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Hegemonic Masculinity and National Identity in Twentieth-Century American War Literature: A Comparative Study of the Selected works by Hemingway, Mailer, and O'Brien

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Abstract

This paper explores the construction and negotiation of hegemonic masculinity and national identity within the framework of twentieth-century American war literature, centering on Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and Tim O'Brien. Through a comparative textual analysis, the study scrutinizes how these novelists lucid masculine ideals and nationalistic discourses against the background of war's physical and psychological trauma. By applying R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and drawing on cultural studies, the paper reveals how literary depictions challenge, reinforce, or complicate dominant narratives about gender and nationhood. The findings suggest that while Hemingway emphasizes stoic, heroic masculinity linked to American imperial identity, Mailer critiques and problematizes this ideal through a raw, often violent portrayal of masculine bravado. O'Brien, writing in the post-Vietnam era, deconstructs traditional masculinity by highlighting vulnerability and moral ambiguity, thus reflecting a fractured national identity. This study contributes to the broader understanding of how war literature shapes and contests hegemonic masculinity and national belonging in American cultural memory.

Keywords: *Hegemonic masculinity, national identity, American war literature, Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, Tim O'Brien, R.W. Connell*

Introduction

War literature has long served as a potent and complex medium through which societies grapple with evolving notions of masculinity and national identity. The turbulence of armed conflict not only disrupts social and political orders but also profoundly reshapes cultural narratives about what it means to be a man and a citizen. In the context of twentieth-century American literature, the two World Wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and other military engagements provided fertile ground for literary exploration of these intertwined themes. The trauma, violence, and ideological fervor of these conflicts offered writers a unique lens through which to interrogate the ideals of manhood—often framed in terms of courage, sacrifice, endurance, and loyalty to the nation. Yet, alongside such valorization, war literature frequently reveals the

tensions, contradictions, and vulnerabilities beneath these surface ideals, complicating the traditional heroic masculine narrative.

This study focuses on three seminal American authors—Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, and Tim O’Brien—whose war narratives span much of the twentieth century and collectively provide a rich tapestry of evolving masculine ideals and national identities in American culture (Gifford et al., 2021). Each author writes in a distinctive historical moment and literary style, yet all engage deeply with the question of how masculinity is constructed, performed, and contested in the context of war. By examining their works comparatively, this paper seeks to illuminate the shifting contours of hegemonic masculinity within the broader discourse of American national identity and cultural memory.

Ernest Hemingway’s literary output, notably shaped by his personal experiences as an ambulance driver during World War I and as a correspondent during the Spanish Civil War, epitomizes the modernist aesthetic of brevity and emotional restraint (Nodira et al., 2025). His terse prose and understated narrative style crystallize a vision of masculinity characterized by stoicism, physical courage, and emotional control. In works such as *The Sun Also Rises* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway’s male protagonists embody what has often been termed the “code hero”—an idealized figure who faces chaos and suffering with quiet dignity and an unyielding sense of honor. This ideal reflects the hegemonic masculine norms of the early twentieth century, emphasizing self-mastery, toughness, and the readiness to sacrifice oneself for a cause greater than the individual. Yet, Hemingway’s portrayals are not uncritical; beneath the surface lies a subtle exploration of alienation, trauma, and the limits of such stoicism, indicating a complex engagement with the costs of hegemonic masculinity in war.

In contrast, Norman Mailer’s works emerge from the post-World War II era, marked by the psychological scars of global conflict and the contentious Vietnam War (Cohen, 2021). Mailer’s narratives, such as *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Executioner’s Song*, offer a grittier and more graphic exploration of violence, masculinity, and national identity. His prose exposes the raw brutality of combat and the psychological fragmentation experienced by soldiers, challenging the heroic myths perpetuated by earlier war literature. Mailer interrogates the traditional machismo associated with war, delving into the tensions between domination, vulnerability, and ideological disillusionment. His work often reveals how hegemonic masculinity functions as a cultural mechanism that both sustains and undermines the nation-state, implicating male bodies and psyches in the perpetuation of violence and power structures.

Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, written from the vantage point of the post-Vietnam era, further complicates the literary treatment of masculinity and national identity through its postmodern narrative strategies. O’Brien’s metafictional approach blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, heroism and trauma, and memory and storytelling. His portrayal of soldiers foregrounds emotional vulnerability, ethical ambivalence, and the heavy burden of psychological trauma, thus dismantling the traditional heroic masculine ideal. The complexity of O’Brien’s characters and their narratives reflects a broader cultural shift toward acknowledging the moral ambiguities of war and the contested nature of American patriotism (O’Brien, 2021).

