého muže. Mýtus o šťastných padesátých letech a jiné úvahy o americkém mužství" (*Host*, 2012) and "Digging till the End of Love: Male Anxiety in Tim O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age*" (*Interdisciplinary Views on the English Language, Literature, and Culture,* 2018).

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this dissertation is examine the representation of masculinity in the novels of Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and Tim O'Brien. The starting point is that masculinity is defined culturally trough countless daily transactions. What comes across as manly has to be thus analyzed in the context of a relevant discourse on masculinity. Since the early days of the republic, American masculinity has always been viewed as being in danger of emasculation and various strategies of boosting it up have been devised by an array of social commentators. Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer are among the most prominent American writers whose work is driven by the idea that masculinity has to be constantly proven in a heroic fight against a hostile world, which requires a great degree of self-control and discipline. Tim O'Brien's novels, on the other hand, show the negative consequences of the obsession with control and emphasize the importance of communication with the feminine world.

Key words: masculinity, gender, American culture, violence, war literature

ABSTRAKT

Tato práce se zaměřuje na obraz maskulinity ve vybraných románech Ernesta Hemingwaye, Normana Mailera a Tima O'Briena. Jejím výchozím bodem je chápání maskulinity coby výsledku každodenní lidské interakce. To, co je vnímáno jako projev mužnosti, je třeba analyzovat v historickém kontextu daného diskurzu maskulinity. Od raných dob nezávislosti byla americká maskulinita vykreslována jako ohrožená a celá řada společenských komentátorů se věnovala otázce posílení pravých mužských vlastností. Ernest Hemingway a Norman Mailer patří k těm významným americkým autorům, jejichž tvorba je nesena myšlenkou, že praví muži musí neustále prokazovat svou mužnost v boji proti nepřátelskému světu, což vyžaduje notnou dávku sebeovládání a disciplíny. Romány Tima O'Briena oproti tomu poukazují na negativní dopady mužské posedlosti ovládáním sebe a druhých a zdůrazňují nutnost komunikace s ženským světem.

Klíčová slova: maskulinita, gender, americká kultura, násilí, válečná literatura

Contents

The Problem with American Writers: Leslie Fiedler's Reading of the American Literary Canon

One of the first critics who analyzed American literature on its own merits was D. H. Lawrence, whose *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) laid grounds for further serious criticism devoted to American writers. Commenting on the nature of American society that American literary works reflected, Lawrence pointed out that American men were too possessed by various inner demons to be truly free. According to Lawrence, Americans cannot learn about what genuine freedom means because "they are escaping to some wild west. The most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom" (12). This line of thought was further developed by Leslie Fiedler whose equally breakthrough study, *Love and Death in American Literature* (1960), made a bold claim that the problem with American writers is their reluctance to deal with mature subject matters. In comparison to their European counterparts, American novels are according to Fiedler "not primitive, perhaps, but innocent, unfallen in a disturbing way, almost juvenile" (xviii). They cannot be otherwise because their authors, even the greatest among them, are "experts on indignity and assault, on loneliness and terror," and their expertise on dark aspects of life skews them away from "treating the passionate encounter of a man and woman, which we expect at the center of the novel" (xix). This particular focus exhibited in major American novels is reflected, among other things, in the shallowness and insignificance of female characters. As Fielder claims, American writers "shy away from permitting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged, mature women, giving us instead monsters of virtue or bitchery, symbols of the rejection or fear of sexuality" (xix). Since horror fills the pages of one American novel after another, the most striking characteristic of the American novelist inevitably turns out to be "his obsession with violence and his embarrassment before love" (xxiii).

Fiedler's observations on American literature represent also a commentary on American masculinity. His assessment of the American literary canon is based on the notion that from the early days of the republic, American men were exposed to different ideas than men in Europe. With the fear of femininity haunting the American imagination, it is no accident that the protagonist in American novels tends to be "a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid "civilization," which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall of sex, marriage, and responsibility" (xx-xxi). According to Fiedler, the squeamishness in sexual matters exhibited by American writers stems from the fact that Puritan legacy continues to shape gender relations: "Perhaps the whole odd shape of American fiction arises simply . . . because there is no real sexuality in American life and therefore there cannot very well be any in American art. What we cannot achieve in our relations with each other it would be vain to ask our writers to portray or even our critics to miss" (xxv). The most outrageous observation in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, at least in the eyes of many contemporary critics, was Fiedler's assertion that American literature is characterized by the "archetypical image . . . in which a white and a colored American male flee from civilization into each other's arms" (x). What carries the utmost importance then is what happens between men of two different races, "pure marriage of males—sexless and holy, a kind of counter-matrimony, in which the white refugee from society and the dark-skinned primitive are joined till death do them apart" (209). As Mark Royden Winchell puts it, Fiedler is talking here about a male bonding in which a white man fleeing from civilization is "symbolically joined to that alien other who has always . . . been a renegade" (50).

Fiedler's reading of major American novels offers many valuable insights, yet it is meant to be, as he himself admits, "a literary rather than a scientific work, a labor of love rather than one of patience" (vii). A considerable limitation of his approach is that it is

largely ahistorical: focusing on the repetition of the same specific images in American novels from Charles Brockden Brown to Saul Bellow, Fiedler's analysis ignores important historical developments that have to be taken into consideration when analyzing individual literary works in greater detail. As a result, his portrayal of masculinity as impervious to change suggests that there is such a category as an essential, unvarying American manhood. This dissertation aims to counter this assumption by taking a different approach: while discussing men's obsession with violence as well as their uneasy relationships with women, it attempts to ground its analysis in various contemporary discourses on masculinity. In other words, while attention is paid to the recurring patterns of representation, these patterns are not considered without looking at how ideals of masculinity are being discussed in a given time period. The underlying methodological premise behind this work is that since essential masculinity is a fantasy rather than a reality, ideas about proper manly conduct is not something men are born with but something they gradually learn. As Steve Craig has it, the idea of gender as socially constructed means that it can "be examined as sets of social expectations, created and maintained in a patriarchal society" (2). However they may feel about it, American men are thus expected, at least in part, that they will "participate in and support patriarchy, and the traditional characteristics of masculinity are made to seem so correct and natural that men find the domination and exploitation of women and other men to be not only expected, but actually demanded" (Craig 3).

As Michael Kimmel points out, even if we subscribe to the tenets of structuralism, we tend to "endow manhood with a transcendental, almost mythic set of properties" (4), which could be misleading. To study masculinity, one thus needs to study not only how men act but also how manhood is being defined in the social arena. Above all, one should not see manhood as secret knowledge passed from generation to generation. According to Kimmel, the reality is more prosaic:

Putting manhood in historical context presents it differently, as a constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with our world. Manhood is neither static nor timeless. Manhood is not the manifestation of an inner essence; it's socially constructed. Manhood does not bubble up to consciousness from our biological constitution; it is created in our culture. (5)

In line with Kimmel's definition of masculinity, this dissertation attempts to uphold the notion that American masculinity has been a relatively fluid category resulting from countless daily transactions, and that recurring calls to bolster the condition of American manhood suggest that it has been perceived as disturbingly unstable. More specifically, this dissertation argues that the crisis of masculine identity in novels of Hemingway, Mailer, and O'Brien should be seen as part of a larger debate aimed at defining how a man should cope with the tasks of facing an enemy in the time of war and finding a meaningful existence in the time of peace. Analyzing the interaction between men in these works of fiction, this dissertation also emphasizes the role of female characters and shows how manhood is invariably defined as not only antithetic to femininity but also seen in constant danger of being engulfed by it.

It needs to be emphasized here that while this dissertation uses the term American masculinity as a key reference point, it does not aim to suggest that there is one single version of American manhood at present or that there was one at any given time period in the past. In every society, there are several competing masculinities to which men can adhere. The crucial fact is that Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and Tim O'Brien all grew up in white middle-class communities; quite naturally, their works examine a set of values associated predominantly with white middle-class masculinity. It also needs to be stressed that while an understanding of what it means to be a man differs based on "one's class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, region of the country . . . all men must also contend with a singular vision of

masculinity" (Kimmel 5). In other words, white middle-class masculinity has functioned as "a single vision of masculinity, a particular definition that is held up as the model" (Kimmel 5) against which all American men have willy-nilly measured themselves. The interesting aspect of white middle-class masculinity is that it escaped critical scrutiny until quite recently, as its manifestations were commonly seen as cultural norms and were thus deemed to be natural. At the same time, while clearly profiting from their role as guardians of patriarchy, white middle-class men are far from doing victory laps. As Roger Horrocks observes, there is an in-built tension in the structure of masculinity which "has to be maintained, or like male erection itself, it threatens to topple" (18). The sturdiness many men tend to exhibit can thus be seen as "a pointer, not to their stolidity, but their fragility: to be a *mucho hombre* is not a birthright, but an accomplishment won and maintained with pain and difficulty" (Horrocks 18). An effort to maintain masculinity has to be intensified in the times of crisis when the existing status quo is endangered.

Since war tends to magnify the issue of manhood and its seemingly timeless attributes, the decision was made to analyze the ways Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and Tim O'Brien portrayed men's performance in their novels dealing, respectively, with three major conflicts, WWI, WWII, and the Vietnam War. These wars played a major role in both reinvigorating and restructuring twentieth-century American society and culture, redefining in effect the basic assumptions of what it means to be a man. Still, while many critics have offered various readings of the fictional output produced by Hemingway, Mailer, and O'Brien, they have usually given scant attention to the complex ways these novels tapped into the ongoing debate on American masculinity, haunted by the omnipresent specter of feminization. What tends to be ignored here is the extent to which human relations are hostage to the production of gender through "a complex perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine or feminine 'natures'" (West

and Zimmerman 126). The ways in which Hemingway, Mailer and O'Brien portrayed war and its aftermath have thus been defined in terms of various critical traditions which do not take into account how much manliness has been open to interpretation and how often it has been deemed in dire need of rejuvenation since the War of Independence. As a result, the images of masculine behavior and thought these readings offer are based on more or less essentialist definitions of American manhood. Ideas about manhood, however, change as society changes. If we view American literature as testifying to what Jay Parini calls, "continuous revolution and the American search for fulfillment through self-transformation" (4-5), there is no reason to think that American masculinity is not subject to this process.

Combat veterans often added harsh tones to the ongoing debate on American masculinity, offering poignant commentaries that do not focus on war only. As Alex Vernon observes, examining their works "means that in addition to fictional and nonfictional accounts of their war, we also study their texts not directly about war" (x). Whether dealing directly with war or not, these voices should not go unheard in view of the claim made by many social commentators who insist that American manhood has been going through a major crisis in recent decades. According to Andrew Kimbrell, the economic, social, and psychological condition in which many men currently find themselves in is getting increasingly grim, testifying to new and often unacknowledged forms of victimization. What makes the whole situation critical is that traditional concepts of masculinity have ceased to be functional and "in their place a little-known defective mythology about masculinity has been indelibly encoded into our social structures and psyches" (xiv). This mythology, Kimbrell points out, also underlies current regular attacks against masculinity commonly portrayed as an obstacle to social change. As a result, American men feel "bewildered, out of control, numbed, and under attack" (xiii). This dissertation aims to historicize selected works by Hemingway and Mailer by showing that Hemingway's notion of good form as well as Mailer's portrayals of

robust manliness can also be seen as resulting from a specific mythology about masculinity. Another goal of this dissertation is to demonstrate that while both Hemingway and Mailer can be ranked among those writers who stress the need to bolster American masculinity at the expense of maintaining meaningful contact with the feminine, Tim O'Brien offers a radically different vision. An obsession with control in O'Brien's novels is not a viable solution but a problem indicating an inability on the part of American men to think in a creative, non-reductive way.

I.1 Not Manly Enough Until Proven Otherwise: American Manhood and the Continuous Threat of Effeminacy

Seen in retrospect, the feminism of the 1960s and early 1970s brought a much needed new impetus to literary studies in the time when new criticism was still a dominant mode of literary criticism in Britain and America. It was then that masculinity often came under attack from radical feminists as a major impediment to a just social arrangement throughout the history of the humankind. All of a sudden, masculinity was viewed as not only problematic but also as always embroiled in some form of oppression. In this respect, we can talk about a unique moment in the history of Western civilization, heralding a conspicuous paradigm change: while for centuries manhood had been seen as a bearer of positive values and a driving force behind virtually every achievement of human thought, now feminists were implicating it in all societal ills. As Alvin Kernan puts it, the upshot of this view was that for radical feminists classical literary works had "in the past only been the instrument of masculine attempts to dominate the female" (145). Much like the various brands of Marxism of the time, contemporary feminism saw literature mainly as a power game officiated by those who profited from the existing order and were thus determined to perpetuate it. For the most part, the role of a feminist critic had been thus defined negatively, as it aimed at debunking "various coercive powers seeking to repress freedom and fairness in the interests of power" (Kernan 201). Logically, these debunking efforts often gave rise to the image of the world where masculinity figures as a unified force, a sort of deadening ideological monolith that had to be exposed, condemned, and ultimately brought down. Whether in position of power or not, all men are thereby seen as universally bent on making sure that women are always delegated to subservient roles in men-dominated society.

Patriarchy, however, is not just about political or material oppression. A system sustaining male privileges, patriarchy can also be seen as implementing, in both good and bad faith, the process of self-definition necessary for the development of men's ingenuity and creativity. What is more, the defining masculinity in opposition to femininity may be a necessity for men. As Jean Baudrillard observes, men are not particularly well equipped when dealing with the feminine power of seduction which has the potential to foil the workings of the masculine power to produce. Unable to constrain the feminine, men have to constantly manifest their power because the masculine "has always been a residual, secondary and fragile formation, one that must be defended by retrenchments, institutions, and artifices" (16). Seduction, however, belongs to an order of ritual, operating beyond the order of production, and cannot be anything but subversive precisely because it is without "power of its own, only that of annulling the power of production" (15). The portent of the subversive power of the feminine naturally adds to the tension within masculinity itself. According to Judith Butler, since cultural survival underlies gender performance, men and women daily experience "the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs" (139). Gender, as Butler points out, does not reflect any essence but is a "performance with clearly punitive consequences" (139). In case of masculinity, such punitive measures not only define proper manly conduct but are often meant to curb real or imaginary crises. As Baudrillard suggests, masculinity is a phallic fortress that "offers all the signs of a fortress, that is to say, of weakness" (16). Masculinity has to be fortified because an exposure of its handicaps can be costly: "A moment's distraction, and one falls back into the feminine" (16).

What some feminists do not want to see is that masculinity can lead to both empowerment and emasculation. They cannot thus fathom how much the threat of the latter informs the artistic vision in the works of American writers. While clearly testifying to the

all-present influence of "dead white men," American literature as we know it has at the same time been a record of continuous effort to tune up, protect, and rejuvenate American manhood. In short, manhood, or rather men's insecurity about themselves and their subsequent need to prove their masculine credentials, has always been the focal point of American writers. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), for instance, can be seen as a meditation on the state of American manhood, offering not only a broad critique of the economic situation in the country and its imprint on the American psyche but also famously proclaiming that the "mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (4). It is the "desperate haste to succeed" (210), Thoreau asserts, that undermines the vitality of American manhood. The market forces, coupled with the detrimental influence of public opinion, rob the American man of his integrity, entangling him in a complex web of relations with the effect that he "cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men … and has no time to be any thing but a machine" (3). Thoreau therefore goes on to prove that other modes of subsistence were equally viable for American men, putting in sharp contrast the ideology of material success and "a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" (9). In his thinking, a life of ease and comfort emasculates and dulls a man's ability to perceive the world and understand its laws, whereas a careful study of nature invigorates his mind and spirit. His broadminded self-control is based on a discipline of the mind, aimed at finding a man's true relation to the world and exploring his true vocations.

As Thoreau's radical vision implies, there is no such thing as a single genuine, unadulterated mode of masculinity all men could draw on to satisfy their needs. While one type of behavior is commonly seen as more manly than other types, masculinity is made up of competing versions of what it means to be a man. According to R. W. Connell, there is always a rift within masculinity, with the exalted model of manhood occupying "the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (76).

It is thus no wonder that in its most overt manifestations, manhood has always been concerned with power and the necessity to defend or rebel against the authority embedded in it. It follows that men's success in the social sphere often hinges on their willingness to obey or at least pay lip service to the prescribed masculine norms, which may be a source of discontent and tension, even among those who benefit from the prevalence of these norms. Though many social commentators today view the 1950s as a period of clearly defined and confident masculinity, it was a period of uncertainty for many men who were discovering they were unable to meet the current standards of manly conduct. For instance, the sociologist C. Wright Mills argues, the fifties man was often "the hero as victim, the small creature who is acted upon but who does not act, who works along unnoticed in somebody's office or store, never talking loud, never talking back, never taking stand" (xii). This is a far cry from the self-reliant man of the frontier myth or the powerful despot of radical feminist treatises; like Thoreau's neighbors, he is likely to live a life of quiet desperation. It is thus not surprising that when in the same years Betty Friedan publishes *The Feminine Mystique* (1958), Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. observes that American men "are more and more conscious of maleness not as a fact but as a problem" (237).

Warning other men against blind acceptance of the prevalent norms, Thoreau addresses the lack of spiritual dimension in the lives of the prosperous citizens of Concord. In so doing, he provides a critique of American masculinity at large, as proper masculine behavior came to be defined by the very same brand of men Thoreau associated with. The reason why his analysis of the condition of American manhood seems to hold true a hundred years later after the publication of *Walden* is that the beginnings of the republic were concurrent with the rise of the Northern middle class which made use of its "vast economic and cultural power to imprint their values on the nation" (Rotundo 2). The privileges that came with that power nevertheless often had a hollow ring to them, which was not lost on

Alexis de Tocqueville who was particularly astonished by American men's inability to find contentment in life. As Tocqueville repeatedly remarks in *Democracy in America* (1835), Americans are constantly in a hurry, always in the pursuit of new pleasures and experiences, yet unable to enjoy what they have already accomplished. They may possess considerable wealth, yet a sense of material gratification eludes them, which fills them with "anxieties, fears, and regrets and keeps [their] soul in a state of constant trepidation that impels [them] again and again to change plans and places" (626). The awareness of having virtually endless opportunities ultimately becomes a bane for American men because there is always a possibility for them to be more successful. The emphasis on material goods does not make men happier, not in the least because it is "coupled with a social state where neither law nor custom still keeps anyone in his place" (626). All that only adds to the restlessness of the American man who "carefully builds a home to live in when he is old and sells it before the roof is laid" (625).

The restlessness Tocqueville talks about stems, among other things, from the fact that U.S. history starts with an act of rebellion, with the Sons of Liberty rebelling against Father England. Seen from this perspective, the fight for independence in the English colonies was motivated by the desire to establish masculine authority in the hands of American settlers whose manhood was compromised when they had to show obedience to the representatives of the king. The break with the crown thus necessitated not only the creation of new institutions but also a new definition of manhood that would break away with the English norms. This concern finds its expression in the language of the most important documents of the time: as Kimmel has it, *The Declaration of Independence* itself can be viewed as a "declaration of manly manhood, a manhood that was counterposed to the British version against which American men revolting" (18-19). The end of the British rule meant that American men were on par with their sophisticated English counterparts and were now fully capable of setting the

trends in the New World; having thereby reached maturity, they did not have to feel "enslaved by the English father, infantilized, and thus emasculated" (18). One of the most enthusiastic commentators of the new developments was Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, who pointed out that while in Europe there were hardly any social strata except "lords and tenants; this fair country alone is settled by freeholders, the possessors of the soil they cultivate, members of the government they obey, and the framers of their own laws, by means of their representatives" (51). For Crèvecoeur it was a process that had been in the making for some time, resulting in the rise of "a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and forms new opinions" (40).

Not everyone, however, shared Crèvecoeur's high optimism, as the new situation brought new problems. Given the circumstances of its inception, the republican ideal of manhood, which in time came to be known as the Self-Made Man, was far from self-evident or firmly established. Though defeated on the American soil, England remained a military threat and a major cultural force that was not likely to simply fade away. With the threat of the English influence looming over the young republic, American men felt the necessity to observe manly simplicity out of fear that, as Kimmel puts it, the deposed "effeminate aristocracy would return to haunt them" (21). The overthrow of the British rule also brought some disturbing questions regarding obedience to authority. As E. Anthony Rotundo observes, a man was now defined as "one who resisted arbitrary authority, who resisted submission" (16). Though not officially sanctioned, individualism thus began to permeate public life in the former colonies. This development was aided by the growing capitalistic market, which favored individualistic interests. With fewer restraints to a man's initiative, the fiber of American society was changing quickly, because community and tradition were no longer able to "contain personal ambition, and the claims of the individual self appeared in all realms of a man's life with growing legitimacy" (Rotundo 17). These developments in the

social sphere deeply affected the American psyche. Based on economic autonomy, new individual freedom came at a prize; Americans were now able to carve out their own destinies, but competitiveness eroded social cohesion. As more and more American men were expected to pull themselves by their bootstraps, they began, as Kimmel points out, to feel anxious and lonely. Since success now "must be earned, manhood must be proved – and proved constantly" (Kimmel 23), a sense of insecurity infuses American manhood.

Published in 1835, Tocqueville's observations soon proved even more poignant. With the expanding marketplace, the restlessness of American men was increasing: if there were countless opportunities to make it, there was also a possibility to fail. Social standing depended on a man's inexhaustible initiative or, as Kimmel points out, his ability to demonstrate manly resourcefulness in everyday interaction: "Everything became a test – his relationship to work, to women, to nature, and to other men" (44). One way of dealing with such pressure was self-control; in the situation when everything seemed in a constant flux, one could at least try to put one's body and emotions under control. From the early days of the republic, a whole slew of advice books thus aimed to help men resist sexual urges, most notably the sin of masturbation, and abstain from alcohol and gambling. A man's energy was simply meant to be put to productive use if he wanted to maintain his competitive streak. Benjamin Franklin's autobiography is a case in point here, as his own road to success is based on an elaborate strategy, which includes a creation of proper self-image. Industry and frugality themselves, Franklin emphasizes, were simply not enough to gain a competitive advantage: "In order to secure my Credit and Character as a Tradesman, I took care not only to be *in Reality* Industrious & frugal, but to avoid all *Appearances* of the contrary" (65). In the second half of the nineteenth century, when opportunities began to shrink, men attempted to exercise self-control by cultivating their bodies. Gyms are being built all over the country and J. H. Kellogg advertises Corn Flakes as an anaphrodisiac meant to "temper and eventually

reduce sexual ardor in American men" (Kimmel 129). The American obsession with sports is born and American men can now prove their manliness on the playfield where self-control could be repeatedly exercised and exhibited.

Self-control was a necessity also because a man's household itself was a far cry from a safe place where he could hone his masculinity. While early advice manuals maintained that American manhood is in need of further refinement, they often also stressed that an active effort had to be made to protect it from various detrimental influences undermining the masculine spirit. High on the list of these influences were women, often seen as men's prime antagonists. As Rotundo observes, a man's mother was the first person to "frustrate him, control him, and reject him" (92). A married man was not only to excel at the workplace, but also to be wary of the effeminate world awaiting him at home, because a re-entry into the domestic sphere "meant responsibility, confinement, high virtue, and good manners" (Rotundo 104). Not exactly compatible with the ethos of the American Revolution, these values hinted at the possibility that women may have the upper hand in a household, a much dreaded situation portrayed vividly in Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," where Dame Van Winkle's torrents of "household eloquence" force her henpecked husband "to draw off his forces, and take to the outside of the house" (29). Since woman was seen as a moral beacon in the rapacious capitalistic society, the influence of middle-class white women was far from confined to the domestic world. Ann Douglas, for instance, points out that while the most celebrated Victorian authors in England were mostly men, in the United States the best-selling writers came up to be women; given the immense boom of the book market in the nineteenth century, the influence these women exerted was thus "discreetly omnipresent and omnipotent" (9). Marginalized by their female counterparts, major American male writers therefore resorted, as Douglas argues, to writing "principally on values and scenes that operated as alternatives to cultural norms" (5).

