

# Half-Comic and Half-Tragic: Irony in Post-World War II Literature

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In their 1982 January issue, Harper's Magazine published Paul Fussell's essay "My War: How I got irony in the infantry." Fussell served as a lieutenant in the American infantry during World War II and afterwards became an academic, eventually receiving widespread praise and literary awards for his 1975 study, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, investigating World War I and its force in altering aesthetics. Seven years later, Harper's published "My War," documenting Fussell's own shift in personal aesthetics as a result of his World War II experience. Fussell begins by disclosing a few responses from readers repulsed with his depiction of warfare. "Whenever I deliver [an] unhappy view of the war, especially when I try to pass it through a protective screen of irony, I hear from outraged readers" (40). Fussell admits to an emphasis of the "noisome materials" of the war in his treatments, the "corpses, maddened dogs, deserters and looters, pain, Auschwitz, weeping," and the list goes on. By refusing to ignore the cruelty and suffering of the war, and by rendering it ironic, Fussell has been labeled, "callous," his "black and monstrous" work revealing an "overwhelming deficiency in human compassion" (40).

Fussell's ability to speak of the War as a genuinely noble endeavor dissolved during his first operation, when his platoon was ordered to relieve another squad during the night. Pinned down and lost, in "darkness so thick we could see nothing at all" (43), his platoon decided to stop for the night. Fussell and his soldiers awoke in the morning and found that they had bedded down among "dead German boys in greenish-gray uniforms." Fussell wrote, "My adolescent illusion, largely intact to that moment, fell away at once, and I suddenly knew I was not and never would be in a world that was reasonable or just. The scene was less apocalyptic than shabbily ironic: it sorted so ill with modern popular assumptions about the idea of progress and attendant improvements in public health, social welfare, and social justice. (43)

Forget letters from repulsed citizens, there is no doubt that in 1982, Fussell found among his readers, a batch of veterans nodding in agreement, though, perhaps not veterans of the same war. It is harder to discern if

Fussell would have received the same hypothetical response if he had published an exact duplicate essay thirty years early, in 1952. What would be the response to a statement like, "What got us going and carried us through was the conviction that, suffer as we might, we were at least 'making history.' But we didn't do that. Liddell-Hart's 766-page *History of the Second World War* never heard of us"(45)? While Fussell's surprise at waking up among dead soldiers may have rung true to an audience of World War II veterans in 1952, Fussell's ironic bite and disillusionment may not have.

Though this thought experiment proves nothing in and of itself, it offers a potential framework when questioning how America's understanding of warfare—its grim gory reality, its ideals of sacrifice and brave, noble servicemen—has changed since 1945. However, because examining a cultural shift over more than half a century would be a large and unwieldy topic, I hope to pare down its scope by limiting this paper to three seminal Post-World War II texts, MacKinlay Kantor's 268 pages of blank verse, *Glory for Me* (1945); Joseph Heller's outrageously popular *Catch-22* (1961); and Kurt Vonnegut's tragicomic sci-fi novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). My approach in analysis emerges from an understanding that culture and literature are interactive and reciprocal, and that each writer interpreted their war experience in the context of an American culture shifting from the guarded optimism of 1945 to the contentious Vietnam era. As I review these texts, I will use Fussell's explanation of irony, as "the emotion, whatever it is, occasioned by perceiving some great gulf, half-comic, half-tragic, between what one expects and what one finds" (44), as a sort of dowsing rod for the discussion. With Fussell's irony as a gauge, the three texts reveal a growing prominence of ironic sentiment and an overall darkening of opinion towards WWII conflict and combat in general.

In 1945, Coward-McCann, Inc. published MacKinlay Kantor's *Glory for Me*. The narrative would later be adapted into the popular Samuel Goldwyn film, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). Kantor, a novelist and journalist before 1939, became a war correspondent in Europe with the British Royal Air Force. Then, desiring a direct role in the war, Kantor received combat training, and eventual flew eleven missions as a B-17 gunner. Forged out of Kantor's experience with the Eighth and ninth United States Air Force and from interviews with World War II veterans recently discharged, Kantor produced *Glory for Me*, an account of three World War II veterans struggling to adapt to civilian life in Boone,

Iowa (Eckley, "MacKinlay Kantor").

