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Title	Manhood and American Literary History : An Overview with Selected Bibliography of Masculinities and Men's Studies
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Citation	北海道大学文学研究科紀要, 118, 95-118
Issue Date	2006-02-28
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/34102
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	118_P95-118.pdf



Manhood and American Literary History: An Overview with Selected Bibliography of Masculinities and Men's Studies

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Introduction

Manhood is a socio-cultural construct, and its concept in the field of literature is one of the last significant gender issues. After studying women writers for over ten years, it has become clear that the feminist perspective alone is not sufficient to fully understand gender. In the oft-overlooked area of masculinities and men's studies, specifically the male identity and the ideal man, there is much that can be ascertained about American history and literary movements through the prism of the male perspective. In this essay, modifying what Harold Bloom calls "anxiety of authorship," I would like to re-construct the US history to show that politics and national history created the "Myth of Manhood" and mainly analyze white male writers as they represent their growing anxieties of American manhood in literature.

I. Man of Faith: 1585-1774

The first English to settle across the Atlantic Ocean created two types of "faithful" manhood: one through their loyalty to the king and

another through their faith in God. Their patriotism and religious faith are recorded in official reports and private journals.

The founders of Jamestown in 1607 are considered the first successful colonists, following the failure of the Roanoke Plantation in 1585. In his *The General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624), Captain John Smith portrays himself as the ideal man who, confronted with a series of challenges that could have brought about his downfall, succeeds in establishing a colony in the King's name - enabling England to benefit from the New World's abundant natural resources. Those who came afterwards developed plantations in the South, further benefiting the mother country. In American literary history, Smith's work can be considered archetypal "travel literature," but it is even more important, because it serves a patriotic function in the name of the King. It suggests that, for the aristocracy, European chivalry was a practical expression of manhood.

Through their faith in a Christian god, the Puritans who settled in the Northeast practiced another form of manhood. Having left the Old World, they endeavored to establish God's kingdom in the New World. In 1620, before even establishing Plymouth Plantation, the 102 Pilgrim Fathers passed the Mayflower Contract, establishing a theocratic nation. As is clear from their journals, the Puritans viewed the New World symbolically, regarding its wilderness as a place to test their faith. For example, William Bradford is simply thankful to God in his official *On Plymouth Plantation*, while John Winthrop, in *A Model of Christian Charity*, expresses anxiety about the challenges forcing him to prove himself as "a faithful man."

These early expressions of "manhood" did not last long, as the colonists were soon subjected to British oppression, shaking not only their faith in the kingdom, but also their faith in God. This experience caused

the colonists to seek a new “revolutionary” manhood and American independence.

II. Self-Made Man: 1774–1848

For the newly born nation to achieve freedom and democracy, America creates its own unique hero, the self-made man, modeled after actual historical figures. They are self-disciplined, individualistic men who successfully sacrifice themselves for the development of the country. Their moral fortitude and way of life are recorded in the form of nonfiction novels, biographies and autobiographies, such as Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* and John Marshall’s *The Life of George Washington*. Regardless whether it is self-fashioning or not, the contributions by the nation’s founding fathers are soon to become mythologized as the national and individual goals are always the united state for America.

Nonfiction novels also created America’s ideal man as the frontier expands westward. Natty Bumppo of James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* is free from the Old World manners, living with his own sense of justice in order to survive in the wilderness of the New World. Bumppo is probably the first American hero for many, but this character also shows the author’s anxiety over an ideal manhood for America. This is especially true when one notices the villain Magua’s corruption by his association with European military forces in *The Last of the Mohicans*. The author’s ambivalence for the development of nation, however, was not taken seriously at that time but rather oversimplified in the form of an upcoming genre called dime novels.

III. Man of Adventure: 1848-1897

When gold is discovered in California in 1848 and the nation continues to progress à la the Manifesto Destiny, the American dream becomes the goal of every man. In this climate, the new genre, dime novel adventures, represents American optimism. The birth of popular literature means the birth of “American Man” who is self-reliant, ready to fight any oppression and fault, capable of making his dreams come true, and then moves on to the next challenge. Thus, the dime novel created a melodramatic prototype of “American Manhood.” Ned Buntline’s *Deadwood Dick* is a tale about Buffalo Bill, and continues to attract a considerable readership. As Jack Salzman points out, the dime novels created the “tales of adventure and excitement that were implicitly political in their nationalism and patriotic fervor” and also “created an illusory rather than a real past. These works were not intended to tell their audience who they were, but who they ought to be.”

