

Masculinity and world war ii

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Masculinity and World War II The image of Man has changed throughout time. Dominant constructions of masculinity, which are basically attempts to stabilize gender identity, are developed within the dynamics of shifting cultures and societies. The male stereotype, which is still prevails nowadays, started rising at the end of eighteenth – beginning nineteenth century in Europe with a great concentration on the male's body. The stereotype made the world look at man more like a type rather than an individual.

Masculinity was strengthened due to the positive stereotyping, however for those that did not conform to this label or fit in with the ideal, were negatively stereotyped. Being an outsider who was born in a different country made it especially interesting to penetrate the American culture and research about American masculinity. Truly, much of the progress of any country has been defined around the lives and accomplishments of great men. One cannot begin understanding the history of America without understanding manhood and the influence of the male. In every generation in America, manhood has been in the center of life and progress.

It constantly strives to uphold its own traditions while trying to redefine itself. I have done a lot of research about American masculinity and how it has been changed throughout the history. While going through different literature about the nature of masculinity, I came to the conclusion that for many men, the idea of masculinity is deeply tied to military prowess and adventure. One cannot but agree that war, the most violent and decisive of human acts, is the paradigmatic masculine enterprise. Military service is one of the rites of manhood; it makes men men.

Moreover, war makes nations masculine, too. This paper examines the nature of masculinity and the role of masculinity in America. My main focus is on the changes in definitions of masculinity during the WWII Era and goes on to discuss the psychological and emotional effects of the war and the subsequent readjustment efforts in the same era. In this work I will try to explore different author's conclusions about masculinity, its changes and/or problems during the WWII and in its post-period. War, more than any other action, offers the ultimate test and demonstration of manhood.

Indeed, it has been suggested that the sole cause of war is masculinity. War requires masculine energy and communal effort. It engages man in the age-old conflict between courage cowardice, right and wrong, aggression and compassion. In his book *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Michael Kimmel concentrates his attention on a large set of questions about the importance of masculinity: " I do believe that a comprehensive historical account of the American experience can no longer ignore the importance of masculinity - and especially of men's efforts to prove their manhood - in the making of America" (5).

For the soldier who fought during the WWII, the country conveyed upon him the gift of manhood. It was a war which redefined American masculinity. Although it led men to brutality on a very personal level, it served the hero archetype well. To embody courage under the most gruesome circumstances, the soldier has to repress his fear. To embody strength, he had to repress his feelings of vulnerability. In fact, what war required is manliness: " The men who were the best soldiers were, in effect, the best men" (Gagen 23).

Elizabeth A. Gager in her article “Homespun Manhood and the War Against Masculinity: Community Leisure on the US home front, 1917-19,” discussing the war and its influence on masculinity, states that “military masculinity became more entrenched in myths of heroism as sacrifice as citizenship was masculinised and masculinity was militarized” (27). Even though the author’s concentration is mostly on the WW I, Ganger discusses a lot about masculinity and the effect of wars on American cultures.

Gager locates the early-century crisis of masculinity in the loss of control men were experiencing: the authority of white, middle-class men was being threatened by the increasing presence of women in the public sphere. While on the one hand it was great opportunity for economic success, it also destabilized traditional gender and class hierarchy. All this placed a lot of pressure on the soul of American manhood. As it started happening, across America men returned to an increasingly protected wilderness in the hope that rehearsing primitive blood sports might revive in them their primal instincts.

As Ganger goes on, she brings a very interesting point of view, where she connects the image of fighter with the image of hero and explains the men’s necessity to participate in the war: While blood sports and boxing could go some way towards providing a satisfactory venue for cultivating masculinity, there was something peculiar to war that was uniquely desirable. When all around them masculinity seemed to be failing, war appeared as the last frontier of manliness: a crucible in which masculinity could be reborn. (27) A military service man was not just an aggressive heroic individual, he was a unique blend of masculinity.

Therefore, for American man the war became a great opportunity to show their aggression, strength, courage and endurance. All these are the qualities of manhood. Similar to Gagen, Christina Jarvis, a psychologist and a professor at the State University of New York, in her discourse “ If He Comes Home Nervous: U. S. World War II Neuropsychiatric Casualties and Post War Masculinities,” illustrates the traditional masculinity ideology. She uses the analogy of medieval knightly chivalric code. The chivalric code was the guiding principle that highlighted the designated features of medieval warrior class as unyielding, heroic, and tough.

The chivalric code, as Jarvis notes, would in turn have a significant influence in developing the ideals of traditional masculinity in the earlier 20th Century World War years. During the same period, the perceived notion of masculinity gender superiority was prevalent in then overly patriarchal society that existed at that time. The society depicted military masculinity as invincible. The common notion was that since men are physically more capable than women are and that only the toughest got into the military, then masculinity ultimately surpassed shallow emotional vulnerability.

The United States came out of the conflict viewing itself as a masculine nation. The postwar generation of American men grew up revering a hero image, but, as it turned out, there was one major problem. The heroes too often didn't see everything the same way as the other people did. What they brought back from the war were oppressivememoriesthat wouldn't go away. What they brought back from the war was emotional trauma and enormous challenges in reintegrating with domestic life. While they were recruiting in

anticipation of war, American soldiers trained vigorously pledging their undying dedication to protect and defend their country.