Kantor plucks the title *Glory for Me* from an American gospel song, "O That will be Glory" (Knepper and Lawrence, 335). Its lines are included in the book as an epigram: "When all my labors and trails are o'er / And I am safe on that beautiful shore... / O that will be / Glory for me!" But the triumphant tone of deliverance present in the gospel lyric is not present in Kantor's novel. From the beginning, the veterans feel separation and anxiety as opposed to relief and "glory" in their homecoming. Al Stephenson, a sergeant from the infantry, describes Boone as untouched by the war (26-27). The bomber Fred Derry, age 21 and "killer of a hundred men" (3), who is bored by civilian employment and knows a "Norden bombsight, [but] not much else" (205), asks throughout the narrative, "how much bombing / Will they want in Boone?" (133). And Homer Wermels, a physically disabled Navy veteran, displays his alienation prominently in the way he staggers instead of walks, slurs instead of talks, and in his inability to eat his meals decorously because of his shaking hands.

Recognizing the difficulties Kantor's veterans experience in Boone, *Glory for Me* is as ill fitting and traditionally ironic a title as Swift's "A Modest Proposal." But while "A Modest Proposal" aligns well into Fussell's explanation of irony as being "half-comic, half-tragic," Kantor's narration hardly touches on the first. Kantor's irony is pointed, not at the veterans, but rather at the civilians of Boone, and in extension, all of Kantor's contemporary readers unmarred by the war. The recently discharged servicemen wait for their ticket home at an airfield, anxious, but skeptical of their homecoming. Though inevitably drawn back to the communities they left, the veterans know to be wary. Kantor wrote,

What waited [they] did not know,  
But they could guess.  
Their guesses would be wrong.  
They knew it well,  
And so did many million other men.  
They were afraid. They were resentful,  
But they wanted Home. (10)

Conversely, the ignorance of Boone's citizens is exemplified in Stephenson's boss, who considers Stephenson's war experience as an infantryman as something akin to a travel tour. "The war has broadened you" (10), the boss asserts.

Kantor's depiction of warfare in *Glory for Me* is

not uncommon when compared to other major American World War II novels from the late 1940s. Like Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* or Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions*, World War II combat is unfiltered (Pinsker, 602). It includes some of the "noisome materials" Fussell guaranteed in his own work—dismembered corpses, pain and suffering, horrible wounds, affairs with WAAC women—but neglects others; Kantor has no deserters or looters, no weeping or scandal, no hints at sadism. And though Stephenson laments that the war was fought with youth, more specifically, of the stuff inside the youth: "The wet and greasy parts you never see / When any man strips down," (113-114) his service is never questioned. Stephenson may be disillusioned, but just like Kantor, his energy is spent critiquing the civilian sector. Stephenson never gains an ironic glint. It's all tragedy, no comedy.

Kantor's *Glory For Me* was released in 1945, the same year America tied up the loose ends of World War II with two atomic bombs called Fatman and Little Boy detonated over the predominantly civilian communities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan (Chafe 58). Veterans returned to a United States that was colloquially referring to World War II as "The Good War," indicating that attitudes rested far from the isolationist and pacifist ethos that trailed the First World War (Chafe 33). America was the triumphant power. It alone had access to the super weapon that brought Japan to its knees. America exited the war with its economy and infrastructure untouched, far removed from the devastation present in Axis and Allied countries alike (Chafe 68). America's 1945 GDP was greater than those of the United Kingdom, France, Italy, the USSR, Germany, Australia, and Japan combined (Zuljan, "Allied and Axis GDP"). Yet, if the American public was optimistic, it was a cautious optimism. Society appeared primed for domestic unrest. Minorities had begun demanding extended rights and liberties. Women sought to continue their position in the work force as America moved beyond the wartime production levels. And some feared that another Depression loomed with so many American veterans returning to the job markets (Chafe 108-110).

In September 1949, American scientists discovered a tangible reason for Americans to check their optimism. They had detected traces of radioactive material in the Earth's atmosphere, a clear sign that the Soviet Union had successfully constructed and tested Atomic Bombs of their own (Burr, "U.S. Intelligence and the Detection of the First Soviet Nuclear Test"). In a few

months, the two superpowers were locked in an arms race, both threatening the other with the potency and scope of their respective stockpiles. The two settled into the political rhetoric of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), a tacit agreement of mutual destruction: if either super power used a weapon of mass destruction, it would end in the annihilation of both parties. In 1954, amid the developing tension of the Cold War, as bomb shelters became an American building trend ("Atomic Honeymooners"), a veteran of the Twelfth Air Force, Joseph Heller, began his first attempts at his debut novel.