By emphasizing the weight of memory and the personal costs of conflict, O'Brien's work critiques hegemonic masculinity's simplistic valorization of war and challenges readers to reconsider the narratives that sustain national identity.

The theoretical framework guiding this study is drawn from R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, which has been influential in gender studies and cultural criticism. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as the culturally exalted form of masculinity that legitimizes men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of women and marginalized masculinities. It is not a fixed or universal trait but a dynamic and historically contingent configuration of gender practices that operates through social institutions, cultural norms, and individual behaviors. Applying Connell's framework to literary texts enables a critical analysis of how dominant masculine ideals are constructed, maintained, and contested within the narrative, revealing the intersection of gender with power, violence, and national ideology.

In the context of war literature, hegemonic masculinity often manifests through ideals of physical bravery, emotional stoicism, loyalty to comrades and country, and the willingness to engage in violence (George, 2023). However, such ideals also entail exclusions and hierarchies that marginalize alternative expressions of masculinity and reinforce systems of oppression. Through the comparative examination of Hemingway, Mailer, and O'Brien, this study seeks to trace the evolution of hegemonic masculinity in American war literature across the twentieth century, highlighting continuities and ruptures shaped by historical, cultural, and literary forces.

Moreover, this research engages with the concept of national identity, recognizing that war narratives not only depict individual and collective experiences of conflict but also contribute to shaping the symbolic meanings of nationhood. The relationship between masculinity and national identity is particularly pronounced in American war literature, where martial valor and sacrifice are often central to patriotic discourse. Yet, as these authors demonstrate, national identity is neither monolithic nor unproblematic; it is frequently contested through narratives that expose the contradictions, failures, and human costs of war.

By situating the works of Hemingway, Mailer, and O'Brien within this analytical framework, the paper aims to contribute to interdisciplinary scholarly conversations that intersect literary studies, gender theory, history, and cultural memory (Khale, 2024). This comparative study offers insights into how literature serves as a site for negotiating and reimagining masculinity and national identity in the shadow of war. Ultimately, it underscores the enduring relevance of these texts for understanding the complexities of gender and nationhood in American cultural history.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between constructions of masculinity and American national identity in twentieth-century war literature.
2. To analyze how Hemingway, Mailer, and O'Brien represent and contest hegemonic masculinity in their war narratives.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do these authors' representations of masculinity intersect with evolving discourses of American national identity during and after major twentieth-century conflicts?
2. How do Hemingway, Mailer, and O'Brien construct and challenge hegemonic masculinity through their depictions of male soldiers and war experiences?

Significance of the Study

This study offers a critical contribution to the interdisciplinary fields of literary studies, gender studies, and cultural history by exploring how three major American war authors engage with and reshape the ideals of masculinity and nationhood during the turbulent twentieth century. By applying R.W. Connell's theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity, the research provides nuanced insights into the ways literature reflects and critiques dominant gender norms that have been historically tied to militarism and patriotism. Furthermore, the comparative analysis of Hemingway's stoic heroism, Mailer's violent machismo, and O'Brien's vulnerable storytelling highlights the shifting cultural and psychological dimensions of masculinity in response to changing socio-political realities. This study deepens our understanding of how literary texts serve as sites for negotiating national identity and collective memory, particularly in the aftermath of war's traumas and moral complexities. Ultimately, it encourages reconsideration of traditional masculine ideals and contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about gender, violence, and cultural identity in American literature.

Literature Review

Masculinity studies, particularly in the field of literature, have been enriched by R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, which describes the culturally exalted form of masculinity that legitimizes male dominance and subordinates alternative masculinities and femininities (Connell, 1995). Scholars such as Michael Kimmel (2008) have emphasized the historical and social construction of masculinity as fluid and contested.

In American war literature, Hemingway's work has been widely analyzed for its portrayal of the "code hero," whose masculine identity is defined by courage, honor, and emotional restraint (Baker, 1997; Fluck, 1997). Critics note Hemingway's emphasis on traditional male virtues as reflecting broader nationalistic discourses that valorize sacrifice and imperial strength (Smith, 2003).

Norman Mailer's war narratives, such as *The Naked and the Dead*, complicate this heroic masculinity by exposing its brutality, fragility, and performativity (Jones, 2001; Redding, 2010). Mailer's texts have been interpreted as critiques of postwar American machismo and the ideological violence underpinning it (Green, 2014).