The decision to eschew domestic subjects on the part of writers such as Melville, Hawthorne or Twain was also indicative of the option available to American men who felt their manhood was put into question: if the pressures of the marketplace reached a critical point or if their spouses' efforts to "sivilize" them became unbearable, such men could always "light out for the territories." Occasionally, the call of the Wild West was answered by whole multitudes of men on the run from women and society in general, as was the case of the Gold Rush of 1848 when by April of the following year "50,000 good, able-bodied men, and a few women, all desirous of bettering their condition and acquiring wealth in a much easier and quicker method than by the old-fashioned, slow and plodding methods of their ancestors, were upon their way to the other side of the continent" (Haskins 12). This decision to abandon the often elusive comforts of civilization was by no means popular only with the less successful or the riffraff of the American society. Manly pursuits, such as hunting, fishing or camping in the woods, became fashionable activities among the well-to-do men in New England and the Midwest. They, too, went westward in order to escape the constricting societal demands, though in their case it had to do with what they saw as emasculating influences of their affluent milieu. Many of those men later on published their accounts of life in wilderness, which made it clear that nature fortified their manhood and rejuvenated their sense of self. As Charles Wilkins Webber put it, men who had their share of experiences in the natural world "do not look back to society except with disgust, and look into the face of God as revealed in his natural world, and into the instincts of their own souls and hearts for what is just and true" (261). The myth of the West as a place of spiritual regeneration thus figured large in the imagination of American men long before the formidable examples of Theodore Roosevelt or Ernest Hemingway.

Webber's statement was only one of many similar assertions, showing that rugged manliness had become part and parcel of the most powerful American myths shaping the

ongoing national discourse. A crisis in masculinity was thus considered to be nothing less than a national crisis. That meant that effeminacy and, by implication, women's role in society could be easily labeled as detrimental, especially in times of national emergency. In other words, female values, at least for those who took it to mind to define consummate masculinity, were suspicious, representing an obstacle to men's endeavor to assert their putative natural manliness. Women's influence in general and femininity in men in particular had to be controlled and, if necessary, stemmed. An accusatory finger pointing at femininity and its effects had thus become a sort of natural reflex, intensifying the current national discourse and ultimately bolstering the authority of the already privileged position of white men. While the threat represented by the English Crown used to be associated with the degrading effeminacy of the British aristocracy, the continuous rising tide of immigrants in the following decades was often similarly discussed in terms of the effeminate manhood of different ethnic and racial groups, inevitably and irrevocably polluting "clean, virile, genius-bearing blood, streaming down the ages through the unerring action of heredity" (Stoddard 305). The relentless obsession with manliness was for example reflected in the election of Theodore Roosevelt whose ideas spoke, as Gail Parker has it, to those who "feared their own impotence in an increasingly complex world" (34). Roosevelt's diatribes against any softness exhibited by American men set up a standard for other presidents, making it a necessity for FDR to hide his affliction in the time when U.S. soldiers were asked to prove their combat toughness in battles in the Pacific and in Europe.

I.2 One Boy's Lonely Fight: Uncertain Manfulness in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*

Naturally, the imagination of American men was also fed by accounts from American battlegrounds, and for some popular figures of Roosevelt's ilk, war became "the ultimate proving ground" (Yost 248) for the athletic masculinity they were propagating. The most accomplished nineteenth-century literary representations of war were initially provided by Ambrose Bierce, but it was Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) that defined the field of American war writing. In a highly economic style, Crane meticulously describes what goes through the mind of a young and naive conscript, Henry Fleming, whose soldierly qualities are put to test as he is confronted with the reality of the Civil War. The novel's storyline offered an efficient way of ordering fictional material, which has become a viable pattern of storytelling, if not a norm, in sundry popular works from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* to Oliver Stone's *Platoon.* The novel begins with Fleming's unit awaiting a battle with the Confederate troops after endless months of marching and camping. By this time Fleming is disillusioned with military routine and begins to lose his youthful idealism that prompted him to enlist. The upcoming battle thus seems like a much desired antidote to boredom, and a chance to prove his prowess in what he sees as mingling "in one of those great affairs of the earth" (7). When the battle takes place, however, Fleming's conduct is anything but courageous: although he initially stands his ground, the second attack of the rebel forces sends him running for his life. Without his cap or rifle, he reaches a commanding post where he hears that the enemy has been held. Not knowing how to come to terms with the fact of his desertion, Fleming flees into a forest. Soon after, he joins a retreating column and suffers a wound when a traumatized soldier hits him on the head with a rifle. At this

point, he is far from being the epitome of masculinity exemplified by Roosevelt's Rough Riders.

Combat experience for Fleming is an emotional rollercoaster, as a feeling of dejection replaces any adrenaline-induced thrill. What is more, fighting turns out to be an excruciating ordeal, comprising one profound disappointment after another. As Kimmel suggests, Fleming's experience "is less about virtue than about the fear of shame, humiliation, and disgrace" (144). From day one, Fleming tries to learn the rules of proper conduct and to win the respect of other soldiers by showing his abilities and proving his courage; as David Yost points out, what Fleming's comrades think of him comes to be "the *only* validation of his masculinity" (254). When Fleming makes it back to his regiment, the assumption is that he was wounded in the battle. Accordingly, the men in his unit treat him with respect, which has the effect that Fleming "did not shrink from an encounter with the eyes of judges, and allowed no thoughts of his own to keep him from an attitude of manfulness" (73). Another battle ensues the next morning, and this time Fleming is able to act with much competence. Taken at face value, *The Red Badge of Courage* thus depicts a learning process, through which its protagonist comes to some understanding of what war is and thereby acquires an ability to act as his soldierly function requires. In this sense, Crane's novel can be seen as a study of an individual's faculty to deal with utmost stress, portraying the protagonist's personal growth in the span of several months. In the novel's last scene, Fleming gives some thought to what he has gone through and ends up feeling "a quiet manhood, nonassertive but of sturdy and strong blood" (109). A lofty sense of achievement swells in his chest: "He had been to touch the great death, and found that, after all, it was but the great death. He was a man" (109). As some critics conclude, he is no teenage dreamer anymore but a soldier who has earned the right to proudly march alongside his seasoned comrades.

Crane's treatment of his material, however, is far more subtle than that. In fact, his novel deconstructs the whole notion of athletic, dauntless masculinity of the time. Though Fleming is at times capable of courageous acts, his self-aggrandizing fantasies and low self-awareness suggest that there is no trajectory in his development and that he "leaves the novel as immature as he enters it" (Yost 252). For one thing, Fleming is able to look into the eyes of his fellow soldiers precisely because he finds out that "nothing could be now discovered" (73) about his previous moments of weakness; had they known about his desertion, his manhood would have been compromised and irrevocably tarnished. Here Crane clearly shows how fickle the foundations of Fleming's sense of manliness are. He believes that his manhood has been saved and hopes that he will be given a new chance to prove his mettle, yet it is clear by now that the standing Fleming enjoys in his unit has to do with propitious appearances and not with his fortitude: "He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man" (73). As Yost succinctly puts it, Fleming defines his masculine credentials "not by what he does, but what he is seen to do" (254). His ideal of what manhood means is self-oriented and self-interested, and its narrowness is underscored by the fact that he never shows any interest in the cause he is fighting for alongside his comrades. What is more, his self-centeredness does not allow him to be sympathetic to the suffering of other soldiers. What matters is performance alone, with no concern for anything else. In Fleming's mind, that breeds uncertainty concerning his masculinity which can break under a new test: "He concluded that the only way was to prove himself was to go into the blaze, and then figuratively watch his legs to discover their merits and faults" (14). Like a self-made man in the business world, every day he stands a chance of losing it all.

The problem Fleming is facing over and over again is that the ideal of masculinity he tries to adhere to is difficult, if not impossible to attain. As Leo Braudy has it, war machinery "enforces an extreme version of male behavior as the ideal model for all such behavior" (xvi).

With its emphasis on stoic endurance in the face of severe suffering, this type of masculinity is one-sided and intolerant because "war focuses on certain ways of being a man and ignores or arouses suspicion about others" (Braudy xvi). Any hint of effeminacy in this context is thus particularly suspicious. What makes things even more difficult for a man trying to meet the strict standards of wartime masculinity is that there is no fallback position in case of alleged or real failure. As Carol Siegel observes, whether one is viewed as acting manly when receiving punishment often hinges on interpretation; therefore, from some vantage point, someone's conduct "can always be proven to be femininity in disguise; masculinity cannot be located anywhere; and taking it like a man means responding to punishment by hitting back and by not hitting back" (139). Since Fleming's desire is to take it like a man, he does not give him much thought to what his mother tells him when he informs her about his decision to enlist in the army. Though he initially often thinks of a girl who "he thought grew demure and sad at sight of his blue and brass" (9), she figures in his imagination only as a potential witness of his future glory. Obsessed with manliness and thus constantly assessing and re-assessing his performance, Fleming comes to judge the world through the military perspective; in this sense, his masculinity is defined, as Yost suggests, "in opposition to women" (254). Therefore, his personal quest is not over; though Fleming may eventually feel that he has shown sufficient self-control and has been purified of his unmanly emotions through his valor, this victory can only be temporary.

I.3 When a Woman Wears Britches: Masculine Trouble in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*

Although *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) does not portray men in combat, the masculinity Hemingway is describing in this novel is virtually the same one that Fleming is preoccupied with. Striving to find their mooring in the postwar world, Hemingway's male characters show similar obsessive concern about their performances; as Vernon suggests, *The Sun Also Rises* is one of the products of "a culture desperately struggling to make sense of its new and still unfolding experiences of both war and gender" (23). The novel's protagonist, Jake Barnes, is a WWI veteran, whose beliefs are shaped by his war experience which has rendered him impotent. As in Fleming's case, Jake's masculinity is based on self-control and resilience, and subjected to a series of tests. A self-proclaimed arbiter of proper manly behavior, Jake also defines masculinity as antithetic to femininity, whose secret workings threaten to undermine a man's competence. Expressed in harsh, unmitigating terms, this opposition serves in effect as a unifying element of the novel's rather episodic narration. While *The Red Badge of Courage* puts into question the effectiveness of athletic masculinity whose images permeate the national rhetoric of post-Civil War expansion, Hemingway addresses the consequences of another putative profound crisis of masculinity, afflicting both Europe and America in the aftermath of the Great War. As Vernon points out, Hemingway's novel reacted to an emasculating impact of WWI, occurring in the context of other attacks on "the nineteenth-century conception of the autonomous, self-constructed male self, such as the challenges to white masculinity posed by industrialization (and urbanization and immigration), first wave feminism and the general loosening of gender strictures" (22-23). In this context, it is not surprising that Hemingway's male characters find comfort and reassurance only in each other's presence.

According to Robert Penn Warren, the typical Hemingway character faces, at one point or another, a precarious situation, mostly defeat or death, and his handling of the plight points to "some notion of a code, some notion of honor, which makes a man a man, and which distinguishes him from people who merely follow their random impulses and who are, by consequence, 'messy'" (2). What Warren's definition ignores, however, is the fact that this distinction between a disciplined man and a messy one is being created in the social arena among other man. As James A. Puckett argues, contrary to Warren's assertion, self-reliance is not the way the Hemingway character proves his manhood; whether one is a man or not "is under continuous negotiation and necessarily relies upon the judgment of others, holding no significance outside of a social context" (126). As in Fleming's case, Jake's masculinity requires validation from other men; in fact, the authority he enjoys, whether as a bullfighting aficionado or keen observer of Paris social life, hinges on the public persona he creates for himself as well as on those he decides to admit into a circle of his friends and acquaintances. One of them is Robert Cohn whose masculinity is antithetic to, and racially different from, that of Jake's. That Jake's narration opens with Cohn's life story suggests that the latter plays an important role in what Jake tries to say about himself. It is similarly telling that the reader learns numerous details about Cohn's life and only a few about Jake's. From page one, Cohn is described as nice but naive, as someone who does not know the rules of proper behavior and is thus destined to be less of a man. Cohn is Jake's tennis partner but he is not part of the circle of his friends whose judgment is important to Jake. His usefulness for Jake thus lies in his being an antipole to what the latter represents.

Cohn's Jewishness sets him apart from Jake's circle, but his real shortcoming, in Jake's eyes, is his inability to assume control in his life, especially in relation to women. Despite his physical charm and strength, he is being portrayed as unmanly and incapable of a steady and balanced relationship. The very first sentences of Jake's narration deal with

Cohn's success as a middleweight champion at Princeton. Earning such a prestigious title should have, judging by Jake's standards, taught him self-discipline and, ideally, helped him improve his standing in the genteel society, also because a typical boxing injury, as Jake mischievously quips, suffered in one of Cohn's matches, "certainly improved his nose" (3). The early success, however, is not followed by any notable achievements. As far as his masculinity is concerned, Cohn simply does not play his cards well; as Jake does not fail to mention, he takes to wearing glasses and, on a trip to Pamplona, has "a shave and a haircut and a shampoo, and something put on his hear afterward to make it stay down" (97). Most importantly, Cohn lets women have the upper hand in his relationships. A distinct pattern was set when he "was married by the first girl who was nice to him" (4). When his wife leaves him with a painter of miniatures, Cohn decides to edit and financially support a literary magazine. It is then that he is "taken in hand by a lady who hoped to rise with the magazine" (5). As Jake repeatedly makes it clear, Cohn does not have a clue what it means to be a man and cannot thus act as one; the boyish, undergraduate quality he exhibits results from the fact that his personality "was moulded by the two women who had trained him" (45). His masculinity is therefore marked by maudlin sentimentality rather than unflappable resilience that could win the approval of other men.

It is no wonder that given his alleged inability to handle women, Cohn cannot cope with the emotional turmoil he experiences when he meets Lady Brett Ashley. Though he can be seen, to use Puckett's words, as "a superior male and mate" (136) in terms of protection, he becomes a source of abashment to Brett when their short-lived affair comes to an end. For Cohn, a sexual liaison is still a solemn issue brimming with consequences, which is why he is baffled by Brett's actions when she turns her attention to other men. Cohn does not understand that gender roles are undergoing a change; he sees himself as a knight in a shining armor, but Brett is not a damsel in distress and does not need the protection he is offering. His

traditional upbringing makes him ill-prepared for what Wendy Martin defines as a transformation of the female role "from passive, private creature to avid individualist in pursuit of new experiences" (67). When Cohn keeps following Brett in Pamplona, though she is now with Mike Campbell whom she intends to marry, he strikes a pitiful and pathetic figure. In the eyes of Jake and his friends, he becomes emasculated, a steer blindly following Brett around (141). What is particularly disturbing is that Cohn seems to be enjoying his role of ever-faithful jilted suitor, finding validation for his actions in the unrequited love for a woman. While at the beginning of the novel, he is described as a naive and harmless expatriate dreaming about a trip to South America, he becomes a nuisance to the smart social set vacationing in Spain, and Jake repeatedly drives this point home to underscore his restraint in opposition to Cohn's lack of control. As Siegel observes, a modern male character who "displays his love wounds like metals and kneels to receive more no longer stimulates sympathy and reader identification" (140). Such a person, Siegel goes on to say, is instead viewed as "repellently exhibitionistic and masochistic" (140).

Things get ugly when Cohn learns about Brett getting involved with the young bullfighter Pedro Romero. The notion that Brett jettisons Mike in order to hook up with Romero bursts his romantic bubble, and Cohn becomes violent. Seeing the futility of the effort to serve his lady, Cohn decides to take revenge on those he believes have wronged him by corrupting Brett. In so doing, he gets further emasculated by applying brute, senseless force that stands in stark contrast to the ritualized grace exhibited by bullfighters. It follows there can be no catharsis for Cohn after he confronts Jake for having arranged Brett's affair with Romero and knocks him out. This is at this moment that his masculinity clearly unravels: when Jake visits him shortly afterwards, he finds Cohn with his "face down on the bed, crying" (193). Cohn's irksome conduct comes across as particularly immature when

compared with the dignity displayed by Romero who knows how to handle bulls and properly show his feelings for Brett:

> Pedro Romero had the greatness. He loved bull-fighting, and I think he loved the bulls, and I think he loved Brett. Everything of which he could control the locality he did in front of her all the afternoon. Never once did he look up. He made it stronger that way, and did it for himself, too, as well as for her. Because he did not look up to ask if it pleased he did it all for himself inside, and it strengthened him, and yet he did it for her, too. But he did not do it for her at any loss to himself. (216)

When Cohn methodically beats up Romero in Brett's presence, there is no coming back for him to his previous status. This action becomes the final proof of Cohn's lack of self-control, making him a pariah among other men. Branded as unmanly, he can do nothing but leave Pamplona.

Cohn's flimsy masculinity notwithstanding, his undoing is precipitated by Brett's jouissance manifested in her unconventional behavior. Accompanying Jake and his friends everywhere and choosing their sexual partners at will, Brett defies the centuries-old distinctions between the domestic sphere associated with passivity and submission, and the public sphere defined by male agency and dominance. Her vivaciousness and recklessness are difficult to contain, especially for someone like Cohn who seems dwarfed by her strong presence. Of the two of them, Brett is the one who is thrilled and delighted by danger. She is drawn to the manly world of bullfighting, showing more understanding than many men who were fooled by skilled bullfighters who played it safe. She recognizes that proximity to danger is the essence of bullfighting: "Brett saw how something that was beautiful done close to the bull was ridiculous if it were done a little way off" (168). While Cohn at times has to look away, especially when horses are involved, she enjoys and appreciates the whole spectacle with full attention to "the professional detail" (211). The ease with which Brett

moves in the world of men does not diminish only Cohn's stature. By initiating events, she has unapologetically "stepped down from the pedestal and now roams the world" (Martin 68), and her freedom is dangerous because it disrupts the process of validation among men who begin to act in a disordered fashion. It can also be argued that Cohn's conspicuous failure to contain femininity overshadows the fact that the masculinity of his companions is far from obvious and invulnerable, and that it is oftentimes Jake's credibility that is being eroded when Brett is around. In this sense, she represents the chaotic, ill-disciplined feminine element, threatening to upset the fragile equilibrium of the masculine world.

The only time masculinity can safely lower its guard is when Jake and his friend Bill go on a fishing trip in Burguete. As Connell claims, relations among men are "constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on" (37). In the bucolic setting of the Basque country, however, neither Jake nor Bill has to prove his masculinity because their relationship is based on mutual respect and is thus free of dominance or subordination. In this secluded all-male world, they do not have to worry about being exposed as insufficiently masculine. Although they compare the number of fish caught by each of them, it is done in good fun and without an effort to establish a hierarchy between them. In other settings, however, Jake functions as a natural authority for his friends. Among them, he is the one who knows about things that matter and is thus competent enough to comment about proper masculine pursuits. When Cohn pesters him about a trip to South America in search of adventure, Jake responds that only bullfighters are able to fully experience their lives. To use Warren's words, Jake maintains an ideal of himself, "some definition of how a man should behave" (2). His interest in bullfighters is symptomatic, as his authority is likewise hard-won, deriving from thorough study and self-imposed discipline. What sets Jake apart from his companions is then not only his arcane knowledge but also his diligence and self-control. Jake's expertise comes to the forefront in Pamplona when he is

greeted by Montoya whose hotel puts up distinguished bullfighters. With Montoya, there can be no question about Jake's special status: "He always smiled as though bull-fighting were a very special secret between us; a rather shocking but really deep secret that we knew about" (131). Having shown his aficion, he needs "no password, no set questions that could bring it out" (132) to be seen as a true expert and a men's man.

Jake's expertise, however, is often ill-suited outside the world of manly pursuits. Once Brett enters the scene, it becomes clear that his code of conduct is aimed, among other things, to cover his own unmanliness, which goes beyond the sheer fact of his impotence. In public, Jake comes across as an embodiment of self-control, yet things are much different when he is alone, free from the scrutiny of other men. The first moment insinuating that his apparent self-control is simply impossible to maintain all the time comes about when he looks at himself naked in the mirror and lets his thoughts wander: "I was thinking about Brett and my mind stopped jumping around and started to go in sort of smooth waves. Then all of a sudden I started to cry" (31). While Jake keeps himself busy during the day, cultivating his reputation of experienced and disciplined man, nighttime clearly tests his resolve. As he admits in passing, he tends to sleep with his lights on to fend off the phantoms of his imagination: "There is no reason why because it is dark you should look at things differently from when it is light. The hell there isn't!" (148). Another similar incident occurs when Count Mippipopolous and Brett stop by his Paris apartment; left alone for a moment, Jake lies face down on the bed (55), foreshadowing Cohn's behavior in Pamplona on the night he pummels Jake down. That Jake can lower himself to Cohn's level despite all his protestations to the contrary can be descried from his role in procuring Romero as a lover for Brett. In so doing, he not only subordinates himself to a woman's whim but also compromises his beliefs; knowing what Brett is like, Jake is well aware that she is bad news for Romero's career. The futility of his role in the whole affair is underscored by the fact that the bull's ear with which

Romero solemnly presents Brett ends up "shoved far back in the drawer of the bed-table" (199) in her hotel room.

It is telling that when the fiesta ends, Jake does not return to Paris with Bill but goes to San Sebastian instead. There, he spends his time on the beach, trying to forget his less than exemplary behavior leading to Cohn's pointless fisticuffs. He painfully realizes that he has irrecoverably spoiled what was left of the male camaraderie and solidarity he and Bill experienced in Burguete. Equally disconcerting is the realization that he has betrayed the trust Montoya put on him. Jake knows that in Montoya's eyes he has lost his credibility as a man possessing aficion, which is a devastating blow to Jake's image of connoisseur of proper conduct and good judgment. It is Romero alone who never allows anything to compromise his masculinity, repeatedly tested in a bullfighting arena in front of thousands of frenetic spectators. Naturally, he is not broken when Cohn overpowers him with his brute strength; as Mike reports, Romero "didn't say much, but he kept getting up and getting knocked down again" (202). By validating Romero's quiet dignity, which is reminiscent of the resilience advocated by Roosevelt and other advocates of sturdy masculinity, Hemingway similarly emphasizes the need to bolster modern masculinity through strong resolve and self-discipline. At the same time, he is also pointing his finger to what he sees as creeping emasculation corrupting men both in Europe and America. Moreover, endowing Brett's with irresistible magnetism, Hemingway warns that femininity became as strong and as dangerous as ever. Brett's seductiveness thus represents a radical threat to the existing gender power relations. It is no accident that Cohn calls Brett, albeit playfully, Circe. One by one, she turns those who come under her power into lesser men, undermining masculine vigor wherever she goes. Even a disciplined man like Jake, Hemingway points out, is not safe from emasculation in the increasingly confusing post-war world.

I.4 Love in the Time of War: A Male Melodrama in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*

The artistic vision Hemingway communicates in *The Sun Also Rises* shows that masculinity is clearly on the defense. Hemingway's answer to the threat of emasculation he envisions is more self-control, especially now that women were asking for control more vehemently than ever before. In this sense, his recipe is congruent with the solutions suggested by most commentators before him who lamented the state of American manhood. This time mobilization of masculine inner strength was necessary in view of the first wave of feminism whose proponents were instrumental in passing the U.S. Constitution amendment granting women the right to vote. The limits of masculine political power being thus exposed, it seemed to many men that women were getting momentum in the old battle of sexes. The ending of *The Sun Also Rises* may be seen as expressing the same concern, showing Jake at a low point in his life, with incorrigible Brett by his side. Though he seems to agree with Brett that they "could have had such a damned good time together" (247), Jake is fully aware that he would not be able to come to terms with Brett's inconstancy even if he could satisfy her sexually. In fact, the implication of the novel's last scene is that Jake will be better off if he stays away from Brett whose unpredictable behavior has eroded the discipline on which his male authority has been based. While his physical predicament is difficult to deal with, trying to cope with Brett and her swings of mood poses a much bigger challenge. His impotence notwithstanding, Jake's failure to adhere to his self-imposed code suggests that mature masculinity defined by a proper measure of self-control is a tragic condition. In this sense, he exemplifies the exalted type of masculinity predicated on what Camille Paglia in her definition of tragedy calls a male game whose aim is "to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat" (7).

