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English 232A

### **All the World's a Stage**

“You know.” This simple sentence tacked onto the back of a colossal diatribe or a flowing compliment connotes a shared experience between the speaker and the listener and also demands an immediate affirmation or denial from the listener. Sociologist Michael Kimmel, in conducting interviews for his texts, often quotes young males who overwhelmingly conclude their opinions or remarks with the simple question or statement of “you know.” Yet, the punctuation behind that short sentence is vital. As a fishing question, the sentence is seeking the recognition of the speaker’s effective communication and the listener’s understanding of whatever was shared. As a direct statement, however, the sentence implies a shared male compliance or a blind acceptance of what the speaker had just said. And it is in this assumed conformity of opinion, action, and experience that American men can begin to trace their shared crisis of masculinity.

As many authors repeatedly echoed throughout the numerous novels published after the turn of the 20th century, the theme of the crisis of masculinity was a prevalent issue that demanded being addressed, either directly or discreetly. It was experienced keenly by most, if not all, American men from that era onward. Amongst other causes, this crisis was the end product of two world wars and their countless human and intangible losses, the re-entry of hundreds of thousands of soldiers into civilian life, rapid industrialization and mechanization, mass exoduses to the big cities, and the drastic shifts men encountered in their work and domestic relationships. All of these changes affected how American men defined themselves and behaved, and, hence, the definition of masculinity had altered extremely in a rather short span of fifty years. Appropriately, American men were searching for their new role(s) in this new

society, trying to define them by way of their nebulous masculinities which were not yet set in stone once again because they could no longer be set in stone. They had to be carved into or integrated into some societal material more malleable. Or, at the very least, the men had to play the part as though they had become functioning members of society once again. It was in these ever-redefined ideals of performed masculinity that society either endorsed or marginalized certain men of this era, and, as seen with the main characters of *A Farewell to Arms* and *On the Road*, the reactions of these men to society's treatment of them only shaped American society further. Thus, the main schisms between American society of this era resulted from individual men or groups of men consenting with and conforming to or confronting with and entirely evading from these performance-of-masculinity requirements surrounding homosocial locales and relationships, physical appearance, the act of sex and the treatment of women, and work and breadwinning. Nevertheless, despite their different responses to masculinity's performance demands, all of these men still intentionally or unintentionally display most of the same "masculine" behaviors.

Since the definition of masculinity was in constant flux during the era of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, men were forced to adapt to it repeatedly. In attempting to save some confidence and a few shreds of dignity from their crises of masculinity, men began focusing their energies and efforts on the performance of masculinity so as to rise above the crisis and to begin to redefine themselves. As Kimmel is quick to state, "American men's economic, political, and social identity was no longer fixed. If social order, permanence could no longer be taken for granted and a man could rise as high as he aspired, then this sense of himself as a man was in constant need of demonstration. Everything became a test – his relationships to work, to women, to nature, and to other men" (*Manhood in America*, 30). In that constant assertion, men inevitably

created a dichotomy between performed “masculinity” and actual “manhood.” To briefly differentiate, “manhood” is the seemingly unattainable evolution of men-kind that Kimmel, like the protagonists in *A Farewell to Arms* and *On the Road*, does not spend much of his time focusing on in his sociological studies of the behaviors of men. It is merely the ambiguous part of life that a boy does not recognize he has ended up at until he is already there and it is too late for him to turn back. Nevertheless, manhood has become the gendered term for male adulthood, and it signifies that a boy has successfully navigated the appropriate rites of passage and has taken on the necessary responsibilities, willingly or unwillingly, to be considered as an equal in the adult world. On the other falling foot, “masculinity” is simply the becoming of a “guy,” which requires the rejection of feminine qualities and to be welcomed as a “bro” like the rest of his social equivalents who have been excluded from, are avoiding, or are inherently unable to attain entrance into the realm of adulthood. Kimmel, giving it the name of “Guyland” in his text, describes masculinity as the possibly limitless, gray area of maturation between boyhood and manhood:

It is both a stage of life, a liminal undefined time span between adolescence and adulthood that can often stretch for decade or more, and a place, or, rather, a bunch of places where guys gather to be guys with each other, unhassled by the demands of parents, girlfriends, jobs, kids, and the other nuisances of adult life. In this topsy-turvy, Peter-Pan mindset, young men shirk the responsibilities of adulthood and remain fixated on the trappings of boyhood, while the boys they still are struggle heroically to prove that they are real men despite all evidence to the contrary. (*Guyland*, 4)

Moreover, performed masculinity is but a lacking reflection of manhood – far less redemptive than actual, realized manhood – as it only concerns itself with the outward appearance it projects and rejects or shirks many responsibilities it pretends to uphold. With these operating definitions, men attempted to cope with the life that was thrust upon them during this era of American history.