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* represents a shift toward postmodern skepticism of grand narratives, highlighting the psychological costs of war and the erosion of masculine ideals (Johnson, 2009; Baker, 2012). His narrative foregrounds emotional vulnerability and moral

uncertainty, challenging hegemonic masculinity and the patriotic myths of the Vietnam era (Wilson, 2015).

However, comparative studies that situate these three authors within a single framework of hegemonic masculinity and national identity remain underexplored. This paper addresses this gap by conducting a cross-author textual analysis informed by gender theory and cultural studies.

Methodology

This research employs qualitative textual analysis guided by R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. Primary texts analyzed include Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, and O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. The analysis focuses on character representations, narrative voice, and thematic patterns relating to masculinity and nationalism. Secondary scholarly sources are consulted to provide critical perspectives and theoretical grounding. The comparative approach enables identification of continuities and ruptures in the literary construction of masculinity and national identity across different wars and historical contexts.

Analysis and Discussion

Hemingway: Stoic Heroism and National Idealism

Ernest Hemingway's war novels have long been recognized as foundational texts in the articulation of hegemonic masculinity within twentieth-century American and Western literature. His male protagonists exemplify an ideal of masculinity characterized primarily by endurance, honor, and emotional suppression. This construction aligns closely with dominant cultural and imperialist values of the early twentieth century, reflecting a broader ideological framework in which manhood is inextricably linked to physical courage, self-control, and a willingness to endure suffering without complaint. Characters such as Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* embody this archetype; he is portrayed as a man whose masculinity is forged and tested in the crucible of war, where personal valor and steadfastness become the ultimate measures of character.

Hemingway's narrative style reinforces this masculine ideal. His famously terse, economical prose—marked by short, declarative sentences and sparse description—mirrors the stoicism he valorizes in his characters. This stylistic minimalism functions as a form of literary embodiment of masculine restraint, emphasizing action and silence over emotional expression or introspection. Such prose evokes a world in which words are weapons or shields and where emotional vulnerability is considered a liability. In this way, Hemingway not only depicts hegemonic masculinity thematically but enacts it through his narrative form.

Moreover, Hemingway's vision of masculinity is deeply intertwined with a national identity grounded in sacrifice, duty, and the defense of Western ideals. The war is framed not only as a physical and psychological trial but as a moral and patriotic obligation. The masculine subject, in Hemingway's texts, often becomes a symbol of the nation's resilience and moral fiber. This intertwining of gender and nationhood reflects hegemonic discourses prevalent in American and Western societies during the interwar and wartime periods, where ideals of manhood were

mobilized to sustain imperialist and nationalist projects. Masculinity here functions as a cultural currency through which national belonging and legitimacy are asserted.

However, Hemingway's portrayal is not uncritical or wholly celebratory. Beneath the surface of heroic endurance lies a persistent undercurrent of fragility and existential crisis. The tragic fates of his characters, their wounds—both physical and emotional—and their moments of doubt and disillusionment complicate the hegemonic masculine ideal they ostensibly uphold. As Winfried Fluck (1997) argues, Hemingway's narratives reveal the contradictions inherent in hegemonic masculinity: the very traits that confer honor and strength also expose men to profound vulnerability and alienation. This tension between appearance and reality, between the ideal and the lived experience, destabilizes simple heroic narratives and invites readers to reconsider the costs of stoic heroism.

Through this dual dynamic of affirmation and critique, Hemingway's war novels participate in a broader cultural negotiation over masculinity and national identity. They serve as texts through which hegemonic masculinity is both reinforced as a cultural norm and problematized as a site of emotional repression and loss. Thus, Hemingway's work remains pivotal in understanding the literary construction of masculinity during a period when war profoundly shaped American identity and ideals of manhood.

Mailer: Violent Machismo and Psychological Crisis

Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* offers a stark and unvarnished portrayal of the violence and psychological turmoil that underpin hegemonic masculinity in the context of World War II. In contrast to Hemingway's stoic and emotionally restrained heroes, Mailer's characters are often defined by aggressive bravado, overt sexual aggression, and deep psychological fragmentation. This shift reflects the postwar cultural milieu in which ideals of masculinity were increasingly fraught with contradictions and crises, as the realities of modern warfare exposed the fragility beneath traditional masculine posturing.

Mailer's narrative exposes how hegemonic masculinity during war is not simply about noble endurance but also involves coercive and performative demands that compel men to enact roles of dominance, control, and toughness, often at great personal cost. His characters struggle with internal conflicts marked by fear, insecurity, and the desire for power, which destabilize any simple heroic identity. This psychological complexity reveals how the masculine ideal is both enforced and undermined by the brutal realities of combat and the oppressive hierarchies within the military system.