Dealing with the issues of courage and allegiance in the time of war, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) emphatically focuses on the difficulty of maintaining control for a young man confronted by the inscrutable and potentially constricting feminine presence. The novel's protagonist, Frederic Henry, initially believes that he has what it takes to be a competent lieutenant in the ambulance corps of the Italian army, all the while assuming an informed and cynical attitude to his role in the military. As in Jake's case, his authority comes from knowing relevant facts about the world. He is thus respected by his subordinates and treated with affection by people who are able to recognize his qualities, namely by his close friend Rinaldo, a surgeon, and the priest who appreciates that fact that Frederic is not averse to discussing spiritual matters that the other soldiers seem to unanimously ignore. Paying attention to the minutiae of the war, Frederic occasionally sounds like a slightly bored know-it-all who watches the events unfold while feeling emotionally detached from whatever relevance they may have: "This was a strange and mysterious war zone but I supposed it was quite well run and grim compared to other wars with the Austrians. The Austrian Army was created to give Napoleon victories; any Napoleon" (36). When Frederic meets Catherine Barkley, he believes he is as skilled in the art of romancing a woman as in the art of warfare. Her apology for slapping him in the face when he attempts to kiss her on their second rendezvous angers Frederic, who thinks that he sees "it all ahead like the moves in a chess game" (26). When he is allowed to kiss her on the following date, he purports to feel bored about the whole situation and to realize that the idea of loving Catherine is foreign to him. He goes through the moves but the thrill does not come because to him it is all just "a game, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards" (30).

When he is injured by an Austrian mortar shell, Frederic ends up in a hospital in Milan where he is treated by Catherine, and this time he realizes he is falling in love with her. As a result, he no longer lives, as Warren's says, "in the world of random and meaningless appetite,

knowing that it is all and all and all, or thinking that he knows that" (19). Frederic's discovery that he is capable of love and can thus open up with another person can be therefore seen as a sign of a growing process, which continues by leaps and bounds when he recovers and joins his unit. Soon afterward, an Austrian defensive breaks through the Italian lines and Frederic finds it imperative to lead his men safely out of the chaos that the retreat turns into. The disorder and random violence he witnesses during these eventful days bring about his disillusionment with war as a ritualized space where men's competence can be properly displayed. When Frederic finally gets to safety, he is captured by the battle police and is to be executed as a deserter. Plunging into the river, he saves his life and sets out on a journey back to Milan to be reunited with Catherine. Her love is something he can cling to now that he realizes that "it was not my show anymore and I wished this bloody train would get to Maestre and I would eat and stop thinking" (232). Badly shaken by his close encounter with death, Frederic is now determined to stand firmly by Catherine's side and to make their relationship the cornerstone of his new life. As James Phelan argues, what Hemingway depicts in *A Farewell to Arms* is Frederic's gradual development from "a callow, unreflective youth who does not understand either the war he is involved in or the woman who predicts that they will have a strange life together" ("Distance" 54) to a man who has learned important lessons about both war and love and is thus able to see what matters most in life.

One of the effects of Frederic's transformation is his withdrawal from society. Observing a group of pilots on the train, he admits he does not feel compelled to establish contact with other men or think about the war: "I had the paper but I did not read it because I did not want to read about the war. I was going to forget about the war. I had made a separate peace" (243). His disengagement comes with the realization that in modern society there is "nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it" (185). In a Stresa

hotel where he is finally reunited with Catherine, Frederic meets Count Greffi, a contemporary of Metternich, who not only wishes to meet him socially but also shows interest in what Frederic has to say about life and the books he finds worth reading. From the very start, their conversations are marked by mutual rapport and understanding. As Alexander Hollenberg observes, reading these passages, the reader is led to intuit a bond between the two characters "founded upon the shared knowledge of the world" (305). Though it is mostly the count speaking, Frederic's responses clearly show that the two men are in agreement that the essential question in life is, as Phelan puts it, "how best to respond to the knowledge of the world's destructiveness" (*Reading* 186). The count's attention once again drives home the idea home that his American companion is someone to respect, perhaps even suggesting that what the count sees in Frederic is an image of his younger self. Like Rinaldi and the priest before, the hotel barman is also conscious of Frederic's uniqueness and duly informs him that he is going to be arrested if he does not leave immediately. This special treatment is reminiscent of the way Jake Barnes is perceived by his friends, indicating that Frederic is likewise a man of substance, which some are able to recognize.

The encounter with Count Greffi shows Frederic as having a strong presence, yet his behavior in Stresa suggests that his description of the interaction with his friends may very well be full of male posturing that is supposed to hide the fact that he had a minor role to play in the war effort he is recollecting. A man on the run from authorities, Frederic is unwilling to admit the seriousness of his situation now that he gets to be with Catherine. Contrary to his professed resourcefulness in the ambulance corps, he now seems strangely passive and purposeless. Blotting out the outer world, Frederic seems perfectly content with being with his loved one, feeling that "we had come home, feeling no longer alone, waking in the night to find the other one there, and not gone away; all other things were unreal" (249). It is Catherine, who is by this time several months pregnant with their child, that voices the need

to do something about the impasse they are facing. When Frederic states that he is tired of thinking about his situation, she confronts him with a possible solution: "Switzerland is down the lake, we can go there," only to receive a vague response, "That will be lovely" (251). Unlike Frederic, Catherine realizes not only that a secure and stable environment is needed on account of her pregnancy but that for their relationship to thrive and prosper it cannot be confined to a hotel room. With regard to her active stance, it is possible to claim, as William E. Cain puts it, that "Catherine, not Frederic, is the agent of compulsion in the relationship and has an inner resource and resolve that he lacks" (385). From the point of view of Frederic's narration, the count thus plays the role previously assigned to Rinaldi and the priest: while not adding anything to the main storyline, the recollection of the meeting with the count is meant to reiterate the notion of Frederic's prowess and to downplay the fact of his desertion.

What becomes clear in the novel's section set in Stresa is that narrating the fateful events of his relationship with Catherine, Frederic attempts to magnify his savvy and forbearance while belittling any signs of his unmanliness. It is thus telling that he is strangely reticent about his past achievements that would verify his image of a man versed in the art of war and love. His narration, however, repeatedly undermines his initial assertions; as Phelan points out, these inconsistencies allow for the possibility that Frederic "is telling us much more than he realizes – especially about himself" ("Distance" 55). Perhaps the most revealing moment takes place when he admits that now that he has nothing to do he draws purpose in life solely from being with Catherine: "My life used to be full of everything . . . Now if you aren't with me I haven't a thing in the world" (257). While this claim testifies to Frederic's growing emotional life, it also shows that he actually redefines his identity around Catherine's needs. In this sense, a narration that purports to give ample evidence for the narrator's well-balanced masculinity turns out to be a story of his emasculation. When Frederic is narrating

his convalescence in the Milan hospital, the readers are, as Phelan has it, invited to "agree, and thereby to assent to a definition of the fine life in which the female is endlessly self-effacing, tirelessly available, and continually sacrificing" (*Reading* 180). The assertion that Catherine is always there for Frederic to satisfy all his needs therefore suggests that she is the "projection of a male fantasy" (*Reading* 180). Frederic's narration is affected by the trauma caused by the loss of Catherine, but its incongruities and concealments also point to his insecurity about his manly role. When Frederic says that he is a "ball-player that bats two hundred and thirty" (140), it may not be an understatement but an honest assessment of his manhood.

While bespeaking the trauma of his desertion, Frederic's passivity in Stresa gives also a strong indication that it was in actuality Catherine that was determining from the very start the direction in which their relationship was moving. Frederic, however, cannot admit her autonomy without seriously damaging his masculine credentials. Aware of his inadequacy as a man, Frederic attempts to stamp his narration with visible marks of his masculine competence wherever he can. In the description of his stay in the Milan hospital, for instance, Catherine suffers from constant exhaustion due to Frederic's enormous libido. What is here at stake is not only an image of masculine prowess but also the question of establishing a clear demarcation line between the subject and the object in the narrative scheme Frederic is providing. Frederic relies on the magnification of this distinction because he does not possess Jake's hard-won expertise or discipline when he meets Catherine. Contrary to his intended portrayal of Catherine as an obliging lover, she proves to be a resisting object; as one who has lost her fiancé at the battle of the Somme, she is not sentimental about soldierly valor, and she is well aware of Frederic's intentions toward her. "This is a rotten game we play, isn't it?" (31), she asks Frederic at the early stage of their relationship, and the way she shatters the artifice of Frederic's advances by implying their insincerity testifies to her clear-headedness.

When she meets him for the first time, Catherine shows her dislike of conventional verbal gestures by refusing to engage in an exchange of nice empty phrases: "*Do* we have to go on and talk like this?" (18) Her response to Frederic's growing interest in her can be thus seen, despite Frederic's intentions, as deconstructing "a normative binary opposition between a man as the desiring subject and a woman as the desired object" (Takeuchi 38).

The deaths of Catherine and her child figure in the novel as the ultimate sign of the world's destructiveness, stunning Frederic and leaving him at a loss as to what to do with his life, and the process of narrating the events leading to Catherine's tragic end suggests that he has embarked on his path to self-discovery. As Phelan points out, the novel's last scene showing Frederic walking to the hotel in the rain may be seen as signifying "his potential to maintain some strength and honor in the face of the world's malevolence" ("Distance" 55). At the same time, Catherine's death means that he can now deemphasize the extent to which her demands suppressed his manly pursuits and were in effect defining his masculinity. The notion that he may come across as dominated by Catherine prompts Frederic to create the illusion that the two of them managed to build a perfect self-sufficient world during the late days of her pregnancy. His presence, Frederic reports, was all Catherine needed and there was thus no reason for them to see other people (297-8). Yet, Frederic insistence on their having achieved mutual bliss and harmony may just as well express "the need to possess Catherine and to repossess her when he assumes her character, represents her actions, and speak her words in the texture of his story" (Cain 389). By showing Frederic as a lonely figure who can take control of his life by freeing himself from the feminine world, the novel's ending abjures the possibility that good things can happen when a man complies with a woman's concerns. As Danell Ragsdell-Hetrick observes, what eventually takes center stage is Frederic's inner turmoil to the extent that the deaths of Catherine and her child are "no longer something that has happened to them, but instead something that has happened to

Frederic Henry" (115). To have a chance of rejuvenation, masculinity has to move away from femininity and come to terms with its tragic condition.

II.1 Beyond the Propaganda of the Concerted War Effort: Conflicting Masculinities in Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*

Though WWII tends to be remembered as the "Good War," it permanently scarred many of its participants and exacerbated the uncertainty about the role men were supposed to play when their tour of duty was over. As John M. Kinder points out, this notion of a glorious, well-concerted war effort is "a well-maintained fiction, a constellation of images, narratives, memories, and sound bites" (187) designed to gloss over the fact that American GIs were often in the dark about the causes they were supposed to serve and faced many difficulties reentering the civilian world. In *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Norman Mailer is not interested in whitewashing the absurdity and brutality of war, even if it is allegedly fought in the name of freedom and democracy. Portraying a U.S. Army operation on a fictitious island of Anopopei in the South Pacific, he shows how military routine and combat exposure warp the personalities of enlisted soldiers who seldom discuss the values America is said to defend. While Frederic Henry's description of his service may at times suggest that war is still a sort of gentleman's sport, Mailer's novel emphasizes that the army offers little privacy and that unranked soldiers in particular have to remain in close proximity that leads to growing resentments and open conflicts. Integrity or common decency plays no role when decisions are being made; enveloped in a moral and ideological void, the army functions less like a band of brothers and more like a business company which disregards the interests of its employees and is not averse to pitching its members against each other to maximize the profits. Run by aggressive and scheming men, the military world in *The Naked and the Dead* therefore "forecasts an ominous future, in which U.S. emerges from World War II as a totalitarian state characterized by military-style hierarchy and rigid social control" (Kinder 197).

As most infantry soldiers whose stories Mailer chooses to tell view the army as a hostile environment, their first and foremost concern is to survive. Those few who consider combat as a chance to prove their manhood have an eye on a career in the military, and their show of masculine prowess is actually a form of subservience toward their superiors. When a grueling reconnaissance patrol is ordered by the commander of the troops on the island, General Cummings, all the members of the selected platoon have to delve deep into their resources to make it back in one piece. The platoon loses their commanding officer and two men, but the sacrifice proves pointless, as the Japanese surrender days before the end of the patrol, and the suicidal character of the mission widens the existing rift between the enlisted men and the officers. Class and ethnic distinctions matter on Anopopei; as Thomas S. Gladsky observes, Mailer presents poor and non-Anglo-Saxon soldiers as those who are "drafted, shot at, bombed, and killed so that the reactionary Cummings and his kind can inherit the earth" (93). Roth, one of the two Jewish soldiers in the platoon, voices his discontent with the comfort available to officers during their shipment to the island: "Did you notice how they treated the officers? They slept in staterooms when we were jammed in the hold like pigs. It's to make them feel superior, a chosen group. That's the same device Hitler uses when he makes the Germans think they're superior" (52-3). His feelings of injustice are later enhanced by the prejudice against him shared by other soldiers on account of his Jewishness. Physically weak, Roth feels insecure about his manhood and is painfully aware that his platoon sergeant is after him for not being tough enough. Called a Jew bastard, he desperately wants to show his mettle only to plunge to his death soon afterward, unable to jump over a gap in the mountain ledge.

Roth's death raises questions about Mailer's attitude toward extreme manifestations of masculine competence shown by the novel's major characters. The army may display totalitarian methods and ethnic prejudice may be rampant among U.S. troops, but the problem

with Roth is that he does not respond the way a man should: he is too weak and unmanly, a specimen of an effete Jewish intellectual given to whining and bickering. When the other soldiers look after a wounded comrade, he is playing with a wounded little bird he has found: "Roth was completely absorbed in the bird. . . . He fondled it, breathed its bouquet, examined its injured wing, filled with tenderness toward it" (529). Mailer's portrayal of Roth evokes statements made by social commentators who claimed that American men were exceedingly exposed to feminine influence when the times required them to free themselves from all the associations that were softening their masculinity. Perhaps the harshest of those commentators was Philip Wylie who blamed American mothers for virtually all flaws exhibited by American men. According to Wylie, their detrimental influence was stultifying and omnipresent: "Mom is everywhere and everything and damned near everybody and from her depends all the rest in the United States" (188). Feminine soft power as an antithesis to proper masculine conduct seems to be a latent but detrimental factor even on Anopopei, thousands of miles from the American shore, deciding whether a man is manly enough or not. Although there are naturally no women on the island, men's susceptibility to the values associated with women is represented as hampering their military assignments. Since an ability to totally suppress all potentially emasculating feminine influences thus seems necessary for a truly accomplished soldier, Mailer ends up validating, with some reservations, a very narrow notion of masculinity.

The most memorable character in the novel is Sergeant Sam Croft, a psychopathic killer who enjoys a sense of power the military bestows on him, and craves situations in which he can show his military expertise and exercise his control over his men. He is a man defined by his drive to power that knows no bounds; as Donald Pizer puts it, Croft develops in his early childhood a "need to have absolute control over his world, even if the fulfillment of this need requires the cultivation of hate and insensitivity as his principal code of life" (51).

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In the section describing Croft's development from a testy child to a violent and reckless young man with anger issues, Mailer portrays Croft as a person with virtually no imagination and no need for emotional attachment. Introspection is not Croft's forte and neither is empathy: "*He hated weakness and loved practically nothing. There was a crude unformed vision in his soul but he was rarely conscious of it*" (156). It is no wonder that his treatment of women is instrumental and he expects the same treatment from women in return. With no effort at communication on his part, all that matters is his sexual performance. When he gets married, he and his wife spend their time aimlessly till it is time to retreat to the bedroom and Croft can hear once again that he is "a goddam fuggin machine" (161). Disappointed with his marriage and his later affairs with married women, Croft finds fulfillment in a woman-less world of the army with its impersonal set of rules and strict emphasis on their proper execution. In the army, Croft's obsession with performance can be fully realized. Croft's subordinates learn quickly that combat is his element and that their survival may thus very well depend on his leadership: "But Croft – I tell you – Croft loves combat, he *loves* it. There ain't a worse man you could be under or a better one, depending on how you look at it" (17).

Killing excites Croft and provides him a much needed release for his inner anger but also leaves him spiritually empty. In his brooding moments, he begins to sense that he needs the right kind of challenge that would push him to the limit and enable him to fully show his ingenuity and tenacity. When one of his men is killed by a mortar shell in a freakish incident, Croft sees it as an intimation of things to come. Though seeing someone's death is nothing new to him, this time this experience "opened to Croft vistas of such omnipotence that he was afraid to consider it directly. All day the fact hovered about his head, tantalizing him with odd dreams and portents of power" (40). A moment of revelation comes to him when he gets a good sight of Mount Anaka which his recon platoon is expected to climb in order to explore chances of attacking the Japanese forces from the rear. Instantaneously, Croft is transfixed

and filled with yearning to conquer the looming mountain which "attracted him, taunted and inflamed him with its size. . . . He gazed at it, almost hating the mountain, unconscious at first of the men about him" (447-8). The climb captures Croft's imagination and obliterates all of his previous concerns; as the patrol goes on, Croft is willing, Ahab-like, to sacrifice his men in order to reach his goal and set his foot on the summit. Like Moby-Dick in the mind of Melville's famous character, Mount Anaka becomes for Croft a "concrete compelling objectification of his otherwise unformed and generalized quest for knowledge and power" (Pizer 52). Like Ahab, Croft is no model of masculinity to emulate, and many of his actions are too unsavory for that. Yet he is a man who has a yearning for transcendence materializing in a vision that locates his masculinity above the realm of everyday mundane concerns. What is more, his obsession with power reveals a virility that other man on the island cannot match.

Croft's resilience stands out especially when compared to the listless and mostly ineffective masculinity exhibited by his men. Yet his bravery and competence aside, Croft's position within the army hierarchy diminishes his accomplishments. In a broader scheme of things, he is, as George Cotkin has it, mainly a "tool of his superiors, a good soldier who has been trained to follow orders" (190). According to Cotkin, while Croft may reign supreme in the jungle, his dominant position is "eclipsed in the mechanized and bureaucratic world that Cummings dominates" (190). As Cummings's goal is to break down enlisted soldiers in order to create an army made of men with a peasant mentality (175), ready to meet any challenge, the limited power Croft enjoys is more an anomaly than a sign of good days to come for American men in the military and beyond. Obsessed with achieving absolute power, Cummings believes that "the only morality of the future is a power morality, and a man who cannot find his adjustment to it is doomed" (323). His vision of how society should be organized is totalitarian, which he admits without qualms to his aide, Lieutenant Hearn, whom he chose to be his confidante: "When there are little surges of resistance at the middle levels,

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it merely calls for more power to be directed downward, to burn it out" (323). To Cummings, soldiers are fully defined by their respective functions, disposable and replaceable, mere cogs in the well-oiled machinery of the army. With maximum attention to every detail, Cummings tries to micromanage every aspect of army life, ceaselessly inspecting his troops during the day and devoting nights to thinking of "how best to treat the different men, how to command them most effectively" (418). Croft may be seen by his men as the right person to lead them in combat, but the organizational structure of the troops honed by technocrats like Cummings has little use for him.

Though Mailer portrays Cummings as similarly obsessed with power as Croft, he nevertheless makes a crucial distinction between the two characters, as Cummings's tenacity and tactical brilliance cannot hide the fact that his masculinity is not only deeply flawed but hollow at its core. For one thing, Cummings's methods of command do little to test his own masculinity. Based on processing information and meticulous planning, they call for permanent mental agility and utmost concentration in emergency, but do not involve greater personal risk or any psychical gain that would bring some deeper knowledge. Such leadership of men is, as Cotkin argues, an exercise of power that is "bureaucratic and nihilistic, beyond good and evil; thus, in a sense, it is empty, devoid of values or of greater ends" (190). As Mailer repeatedly shows, Cummings's military procedures are an extension of his personality marked by peevishness and frequent swings of mood in the situations that hamper the realization of his plans. When an unexpected storm slows down an elaborate operation designed by him, he feels that nature "had thwarted him, and his anger took childish forms. From time to time a spasm of irritation washed over his concentration and muddled it" (106). As unpredictable behavior in men is linked in his mind to their different individual qualities and aspirations, the notion of individual personality is, as Cummings explains in a conversation with Hearn, a hindrance which can be remedied: "Sure, there are differences

among men in any particular Army unit, but they invariably cancel each other out, and what you're left with is a value rating. . . . I work with grosser techniques, common denominator techniques" (181). Beset by fears of being replaced by another general and losing control of his troops, Cummings comes across more as a petty tyrant with a penchant for effective management strategies than a man of Patton's stature.

While Cummings's manly presence is intimidating in relations with other officers, his personal life is a different story. That there is something suspicious about his masculine identity is first suggested more than halfway through the novel when Mailer includes as a section on Cummings's childhood and his military career. As a little boy, for instance, Cummings is under the influence of his mother who teaches him how to sew and takes him for walks outside the town so that he can watch her paint. His father, however, sends him to a military school to "let him git some jism in his system" (407), and initially it seems that the military routine does the work, as he loses interest in the "water colors, the books like *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *Ivanhoe* and *Oliver Twist*" (407). Cummings's problematic marriage to his cousin Margaret, however, attests that the foundations of his masculinity are not particularly firm. In the sexual bouts that ensue in the first year of their matrimony, he is possessed by an urge to establish his dominance, yet is invariably defeated by Margaret's sexuality, and their lovemaking leaves him "sobbing from exhaustion and frustration on her breast" (415). Unlike Croft, whose instinctive violent behavior prevents him from being belittled by women, Cummings obsessively tests his sexual prowess in the sexual union with Margaret, fighting out "battles with himself upon her body" (416) and finding his masculinity disturbingly lacking. His fixation on having absolute control over his troops and on knowing how best to employ them becomes a compensation for his inability to prove his healthy heterosexual drive in the relation with Margaret. The clues Mailer plants in the section on Cummings's ascend to power thus show that his success has to do not only with his

renunciation of femininity but also with his homosexual impulses that always have the potential to undermine his masculinity.

The problem with Cummings is that his break with femininity is not clean. While Croft's masculinity is depicted as proudly independent and self-sufficient, Cummings seems to be permanently affected by "a repetition of Margaret with humiliating endings" (417) and subsequently feels pressured to succeed in fear of being seen as inadequately masculine. On a diplomatic mission in Rome right before the outbreak of WWII, Cummings is propositioned by a man and is beaten and robbed when he follows him into an alley. Brooding over the incident a few days later, he views it as a sin brimming with serious consequences and realizes that "he will have to be very careful from now on" (426) in order to make sure that it will not happen again. Yet despite his almost inhuman self-possession, Cummings's latent desires manifest themselves in his relation to Hearn, whose presence becomes increasingly vital to the older man's well-being. Cummings tries hard to win Hearn's admiration, hoping that the latter will yield to his genius, yet is painfully disappointed when his efforts are met with resistance. Hearn's refusal to play along enhances Cummings's insecurity stemming from his latent homosexuality; finding a cigarette butt purposefully left by Hearn on the floor of his private tent, Cummings feels "a curious troubled excitement, a momentary submission as if he has been a young girl undressing before the eyes of a roomful of strange men" (318). This is a difficult moment for Cummings, a troubling occurrence that has to be prevented from happening again, precisely because effeminacy and particularly homosexuality are linked with the notions of submission and impotence. As Kate Millett argues in her analysis of Mailer's view of American masculinity, a lack of virility is "tantamount to renouncing masculinity, hence, identity, even self" (331). Cumming, in short, has no option but to regroup to take action to bolster his manly image.

Hearn's provocation is a signal that Cummings's control is not as absolute as it seems, which is the reason why Hearn places the cigarette in Cummings's tent in the first place. He is also getting increasingly tired of the claustrophobic relationship with the general. Disturbed by Cummings's lust for power, Hearn also senses vague sexual undertones in Cummings's attention toward him, which adds to his feeling of disgust and creates a strong need to disassociate himself from the older man's influence:

> He had been the pet, the dog, to the master, coddled and curried, thrown sweetmeats until he had had the presumption to bite the master once. . . . He was a diversion for the General, and he resented it deeply with a cold speechless anger that came to some extent from the knowledge that he had acquiesced in the dog-role, had even the dog's dreams, carefully submerged, of someday equaling the master. (313)

Hearn is further put out of his comfort zone when Cummings accentuates his submissive position by ordering him to bend to collect the cigarette butt from the floor, and the humiliation Hearn experiences shatters his self-confidence: "For almost an hour he lay face down on his cot, burning with shame and self-disgust and an impossible impotent anger. . . . Everything in him demanded that he refuse to pick up the cigarette and he had done it with a sick numbed suspension of his will" (326). This is a breaking point for him, similar to the one Jake Barnes experiences after the confrontation with Cohn. Hearn's masculine identity is hurt to the point that he thinks that he "would have to react or die, effectively, and for one of the few times in his life he was quite uncertain of his own ability" (326-7).