Most importantly, the performance of masculinity is an *act*, a show, a façade of consensus and conformity – something to be displayed for the viewing of others. Kimmel succinctly noted that “masculinity [is] now understood to be learned through the successful mastery of a variety of props,” the handling and wearing of many devices of deception (*Manhood in America*, 139). Not only that, but he goes on to point out that “masculinity is largely a ‘homosocial’ experience: performed for, and judged by, other men” (*Guyland*, 47). By and large, during the First World War, many American men and imminent soldiers ascribed to this sort of showcasing of masculinity, and Hemingway’s protagonist, Frederic Henry, in *A Farewell to Arms*, was no different. These men initially joined the ranks of the army as a way to conform to an ideal of masculinity, to show their national pride, and to fulfill their masculine duty to protect their country, women, and children. However, Henry went out of the country looking for the fight on the Italian front. He willingly involved himself in the war – in the sort of maternal, caretaker sort of role of an ambulance driver, nonetheless – that had not yet come knocking at his door. In doing so, he became over-consenting and over-zealous about displaying and asserting his masculinity. The irony of this assertion was that Henry was limited by his ill-defined masculinity and immaturity, and he was thus relegated to the ancillary position of an ambulance driver because he was not yet “man” or mature enough to handle full-blown, first-hand combat. Nonetheless, Henry took his job as a lieutenant in the Italian army rather seriously at first, but only because he got to act as a leader of men and to command respect from them, pretending all the while that he had attained manhood. However, as seen when Henry had to actually control men and demand their obedience to his authority, everything started falling apart:

“I order you to come back to the car and cut brush,” I said. The one sergeant turned. “We have to go on. In a little while you will be cut off. You can’t order us. You’re not our officer.”

“I order you to cut brush,” I said. They turned and started down the road.

“Halt,” I said. They kept on down the muddy road, the hedge on either side. “I order you to halt,” I called. They went a little faster. I opened up my holster, took the pistol, aimed at the one who had talked the most, and fired. I missed and they both started to run. I shot three times and dropped one...I handed [Bonello] the pistol and he walked down to where the sergeant of engineers lay face down across the road. Bonello leaned over, put the pistol against the man’s head and pulled the trigger. (Hemingway, 204)

Henry could *perform* or *play* the role of masculinity very well, and probably played it up even more in his transcribing of the events he had encountered or endured, but the *real* war and the real commanding was kept for those soldiers whom have already, seemingly found manhood.

Still, the irony of this assumption of manhood was that these adult men still exhibited childlike behaviors, perhaps even more immature than Henry’s. When surrounded by one another in the mess hall of the field army base, the soldiers drank excessively not only as a show of masculinity, but also as a way by which they hoped to create that homosocial bond of a band of fighting brothers against a common enemy. They tried to make every other soldier complicit in this sharing, bonding, and debaucherous boasting. Yet, as Henry reveals, “They talked too much at the mess and I drank wine because tonight we were not all brothers unless I drank a little” (Hemingway, 38). Similarly, the other, older soldiers continuously hazed the priest, supposedly for Henry’s benefit, even though Henry had befriended the priest and was not really entertained by it. When Henry recovered from his leg injury and operations and made his grand return to the mess hall, his adoptive, older, Italian brother Rinaldi tried to rowel up the priest once again, but only to soon realize that he was alone in his baiting, “‘Where are all the good old priest-baiters?...Do I have to bait this priest alone without support?...He is a good priest,’ said Rinaldi. ‘But still a priest. I try to make the mess like the old days. I want to make Frederico happy. To hell with you, priest!’” (Hemingway, 173). In seeking to invoke the old days, which include the

abusing of a fellow comrade, Rinaldi was only promulgating the performance of masculinity that allowed one boy to advance his own lot at the expense of another.