In 1961, Simon & Schuster publishing company purchased Heller's manuscript and published the novel in October (Aldridge, "The Loony Horror of it All: 'Catch-22' Turns 25"). In *Catch-22*, Heller describes the plight of an American bomber grouping on a fictional island in the Mediterranean in 1944. Readers follow the anecdotes of Captain John Yossarian, a bombardier, encountering a story that is presented without any devotion to traditional plot structure and lacking any modesty towards repetition. The repetitive and nonlinear nature of *Catch-22* establishes the novel's scope in the rehashing of exaggerated routines, both comedic routine and the quotidian (Deadalus 158). Heller wrote of Yossarian's comic hospital routine, of his maddening combat routine, and of his paradoxical military bureaucratic routine. These routines are acted out by characters with descriptions and behavior that appear more akin to cartoons than human illustrations. Instead, Heller's puppets work like crash-test dummies with nonsense names, created in order to rattle around in a system defined by *Catch-22*, the famous phrase that describes a circumstance from which escape is futile because of mutually antagonistic conditions. The clearest explanation of *Catch-22* comes from a conversation between Yossarian and Doc Daneeka, the squadron's doctor, the one friendly entity in the war that appears to have the authority to send an officer home. Yossarian question the doctor if his fellow pilot, Orr, is suitable to be grounded:

Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach. "Is Orr crazy?"

"He sure is," Doc Daneeka said.

"Can you ground him?"

"I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That's part of the rule."

"Then why doesn't he ask you to?"

"Because he's crazy," Doc Daneeka said. "He has to be crazy to keep flying combat missions after all the close

calls he's had. Sure, I can ground Orr. But first he has to ask me to."

"That's all he has to do to be grounded?"

"That's all. Let him ask me."

"And then you can ground him?" Yossarian asked.

"No. Then I can't ground him."

"You mean there's a catch?" "Sure there's a catch," Doc Daneeka replied. "Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy." (45)

Initially, the book garnered a mixed response from critics. The negative declarations that the book was "derivative, poorly edited, repetitive and overlong" (Shatzky 150), or as a *Deadalus* review put it more bluntly, "worthless" (156), were balanced with higher praise. Nelson Algren, writing in *The Nation*, called *Catch-22* "not merely the best American novel to come out of World War II; it is the best American novel to come out of anywhere in years" (qtd. in Aldridge, "The Loony Horror of it All"). Whatever the mixture of adulation and lambaste, the novel did not chart on any best-seller list, and after a year, only 30,000 hardcover copies had sold. It wasn't until after *Catch-22* was released in paperback in 1962 that Heller's novel received vast public attention. It became a number one best seller and within a year, Americans had purchased over two million copies (Aldridge, "The Loony Horror of it All").

As the 1960s progressed, *Catch-22* quickly became the defining emblem of another war. Pinsker writes, "the absurdities that Heller so painstakingly chronicled seemed to be happening at the end of his reader's noses as they followed, for the first time on evening television, a war that was both unpopular and probably unwise" (602), Vietnam. The vast anger and disillusionment engendered from America's controversial involvement in Vietnam found its expression published a few years before, within the pages of Heller's *Catch-22*. As neoconservative writer Norman Podhoretz, in one of his many censures of the novel, asserts, "*Catch-22* was a product of a new climate, and so was even applauded for what a few years earlier would have been thought virtually blasphemous—showing up World War II as in effect no different from or better than World War I" (qtd. in Rosenbaum, "Seeing *Catch-22* Twice"). Yet even Yossarian would have something to say against Podhoretz's reading. As Major Danby confronts Yossarian over his stubborn refusal to fly more bombing missions, he, using Podhoretz's rational, says, "This is no World War One. You must never forget that we're at war with aggressors who would not let either one of us live if they won."