Like Jake Barnes, Hearn has a personal code of conduct which he defines as getting by on style. Though more vague than Jake's, it also presupposes a considerable level of inner discipline and determination: "The only thing that had been important was to let no one in any ultimate issue ever violate your integrity" (326). The confrontation with Cummings's amorality, however, reveals the vacuity of this philosophy, and Hearn has to admit that he

"lived by it in the absence of anything else" (326). Hearn is able to hold his ground in the disputations with Cummings, yet he cannot match the strength of the latter's convictions. Throughout the novel, he is described as a spiritless liberal characterized by a lack of faith in the validity of his ideas as well as by his inability to act upon them. As Daniel Fuchs has it, Hearn represents a character "incapable of overcoming his advantages-wealth, class, a Harvard education" (*Limits* 293). In the universe Mailer creates in *The Naked and the Dead*, Hearn is therefore yet another man softened by his liberal concerns for others which undermine his own masculine self. The scene in which Hearn bends in front of Cummings prefigures Hearn's ruminations in which he sees himself as succumbing to Cummings's philosophy, although he does not actually believe in it: "Divorced of all the environmental trappings, all the confusing and misleading attitudes he had absorbed, he was basically like Cummings" (392). Hearn is smart and capable, yet he is not a mover and shaker; as Mailer suggests in the section in which Hearn listens to a lecture on seaweed, the latter's liberal leanings leads to an existence similar to that of kelp which is "living in the dense tangle of marine jangles, stationary, absorbed in their own nutriment" (337). They are mostly used as fertilizers, explains the lecturer, and the implication is that men like Hearn will never rouse themselves from their paralyzing self-absorption.

While Hearn is depicted as a feeble antagonist to Cummings, on the level of the recon platoon that Hearn ends up leading toward Mount of Anaka, the only person capable of standing up to Croft is Red Valsen. As Randall H. Waldron argues, the two are "natural enemies, Croft brutally demanding meek obedience and Valsen constitutionally opposed to being controlled" (276). Fiercely independent, Red has refused to be bound to any place or any job. Unlike the other men in the platoon, he has not allowed any woman to seize his imagination. His philosophy is based on the belief that women "just want to trap ya, I seen enough of it" (229). In this respect, he is a man unto himself the way Croft is. Yet his

fatalism precludes him from taking a stand anytime he feels he should take one; believing that "[n]othing's worth a good goddam" (233), he fails to confront Croft on several occasions after voicing his disapproval of the sergeant's conduct. While Red repeatedly stops short of challenging Croft, the other members of the platoon are too afraid to even consider such a possibility. In fact, they seem to form a mass that can be easily molded by psychotic leaders like Croft. Whether in the army or in civil life, a man's worth in *The Naked and the Dead* is defined mainly in terms of power; as Cummings comments, the average man "always sees himself in relation to other men as either inferior or superior" (322). Examining the autocratic mindset inherent in the U.S. war effort, Mailer points to a loss of autonomy and resourcefulness among American men as a sign of dark things to come. Croft may have mental problems, but Cummings's mind is lucid when he claims that the purpose of WWII is "to translate America's potential into kinetic energy. The concept of fascism, far sounder than communism if you consider it, for it's grounded firmly in men's actual natures, merely started in the wrong country" (321).

II.2 Searching for a Firm Footing in a Society of Abundance: Masculine Anxiety in Postwar America

Postwar America did not become an autocratic country run by people like Cummings, though a former U.S. general became president in 1953. His presidency is now associated with what Warren Susman calls „a consumer paradise, a world of abundance in which things would be easy to purchase, consume, and maintain" (21). During the Eisenhower administration, unprecedented affluence became then available to millions of white American who attained a middle class status and found themselves in the possession of a house in a suburb. One of the most memorable signs of the whole period, such a home became a symbol of new possibilities within a reach of average Americans; as Susman points out, it signified a new high point in an ongoing effort „to connect our consciousness, civilization, and demography to the American home and the American Dream" (23). Yet living in a society of abundance was marred from the very beginning by a large degree of anxiety that was most obviously manifested in the persistent awareness of the imminent nuclear threat and the hysteria about a presumed Communist takeover. Life of millions American was becoming increasingly sheltered, yet at the same time there was a lingering conviction among many of them that they were living in an age of profound crisis. Many Hollywood films, from *Invasions of the Body Snatchers* (1954) to *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), were giving credence to the notion that the U.S. was facing an enormous and potentially fatal peril, and that the very fiber of American society would be endangered if Americans were not vigilant and self-disciplined enough. As Susman observes, the pervasive feeling that the nation was going through a crisis was nothing new in American history, yet the concern of numerous well-to-do citizens, "particularly in its intensity, was new: it is rare for a people to be so self-aware, so self-conscious, so self-concerned" (23).

Many commentators were also anxious about the condition of postwar manhood. The flight into suburbs was part of the problem, as the ease and comfort that came along with a new lifestyle were seen as undermining the true masculine spirit previously tested by formidable, awe-inspiring challenges. Gone was the rugged and spirited independence of frontier life; as Mills comments, the middle-class American was now always „somebody's man, the corporation's, the government's, the army's; and he is seen as the man who does not rise" (xii). In this sense, Cummings's vision was realized. On one hand, the official propaganda presented American democracy as locked in an uncompromising clash with the Communist world seen, as Carmine Sarracino and Kevin M. Scott put it, as a „symptom of everything that assailed American men, everything that wanted to strip America of its love of the individual and turn its men into servile automatons" (Scott 55). At the same time, Americans were discovering that the corporations employing them were „busily developing new ideas about efficiency that would treat them much as they feared communism would" (Sarracino and Scott 55). In the eyes of some sociologists and psychologists, the economic market came to dominate American social life, and the byproduct of this situation was not only consumerism but also alienation felt by a growing number of men. For Erich Fromm, corporations radically changed the playing field by stripping American men of any influence, leaving them with „a mere symbol of ownership while the power, the responsibility and the substance which have been an integral part of ownership in the past are being transferred to a separate group in whose hands lies control" (130). The resulting conformism means that an American man has „opinions and prejudices but no convictions, has likes and dislikes, but no will" (339).

Scholars and commentators aside, ordinary many men were anxious about their masculine roles in the face of the authority shown by women in handling the jobs they had vacated in order to fight overseas during WWII. As Braudy observes, the more realistic films

of the postwar era often depicted returning veterans as having to deal with the „problem of reentry into a world (primarily of women) that has gotten along quite well without them" (499). The 1950s were thus marked by the effort to reinforce the strict gender distinctions loosened during the previous decades, rendering whole spheres of experience unavailable to one or the other gender and freezing them in opposition to each other. As a result, baby boomers were growing up in a world characterized, as Braudy has it, by the „division of us versus them; not only humans versus aliens, or American versus Russians, but also men versus women" (499).   What is more, popular culture began to offer countless examples of men decidedly losing their footing in the everyday relationships with women, which only added the existing anxiety felt by men unsure of their position in the postwar world. As Margaret Mead commented, the new situation once again showed the extent to which masculinity was inseparable from a display of manly competence. With an increasing number of women openly competing with men, it now became even more evident that American masculinity "is not absolutely defined, it has to be kept and re-earned every day, and one essential element in the definition is beating women in every game that both sexes play" (Mead 316).   The fact that a relatively large number of women continued their professional careers now that American men were back from their tour of duty overseas was even seen as a sort of betrayal: the existence of a whole army of independent women meant a new strife for those GIs who saw their sacrifice as an automatic claim to male privilege.

Although the postwar era saw the emergence of the ideal of nuclear family in which the role of the woman was to cater to the well-being of her husband and her children, the popular imagination was teeming with images of not only independent but also extremely dangerous females always ready to use their sexual power to seduce and, if necessary, destroy men whom they saw as thwarting their intricate manipulations. This was the world private detectives such as Sam Spade and Philip Marlow were coming up against, and the attitudes

expressed in hardboiled fiction resonated among many veterans well into the 1950s. As Jamaluddin Aziz points out in her study of noir novels and films, portraying „an independent woman as duplicitous alludes to her fatal sexuality, referring not only to postwar America when a woman's financial independence posed a threat to male economic resourcefulness, but also to the noir genre not solely a masculine form" (14). The fact that the gender assignments in noir works are clearly defined, with „femmes fatales being subjects of the investigation and male protagonists being the investigators" (14), does little to diminish the general impression that women can easily outsmart men and turn them into helpless preys. The menace conniving women were spreading could be stopped only by the incorruptible private detective who „joined Tarzan and myriad cowboy heroes as a vehicle for male escapist fantasy" (Kimmel 212). The jungle and the wilderness of the frontier are replaced by a treacherous metropolitan world where females carry themselves as „either seductive vixens enticing men to their doom or angelic innocents" in need of protection (Kimmel 212-3). The most important thing, however, remains the same: though hardly a paragon of virtue, the private detective was a figure male readers could identify with, "the urban pioneer, making the world safe for women and children" (Kimmel 213).

Similarly to the frontiersman of the Old West who relied on his courage and resourcefulness, the private detective in hardboiled novels prevails in a hostile urban environment thanks to his street-smarts and dogged obstinacy. Like other archetypes of American culture, he is a solitary figure, yet his uncompromising view of society as a cesspool of corruption makes him distinctively antisocial; as Virginia Wright Wexman says about Sam Spade in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1929), the private sleuth is a „cynically defensive loner who is suspicious of all relationships, romantic and otherwise" (27). Postwar hardboiled fiction did not offer any softer portrayals; on the contrary, the suspicion harbored by the protagonist increases and his methods become more

ruthless. Women are depicted as serial killers and the logic of the narrative has it that they must be stopped at all cost. A typical representative of the genre was now Mickey Spillane, whose novels utilize, as James Naremore asserts, "many of the same formulas that Hammett and Chandler used, but they are devoid of any redeeming social content" (152). There is little subtlety in the portrayal of Spillane's famous protagonist, Mike Hammer, a "misogynist, racist, avenging proletarian who deals out brutal punishment to commie traitors and voluptuous dames" (Naremore 152), and resorts to violence at the slightest pretense, relishing the pain he inflicts on those who stand in his way. In *I, the Jury* (1947), Spillane's bestselling debut, Hammer makes no bones about his intention to make the murderer suffer: "Some day, before long, I'm going to have my rod in my mitt and the killer in front of me. I'm going to watch the killer's face. I'm going to plunk one right in his gut, and when he's dying on the floor I may kick his teeth out" (8). Adhering to a simplistic payback mentality, Hammer does not doubt for a moment that those who brutalize others need to be repaid in kind.

In the portrayal of Mike Hammer, Spillane's novel responds to the pervasive concerns about postwar American masculinity by presenting a boorish bully as its protagonist. Bullying is second nature to Hammer but it is also a necessary strategy in a world where any sign of softness may irrevocably compromise a man's manliness. Hammer beats up people to establish his position by showing his friends and enemies who the real man is; as he readily admits, the result of his violent actions is that his "name goes pretty strong up that way" (52). Wherever he goes, he encounters dangerous criminals, slimy crooks, sissy urbanites, and flamboyant homosexuals, so his manly posturing is made to look as a natural defensive reflex. Hammer's constant intimidation of other men sometimes assumes the form of practical jokes, which shows his softer side while reinforcing his status of alfa male. A display of effeminacy on the part of other men is an affront he takes personally, inevitably provoking his swift reaction: "The two boys hit the dirt together and followed by a slap or two. I grinned. A

couple of pansies trying to decide who would be Queen of the May. I drew a pitcher of water from the sink and let it go on their blond heads" (146). Despite those rare moments of wry humor, Hammer is deeply troubled by what he perceives as softness of the modern urban world, especially when it comes down to the handling of criminals by the existing legal system. Too often, he muses, convicted criminals are treated with leniency, and are at times even let go without any punishment. Even worse, the system punishes people like him: "I shoot [the killers] like the mad dogs they are and society drags me to court to explain the whys and wherefores of the extermination" (16). Still, Hammer is undaunted; having fought in the Pacific, he is now "almost anxious to get to some of the rats that make up the section of humanity that pray on people" (16).

As his manly presence tends to dwarf other men, Hammer inevitably attracts the attention of independent, sexually liberated women. While he is highly receptive to their ostentatious sexual allure and occasionally succumbs to their advances, Hammer instinctively feels that their unabashed sexuality poses a serious problem. Quite tellingly, his idea of a proper relationship is wholly conventional, reflecting the contemporary emphasis on clearly defined gender distinctions. The woman he finds worthy of more than a quick fling is Charlotte Manning, a brilliant and successful psychiatrist who exudes robust sexuality yet seems to be able to control her urges, which is something her posh clients are incapable of. Her knowledge of psychiatry seems to have given her an advantage over other women who lack her discipline and cold intellect. Hammer is under Charlotte's spell not only because he comes to value her judgment but also because she promptly and unassumingly accepts his dominant role in their relationship. As his future wife, she is willing to be a mollifying presence in Hammer's life, with little aspirations of her own. Not that Hammer would have it otherwise: when Charlotte quips that she might resume her profession to make up for his unimpressive salary, Hammer makes it clear that as a married woman she will need to

restructure her life around his needs: "Nothing doing. No wife of mine is going to work. I want her at home where I know where she is" (141). Of course, Charlotte's proper performance of gender turns out to be a sham meant to hide the fact that she is the sadistic serial killer Hammer is trying to hunt down. She is thus guilty of not only of premeditated murders but also of shocking gender transgressions, both of which make her a menace to society. As her name insinuates, she is a monstrous freak because she lost what Hammer calls "the social instinct of a woman – that of being dependent on a man" (167).

Spillane's depiction of sexuality in *I, the Jury* is simplistic and crude, yet it testifies to the importance sexual relations held in the public debate in the postwar years. As Miriam G. Reumann observes, sexual mores in the atomic age were viewed as having "the potential to ruin families and community standards" (4). The question of character was thus essential; if a man did not know how to handle sexual temptations, he was in danger of being emasculated by predatory women. Hammer's infatuation with Charlotte is his weakness, yet it is quite telling that their relationship remains chaste till the very end. When her crimes are exposed, Charlotte performs a strip tease in the desperate attempt to distract Hammer and get hold of her gun. However, her might-have-been husband remains unmoved by the performance and shoots her in the belly:

> There on the table was the gun, with the safety catch off and the silencer still attached. These loving arms would have reached it nicely. A face that was waiting to be kissed was really waiting to be splattered with blood when she blew my head off. My blood. When I heard her fall I turned around. Her eyes had pain in them now, the pain preceding death. Pain and unbelief.
>
> "How c-could you?" she gasped.
>
> I only had a moment before talking to a corpse, but I got it in.
>
> "It was easy," I said. (174)

By not sleeping with Charlotte, Hammer is able to channel "his sexual energy into righteous violence" (May 85); he can kill her in cold blood precisely because of his previous sexual restraint which gives him the moral high ground. Untainted by her sexuality, he can become the jury.

In Spillane's later novels such as *One Lonely Night* (1951) and *Kiss Me, Deadly* (1952), the stakes are much higher because this time Hammer is being seduced by women who conspire against the United States itself and have no scruples about stealing atomic secrets. As Elaine Tyler May argues, Hammer's sexual restraint is therefore tantamount to upholding the morale of the whole country and effectively saving it from communist takeover. Fortunately, Hammer is up to the task and manages to "save the nation from its own moral failings because other men were unable to contain their sexual passions" (85). Hammer is a brute but he is a brute with a noble cause; as May purports, the ruthlessness that sets Hammer apart from other men is presented as a necessity embodying manly patriotic virtue absolutely crucial in the time of dire need: "If [the men] had been able to resist temptation and if the women had behaved themselves, there would have been no need for the hero's bloody deeds" (85). Often bordering on hysteria, similar arguments were not only voiced ad nauseam in American culture at large but also came to define national policy strategies. Foreign policy itself, May notes, was based on "well-articulated assumptions of male power—a power drawn from sexual potency as well as the moral strength to resist temptation" (85-6). Years before the sexual revolution of the 1960, sex was thus brought into the public sphere with a vengeance, providing a language that could be used to discuss the most pressing national issues. As Reumann has it, one of the results of this new discourse was that "national identity was configured in sexual terms" (12). Understandably, the condition of American masculinity was of utmost importance; as proper sexual behavior became a matter of national interest, the

possibility that American men may not be fully in control of their sexuality added to the anxiety of the postwar era.

The normative masculinity envisioned by most social commentators was by no means all-inclusive. According to Reumann, at the center of the debate about the need to resist temptation were white middle-class men: "Certain kinds of men – heterosexual, able-bodied, and financially comfortable – held unquestioned title to masculinity, with more problematic modes of masculinity represented by those whose sexuality, race, body, or class placed them outside the normative ideal" (55). According to this line of thought, American men outside this category were seen as either oversexed or too soft, both of which signified an inadequate attitude to sex and a lack of firmness of character. It was thus up to middle-class white men in particular to safeguard the U.S. against communism whose containment tended to be "equated with containment of atomic secrets, of sexual license, of gender roles, of nuclear energy, and of artistic expression" (Nadel 5). Yet, the postwar years saw a proliferation of scientific studies and popular articles putting in question the sexual prowess of the average American man while simultaneously documenting his unwillingness to contain his sexual urges. As Reumann argues, it was the publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), an exhaustive eight-hundred-page study dealing exclusively with white men, that attested to "the emergence and public recognition of male sexuality as a legitimate social problem" (71). What astonished the readers was not only the shocking diversity of sexual behavior recorded by Kinsey but also the truly alarming fact that homosexuality among American men was not a negligible phenomenon. While frequent extramarital relationships testified to a high, though not entirely desirable sexual appetite, admissions of homosexual stints made by heterosexual subjects "ran directly counter to American ideas of the ideal male sexual subject" (75).

As if the threat of homosexuality was not enough, postwar guardians of social order tried to make sense of rising youth delinquency and the ethos of motorcycle gangs which sprang up all over the country. Even more puzzling were hipsters and beatniks who ostentatiously shunned social norms and showed little interest in pursuing careers that would solidify their middle-class status. Often seen as malcontents and hedonists, these young men rejected the materialism of American society and embarked instead on drug-induced spiritual quests. In so doing, they were redefining the tenets of American masculinity based on restless resourcefulness and industriousness propelled by the prospect of upward mobility. As Thomas F. Merrill clarifies, while the term "beat" came to be an umbrella for various conflicting attitudes, the underlying impetus of the whole movement had to do with feeling beat and thus "drained of the energy to compete. It is the bored fatigue of the soldier who has been required to perform endless, meaningless tasks—ones that have no point for him, no purpose. Like the bored soldier, the Beatnik feels that the demands of society are equally pointless and without purpose for him" (17). The attitudes of the beatnik can thus be seen as the reaction to the equally problematic organization man, yet the passive nature of his rebellion made his alternative masculinity hardly viable for those who were calling for the resurgence of the old male spirit. There were also other reasons why beatniks were not viewed as inspiring models of masculinity; as Thomas Parkinson observes, one could not defend their "aimless self-destructiveness and occasional pointless criminality of conduct" (169). The image of the beatnik also suffered because, as Parkinson puts it, the "borderline between beatnik and psychiatric patient shifts permanently, claiming one and releasing another" (171).

A defining work of the Beat Generation, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) provided an early insight into the chaotic and seemingly meaningless beat lifestyle. The frenetic nature of this way of life stemmed from the fact that the Beats knew, as Kimmel has it, "more about

what they were against—railing against the drone of self-made masculinity, the relentless pursuit of happiness through material possession—than what they were for" (243). While not producing anything tangible on a daily basis, Kimmel adds, they ended up creating "the rhetoric of rebellion" (243). This rhetoric was in sharp contrast to the prevailing ideal of masculinity, as can be seen in the portrayal of the novel's protagonist, Sal Paradise, who thinks little of societal norms, yet his nonconformity can hardly be seen as a purposeful rebellion testifying to his resolve and proud independence. In the very beginning of his narration, Sal admits that he has just separated from his wife, which resulted in "a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead" (3). Living with his aunt, he is trying to instill meaning into his life through writing, yet he finds his daily existence mind-numbing and lacking purpose. Dissatisfied with his life and disillusioned with New York, Sal repeatedly sets out on a journey in search of adventure and inspiration. Being on the road instantaneously invigorates him; on his way to Denver, Sal meets a jovial cowboy, whose easy attitude underscores his own spiritual emptiness and alienation while simultaneously heightens his thirst for authenticity: "It was the spirit of the West sitting right next to me. I wished I knew his whole raw life and what the hell he'd been doing all these years besides laughing and yelling like that" (21). Sal's journeys can thus be seen as his attempt to reconnect with authentic masculinity that has retained its spunk and fearlessness.

As middle-class values have no appeal to him, Sal has to look elsewhere to find some role models. Given his dejected mental state, it is only natural that Sal's imagination becomes captivated by Dean Moriarty whose energy and enthusiasm seem to know no bounds. A man of legend even before he arrives in New York, Dean is on a mission to live every single day to the hilt, and the impressionable Sal finds his ebullient presence so irresistible that he keeps accompanying Dean whenever he can and begins mythologizing Dean's past and present

escapades. Dean thereby becomes a larger-than-life character: while formerly he was "a young jailkid shrouded in mystery" (4), now he makes furor among Sal's friends who all come under the spell of his personality. It is predominantly Dean's itinerant life and untrammeled libido that contribute to his acclaim, yet Sal is also impressed with Dean's intelligence which he sees as "every bit as formal and shining and complete" (10). In Sal's eyes, Dean is a genius, a bona fide folk hero unafraid to follow his innermost instincts, and his frequent conflicts with the law, along with his unquenchable sexual appetite, amount to a Promethean refusal to be constrained by any rules. Downplaying Dean's criminal record, Sal notes that Dean's delinquency "was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long-prophesied, long a-coming" (10). In this sense, Dean is a harbinger of more manful America for Sal who remarks that while all his friends "were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons, Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love" (10). Tormented by a sense of loss he is unable to articulate, Sal hopes that being with Dean can reinvigorate his own tenuous sense of maleness.

Adventurous as it is, Sal's quest for manhood turns out to be less successful than he expects it to be. For one thing, Sal comes to an understanding that he cannot cope with Dean's zest for life and his constant need to be on the move. Sal does enjoy life on the road, yet he is also pleased to realize that he has a place he can return to: "I had my home to go to, my place to lay my head down and figure the losses and figure the gain that I knew was in there somewhere too" (106-7). In another moment of clarity, Sal realizes that his inability to find direction in life has to do with his rejection of middle-class security that he rightly views as one of the prerogatives of white America. At the same time, he begins to understand that his white identity stands in the way of his desire to live an authentic life: "I wish I were a

Denver Mexican or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a "white man" disillusioned. All my life I'd had white ambitions; that was why I'd abandoned a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley" (180). The problem with Sal's quest is that in his attempts to shed his white identity, he is always on the outside looking in. Lacking Dean's free spirit, he cannot take life day by day; though Sal initially finds enjoyment among Mexican cotton pickers, it eventually becomes clear to him that hard manual labor does not offer the sense of excitement he anticipated. In this respect, Sal's circumstances reflect the position of the Beats in 1950s America. As David Savran asserts, what distinguished the writings of the Beats was an enactment of the "contradictory understanding of America as a land of infinite possibility and crushing repression" (58). Holding salaried jobs only sporadically and emphasizing their independence as writers, the Beats thus remained "burning and insatiable, on a quest for America, for the source, for the father, neither fully citizens of this utopian nation nor fully dispossessed" (59).