This sort of showy, bragging behavior only continued as the novel progressed. Henry, like his small company of previously-injured and currently-recovering soldiers, dressed well and, before defecting, proudly displayed his uniform and war medals. But his doing so was only to impress his boys rather than out of any sense of national pride or honor. Similar to his friend Ettore, who earned three wound stripes, two bronze medals, and three silver medals, Henry endured the suffering of injury and recovery so that he could have yet another prop to wield in his grand performance of masculinity (Hemingway, 121). A mature adult would not want to risk life and bodily harm for the sake of bragging rights. Yet, this same sort of bragging occurred between Rinaldi and Henry about the women with whom they had slept, and, for this, they both eventually endured some sort of pain: Rinaldi caught syphilis and Henry lost a child and lover in childbirth. Though they both slept around with a few other women in Italy, they always returned to their shared room to boast about the previous night's conquests. After meeting and falling for Catherine, however, Henry, though rather immaturely, eventually treated her as if she were his only love, but he still had to maintain his distance, performed, masculine bravado when around his fellow comrades:

“I thought she was probably a little crazy. It was alright if she was. I did not care what I was getting into....I knew I did not love Catherine Barkley nor had any idea of loving her. This was a game, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards. Like bridge you had to pretend you were playing for money or playing for some stakes. Nobody had mentioned what the stakes were. It was all right with me.”  
(Hemingway, 30-31)

Admittedly though, their relationship was mostly based upon sex – what they called “playing” – and Catherine's taking care of a wounded Henry in the hospital. The truth of their relationship was that the veneer of a mature bond could not hold its own on the stage of real-life problems.

The performance of masculinity could not fully play its part, and the whole show came tumbling down in a bloody and deathly fashion. In the end, the casting of boy soldiers to play the roles of men in the theatre of war was doomed to fail.

Witnessing their grandfathers' and fathers' generations suffer through these failed performances, the Beat Generation sought something different for their own existence. The more radical, younger Beats – who will be discussed later – differed from the older Beats who all sort of took on a specific role in the shared, homosocial relationship of the dispersed Beat community. Even though Kimmel asserts that even “if the suburban breadwinner father didn't exactly know who he was, he could at least figure out who he wasn't. In the 1950s American men strained against two negative poles – the overconformist, a faceless, self-less nonentity, and the unpredictable, unreliable, nonconformist” these two different parts were actually more similar than the critics may have perceived them (*Manhood in America*, 155). Some of the older Beats, such as Old Bull Lee, eventually tired of the incessant movement and began to assimilate into the widely-accepted definition of masculinity and, perhaps, even began the transition into manhood, though not through the main entryway into that domain. Old Bull was the “model” Beat; he had a wife, two kids, a home, a stable and legal job as a schoolteacher, learned for the love of learning, and was no longer nomadic, but he would shoot up twice a day to “get his fix” (Kerouac, 142-4). Carlo Marx became the revered poetic mentor, a Beat rendition of the clairvoyant prophet Tiresias of Thebes. Many of the main Beat characters mentioned throughout the novel – Dean Moriarty, Sal Paradise, Ed Dunkel, etc. – would flock to Carlo for wisdom, advice, and direction, receiving statements like, “Now I'm not trying to take your hincty sweets from you, but it seems to me the time has come to decide what you are and what you're going to do” in return (Kerouac, 129). Eventually, for those who could not keep up with or were not

converted by Dean's non-stop, endless source of energy and commotion, Beat folks began to follow Calro instead of Dean because they gradually began to realize that Dean's way of life, while extremely enjoyable, was unsustainable. Sal Paradise, the main character and autobiographical version of Kerouac, becomes the historian of the group. By transcribing these Beat adventures, he redefines accepted ideals of masculinity by exposing the general public to the "other types" of Americans that exist somewhere out in the grand countryside. While portraying the Beats all as suffering madmen who were beaten down into conformity and who are opposing or evacuating the poisonous, normalized, expected narrative of masculinity in society, Sal, too, grew weary of Dean's endless energy and motion and requires time and stillness to sit down and write his books. Though these men may not have been model citizens of "manhood" in the widely-accepted definition of the term, they were less concerned with the performance of their masculinities and were therefore able to mature into concerns and behaviors of genuine manhood. They had defined their roles within an alternate society and were able to shape their identities around those roles, forgoing the showy cloak of masculinity for the humble Beat moccasins. However, there are always at least a few bugs in every bit of social programming.

