

DETECTING MASCULINITY: THE POSITIVE MASCULINE  
QUALITIES OF FICTIONAL DETECTIVES

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Detective fiction highlights those qualities of masculinity that are most valuable to a contemporary culture. In mysteries a cultural context is more thoroughly revealed than in any other genre of literature. Through the crimes, an audience can understand not only the fears of a particular society but also the level of calumny that society assigns to a crime. As each generation has needed a particular set of qualities in its defense, so the detective has provided them. Through the detective's response to particular crimes, the reader can learn the delineation of forgivable and unforgivable acts. These detectives illustrate positive masculinity, proving that fiction has more uses than mere entertainment.

In this paper, I trace four detectives, each from a different era. Sherlock Holmes lives to solve problems. His primary function is to solve a riddle. Lord Peter Wimsey takes on the moral question of why anyone should detect at all. His stories involve the difficulty of justifying putting oneself in the morally superior position of judge. The Mike Hammer stories treat the difficulty of dealing with criminals who use the law to protect themselves. They have perverted the protections of society, and Hammer must find a way to bring them to justice outside of the law. The Kate Martinelli stories focus more on the victims of crime than on the criminals. Martinelli discovers the motivations that draw a criminal toward a specific victim and explains what it is about certain victims that makes villains want to harm them.

All of these detectives display the traditional traits of the Western male. They are hunters; they protect society as a whole. Yet each detective fulfills a certain cultural role that speaks to the specific problems of his or her era, proving that masculinity is a more fluid role than many have previously credited.

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## CHAPTER 1: THINKING MASCULINE: SHERLOCK HOLMES

Where all men think alike, no man thinks very much. –Walter Lippmann

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is an early, almost the earliest, example of the detective hero. As a hunter, Holmes's goal is the same as that of the earliest societal groups—preservation of the society. However, Holmes has a more interesting quarry than mere sustenance and better tools for his hunt. His quarry is those who would fracture society, morally more than physically, and he uses the newest and most intellectual weapons available to the Victorian—the sciences of logic, psychology, and chemistry. As a hunter, Holmes provides an exceptionally striking example of masculinity to Victorian society.<sup>1</sup>

### Overview of Criticism

Sherlock Holmes is likely the most recognized fictional detective in the world. Critics have studied everything about the man, proposing theories on the reasons for every behavior he exhibits. There are many book-length studies of Holmes and a journal, *The Baker Street Journal*, that is published quarterly and deals exclusively with

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<sup>1</sup> I am not suggesting that the only evidence of masculinity in Victorian society revolved around this single manifestation of it. There were also successful businessmen, artists, and family men who fulfilled their functions as masculine characters. I am here proposing that the earliest groups used the hunter as that person who defended the tribe without personally exercising the benefits of tribal life, such as marriage and children. He was outside the prescribed norm. He was neither a farmer nor a family man.



Sherlockiana. Critics have analyzed every foible of Holmes and even of the secondary characters.

Bruce Harris has given Holmes a personality test and labeled him an "ectomorphic mesomorph" (12). Jeffrey Burns has analyzed Holmes in response to certain psychological types; Leo Hanvik has studied Holmes's personality. Many critics have suggested possible origins for Holmes: Percy Phelps proposes Holmes's mother was Indian; Margaret Nydell suggests Holmes was an Arab; James McCord speculates that Holmes could be Irish. Several critics have commented on Doyle's patterning of Holmes on Dr. Joseph Bell, a fact that Doyle readily admitted.

In addition to Holmes's origins, critics have speculated on Holmes's reasons for using cocaine, his possible university attendance, and his likely political leanings. Madeleine Stern has even reconstructed Holmes's library. Sherlockiana is a wide field with critics speculating on every possible movement and personality quirk. I would like to add to the field a suggestion of Holmes as a figure of masculinity, worthy of imitation by his reading public.

Several critics have noted that the code of masculinity demonstrated by Watson and Holmes was of particular interest to its primarily male audience. Readers of the *Strand Magazine* were looking for a paradigm in their fiction upon which to base their own ideals. Michael Kimmel explains the "crisis of masculinity" faced by the 1890s male by detailing the problems of industrialization and the upheavals in male definition caused by the rise of the "New Woman" (267). Elaine Showalter explains that men as well as women faced difficulties in gender identification during this time period (9).

Because of this crisis, many men looked to fiction to find a pattern for admirable masculinity.

While many critics have focused on specific aspects of Holmes, few have focused on masculinity. Joseph Kestner and Diana Barsham have each written a book-length study on the subject, but Barsham has concentrated more on Doyle's motivations and attitudes than on Holmes's foibles. Kestner states directly, "The Sherlock Holmes paradigm, as was evident from its use in Robert Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys* of 1908, over a period of 40 years from 1887 to 1927, interrogated, constructed and reinforced male gender during the Victorian, Edwardian, and Georgian eras" (200). To add to the critical framework, I would like to suggest that Holmes is a model of masculinity for the entire Western culture and that his detective qualities are what fit him for that role.

### Masculinity

For centuries men have sought certain characteristics to define their gender. The biological separation from women was the thing that made them most obviously men: Women could bear children; what could men do that was of equal importance to the culture? Many cultures used men as defense against predators and to do jobs that were dangerous enough to cause loss of life, believing that women were more valuable to ensure their race and should be protected. Doing a man's, or at least not a woman's, work became one way of defining a male, but what made the male into a man? For a boy to achieve manhood, he must prove himself in some way. Ancient cultures presented rites of passage for their young men, and not all of them passed. Later

cultures sent their boys off to war or off to sea (where women of their own social sphere did not go) to learn manly traits.

In the modern era, as sociologists and cultural studies analysts seek to create definitions of masculinity, it becomes apparent that there is no cohesive definition for the male sex role. The role changes as the needs of the particular society do (Gilmore 14). In fact, few scholars even see masculine studies as cohesive (Horrocks 2). One of the reasons for this lack of cohesiveness is the desire of several separate groups to define gender in reference to their various disciplines. Sociology, feminism, cultural studies, and psychology have all sought to define gender and assign sex roles (Connell 3).

Sociologists Joseph and Elizabeth Pleck put forward a definition of five basic periods for men, noting the shifting definition of masculinity over time: The Agrarian Period (1630-1820), the Commercial Period (1820-1860), the Strenuous Life Period (1861-1919), the Companionate Providing Period (1920-1965), and After 1965. Clyde Franklin describes these categories in terms of the male sex role in each period. According to the definitions put forward variously by Pleck, Pleck, and Franklin, Sherlock Holmes would fall into the Strenuous Life period and be expected to have a sphere of influence entirely separate from that of women: "Masculinity during this period continued to imply that males had questionable moral standards, control over most affairs in the business world, male subcultures, and an emphasis on being physically active and fit" (Franklin 7).

While men in the Victorian era were expected to have "questionable moral standards," Victorians also viewed these men as flawed. The idealized male would have a reverence for women that prevented his abuse of them in any way—not just for

the women of his own class, but for all women. The idealized man would keep himself pure until marriage, or if he were a bachelor, reverence women from a distance. The popular literature of Tennyson and Dickens speaks to the Victorian reverence for women and to the standard of purity set for men. Both Holmes and Watson fall into this category—at least so far as the reader is aware. Neither Holmes nor Watson is ever implicated in any wrongdoing concerning women in any of the stories.

They are both presented as supremely masculine by the Victorian definition of the word, embracing physical danger without fear for their personal safety. Tests of manhood in many cultures require that the boy face some physical danger and be wounded in some way. The Victorian culture was no exception although it did not require a wound but only the demonstrated bravery of confronting a violent enemy. Victorians had a particular reverence for soldiers because they faced death in defense of their country. Watson, therefore, is shown in the very first story as a truly masculine man. Watson's stint in the army makes him masculine—he clearly passed his trial of manhood by being wounded and demonstrates his disregard for personal danger in several stories. He is even less afraid of contracting a horrible disease than the loss of his friend in "The Dying Detective."

In fact, Watson's wounding occurred during the battle of Maiwand in 1880, a battle that Joseph Kestner cites as "one of the worst defeats of the imperial army during the century" (7). Kestner points out that Watson's involvement in such a battle speaks to his masculinity. However, it is worth noting that Watson was shot in pursuit of his country's policies and that he was invalided out not because of his wound but because of the fever he contracted while in hospital in India. Thus he was felled not by the

enemy's bullets but by "enteric fever, that curse of our Indian possessions" (*Study in Scarlet* 3). In this case, Watson's masculinity remains intact. He was courageous enough to face fire in one of the worst battles of the second Afghan war, lived through being dragged across mountain passes while pursued by the enemy, convalesced successfully, and was finally overcome by a foreign disease that no British courage could be expected to withstand.

The Empire faced many problems abroad, which I will discuss in greater detail later in the chapter; however, the horrors of war were certainly a strengthening event in Watson's life, and because of them, the reader never questions Watson's courage nor willingness to put himself in danger for what he perceives to be right reasons, such as the word of Holmes. In fact, the army trained Watson well for his role of unquestioning obedience. He follows Holmes bravely and blindly, if often ineptly, demonstrating the most lauded traits of British soldiery.

Holmes, although he has not gone through the tests of manhood that Watson has at the beginning of the stories, is no less masculine in his dismissal of personal danger. He uses any means necessary to capture criminals and disregards physical danger of all types in his hunt for them. He confronts and shoots at the dog in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. In various stories he is poisoned and shot at and still rushes forward. He goes willingly to his death in "The Final Problem" in order to remove Moriarty from the world.

## Reflection of Culture

The Victorian boy was encouraged to develop a Holmesian outlook. Joseph Kestner points out the cultural emphasis on observation put to Britain's youth when he quotes from Robert Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys*:

Remember how 'Sherlock Holmes's met a stranger and noticed that he was looking fairly well-to-do, in new clothes with a mourning band on his sleeve, with a soldierly bearing, and a sailor's way of walking, sunburnt, with tattoo marks on his hands, and he was carrying some children's toys in his hand. What should you have supposed that man to be? Well, Sherlock Holmes guessed, correctly, that he had lately retired from the Royal Marines as a Sergeant, and his wife had died, and he had some small children at home. (139)

This scouting manual presented a paradigm of masculinity for the British culture, one that valued "observation, rationalism, factuality, logic, comradeship, daring and pluck" (Kestner 2). All of these qualities Holmes possesses in abundance, and British youth were encouraged to develop a masculinity that emulated Holmes's.

Holmes represents one aspect of masculinity because of his scientific approach to crime solving. He is a hunter in truth, but his tools are more sophisticated than those of his predecessors. He is a product of the scientific interest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Huge advances in science occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the first law of thermodynamics formulated by Joule in 1840 to Baekeland's 1909 formulation of the first completely synthetic plastic.

Westerners began to explore their world more fully. In 1855, the explorer David Livingstone discovered the Victoria Falls on the Zambezi River; in 1858 William Parker Foulke discovered *hadrosaurus*, the first nearly complete dinosaur skeleton; and in 1870 Heinrich Schliemann began his excavation of Troy. Men began to explore the Arctic, culminating in Admiral Robert Peary's 1909 expedition to the geographic north pole. In 1911, Roald Amundsen, a Norwegian explorer, mounted an expedition to the south pole, and U.S. explorer Hiram Bingham found the lost Inca city Machu Picchu in Peru.

Because of the qualities required for this type of exploration, these adventurers were held up to the British public as examples of masculinity. They were brave, hardy, and resourceful; in fact, they pressed on in conditions that killed off many in their parties so that they could be the first to enter an unmapped or unexplored area of the globe. They were relentless in their pursuit of information which they believed important to civilization in general, and many also sought personal fame. In these remote places, the explorers discovered facts about ancient civilizations, truths about the limits of human endurance, and the strength of civilization's influence on men completely separated from it. In all these actions, these explorers highlighted the positive results of masculine qualities such as hardiness, adventuresomeness, and a value for empirical evidence.

As these explorers found ruins of ancient cities and discovered new processes for survival in difficult conditions, they published their findings for the British public back home. As a result, the British reading public had more information about the remote parts of the globe than they had ever had before. The explorers also brought back their

scientific theories, the most famous of which belonged to Charles Darwin, who published his *Origin of the Species* in 1859.

Holmes is one striking representation of the Victorian ideals of masculinity because of his knowledge of these activities. The Victorian culture declared distinct spheres for men and women. True femininity required a focus on hearth and home; true masculinity required a full knowledge of the outside world. However, both of these gender definitions were in flux during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the rise of feminism, women sought greater legal powers over their property and themselves. Joseph Kestner contends that the Sherlock Holmes adventures "served to model male gender behavior by grasping this function of literature" (7). While he does not journey to these remote locations himself, Holmes demonstrates his understanding of the outside world in most of the stories. He is knowledgeable about rare South American poisons and the tattoos a sailor could acquire in the South Pacific.

One of the great strengths of the stories, and a mark of Holmes's masculinity, is that Holmes provides a practical use for the flood of scientific information that the public was receiving. The British public was proud of its explorers but did not necessarily know what to do with the information they provided. Holmes assimilates all of this worldly knowledge and uses it to protect and preserve his society. In this, Holmes is supremely masculine. He possesses more knowledge of the scientific world than any other human and the acuity to apply it, demonstrating his knowledge and abduction process to the amazement of spectators—Watson, Scotland Yard, and various clients. Just as the villain in a piece will confess at the most climactic moment, Holmes enjoys



the superiority he feels in solving the mystery, so he explains his cases for Dr. Watson and Scotland Yard with great drama.<sup>2</sup>

Holmes's belief that science could provide the answer to crime is a mark of the philosophy of the day. Victorians believed that crime could be detected because it had a solution. A man who knew enough about science, a man who was willing to ferret out all the details, could find the correct answer to any problem. This ability was particularly valuable to the Victorians. Science was becoming more refined and more popular, and some felt that it diminished the natural and spiritual world. Holmes provides certainty in this environment. He uses science to assess the guilt of the thoroughly irrational and uncontrolled behavior of human beings, even ones who face serious moral dilemmas. It does not matter to Holmes what a person's motivation for crime might be because he is looking at objective data to determine suspects. He explains his methods to the public in a newspaper article: "By a man's finger-nails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boots, by his trouser-knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirt-cuffs—by each of these things a man's calling is plainly revealed" (*A Study in Scarlet* 15). Thus science can provide an answer to crime even when motive is obscure.