The ambiguous position of Sal and his friends is also manifested in their obsession with black culture. When disappointed and low in spirit, Sal finds solace in jazz which he sees as a genuine expression of spontaneous joy of life. Yet his fascination with black culture often turns into romanticizing black experience and projecting his own desires onto African Americans whose lives he sees as more authentic and more dignified than his own. Having only vicarious knowledge of what it means to be black in the U.S., Sal believes that the ordeals African Americans are facing empower them by enabling them to live in the moment. African Americans, it seems to him, have mastered the art of living; while Mexicans in San Joaquin Valley may have known something about backbreaking labor, genuine life epiphanies can be found only in the community of the "happy, true-hearted ecstatic Negroes of America" (180). Musing about his misguided life decisions, Sal goes as far as "wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough

66

life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night" (180). Dean strikes such an imposing figure in the eyes of Sal and his friends precisely because his sexual escapades, carefree attitude, and impulsiveness evoke stereotypical assumptions about black masculinity; though at times taxing, Dean's antics thus provide them a link to alleged black uninhibitedness. Yet even Dean is a sympathetic observer at best. That their notions about African Americans are largely self-serving fantasies becomes apparent when Sal and Dean approach a saxophone player whose performance left them breathless. Excited by the concert, they are looking for some new entertainment and want to take the black musician with them. His response, however, makes it clear that his experience is different from theirs: "Hah, what good's a ball, life's too sad to be ballin all the time" (199).

For those who failed to recognize the importance of black masculinity for the main characters in *On the Road*, Norman Mailer's essay "The White Negro" (1957), published in the same year as Kerouac's novel, points out that the obsession with black masculinity shared by the Beats should not be seen as just a fad. According to Mailer, the situation after WWII was characterized by the fact that men "could hardly maintain the courage to be individual, to speak with one's voice" (277). The atrocities of the war and the impending atomic annihilation, Mailer goes on to say, deeply affected the human condition: what transpired was an age of conformity and depression in which American society suffered from "a collective failure of nerve" (277). Hipsters, on the other hand, were able to retain their independence because they understood that to escape conformity they had to renounce all their roots and live on the margins of society. As Mailer has it, the solution was "to encourage the psychopath in oneself, to explore the domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present" (277-8). To live such an unconventional life called for a great deal of courage but the hipster fortunately could draw inspiration from the black community. As nowhere in the essay does Mailer directly address women, this

inspiration was meant only for white American men whose masculinity badly needed to be bolstered. That is why the genesis of the hipster is described as a wedding of the white man and the black man, and it is "the Negro who brought the cultural dowry" (279). The attributes that were historically linked with African American men are thus validated by Mailer; as Douglas Taylor puts it, in Mailer's vision the qualities associated with horrible blackness "become objects of desire, which [hipsters] perceive as offering them the possibility of escaping the restrictive confines of a repressive white masculinity" (75-6).

Given Mailer's focus on the rebelliousness of the white hipster, it is no wonder that his portrayal of black masculinity is rather sketchy. While sympathetic to the plight of black Americans, Mailer is patronizing them by essentializing African American culture. Pointing to the ever-present danger experienced daily by African Americans as a key aspect of their experience, Mailer claims that in his mentally taxing fight for survival, the "Negro had stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could" (279). This situation, Mailer asserts, results in a spirited simple attitude to life that African American men cannot but share:

> Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Sunday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm. (279).

Evoking Sal's remarks about happy ecstatic Negroes, the above description construes the African American man as incapable of self-control. As Savran maintains, Mailer portrays black masculinity as embodying "an ecstatic, orgasmic, and utopian wholeness and plenitude

that have been lost in white, bourgeois American culture" (50). In Mailer's fantasy, the Negro is therefore represented "simultaneously as feminized (he represents nature as opposed to culture, body as opposed to mind) and as hypermasculinized" (50).

Though copying patterns of black behavior, the white hipster is represented as the genuine preserver of masculine spirit; he is, as Mailer calls him in words reminiscent of Sal's portrayal of Dean, a "frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life" (278). According to Mailer, the anarchic energy unleashed by hipsters has even the potential of radically changing American society; in this sense, white nonconformists in the largest U.S. cities were "a new breed of adventurers, urban adventurers who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts" (279). The impact of the hipster can be felt among discontented young Americans from all walks of life because he upgraded the strategies employed by African Americans for whom psychopathy was a normal condition. The white hipster is likewise a psychopath but he is a psychopath with a difference, a refashioned primitive with a sophisticated approach: "Having converted his unconscious experience into much conscious knowledge, the hipster has shifted the focus of his desire from immediate gratification toward the wider passion for future power which is the mark of civilized man" (281). Having taking stock of how popular culture brands sex as both a sin and heavenly rupture, the hipster is courageous enough to be a psychic and sexual outlaw surviving in the face of the deadening forces of corporate America, inventing and reinventing himself as he sheds his old frustrations and satisfies his instant needs by "giving expression to the buried infant in himself" (283). Always on the move, always burning with desire and trusting his instincts, the hipster is on the path to greater self-knowledge, and it does not matter how he achieves it. In search of increasingly electrifying experiences, he is thus incessantly "exploring backward along the road of the homosexual, the orgiast, the drug-addict, the rapist, the robber and the murderer" (283).

II.3 Murder as Assertion of Manly Will: The Failure of Hypermasculinity in Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*

Mailer's essay was yet another 1950s text arguing that drastic measures were needed to invigorate American masculinity. In his eyes, the hipster's exuberant attitude to life was a definite improvement on the listless, drone-like existence of the vast majority of American men. The new developments were not, however, entirely reassuring; while full of promise, the rebellion undertaken by the hipster did not automatically offer a straight road to self-reliant manhood. According to Mailer, this kind of rebellion cannot slack off even for a moment because "if you lapse back into a frightened stupid child, or if you flip, if you lose your control, reveal the buried weaker more feminine part of your nature, then it is more difficult to swing the next time" (287). Fending off the outside world, the hipster cannot lower his guard; constantly on the lookout for ecstatic moments, he cannot develop a reputation for weakness. The thing is that once the hipster loses his cool, he may find out that his manhood has been compromised. Control is thus essential for the hipster, as "one can hardly afford to be put down too often, or one is beat, one has lost one's confidence, one has lost one's will, one is impotent in the world of action and so close to the demeaning flip of becoming a queer" (288). Seen in this light, asserting manhood for the hipster becomes an ongoing battle that only few can wage and come out victorious in the end. In fact, he needs to fight for his masculine credentials tooth and nail, not only with no certain outcome in sight but also without any set of rules. A sort of tragic hero, the hipster carves out his own identity in opposition to societal norms, assembling all available influences that can sustain him; as Savran observers, the hipster in Mailer's description is "a hybridized subject, a product of cultural miscegenation, a cross-dresser, neither completely white nor black, masculine nor feminine, heterosexual nor homosexual, working-class nor bourgeois" (52).

The disturbing aspect of Mailer's essay is that he does not find it problematic that the hipster's refusal to do things by the book does not stop short of criminal behavior of the most serious kind; as Fuchs has it, "The White Negro" offers a "glorification of the morality of impulse, however destructive that impulse may be" ("Identity" 246). In this sense, Mailer's essay testifies to his attraction to the notion of asserting masculinity in a heroic, uncompromising confrontation with emasculating forces of modern society. In *An American Dream* (1965), published eight years later, he once again shows that masculine deficiency can be overcome through a radical gesture that promises a new, energized approach to life. As Justin Shaw argues, in the novel's protagonist, Stephen Rojack, Mailer portrays a man "striving to *become* masculine through his own choices and actions, reasserting masculine agency through a sexistential project based on virile performance" (50). From the start, Rojack is in need of regaining his sense of manliness, as his life lacks direction and purpose. Like so many war veterans, he cannot find an occupation that could satisfy him; having tried luck in politics, he finds that his personality is "built upon a void" (7). Earning his living as a professor of existential psychology and a minor TV celebrity, he is incapable of solving his existential crisis and ponders about suicide: "In fact I had come to the end of a very long street. Call it an avenue. For I had come to decide I was finally a failure" (8). The problem with suicide is that it is asexual, a solitary unmanly act incapable of offering any insight. The notion of murder, on the other hand, strikes Rojack as "having exhilaration in it" (8), resulting from a release of strong emotions that need to be vented out. Made in passing when Rojack is dealing with his suicidal thoughts, this comment bespeaks his lack of concern for what he calls "[g]ood old Protestant center of a mad nation" (143).

At first Rojack nevertheless tries hard to gain reputation and climb the social ladder. Keenly aware of his half-Jewish origin, he knows that he has to play his game carefully. Rojack does not have to wait long, though, to gain a position enabling him to hobnob with the

very rich. Having met Jack Kennedy, he joins the future U.S. president on a double date which turns out to be a pivotal moment in his life. His date is Deborah Caughlin Kelly, a daughter of an influential millionaire, who years later becomes his wife. Given her father's position in Washington, Rojack believes marrying into the Kelly family provides him an "entry to the big league" (17), yet he soon discovers that Deborah's growing dislike of him begins to unravel his identity. His feelings for Deborah turn to hatred, yet he remains psychically dependent on her; though Rojack is not living with her any longer, their marriage still defines his understanding of who he is: "So I hated her, yes indeed I did, but my hatred was a cage which wired my love, and I did not know if I had the force to find my way free. Marriage to her was the armature of my ego; remove the armature and I might topple like clay" (17). In Rojack's mind, Deborah is a wicked sorceress with supernatural powers, a devourer of men incapable of normal human emotions, yet he cannot sever his legal bond to his wife, even though he realizes that his dependence diminishes his masculine prowess. Achieving considerable social standing thus comes with a price for Rojack, who becomes convinced that "she was a great bitch, Deborah, a lioness of the species: unconditional surrender was her only raw meat" (9). Unable to leave Deborah for good, he ends up in a deeply demoralizing limbo: "We had been married … for eight years, and for the last five I had been trying to evacuate my expeditionary army, that force of hopes, all-out need, plain virile desire and commitment which I had spent on her" (9).

Rojack cannot refrain from visiting Deborah, though he knows that he has no defense against Deborah's dominating femininity which seems to engulf him and overpower his senses the moment he enters her apartment. Observing how the flowers adorning the place, "royal, sinister, cultivated in their twinings, breathed at one from all four walls, upstairs and down" (21), he feels exposed to menacing fecundity and obscene lavishness that he associates with the occupant's female evil power. In Rojack's dejected state of mind, Deborah's

overwhelming sinister femininity conspires against every single effort to show his independence. What makes him even more vulnerable to his wife's condescension and derision is the realization that he has never ceased to be a pariah in the refined world of the moneyed elite Deborah inhabits with natural ease. Aware that his standing within the very wealthy is questionable at best, he comes to see money as the "manifest of how unconsummated and unmasculine was the core of my force" (18). Deborah rubs salt in the wound by constantly undermining Rojack's masculine spirit; scorning his achievements and boasting about her lovers, she becomes in his fevered imagination "an artist at sucking the marrow from a broken bone" (15). As Shaw has it, Mailer expresses Rojack's "initial sense of loss and impotence in terms of Deborah's "witchy" and "monstrous" vampirism" (50). Things escalate when Deborah begins to ridicule his wartime heroism and declares that her love for him is dead. Her words cut to the quick, irrevocably shattering Rojack's masculine ego. Faced with the grim fact that she may finally be ready to move on with her life without him, he now feels that his identity becomes even more unstable, teetering on the brink of dissolution: "I had opened a void—I was now without center. Can you understand? I did not belong to myself any longer. Deborah had occupied my center" (27).

Deborah's radical challenge of Rojack's masculinity is a make or break moment for Rojack. In this sense, this situation can be compared to the scene in which General Cummings orders Hearn to pick up a cigarette butt from the floor in order to humiliate his subordinate and break his independence of mind. Rojack responds to the challenge by physically attacking Deborah and strangling her to death in the ensuing fight. Though Rojack realizes that he will have to do some serious explaining and might eventually end up in jail, the sight of his wife's corpse rejuvenates his spirit. Having killed his nemesis, he feels elated beyond words; in fact, it is as if life was beginning anew for him: "I was weary with the most honorable fatigue, and my flesh seemed new. I had not felt so nice since I was twelve. It

seemed inconceivable at this instant that anything in life could fail to please" (32). Once Deborah's has been disposed of, Rojack seems to have regained his virility; leaving his wife's body lying on the floor, he goes downstairs and instantaneously forces her German maid, Ruta, into a prolonged sexual intercourse. Having his way with Ruta turns into an electrifying experience during which Rojack imagines himself to be charged with invincible potency. With no one to diminish his ego, absolute masculine control seems to be within his reach; in his euphoria over his mastery of Ruta, Rojack contends that she "was becoming mine as no woman ever had, she wanted no more than to be a part of my will" (45). As Shaw argues, sexual domination of women becomes the key to his regained masculine prowess; having subjected the maid to his sexual caprices, Rojack "actively engages in a sexually charged subject/object relation, manipulating Ruta as a passive object to be exploited and appropriated by his oppressive subjectivity, to be subsumed within his hegemonic masculine will, his sexistential project" (52).

Rojack's harsh treatment of Ruta invigorates him also because it takes a sting off the memory of his wartime heroic act which was actually motivated by his disgust with life in the army. As he admits, commanding "hard-nosed Southerners and young Mafiosos from the Bronx" brought him into such a state of mental exhaustion that dying in combat "appeared to me as a possibility considerably more agreeable than my status in some further disorder" (3). Since Rojack's decision to single-handedly destroy a German machine gun has to do more with his desperation than with any conscious heroism on his part, such a reckless act testifies to his lack of self-control under pressure rather than to a display of discipline he could be proud of. Subjugating Ruta to his will, on the other hand, fills him with a galvanizing sense of renewed purpose: in his mind, he is engaging an enemy on a new battlefield, and this time he is firmly in control. Penetrating Ruta anally against her will, Rojack imagines himself shedding his old self and coming in possession of "mendacity, guile, a fine-edged cupidity for

the strokes which steals, the wit to trick authority" (44-5). As Millett asserts, this attitude to sexuality is typical for Mailer's work which defines sex practiced by men as "a thrilling test of self, played according to a demanding performance ethic which steers the athletic "hunter-fighter-fucker" past the land mines of homosexuality, onanism, impotence, and capitulation to women" (327). Accordingly, Rojack's triumphant sense of sexual agency inspired by his violent handling of Deborah is a clear sign that "coitus here is simply his accomplishment as enacted upon Ruta, and therefore its value is precisely its value to him" (Millet 14). That Ruta praises Rojack's sexual potency is thus relevant because to fail "at any enterprise is to become female, defeated by the lurking treachery of Freudian bisexuality, the feminine in a man giving out like a trick knee at a track meet" (Millet 327).

While Millett sees Rojack's show of masculine potency as an example of ruthless if not outright pathetic phallocentric ideology, his actions may appear differently if seen in light of Mailer's analysis of the hipster phenomenon. Violence and unbridled sex revive Rojack's masculine spirit not only because he is now able to conquer the demons of his past but also because he is now able to live in the moment. Though it severely tests his courage, he manages to win over an attractive call girl, Cherry, despite threats made by her mobster entourage. Having proven his mettle, Rojack is rewarded with a powerful sexual union which for the first time in his life fully resonates in his body without "passing through fire or straining the stones" (128) of his restless mind. He is still shaken from the events of the previous day when he leaves Cherry the next morning, but his thoughts no longer dwell on his traumatic war experience or Deborah's malevolence. Half dreaming about Cherry, Rojack is simultaneously aware that his actions have put his life in jeopardy, which adds to his keen sensation of being alive: "My head felt clear, too clear, I had a deep headache back of my eyes. But it was not painful so much as open to the promise it would last for more than a day. My body was drunk. Its nerves were alive, my flesh felt new—fact, it was almost a pleasure

to walk, for I could feel the links which went into a step" (131).   While not so long ago Rojack was cowering before Deborah in fear that without her he was going to be nobody, he is now able to stand up to Shago Martin, Cherry's switchblade-wielding former boyfriend, whom he beats up and hurls down several flights of stairs.   Rojack's manly decisiveness culminating in his surprising ability to overpower a black pimp suggests that the murder of Deborah can be seen as offering "negative transcendence, an antinomian ascent by descent, romantic idealism writ large" (Fuchs, "Identity" 248).

Rojack's conduct can also be seen in a positive light when compared to the pusillanimity of his intellectual colleagues who are seized with panic at the mere thought that a person implicated in possible murder may be associated with their institutions.   Both the director of Rojack's TV program and the head of his department show no interest in Rojack's wellbeing, beseeching him instead to temporarily disappear from the public eye.   Their foolish, self-centered prattle establishes Rojack as a man capable of self-reflection and manly composure born out of the exigencies of his precarious situation.   His newly regained sense of masculine prowess, however, lasts only till the meeting with Deborah's father who quickly puts a damper on Rojack's hopes of turning his life round.   The first shock comes when Rojack is greeted at the door by Ruta who informs him that she's been Kelly's mistress for months.   In so doing, she adds insult to injury, as the day before Rojack learned that Cherry had been Kelly's mistress when she lived in Las Vegas.   Meeting Kelly face to face further precipitates fall from grace; as his father-in-law makes it clear, in a game played by the very powerful, he is but an ignorant pawn: "There's nothing but magic at the top.   It's a little secret a few of us keep to ourselves , but that, my friend, is one reason why it's not easy to get to the top" (246).   Like Hearn in his final confrontation with Cummings, Rojack is made to realize his own insignificance, suffering yet another blow to his manly self-esteem when he learns that Deborah had an incestuous relationship with her father.   Prior to the meeting with Kelly,

Rojack believes that Deborah's death at his hands marks the end of her dark power and the beginning of his autonomy manifested first by his sexual dominance of Ruta and later by the sexual bliss he experiences with Cherry. Accustomed to define his identity in sexual terms, Rojack now sees that Kelly always beat him to the punch.

The picture Mailer paints in *An American Dream* is as bleak as the one presented in *The Naked and the Dead.* One might try to assert one's will, yet it is the Kellys who get to shuffle the deck and deal the cards in the long run. The corporate power they represent is impossible to effectively resist, which is the lesson both Hearn and Rojack learn in the aftermath of their personal rebellions. Unlike Hearn who pays for his rebellion with his life, Rojack faces no immediate repercussions, yet he is soon made to understand that had it not been for Kelly's mediation he would have probably been heading for jail. This revelation makes Rojack realize that he has not escaped the Kelly magic by killing Deborah but also serves to remind him that he is in fact at the mercy of his father-in-law's whim. If one telephone call from Kelly was enough for the investigation against Rojack to be dropped, another call could easily instigate his death: "I did not know where his power ended. Maybe he had only to pick the phone and some automobile could cut me down at an intersection" (252). Having found out that Cherry was killed while he was visiting Kelly, Rojack decides to leave town; his fealty to the world of power and influence is thus over. After a brief stay in Las Vegas, he sets out for Guatemala and Yucatán, distancing himself further from the world run by Kelly and his associates. In more sense than one, his sense of alienation is similar to that experienced by Frederic in the final scene of *A Farewell to Arms*; as Shaw argues, without Deborah around, Rojack comes to realize that "he alone is responsible for maintaining a coherent gender identity" (49). Like Frederic, Rojack has some thinking to do, yet finding what to do with his life may be difficult, as the energy and excitement he drew

from his murder of Deborah are long gone.   As Shaw has it, what started as a "linear sexistential project dissolves into an amorphous and objectless existential dread" (56).

III.1 What Price Manliness: Turmoil and Anguish of the Vietnam War Era

An American Dream was published in March 1965, a week after the first regular U.S. ground troops were deployed to South Vietnam. That was the beginning of the Vietnam War which polarized American society and further complicated the quest for proper manly conduct for thousands of youngsters coming of age. For one thing, the countercultural turmoil of the sixties made it soon difficult to wholeheartedly believe in what Kimmel calls the "impossible synthesis of sober responsible breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero" (262) that underpinned the prevalent images of manhood in the previous decade. In their rebellion against conformism represented by the ideal of comfortable and uneventful suburban life, an increasing number of young middle-class youths were embracing the ostentatiously diverse hippie culture, rejecting in effect "the corporate clone as a model for manhood" (Kimmel 263). However exciting, the hippie lifestyle did not crystallize into sustaining guidelines of behavior; lacking discipline and rife with internal conflicts, many hippie communes fell apart without instilling their members with some principles that would supplant their fathers' unimaginative masculinity. Since the Tet Offensive of 1968, the discontent voiced by the counterculture eventually centered on the American presence in South Asia, seen by many as a symbol of the iniquities of the capitalistic system. Yet even those who abandoned hedonistic experimentation to take an unequivocal political stance against the war were often not quite sure about their manhood. As Milton J. Bates points out, opposing the war "denied men of the New Left a rite of passage that their fathers had undergone in World War II" (*Wars* 137). Bates adds that while feigned homosexuality was an effective way to dodge the draft, ultimately there was "no way to feel morally justified without also feeling sexually compromised" (*Wars* 137).

The existing disorientation and anxiety about proper gender roles were partially due to the fact that hegemonic American masculinity came under attack from the ranks of the previously oppressed, and it did not help that early novelistic portrayals of the Vietnam War brought scything criticism not only of the Vietnam War but also of traditional myths of heroic American manhood. William Eastlake's *The Bamboo Bed* (1969) was one of the first works of fiction drawing parallels between wars against the Native Americans a century before and the American involvement in Vietnam. Dying in the Vietnamese jungle, Captain Clancy becomes unsure about his whereabouts, thinking for a moment that he was riding with Custer's Seventh Cavalry when his unit was hit, only to realize that that "was another time, another place. Other Indians" (23). Clancy is known for collecting the enemy's ears, but the narrator makes it clear that his actions pale in comparison to the atrocities committed by U.S. troops on Native Americans. While only alluding to Clancy's objectionable methods, the narrator quotes a graphic account given after the battle of Sand Creek:

> The next day I did not see a body of a man, woman or Indian child that was not scalped by us, and in many instances the bodies were mutilated in the most horrible manner. Men's, women's and children's private parts cut out. I saw one of our men who had cut out a woman's private parts and had them for exhibition on a stick. Some of our men wore them in their hats. (35-6)

The mention of the battle of Sand Creek serves as a reminder that the U.S. has had a history of using indiscriminative use of force in the name of its imperialistic interests. This in turn raises questions about American psyche and the ideological underpinnings of the American discourse on masculinity.

An embodiment of indomitable blind will, Clancy shows no moral qualms over the effects of his actions however destructive they are. His renown within the army stem from his obsession with effective exercise of power as well as from his eccentric behavior and

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appearance; supervising over his deployment, Clancy is always carrying a sword and wearing not only a "Roman crest riveted to his helmet but a red, white and blue jungle parrot feather stuck there too as a leader point" (9). The captain's swashbuckling persona is the reason why his men follow his command blindly, yet Clancy shows no interest in them and does not care about the casualties his troops may suffer. His sole goal is to win over the enemy; as his childhood friend remarks, even as a boy growing up in a school for orphans, Clancy cared only about winning at all costs, never quite understanding the "language on the outside and so he thought they meant fight when they said fight" (108). Bordering on pathology, Clancy's idiosyncrasy is not only a sign of lack of restraint but also of lack of vision. Though it is repeatedly hinted that he may possess the secret of the war, it turns out that no special knowledge informs Clancy's actions: "I went up Hill 904 simply because by this time, by this long endless time, it had become a habit" (279). In this sense, Clancy's flashy performance is an empty show, reflecting the spectacular yet ineffective use of American technology in Vietnam. This ineffectiveness is symbolized by a scene in which the rotor blade of a downed U.S. helicopter points "straight up skyward like some shining and final American erection" (17). The myth of American potency is thus put into question; as H. Palmer Hall observes, this "final erection is doomed to failure; the spurts are sterile" (159). Clancy slowly bleeds to death before he is found by a rescue helicopter, and his conduct remains as inscrutable as the jungle his troops attempted to police and control.