However, toward the end of the 19th century, “American man” starts to face a new set of anxieties, brought on by such ideologies as abolitionism and imperialism, these ideologies creating new distinctions between strong and weak white males. As a result, Mark Twain divides American literature into two streams: Romantic and Realistic. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* follows the stream of dime novels and describes a romantic as well as an optimistic white boy for whom his linear life is like a game, and he is always the winner. Contrary to the chauvinistic Tom, Huck is a wanderer in the South, and Twain introduces his own anxieties on manhood as an inevitable issue in the postbellum America. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* presents a labyrinthine life of a boy who continuously suffers from social conflicts and is unable to get out.

Twain's concerns about manhood in its relation to society represent the majority of men in the period as he once confessed: "Huckleberry Finn is not an imaginary person. He still lives; or rather, they still live." A sense of loss presented here would be inherited by the writers of the lost generation in the next century.

Stephen Crane also presents the same anxieties as Twain's, but this time in a single work, *The Red Badge of Courage*. Henry Fleming's decision to return to the battlefield may suggest a politically correct man's heroism, much like in a dime novel. Ironically, however, it also indicates false manhood just as Huck's story does. Crane's ambiguous presentation of the protagonist shows not only his creative skill as an early modernist but his own anxiety about "what man should be" compared with "what man is."

Heroes of the dime novels continue to prove themselves, finding the silver screen and even cartoons as new mediums to demonstrate their ideal manhood. In the realistic literary texts, on the contrary, men are now spiritually weak, living in a society that can no longer help them prove their strength. Twain's presentation of an anti-hero in his companion novel and Crane's ambiguity in a single work both influence the modernist writers' description of manhood.

IV. Man of Dis-ease: 1898-Present

Twentieth century literature continues to describe male suffering and confusion, especially as the result of capitalist materialism and war. Its protagonists become powerless, lost, and then insane as their identities are shattered.

Representative of these new feelings of male ambiguity are the so-called anti-heroes of the lost generation, exemplified by the characters

created by Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. These writers are well aware of the fantasy of Victorian manhood in the 20th century and create totally un-heroic protagonists to present authorial anxieties. Jake Burns' impotence and his imaginary flight from reality "Isn't it pretty to think so?" represent the desperation of manhood after the WWI. Even for J. Gatsby, neither Franklinesque self-discipline nor his materialistic success helps him achieve his personal dream of regaining Daisy's love. They are harmless, neurotic losers.

WWII, Vietnam, and the postmodern movements create "deformed" images of manhood, and men become insane. A story of an insane man is not new among the Jewish writers such as Salinger and Roth, but it is not until 1960 that white male writers adapt insanity to describe the split male identities in such works as Heller's *Catch-22* and Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Men's "dis-ease" appears to find no exit.

However, recently, "American Man" is beginning to realize he does not have to "*be a man*" in the traditional sense. He consists of multiple selves - not just "*man*" but also, "*human*." In what is called "Self-Reflexive Fiction," man looks back at his past and tries to collect his own broken pieces so he can reconcile with himself. William Styron's *Stingo* accepts his southern heritage, and then later Sophie's choice of death makes him a successful writer. John Irving's *The World According to Garp* and *Hotel New Hampshire* introduce male characters that try simply to live in order not to die. The reconciliation within seems to be a way to be oneself, which one may call "Others-Made Man."

Conclusion

Literary history of American manhood illustrates the white male writers' submission, confusion, and awakening from a sort of politico-

gender hypnotism. “Myth of Manhood” may still dominate the twenty-first century, but I believe that the application of the Bloomian theory of “anxiety of authorship” in an existentialist examination of American manhood in historical and literary contexts will shed light not only in the field of history and literature but also in the long neglected but vital field of “man” in gender studies.

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