While the police in these stories continually seek to determine suspects by motive, Holmes reduces the suspects of a crime to those who could possibly have committed it. In *The Sign of Four*, when the police are seeking a reason for the victim to have been murdered, Holmes examines footprints and determines that one of the

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<sup>2</sup> The idea of Holmes and dramatic announcements will be covered with greater emphasis later in the chapter.

murderers had one leg and that the other had very small feet. While Scotland Yard bumbles about ineffectively in "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," Holmes studies the clues at the site of the murder and explains that the murderer "is a tall man, left-handed, limps with the right leg, wears thick-soled shooting-boots and a gray cloak, smokes Indian cigars, uses a cigar-holder, and carries a blunt pen-knife in his pocket" (Vol. I, 283). Here Holmes's scientific acumen proves the innocence of the victim's son who had been seen arguing with his father a few hours before the body was found. Even though the son has an excellent motive for killing his father, Holmes proves that he did not do so by gathering evidence and applying his intelligence to the issue.

Besides his scientific acumen, Holmes models masculinity by being a detective. The very fact that Holmes uses his skills to preserve society allows him to bolster the image of the masculine man. In the 1880s multiple events contributed to social instability. Two pamphlets, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* and *How the Poor Live*, drew social awareness to the plight of London's poor. Later in the decade Irish nationalists and others attempted to blow up *The Times* office and successfully dynamited two underground railway stations, the CID office in London, and part of Victoria Station. Riots took place in Trafalgar Square, factory workers went on strike, and Jack the Ripper terrorized London with his grisly murders. Into this climate of fear and social unrest, Conan Doyle launched Sherlock Holmes, a model of masculinity because he detected crime and reestablished order in society.

While Holmes finds his answers through the hard sciences of chemistry and physics, he also values the softer sciences, such as phrenology and psychiatry. Phrenology proved that a philanthropist or a criminal could be determined by the shape

of his head.<sup>3</sup> In 1879 Ivan Pavlov proved that some reflexes are learned and conditioned and proposed that people could be taught to respond to anything. Fewer than 20 years later, Sigmund Freud published *Studies in Hysteria* and in 1900 *The Interpretation of Dreams*, creating a public awareness of and interest in psychoanalysis.<sup>4</sup>

Victorians were interested both in phrenology, which defined a person's character by the bumps on the skull, and the theories of Victor Lombroso, who drew correlations between a person's outward appearance and inward characteristics.<sup>5</sup> Direct

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<sup>3</sup> The theory of phrenology was first proposed by Franz Joseph Gall of Vienna in 1790. The pseudo-science gained greatly in popularity through the Victorian Age. Many pamphlets were written on the proper way to take a head reading, including Donovan's *A Handbook of Phrenology* published in 1870. In 1887 Lorenzo Niles Fowler founded the British Phrenological Society.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Inward Gaze*, Peter Middleton compares the ideas of Freud and Conan Doyle, who apparently saw the modes of masculinity similarly: "Freud uses the idea of a mystery to be solved and the image of a man's study as a metonymic sign of the masculine rationality that will enable this to happen, and to help legitimize his innovative blend of medical consultation, confession and detection" (80).

<sup>5</sup> Cesare Lombroso held that certain men were born criminals and could be identified by certain physical traits which labeled them savage or atavistic. Conan Doyle himself joined the Society for Psychical Research in 1893, which valued the ideas of Lombroso and of his colleague Frederick Myers. In *Arthur Conan Doyle and the Meaning of Masculinity*, Diana Barsham explores the separate values of genius and

correlations between personal appearance and character are obvious to the discerning reader. The reader can often spot the villain by his unappealing personal characteristics; the blackmailer has a lean and cruel mouth and the self-indulgent villain has fat and sensuous features.

In "The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger" the husband is bestial. His wife shows Holmes and Watson a picture of him: "It was a dreadful face—a human pig, or rather a human wild boar, for it was formidable in its bestiality" (Vol. II, 630). The man's behavior is correspondingly bestial; he beats his wife and enjoys attacking other people even though "again and again he was had up for assault" (Vol. II, 631). It seems that the man's instinct is to savage others even though he is punished for it, the behavior one would expect from a wild beast.

Amberly of "The Adventure of the Retired Colourman" is described as a bird of prey. When confronted with Holmes's knowledge of his murderous activities, Josiah Amberly "clawed into the air with his bony hands. His mouth was open, and for the instant he looked like some horrible bird of prey. In a flash we got a glimpse of the real Josiah Amberley, a misshapen demon with a soul as distorted as his body" (Vol. II, 657). The man's true character is revealed through his personal appearance.

Watson describes the villain of "The Adventure of the Dying Detective" as gnomish:

I saw a great yellow face, coarse-grained and greasy, with heavy, double-chin, and two sullen, menacing gray eyes which glared at me from under

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criminality, explaining Conan Doyle's familiarity with the theories of Lombroso and Myers (123-24).

tufted and sandy brows. . . . The skull was of enormous capacity, and yet as I looked down I saw to my amazement that the figure of the man was small and frail, twisted in the shoulders and back like one who has suffered rickets in his childhood. (Vol. II, 393)

The man's repulsiveness of feature is later linked to an equally repulsive spirit. Mr. Culverton Smith attempts to poison Holmes and listens with glee to a list of Holmes's pains. He even promotes Holmes's mental anguish by gloating over his own victory: "But you have the truth now, Holmes, and you can die with the knowledge that I killed you. . . . You are very near your end, Holmes. I will sit here and I will watch you die" (Vol. II, 397). Holmes promptly rises from his chair, showing that his decline was merely a ruse to gain a confession.

Holmes demonstrates his superiority in masculinity by a knowledge of all sciences pertinent to his job of catching criminals. His knowledge that Culverton Smith is twisted in body allows him to consider that Smith is equally twisted in spirit. This knowledge helps Holmes to set and spring the appropriate trap; his acumen is supported by the results of the case. The way to induce a confession from the twisted man was indeed to allow him to gloat over a felled Holmes.

While Holmes notes the relation of outward and inward characteristics, the stories reveal very little of each character's spiritual orientation. The Holmes stories are rather interesting in their lack of focus on religion. There was a huge social debate at the time over Darwinism and Christianity, which were held at the time to be utterly separate philosophies. Science seemed to be proving that the Biblical account of creation was false, and several religious philosophies were shown to be false or at least

highly suspect. Conan Doyle avoids dealing directly with the Darwin debate and touches religion tangentially. Nonetheless, even though Holmes clearly emphasizes science, factuality, and human reason, he does not reject the idea of a higher form of justice.

*A Study in Scarlet* reveals evil Mormons but also good praying Christians. Both parties seem to find murder and revenge appropriate. Jefferson Hope devotes his life to revenge, yet he seems to be rewarded by God: After murdering the villain, Hope has an aneurysm before he can be publicly hanged. During "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," John Turner murders a blackmailer. Holmes lets the man go free because he despises blackmailers and has sympathy with Turner. However, Turner has diabetes and is not expected to live. The last act in "The Five Orange Pips" sees the *Lone Star* go down with all hands before Holmes can wreak revenge upon the villains aboard. There is a strong implication that God got them before Holmes could. Wrong is nearly always punished, whether Holmes turns the criminal over to Scotland Yard, deals with it himself, or is pre-empted by God.

The various criminals who are punished or released from public ignominy by death reveal Conan Doyle's burgeoning interest in spiritualism. Later in life Conan Doyle would thoroughly embrace spiritualism, but it is interesting to note that Holmes's embodiment of masculinity, while emphasizing factual information and rationality, nonetheless accepts a higher power as justice.

#### Personification of Empire

The British Empire ruled the world, at least financially and scientifically, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the idea of detecting crimes became interesting. After the

installation of the police in 1829 by Sir Robert Peel, the British became extremely proud of their police force and their ability to enforce the law at home. During the 1870s, the British Empire expanded its holdings in Africa and in 1875 obtained control of the Suez Canal, controlling shipping in the area. In the late 1870s the British Empire took control of South Africa, India, and Afghanistan (Sunderland 42-45). Sherlock Holmes shows the public what a truly masculine man should know and how he should stalk his prey, but he also reveals what, or rather who, a masculine man should be in the late 1800s. Holmes is a citizen and therefore a representative of the British Empire.

Despite its overall dominance, however, the British Empire had suffered several major defeats abroad and was facing serious trouble in governing its colonies. Kestner details army defeats during the time—Gundamuck (1842) during the First Afghan War, Isandhlwana (1879) during the Zulu War, Majuba Hill (1881) during the First Boer War, and El Teb (1884) and Khartoum (1885) during the Sudanese War—and even points out that Watson's wounding occurred during the battle of Maiwand (1880) (7). In addition to these military disasters, there had been the Indian Mutiny in 1857. In all cases, the British reclaimed their possessions and continued to send the wealth (of both goods and taxes) of these colonies back home. The British public who received this evidence of British superiority in military matters and governance admired the masculinity of the military men who enforced British laws in such difficult conditions.

Holmes is a product of the Empire. He is superior. In many of Holmes's dealings with foreign criminals, the reader can detect an air of snobbishness that comes from the British supremacy in foreign affairs. It was self-evident to the British that a culture that could conquer most of the world was superior to the cultures it conquered, and Conan

Doyle was clearly of this opinion. While Holmes is not prejudiced against other cultures, he is aware of their distance from the superior British ideals. He shows not contempt for but awareness of the foibles of other cultures.

One mark of Holmes's masculinity is his ability to remain rational in the face of strong emotion. His British ideals also serve as a paradigm for masculinity as Holmes assesses clues rather than reacting emotionally to the plights of his various clients. He is sharply contrasted with other characters, such as women and foreigners, who do not retain these masculine British ideals. Other characters are not logical and rational in a crisis; rather they are extremely emotional. Conan Doyle uses the uncontrolled emotions of these other characters to highlight Holmes's rationality and consequent British superiority.

The tropics are often blamed for inflaming the temper of criminals, such as that of the villain of "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," or for causing differences in a marriage. In "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire" Mrs. Ferguson is from Peru, and "the fact of her foreign birth and of her alien religion always caused a separation of interests and feelings between husband and wife" (Vol. II, 536). Mrs. Gibson of "The Problem of Thor Bridge" is Brazilian and quick to anger and revenge. She kills herself and manages to set up the woman her husband loves for murder. Evidently all this excess of emotion is a result of her upbringing in a hot climate. There is a clear assumption in these stories that anyone who was raised in great heat will have heated emotions and that the proper British islander, brought up in a cooler climate, will retain a *cool head* when faced with a crisis.



Holmes sees through experience that the tropics affect a person's emotions. He assumes a high level of emotionalism in warm-weather creatures but does not necessarily assume their guilt. For instance, other races are occasionally shown to be more upright than the British. In *The Sign of the Four*, the Sikhs kept their pledges when British officers did not, and the cannibal is the most loyal of the characters. I believe that Conan Doyle's intention is to illustrate a topsy-turvy world here, but he could be making an important social comment about British cultural assumptions. In any case, Holmes does not jump to conclusions that a man's race or personal habits automatically make him innocent or guilty; once he collates the data, Holmes uses abduction to fit the pieces together.

#### Social Position

Masculinity includes dominance (positive as well as negative), and any field in which a man can display superiority contributes to his position of power. Social position is one such field. The higher a man's social position, the greater his power over his fellows and consequently the greater the public perception of his masculinity. Holmes is of an appropriate social class to be admired. Holmes is not a paid policeman but a private gentleman of education who enjoys detection. On the social scale, Holmes is neither very high, which would hamper his ability to detect by making his actions too visible, nor so low as a common policeman, who were considered a superior form of rat catcher. He is not overly wealthy, but he is not required to hold a steady job. He is a gentleman. As such, he can mix with nobles and with the very wealthy, such as the King of Bohemia ("A Scandal in Bohemia") and the Duke of Holderness ("The Adventure of the Priory School").

Even though Holmes is not himself of exalted birth, he enjoys name-dropping. He assures Watson continually that a man's rank is secondary to the mystery he brings, but the reader will notice the number of exalted clients who retain Holmes. In "The Case of the Noble Bachelor," Holmes asserts: "I assure you, Watson, without affectation, that the status of my client is a matter of less moment to me than the interest of his case" (Vol. I, 389). Holmes may be above being intrigued by titles, but Conan Doyle is aware that his reading public is not. As a reflection of a rising middle class, the British reading public enjoyed the idea that a man, because of his personal skill, could work with kings yet survive uncrushed by the weight of a man's title. Holmes has enough social power of his own to allow his intelligence to level any field to which his interests bring him.

One aspect of social position is rank; another is marital status. As one acceptable form of the masculine, Holmes is also a bachelor, which allows him the freedom to do much as he pleases. (As a good Victorian, Holmes conducts his sexual life, if he has one, without involving the reader.) To the Victorian, a married man had specific responsibilities. He was required to provide a good income for his family. Holmes prefers to take only those cases that interest him, making his income thoroughly irregular. Societal pressure would force a married man to take enough cases to support a family, and so Holmes, if he were to adopt the masculinity of an ideal husband, would have to do so. For instance, Watson dissolves the partnership and goes into private medical practice after he marries. In "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier," Holmes positively whines that Watson had married and consequently deserted the partnership—"the only selfish action which I can recall in our association" (Vol. II, 486). Through this

statement Holmes asserts his own hunter code, the supremacy of society's needs over those of the individual. He understands that the tie of marriage prevented Watson from flinging himself into danger for an irregular salary. Holmes does not deny Watson's responsibilities; he merely makes it clear that he prefers his own freedom to the married man's responsibilities. Thus, Holmes chooses a form of masculinity that emphasizes independence where Watson chooses the masculine paradigm of providing for his family.

#### Justice v. Law

As a consulting detective, Sherlock Holmes is entirely separate from the police and faces fewer legal restrictions than his fellows on the force. He follows an internal code of honor and does not care about outside attitudes. His certainty of right is at once supremely masculine and attractive in an uncertain world. The idealized masculine should be certain that he is right,<sup>6</sup> and Holmes is certain because he is extremely intelligent and has collated all the scientific data that apply to each case. Additionally, Holmes is a meticulously honest man who believes that a wronged person has a right to justice.

Holmes's distinction from the police allows him to follow justice rather than law, which is of more interest to him. The reading public accepted Holmes's choice because the Victorians knew that justice and law might be different things. The police force was

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<sup>6</sup> I should assert here the particular difference between "masculine" and "male." The "masculine" possesses many of those characteristics seen in the definition of masculinity given by Clyde Franklin (5). Those possessing any or all of those characteristics are not limited to a certain genetic code.

very new at the time of the Holmes stories, and the reading public still viewed it as potentially flawed. Many people remembered the miscarriages of justice brought about by the Bow Street Runners, a group of professional thief catchers notable during the Regency. The Runners were paid by conviction and were well known to fabricate evidence to get a conviction when the suspect was not, in fact, guilty<sup>7</sup> (Radzinowics Vol. II, pp. 268, 333-337). Holmes, however, collates scientific data (i.e. a man's shoe size, the type of mud on his boots and where it can be found) to ab/de/induce the correct answer and so can carry out *true* justice when he doubts that the law will provide it.

