

Manhood in the great depression essay

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Manhood during the Great Depression Manhood was shaken to its core during the Great Depression. Never before has an era had such an altering impact on the way we perceive masculinity. This is best portrayed in the popular culture of the day that demonstrated conflicting views of men at the time.

This division of what masculinity is developed directly from the cynicism, escapism, and the traditional view of what the American man should be. Popular Culture depicts a media response to what is happening in society at the time. During the Depression early on, Pop Culture tries to force the traditional American way of living and perspective of manhood despite the growing change in sentiment. This traditional view on pre-depression American masculinity has the man as the bread-winner and protector of the family unit .

This customary view of masculinity was pushed by men like Henry Ford. Ford used his Sociology Department to control his employees to what he thought the proper American Father, employee and man should be. Henry Ford was quick fire any employee that had emotional, drinking or gambling problems . Carrying into the beginning of the Great Depression, the media still tried to promote this age-old vision of what the proper man should be. In movies like, King Vidor's *The Crowd*, James Murray plays a man who is stuck in an environment where he is asked by society to be just another man “ working behind the endless desks manned by faceless clerks.

” By the mid 1930's the average American man felt the growing confrontation with between the traditional American man and the lack of

means to achieve it. It has often been argued that men's roles in society have to be artificially created and so are fragile and in constant danger. " It is impossible to strip [the woman's] life of meaning as completely as the life of a man can be stripped," anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote in 1932 . For many men, the Great Depression went a long way toward stripping their lives of meaning.

What had traditionally given meaning to men's lives were their roles as providers and protectors. Without this many men felt lost and cynical at the position society had put them in as they scoffed at the idea of the traditional American man. In John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Pa Joad says, " I ain't no good any more...Funny! Woman takin' over the fambly. Woman sayin' we'll do this here an' we'll go there. An' I don't even care. " This cynicism of the old-age American man transferred over to the popular culture in a variety of faces who challenged what type of man one can be. The Marx Brothers showed a range of different types of males placed in starring roles .

Groucho Marx was very effeminate, loose limbed and stooped. Chico Marx was a ridiculous Italian con man and musician. Harpo Marx was never talked and was consequently very physical. Harpo was driven by appetite and was always chasing after women.

These three are so unconventional that it comforts the struggling depression man to see and laugh at characters such as these . It was the fourth brother Zappo, who displayed the greatest resemblance to the traditional male character, yet it was because of this he was the least popular. Many men

attempted to temporally escape during the Great Depression and movies were the easiest and most popular way to do it . Men in search of their lost masculinity could turn to Hollywood, which was happy to supply those willing to pay.

Most notably, Walt Disney's 1938 animated feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, reflected the male fears and longings of the Depression years. The film portrays the "two kinds of women" view of the world with a vengeance . The Wicked Queen is a female with power, like all too many women seemed, in the view of many men, to have in the 1930s. The heroine, on the other hand, is domestic, naive, and finally completely helpless. Snow White must be restored to life by a man's kiss, reversing the reality of the Depression years for many men, who were in their own form of 'sleeping death', from which they could be brought back to life, however briefly, only by a woman's "kiss"(which has to imply sex).

The redefining of masculinity continued across all genres in Hollywood during the 1930's. In comedies such as *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin attacked the work system society has set up for men. Like sheep herded into a cage to be slaughtered, Chaplin resented the factories and their Big brother mentality with Executives and Foremen. In Chaplin's *Modern Times*, the individual man counts for nothing other than the production he creates at work . This scientific management of factory production ends up 'consuming' the factory man and driving the Chaplin's character into a manic frenzy. In radio shows such as the popular *Jack Benny Show*, Benny challenged what type of man is acceptable in society. Men were supposed to be the confident leader

and bread-winner of the family, not someone like Jack Benny who was unsure and troubled with money.

Jack Benny wasn't perfect; in fact even people in usually subservient roles such as women and blacks openly criticized Jack Benny . But McFadden states, " Jack's frustration makes him seem powerless and effeminate, expressing the way many people (especially men) felt during the Great Depression. To laugh at him was to laugh at things the listener most feared in himself or herself.

By having a popular character like Jack Benny provide a laugh and an example of a true ordinary man, it released much of the stress of the troubled men of the Great Depression. By the end of the 1930's the traditional view of American masculinity had be shaken and moved in all directions by the cynicism and escapism in the Depression era. Hollywood and the media realized that people connect better with a character that reflects what is going on in their lives as to a character that portrays an unrealistic image of men.