"I know that," Yossarian replied tersely, with a sudden surge of scowling annoyance. "Christ, Danby, I earned that medal I got, no matter what their reasons for giving it to me. I've flown seventy goddamn combat missions. Don't talk to me about fighting to save my country. I've been fighting all along to save my country. Now I'm going to fight a little to save myself. The country's not in danger any more, but I am." (445-446)

No matter the historical accuracy of Yossarian's claim that the United States was, by late 1944, out of harm's way, here Heller is attempting to distance himself from any questions concerning the consequences of victory or defeat. This is a protest novel, but one, as J. P. Stern wrote, "based on the premise that war is meaningless, or, to be exact, they portray war to the extent that it is meaningless" (207). Yet, a qualification should be added to augment Stern's commentary—meaningless to the individual. Questions of the war's motives, honorable or not, is hardly the concern of Heller's characters as they pursue lasting respite. Their driving focus is based in one thing only: getting out alive. Heller trims war of all its lofty prattle of sacrifice and protecting one's country. For the youth of draft age in 1965, those deeply angered by the Vietnam War, not particularly invested in the outcome, fearful to join the dead Americans in the Vietnam jungle, what better contemporary literary message to identify with?

What they read was a protest novel, a protest novel laced heavily with Heller's distinct blending of the tragic and the comedic. Snowden's death scene, considered among many critics as the moral heart of the novel, is a gruesome rendering of a young soldier's disembowelment devoid of any comic exaggeration. The echolalia that inspires most dialogue in *Catch-22* lacks all comedy as Snowden whimpers again and again, "I'm cold. I'm cold," and Yossarian, unable to do much else, responds repeatedly, "There, there" (439-440). It is a heartbreaking scene; presumably sacred enough for Heller to leave it untouched by comedy. But while Snowden's death scene lacks humor, the humor of *Catch-22* is defined by death.

The comedy within each absurd statement, each opportunity of veritable combat relief negated by a *Catch-22*, each contradiction and each frustration, is pinned to the reality encapsulated in Snowden's death and the secret written out in his blood, that, "Man was matter" (440). The grotesque is countered by the tragedy that those caught within the system are in fact not cartoon characters, but are men of matter. This is

*Catch-22*'s double thread. This is *Catch-22*'s irony. What Heller is able to accomplish in his blending of both the tragic and comedic, is a text much closer to exemplifying Fussell's definition of ironic sentiment than Kantor's somber, *Glory for Me*. When mortals face the reality of their fragile insides, and thereby, acknowledge the real external dangers threatening their fragile insides, it's a safe bet that that awareness is the outcome of a rational, healthy mind. Yet, as the dialogue between Yossarian and Doc Daneeka shows, within Heller's microcosm, to express such sensible thinking would only ensure more missions. These are men, real humans with precious fluids, trapped within the absurdity of *Catch-22*.

At the end of the novel, the reader finds that death, the single previous result of living within *Catch-22*, is not the lone response. In a decision that elicited one critic to label Yossarian a malignant anarchist (Shatzky 150), Yossarian chooses to desert. But instead of depicting Yossarian's commitment to go AWOL as cowardly, Heller couples it with the noble human endeavor of perseverance. As Yossarian explains, "I'm not running away from my responsibilities. I'm running to them. There's nothing negative about running away to save my life" (451). Yossarian intends to join Orr, another deserter who has found successful refuge in Switzerland. All the while the squadron's Chaplain, a usually meek character, showing more energy and gumption than ever before, shouts, "It's a miracle of human perseverance" (449), in reference to Orr's success. The Chaplain declares that he will persevere within the bureaucracy that has alienated and even arrested him under false, outrageous charges. Yossarian jumps out of the hospital window with a new faith in the individual against an absurd, seemingly all-powerful system.

This final scene reveals Heller's vision as one that sees the absurdity of the war, and in extension of life itself, as a remediable and escapable fact. The irony of pointless caution, the comedy of paradox and Snowden's death, is only present within the context of *Catch-22*, a product of a meaningless war. Escape that context, possible through human perseverance, and sanity can be resorted in the individual. The protest can succeed.

Certainly, Heller's worldview coincides with the protest movements, be it along racial or economic, gender or sexual lines, occurring in America during the early 60s and into 1966. The millions of Americans that advocated against the absurdity of racial violence and

America's involvement in Vietnam, the absurdity of institutionalized economic disparity, the absurdity of ubiquitous cultural images defining gender roles, presumably believed that those societal injustices could be subverted and reformed, with human perseverance serving as no small part of the campaign. But by 1967, American culture had reached its fracturing point. For some segments of the activists, the incremental reform sought earlier in the decade became simply not enough, or in some cases, downright illusionary. As historian William Chafe explains in *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II* (1986), "many activist gradually lost faith in the capacity of the American political system to reform itself" (379). The Black Power activists, radical student demonstrators, and radical feminists, all expressions of a growing extremism (341), are testament to this shift in perspective and goals. And then came 1968.