What would be considered overweening arrogance in today's culture would have been seen by Victorians as an accurate assessment of the police's qualities and his own. While demonstrating his own internal moral code to Watson, Holmes releases criminals, or at least fails to turn them in, on a regular basis. Sometimes he insists that they pay a form of compensation to the victim that does not involve the law, as when he forces Isadora Klein to fund Mrs. Maberly's trip around the world in "The Adventure of Three Gables." Although Holmes does not abide by lawful principles every time, he does follow his own code of right and wrong.

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<sup>7</sup> In 1816, a paid policeman who was also a Bow Street runner was involved in a particularly public entrapment scandal. Several runners were well known to have gained substantial fortunes through their efforts at thief taking and trial testimony. Because of this sort of publicity, 19<sup>th</sup> century juries tended to disbelieve police evidence given at trial. For more on the early police and the Bow Street runners, see Sir Leon Radzinowicz 333-346.

For instance, in "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client," Holmes sends a former criminal, Shinwell Johnson, to find evidence to discredit Baron Gruner in the eyes of his fiancée. Sherlock Holmes knows that Gruner is a murderer yet is unlikely to be convicted, so Holmes seeks to discredit the man enough to prevent his marriage and thereby to cut off his source of income. As well, in "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle," Holmes allows a thief to go unpunished so long as he does not pursue the greater crime of allowing an innocent to be punished in his stead. When the thief confesses to Holmes and agrees not to testify against an innocent man, Holmes chooses not to lay the case before Scotland Yard.

Holmes even allows much larger crimes to go unpunished, particularly any assault on a blackmailer. He is harsh in his condemnation of blackmailers because they sewed a kind of destruction to which Victorians were particularly vulnerable. Because of the moral and ethical rigidity of the monarch, entire families could be ruined by the slightest scandal. This aversion to blackmailers causes Holmes to impede an investigation by not aiding the police. Having actually witnessed the murder of a blackmailer by a woman of high rank, Holmes nonetheless refuses to help Lestrade when he is asked:

"Well, I'm afraid I can't help you, Lestrade," said Holmes. "The fact is that I knew this fellow Milverton, that I considered him one of the most dangerous men in London, and that I think there are certain crimes which the law cannot touch, and which, therefore, to some extent, justify private revenge. No, it's no use arguing. I have made up my mind. My

sympathies are with the criminals rather than with the victim, and I will not handle this case." (Vol. I, 806)

It is clear from his comments that Holmes disapproves of any blackmailer getting ahead, and so he does his best to uphold what he sees as justice, even when he is clearly breaking the law.

Holmes believes firmly in justice, but it is clear that Conan Doyle does also. Holmes is not the only character to emphasize justice over law. *The Sign of Four* shows the police detective Athelney Jones chastising the criminal not for taking the law into his own hands but for a failure to pursue true justice: "If you had helped justice, instead of thwarting it in this way, you would have had a better chance at your trial" (Vol. I, 185). Conan Doyle shows a jury giving Kitty Winter the least possible sentence for having thrown vitriol in a man's face because she had just cause ("The Adventure of the Illustrious Client").

#### Emotional Life

As an idealization of Victorian masculinity, Holmes does not allow his judgment to be overthrown by emotion. He presents himself as a thinking rather than feeling character. There are few instances of his emotional involvement in life, let alone in a case. Additionally, Holmes routinely prioritizes the needs of the case over the emotional needs of others and does not really acknowledge that he has any emotional needs himself. In the case of Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle goes further than the prescribed standard of masculinity by separating Holmes so thoroughly from the tenderer emotions that Watson clearly displays. Where Holmes sneers at the emotionalism of most other

characters, Watson feels able to express admiration for Holmes and love for women without a loss of masculinity.

Because a married Victorian man had emotional responsibilities, Holmes avoided marriage out of a desire to keep his judgment clear. In "A Scandal in Bohemia" Watson explains Holmes's aversion to emotional clutter:

He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen, but as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position. He never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer. They were admirable things for the observer—excellent for drawing the veil from men's motives and actions. But for the trained reasoner to admit such intrusion into his own delicate and finely adjusted temperament was to introduce a distracting factor which might throw a doubt upon all his mental results. (Vol. I, 209)

Watson here shows Holmes as more masculine rather than as less human. There is no loss of admiration but rather an explanation of clear, and by association masculine, thinking.

In spite of his emphasis on reason over emotion, Holmes is not a cold character. The one case that Holmes is shown to lose is a triumph of emotion over intellect.<sup>8</sup> He

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<sup>8</sup> In "A Scandal in Bohemia" Holmes is outwitted by Irene Adler. I believe that Conan Doyle makes the only character to seriously triumph over Holmes a woman because he intends her to symbolize emotion rather than because he wants to make any sort of feminist statement. He was writing a short story rather than a novel and had little space to develop a character. Making her a woman would have been very much

displays the British reverence for women that would be necessary in a proper gentleman. He only becomes emotionally involved in a case when a woman, who is nearly always a helpless innocent, is attacked. In fact, in "A Case of Identity" Holmes becomes very angry because the villain is not prosecutable and threatens to horsewhip him, and he would have done so had the villain not precipitously fled.

Additionally, the reader can identify some villains through their lack of reverence for women. One startling example is the man who referred to women as "heifers" in *A Study in Scarlet*.<sup>9</sup> But Holmes becomes very protective of women—even when they don't want his protection, like Violet de Merville in "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client." Holmes actually begs her to listen to his evidence against her fiancé: "But I really did plead with her with all the warmth of words that I could find in my nature" (Vol. II, 474).

Holmes separates the idea of the thinking masculine from the feeling feminine, but he values the feeling feminine highly. Holmes values the opinions of women and greatly admires their emotional courage even when he does not credit them with scientific skill: "I have seen too much not to know that the impression of a woman may be more valuable than the conclusion of an analytic reasoner" ("The Man with the

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the same thing as explaining her as an emotional rather than a logical person in the minds of the Victorian audience. Women weren't considered rational beings at that time. Irene Adler is shown to have a very logical mind and to be infinitely more intelligent than the king of Bohemia, but she carries out her plot for emotional reasons.

<sup>9</sup> A footnote in *A Study in Scarlet* refers to a sermon by Heber C. Kimball, who "alludes to his hundred wives under this endearing epithet" (Conan Doyle 72).



Twisted Lip" Vol. I, 320). However, Holmes has to use different tools when dealing with women because of their purported lack of logic. In "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client," Holmes deals with a woman who displays excellent loyalty but very little sense and insists on marrying the villain simply because those who love her are trying to prevent it. When dealing with this woman, Holmes confronts her with evidence that the man is a murderer. When this information has no effect, he obtains information that her fiancé has treated other women badly. The evidence of murder makes no impression on her, but evidence of seduction has a greater effect as Holmes explains to Watson: "Woman's heart and mind are insoluble puzzles to the male. Murder might be condoned or explained, and yet some smaller offense might rankle" (Vol. II, 468).

Holmes finds ways to approve of women in general and to value them for the qualities they possess, such as physical courage and loyalty, without crediting them with skill in analytic reasoning. Most of the women in the Holmes stories are poor reasoners and emotionally frail. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the story of the curse is explained to the Baskerville sons with strict instructions that they not tell their sister Elizabeth because their father feels that Elizabeth is too weak to bear it. However, Beryl, the villain's wife, shows admirable strength of character as she endures repeated beatings without giving in to the demands of her husband to help in a man's murder. Additionally, there is Miss Burnett of "The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge." Having married a foreign man and moved with him to his country, Miss Burnett becomes enraged when her husband is killed because of the policies of that country's dictator. Miss Burnett follows the dictator Murillo to England and attempts to kill him herself,

taking great personal risks because the man is evil. She is very emotional, certainly, but she is also admirable.

Although he sees value in some women's intuition and admires loyalty, Holmes despises over-emotionalism. In "The Adventure of the Cardboard Box" a man chooses to be with his wife rather than keep a better paying job (Vol. II, 332), and Holmes cites this choice as a lapse in the man's judgment. Holmes even goes so far as to find this decision evidence of the man's stupid excitability and reasons that the man is governed by his passions and likely to commit murder in a jealous fit.

In fact, over-emotionalism is often evidence of villainy. The mass murderer of "The Adventure of the Red Circle" was physically unappealing, as are nearly all Conan Doyle villains, but also emotionally over-indulgent as seen through the eyes of one of his victims:

Not only was his body that of a giant but everything about him was grotesque, gigantic, and terrifying. His voice was like thunder in our little house. There was scarce room for the whirl of his great arms as he talked. His thoughts, his emotions, his passions, all were exaggerated and monstrous. He talked, or rather roared, with such energy that others could but sit and listen, cowed with the mighty stream of words. His eyes blazed at you and held you at his mercy. (Vol. II, 355)

This villain clearly lacks control of his passions and consequently, and inevitably in Holmes's view, fails to adhere to a code of honor and lawfulness.

Holmes represents the idealized masculine in his society because he can separate his emotions from his intellect. He uses cold science to find the truth. While

he acknowledges the value of emotions and of intuition, Holmes considers his own emotional involvement in a case to prejudice his conclusions and tries to avoid it ("A Scandal in Bohemia," Vol. I, 209). He reverences women without having much faith in their intellects, and he values the police force while believing their reasoning to be thoroughly wrong-headed. Holmes is certain of his conclusions because they are obtained objectively (in his opinion) and because he does not allow his liking for particular people to cloud his accurate assessment of them.

In addition to these character qualities, Holmes expresses the manly emotion of loyal friendship in rare cases. There is a great instance of his compassion for Watson in "The Adventure of the Three Garridebs" when Watson is shot by the villain: "Then my friend's arms were round me, and he was leading me to a chair. 'You're not hurt, Watson? For God's sake, say that you are not hurt!' It was worth a wound—it was worth many wounds—to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask" (Vol. I, 562). Watson does not believe Holmes to be indifferent to their friendship, but he was not certain until this time that Holmes was as attached to him as he was to Holmes. The "cold mask" that Holmes wears is one that is required by his culture's definition of masculinity so that not even his best friend is entirely certain of his affection.

In "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot," Holmes purposefully poisons both Watson and himself in an attempt to recreate the crime. In this instance Watson gets to rescue Holmes and receives a heartfelt and unusual apology:

"Upon my word, Watson!" said Holmes at last with an unsteady voice, "I owe you both my thanks and an apology. It was an unjustifiable

experiment even for one's self, and doubly so for a friend. I am really very sorry."

"You know," I answered with some emotion, for I had never seen so much of Holmes's heart before, "that it is my greatest joy and privilege to help you." (Vol. II, 435)

Here again Holmes should not be perceived as heartless. Watson does not see Holmes as stingy with his affection but as supremely masculine in his lack of vocal expression.

Holmes very rarely shows emotion in these stories, but when he does, it is for one of two reasons: He is either protecting a woman or valuing Watson. The Victorian form of male bonding did not include an excess of visible emotion, but the reader can see that the emotion was there. Holmes clearly feels strongly about Watson; he is just prohibited by disposition and culture from expressing it very often.

### Competition

Despite the point of brotherhood that links Holmes to Watson, Holmes's relationship with other men is primarily competitive, a state that the code of masculinity demands. Clyde Franklin explores this characteristic fully in *The Changing Definition of Masculinity*. He traces the inculcation of competition in Western males from early childhood to adulthood: "Early male youth friendships, as we have seen, are based on competitiveness, dominance, aggressiveness, and the like because these traits are ones male youth must learn if they are to become 'men'" (120). As these boys become men, they strive to dominate other men, and Holmes shows his adherence to the code of masculinity by thoroughly embracing competition.

Holmes needs to dominate others intellectually, and Watson bears the brunt of his need. Many stories open with a small incident of Holmes condescending to explain something to Watson and Watson's exclamations of surprise. Additionally, Holmes uses Watson to distract criminals, knowing that Watson will investigate poorly and then enjoying Watson's mistakes. In "The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax" Holmes sends Watson to conduct an investigation, critiques it, and then shows that he has solved the case himself: "'And a singularly consistent investigation you have made, my dear Watson,' said he. 'I cannot at the moment recall any possible blunder which you have omitted. The total effect of your proceeding has been to give the alarm everywhere and yet to discover nothing'" (Vol. II, 406).

Holmes uses Watson to distract a criminal in a particularly dramatic way in "The Adventure of the Dying Detective." Holmes pretends to be dying and causes his best friend a certain amount of anguish in order to catch his criminal. Posing as a poisoned and rapidly-dying man, Holmes manages to extract a confession of murder from Mr. Culverton Smith. Upon hearing the confession, he reveals his pretense and watches as the police take the villain away. A few moments later, he explains to Watson: "It was clear to me, however, that by pretending that he had really succeeded in his design I might surprise a confession. That pretense I have carried out with the thoroughness of the true artist" (Vol. II, 399). Holmes is smug, admiring his own dominance of both the criminal and Watson, assuming Watson's agreement that solving the case supersedes any emotional pain Watson might feel.

It is this need for competition and dominance that drives Holmes's detecting focus. He seeks to outwit someone and chooses criminals as his target so that his own

pleasure in detecting can aid his society. He even becomes testy when he has no opportunity to compete, and Watson notes that it is the lack of competition that irritates Holmes. The opening lines of "The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans" sees Holmes whining over a dearth of criminals to thwart: "'The London criminal is certainly a dull fellow,' said he in the querulous voice of the sportsman whose game has failed him" (Vol. II, 358).

Additionally, Holmes is happiest and most fulfilled when he has the opportunity to triumph over his fellow man. When he abduces the villain in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Holmes laughs in delight, and Watson's recounting of the incident emphasizes Holmes's enjoyment: "'We have him, Watson, we have him, and I dare swear that before to-morrow night he will be fluttering in our net as helpless as one of his own butterflies. . . .' He burst into one of his rare fits of laughter as he turned away from the picture. I have not heard him laugh often, and it has always boded ill to somebody" (Vol. II, 121).

Occasionally, Holmes reveals that he has ulterior motives in taking particular cases. For instance, in "The Red-headed League" Holmes helps a man prevent a bank robbery. When the man thanks him, however, Holmes explains that his motives were less altruistic than vengeful: "I have had one or two little scores of my own to settle with Mr. John Clay" (Vol. I, 249). Holmes's ultimate triumph over this man gives him substantial satisfaction, which he rubs in during the apprehension of the villains. He first grabs Clay by the back of the collar and then strikes Clay's wrist with his riding crop, preventing the man from aiming his gun at Holmes. It is rare to see Holmes physically attacking a criminal, so it is all the more noteworthy that he does it in this instance.