The flipside of the consent-and-conform coin is the face of confrontation and evasion, equally prevalent behaviors in the performance of masculinity. Often, World War I soldiers would desert the army, as Frederic Henry did, because they would foresee that the performance of perceived masculinity would only eventuate into their own immediate deaths on the battlefield or gradual deaths from sexually-transmitted disease, alcohol poisoning, or post-traumatic stress disorder. As psychologist Joseph Pleck once stated, "It's becoming clear to many of us that many of our most important inner needs cannot be met by acting in the ways we have been

expected to act as men” (*Manhood in America*, 185), and so the soldiers would abandon their imagined, performed figments of Victorian-era masculinity in exchange for the safekeeping of their lives because “life isn’t hard too manage when you’ve got nothing to lose” (Hemingway, 137). Eventually, the majority of the Italian army’s soldiers and commanders also lost their faith in the war and sought to abandon their entrapment within it, as depicted with the breakdown of the retreat to Caporetto and the immobile lines of abandoned cars, wheeled carts, and farm animals sprinkled throughout. As Catherine so sagely put it, “We live in a country where nothing makes any difference. Isn’t it grand how we never see any one? You don’t want to see people do you, darling?” (Hemingway, 303). The answer was obvious to the point where the question could have become rhetorical. They all became part of the amorphous “lost generation” far from being concerned any longer with their performance of masculinity.

Like the post-WWI lost generation before them, the post-WWII Beat generation sought a life that was a departure from the prevailing norm of American masculinity. Kimmel dropped his two cents in this gumball machine as well, “If American men were chronically restless and anxious,...it was because of the contradictory cultural messages that form the backbone of male socialization” (*Manhood in America*, 151). Hence, the younger Beats circumnavigated the accepted definition of “masculinity” used by the general public, but they still put on display characteristics of a performed masculinity for their homosocial circles of friends. It was not as if they attempted to confront “masculinity” and tried to destroy it outright, but rather, they choose to subvert the accepted social norms surrounding masculinity and to avoid as much interaction as possible with how the other half lived. As leading Beat figures, Dean and Carlo “were like the men with the dungeon stone and the gloom, rising from underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation that I was slowly joining” (Kerouac, 54). These youthful Beats

wore whatever clothes they wanted to and composed and carried themselves however they wanted to. They rarely held down steady jobs. After living as a migrant farm worker in California for a few months and entering into a pseudo-marital relationship with Terry, a beautiful Mexican woman, he boasted, “I was a man of the earth, precisely as I had dreamed I would be” (Kerouac, 97). However, this was just Sal simply trying on this character for a little while, growing weary of it, and then returning to his former self; “[he] could feel the pull of [his] own life calling [him] back” (Kerouac, 98). Dean had a similar pattern of rushing into stable, mature relationships and then quickly about-facing to rush back out onto the road to perform for the boys once more like a reunion tour. As they traveled, the Beats were always searching for the ambiguous, elusive character of Hessel who was supposed to be just around the corner in every major city they visit on their journeys. However, they never seemed to locate this Hessel, for he stood in only as the intangible embodiment of the “lost” masculinity and the missing father figures that the Beats sought, as all these main characters were bereft of one for some reason or another.

The Beats frequently abandoned their wives, the mothers of their children, their own children, and even the seemingly stable, external family structures into which they were adopted by friends and the families of friends. Moreover, despite all of their repeated, illicit sexual escapades with these and other sexually-liberated women, there was a definite streak of misogyny that ran alongside the roaming Beats, and their objectification of women was continually apparent. Sometimes it was a worshipping objectification; other times it was merely a sexual objectification. As Sal shared depressingly, “Boys and girls in America have such a sad time together; sophistication demands that they submit to sex immediately without proper preliminary talk. Not courting talk – real straight talk about souls, for life is holy and every

