

America has been shaped by pop culture. Ideas of race formed in minstrel shows 150 years ago persist to this day. Ideas surrounding gender roles, sexuality and orientation, and patriotism have been drawn from popular culture mediums. Little girls dreamed of having small waists like Barbie, boys idolized big muscles and guns they saw in Rambo and Predator, white folks feared gang bangers and saw themselves as being different from the “poor” whites getting arrested on COPS; all of these topics deserve a deeper dive. **In this essay, I will examine the ways pop culture shaped views of American masculinity following World War Two until the turn of the century.**

Merriam-Webster defines masculinity as “the quality or nature of the male sex : the quality, state, or degree of being [masculine](#) or manly.” (1) From the moment young men are brought into the world, they are swarmed with ideas of manhood. Many of the popular ideas of masculinity in modern America are admirable traits; bravery, courage, honesty, integrity. These virtues are seen as ideal for a man. Much of what makes a man a “man” has changed over the years and has varied widely from culture to culture. Much of what is considered masculine today in the United States has roots in pop culture of the past. Specifically, the advent of mass media helped produce a widespread vision of manhood across the country.

Following World War Two, no one doubted the masculinity of American men. “World War II provided American soldiers with the opportunity to develop and prove their manhood to themselves and others.” (3) Once these fighting men returned home, they were expected to join the workforce and provide for their families; their wives having done their patriotic duty of taking on jobs while the men were away. Advertisers played to these new domestic expectations of masculinity by promoting fine dress and fashion. A series of ads from Stetson Hats depicts a

number of scenes including dates, watching sports, traveling, and heading to work. (2) These ads told men they could “look like a \$1,000,000” and look like celebrities like Bing Crosby. The common theme amongst the series is men, all white, wearing suits and sporting Stetson hats and accessories. They go so far as to claim a man can look fashionable without having the eye for it. With men returning from war needing new ways to show their masculinity, fashion became a logical route and a profitable one for advertisers. The suit and tie remain the go-to for business dress and remained popular in less formal occasions for many years.

As the decade rolled over into the 1950's, television began to become more common in American households. This was because disposable incomes were also becoming more common. Popular programs like *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Andy Griffith Show* promoted ideas of family, honesty, and wholesomeness. Pop culture depicted the American dream in opposition to the communist ideals of the Soviet Union. This commitment to American democratic ideals was largely due to McCarthyism. “From the late 1940s to 1950s, anti-communist hysteria led by Senator Joseph McCarthy and others gripped the nation. Hollywood was a prime target, with hundreds of professionals in the industry being accused of having communist ties or sympathies.” (9) Socially conservative programming was the safer investment for studios at this time, thus leading to a more conservative idea of masculinity taking root. This did lead however to push back. Rebellious young people took up leather jackets and supped-up hotrods like James Dean and Elvis. Rock and Roll became the soundtrack to youths trying to find their way, an art form derived from the Blues created by African Americans. Rock would remain the music of the anti-establishment for decades, in one form or another, until being supplanted by another African American music genre.

The 1960's brought social change, and changes to what it meant to be a man. By now, television was in virtually every home in the country. Baby boomers were coming of age and the British were exporting their own brand of rock and roll. Being a fashionable veteran or a rebel without a cause was no longer enough. A contemporary example of what man men in the 60's looked like is the character Don Draper from the series *Mad Men*. "On one reading Don Draper, and *Mad Men*, presents a recurring kind of American masculinity: insistent, insatiable, forward-looking. Weaned on the abundance of the 1950s, it has been challenged by the upheavals of the 1960s." (4) Many men in the 1960's sought to prove their masculinity by imitating the popular masculine figures on TV. Cowboys were all the rage in Hollywood, and it was easy to pick up their traits. Stetson Hats were still popular, as was drinking whiskey and smoking cigarettes. These social traits were used to make up for these men's hands lacking callouses caused by a hard day's work. It was becoming harder in the 60's to be "self-made." As Don Draper learned, getting ahead was about who you know as much as how hard you work. While Draper is a fictional character, it's telling that the creators of *Mad Men* viewed him as the quintessential 60's man. While McCarthyism had been done away with, the impact on the pop culture products produced remained. Even when more progressive programs were able to become popular, they retained many of the masculine ideals of the previous decade. *Star Trek* for example depicted a utopian future free of racism and capitalism, but still depicted Captain Kirk as bold lady's man.