Clearly, Holmes bears a grudge for Clay's previous triumph and truly enjoys his revenge.

While it is obvious that the focus of the stories is Holmes's outwitting of the criminals, Holmes also enjoys exposing the failings of the police. Holmes emphasizes his superiority over the police force by pointing out their inability to collate data correctly. In fact, nearly all of the Holmes stories are a result of the police's being less knowledgeable than Holmes and their consequent inability to find or apprehend a criminal. Their lack of skill is the reason for Holmes's very existence as a consulting detective. In the first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson explains to the reader that Holmes answers pleas for help from various sources—the police among them. The police do not employ a detective of private means who can investigate at the length that Holmes can, so they request Holmes's help when they have a case that they believe requires his skill or that will pique his interest.

Holmes explains to Watson that while he values the police for the skills they have, he is fully aware of their limitations: "Gregson is the smartest of the Scotland Yarders,' my friend remarked; 'he and Lestrade are the pick of a bad lot. They are both quick and energetic, but conventional—shockingly so'" (Vol. I, 19). Holmes usually takes a dig at the police when he explains his own profession, as he does in *The Sign of Four*. "I am the last and highest court of appeal in detection. When Gregson, or Lestrade, or Athelney Jones are out of their depths—which, by the way, is their normal state—the matter is laid before me" (Vol. I, 108).

It is in his intense competitiveness that Holmes's flair for the dramatic is most noticeable. He clearly revels in explaining his reasoning well after he has solved the

case. He offers his abductions casually, as if it were commonplace to have his skill and knowledge, but the reader will notice that he times his revelations to astonish his audience. In fact, when he narrates his own tale in "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier," Holmes complains that he has to reveal his thinking before the end of the story: "Alas, that I should have to show my hand so when I tell my own story! It was by concealing such links in the chain that Watson was enabled to produce his meretricious finales" (Vol. II, 497); and he loves the meretricious finale.

In "The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone," Holmes has the opportunity to pit himself against a very clever criminal and to astound Lord Cantlemere, who has hired Holmes to retrieve the Mazarin stone. After placing a dummy of himself in his own living room for Count Silvius to "murder," Holmes then confronts the Count about the diamond. His enjoyment of the contest is obvious: "Holmes clapped his hands with amusement, and then pointed a derisive finger. 'Then you do know. You have admitted it!'" (Vol. II, 510).

Holmes manages to trick the information out of the Count, who admits defeat. The drama of his triumph over the Count, however, is secondary to that of his revelation of the stone to its owner:

"Put your hand in the right-hand pocket of your overcoat."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Come—come, do what I ask."

An instant later the amazed peer was standing, blinking and stammering, with the great yellow stone on his shaking palm.

"What! What! How is this, Mr. Holmes?"



"Too bad, Lord Cantlemere, too bad!" cried Holmes. "My old friend here will tell you that I have an impish habit of practical joking. Also that I can never resist a dramatic situation. I took the liberty—the very great liberty, I admit—of putting the stone into your pocket at the beginning of our interview." (Vol. II, 517-18)

Holmes seems to relish the astonishment of both the criminals he catches and the clients who retain him. The end of nearly every story reveals a brilliant piece of abduction and the solution of a case. In all of these instances, it is clear that Holmes is competing with others and thoroughly enjoying his triumph over them. This leaning toward drama in the revelation of his solutions shows all present that Holmes is the most masculine among them.

## CHAPTER TWO: ACTING MASCULINE: LORD PETER WIMSEY

The fool cannot be a good actor, but a good actor can act the fool. --Sophocles

Lord Peter Death Bredon Wimsey, the detective creation of Dorothy L. Sayers, is the idealized masculine hunter of the post World War I generation. Through various short stories and novels, Wimsey displays formidable intelligence, bravery, and relentless pursuit of his prey, but in a very different fashion from Sherlock Holmes. Where Holmes trumpeted his dominance, Wimsey is apologetic about his. He is dominant without directly forcing others to feel inferior.

Where Sherlock Holmes embodied true masculinity in his generation, Lord Peter understands the role he is supposed to fill and fills it on the surface. In public situations Lord Peter is polite, charming, unemotional, and urbane; in private, Wimsey experiences the emotional repercussions of war and his chosen field of detection.

### Overview of Criticism

Critics who value the Lord Peter Wimsey stories generally analyze the novels in the greatest depth. The short-stories are considered to be well-written formula stories with engaging characters of little depth. Several critics have addressed Wimsey's collection of first editions (Bracht, McFarland) and several have addressed his tendency to hide his true self from public scrutiny (Pitt, Hone, Patterson). The mysteries in which Harriet Vane appear—*Strong Poison*, *Have His Carcase*, *Gaudy Night*, and *Busman's Honeymoon*—are more thoroughly engaged and preferred by most critics as revealing the true depth of the characters and confronting thorny questions.

By far the most critical attention is focused on feminist issues, despite Sayers' adamant claims not to be a feminist. The problems that confront Harriet Vane in *Gaudy*

*Night* deal with prominent issues of contemporary England. Susan Haack lists the questions that confront Harriet: "Why is honesty valuable in scientific and other inquiry? Is suppressing a fact as bad as telling a lie? What is the relation between epistemological and ethical values? Do the obligations of one's job always, or ever, override considerations of personal loyalty?" (10). Nonetheless, Harriet addresses these questions in a women's college, and most critics get sidetracked by secondary characters' struggles with a woman's place in the life of the mind.

Laurel Young deals with the "New Woman" as detective; Harriet as an independent wage-earner solves mysteries in tandem with Lord Peter (39). Ann McClellan speaks to the specific roles available to academic women and the tendency of many to mother—their own or others' children. Marion Frank lauds Sayers' addition of feminism to the mystery genre. Elizabeth A. Trembley displays much the same admiration for Sayers from a feminist perspective.

What is lacking in the critical canon is a focus on Wimsey's masculinity. Nancy-Lou Patterson analyzes his choice of detection in response to his war experience, but she does not directly confront Wimsey's image as a man. I believe that it is through both his war experience and his role as a detective that Wimsey displays the positive masculine characteristics of his generation.

### Masculinity

In *The Changing Fictions of Masculinity*, David Rosen writes that "in each epoch groups of men try to pass on a stable 'masculinity' that can encompass traditional roles, accommodate new experiences, ensure a meaningful contribution to society, and insulate from the shock of change" (xiii). Lord Peter Wimsey fulfills certain traditional

roles: Warrior, noble, protector of society. But he also embodies the disconnect between what men are expected to feel by definition of masculinity and what they actually feel.

Lord Peter is a warrior. As a major in the Army during World War I, Peter is shelled, is buried alive, and suffers a nervous breakdown. His burial and resurrection are cited by Nancy Lou Patterson as the key event in his life and the reason for his choice of career as a detective. Patterson cites the shamanic role of "wounded healer" to describe Wimsey, pointing to his own mental wounds as the reason he seeks to establish a safe society (13). She considers his detective work to be his means of healing himself and believes that it is his resumption of responsibility (this time for society as a whole rather than for individual soldiers under his command) that ultimately creates meaning for his war experience.

Despite his self-healing through the course of the stories, Wimsey did endure horror, and thus he embodies the entire generation of British men who were sent to the war. Society had certain expectations of these men that many of them did not fulfill. As warriors, men were supposed to be brave in the face of the enemy and unwavering in their duty. Those who suffered shell shock had somehow failed the test of masculinity. Both their doctors and their peers felt that men who collapsed emotionally were to be pitied as failures: "Sufferers had no choice but to acknowledge that their reputations as soldiers and men had been dealt a severe blow" (Bourke par. 9).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In her book *Dismembering the Male*, Joanna Bourke considers shell shock extensively, in particular its treatment and relation to malingering in contemporary

The Army doctors sought to cure these men and get them back into battle as quickly as possible. In doing so, they cultivated the idea that *real men* could face battle unflinchingly: "In all instances, occupational training and the inculcation of 'masculinity' were highly recommended. As the medical superintendent at one military hospital in York put it, although the medical officer must show sympathy, the patient 'must be induced to face his illness in a manly way'" (Bourke par. 8).

Wimsey manages to retain his masculine pride by never running from the enemy. He does, however, run from himself. For eighteen months after the war, he sits in a room and refuses to make any decisions at all. He comes to the conclusion that running away does not actually work and takes up his life again; however, he does have horrible dreams for the rest of his life, proving that his experiences did lasting damage to his psyche. These dreams show that although a man might be expected to behave bravely, he was also allowed a certain amount of sensitivity. In fact, in these stories the sensitive and imaginative men like Wimsey suffer the consequences of the brutality of war and the impervious men appear rather less attractive.

Men with the ability to survive the war undamaged are shown to be insensitive in all areas. Robert Fentiman of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* is a vaunted war hero well known for his bravery, but he sneers at unattractive women and at men who cannot hold jobs, such as his brother. With this attitude, he is unattractive both to his more sensitive male peers and to most women. Sayers shows that the Victorian admiration for warriors is valid but that the old warrior ideal is brutalized in the new type views. Many doctors believed that shell shock could be overcome by force of will (107-22).

of warfare. A man sensitive enough to be admirable would necessarily be damaged by the war. And while the code of masculinity partially defines manhood by martial prowess (Connell 189), the Wimsey stories show the emotional damage a man takes by fulfilling his role.

Multiple men in the Wimsey stories suffer from the war. Wimsey himself spends some time after the war in a shaking mess; several of his friends at the Bellona Club have suffered lung damage from mustard gas. Nonetheless, none of the sympathetic men in the stories are shown to have actually deserted. In *The Nine Tailors*, Wimsey encounters a man who had deserted under fire and consequently hid himself, afraid of the repercussions of his actions. Lord Peter declares that if the man were shell shocked, he should have "reported to his unit and applied for sick leave" (*Nine Tailors* 218). So even though Wimsey understands the emotional repercussions of war and even the desire to desert, he upholds the standard of masculinity that one cannot simply run away from one's duty.

Wimsey's generation seems to have a harder time dealing with the demands of masculinity in war than the previous generation did. In *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, Wimsey speaks to several old soldiers who had fought in other and equally horrific wars but who had either not suffered from shell shock or had not allowed it to show. The old warriors complain that the young lack decent standards. Conversely, the men of Wimsey's generation complain that the old don't understand the new type of war. George Fentiman complains to Peter about his grandfather: "The old man—damn it all, I know he was in the Crimea, but he's no idea what a real war's like. He thinks things can go on just as they did half a century ago. I daresay he never did

behave as I do. Anyway, I know he never had to go to his wife for his pocket-money, let alone having the inside gassed out of him" (*Bellona Club* 126).

Both generations embrace the same standard of masculinity—a man should not allow the effects of war to color his social manners. Those men who escaped the war with their nerves intact were considered better soldiers and better men than those who suffered shell shock. Sayers shows that the standard of masculinity was not met by a substantial portion of the male population and that they felt their lack.

However, war was not the only sphere in which men were required to have standards. They were supposed to provide for their families financially.<sup>11</sup> Those who could not hold a job because of their nerves or for any other reason felt shame. George Fentiman in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* cannot hold a job because of shell shock, and his wife has to work to support them. He is embarrassed at being "kept" by his wife and shamed before other men; whenever his wife mentions her job even tangentially, he is stung: "You needn't keep on rubbing it in about your having to go out to work. You don't suppose I *enjoy* it, do you?" (83). In *Gaudy Night*, a man commits suicide because he loses his job and cannot provide for his family.

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<sup>11</sup> Clyde Franklin defines the masculinity of Peter's generation as primarily financial: "Also significant was the fact that the *male as provider* became a dominant characteristic of masculinity. A 'real man' paid his bills on time, took care of his family by purchasing goods and providing for them in the best way possible. Obviously, this meant that work, aggressiveness, providing, competitiveness, and, in essence, 'getting ahead' became integral features of masculinity" (8).

However, men are required to be publicly honorable in spite of these pressures. In several of the stories, men are caught stealing or cheating or murdering and are expected to "do the honorable thing." In this generation, suicide is an honorable and manly way to protect one's family. Despite a man's actual behavior, he must maintain the social mask of honesty so that he and his family can function in society. If he cannot maintain that social mask, he must remove himself as the visible symbol of his failure. When Lord Peter obtains evidence that Dr. Penberthy has murdered a man in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, he suggests that Colonel Marchbanks offer Penberthy his gun. Penberthy clearly agrees that suicide is the honorable course of action, for he shoots himself soon after Wimsey and Colonel Marchbanks leave the room.

In accepting the responsibility for a crime by killing himself, a man could take the shame of his crime with him, leaving his relatives free from his taint to some degree. They would bear the shame of his suicide, but suicide was a lesser social offense than publicly exposed dishonesty. A man known to have been dishonest or to have committed some other offense would be shunned by polite society. His relatives would feel the shame of being cut off from social interaction. However, by committing suicide, a man would remove the physical symbol of his guilt, himself, from society and allow his family to preserve the mask of respectability.

In *Murder Must Advertise* Lord Peter discovers that Mr. Tallboy has murdered his blackmailer and offers the man an alternative to a public trial that would embarrass Tallboy's wife and leave his son open to the hateful things schoolboys might say. Knowing that Tallboy has betrayed a drug ring and the likely consequences, Wimsey



suggests that the man walk home without looking behind him. Tallboy apprehends the fact of his imminent death, shakes Wimsey's hand, and leaves. He is murdered on the way home.

Lord Peter himself is faced with a similar situation. In *Clouds of Witness*, Wimsey suspects his brother Gerald of committing a murder. While his social conscience will not allow Peter to let his brother go free, his need to protect his family from public shame will not permit a trial. If he were to give Gerald the option of suicide, Peter would feel such terrific guilt over being responsible for his brother's death that he would be incapacitated. Happily, Peter exonerates Gerald by finding the real murderer. Nonetheless, he faced the decision of what to do under those circumstances and explains later to Charles Parker that he would have provided the means for Gerald's suicide and then killed himself as well.