moment is precious” (Kerouac, 58). Nevertheless, their mistreatment of women, while granting them entrance into the boy’s club of masculinity, simultaneously lit the fuse to a bomb that was destined to explode soon and make the Beat men look like immature adolescents rather than the mature, cultural men they were attempting to portray themselves as. At the same time, they would publicly denounce or belittle the masculine behaviors of the assimilated male “actors” functioning in everyday society or serving in the war efforts. They failed to see that they were, in at least a few shared strands of performed masculinity, rather similar to those they ridiculed and/or despised. For example, while they were traveling in Mexico, and especially in the Mexican whorehouse, Dean, Sal, and Stan flaunted overtly Americanized, masculine characters. The empowering and invigorating surge they felt from the favorable monetary exchange rate made their magic money worth more and gave them even more economic power in a land so desperate for the purchasing of commodities or humanities. They behaved in imperialistically and possessively boyish manners, their performed, masculine sense of sexual and cultural entitlement overriding their more mature, egalitarian sensibilities. Essentially, they were sexed-up boys given temporary free reign in candy shop of lust. Hence, while the Beat generation may have sought to separate itself from the lost generation, it was unable to fully shed its entrapping skin of performed masculinity and was, therefore, unable to grow into an actualized maturity of manhood.

In 1976, psychologist Robert Brannon brilliantly reduced the male sex role into four basic rules of performed masculinity:

- 1) ‘No Sissy Stuff!’ Being a man means not being a sissy, not being perceived as weak, effeminate, or gay. Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of the feminine.
- 2) ‘Be a Big Wheel.’ This rule refers to the centrality of success and power in the definition of masculinity. Masculinity is measured more and more by wealth, power, and status than by any particular body part.

- 3) 'Be a Sturdy Oak.' What makes a man is that he is reliable in a crisis. And what makes him so reliable in a crisis is not that he is able to respond fully and appropriately to the situation at hand, but rather that he resembles an inanimate object. A rock, a pillar, a species of tree.
- 4) 'Give 'em Hell.' Exude an aura of daring and aggression. Live life out on the edge. Take risks. Go for it. Pay no attention to what others think. (*Guyland*, 45-46)

However, a few questions concerning these summarized and simplified rules must be asked.

What do these four basic rules accomplish, and for whom? If one follows these rules, what is he guaranteed to gain? Are these rules a willing or a complacent creation? Are they a necessity, and if so, from or by whom – women, other men, themselves, and/or societal ideals? Regardless of whether the males abiding by these rules were members of the armed forces, the lost generation, or the Beat generation, they all, either implicitly or explicitly, adhered to this codified listing of an oral tradition that has been followed and handed down for centuries. Frederic Henry, Sal Paradise, and Dean Moriarty all upheld this unspoken doctrine, but, as seen through the repetition of their behaviors in relation to the rest of the world, these masculine conventions have achieved very little over progressive generations. These men, living in the primes of their lives fifty or more years apart from each other, were more similar than they were different, with their behaviors altering only ever so slightly as time whittled away at their oaken façades. And what have they gained by remaining loyal to the doctrine? Just more instability, war, trauma, and confusion. As the former Beatles band member John Lennon was once said, he sees no necessity for the performance of masculinity anymore:

Isn't it time we destroyed the macho ethic?...Where has it gotten us all these thousands of years? Are we still going to have to be clubbing each other to death? Do I have to arm wrestle you to have a relationship with you as another male? Do I have to seduce her – just because she's a female? Can we not have a relationship on some other level?... I don't want to go through life pretending to be James Dean or Marlon Brando. (*Manhood in America*, 193).

Lennon, in casting off the hyper-masculinized personas of James Dean and Marlon Brando, asserts his individualistic manhood and rejects the conformity of a shared performance of masculinity that other men are desirous to watch. He is no longer consenting with, conforming to, confronting with, or entirely evading these performance-of-masculinity requirements surrounding homosocial locales and relationships. To him, they are no longer necessary and have thus become moot points. As Lennon sings in the song “Crippled Inside,” “You can wear a mask and paint your face / You can call yourself the human race / You can wear a collar and a tie / One thing you can't hide / Is when you're crippled inside.” It is high time we stopped crippling ourselves inside with such a feigned external performance, you know.

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