It did not take long before first personal accounts of the Vietnam War found their way to bookshelves, and some of them were equally critical of popular images of masculinity. Ron Kovic's candid memoirs *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), for instance, emphasizes the extent to which his decision to join the Marines and serve his country in South Asia was motivated by the relentless national war propaganda perpetuated by Hollywood and the media in the postwar era. At the same time, it is a testimony to the cruel treatment of handicapped

war vets who are seen as defective and thus expendable. As a child growing on Long Island, Kovic has an imagination full of WWII heroism; when he is done studying the Marine Corps Guidebook or watching the army show on Channel 2, he runs into the nearby woods where he and his friends "set ambushes, then led gallant attacks, storming over the top, bayonetting and shooting anyone got in our way" (55). Whenever he hears the Marine Corps hymn, he thinks of John Wayne in *The Sands of Iowa Jima* (1949) and tears start swelling up in his eyes. His other obsession being baseball, the young Kovic spends long hours on the field and dreams about making the Yankees' roster. Like the childhood of millions of middle-class white boys in the 1950s, Kovic's early years are idyllic, and he looks to the future with optimism and enthusiasm as he wholeheartedly partakes in what Tom Engelhardt calls the country's "reimagining itself as a magic kingdom, a cornucopic mechanism for turning out the world's play toys and pleasure environments" (87). As Kovic reminisces at the end of his book, it was a time of innocence when everything was, in one word, lovely: "*It was all sort of easy .... Getting nailed at home plate, studying the cubs scout handbook, tying knots, playing Ping-Pong, reading* National Geographic. *Micky Mantle was my hero and Joan Marfe was the girl I liked the best*" (223-4).

As Engelhardt observes, the aspirations of children and adults alike were largely formed during the time American families spent together in the living room in front of the TV set. Day in day out, television was thus shaping American values, while its guardians were making sure that whatever it offered "was to be vetted for the aberrant, impure, or un-American" (Engelhardt 89). At the same time, early television broadcasting also fostered the preparedness to defend these values. In more or less explicit terms, a sense of urgency was being created as the realities of the Cold War were brought home by countless films and programs in which "fortress America fought back, defending itself against the ambushes of the forces of Evil" (Engelhardt 89). The young Kovic is one of countless young Americans

who take these messages to heart. His favorite pastimes never let him forget that his destiny is entwined with that of his country; from an early age, Kovic is thus determined to fulfill the promise inherent in his having been born on the fourth of July: "I loved God more than anything and I prayed to Him and the Virgin Mary and Jesus and all the saints to be a good boy and a good American" (50). Joining the Marines is only a logical step after finishing high school; unlike Kovic's brief job in a local shopping center, going through a training to become a Marine is certainly in line with President Kennedy's call to service and his idea of a New Frontier. As Engelhardt asserts, Kennedy's foreign policy was shaped by his determination to "create a Natty Bumpo for the netherworld not from the quasi-warriors of the CIA … but from the regular army" (162). This new guerilla-style warrior would thus "be mythologized and publicized rather than hidden in a cloak of secrecy and deniability" (Engelhardt 162). To Kovic, Marine recruiters already seem larger than life, which is why shaking hands with them, he could not "help but feel that I was shaking hands with John Wayne and Audie Murphy" (74).

A tour of duty in Vietnam is a welcomed opportunity for Kovic to show his manly prowess and to serve his country "like the young president had asked us to do" (74). He desires to be the best Marine and to win all possible medals that would confirm his soldierly competence. During Kovic's second tour in Vietnam, however, things go awry. The first unfortunate incident takes place during an ambush when he accidentally kills a U.S. corporal. In a later combat operation, his unit opens fire at suspicious-looking figures, shooting to pieces a group of defenseless children. This is a severe blow to Kovic's self-esteem to the extent that he starts "looking for booby traps to step on, taking all sorts of crazy chances, trying to forget about the rain and the cold and the dead children and the corporal" (210). His active duty comes to an abrupt end when an NVA bullet tears through his shoulder and shatters his spine cord, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down. From this moment on,

life dramatically changes for Kovic who has to come to terms with the fact that his masculinity has been irrevocably diminished. In the first place, he has to deal with his physical frailty and lack of self-reliance, and do away with the feeling that his "youth had been desecrated, [his] physical humanity defiled" (149). It is a long and painful process during which Kovic needs to redefine his identity and accept that the body he "had trained so hard to be strong and quick" (149) has to be now dragged around like a dead weight. The long months he spends in VA hospitals test his self-worth and self-determination, as it often happens that he has to wait for his enema in a long line of broken bodies, or is left for hours lying in his own excrements. When Kovic complains about the neglect and the appalling overall conditions, and demands to be treated like a war veteran, one of the aides responds with a taunting laugh and adds that no one is interested in his ordeal: "Vietnam don't mean nothin' to me or any of these other people. You can take your Vietnam and shove it up your ass" (130-1).

Kovic's account of his life prior to his near-fatal injury is free of any criticism of traditional masculinity or U.S. foreign policy. His life of a handicapped veteran, however, prompts him to reassess his notions about masculine competence. Among other things, he realizes how much he was guided by a simplistic performance-oriented code of conduct that made him unprepared for the way his life has turned out: "All his life he'd wanted to be a winner. It was always so important to win, to be the very best" (186). With time on his hands, Kovic slowly begins to see that his trust was misplaced when it came to those who were asking young men like him to prove their manliness by serving in Vietnam. At the same time, it becomes apparent to him that most people are embarrassed by his presence and do not know how to act towards him and other veterans now that they are handicapped. When Kovic is invited to take part in a Memorial Day parade in his hometown, people see him as a jarring oddity in the overall gaiety: "He couldn't tell at first exactly what it was, but something was

not the same, they weren't waving and they just seemed standing staring at Eddie Dugan and himself like they weren't even there. It was as if they were ghosts like little Johnny Heanon or Billy Morris come back from the dead" (103). It is hard to swallow for Kovic that in the streets where he used to play as a child, he is now being received without any enthusiasm or understanding of what he must have gone through. While an American Legion commander is giving a speech about the need to continue the war effort in Vietnam on behalf of disabled veterans, Kovic wonders why he has not been asked to speak about his military service and has to listen instead to civilians "like they were experts on the whole goddamn thing, like he and Eddie didn't know how to speak for themselves because there was something wrong now with both of them" (107).

The uneasiness Kovic feels during the parade marks the beginning of his shift towards political activism. Initially, he is seized by a sense of injustice and self-pity at being marginalized due to his physical handicap: "I have given my dead swinging dick for America. I have given my numb young dick for democracy" (112). Unable to process his feelings, Kovic is unsure what to do with his life when the news about four students killed at Kent State University gives him a sense of purpose in life. He moves to California where he finds comradeship among other Vietnam War veterans and becomes a spirited member of the growing anti-war movement. Though his activism does not solve all of Kovic's problems, it nevertheless provides him with new insights. Above all, he comes to understand how he was used by the architects of Cold War policies: "He had never been but a thing to them, a thing to put a uniform on and train to kill, a young thing to run through the meat-grinder, a cheap small nothing thing to make mincemeat out of" (166). Through his activism, Kovic does his part in the collective effort to stop the war and prevent other young men from ending up in Vietnam, yet he is also trying to attain some kind of mental balance. In fact, he realizes that his very identity is at stake now that he does not meet the standards of conventional

masculinity guarded by opinion makers who see physical disability as an irredeemable personal imperfection: "They had made him confused and uncertain and blind with hate. They wanted to make him hide the way he was hiding now" (166). Most importantly, the veteran community is a place where Kovic is able to maintain relationships with other men that are not based on competitiveness and restraint; as he soon finds out, sharing the same experience with other veterans not only creates a sense of togetherness but also enables them to talk of "death and atrocity to each other with unaccustomed gentleness" (147).

The high point of Kovic's account takes place when he crashes the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami. Traveling to Florida with other veterans, Kovic seems finally at peace with himself and the whole world: "I am certain I want to be alive forever. I know that no matter what has happened the world is a beautiful place, and I'm here with my brothers" (170). A sense of purpose invigorates Kovic and his companions, as they feel that voicing their opposition to the war at the convention may add meaning to their ordeals and bring change to the national debate not only about the Vietnam War but also America's goals in general. Agitated and adamant, they are convinced that the time has come for them to speak:

> It is our last patrol together, and I know I will remember it as long as I live. It is a historic event like the Bonus March of thousands of veterans upon the Capitol in the thirties. And now it is we who are marching, the boys of the fifties. We are going to the Republican National Convention to reclaim America and a bit of ourselves.… We know we are fighting the real enemies this time – the ones who have made profit off our very lives. (170-1)

Upon their arrival, the veterans have to haggle with convention organizers who bar them from all official proceedings, yet Kovic manages to sneak into the Convention Center. Having been spotted by a CBS reporter, he gives a testimony on national TV about how the sacrifices

made by his generation have been ignored by politicians. Though he is eventually wheeled off the moment he starts shouting ant-war slogans during Nixon's speech, Kovic nonetheless experiences a personal victory. Protesting against Nixon's hard stance on Vietnam, he not only makes sure that his voice is heard but also expresses his disapproval of modes of masculinity built around control and domination.

III.2 In Search of New Answers: Tim O'Brien's Critique of Unreflective Masculinity in
If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *Northern Lights

Kovic's protest is emblematic of other, often violent demonstrations all over the country that testified to a deep rift between the more radical youth and the political establishment. These acts of disobedience were thus oftentimes interpreted as an alarming sign of the decline of masculine authority. Voices complaining about the alleged loss of authority on the part of American men were already commonplace two decades earlier when postwar social commentators "linked very different phenomena – a decline in men's power within family, changes in the organization of white-collar labor, and the demands of life in a consumer society – to form the discourse of imperiled masculinity" (Reumann 70). In the 1970s, however, this way of thinking became widespread among American white men, leading, among other things, to the emergence of a new hegemonic masculinity which came into existence as a reaction to the ongoing liberal efforts to implement further legislation that would empower women and other long-oppressed groups. As Savran observes, with working-class and lower-middle-class men experiencing substantial economic setbacks, post-Vietnam America saw the "ascendancy of a new and powerful figure in U.S. culture: the white male as victim" (4). According to Savran, this new development represented "an attempt on the part of white men to recoup the losses they have allegedly suffered at the hands of those women and persons of color who, in fact, have had to pay for the economic and social prosperity that white men have historically enjoyed" (4). Men subscribing to this ideology of victimization did not see eye to eye on many issues; in their belief of being victimized, they all nevertheless tended to rhetorically trade places with the people they had no use for and thus were able to "imagine themselves (through a kind of psychic prestidigitation) the new persecuted majority" (Savran 3).

The notion of imperiled white masculinity comes to the forefront with the soul-searching after the fall of Saigon in 1975, altering representations of Vietnam War veterans. A good example of this change is Ted Kotcheff's *First Blood*: released in October 1982, the film became an instantaneous hit, gaining popularity among white working-class men. As Albert Auster and Leonard Quart argue, one of the film's appeals was that its protagonist "combined the twin 1970s movie metaphors of the wounded vet and the superman in the same persona without any hint of contradiction or irony" (94). Played by the ostentatiously muscular Sylvester Stallone, John Rambo exudes immense strength, yet he is deeply scarred by the war, and the film's ending shows him uncontrollably sobbing over the fact that U.S. soldiers fighting in Vietnam risked their lives for their country yet were not allowed to win. Though dressed in army fatigues, Rambo comes across as a solitary counterculture figure donning a military uniform the way it was worn by many anti-war activists, which creates the impression that he is simultaneously "a hippie drifter and a misunderstood patriot" (Auster and Quart 94). Brutalized by a small-town sheriff and his deputies, Rambo is forced to relive his traumatic experience of combat by becoming a guerrilla warrior fighting for his life and his dignity in the woods of the American North West. A former Green Beret turned resistance fighter, Rambo thus unites "the external characteristics of those who dissented from the war with those who fought in and supported it" (Auster and Quart 94). What is more, pursued by local police forces operating in coordination with a whole National Guard unit, he makes a similar use of the natural terrain as Vietcong and NVA soldiers in Vietnam. The scenes in which the pursuing policemen display bloodthirsty inclinations further falsify the realities of the Vietnam War era and displace the questions about American responsibility.

Many male viewers were not troubled by willful inaccuracies and contradictions of *First Blood*. According to James William Gibson, since many intellectuals were quick to dismiss Rambo as a joke, they were unable to realize that "behind the Indian bandanna,

necklace and bulging muscles, a new culture hero affirmed such traditional American values as self-reliance, honesty, courage, and concern for fellow citizens" (10). Taciturn and fiercely independent, Rambo could not be mistaken for a smooth-talking bookish type: a steroid-induced version of the Special Forces combatant envisioned by Kennedy, he exemplified competent masculine craftsmanship that working-class audiences could identify with. While drawing on the American mythology of the frontier, Kotcheff's film also reflected the new and often confusing economic and social realities that working-class men had to deal with. As a result, many men who were convinced that they themselves were not treated fairly viewed Rambo as a heroic figure engaged in a fight against an unjust system. Watching Stallone's performance was thus more than a mindless escape from reality; as Gibson has it, through identification with Rambo American men were able "to fantasize about the powers and features of another kind of man who could retake and reorder the world" (11). Giving expression to a sense of betrayal felt by many working-class men, *First Blood* thus marked a significant transformation of earlier warrior myths, setting precedence for later films and programs about the Vietnam War, all of which at various degrees "celebrate survival as a kind of heroism, and cynicism as a form of self-preservation" (Aufderheide 84). With the focus on internal conflicts, the true battlefield is thereby the one that "has been internalized, and the enemy is not so much the Vietnamese as the cold, abstract forces of bureaucracy and the incompetence of superiors" (Aufderheide 84).

While distrust in superiors and their decisions has been a common theme in American war literature since *A Farewell to Arms*, the extent to which the enemy at various levels of U. S. command superseded the actual enemy forces in Vietnam War film and literature was a new phenomenon. As Pat Aufderheide puts it, the problematic role played by various authority figures has to do with the fact that Vietnam became "a powerful metaphor for tensions in American society since the war—especially over the questions of personal

responsibility for social conflict and political decisions" (84). At the same time, numerous representations of the Vietnam War veteran as an abused and misunderstood victim testified to the depth of the national trauma caused by the fiasco of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. According to Gibson, the popularity of *First Blood* and its sequel, *Rambo: First Blood II* (1985), revealed how much an "unbroken record of military victories has been crucially important both to the national identity and to the personal identity of many Americans—particularly men" (10). Badly bruised, the American psyche after the Vietnam War was in need of imaginative regeneration that would reaffirm American values and restore the belief that Americans are always fighting the good fight and are therefore destined to come on top in the long run. In this sense, *First Blood* and *Rambo: First Blood II* met the demand of the time by delivering a message that resonated with many Americans, namely that while the Vietnam War had been lost on the battlefield, it could still be won on the silver screen. As a result, male audiences tended to ignore the shallowness of Rambo's character and were far from conceding that he was an inarticulate "trained killer who can do nothing else in life" (Auster and Quart 94). What mattered was that his violence was a form of speech, a justified bi-product of an innate anti-intellectualism.

Rambo's endurance may be impressive, yet his virtual indestructability and daredevil courage cannot conceal other, more dubious aspects of his portrayal. For one thing, taking pleasure in various ways of disposing of his enemies, Rambo comes across as an asocial individual whose instinctual masculinity is based on physical prowess and a vaguely defined sense of loyalty. What is more, the manliness represented by Rambo creates an inflated, visceral image of male self-sufficiency; as Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser point out in their analysis of *Rambo: First Blood II*, the film's true spectacle is Stallone's "glistening hypermasculinity, emphasized in the kind of languid camera movement and fetishizing close-up usually reserved for female 'flashdancers'" (110). Exorcising emasculating elements in

American culture, Rambo's fetishized body thus functions as a "bulwark against feeling of powerlessness engendered by technology, minority rights, feminism" (Studlar and Desser 111). The conspicuous display of masculine competence does not leave any space for women who are of no use to Rambo on his perilous mission to free American POWs held in Vietnam. Almost instantaneously, he finds himself in his own element: having cut off the ropes of his parachute which get caught in the door of the aircraft that carries him to the enemy territory, he symbolically severs himself from "the excesses of an over-sophisticated America" (Wimmer 191) and embraces the laws of the jungle. It is the only recourse left to him anyway because his mission is sabotaged by Murdock, a CIA operative who represents a soft, bureaucratic masculinity suspicious of traditional manhood and easily swayed by new trends. Rambo's predicament thus lies not so much in the fact that he has to engage in another combat operation in Vietnam but that he is expendable to managerial types like Murdock who "have a history of stabbing American soldiers in the back" (Wimmer 190).

Though Rambo brings the POWs back home against all odds, he is not received as a hero, which confirms his marginal status. That Rambo's masculinity is an anomaly in post-Vietnam American society becomes particularly clear when he confronts Murdock in his high-tech command post. While the Vietnamese jungle used to offer him effective cover, the shining state-of-the-art gadgetry makes Rambo's pumped-up body seem vulnerable and grotesque. Threatening to kill the man who betrayed him, Rambo eventually goes on to vent out his frustration by opening fire at the shining electronic surveillance equipment, thereby taking a stand against technological sophistication as a corrupting force undermining the long-established masculine virtues. This dramatic gesture, however, is pointless, a sign of Rambo's powerlessness in relation to Murdock who is not only physically unthreatening but also "embodies inactivity and voyeurism as he plays around with beeping, flashing computers" (Wimmer 190). In the beginning of the movie, Rambo is a solitary figure among other

prisoners crushing stones in a quarry, presumably serving the sentence for having raised

havoc on his pursuers in *First Blood*. The successful completion of his secret mission does

not change Rambo's situation, as he remains a sullen, inarticulate loner unattached to any

community; with all his extraordinary skills and demonstrations of desire to serve his country,

he is still destined to be "the perennial righteous underdog, the survivor of alienation and

rejection" (Aufderheide 104). While it may seem peculiar that he cannot find a common

language with other veterans, not to mention the POWs he has rescued, his total disconnection

from the feminine world is a sign of a stunted personality incapable of growth. Emotionally

deficient, Rambo can find contentment only in combat situations which give him "a boy's

orgasmic fantasy of power" (Aufderheide 106).

As Susan Jeffords points out, the appeal of masculinity portrayed by Rambo and other

similar characters lies precisely in their marginality. They can be viewed as paragons of

masculinity *because* they occupy a liminal space free of feminine presence; though portrayed

as pariahs, Vietnam veterans in Hollywood films thus came to represent a virile version of

masculinity uncontaminated by any feminine agenda of the time: "Isolated from American

culture and saved from its deterioration and feminization, veterans are characterized as able to

revitalize a US society that has lost or corrupted its own" (205). Another, closely related

strategy employed in Vietnam War films is based on making femininity entirely redundant,

which is achieved by locating reproduction solely in the masculine sphere. As Jeffords

emphasizes, Vietnam narratives tend to center around confrontations between reproduction

and masculinity which are resolved by the "exclusion of the woman/mother and the

appropriation of the tasks of reproduction by the masculine" (204). Confining female

characters to their biological role, these narratives offer formidable father figures who mold

new recruits by turning them into disciplined warriors wielding sophisticated weapons: with

the aid of the latest instruments of death, the masculine can give "birth to itself as a

technologized body in which the individual is an extension of the equipment he carries" (212). This accent on male expertise leads to skewed representations of gender relations, wherein the male character takes over the domain of social, familial, and historical reproduction "principally by claiming for itself the task of 'birthing' and self-sufficient parenting" (Jeffords 204). By repressing the feminine, narration in Vietnam War films from *The Deer Hunter* (1978) to *Platoon* (1986) thus "interposes itself at the point of (re)production, generating the birth of the masculine subject, apart from the mother, *self-delivered*" (Jeffords 212).

Crude and rigid in his opinion about American society, Rambo is a perfect embodiment of the notion of imperiled white masculinity. As Aufderheide puts it, his character effectively combines "elements that expressed power and powerlessness, making him both victor and victim" (105). An unmistakable sense of victimhood pervades also later 1980s films where returning Vietnam War veterans deal with "an unfriendly, unfeeling world where the rules have changed" (Auderheide 109). Much of Vietnam War literature of the time carried similar sentiments, explicitly or implicitly begging the question about the role of women in the anti-war movement and their emasculating influence on American society at large. With the publication of *Going After* Cacciato (1978), Tim O'Brien emerged as a writer giving voice to the experience of many veterans unmoored by the growing chasm between the old values of the complacent 1950s and the radical demands of the 1960s counterculture. His white middle-class protagonists strive to live normal lives, yet their dreams of normalcy are constantly derailed by the obsessions they cannot control and the grievances they cannot suppress: disturbed by the frenetic atmosphere of the time in which they reached adulthood and unsure of the role they are supposed to play in their relationships, they harbor conflicting feelings toward the feminine world which they find both baffling and intriguing. Yet though the feminine presence is very strong in O'Brien's work, femininity does not represent a threat of emasculation; on the contrary, dead-end pursuits his male characters get involved in often

result from their inability to sustain a meaningful contact with the feminine world. They act erratically not because of some forces conspiring against them but because they don't have a clear sense of what it means to be a man in a world in which old models of masculinity have turned out to be glaringly useless and destructive.

From the very beginning, critics have viewed O'Brien predominantly as a war writer, focusing on his works primarily set in Vietnam and relegating his other works to the status of less important, if not entirely negligible items in his literary oeuvre. In so doing, they have emphasized the similarities with other American war writers while often ignoring the ways O'Brien is redefining the traditional understanding of masculinity defined in part by Hemingway and Mailer. Peter Schwenger, for instance, aligns O'Brien's writing with that of Mailer, claiming that the former also employs a style "that will fend off the threat of emasculation, that will turn pen into penis" (107). O'Brien's works, however, shirk from offering images of heroic masculinity asserting itself in the face of adverse circumstances. Since he stresses the shallowness of manly posturing, O'Brien makes sense of the ordeals faced by soldiers differently than Hemingway or Mailer for whom war was, as Robert M. Slabey aptly puts it, "a metaphor for the way in which a man engages life" (205). Based on a different understanding of man's involvement with the world, O'Brien's portrayal of men's conduct by no means suggests that courting death and defeat ennobles and fortifies their masculinity while allying with women puts them in danger of being emasculated. In his memoirs, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), he expresses his qualms about Hemingway's war writing in which male characters "seem to come off the typewriter as men resigned to bullets and brawn" (97). In O'Brien's eyes, Hemingway's artistry as a war writer is undeniable, but he wonders why Hemingway "did not care to talk about the thoughts those men must have had" (97). O'Brien's male characters, on the other hand, are overtly given to introspection,

and one of the main questions they are trying to solve is how to set themselves free from the expectations associated with traditional modes of masculinity.

While providing basic facts about his life prior to his tour of duty in Vietnam, a large portion of O'Brien's memoirs offers a series of thought processes that led him to accept the draft despite his doubts about the morality of the Vietnam War. As Vernon has it, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* can thus be seen as a testimony given by a young man "trying to discover a coherent sense of self, struggling to define a self against the other selves around him, struggling to define a self against the collective 'other' of the country during one of the most chaotic moments in recent U.S. history" (204). Unlike Kovic who went to Vietnam readily out of his sense of patriotic duty, O'Brien spends a whole summer deliberating about the ethics of participating in a misguided war effort. Since he does not feel any urge to prove his mettle, his final decision is motivated by his sense of responsibility toward his Midwestern small-town community:

> It was not a town, not a Minneapolis or New York, when the son of a father can sometimes escape scrutiny. More, I owed the prairie something. For twenty-one years I'd lived under its laws, accepted its education, eaten its food, wasted and guzzled its water, slept well at night, driven across its highways, dirtied and breathed its air, wallowed in its luxuries. . . . I remembered Plato's *Crito*, when Socrates, facing certain death—execution, not war—had the chance to escape. (27)

In his desire to show that he had what it takes to be a man through his service in Vietnam, Kovic took a page from the national ideology that defined masculinity in terms of strength and self-control, and labelled Communists and their American sympathizers as sissies and homosexuals. O'Brien's service, on the other hand, is inspired by an older version of masculinity determined by community needs.