In less intense situations, Wimsey's generation defined masculinity in other ways, demanding that a truly masculine man be good at sports, preferably physically difficult sports; here, Wimsey truly excels. In *The Changing Fictions of Masculinity*, David Rosen explains the need for these sports as a definition of masculinity:

In the forty years prior to World War I, men apparently suffered psychic conflict from the softening of gender lines under the influence of urban middle-class domestication and from the concomitant construction of a more rugged, natural, rural masculine identity that became identified with a primitive past and that people felt society had eroded. . . . Rugged games, often identified with primitive, rural, folk and under-class culture,

such as rugby, football, baseball, and cricket, were becoming widespread professionally and in colleges, grade schools, and towns. (181-82)

While Sherlock Holmes had no need to excel at sports to prove his masculinity, Wimsey does because of the cultural changes of his age. Women were pursuing men's careers, entering university, and blurring the distinctions between men's and women's spheres. Men felt a need to define themselves by some strong physical display that was not available to women, such as rugby or cricket.<sup>12</sup>

Many men of Wimsey's generation also saw sport as a means of revealing a man's character. School leaders demanded that boys learn sports in order to form proper character and develop the skills of masculinity that they would need to continue the Empire. In some schools, sports were considered more important than academics. The Reverend J. E. C. Welldon, headmaster of Harrow School from 1881-1895, makes the following statement about the importance of sport:

When the athletic games of English Youth are considered in their reference not to physical energy but to moral worth, it would seem that they possess an even higher value than intellectual studies. For learning, however excellent in itself, does not afford such necessary virtues as promptitude, resource, honour, cooperation and unselfishness; but these are the soul of English games. (qtd. in Horrocks, 149)

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<sup>12</sup> Roger Horrocks provides a detailed link between masculinity and sports (147-169). See also J.A. Mangan and J. Walvin, eds. *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* and J.A. Mangan *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal*.

Thus Lord Peter's facility at sports defines him as an honorable man as well as emphasizing his masculinity.

Wimsey is an outstanding cricketer, having played for Balliol College when he was at Oxford and earned a solid reputation. His excellence at the sport is one of his defining characteristics, for many different characters in the stories link him both to cricket and crime. In *Murder Must Advertise* Wimsey is given the opportunity to display his talents to the ecstasy of the crowd: "'He's a new member of the staff,' said Tallboy, 'he's a public-school man and he said he'd done a good deal of country-house cricket, but I hadn't an idea he could play like that. Great Scott!' He paused to applaud a particularly elegant cut. 'I never saw anything like it'" (*Murder Must Advertise* 191).

Not only does Wimsey play cricket, he is generally athletic, commanding the admiration even of his enemies. Wimsey infiltrates a narcotics ring in one novel by pretending to be a fellow thrill-seeker. To capture the attention of this jaded and drugged group, Wimsey dives off a fountain, an extremely athletic performance which gains him instant acceptance even among those with cause to dislike him:

He caught the edge of the upper basin with his hands, swung for a moment and lifted. Even in that moment, Willis felt a pang of reluctant admiration. It was the easy, unfretted motion of the athlete, a display of muscular strength without jerk or effort. . . . The slim body shot down through the spray, struck the surface with scarcely a splash and slid through the water like a fish. Willis caught his breath. It was perfectly done. It was magnificent. He forgot his furious hatred of the man and applauded with the rest. (*Murder Must Advertise* 64-65)

Among men, Wimsey is a figure of admiration, a warrior and an athlete; among women, Wimsey presents another form of the idealized masculine. He is not only extremely well-mannered but allows women their independence. Again, Wimsey displays the disconnect between the way men are taught to behave and the way a thinking man should behave. In *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, Wimsey speaks to the wife of a murder suspect and encourages her to sit while he makes her some tea:

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bully. One has an ancestral idea that women must be treated like imbeciles in a crisis. Centuries of the 'women and children first' idea, I suppose. Poor devils!"

"Who, the women?"

"Yes. No wonder they sometimes lose their heads. Pushed into corners, told nothing of what's happening and made to sit quiet and do nothing. Strong men would go dotty in the circus. I suppose that's why we've always grabbed the privilege of rushing about and doing the heroic bits."

"That's quite true. Give me the kettle."

"No, no, I'll do that. You sit down and—I mean, sorry, *take* the kettle. Fill it, light the gas, put it on." (258)

Wimsey's willingness to allow women their independence is truly glorious to the women concerned.

In *Gaudy Night*, Harriet Vane, the woman who has been steadily refusing Wimsey's proposals of marriage, deals with a nasty mystery in a women's college and

writes to Wimsey about it. His return letter surprises and confuses her because of his encouragement:

More generously still, he had not only refrained from offers of help and advice which she might have resented; he had deliberately acknowledged that she had the right to run her own risks. "Do be careful of yourself"; "I hate to think of your being exposed to unpleasantness"; "If only I could be there to protect you"; any such phrase would express the normal male reaction. Not one man in ten thousand would say to the woman he loved, or to any woman: "Disagreeableness and danger will not turn you back, and God forbid they should." That was an admission of equality, and she had not expected it of him. If he conceived of marriage along those lines, then the whole problem would have to be reviewed in that new light; but that seemed scarcely possible. To take such a line and stick to it, he would have to be, not a man but a miracle. (215)

Despite its modern attractiveness, this view of Peter is only shared by intellectual women. The disturbed individual who is the author of the mystery in *Gaudy Night* sees Peter's view of equality as weakness and lack of manliness. She embraces the cultural view that men should work to support their wives and families, protecting the women and children, restricting the flow of information to them, and generally dominating them. She sees a man who encourages intellectualism in women to be a traitor to his sex:

You! you dirty traitor! You rotten little white-faced rat! It's men like you that make women like this. You don't know how to do anything but talk. What do you know about life, with your title and your money and your clothes

and motor-cars? You've never done a hand's turn of honest work. You can buy all the women you want. Wives and mothers may rot and die for all you care, while you chatter about duty and honour. (*Gaudy Night* 445)

Despite this woman's opinion, Wimsey continues to hold his principles that women should be allowed their own lives. Fearing that Harriet's interference in the college mystery will encourage an attack on her, Wimsey teaches Harriet how to defend herself rather than urging her to leave the college and drop her investigation. In *Strong Poison*, Wimsey has one woman taught to pick locks so that she can steal a copy of a will and sends another to infiltrate a house to look for that same will.

These latter characters are spinsters past prime marriageable age and would normally be discounted by male society. For instance, Chief Inspector Parker discounts a similar lady's eyewitness of a murder in *Murder Must Advertise*, and Peter makes fun of him for it: "What is it? A witness to the assault, what? Somebody who was on the platform? Somebody you weren't inclined to pay much attention to? You old leg-puller. I can see it in your face. Out with it now—who was it? A woman. A hysterical woman. A middle-aged, hysterical spinster. Am I right?" "Curse you, yes" (248). And by his actions throughout the stories, Peter proves that he does not discount such spinsters.

Lord Peter Wimsey's version of the masculine supports the cultural ideals of the post World War I generation. Men admire him because he is a successful warrior, an honorable man, and a consummate athlete, yet they are aware of his sympathy for those who fail to live up to the ideal standard. Women admire him because he encourages their independence. These were each very important issues, and Wimsey demonstrates that a manly man can support a character that is admirable to both sexes.

## Reflection of Culture

In 1912, the Harland and Wolff yards in Belfast, Ireland, put together the most magnificent ocean-going passenger vessel to that date. It was hailed in newspapers around the world as "unsinkable." However, the *Titanic* hit an iceberg, and all of its built-in safety precautions sank with it to the bottom of the Atlantic; of its 2,220 passengers, only 705 survived. British technology had failed, and failed spectacularly, on the world stage.

In 1914, Archduke Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated, an event often referred to as the opening shot of World War I. Because of her treaties with Belgium, England entered this war in 1914 and continued, losing some 3 million of her citizens, until 1918.<sup>13</sup> War technology of all kinds flourished during this war: The Germans used submarines to torpedo British and American ships; airplanes bombed targets from above, tanks rolled past or over light arms fire, and both sides used poison gas. For the first time in English history, the common man was drafted into the army. Until the Great War, no Englishman was required to fight for his country; professional soldiers, some home-grown and some foreign-bought, fought the wars. However, to keep the Germans from overrunning the battle lines and taking England itself, the country created its first draft. Thus, the common man, who had not been trained as a soldier and might

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<sup>13</sup> According to Funk & Wagnall's *New Encyclopedia*, Great Britain mobilized 8,904,467. Of those, 908,371 died, 2,090,212 were wounded, and 191,652 were taken prisoner or reported missing. The total casualty number came to 3,190,235—35.8 percent of those mobilized.

be uninterested in or actively opposed to war, was forced into uniform and shipped to France to be shelled and gassed.

The warrior mythos so accepted by the public was conclusively shattered by the soldiers returning from the trenches in France. Whereas previous generations of men had been taught that the epitome of masculinity was to be a warrior, those men who fought in the first world war came away with a completely different attitude. Peter Stearns speaks to this difficulty in defining masculinity: "Large numbers of men, along with many women, drew the sensible conclusion that modern war and modern maleness should not mix, and a minority of men in the United States and Europe participated in pacifist organizations. But this of course, while admirable, simply added to the problem of how men were to know they were men, if they could no longer even look forward to war" (160).

In 1917, Medical Officer Charles Myers coined the term "shell shock" to describe the emotional breakdown that occurred in many of these soldiers. By 1918, the British Army reported treating 80,000 cases of it (Bourke 109). At the time, it was thought that shell shock was a direct result of being buried alive, a fairly common situation for men being shelled in trenches (Bourke 115). Interestingly, Wimsey's episode of burial and rescue does not make him question his masculinity. He feels as though he has dealt with his troubles in a "manly way." His mother does not accuse him of a lack of masculinity, either, when she describes his collapse after the war; she attributes his nervous breakdown to a natural reaction to war:

"He doesn't like responsibility, you know," said the Duchess, "and the War and one thing and another was bad for people that way. . . . There were



eighteen months . . . not that I suppose he'll ever tell you about that, at least, if he does, then you'll know he's cured. . . . I don't mean he went out of his mind or anything, and he was always perfectly sweet about it, only he was so dreadfully afraid to go to sleep . . . and he couldn't give an order, not even to the servants, which made it really very miserable for him, poor lamb! . . . I suppose if you've been giving orders for nearly four years to people to go and get blown to pieces it gives you a—what does one call it nowadays!—an inhibition or an exhibition, or something, of nerves. . . ." (353)

Lord Peter encounters several characters in his stories who have had equally hard wars. Some of them have not readjusted so well as Wimsey. In the opening scene of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, one of the club members is found dead in his chair. His grandson is in the club at the time and, upon hearing that his grandfather had been dead some hours, yells: "Take him away! . . . He's been dead two days! So are you! So am I! We're all dead and we never noticed it!" (6). And while several of the older patrons are shocked at the man's outburst, his contemporaries are not:

It is doubtful which occurrence was more disagreeable to the senior members of the Bellona Club—the grotesque death of General Fentiman in their midst or the indecent neurasthenia of his grandson. Only the younger men felt no sense of outrage; they knew too much. Dick Challoner—known to his intimates as Tin-Tummy Challoner, owing to the fact that he had been fitted with a spare part after the battle of the

Somme—took the gasping Fentiman away into the deserted library for a stiffener. (7)

Sherlock Holmes's generation found science to be the great explanation; Lord Peter's generation, as Sayers puts it, "knew too much" (7). They knew that while science produced wonders, it also produced mustard gas.

For Lord Peter's generation, science was not the noble adventure that it had been to Holmes's peers. Besides producing horrors and means of killing people in great numbers, science was becoming incomprehensible to the average citizen. In 1900, German physicist Max Planck introduced the theory of Planck's Constant. Planck's original theory was that "energy is not continuous, but moves instead as separate or discrete units or jumps (quanta). . . . The formula by which a quantum of energy is calculated is  $h=6.6 \times 10^{-27} \text{ erg} \cdot \text{sec}$ " (Greenberg 28-29). This explanation was not wildly informative for the non-physicist, and the average English citizen found himself at a loss to even comprehend the value of such a statement. Thus the common man ceased to respect the scientist as the most masculine of male paradigms. The contemporary reading public found Sherlock Holmes entertaining but outdated.

In 1918, science was also failing to find a cure for the effects of the war on British citizens. Psychoanalysis was a relatively new science, and few doctors understood either it or any other way to deal with shell shock. Many men could not hold jobs because of their mental state after the war and consequently could not provide for their families. Additionally, unemployment was rising rapidly. Britain was forced to introduce unemployment insurance by 1920 to combat the dearth of jobs for returning soldiers and others; by 1921 Britain reported over 2 million people unemployed. By 1932,

registered unemployment would peak at 3.4 million, 17 percent of the population (Perry 202).

One of the effects of unemployment was a feeling among British men that they were losing masculinity. Since men had traditionally been the bread-winners of their families, many men saw an inability in that direction as an attack on their manhood. Some men could not hold jobs because of their war experiences; some found that jobs were too scarce for them to acquire one. Peter Stearns speaks to this problem in *Be a Man!* and suggests that one reaction was organized protest:

Male-dominated protest was in many ways a celebration of an enhanced equation between manhood and independence. . . . Men's freedom was in many ways increasingly circumscribed, by the growing need to work for others rather than oneself, by the ever more bureaucratic organization of the most common forms of work. Yet the proclamation of freedom as a vital facet of manhood was an important fact in its own right. (101)

Lord Peter Wimsey, a very wealthy man, is not required to work for his money and consequently does not feel male role stress in his ability to provide for himself and his dependents. However, in *Murder Must Advertise* Lord Peter joins the staff of an advertising agency and discovers that the average British citizen is chronically short of cash. While not feeling an attack on his own masculinity, Wimsey becomes aware of the attack that other men feel.

The novel, published in 1933, deals with a murder of a blackmailer. The victim had been blackmailing another man in the office, Tallboy, who had been selling information to a drug ring. Tallboy needed money to support his family and could not

earn enough in advertising to do so. However, because of the state of unemployment in Britain at the time, he could not quit his job to find a better situation. Tallboy's secret is discovered by Victor Dean, who threatens to go to the owners and have Tallboy fired unless he pays blackmail. Tallboy cannot afford either one, so he murders Dean. He explains the desperation of his circumstances to Wimsey at the end of the novel:

You don't know, Bredon—Wimsey—you don't know what it means to be stuck for money. They don't pay any too well at Pym's, and there are heaps of fellows who want to get out and find something better, but they daren't. Pym's is safe—they're kind and decent, and they don't sack you if they can help it—but you live up to your income and you simply daren't cut loose. The competition is too keen, and you marry and start paying for your house and furniture, and you must keep up the installments, and you can't collect the capital to sit round for a month or two while you look for a new job. You've got to keep going, and it breaks your heart and takes all the stuffing out of you. (*Murder Must Advertise* 310)

While the advertising agency serves as a backdrop for the mystery story, it is nonetheless a revealing place. The employees are all short of cash but pleased to have a job at all. There are office tensions between those who have gone to schools such as Oxford and Cambridge and those who have been educated in less exalted establishments.