Significantly, Mailer problematizes the nationalistic rhetoric that often legitimizes war by illustrating how it imposes rigid and violent expectations on masculine behavior. His vivid depictions of fear, interpersonal power struggles, and moral ambiguity serve as a critique of the glorification of war and the traditional masculine norms it demands. Through scenes of brutality and moments of psychological despair, *The Naked and the Dead* unveils the contradictions inherent in hegemonic masculinity—where the projection of strength masks vulnerability and the pursuit of honor coexists with ethical disillusionment.

The novel reflects broader postwar American tensions regarding identity, power, and masculinity. It emerges during a period when the nation grappled with the aftermath of global conflict, shifting social values, and the early stages of the Cold War. Mailer's work captures the anxieties of a society struggling to reconcile its heroic self-image with the trauma and moral complexities of war. By foregrounding the darker and more conflicted aspects of masculine identity, Mailer challenges the simplistic narratives of heroic nationalism and invites critical reflection on the costs of hegemonic masculinity.

As Jones (2001) asserts, Mailer's depiction of masculinity is deeply embedded in the political and psychological realities of his time, making *The Naked and the Dead* a pivotal text for understanding the post-World War II crisis of masculine identity. His work exposes the underbelly of war's masculine ideal, revealing how violence, power, and psychological disintegration are integral to the construction—and deconstruction—of hegemonic masculinity in the American cultural imagination.

O'Brien: Vulnerability and the Crisis of National Identity

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* represents a profound departure from traditional depictions of war and masculinity by deconstructing the hegemonic masculine ideal and foregrounding the emotional burdens, psychological vulnerabilities, and moral ambiguities experienced by soldiers during the Vietnam War. Through his innovative use of metafiction and fragmented narrative structures, O'Brien challenges the prevailing myths of war heroism and American exceptionalism that had long dominated earlier war literature. His work exposes the tension between public narratives of patriotic valor and the private realities of fear, trauma, and ethical confusion endured by individual soldiers.

O'Brien's representation of masculinity is notably marked by its embrace of vulnerability, emotional openness, and the acknowledgment of trauma, which stands in sharp contrast to the stoicism and aggressive bravado found in the works of Hemingway and Mailer. Rather than celebrating physical courage or unquestioning loyalty to the nation, O'Brien's characters wrestle openly with their fears, doubts, and the psychological scars left by combat. This reframing of masculinity challenges the rigid hegemonic scripts inherited from earlier literary and cultural traditions and reflects a broader cultural shift in the post-Vietnam era toward more nuanced and critical understandings of gender, identity, and patriotism.

The novel's fragmented and recursive storytelling technique further reinforces this thematic complexity. By blurring the lines between fact and fiction, memory and invention, O'Brien destabilizes authoritative narratives of war and masculinity. His metafictional approach invites readers to question the reliability of storytelling itself as a means of constructing meaning, heroism, and national identity. This narrative strategy highlights the difficulties of representing trauma and the multiplicity of individual experiences within the broader sweep of history.

O'Brien's work is also emblematic of a larger crisis in American national identity that followed the contentious Vietnam conflict. As Wilson (2015) notes, *The Things They Carried* captures the ambivalence and fragmentation of a nation grappling with the moral and political fallout of a divisive war. The disillusionment and skepticism that permeate O'Brien's narrative reflect

widespread doubts about American exceptionalism and the legitimacy of national myths predicated on military glory and moral certainty.

When placed in dialogue with Hemingway's stoic minimalism and Mailer's raw realism, O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* illuminates the evolving conceptions of masculinity and nationhood in American war literature across the twentieth century. Hemingway's valorization of endurance and honor, Mailer's interrogation of violent machismo and psychological crisis, and O'Brien's focus on vulnerability and ethical complexity collectively trace the shifting terrain of gender and national identity in response to historical and cultural transformations. Together, these authors provide a layered and critical literary archive that reflects the contested meanings of masculinity and patriotism in the American imagination.

Conclusion

This comparative study reveals that Hemingway, Mailer, and O'Brien each construct hegemonic masculinity and national identity in ways that both reflect and critique the sociohistorical contexts of their respective wars. Hemingway's valorization of stoic heroism aligns with early twentieth-century American nationalism, Mailer's brutal depictions interrogate postwar masculine myths, and O'Brien's postmodern narratives expose the vulnerabilities and contradictions of Vietnam-era masculinity.

Together, these authors provide a rich literary map of the changing meanings of masculinity and nationhood in American cultural memory. Understanding these shifts contributes to broader discussions on gender, war, and identity in literature and society.

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