If the extremism on the left represented the initial fracturing of the protest movements, then the assassinations and election ballots of 1968 sounded its death knell. Those, perhaps naïvely, who saw hope for change in the promises of antiwar candidates, Eugene McCarthy and especially Robert Kennedy, and in the racial and economic activism of Martin Luther King, found their hope dashed by June. Chafe doesn't refrain from a dramatic characterization: "The nation seemed to come apart as, one blow after another, it reeled from psychic and emotional wounds unprecedented in the modern era" (380). The political leaders who were considered perhaps capable of bringing change to America were dead by the '68 election. So instead, America got Richard Nixon.

The following year, a Boston independent publisher, Seymour Lawrence, published Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five: Or the Children's Crusade, a Duty Dance with Death*. With *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut employed traditionally genre specific tropes of science fiction in his account of the life and wartime experience of WWII veteran Billy Pilgrim, creating an idiosyncratic mixture of time-travel narrative and complicated verisimilitude, as Vonnegut's own WWII campaign was near identical to Billy's. *Slaughterhouse-Five* became both a critical and popular success. Obituary authors at the time of the Vonnegut's death in 2007 considered the novel to be his breakthrough (Rigney 7-8), lifting Vonnegut from his previous status as a cult figure, marginalized to science fiction friendly college campuses (Harris 52), to an American literary icon. A review representative of much

of the critical reception can be found in Christopher Lehmann-Haupt's commentary for *The New York Times* in March 31, 1969. He wrote, *Slaughterhouse-Five* "sounds like a fantastic last-ditch effort to make sense of a lunatic universe. But there is so much more to this book. It is very tough and very funny; it is sad and delightful; and it works," but he concludes with the qualification, "it is also very Vonnegut, which means you'll either love it, or push it back to the science-fiction corner." As a rhetorical answer to Lehmann-Haupt, within the first year 800,000 copies of Vonnegut's novel were sold in the United States. The novel became a best seller, cementing Vonnegut's cultural significance and establishing *Slaughterhouse-Five* as his primary vehicle (Rigney 8).

*Slaughterhouse-Five* depicts the life and WWII experience of Billy Pilgrim, a passive, innocuous chaplain's assistant who appears, as a general rule, marginally enthusiastic about life. In WWII, after the Battle of the Bulge, Billy finds himself behind German lines, separated from his squadron. He promptly becomes 'unstuck in time.' First "swing[ing] grandly through the full arc of his life" (43), Billy then slips into a time before his birth, then to childhood swimming lessons, then to life events in '68, then '55, then '61, and finally, back again to WWII Germany. This moment is the first for Billy in what becomes a life-long occupation of time 'unsticking'. Back in 1944, Billy is captured by German troops and is shipped to Dresden, where he and other prisoners of war will work in a vitamin syrup factory. A few months later, Allied forces firebomb Dresden. Vonnegut reports the death toll at 135,000. Their housing, the titular concrete slaughterhouse, protects Billy and his fellow prisoners of war. The bombing itself is never described beyond the wailing of air raid sirens, but the aftermath, Vonnegut's vision of Dresden as "moonlike ruins" (194), is included. Billy emerges into the devastated city to help locate and dispose of the bodies of thousands of victims.

It isn't until Billy is abducted by an alien species called the Tralfamadorians that he can understand the implications of being "unstuck in time." The Tralfamadorians are able to see all time and everything at once. Humans to the Tralfamadorians appear as "great millipedes—'with babies' legs at one end and old people's legs at the other'" (87). They are witness to the full panorama of time, all historic, contemporary, and future events appear before them as if a mountain range. The Tralfamadorians never ask "Why?" questions, because the moment simply is (77). As a

Trafamadorian explains to Billy: "All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations" (86).

The Trafamadorians' understanding of non-time informs Billy's sense of existence. Once Billy is brought into the Trafamadorians' company, he is able to freely travel from one moment of life to another. Though never able to obliterate discrete events, Billy understands the illusion of chronology: "It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever" (23). After a Trafamadorian informs Billy that the Universe will end because of a Trafamadorian accident, (the accidental result of a test pilot pressing a button when experimenting with new flying saucer fuels,) Billy asks if there is a way the end can be prevented. The Trafamadorian responds, "He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way" (117). Billy gradually acknowledges that the efforts for change, to rid the world of war, of poverty, of suffering and cruelty, are empty. A Trafamadorian advises Billy to "Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones." Billy responds with an, "uh" (117).