The Wimsey stories also show a cultural awareness of the hostility many felt for employed women. Because unemployment was so high, many British citizens felt that any employed woman was taking a job that rightfully belonged to a man. In *Gaudy*

*Night*, one woman complains to a roomful of female dons that academic women are stealing men's jobs: "A woman's job is to look after her husband and children. . . . Don't you know what you're doing? I've heard you sit round sniveling about unemployment—but it's you, it's women like you who take the work away from the men and break their hearts and lives" (443).

While Lord Peter has no need to hold a job himself, he nonetheless understands the financial climate both of his own country and that of the rest of Europe. As a truly masculine character, Peter has a clear understanding of Britain's place in the world economy.<sup>14</sup> He is also aware of the political climate on the Continent. As early as 1923, there were rumblings of the war to come. In 1923 Adolf Hitler, leading the Nazi party, seized Munich's city government, was arrested, and spent the next five years in prison. While there, he began to write *Mein Kampf*, which outlines the philosophy of the Nazi party, and published it in 1925 and 1926.<sup>15</sup> Much of Hitler's anti-Semitism was based on Jewish financial liquidity in the face of the inflation which resulted from the

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<sup>14</sup> Sociologists Joseph and Elizabeth Pleck list several male-valued traits in *The American Man*. They trace the development of the masculine role through Western culture, citing many characteristics typical of the male role, including a familiarity with politics and a knowledge of the world.

<sup>15</sup> The original title of *Mein Kampf* (or My Struggle) was *Four and a Half Years of Struggle Against Lies, Stupidity, and Cowardice*. The publisher decided to shorten it. In the book, Hitler outlines his anti-Semitic feelings, stating that the world would have been better off had the Jews been held under the poison gas of WWI, and his plans for re-arming Germany.

previous war. As such, Hitler's treatise was more popular than expected and swelled the ranks of the Nazi party. While Hitler was writing and publishing *Mein Kampf*, France was building the Maginot Line as a barrier against further German aggression.

In Italy, the theories of Fascism became very popular, and Benito Mussolini made it the state party in 1926. In 1928, the party restricted voting rights, disallowing suffrage to two-thirds of the voting public, including all women. Non-Fascist European nations viewed the growing popularity of Fascism with great unease. In 1928, the fear of upcoming war had reached many nations. The Kellogg-Briand Pact was forged, in which sixty-two nations officially renounced war as a means of conflict resolution.<sup>16</sup> World War II would begin eleven years later.

Lord Peter is not only cognizant of but strongly affected by the war climate in Europe. In *Gaudy Night*, published in 1936, Peter is called away to Europe for political reasons just when he is wanted to solve a mystery. Harriet Vane, detective novelist and Wimsey's love, speaks to him upon his return:

"You only look as though you hadn't slept for weeks."

"I'm not sure that I have, now you mention it. I thought—at one point we all thought—something might be going to happen. All the old, filthy uproar. I got as far as saying to Bunter one night: 'It's coming; it's here; back to the Army again, sergeant.' . . . But in the end, you know, it made a noise like a hoop and rolled away—for the moment." (278)

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<sup>16</sup> Among the nations to subscribe to the Kellogg-Briand Pact were Great Britain, the U.S., Japan, and Italy. For the actual text of the Pact and cultural reactions to it, see Stephen J. Kneeshaw.

Peter's awareness of the political climate in Europe speaks to the idealized masculinity of his character. In his generation, men held most political positions, and men were expected to have a certain knowledge of world events. Women could confine their interests to hearth and home without social penalty, but men still needed to possess a basic understanding of the political climate. Peter goes far beyond a simple understanding, being sent by the Foreign Office to deal with sensitive political issues in Italy, a Fascist country.

From 1935 until 1939, many countries in Europe and Asia increased aggression, moving the general status of the world from peace to war by increasing armament and invading each other. In Germany, the Nuremberg laws made anti-Semitism into law; and Hitler began to publicly re-arm, creating the Luftwaffe in direct violation of the Treaty of Versailles. In Ireland, riots against Catholics in Belfast provoked violent retaliation. Italy invaded Ethiopia. Soon after the publication of *Gaudy Night*, Franco's Fascist party in Spain attacked the Marxist left and began the Spanish Civil War. Germany sent help to Franco in 1937, demolishing the Spanish city of Guernica.<sup>17</sup> Japan invaded China. Italy withdrew from the League of Nations to join with Germany and Japan in an Axis alliance.<sup>18</sup> In 1939, Germany invaded Austria and began World War II. Lord Peter's belief that war was imminent was certainly correct.

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<sup>17</sup> In response to the slaughter in that city, Pablo Picasso painted his cubist masterpiece *Guernica*, which drew attention to the situation from the Western world.

<sup>18</sup> For the actual text of the pact, see "Three Power Pact Between Germany, Italy, and Japan." *The Avalon Project at Yale Law School*. 2006.

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/wwii/triparti.htm>.

## Personification of Empire

The British Empire began to destabilize in the early 1900s. Countries that had once been ruled by Britain began to break away and seek independence. In 1914, as Britain was funneling troops into France, Mohandas Gandhi began his non-violent campaign against British rule in India. In 1921, after much parliamentary debate, an Irish Free State was declared in Southern Ireland although six counties in the north remained part of the United Kingdom. In 1922, Egypt gained partial independence and full independence in 1936.

Lord Peter Wimsey's generation had a very different view of Empire than had Sherlock Holmes's generation. Where Holmes's society saw exploration as a glorious adventure requiring great bravery, Wimsey's society saw the price of possession of the Empire's acquired territories. India had mutinied once and might do so again, with a corresponding slaughter of soldiers and their families. Certainly it had to be defended from acquisitive neighbors and governed properly, which required some number of British officers to live in what they viewed as a "human zoo" populated by foreigners full of superstitious nonsense (Hinduism) who might turn on them at any moment (Kitzan 26). The West Indies and the South Sea islands both failed as productive colonies, but since they were all established on the British model, it was difficult for the British public at home to see how the "principles of justice" could have gone so wrong (Kitzan 31).

Nonetheless, it was obvious to the British public that the colonies had failed, and many of the reasons were failures of masculinity. Where Victorian adventures had featured brave explorers full of masculine virtues such as intrepidity and calmness in the face of danger, the new fiction of the Empire revealed that men lacked these laudable



traits and were often merely greedy. These later adventure tales were mostly a pursuit of treasure of various kinds. From a great Victorian novel such as Herbert Strang's *Samba*, described by one critic as a noble story: "A young man, at seventeen just old enough so that his exploits might be credible, with a few faithful companions, fights successfully against enormous odds, and by courage, steadfastness, and resourcefulness, wins through" (Kitzan 114), the public read Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in which the Empire (even though it is not the British Empire) has no noble goals to speak of and its protagonist watches a brilliant man go mad and fights not to do so himself.

Wimsey represents this decline in Empire by being a member of the declining nobility. Where once nobles had total control through feudalism, the role of government had so changed by 1911 that even the House of Lords in Parliament held no practical power.<sup>19</sup> Thus nobles had a family name that presumed good blood, but what they did not have was the kind of control over their former empires that previous generations had.

By World War I, the British nobility, like the British Empire, was declining but not defunct. It still retained the respect of the common man, quite a bit of wealth, and enormous social power. However, nobles had begun to lose power to directly affect the

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<sup>19</sup> The Parliament Act of 1911 significantly reduced the power of the House of Lords: "(a) The House of Lord's power to reject money bills sent to them from the House of Commons was ended. (b) Lords could reject other legislation but not indefinitely. In practice, if the Commons persisted, the Lords lost the power to delay legislation for more than two years" (Evans 134).

government of the realm. In the Wimsey stories, Peter represents this state of affairs by influencing the police but being unable to arrest criminals directly. Wimsey is still more powerful in certain arenas than Chief Inspector Charles Parker of Scotland Yard, but he is not an officer of the law himself and thus has no lawful authority. Nonetheless, he performs many of the same functions of protecting society, and he lives up to the standards set by nobles of previous generations.

At the time that Sayers wrote the Wimsey stories, the British public wanted their nobility to be something more than decorative. Sayers has several of her characters declare this fact. Harriet Vane muses upon this trend after having spoken to several undergraduates: "The fashion for psychological analysis had, she decided, rather gone out since her day; she was instinctively aware that a yearning for action and the concrete was taking its place. The pre-War solemnity and the post-War exhaustion were both gone; the desire now was for an energetic doing of something definite, though the definitions differed" (*Gaudy Night* 162).

One Oxford don pesters Harriet about Wimsey's occupation: "But what I should like to know . . . is whether this dilettante gentleman does anything. . . ." (*Gaudy Night* 32). And indeed he does. He detects—for a hobby or for the protection of his society, whichever the reader finds more palatable. As such, Peter performs the actual function of his class. In feudal times, he would have been responsible for his people's lives; and since he is the son of a duke, he would be in charge of a great many people. He feels a great sense of social responsibility; for instance, he allows himself to be "pushed out" by the Foreign Office when they need him to placate someone.

As a symbol of the British Empire, Peter exhibits the decline of true power abroad and the inner turmoil of self-government. Peter hasn't the authority to make policy changes in the government, army, or church—either at home or abroad—as a man in his position would have in earlier centuries. Just as the British Empire was losing governmental control of its various colonies while retaining a large income from the property, so Peter is wealthy without having to govern anyone.

In Holmes's generation, the British Empire was based on the presumption that it brought logic and civilization to those they believed to be savages. Reciprocally, Holmes himself is a higher authority than Scotland Yard because of his intelligence; he brings law to the uncivilized, even in London. And just as the post World War I United Kingdom retained influence in world policy without having any ability to demand, so Wimsey is valued by Scotland Yard for his opinions but not sought as a final authority.

In this climate, the public's expectation of masculinity had declined. Many still valued the qualities of Holmesian masculinity—"observation, rationalism, factuality, logic, comradeship, daring and pluck"—but they doubted that the contemporary male, even fictional, retained very many of these qualities (Kestner 2).

### Social Position

Lord Peter Wimsey is the second son of the sixth duke of Denver and the brother of the seventh duke. He has outstanding social position; in fact, he could scarcely go higher without becoming royal. However, the nobility were often thought useless by the general citizens of Lord Peter's generation. They no longer ran the government, nor did they employ any significant number of British citizens on their land. In his character Lord Peter answers a question that plagued his class: Are the nobility truly obsolete?

Peter is a member of an aristocracy with deep roots in the subconscious of the reading public. From the earliest days, the nobility had possessed power over others through their ownership of land. Property owners had a certain dominance over the less privileged which allowed them the power to shape others' lives. As such, they were early symbols of masculine power; the more land a man had, the more masculine he was because of the power that land ownership gave him (Stearns 27-29). Medieval cultures demanded that these men be warriors as well, firmly connecting the idea of power and wealth with aristocracy in the minds of the public. In the post-industrial age, many still connected the "real" aristocracy to landed power rather than to factory ownership, and this perception equated the aristocracy with an older view of masculinity—one of honor as well as strength (Stearns 114).

Wimsey finds his social position extremely useful. Because he is who he is, he can have his name in the newspapers any time he desires. The press follow Peter with slavish devotion and even listen to his directions occasionally. Salcombe Hardy, a London reporter, asks Peter's opinion of trials going forward (*Strong Poison*) and follows Bunter, Peter's manservant, trying to discover Peter and Harriet's honeymoon location (*Busman's Honeymoon*). Peter is news because of his social position.

As a man easily recognizable by the press, Wimsey can use his news value to further his investigations. In *Murder Must Advertise*, he establishes his under-cover identity as Death Bredon<sup>20</sup> by having Lord Peter Wimsey seen publicly and remarked upon while Bredon is being detained by the police:

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<sup>20</sup> Wimsey's full name is Peter Death Bredon Wimsey. He says that most men cursed with the name Death say it to rhyme with *heath* rather than with *breath*.

At 1 o'clock Miss Meteyard went out to lunch, and read in the *Evening Banner* that Mr. Death Bredon had appeared before the magistrates at 10 a.m. on the murder charge, and had reserved his defence. At 10.30, Lord Peter Wimsey (picturesquely described as "the second protagonist in this drama of dope and death") had, while riding in the Row, narrowly escaped injury, owing to his horse's having been startled by a back-fire from a racing car; the animal had bolted and only Lord Peter's consummate horsemanship had averted a nasty accident. There was a photograph of Mr. Bredon entering the court at Bow Street in a dark lounge suit and soft hat; there was also a photograph of Lord Peter Wimsey returning from his ride in neat breeches and boots and a bowler; there was, needless to say, no photograph of the metamorphosis of the one gentleman into another, behind the drawn blinds of a Daimler saloon while traversing the quiet squares north of Oxford Street. (*Murder Must Advertise* 301)

Peter also uses his social position to contact people to whom men of less exalted rank had no access. For instance, Peter calls the Archbishop of Canterbury in *The Nine Tailors* to expedite a wedding, and by doing so he obtains information from the groom that clears the groom of murder.

Yet another use of his rank is the tendency of the general public to confide in Peter because he is a lord. There is an instinctive trust in the British public that their lords are fair and just men. In *Busman's Honeymoon* a constable is involved with a blackmailer, and his superior discovers this information when he, the constable, and Peter are together. Peter decides to leave the room so that the detective can reprimand

his constable without an outside witness, but the constable, Joe Sellon, asks Peter to stay: "Peter glanced at the Superintendent, saw that he, too, recognized the appeal to an authority older than his own, and sat down on the edge of the table" (163-64).

Sellon certainly appeals to Peter as a just and fair arbiter, but the Superintendent also values the noble class for their integrity. He states it himself: "Force Peter's sort to the wall, and they will tell the truth" (*Busman's Honeymoon* 167). The Reverend Goodacre has a similar view of nobles. When a man questions Peter's honesty, the Reverend replies: "You had better keep a civil tongue in your head. Lord Peter Wimsey has given you his personal assurance that we do not know where to find Mr. Noakes. You do not suppose that his lordship would tell you an untruth" (*Busman's Honeymoon* 98). Mr. Goodacre does not even phrase his sentence as a question; it is punctuated as a statement of fact. Peter here is associated with an older view of masculinity, one in which an aristocrat's honesty was taken for granted. As a symbol of valuable masculinity, Lord Peter is expected to be honest even if his honesty hurts him.

#### Justice v. Law

Although he solves more mundane mysteries, Lord Peter Wimsey also solves murders, bringing the culprits to the law to be hanged. In doing so, he causes the deaths of fellow human beings. Although he does not approve of the death penalty, he approves still less of murder. In an academic discussion with the fellows of Shrewsbury College, Peter explains: "The execution of the guilty is unpleasant—but not nearly so disturbing as the slaughter of the innocents" (*Gaudy Night* 334). He realizes as well that his own detection occasionally creates havoc and says so to the fellows of the college in describing one murder he solved. In that case, Peter's investigation prompted the

murderer to try to cover her tracks by murdering two people, attacking three others, and committing suicide. Had Peter not meddled in the case, only one person would have died instead of four.