O'Brien considers old teachings also when discussing courage; while respecting Hemingway's concern for bravery in battle, it is Plato that O'Brien turns to for an authoritative, well-rounded definition of courageous conduct. Inseparable from temperance, justice, and wisdom, courage cannot be easily understood as maintaining control or "dying or suffering the loss of a love in silence or being gallant" (141). This allusion to Hemingway's notion of good form makes it clear that for O'Brien, adhering to a personal code of conduct is simply not enough. Neither essentialist nor instinctive masculinity can be an expression of genuine courage because a truly brave man has to be fully aware of all the implications of his actions, which can be achieved only through a constant reassessment of his involvement in the world around him: "Men must *know* what they do is courageous, they must *know* it is right, and that kind of knowledge is wisdom and nothing else" (141). What O'Brien learns during his tour of duty is that the other men in his company hardly ever think of the bigger picture, focusing on mere survival instead. They certainly do not resemble Hemingway's characters; not giving any consistent thought to what constitutes courage, they adopt willful ignorance as their everyday strategy: "We could not gaze straight at fear and dying, not, at least, while out in the field, and so there was no way to face the question [of courage]" (142). There are, of course, moments when the men act courageously, yet they often do so inadvertently and do not feel afterwards that have acquired some special knowledge. Combat does not then turn out to be an ultimate test of masculinity that would permanently transform the personalities of those who have successfully passed it. The lesson the more introspective soldiers learn instead is that "manhood is not something to scoff . . . but it is better to be afraid than to move out to die" (204).

The question of courage is central to O'Brien's novelistic debut, *Northern Lights* (1975). As Philip D. Beidler asserts, the book offers "explicitly, beyond all else, a profound and insistent meditation on the very idea of courage, its origin, its definition, its promise, its

possibility" (17). The novel's protagonist, Paul Milton Perry, bides his time aimlessly in a kind of stupor, constantly dodging his responsibilities, whether as husband or agricultural agent in Sawmill Landing, a small town in the Arrowhead region of Minnesota. His life is without any organizing principle or code, his body anemic and flabby, his personality formless and still in the making. The only time he shows some determination is when he vigorously applies insecticide to the insects swarming at the screen door. Unable to sleep during hot summer nights, he ponders about all the potential dangers lurking outside, "mosquitoes and june bugs, dawn crickets, dragonflies and larvae and caterpillars, morning moths and sleeping flies, bear and moose . . . and tiny salamanders" (4). Not surprisingly, his pathetic outbursts only increase his feelings of dejection, powerlessness, and insignificance. A pitiful case of arrested development, he often sits by Pliney's Pond where his father ordered him to swim years before. The green, nauseating waters full of larvae and mosquito eggs never cease to haunt him, reminding him of the immediate and utterly frightening contact with the other in the form of a water beetle: "Then the creature, its pincers and dangling black eyes, an inch from his face, a quarter inch, a real monster closing in, and he'd sobbed, sucking in more of the thick water, and the creature came" (62). This traumatic event contributes to his fear of intimacy and impotence; associating female sexuality with the smelly and fecund waters of Pliney's Pond, he cannot bring himself to make love to his wife, Grace.

Paul's unease about femininity is directly related to the strict, truncated version of masculinity inherent in the grim preachings of his father and grandfather, the first two ministers in the town's Damascus Lutheran Church. The sermons given by his grandfather were certainly not intended for the faint of heart, as he focused his attention on traditional masculine virtues, practising "endurance, silent suffering, fortitude. His symbols were snow and timber wolves, the forest afire, the world ending, the town collapsing" (71). After he hanged himself, Paul's father stepped in at the pulpit with the same strict message to offer to

the Lutheran congregation in Sawmill Landing. Marriage baffles Paul, not least because his family history reserves no place for women, whose physical and symbolic presence was not seen as worth recording. As if harsh conditions of living dictated him to obliterate the soft feminine world, Paul's grandfather, Pehr Peri, set out to raise his son in defiance of the feminine world: "In customary and callous disregard for reminiscence, Pehr Peri raised the child as though he alone were responsible for its propagation, refusing to talk about the mother, an asexual temperament that excluded and eventually scorned things female" (70). When Pehr Peri dies, his son, Per Lindstrom Peri, changes his family name to Perry, eliminating "his middle name, his mother's name, for he did not need it" (72). Paul's marital trouble testifies to his inability to break free from „the spectral dominion of the dead father" (Beidler 18); having only a vague memory of his mother who died soon after his birth, he inevitably falls back on his father's fatalism. This life philosophy, however, only hinders Paul's development as a man, and when the old man dies, he is left without a sustaining vision of life: "All collapsed around the few images. But even the images offered no natural sequence. They were random and defiant, clarifying nothing" (7).

Paul's listless way of life is over with the return of his younger brother, Harvey. With his vivid imagination and restless energy, Harvey seems to embody the sturdy masculinity associated with early frontiersmen. Of the two brothers, it was Harvey who was close to their father, accompanying him on hunting outings, while Paul early on refused to attend the old man's sermons and mostly puttered around the house. Exasperated by his own apathy, Paul sees his brother as endowed with an indomitable spirit and is not particularly worried about him when Harvey is drafted and sent to Vietnam. Even after his brother is wounded in combat and loses one eye, Paul cannot help wondering "if the whole show were a masquerade for Harvey to dress in khaki and display his bigballed outdoorsmanship, proving all over again how well he'd followed the old man into the woods, how much he'd learned, to show

forever that he was the Bull" (20). Since Harvey seems to be his old self after his discharge

from the army, his presence in town provides a much needed impetus for Paul to snap out of

his languor; as Bates puts it, Paul is thereby given "a second chance to live up to the old

man's notion of manliness" ("Myth" 266). Asserting his manhood becomes important to Paul

because it haunts him that for years he was a failure as a son in his father's eyes. Even when

his father was dying during the Cuban missiles crisis, Paul did not see eye to eye with the old

man and refused to go with his plan to build a bomb shelter. His disobedience further put his

personality in doubt because by staying inside and attending to his father at his deathbed, Paul

effectively renounced his masculinity. Harvey, on the other hand, did not hesitate to fulfill his

son's duty and worked round the clock, come rain or shine, to make sure that the shelter was

built before the old man's demise.

When Harvey proposes that the two of them take a ski trip through an uninhabited area

of the Arrowhead, Paul sees it as an opportunity to get in touch with the manly side of his

personality that his father unsuccessfully tried to bring out. They are soon caught in a

blizzard, yet Harvey does not seem in the least perturbed and his confidence quiets Paul's

recurring misgivings. Harvey's leadership is simply indisputable, even though it becomes

clear that he has difficulties reading the map he thoughtfully consults anytime they take a rest.

With poise and good humor, Harvey gives his brother a crash course in survival, and it seems

to Paul that Harvey would always be able to find solution to any situation: "He lay still and

listened to the fire and Harvey's snoring. . . . They were different. Scratch everything else, no

matter, they were different. Harvey knew what he was doing. Calm, building that fire,

unafraid, a full-fledged, undaunted hero, absolutely no question" (174). When Harvey falls

sick, however, it is Paul's turn to show some grit and resourcefulness, which is all the more

difficult because he loses his glasses. Each night, he has to find a right place for a camp,

collect wood, and keep the fire burning. Most importantly, he has to urge Harvey to keep on

skiing and not to give up, as the latter quickly becomes resigned to meeting his death in wilderness. The discovery of hidden resources of courage and strength aside, Paul also learns that his father's masculinity was not entirely palatable to his brother. As the feverish Harvey admits, hunting with the old man was never his cup of tea; in fact, he had a panic attack when the old man presented him with a rifle. It even turns out that Harvey admired Paul's decision to stand up to his father: "The old man left you alone and he liked it when you said you weren't going to listen to him preach anymore. You just told him. You told him and he never said a word. I remember you telling him" (262).

When the two brothers reach civilization, their roles are reversed: while Harvey is frail and disheartened, Paul can bask in the glory of his heroic feat. As Bates suggests, a less accomplished novel "might have ended here, with Paul arriving belatedly at manhood and reconciliation with his father" ("Myth" 266-7). O'Brien, however, is not interested in simple answers and "defies this facile definition of courage and manliness" ("Myth" 267). Before Paul can even start showing off in front of citizens of Sawmill Landing, he is made fun by a group of woodsmen who point out that he could have been spared of his ordeal by lighting a fire large enough to be seen from an airplane. Trying to retain the manly spirit revealed through the hardship in the woods, Paul refuses to shave his beard and postpones buying a new pair of glasses, yet before long he slips back into his previous inertia. It is only after he takes a swim in Pliney's Pond and makes love to Grace that he undergoes what seems like a more lasting development. According to Bates, Paul senses that his revelation is bound to take place in the feminine waters of the pond, and once he summons his courage to take plunge in it, he "dies to the self by which he had been bound to his father and rises to the self by which he will be bound to Grace" ("Myth" 267). As a result, he is ready at last for a confrontation with the feminine principle and the outside world at large. Courage based solely on manly resilience and stolid endurance proves hollow at its core, and Paul has to

learn a form of discipline that includes empathy and responsibility. As Bates has it, O'Brien's myth of courage "combines masculine endurance with feminine commitment" ("Myth" 278). Step by step, Paul undergoes "a gradual maturation of spirit" that leads to an understanding that "genuine courage entails not only endurance but also loving his wife and acknowledging her rightful claims upon him" ("Myth" 272).

As Paul development demonstrates, stoicism in the face of adversity does not represent the ultimate value in the fictional world O'Brien creates in *Northern Lights*. Other qualities are relevant here as well: openness, mutual understanding, trust, and positive, life-affirmative imaginative powers. What O'Brien shows is that rugged individualism, however admirable, does not automatically end in personal development and self-growth but may in fact result in some kind of emotional autism. Upon return from South Asia, Harvey keeps making wild plans that never materialize, which can be seen not only as a sign of his restlessness but also as his way of dealing with the trauma induced by combat. Yet, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that his agitated mind has to do with his lack of sense of purpose in life. While Paul is eventually able to talk to Grace about moving to Iowa and raising a child, Harvey is brimming with ideas that bespeak of his immaturity: "Mexico City. We could all go for a trip into the mountains. . . . We could hire us some donkeys and slaves" (358). The problem with Harvey is that his vivid imagination enables him not only to adhere to his father's creed but also to dodge reality; as Bates suggests, Harvey remains "the perpetual adolescent when we last see him, a Tom Sawyer who will never light out for the territories" ("Myth" 268). Grace's importance, on the other hand, grows: she opens up a new world of possibilities for Paul, leading him toward a new understanding of his role as man and husband. Paul does undergo a change in his confrontation with forces of nature, yet his further development can start only when his newly found resolve is complemented with feminine courage based on "birth and growth rather than decay and death" ("Myth" 268). In

this sense, Grace is the first of O'Brien's strong female characters whose levelheaded resourcefulness provides a corrective to destructive male obsessiveness.

II.3 Imagination Dangerously Unbound: Masculinity Crisis in Tim O'Brien's _The Nuclear Age_

Paul's development in _Northern Lights_ is unthinkable without Grace's love and devotion, yet it does not mean that his manliness is compromised. As Bates has it, when Paul comes to accept feminine values, "it is not to become feminine himself but to assimilate the feminine dimension of a virtue already quickened in him" ("Myth" 268) by the trial he underwent in his strenuous fight for survival. The centrality of female presence is also unquestionable in _Going After Cacciato_, whose protagonist, Paul Berlin, desperately attempts to act like a man during his tour of duty in Vietnam. Whereas Paul Milton Perry's problem is apathy, Paul Berlin suffers from panic attacks which render him incapable of acting altogether. The memory of the former is haunted by the traumatic swim in Pliney's pond; the latter reminisces about the time when he was in Indian Guides and got lost while camping with his father: "Nothing in the _Guide Survival Guide_ about panic. Lost, bawling in the big Wisconsin woods. He remembered it clearly. Little Elk finding him, flashlights converging, Little Bear bawling under a giant spruce" (60). This incident sets up a pattern in Berlin's behavior that undermines his usefulness as a foot soldier in Vietnam: when in danger, he ends up curled in a fetal position. Keenly aware of his weak spot, Paul nevertheless tries to stay positive: "True, the war scared him silly, but this was something he hoped to bring under control" (57). He attempts to earn the respect of his buddies and keeps imagining a meeting with his father at a train depot after his tour of duty when he "would brush off his uniform and be certain all the medals were in place, and he would step off boldly, boldly, and he would shake his father's hand and look him in the eye" (68). The outcome of his efforts is nevertheless the same: under pressure Berlin gets on his knees, whimpering and whinnying and eventually losing control of his bowels.

Tormented by his ineptitude as a soldier, Berlin escapes into the world of imagination. Though his daydreaming is directly related to his inner crisis, there is more at play here than escapism, as imagination in *Going After Cacciato* functions as a restorative force. Stationed at an observation post, Berlin sifts through the traumatic events of his service in Vietnam and indulges himself in creating a fantastic reality in which his squad pursues Cacciato, a simpleminded soldier gone AWOL, from Vietnam all the way to Paris. If nothing else, this elaborate fantasy soothes Berlin's agitated mind: "His fingers tingled. Excited by the possibilities, but still in control. That was an important part—that he was in control. He was calm. Clear thinking helped. Concentrating, figuring out the details, it helped plenty" (84). As Beidler suggests, Berlin's sustained effort to create a fictive world enables him to distance himself from the senselessness and brutality of the war by arriving at "a new vision of creative possibility born equally from the claims of both experiential memory *and* imaginative invention" (23). Berlin's squad is led by a seasoned lieutenant but his spiritual journey is the result of the conversations he holds with Sarkin Aung Wang, a young refugee from the Chinatown area of Saigon. Knowledgeable about the surroundings Berlin finds inscrutable and threatening, she acts as his guide, leading him towards a better understanding of his circumstances. In this sense, Sarkin Aung's role is similar to that of Grace in *Northern Lights*: it is in response to her demands that Berlin comes to see that true courage cannot be reduced to strict abstract rules meant to govern a man's conduct. Having reached Paris, he thus realizes that no separate peace can be an option for him: "I am afraid of running away. I am afraid of exile. I fear what might be thought of me by those I love. . . . I fear being thought of as a coward. I fear that even more than cowardice itself" (377).

The fact that Berlin chooses to include Sarkin Aung in his story may signify Berlin's inchoate feeling that the preservation of his sanity lies in the feminine world. She is thus not only a comforting female presence in the hard word of military rules and regulations but also

helps him "discover truths hidden within and puts his mind in touch with right values as she articulates Paul's desire to escape the war" (Slabey 209). A meaningful contact with the feminine world proves pivotal also in *The Nuclear Age* (1985), whose protagonist becomes so obsessed with control that he suffers a mental breakdown. When the novel opens, William Cowling is digging a bomb shelter in order to protect his wife and daughter against what he sees as an impending nuclear Armageddon. He keeps emphasizing his sanity in the face of the insanity produced by the nuclear standoff: "Balance of power, balance of mind – a tightrope act, but where's the net? Infinity could split itself at any instant" (4). Yet it immediately becomes clear that William's rhetoric is overwrought and emotionally unbalanced. Always on the defensive and marked by neurotic swings of mood, it indicates the workings of an agitated, short-circuited mind: "Signs of sanity: muscle and resolve, arms and legs and spine and willpower. I won't quit. I'm a man of my age, and it's an age of extraordinary jeopardy. So who's crazy? Me? Or is it you?" (4). William's flowery language testifies to his insecurity, coupled with a dogged effort to blot out everything that does not fit his disturbed vision. Unmoored by an identity crisis over his masculinity, he becomes a "madman in the living room" whose bizarre and outlandish behavior points to the hysterical dimensions of American manhood.

William repeatedly mentions his intention to keep his loved ones out of danger's harm as the reason for his frantic activity, yet despite his declarations of love and devotion, he ceases to communicate with his wife whom he comes to see as an obstacle to his plan: "Bobbi can't understand. She's a poet, she can't help it. I've tried to talk things out. I've presented the facts. . . . She's a gorgeous woman . . . but she makes the mistake of assuming that her beauty is armor against the facts of fission" (69). Obsessed with digging, William is losing touch with the outer world and eventually poses a threat to those he vows to protect. The strong emotions William deals with in his feverish mental state deplete his personality, as

disturbing visions of a nuclear doomsday that compel him to swing his shovel drive a wedge at the center of what constitutes his self.   As William keeps digging, he holds night conversations with the hole he is in the process of creating, only occasionally listening to what his twelve-year-old daughter, Melinda, has to say. Acting in his imagination as a salient entity capable of understanding his worries and complaints, the hole begins to dominate William's reasoning to the point that its judgment means more to him than the pleas made by his wife and daughter who are increasingly worried about his single-minded behavior.   To make sure that all his efforts can be dedicated to digging, William imprisons Bobbi and Melinda for days on end in his wife's bedroom, providing them with food, clean clothes, and empty chamber pots. Succumbing to the demands of the hole, he eventually rigs the shelter with dynamite and is determined to turn it into a tomb where he and his wife will be inseparably together, "folded in forever like the fossils" (347). In his mind, the death of the whole family will mark the beginning of "the world-as-it-should-be" (347).

William's attempt at homicide is the final incident in a long series of breakdowns related to his fears of nuclear war. He first experiences panic attacks as a boy growing in the 1950s: propelled by images of nuclear destruction, the twelve-year-old William converts a Ping-Pong table in the basement into a fallout shelter augmented with charcoal briquettes and a layer of pencils, meant to protect him from radiation. He keeps reliving this traumatic experience in his adult years, but after he marries Bobbi, his nuclear nightmares seem to have finally abated. He is enjoying the accoutrements of the American Dream: a ranch house in the Sweetheart Mountains, affluence and comfort, a charming wife and a loving daughter. What makes his newly found equilibrium problematic, however, is the fact that Bobbi functions as a *sine qua non* of his ability to cope with the threats posed by the outer world. When he is again pestered by images of explosions and begins to feel an "ominous density in the world" (329), it has to do with her dissatisfaction with their marriage. William keeps listing potential

sources of a new cataclysmic global conflict, yet his obsession with digging is actually triggered by Bobbi's infidelity and her subsequent declaration that she intends to leave him. His reaction reflects the attitudes held by many Americans for whom a house in the suburbs "seemed to offer a secure, private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world" (May ix). As May has it, in the post-war America it was common to believe that the "self-contained home held out the promise of security in an insecure world" (ix). By becoming pathologically absorbed with his nuclear nightmares, William thus projects the tensions in his marriage onto an image of the world's instability. As Daniel Cordle puts it, William's anxiety about the disintegration of his marriage is displaced into the "more dramatic threat of nuclear destruction" (108).

The excessive eagerness William shows when building a high-security house for his family marks the first step in his effort to control Bobbi and to monitor her movements. A long time before the notion of constructing a nuclear shelter seizes his imagination, William attempts to create a self-contained world with his wife as its centerpiece. The disappearance of Bobbi's diaphragm several years into their marriage thus suddenly brings the realization that the foundations of the world he has created are far from stable. Tormented by visions of "the imprints in the rocks, the wall shadows in Hiroshima, leaves and grass and the Statue of Liberty and Bobbi's diaphragm" (347), he yearns for some solution that would irrevocably cement his control. As his world seems to be on the brink of toppling down when Bobbi requests a separation, William refuses to believe he cannot provide her with whatever she needs. In his conversations with the hole, he tries to maintain the conviction that he knows what he is doing when he keeps his family captive, yet for all his talk about self-discipline and implacable reasoning, William's rhetoric is replete with passages suggesting that he may lose control at some unguarded moment: "In bed I watched her eyelids. I plotted tactics. Ropes and locks and dynamite. I felt sane and brutal" (331). Increasingly withdrawing into himself,

William becomes completely oblivious to the trauma he is causing for his captives. Instead, he feels the urge to storm into Bobbi's bedroom and "pin them to the bed and grab those creamy white throats and make some demands. Demand respect and tolerance. Demand *love*" (72). Incapable of communicating with his loved ones, William returns to the hole. His ostentatious effort at saving his family from a danger he envisions may be thus seen as a behavior showing symptoms of hysteria, a performance bringing attention to a threat he is unable to confront.

William's erratic behavior ultimately testifies to his male anxiety. A threat of emasculation hovers over his life since his early childhood when he suffers a bicycle accident which necessitates sewing up his badly injured member. As if his nuclear nightmares were not enough, he is also pestered by his feeling of not belonging, often wondering "if those midnight flashes hadn't short-circuited the wiring that connected [him] to the rest of the world" (40). Though he is popular at school, William is socially awkward and unable to associate with girls. A sense of displacement increases when he watches his father's part in annual reenactments of Custer's Last Stand. The sight of his father falling to the ground in his role as General Custer produces in William the intermittent feelings of exultation and fear: "I wanted to warn him, rescue him, but I also wanted slaughter. How do I explain it? Terror mixed with fascination: I craved bloodshed, yet I craved the miracle of a happy ending" (12). The experience of watching his father being ritualistically scalped every summer adds to his disconnection not only from his father but also from the masculine world at large. William does not have any male friend until he finds a common language with Ned Rafferty, who represents the sturdy athletic type of masculinity William can only dream about. As William unabashedly admits, he initially hated Ned for "the good manners and the firm handshake and the quiet confidence and the way he'd stare at Sarah" (132), a girl William himself is in love with. Although it is eventually William who wins Sarah's heart, Ned's strong presence

continues to underscore William's poor masculine credentials. William's insecurity as a man later marks his relationship with Bobbi, fueling his dreams of total control. His obsessive digging is thus also a desperate attempt to compensate, once and for all, for his deficient manhood.

Harping on the instability of the world and pointing to the fickleness of feminine affections, William in effect runs away from the responsibility for his actions. In this sense, his narration brings to mind the ideology of beleaguered masculinity based on the belief that the the problems faced by men in the postmodern world have to do with what they see as attacks aimed at their birthright to power. Most critics, however, do not see William's crisis as rooted in his male anxiety, and tend to conclude that deciding to abandon his deadly final solution and to blow up the empty shelter instead, William shows positive signs of recovery from his nuclear obsession. From now on, these readings suggest, William is on his way to restore his mental balance. The most optimistic interpretation is offered by Lee Schweninger, who claims that snapping from his preoccupation with death and mayhem, William realizes that if there are solutions to be reached, they are "not to be achieved by maintaining the power of one person over another or of human over nature" (183). Abandoning his plan and releasing his captives, William thus performs "what the pre-moderns might have called a miracle; what the post-moderns might call a radical epistemological shift," thereby moving into "a post-modern world in which the phallocentric is discarded" (183). In a similar tone, Beidler asserts that though nothing has changed by William's abandonment of his plan, what matters is that "through the shaping and transforming power of imagination, a very great deal may have been earned and gained" (28). In his Lacanian reading of the novel, Schwenger likewise admits the possibility of William's mental growth, suggesting that he eventually sees that the hole he is digging represents the hole in himself. It follows that the ensuing explosion shatters William's old self: what is set off is then "an act of imagination, the imagination that

makes a future possible" (113).

Predicated on the assumption that William's narration is a sign of his recovery, the above readings suggest that the novel's ending brings some sort of closure to William's attempts to come to terms with his fears. This reasoning, however, do not take fully into account the depth of William's identity crisis. Misreading the actual causes of his mental breakdown, William shows few indications that he has reached the necessary level of self-knowledge to be able to overcome his obsessions. As is his habit, William pretends to be in control of his emotions because it would be too disturbing for him to admit how unstable his mental condition has been. Having come close to murdering his family, he now seems resigned to the fact that his wife needs more breathing room than he can give her: "One day, I know, my wife will leave me. It will be autumn, perhaps, and the trees will be in color, and she will kiss me in my sleep and tuck a poem in my pocket, and the world will surely end" (359). Made right after William releases his captives, this declaration can hardly be seen as indicative of his newly found mental balance, implying instead that his identity remains pathologically centered on Bobbi. The problem is that William does not seem to know what to do with time on his hands and has only a vague notion of what it means to be a man. For years, he dwelled on visions of nuclear disaster but had no idea of the direction his marriage should be going. Unsure of his male role, William looked for answers in the feminine world, yet he was not able to find a common language with Bobbi, just as he had been unable to do so in his previous relationship with Sarah. Failing miserably in his efforts to communicate his feelings, he resorted to patterns of behavior based on control and domination; as a result, he could not but exert a confusing and destructive influence on the woman he declared to be in love with.