Jarvis asserts that it was a sacred duty for all soldiers to uphold bravery, resilience and courage, which were among the core military ideals. As it turned out, the perceived masculinity resilience ideal was actually overrated. Besides sustaining bodily and physical harm in the course of the war, American servicemen apprehended severe psychiatric and emotional injury as well. These soldiers witnessed atrocities and inhumane acts of war and saw the physical torture of many as well as demise of others in the battlefield.

This in turn caused some of them to apprehend psychiatric harm in form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Similarly, the servicemen who sustained severe bodily harm that left them physically handicapped suffered from acute mental and emotional disorders. As such, physical and mental injuries are inseparable. As Christian Hoge in his work “ Combat Duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mental Health Problems, and Barriers to Care” explains, the course of World War II altered the preconceived notion that masculinity was beyond emotional vulnerability.

In his discourse on mental harm during the World Wars and the Iraqi war on terror, Hoge asserts that the war shattered the spirit of American soldiers given that they had to watch their helpless colleagues die of intensive injuries, disease and starvation. Some lost close friends and relatives in the event of war. This, as a result, undermined the traditional masculinity ideals while people began to appreciate that despite their bravery, soldiers were human beings with emotions and feelings and not as invincible as everybody

initially thought. Numerous soldiers came under immense stress while in the battlefield.

Some of them began to re-evaluate their dedication to defend the integrity of their country amid a situation where it seemed that everyone had forsaken them. At this point, fighting for personal survival went beyond defending the national integrity. The war exposed the emotional dimension of men as they began worrying about their families back at home and the hitherto ardent masculinity ideology began to wither. As soon as the mainstream news periodicals reported on the psychological harm imposed on soldiers by the war, literary advice in form of medical opinions on remasculinisation of war veterans began to emerge in late 1944.

In his discourse on the early years post-war scenario *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, David Wecter wrote that “ the rebuilding of a war neurotic, sent home for treatment, must begin by convincing him that he is not a coward or a failure, but a battle casualty just as truly as the man who lost a leg” (547). His sentiments reflected the mainstream thoughts of the American people at the time. There was a widespread public outcry concerning the psychological welfare of the soldiers who had dedicated their unrelenting efforts to preserve the integrity of America. Jarvis in her work depicts the same problem soldiers faced during and after war.

But, she states that early in the war, soldiers and sailors who “ broke down” under the pressure of combat or military life were generally discharged instead of treated. According to military psychiatrists Malcolm Farrel and John Appel, as Jarvis goes on , “ these early discharges stemmed from the idea that initially the military thought it was possible to contemplate an Army

made up of the cream of American manhood” (100). Given the military’s initial assumptions that only servicemen with weak egos broke down, early psychiatric casualties were stigmatized – especially when soldiers were labeled as “ psychoneurotic. This term associated with both the “ feminine” and “ insane. ” As a result the armed forces began a program of prompt treatment. The term “ combat exhaustion” has been invented by psychiatrists: Despite the fact that labels such as “ battle fatigue,” “ combat exhaustion,” and “ old sergeant syndrome” actually represented approximately one quarter of the war’s total neuropsychiatric admissions, military personnel and the public readily embraced the terms because they destigmatized psychiatric wounds by conveying a sense of masculine toughness rather than weakness. 101) Seeing as the traditional masculinity ideology had significantly shrivelled in the course of WWII, America dedicated its efforts towards a physical and psychological readjustment cause. Apart from the provision of intensive care for the psychiatric casualties, America’s special medical consultants sought to de-stigmatize psychiatric conditions. Psychiatrist George Pratt in his book *Soldier to Civilian: Problems of Readjustment* reassures the casualties that the term psychiatry does not necessarily connote insanity.

He says that on the contrary, the terms psychiatry and neurology as used in this post-war context implied “ a departure from average personality traits or temperament ... that render a soldier unsuitable for military service” (14). In bid to clarify the paradigm shift and divergence of the post war psychological discourses, Pratt explains that these psychiatric discharges resulted from

what he terms ' situational stressors' and not due to flawed personality or ego.

Pratt's efforts in de-stigmatizing psychiatric war injuries oversaw a rapid psychological recovery of the casualties. He notes as well that the condition was in all likelihood temporary save for a few cases of acute neuropsychiatric disturbances. Through his profound medical expertise, Pratt recommends the post war psychiatric casualties to share their war experiences with their families as well as medical experts.

He reckoned that this would help in the gradual healing process and the ultimate restoration of the traditional masculinity ideals. What we know about manhood and masculinity now gives us an extraordinary opportunity to become relevant in our own time. The old models of manhood provide a too-limiting definition for the complex sense of manliness. As we can see through examples from history, men are more than just unemotional beasts, who are ready to die for their nation and their country any time they are needed.

Man can be a soldier, man can be a warrior. No matter in what situation the society puts our men, we shouldn't forget that they are just human beings and nothing human is alien to them. It might sound very sad but the war in some way helped a soldier to figure out what true manliness is. One of the friends of Jess, who is the main character of the book *Stone Butch Blues* by Leslie Feinberg, once said that everyone gets scared once there is a danger, but to be courageous means to go ahead in spite of being scared.

Men should realize that for all of us they are already heroes because they didn't hesitate to go and fight for their country and their people. Manhood and masculinity in America are expressions of many different ideas and sentiments. This review touched the idea that there is no single definition of man. And war, as one of the most important factors, showed us how far away from the reality the society's prospective about masculinity might be.