After much arguing of principles back and forth, Peter explains that his primary interest is in getting to the truth of the case. The intellectual discussion leads all present to declaring their respective principles and explaining which principles should be allowed to stand even when their result is violence. Peter has already thought through this dilemma and is clearly comfortable with his own answer: "Establish the facts, no matter what comes of it" (*Gaudy Night* 336). Wimsey indeed follows his expressed principle of establishing facts no matter what comes of it: he regularly puts his own life in danger in his quest for factual information.

Here again Peter is a symbol of true masculinity. The *real man* is expected to value the truth, no matter its consequences to himself, because with power comes responsibility. One mark of the truly masculine person is his embracing of responsibility. Additionally, as part of the aristocracy, Peter was sent to the best schools where he learned the upper echelon view of fair play. To his peers, Wimsey is the epitome of true masculinity, doing his best to win while giving the appearance of indifference to the outcome (McGregor 23).

In spite of limited public admiration, Peter does not always like the results of his actions. During the course of *Busman's Honeymoon*, Wimsey discovers that the murderer is Frank Crutchley, lays his information out before the police, and then hires a lawyer for Crutchley's defense. The facts of the case are clear, and Crutchley is condemned to hang. Peter asks Crutchley's forgiveness, an action that he always takes

with murderers convicted on his evidence, and he is profoundly disturbed when he does not get it. While Wimsey most certainly does not want the emotional responsibility of condemning a man to death, he holds to his principles as the only right thing to do.

Peter does not blindly support the law. His greatest desire is to establish the facts, whatever the consequences—either to him or others. Occasionally the search for facts requires breaking the law. Once, Peter has an employee taught to pick locks so that she can illegally obtain a copy of a will. Her efforts result in the freeing of an innocent person and the arrest of the real murderer.

Not even the law, in the person of Chief Inspector Parker, always supports the law in these stories. In *Murder Must Advertise*, Peter and the chief inspector are given a choice of leads to follow, one that seems to lead to the murderer and another that seems to lead to the head of a dope ring. Both trails lead clearly to criminals. However, if Parker pursues one lead, he is likely to allow the other criminal to go free. By law, murder is a worse crime than selling drugs, but when Wimsey asks Parker if he'd rather catch the murderer or the head of the dope ring, Parker's response is unwavering: "Dope-runners are murderers, fifty times over. They slay hundreds of people, soul and body, besides indirectly causing all sorts of crime among the victims. Compared with that, slugging one inconsiderable pip-squeak over the head is almost meritorious" (*Murder Must Advertise* 228).

Wimsey's principle is to establish facts and bring them before the law. He does not blindly support law as such nor even justice, which he feels unqualified to mete out, but fact. Wimsey is not even usually pleased with the consequences of his actions but holds to his principle nonetheless. He does not mete out justice with his own hands as



Holmes did. Where Holmes was confident in his ability to discern the crime and motivations of the criminal and equally confident in his assessment of correct punishment, Wimsey does not put himself in the position of sole judge of anyone's actions. He turns the responsibility for the consequences over to the justice system; he merely provides facts for their review. Nonetheless, Lord Peter clearly feels a masculine responsibility for his fractured society that is either the result of his war experiences or his class; he cannot allow criminals to harm others when he has the means to prevent them.

### Brotherhood

Peter had money and Freddie understood money; that must be the common interest and bond of mutual confidence that explained their otherwise inexplicable friendship. She [Harriet Vane] admired the strange nexus of interest that unites the male half of mankind into a close honeycomb of cells, each touching the other on one side only, and yet constituting a tough and closely adhering fabric. (*Gaudy Night* 218)

In this statement Harriet Vane describes the relationships of the male sex in these stories. Lord Peter has a vast acquaintance, many of whom do not know each other. He has friends in the peerage with whom he rides and dines; he has friends in the police with whom he detects; and he has a variety of unsavory contacts whom he uses to advance his cases. Very few of these relationships include strong emotional attachment.

Detective-Inspector Charles Parker of New Scotland Yard is described as Lord Peter's "most intimate—in some ways his only intimate friend" (*Bellona Club* 106-107).

The two share detective cases, each coming at the case from a different angle. Lord Peter has flashes of brilliance and quick insight; Parker does the tedious work and is extremely careful of details. They have almost opposite social lives—Peter preferring first editions and fine wines, Parker enjoying Evangelical theology. However, Parker "was the one person who was never irritated by Wimsey's mannerisms, and Wimsey repaid him with a genuine affection foreign to his usually detached nature" (107).

Their association is cordial throughout the stories, but in *Strong Poison* Lord Peter suggests a family tie. Parker had been taking Lady Mary, Peter's sister, out to dinner on a regular basis and had fallen in love. Despite his feelings, Parker had done nothing else because of their respective states of wealth and social position. Lord Peter decides to push the relationship along and spends several paragraphs explaining to Parker that he should propose marriage. In the usual way of male friendships in this era, Peter does this by making fun of Parker: "'For the last five years or so,' said Wimsey, 'you have been looking like a demented sheep at my sister and starting like a rabbit whenever her name is mentioned. What do you mean by it? It is not ornamental. It is not exhilarating'" (149).

When Parker finally realizes that Peter is serious, he is overjoyed. Peter's reaction is typical of British masculinity: "'Now don't go off the deep end,' said Wimsey, 'it's wasted on me. Save it for Mary. I've done my brotherly duty and there's an end of it. Calm yourself. Return to your reports'" (*Strong Poison* 149-51). This conversation is quite typical of the level of acceptable affection in a male-to-male relationship. Peter invites his best friend into his family and then cuts off any expression of emotion. In fact, any show of affection or real approval from one man to another is quickly cut off in

these stories. Chief-Inspector Parker dares to admire Wimsey in *Murder Must Advertise* and thoroughly embarrasses himself: "'You have a certain decency of your own, Peter,' replied Parker, 'which I like better, because it is not negative.'" Having given voice to this atrocious outburst of sentiment, he became extremely red in the face, and hastened to cover up his lapse from good taste" (229).

While Chief-Inspector Parker is no doubt Peter's closest friend, Peter is still part of the honeycomb of brotherhood. He touches Parker on the job front and the Honourable Freddie Arbuthnot on the financial and social side, but he also connects with men of a much lower social class. For instance, in *Strong Poison*, the reader meets Bill, a former safebreaker turned Christian who helps Peter in the cause of righteousness. Bill teaches Wimsey to pick locks and open most kinds of safes, skills that Peter uses throughout the stories. Wimsey even invites Bill to his wedding, causing Peter's sister-in-law, the Duchess of Denver, severe embarrassment.

Lord Peter even retains the friendship, or at least loyalty, of men he has not seen in years. Padgett, the lodge keeper of Shrewsbury College, was a corporal under Peter during the war. Peter encounters the man at Shrewsbury and reminisces for several minutes. After Peter leaves, Padgett explains to Harriet Vane that Lord Peter had disciplined him and another man during the war. Padgett disliked the other man, Huggins: "Well, this bloke thinks 'e's goin' to be funny, see—and 'e starts callin' the major Little Percy, and usin' opprobrious epithets— . . . Well, anyway, the end of it was, we 'ad a lovely scrap, all round the 'ouses" (*Gaudy Night* 351).

Wimsey sees the results of this fight, the two looking like "a pair o' family portraits" and asserts his authority. Padgett recounts the story for Harriet Vane, who

finds the tale very masculine and consequently confusing. After Padgett and Huggins fought, Peter asked them to explain their bruises. They say that they tripped over a bucket and trod on a mop. Peter has the two mop for three hours to "learn 'em to 'andle these dangerous implements." Harriet's reaction to the story is typically feminine: "Harriet expressed due appreciation of this anecdote, which was delivered with a great deal of gusto, and took leave of Padgett. For some reason, this affair of a mop and a bucket seemed to have made Padgett Peter's slave for life. Men were very odd" (351-52).

The primary thing that Harriet fails to understand is that Peter exerted his authority while protecting Padgett, Huggins, and himself from a failure of masculinity. The unspoken code demands that authority figures such as officers be good leaders, brave men, and intelligent authority. Had Peter overheard Huggins' remarks about himself, he would have been required to uphold his own masculinity in a public venue. By disciplining the men for inability to control mops and buckets, Peter demonstrates that he is intelligent enough to know what really happened and that he can exert his authority correctly. He therefore takes care of the problem of disrespect in the ranks without exposing anyone to public shame. Peter's reward is the undying loyalty of his men.

### Emotional Life

Lord Peter's emotional life most clearly demonstrates masculine role stress. As a man of his generation, Peter is not allowed overt expressions of emotion in public. He must be well-controlled at all times, even among his closest friends. He invites his best friend into his family, but does so lightly and with humor. When he falls in love, he

cannot even communicate the depth of his feelings to Parker but falls back on farce. The two men are discussing a murder trial that they have both been watching, and Peter defends the accused, Harriet Vane, the woman Peter will eventually marry, to Parker rather too hotly for Parker's taste:

"What eloquence!" said Parker, unimpressed. "Anybody would think you'd gone goopy over the girl."

"That's a damned unfriendly way to talk," said Wimsey, bitterly. "When you went off the deep end about my sister, I may have been unsympathetic—I daresay I was—but I swear I didn't dance on your tenderest feelings and call your man's devotion 'going goopy over a girl.' I don't know where you pick up such expressions, as the clergyman's wife said to the parrot. 'Goopy,' indeed! I never heard anything so vulgar."

*(Strong Poison 50)*

Parker reacts to these statements with sympathy and concern and treats Harriet's name with respect thenceforward. It is telling that Parker's reaction is not to merely laugh at Wimsey's phrasing but to acknowledge Peter's actual depth of feeling and act accordingly.

Peter certainly cannot explain to others the pain he feels in catching criminals. He tells the world that he catches criminals for fun and to satisfy his curiosity. He tells the tutors of Shrewsbury College that his aim is to get at the facts, no matter what comes of it. But what does come of it is emotional pain for Wimsey, and it is clear that satisfying his own curiosity and even protecting his society do not adequately compensate him for the emotional damage he takes in consequence. David Rosen

explains this state as a common one among men: "Heroes, and men in general, rarely attain rewards of glory or of hoped-for transcendent self-realization sufficient to compensate their pain" (219).

The reader does not see the emotional consequences of Peter's actions until he is married to Harriet. In *Busman's Honeymoon*, Peter solves a murder, and the criminal is condemned to hang. On the night preceding the hanging, Peter seems to suffer greatly because it is by his action that a man will die. Again, the price of true masculinity in Peter's generation is responsibility, and Peter pays for his. He paces the room, talking to Harriet and waiting for eight o'clock, when the hanging is set to take place:

"They hate executions, you know. It upsets the other prisoners. They bang on the doors and make nuisances of themselves. Everybody's nervous. . . . Caged like beasts, separately. . . . That's the hell of it . . . we're all in separate cells. . . . I can't get out, said the starling. . . . If one could only get out for one moment, or go to sleep, or stop thinking. . . . Oh, damn that cursed clock! . . . Harriet, for God's sake, hold on to me . . . get me out of this . . . break down the door. . . ."

"Hush, dearest. I'm here. We'll see it out together."

Through the eastern side of the casement, the sky grew pale with the forerunners of the dawn.

"Don't let me go."

. . .

The light grew stronger as they waited.

Quite suddenly, he said, "Oh, damn!" and began to cry—in an awkward, unpractised way at first, and then more easily. So she held him, crouched at her knees, against her breast, huddling his head in her arms that he might not hear eight o'clock strike. (*Busman's Honeymoon* 369)

The reader is here shown that a truly masculine man can cry in the presence of his wife without social penalty. While he is still unable to cry in public or to allow even his closest male friends to know that he has strong emotions, there is one place where the married man can give vent to his emotions without a loss of masculinity. Harriet, in fact, values him more highly for being able to share his emotions with her.

### Competition

Lord Peter Wimsey can win at most masculine contests. He is a titled peer; he is extremely wealthy; he has been to the best schools; he is extremely intelligent; he has survived the war; he is naturally athletic; he drives a twelve-cylinder Daimler far too fast; and women fall at his feet. Wimsey's one difficulty is in convincing the woman he loves to marry him, but after five years of wooing, he eventually accomplishes that, too.

The reader only sees Lord Peter feeling insecure about himself in one instance. In the course of wooing Harriet Vane, Lord Peter visits her in Oxford. Since he has seen her last, Harriet has inadvertently picked up an ardent admirer, an undergraduate named Reggie Pomfret. While investigating at Shrewsbury College, Harriet has come into repeated contact with Reggie, who falls desperately in love and asks Harriet to marry him. Upon being told no, Reggie goes off and drowns his sorrows in alcohol.

When Lord Peter and Harriet are buying something in an Oxford shop, Reggie spies them and decides to confront them, making a row in the shop. Wimsey sends him a note later on to explain his own position, and he discusses this note with Harriet:

"Shall I offer him the choice of swords or pistols on Port Meadow at daybreak?"

"I think it's time you grew up."

"Is it?" said Peter, addressing the envelope. "I've never challenged anybody. I've been challenged three times and fought twice; the third time the police butted in. I'm afraid that was because my opponent didn't fancy my choice of weapon. . . . Thanks, Bunter. . . . A bullet, you see, may go anywhere, but steel's almost bound to go somewhere."

"Peter," said Harriet, looking gravely at him. "I believe you're showing off."

"I believe I am," said he, setting the heavy ring accurately down upon the wax. "Every cock will crow upon his own dunghill." His grin was half petulant, half deprecating. "I hate being loomed over by gigantic undergraduates and made to feel my age." (*Gaudy Night* 388-89)

It is interesting that Wimsey speaks of dueling when he feels threatened. He is invoking the warrior code of settling disputes with violence, a physical confrontation with a definite winner. And he tells Harriet, the object of the quarrel and evidently the prize for the winner, that he is skilled in this type of competition. It seems important to him that Harriet know he is brave enough to have dueled and that he is skilled enough to



have won. He believes on some level that she will be impressed, and evidently he is right, for she accuses him of showing off rather than of stupidity.

Lord Peter thus shows the reader, and Harriet, that he is a warrior and capable of protection. He is a sensitive, articulate, and self-deprecating warrior, but a warrior nonetheless. Lord Peter shows the reader what society wanted in a man of the post World War I generation. He is useful to society; he catches criminals and supports his government abroad. He is empowering to women. He is highly principled, pursuing facts even when the emotional consequences to himself are severe. He is a true warrior, who yet understands that war's brutality harms all those who participate in it.