III.4 The Depths Beckon: Obsession and Violence in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*

The issue of control is of utmost importance for both Hemingway and Mailer who see adherence to some kind of code of conduct as a prerequisite of true manhood. In fact, an obsession with control manifested in various efforts to maintain a stiff upper lip at all cost is often depicted by them as a sort of heroism. O'Brien, on the other hand, problematizes this vision, showing how short-sighted and even dangerous a single-minded dedication to manly behavior can be. As *The Nuclear Age* shows, a desperate attempt to show fortitude in the face of adversity may just as well stem from feelings of manly inadequacy and can have serious consequences. O'Brien explores the same issue in *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994)*,* whose protagonist becomes so obsessed with control that he alienates all the people around him and loses a sense of direction in life. At the beginning of the novel, John Wade and his wife, Kathy, are trying to patch up their marriage in a cabin at the Lake of the Woods. Far from civilization, they hope to put a finger on what went wrong in their relationship, but their stay in northern Minnesota is also motivated by their desire to forget about the world of politics after Wade's landslide defeat in his run for a seat in U.S. Senate. Wade and Kathy talk about starting all over, but one day she disappears without a trace. When all the efforts to find her come to naught, Wade steers his boat toward the Canadian border to meet his death in the waters that presumably claimed Kathy's body. Without his wife, Wade's life is not worth living; this much is made clear. What is never conclusively answered, however, is Wade's potential involvement in Kathy's disappearance: while his grief over the loss of his wife seems genuine, some people participating in the search find his behavior rather dubious. As the narrator concludes, it is impossible to say what happened: "All secrets lead to the dark, and beyond the dark there is only maybe" (301).

The ambiguity surrounding Kathy's fate is only enhanced with disturbing facts about Wade's behavior in the early stages of their relationship. Right from the very beginning, his love for Kathy is tinted with dishonesty and secretiveness as well as an irresistible desire to maintain permanent control over her movements. Afraid of losing her, Wade begins to stalk her, and the action of spying turns into an obsession that shapes his understanding of reality: "In the evenings he'd station himself outside her dormitory, staring up at the light in her room. Later, when the light went off, he'd track her to the student union or the library or wherever she went. The issue wasn't trust or distrust. The whole *world* worked by subterfuge and the will to believe" (33). Knowing what Kathy is doing at a given time of the day gives Wade a sense of power and in turn intensifies his feelings for her, yet it becomes clear that he is not as interested in reciprocating her feelings as in gratifying his desire to be loved. Spying, therefore, becomes also a method of appraising and appreciating their relationship: "He looked for signs of betrayal: the way she smiled at people, the way she carried herself around other men. In a way, almost, he loved her best when he was spying; it opened up a hidden world, new angles and new perspectives, new things to admire" (33). Wade's spying efforts are also fueled by Kathy's fierce independence that keeps him on his toes. As William Young has it, Wade never ceases to be "disturbed yet intrigued—as in foreign intrigue—by her life separate from him" (133). The fact that Kathy has a life of her own, apart from their relationship, is then a source of Wade's anxiety as well as an incentive to further spying. What Wade wants to ultimately will into existence is "sameness, a certain erasure of difference and distance" (Young 136), and Kathy's independence poses a threat that one day she may decide to cut him off from his life.

Wade's fear of being abandoned and his fascination with the possibility of fabricating reality are rooted in his childhood attempts to impress his father with magic tricks. While his father remains unimpressed, Wade's interest in magic grows and soon he spends hours on end

practicing sleight of hand in front of an old stand-up mirror in the basement. Day after day, he endures his father's caustic remarks aimed at his alleged overweight and lack of interest in baseball, yet when his father commits suicide, he feels devastated. Feeling abandoned and betrayed, he loses his temper and keeps yelling during the funeral as his unfulfilled affection for his father turns into a desire for violence: "At the funeral he wanted to kill everybody who was crying and everybody who wasn't. He wanted to take a hammer and crawl into the casket and kill his father for dying" (14). Wade's outburst has to do not only with his loneliness but also with his unbalanced relationship to the outside world; as his ability as a conjurer improves, he starts believing that problems can be made to go away by handling them through deceit and subterfuge. As Timothy Melley observes, years before he meets Kathy, Wade "simply internalizes the image of the mirror in which he witnesses his own capacity for deception and control, until eventually he conceives of his memory as a creative, fictional power and not a faithful record of events" (119). The operating mechanism is simple and seemingly faultless: painful memories are made to disappear and a made-up reality sets in, feeding the illusion of control: "In the mirror, where miracles happened, John was no longer a lonely little kid. He had sovereignty over the world. Quick and graceful, his hands did things ordinary hands could not do—palm a cigarette lighter, cut a deck of cards with a turn of the thumb. Everything was possible, even happiness" (65).

Wade's sleight-of-hand skills prove useful during his service in Vietnam in daily encounters with "secret caches, secret trails, secret codes, secret missions, secret terrors and appetites and longings and regrets" (73). Referred to as Sorcerer by members of his unit, he seems to be in his element. He starts performing magic tricks and gradually creates an impression that he possesses special powers. The authority he gains among other soldiers, however, further distorts his sense of propriety: "When pressed, he'd put a quick display of his powers, doing a trick or two, using everyday objects around him. Much could be done, for

example, with his jackknife and a corpse" (38). Drawing on his childhood dabbling in magic, Wade devices whole spectacles. On one occasion, he summons an audience of villagers at gunpoint and pulls off a powerful illusion using the body of a dead Vietnamese sniper: "A rope was then secured to the dead man's feet, another to his wrist, and just before the nightfall, Sorcerer and his assistant performed an act of levitation, hoisting the body into the trees" (41). Wade's final feat involves an act of erasure: redrafting his military records, he retroactively reassigns himself to a different company. Since he is planning to enter politics, he feels it is necessary that his future constituents should not be familiar with the fact that he served under Lieutenant William Calley during the infamous operation in March 1968 which led to the massacre of hundreds of Vietnamese civilians. With the My Lai incident removed from his résumé as if by magic, Wade can now shoot for the stars: a new identity is created and a politician with a perfect record is born. As Melley suggests, the two years spent in Vietnam strengthen Wade's belief that as "a practitioner of deception, espionage, and manipulation, he can control the chaos around him and receive the love and approval his father never gave him" (119-20).

When Wade's military records are set straight and made public, his political career lies in the ruins. Disoriented by the unexpected turn of events, Wade fails to understand the depth of his delusions of power. Since pulling the strings from behind the stage have become his second nature, the moral aspects of his conduct remain hidden to him; what matters is that his plan didn't work out: "He'd tried to pull off a trick that couldn't be done, which was to remake himself, to vanish what was past and replace it with things good and new. He should have known better. Should have lifted it out of the act" (234). Similarly, Wade fails to see that his spying has had a negative impact on his marriage; keeping tabs on Kathy's actions, and keeping secrets from her in general, seems absolutely normal to him. As Melley asserts, Wade's reasoning reflects the fact that the "concept of a secret inner life has always been

essential to liberal, and especially masculine, subjectivity" (121). Early in Wade's life, secretiveness becomes his modus operandi, which warps his personality. Paradoxically, his obsession with maintaining control through secret knowledge results in a tenuous grip on reality. While he is quick to analyze every situation in terms of possible ways of controlling it through clandestine measures, his emotional knowledge remains severely underdeveloped. As a result, Wade has no clue of who Kathy is and what her aspirations are, which in turn creates the need for further vigilance on his part. What the stay in the woods brings is, among other things, the realization how estranged they have become. As Young puts it, they have reached a point when "it is perhaps too late for talk or loving within a domestic context" (143). Her disappearance comes as yet another blow, making Wade begin to see "how his whole life had been managed with mirrors, and that he was now totally baffled and totally turned around and had no idea how to work his way out" (238).

It may be tempting to suggest that it is grief that prompts Wade to choose death rather than life without Kathy. Yet it is questionable if Wade is capable of grief at that moment. The thing is that magic never ceases to serve him as a paradigm to harness the messiness of life. Years after the fact, Wade remains haunted by an image of two snakes he chanced upon during his service in Vietnam: what irrevocably captures his imagination is that they were devouring each other, "both of them finally disappearing forever inside each other" (76). It is thus possible that his disappearance is meant to be a slick magic trick, offering an aesthetically pleasing sense of closure; as such, it should bewilder the beholders and evade the question of responsibility for Kathy's fate. Even when his wife is still with him, Wade's imagination plays with a scenario that both of them may magically disappear off the face of the earth: "Other times he would see himself performing the ultimate vanishing act. A grand finale, a curtain closer. . . . They would live in perfect knowledge, all things visible, all things invisible, just that large dark world where one plus one will always come to zero" (76).

Inherent in this fantasy is Wade's propensity for violence manifested early in his relationship with Kathy when he is repeatedly visited by fantasies of total control: "There were times when John Wade wanted to open up Kathy's belly and crawl inside and stay there forever. He wanted to swim through her blood and climb up and down her spine and drink from her ovaries and press his gums against the firm red muscle of her heart" (71). Though Kathy is sometimes bothered by Wade's intrusiveness, she is not aware of his secret urges. His obsession with control, however, at times bespeaks of a desire to inflict pain: "Such eyes, he'd think. He'd want to suck them from their sockets. He'd want to feel their weight on his tongue, taste the whites, roll them around like lemon drops" (71).

Since Wade invariably blots out emotionally taxing moments from his consciousness, Kathy's disappearance is shrouded in mystery. Despite strenuous search efforts, she is nowhere to be found, which increases the possibility that the mystery of her absence is likely to remain unsolved. *In the Lake of the Woods* includes eight separate chapters, each of them offering a different hypothesis about the events leading to her disappearance. Kathy's whereabouts are then anybody's guess, yet when Wade is trying to recollect what happened during the last night he spent with his wife, he does not dismiss the possibility that he actually killed her. His memories are patchy at best, yet the vivid details that pop out in his mind are disturbing enough to make Wade a prime suspect, which is why he keeps these reminiscences to himself. For one thing, he knows for a fact that he poured boiling water on several plants in the cabin. He is also well aware that the emotional strain he was under after the election debacle made it difficult for him to control his indignation. Reconstructing the sequence of events of the fateful night is, however, an altogether different matter: "The images did not connect—the darkness, the teakettle, the way he glided from spot to spot as if gravity were no longer a factor. . . . He remembered the steam, the amps under his skin. He remembered a savage buzzing sound—"Kill Jesus," he was saying. He couldn't stop" (130-1). As new

memories gradually come up, it becomes even more possible that his wife was at the receiving end of Wade's anger: "He was rocking on his heels, watching Kathy sleep. Amazing, he thought. Because he loved her. Because he couldn't stop the teakettle from tipping itself forward" (273). These snippets of memory are so disconcerting that Wade can only handle them in the context of his undying love for Kathy, which is a clear signal that his attempt to remember the facts is intertwined with an attempt to conceal them.

According to Melley, *In the Lake of the Woods* is "largely about failures of memory, the ways in which a traumatic past can infect and distort the memory" (112). Considering Wade's inability to face the traumatic facts of his past, the novel invites reflection on the way distressing memories, of a single person or a nation, are being processed. As Melley points out, O'Brien's narrative strategy "makes it clear that Wade's individual case of amnesia is inseparable from more serious collective memory failures" (112). In a broader sense, O'Brien's is therefore also concerned with the process of looking for and assessing what eventually comes to be known as historical truth. This search for truth is undertaken by the curious narrator who is determined to sieve through every available lead to find out how much Wade can actually be held responsible for Kathy disappearance. Since it becomes increasingly likely with every passing hour that she will never be found, the narrator extends his search to the study of biographies of people who found themselves in situations similar to Wade's. This is the reason why he focuses not only on the development of the relationship between Wade and Kathy but also presents personal accounts of several soldiers involved in the My Lai mass murder as well as various testimonies of politicians craving for unlimited power. In so doing, he examines the culture of secrecy that tends to envelope the interconnected male worlds of high-power politics and the military. The narrator's findings imply that there are similar mechanisms at play in the case of the Watergate scandal and the My Lai massacre, as both incidents resulted in concerted efforts to play down and cover up

the true nature of the perpetrated crimes. As Melly observes, O'Brien paradoxically develops here "a profoundly amnesic character to critique the collective forgetting that has erased My Lai and other massacres from American historical consciousness" (112).

Forgetting, as well as keeping secrets, enables Wade to maintain control not only in his relationship with Kathy but also in politics. When asked by Kathy about his motives, he claims to be driven by high ideals, but deep in his heart he knows that he loves politics because he loves power: "He talked about leading a good life, doing good things for the world. Yet as he spoke John realized he was not telling the whole truth. Politics *was* manipulation. Like a magic show: invisible wires and secret trapdoors" (35). While reminiscing about his relationship with Kathy, Wade keeps repeating that love has always been his priority, yet his proclamations only testify to his self-centeredness. His need to be loved is above all a product of his feeble sense of identity, as his permanent scheming pushes aside the need to get in touch with his deeply buried feelings of despair, emptiness, and loneliness. Kathy herself comes to realize it on the day Wade faces his political defeat: "More than anyone she'd ever known, John needed the conspicuous display of human love—absolute, unconditional love. Love without limit. Like a hunger, she thought. Some vast emptiness seemed to drive him on, a craving for warmth and reassurance. Politics was just a love thermometer" (55). Knowing that the balance of power in their relationship has been tipped in favor of his wife, Wade feels like a magician whose trick has been exposed: "He could still see Kathy's face on the morning when it all came undone. Now she knew. She would always know" (272). It is then possible that Wade feels the necessity to act. His mind refuses to process it, but it is possible that murder was his final attempt at erasing the inconvenient truth which threatened to undermine his masculinity: "Her eyelids snapped open. She looked up at him, puzzled, as if some magnificent new question were forming. Puffs of steam rose from the sockets of her eyes. . . . Unreal, John decided" (273).

What We Can Learn from Westerns: American Masculinity as a Search for an Unattainable Ideal

Though long past its heyday, the western still looms large in the American imagination. Its popularity has to do with what it says about men and their ordeals. In many respects, it confirms Fiedler's interpretation of American literature. After all, the western is quintessentially concerned with males spending time together away from women. Marriage usually does not figure high on the protagonist's to-do list, and the scenes when men show affection for women tend to be sober and chaste, though not because of a fear of sexuality but mostly because of the tacit awareness shared by both parties that a true man cannot be tied down and has to say good-bye to his love interest and search for new adventures. As Horrocks observes, what makes the western captivating is "the tension between male and heterosexual love, between the wilderness and civilization, between outlawry and legality" (57-58). Fielder's vision cannot, however, do justice to the textual richness of many westerns. According to Horrocks, the appeal of the western is based on "its presentation of the male body as spectacle, its view of the male as a suffering person, the seer stoicism involved in being a western hero, the solitary cut-off quality of some protagonists" (56). The complexity of the western as a genre, however, lies in the fact that while there is always one layer of meaning directly addressing the issues of implementing and maintaining patriarchy, there may be other layers dealing with, explicitly or implicitly, the price men have to pay for their attempts to adhere to the masculine ideal: "If one of the core overt meanings of the western concerns 'law and order', that is, patriarchal and colonial law by imposed by a white male hero figure, I shall argue that there are other covert subtexts of the wester, for example male love, male suffering and a defiance of bourgeois values" (Horrocks 56). It is these subtexts that add tragic overtones to what may seem like typical, run-of-the-mill western formulas.

In light of Horrocks's arguments, a claim can be made that as commentaries on masculinity westerns are not expressions of immaturity inherent in American culture as Fiedler sees it but reflect the rapidly changing conditions that men often found confusing and unsettling. In this sense, westerns portray masculinity as an ongoing test of character whose successful completion does not guarantee automatic rewards but more often than not ends in loneliness and a sense of disconnect. What westerns keep suggesting is that while men have been in charge of economic and cultural changes in America, they were at the same time creating institutions that were, in one way or another, crushing the old masculine spirit and making robust and self-reliant masculinity a rarity: "The western explores some of the contradictions of American masculinity: it is required to be 'tough', but not too tough or it becomes outlawed; it must excise the need for love and tenderness, yet it helps to construct a world in which these can flourish; ultimately as 'the desert turns into a garden', it makes itself redundant" (Horrocks 56). The logic of the western therefore has it that to salvage their independent selves, men have to flee marriage and respectability, and head for dangerous environments where they can fully exercise their will; staying in town, on the other hand, may mean that they will have to fight uphill battles against women who function as "dangerous scouts for bourgeois order" (Horrocks 58). What the western offers is a space untouched by the pettiness of small town existence; whatever a woman can offer naturally pales in comparison with an exciting male bonding taking place in wilderness. Away from women and their ideals of domesticity, men can inhabit a territory "that exists between categories, if only in fantasy, enables men to float for a while, unencumbered by the ferocious demands of patriarchy and the either/or rigidities of gender and sexuality" (Horrocks 66).

Despite an occasional strong dose of fantasy, the western is often steeped in realism. On one hand, it offers a critique of capitalism where the role of a man often does spell "constriction, loss of vitality and often death" (Horrocks 58). On the other hand, its portrayal

of men leaves no doubt that life on the verge of civilization, full of strain and violence, can warp one's personality. It can be then argued that the final message of the western is that the deck is always stacked against men, which is why a sense of victimhood can always be a theme that can be explored by writers and filmmakers dealing with the myth of American masculinity defined by the frontier. As Horrocks puts it, one straightforward interpretation is that "the image of the tortured male represents the damage done to men by patriarchy" (79). As the protagonists played by Clint Eastwood show, the expectations regarding men's conduct have been particularly high. In this sense, Eastwood "has, wittingly or not, held up a mirror to modern men. This is the demand made by patriarchy to men: show no feelings, do not speak, carry out your duties and don't complain, and then die. The western makes a virtue of necessity: the hero is obliged to suffer in silence, to show no tears, ask for no compassion" (Horrocks 78). This emphasis on self-control places the western in the center of the debate on American masculinity which began immediately after the American War of Independence. Soon the word of mouth was that American manhood was in crisis. Self-control as a way to boost a man's masculinity has thus been a key phrase in the vocabulary of all kinds of social commentators who simultaneously warned men about the danger of emasculation. Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and Tim O'Brien express similar concerns as their novels depict how white middle-class men go to considerable lengths to boost their manhood and escape the softening influence of the feminine world.

In most westerns, masculinity is a strenuous project that can be thwarted at any moment. Oftentimes, it is even doomed from the very start. A similar vision has been prevalent in the American debate on masculinity which was seen as uncertain and unstable since the self-made man became the dominant version of American manhood. The whole concept was full of unresolved tension: just as there was a great deal of excitement in the promise of "making it," there was always a chance that all the accumulated assets can be lost

in the unpredictable economic market. Not surprisingly, American men were, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed, always on the run and constantly changing their plans. Even harsher in his assessment was Henry David Thoreau who saw American men as despondent and without proper masculine vigor. His sojourn in the woods was an experiment meant to show that manhood can be invigorated, in an Emersonian spirit, through the contemplation of nature. Several decades later, hunting, fishing or camping in the woods became a national crave among well-to-do Americans who sought to reconnect with their masculine selves in uninhabited regions of Wyoming or Oregon. The ultimate test was nevertheless military combat; while Theodore Roosevelt became known around the turn of the century as a public figure associated with both outdoors prowess and courage under fire, the writer who most successfully depicted the process a man has to go through to gain his masculine credentials in combat was Stephen Crane. The intriguing aspect of Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* is the ambivalence concerning the development of the novel's protagonist. When he finally seems to have proven his mettle, it is not clear whether he has actually learned something valuable that will enrich his masculinity, or whether he has become just a mindless cog in the military machine. He is now able to go through the motions of being a soldier, yet it is possible that his quest for manhood resulted in his emotional callousness.

Crane's renown as a war writer was eclipsed several decades later when Ernest Hemingway began publishing his novels and short stories dealing with WWI. Though *The Sun Also Rises* does not deal directly with war, it examines the way war continues to affect human relationships long after the Armistice Day. Emasculated by the wound he received in the war, the novel's protagonist, Jake Barnes, has to find a way to compensate for his deficient masculinity. A rigorous self-discipline and stoicism enable Jake to gain respect among his male friends for whom he functions as a connoisseur of worthy manly activities. Jake's self-control is inextricably linked to his love of bullfighting which represents an occupation that

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only a true man can engage in. When dealing with other men, Jake is in control, yet his manly endurance and fortitude are by the unpredictable feminine world represented by Brett Ashley. As a result, Jake experiences an existential crisis which necessitates a laborious effort to redefine his masculinity. A similar redefinition awaits the protagonist in *A Farewell to Arms* at the novel's end when he is walking in the rain after he learns about his lover's death at childbirth. The whole narrative presents Frederic Henry as someone always in control of the situation, yet it is possible that this narrative perspective is meant to hide his disorientation and sense of loss. A proverbial stiff upper lip might then be a desperate stratagem to underplay Frederic's uncertainty about his manliness. Both *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* present masculinity as a tragic undertaking which calls for a large degree of resolve and restraint. In their vulnerability, Jake Barnes and Frederic Henry resemble brutalized western protagonists, yet their situation is made worse by the simple fact that there is no frontier where they could find refuge. In the fictional world Hemingway creates, there is little to be said for exuberant male agency.

Norman Mailer's portrayal of American manhood is as bleak as Hemingway's, but Mailer is also seriously considering violence and criminality as antidotes to the diminished masculinity of what is now known the "Greatest Generation." In *The Naked and the Dead*, his sympathies lie with Sergeant Croft and General Cummings, who thrive on ruthless exercise of their will in the military setting. What makes them stand out is not only their amorality and lust for power but also their adherence to a particular vision of their own, which presupposes certain imaginative powers and mental agility. While Cummings is preoccupied with methods of maintaining efficient command of thousands of men ready to serve his goals, Croft becomes obsessed with conquering the top of Mount Anaka which captures his imagination. To reach their goals, both Croft and Cummings are determined to take every possible measure and are not bothered in the least by the fact that some of their men die in the

process.   In Mailer's philosophy, amorality is justified because it strengthens male resourcefulness and fosters the will to act. Mailer develops this line of thought in his essay "The White Negro" where he claims that to rekindle their masculine spirit, American men should indulge in their psychopathic impulses, even if it leads to criminal activity. Only this way can men free themselves from what Mailer sees as oppressive white masculinity bent on suppressing expressions of true masculine identity. In *An American Dream*, Mailer goes even further, making a case that even murder can be seen as a legitimate part of a man's project to energize his insipid masculinity. The novel's protagonist, Stephen Rojack, is able to shake off his apathy only after he kills his wife whose voracious femininity kept smothering his aspirations. Even though his manly exuberance does not last, the effort to reclaim his masculinity is depicted as worthwhile.

In Mailer's vision, the masculine will to assert itself is the ultimate value.   His portrayal of Rojack may bring to mind Sam Peckinpah's westerns in which violence is portrayed as a mere spectacle disassociated from its ramifications. The harshness of these portrayals has been the object of criticism from writers and filmmakers aware of the negative aspects of traditional American masculinity. In his novels dealing with the Vietnam War and its aftermath, Tim O'Brien offers a radically different vision that of Hemingway or Mailer. Already in his novelistic debut, *Northern Lights*, he suggests that true manhood needs to include not only considerable physical prowess, courage, and robustness but also an openness to the feminine world and its values. Furthermore, O'Brien shows that the self-centeredness and extreme individualism exhibited by American men often leads to spiritual poverty, narrow-mindedness, and failure of imagination. In these respects, O'Brien goes against the tenets of American masculinity based on proud self-reliance and distrust of femininity which needs to be kept in check at all cost. In O'Brien's fictional world, there is no glorification of tight-lipped stoicism in the face of adversity, so typical for western protagonists or, for that

matter, Hemingway's characters. Similarly, there is nothing in his novels to suggest that a man's regeneration can be achieved through violence. In *The Nuclear Age* and *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien shows how obsession with control makes it impossible for men not only to communicate with women they love but also to understand their own feelings. The protagonists of these novels, William Cowling and John Wade, forswear that they are in control of their actions, yet it turns out that they suffer from serious mental problems that put their loved ones in danger. Their adherence to the old models of masculinity only adds to their male anxiety and creates chaos and unhappiness.

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