For Vonnegut, the bombing of Dresden, its horror and destruction, is undoubtedly an effective emblem of war's central reality. And Billy's passivity in the war effort, "powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends," (30) appears to be Vonnegut's vision of an appropriate response to such a pitch-black reality. Dresden's destruction was inevitable, was "structured" to occur. Vonnegut quotes from David Irving's *The Destruction of Dresden*:

[The firebombing of Dresden] is one of those terrible things that sometimes happen in wartime, brought about by an unfortunate combination of circumstances. Those who approved it were neither wicked nor cruel, though it may well be that they were too removed from the harsh realities of war to understand fully the appalling destructive power of air bombardment in the spring of 1945. (187-188)

The bombing of Dresden is just that, the bombing of Dresden. Not an order executed in order to wreck German moral or cripple supply lines. Not an exercise in demonstrating firepower and bombing strength. It is only as it appears on the surface: the horrific bombing of Dresden that resulted in the death of 130,000 individuals. Billy, commenting on the act, neither complains nor declares anyone guilty. Instead he says, "It was alright .... Everything is alright, and everybody

has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Trafamadore" (198).

*Slaughterhouse-Five* reports the events of Billy's military career with the same low-level zest that Billy has. These traumatic events are described with the same nonjudgmental tone, the same resignation. If someone happens to die, then the narration includes, "So it goes," at the end of the paragraph, a sort of epitaph for the deceased. The novel's narration creates a dissonance between the cruelty and tragedy of Billy's experience and its voice. As Ann Rigney suggests, it is as if the entire novel is written in understatement (19). This is the novel's absolute irony.

If Kantor uses irony to help render WWII veteran's return more pointed, and if Heller relies on irony to reveal the absurdity of war, then Vonnegut's entire narration, sentence by sentence, is defined by irony. Considering Fussell's description of irony, as half-tragic, half-comedic, the reader quickly acknowledges that in Vonnegut's portrayal, the tragic is nearly the entire breadth of the content. Very seldom, does Vonnegut include an overtly good situation in which Billy could concentrate. And the humor? The humor in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is located within tragic juxtapositions and the ironic deaths. British Prisoners of Wars perform an energetic rendition of a Cinderella musical for their American and German guests using the candles manufactured with the fat of dead humans (10). Edward Derby, an infantryman, is executed for pinching a meager teapot after surviving captivity and the bombing of Dresden (5). Valencia Pilgrim, Billy's wife, collapses from carbon monoxide poisoning, brought upon by a car accident suffered in her urgency to reach her hospitalized husband (182-183). After reaching a certain limit, the tragic can only be translated into the comedic, and irony is the only balm left to sooth the wound.

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## Separating the Boy's from the B'hoys: The Working Class Masculine Identity during the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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For the American man living during the nineteenth century, testing and proving ones "manhood" became a very significant process. Masculinity was the foremost concept behind the definition of a man. In order to gain respect, one needed to establish his own masculinity and demonstrate it amongst his peers. This was especially true in New York City, a standard of manhood was affecting the working class. A common understanding of appearance, attitude, and personality dominated the way working class men carried themselves. The thriving social atmosphere of New York's urban center obliged men to "prove" themselves. It was essential for them to socialize with their peers, demonstrating their manhood as they drank and danced through working class neighborhoods. The desire for male camaraderie brought men into volunteer fire departments, where their masculinity was reinforced on a daily basis. Men gathered in the streets after stressful hours of work as they felt the need to release the tension associated with being a working man. Throughout the nineteenth century a new "manly culture" evolved which ritualized violence amongst men. A sense of competition grew and men struggled to gain respect in society. They were forced to fight by whatever means necessary to protect their manhood. By 1845, the New York City Police Department was established bringing authority figures into the streets. Police officers were to stop the violent nature of the working class but the presence of authority figures only introduced another layer of violence to society. The archetypal man was one who had a manly appearance, socialized with his fellow fire laddies, was always prepared for an honorable fight, and stood up to authority figures. Masculinity dominated every part of a working class man's life forcing him to do whatever it took to uphold his reputation.

This essay focuses on four major aspects of masculinity found in working class men in mid-nineteenth century New York City. After studying the research of historians; Michael Kaplan, Richard Stott,

Elliot Gorn, Amy Greenberg, and James Richardson it was clear that there are many factors that formulate the definition of masculinity during this time period. Richard