During the 1960's, the civil rights movement, feminists, and anti-war movements created waves in society. By the 1970's, these movements had brought attention to the oppression and challenges faced by many Americans; white men however would feel left out and targeted. "The decade saw an overall rise in unemployment through the 1970s and into the 1980s; the recessions of 1973-1975 and 1979-1980; deindustrialization and the corresponding decline in

manufacturing jobs; oil crises; and administrations that cared more about fighting inflation than unemployment. In addition, as a result of the political movements of the 1960s, more attention was being paid to the condition of workers who were not white males, and a series of laws were passed to ensure that they were not discriminated against in the workplace.” (5) While many men in the 60’s sought to prove their masculinity despite their desk jobs, many in the 70’s lost the jobs that lent credence to their manhood. Rock continued to gain popularity, and its artists influenced masculine ideas. Long hair and open chests became popular thanks to the likes of Bee Gees and Led Zeppelin. Androgynous artists like David Bowie also presented a new masculinity for men looking to break from the straight white norm. On television, *The Dukes of Hazard* presented handsome heroes doing whatever it takes to help their family, even if it’s a little more than the law would allow. Doing whatever it took was especially poignant during a time of economic uncertainty. “The country changed in the 1970s, never to return to the way things had been before, and in that, as one man said, “one hardly knows if there are more grounds for hope or for despair” (Koch 156). This feeling that white men are oppressed, despite continuing to be the demographic holding the greatest amount of influence socially, economically, and politically, is based on several elements, some of which could be seen in the men’s lib movement as well as in working-class male voters’ shift rightward. The idea of being called to account for the historical oppression of not just white women but men and women of other races felt unfair and overblown to men who were themselves not in any obvious position of power except at home. And there, too, their roles were threatened by the increase in wives who worked, and who expected greater help in housework from their spouses in exchange for their own financial contributions, not to mention more orgasms. Taking into account social pressure to act tough, not express emotion, impress women, and succeed at work, these men felt that not

only were they not in any actual position of power, but that they were unable to really be themselves, and therefore, they were just as subject to the demands of others as women claimed to be.” (5)

The iconic handshake from *Predator*, Patrick Swayze’s shirtless tai chi in *Roadhouse*, Mr. T as the muscle in *The A-Team*. The 80’s brought with it the pop culture phenomenon of big bodies. Arnold Schwarzenegger made body building mainstream in the 70’s, but when he became a star of the screen in the 80’s, he ushered in a new ideal make body. Big pecs, broad shoulders, huge biceps. These were what the people wanted to see, and what men wanted. “The actors who portrayed action heroes in the movies of the 1980s and the 1990s have a special place in our cultural consciousness. They are remembered for the masculine and courageous image that they projected on screen; an image that could be defined as a hard body.” (6) Toys like G.I Joe and He-Man featured huge physiques and huge guns. Pop culture also saw a return to vehement Soviet opposition. Movies like *Red Dawn* depicted American values fighting against a communist invasion while *Rambo III* was dedicated to the Mujahadeen fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. 80’s masculinity was a near 180 from the 70’s. Discouraged by lost work, and for white men a lessening sense of control at home, men sought to go back to the days of being tough. This was embodied by President Ronald Reagan, an actor many men saw in the westerns of the 50’s and 60’s, and a man worth emulating. Reagan wore a cowboy hat and took a stern approach to diplomacy. He also largely ignored the AIDS epidemic that killed thousands and decimated gay men across America. While homosexuality saw gains over the last decade in social acceptance, the rise of right-wing evangelicalism meant it was still not widely accepted. Reagan would finally act to a larger degree when his friend, fellow actor Rock Hudson, contracted the disease. The AIDS crisis was a major cultural moment in the 80’s and has affected

masculinity going forward, “with the advent of HIV and increased condom promotional activities, condom use has become more normative than in the pre-HIV era - as evidenced by increased condom use across most settings.” (10)

Freddie Mercury died from AIDS related complications on November 24, 1991. His death began a shift in public perceptions of AIDS and gay men. Homosexuality began becoming more mainstream acceptable through the 90s with shows like *Will and Grace* and *Ellen*. “The 1990s will find men increasingly bumping up against the limits of traditional masculinity, yet unable to replace those archaic constructions with coherent new models. It is not that Alan Alda has replaced or will replace Rambo, but rather that neither provides an adequate role model for today's men.” (7) Masculinity was changing in the 90's, once again. The hulking bodies men sought in the 80's were replaced with sleeker, more chiseled appearances. Washboard abs and clean cuts like those sported by Swayze and Kanu Reeves in *Point Break*. Bart Simpson took over the mantle of Dennis the Menace as a rebellious youngster. His father Homer was a beer guzzling, balding, lazy man with a desk job; but no cowboy hat to make up for it. Pro wrestling shot to popularity in the 90's. While hero wrestlers of the 80's like Hulk Hogan exemplified being a “real American” against foes like The Iron Shiek, the 90's saw the heroes facing down “the man.” Stone Cold Steven Austin drank beer and raised hell while kicking his boss's ass. “In the characterizations of Vince McMahon and Steve Austin, WWE writers encapsulate current corporate trends and their impact on employer-employee relations and the resultant impact on masculinities. In keeping with the archetype of the hero, Stone Cold Steve Austin is a white heterosexual male.” (8) Wrestling and sports were often the only places to still see the big bodies of the 80's. To get these bodies, many resorted to steroid use. This led to many controversies

from wrestling to Major League Baseball. While steroid use would in these organizations would be stamped out, seeing the results led many men to begin the practice themselves.

In conclusion, pop culture has played a major role in informing ideals of masculinity in America. Especially after World War II and the proliferation of television and later the internet. It should be noted as well that this is only a brief overview through the eyes of a straight white man. Pop culture and more niche pieces of culture have certainly influenced other men in different ways.

Citations

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