### CHAPTER THREE: LOOKING MASCULINE: MIKE HAMMER

I never agree with Communists or any other kind of kept men. --Mencken

In the wake of WWII and the invention of nuclear warfare, the problems facing Western society became more frightening to the public. Citizens feared not only their men being sent off to war but also their non-combatant families being destroyed by nuclear weapons. Into this climate of fear, Mickey Spillane introduced Mike Hammer, a war veteran turned private detective whose personal code of honor demanded justice in the form of an eye for an eye.

By 1945 the detective hero was well established in the minds of the reading public. The personification of the masculine ideal had mastered science as a tool of the hunt with Sherlock Holmes and justified his existence and value to society in Lord Peter Wimsey. After WWII, the hunter faced another type of dilemma. This hunter had to find the evil hiding under the façade of good before he could deal with it. Mike Hammer is willing to look for evil in places that the sheltered public will not—in seedy bars, in back alleys, in dope dens, and under skirts.

#### Overview of Criticism

Lord Peter Wimsey falls into a category known as the Golden Age of detective fiction when most crime-solving is a game, but detective stories shifted radically with the introduction of characters like Mike Hammer, who display almost no reasoning process at all (Reilly 290). Tough-guy stories became popular during the early 1920s and 1930s, and a corresponding *tough-guy* style of writing emerged. To men returning from WWI, life did not fall into the neat and expected pattern that their fathers had foreseen. This new attitude was highlighted in literature by Hemingway, Hammett, Cain, and

McCoy, creating a new genre with "a stark, forceful, and vividly concrete diction" (Geherin 273).

As the genre progressed through the 1940s and 1950s, paperback novels and pulp magazines featured more and more lurid stories of gun-toting private detectives. These detectives showed a particular kind of masculinity: "As the name suggests, the hard-boiled male was characterized by a tough, shell-like exterior, a prophylactic toughness that was organized around the rigorous suppression of affect and was mirrored by his detached, laconic utterances and his instrumentalized, seemingly amoral actions" (Breu 1). Even among these hard-boiled masculinities, one character emerged more forcefully than the others.

Mickey Spillane's best known character, Mike Hammer, has irritated critics since *I, the Jury* came out in 1947. The next five books came out in spurts until 1952 when Spillane took a break from his famous character for the next twelve years. At the date of publication, the reviews of these books held a similar theme: The novels were too explicit; the sex and violence were too well described and too often in the same scene. Hammer and Spillane were curiously intermingled, and both were vilified as deviants.<sup>21</sup> The next generation of critics ignored Spillane as a pulp fiction writer; the literary establishment had little use for such trash. Only in the last ten years has any serious attention been focused on Spillane, and most of it concerns the sex and violence of the novels. There are still few who see any redeeming literary quality in the novels other

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<sup>21</sup> It is interesting that first-person narration seems to link Mickey Spillane, a quiet family man and writer who converted to Jehovah's Witness in 1951 (Collins 7) and Mike Hammer, survivor of the war in the Pacific and gun-toting avenger, quite so strongly.

than that of being the first of their kind.<sup>22</sup> Jesse Berrett states that "Mickey Spillane remains unquestionably the most critically savaged writer in the history of the form" (2).

Even those who found the novels significant for being the first of their kind considered that the genre of detective fiction had undergone a "perversion" and ended up in "the hands of the unthinking and inept" (Grella 425). Bethany Gordon speaks to the aspects of masculinity addressed in these novels, pointing to the descriptions of secondary characters which "serve to construct a mirror against which a hyper-masculine identity appears" (76). The only other aspect of these novels that critics address is the audience at which Spillane aimed. Despite "scant evidence," Erin Smith claims that these readers "were widely held to be socially and economically marginal. They were working-class, young, poorly educated, and often immigrants" (12). As such, most of them were interested in a hard masculinity.

I propose that Mike Hammer displays a masculinity of increasing isolation. While Sherlock Holmes prided himself on his mental abilities and enjoyed competition, he still had a meaningful friendship with Watson and contributed to society without feeling rejected by it. Lord Peter Wimsey also felt partially isolated by his profession, but he shared it with his brother-in-law Charles Parker and was socially adept. Mike Hammer moves the burden of masculinity still further away from society. In his case, a *real* man

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<sup>22</sup> A notable exception is Max Collins, who finds Spillane little short of genius. His chapter "A Critical Hammering" details much of the general criticism of Spillane. Max Allan Collins and James L. Traylor, *One Lonely Knight: Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State UP, 1984) 23-32.

must make choices to protect his society that make him unfit to participate in it, and the level of his violence may be a partial reaction to that rejection.

### Masculinity

Mike Hammer *looks* masculine, in both the action and linking forms of the verb. He can look directly upon evil, facing the worst of the world unflinchingly. He is masculine in this ability because it requires an emotional toughness that true femininity of this era was not supposed to possess. Hammer also has the personal appearance that defines the *real man* of his generation. Mike is big; he is tall and powerfully built; and he is ugly. Hammer has no hint of personal beauty, for in his generation, male beauty was subtly linked to homosexuality, which was considered a perversion of true masculinity.

Mike Hammer defines his own masculinity in terms of his independence, his interest in women, and the ability to sustain prodigious physical harm without turning from his purpose.<sup>23</sup> The other characters in the novels feel much the same way about what constitutes true masculinity; it is defined by a man's ability to be the biggest predator in the jungle. Men who kill without compunction are admired and sought after. Other men look up to them; women want to sleep with them. And Mike Hammer is the epitome of the masculine.

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<sup>23</sup> Roger Horrocks discusses these particular traits in greater detail in *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity and Popular Culture* in his chapter on Westerns. One idea of American masculinity stems from the loner figure of the cowboy. In particular, Horrocks explains the independent nature of the Western hero.

Hammer himself equates masculinity with independence. He works alone and makes all his own decisions without interference from anyone. Mike takes great pride in the fact that he cannot be swayed by emotion or even by someone else's logic because he sees independent decision-making as a manly trait. When he is talking to his secretary, Velda, during *Kiss Me, Deadly*, Mike explains his position: "What you think makes a lot of difference, kitten, but when it comes to making the decisions I'll make them on what I think. I'm a man. So I'm just one man, but as long as I have a brain of my own to use and experience and knowledge to draw on to form a decision I'll keep on making them myself" (374).<sup>24</sup>

Even when Mike knows that villains have him targeted, he works alone. He is not only unwilling to ask for help, he refuses help when it is offered.<sup>25</sup> Velda gets irritated at him for his attitude and calls him on it in *One Lonely Night*: "Mike, you're a bastard. You're in trouble up to your ears and you won't let anybody help you. Why do you always have to play it alone?" "Because I'm me" (48). Hammer's self-definition as

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<sup>24</sup> All quotations taken from Mickey Spillane, *The Mike Hammer Collection, Volume 1: I, the Jury, My Gun is Quick, Vengeance is Mine!* (New York: New American Library, 2001) and Mickey Spillane, *The Mike Hammer Collection, Volume 2: One Lonely Night, The Big Kill, Kiss Me, Deadly* (New York: New American Library, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Robert Bly discusses this trait in *Iron John: A Book About Men* when clarifying the difference between the Wild Man, whom he extols, and the Savage, who is a danger to himself. Hammer more nearly resembles the Savage, who has the ability to wound and is himself wounded in spirit but who refuses aid of any kind.

a masculine man precludes asking anyone's assistance. He had rather lose his life than his independence, for that is the masculine code he lives by.

John Cawelti draws a strong parallel between the tough-guy private detective and the American cowboy. The two each emphasize independence, possess skill "with guns and fists" (181), and retain "personal codes of loyalty that transcend the written law and the conventional morality of society" (183). They are also both remarkably hard to kill.

While Hammer's demands for independence frustrate most of the characters in the novels, these characters also admire Mike for his choice. He is a warrior, a cowboy, a hunter. He chooses to do dangerous things alone because he knows that he is tough enough to handle whatever situation he encounters, but he is not so confident that others are equally tough. In particular, he doubts the capacity of most women to deal with violence constructively because of his general view of women. In the face of violence, Hammer expects women to faint or scream, alerting the opposition to their presence, or collapse crying across his gun arm, fouling his aim.

When Hammer sees any female, he describes her in terms of her appearance and the way her appearance makes him react. Because it makes him feel like a man, Hammer values women who make him think of sex.<sup>26</sup> His first sight of Charlotte Manning in *I, the Jury* is typical of his reaction to women. After describing her thoroughly, Hammer informs the reader that Charlotte might not have been able to read

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Stearns defines the masculine role in dating as that of a "drooling beast" during the 1950s and 1960s. The changing definition of masculinity no longer emphasized "moral restraint as a part of manhood" (212-13).

his expression, "but she could have sued me if she knew what went on in my mind" (27). The lady first spied in *One Lonely Night* has "a body that could take your mind off beauty and put it on other things" (35).

Hammer believes that "real women" have certain characteristics that "real men" will admire. They are beautiful; they are sexy; they are attracted to tough and violent men. In every Mike Hammer novel, soft, willing women cling to Mike for protection, admire his toughness and independence, and try to sleep with him.<sup>27</sup> Hammer expects this sort of behavior.

Additionally, Mike particularly resents women who pretend to be what a man wants—soft, emotional, willing—and who use men's desires for these things against them. Psychiatrist Charlotte Manning of *I, the Jury* looks the way Mike wants a woman to look and acts the way he wants a woman to act. On their first date, she tells him that she is his: "But whenever you want me, I'll be here. Just come and get me" (56). Mike can think about nothing else and falls in love with her only to discover that she is the one who murdered his best friend. Mike discovers that her actions toward him are only

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<sup>27</sup> These women are all single. Married women fall into a different category and are off-limits to Mike. They are interested in their own husbands and domestic tranquility. However, single women, whether good or bad, are clingy and willing. The willingness of single women is both a reaction to Mike's masculinity and part of the definition of masculinity for his time period. Stearns explains this as part of the definition of male working-class sexuality: "greater male assertiveness, with proof of maleness not just in begetting children but in dominating the female partner" (60).



a pose, and he hates her equally for her betrayal of him and his sudden understanding of her strength.

Charlotte Manning has fought and cheated to obtain her wealth and power, and the thing about her that most bothers Hammer is that she did not particularly want to use these tools; she merely wanted to make herself safe in the world: "You are a woman who wanted wealth and power. Not to use it extravagantly, but just to have it. How many times have you gone into the frailty of men and seen their weaknesses? It made you afraid. You no longer had the social instinct of a woman—that of being dependent on a man" (*Jury* 141). As a therapist, Charlotte uses psychology to find men's secrets and then refuses to be dependent on them.<sup>28</sup> She fails to be feminine, by Mike's definition of the term, on every level: She is cold, brilliant, and ruthless. She unemotionally gets her patients hooked on heroin because that is her surest way to wealth and power, and her coldness particularly repulses Hammer because he sees it as unfeminine.

The villain of *Vengeance is Mine!*, however, wins the prize for a false pose of femininity. Mike meets Juno Reeves at her modeling agency and is so smitten with her personal appearance that he cannot concentrate on the questions he is asking nor on her answers to them. Again, he describes her, as he does all women, in terms of her effect on him:

Some women are beautiful, some have bodies that make you forget  
beauty; here was a woman who had both. Her face had a supernatural

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<sup>28</sup> See George Stade 232-53 for more on the psychological impact of Charlotte's profession. Stade compares her to a witch doctor and accuses her of stealing souls.

loveliness as if some master artist had improved on nature itself. She had her hair cut short in the latest fashion, light tawny hair that glistened like a halo. Even her skin had a creamy texture, flowing down the smooth line of her neck into firm, wide shoulders. She had the breasts of youth—high, exciting, pushing against the high neckline of the white jersey blouse, revolting at the need for restraint. . . . Her voice had a rich vibrant quality when she introduced herself, but I was too busy cursing the longer hemlines to get it. When she sat down again with her legs crossed I stopped my silent protests of long dresses when I saw how tantalizingly nice they could mold themselves to the roundness of thighs that were more inviting when covered. . . . But we talked and she did things with her body deliberately as if I were a supreme test of her abilities as a woman and she laughed, knowing too well that I was hardly conscious of what I was saying or how I was reacting. (*Vengeance* 375-76)

This vibrant woman teases Mike throughout the novel. When he discovers that she is guilty of running a blackmail ring and a party to murder, he confronts her and passes sentence on her, but ultimately he cannot shoot her. She reminds him of Charlotte Manning, the woman he loved and shot, and he cannot shoot another woman. Juno attacks Mike physically, pulling his arm back in a hammerlock that knocks him off his feet and planting a knee in his spine. In the ensuing scuffle, Mike rips off Juno's dress and sees her standing naked except for stockings and shoes. He is appalled to discover that Juno is a man.

Mike's revulsion is instantaneous, and he feels free to shoot Juno since she isn't really a woman. But he is also relieved to discover that Juno is a man because he has not been able to identify the subtle feeling of resentment that he kept having when he looked at her. When Juno teased him sexually and he responded, Mike always had an odd desire to hit her and could not understand why. Upon seeing Juno naked, Mike understands the "resentment that was actually a revulsion" (*Vengeance* 513).<sup>29</sup>

Hammer's revulsion is the more understandable because in all of the novels he sneers at anyone who is not obviously heterosexual. Mike sees sexual interest in women as a major part of his definition of masculinity, and he sees any other kind of sexual interest or appearance as a type of deviance.<sup>30</sup> Hammer expects that a person who has one vice is likely to have another, and he believes homosexuality to be one of the greater forms. In fact, throughout the novels Mike equates several vices: Murder, blackmail, Communism (i.e., treason), and homosexuality.

Mike believes that all people who participate in one of these vices are likely to engage in one of the others. In Hammer's view of the world, Juno's sexual proclivities and personal dress choices go hand in hand with her blackmailing. Mike sees a group of Communist sympathizers in *One Lonely Night* and only expects that they have other

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<sup>29</sup> Mike's desire for Juno wars with his revulsion. Perhaps one explanation for this can be found in Freud: "All human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice, and have in fact made one in their unconscious" (56-57).

<sup>30</sup> Peter Stearns traces the strong reaction against homosexuality to the Christian principles of the first European settlers in America: "Homosexuality . . . was corrosive of true masculinity. . . . The cancer had to be excised so that men could be men" (35).

vices: "Coming toward me a guy who looked like a girl and a girl who looked like a guy altered their course to join one group. The girl got right into things and the guy squealed with pleasure whenever she said something clever" (29). Mike's condemnation of these people is swift: "But they all had something in common. The lump of vomit in the center of each crowd was a Judas sheep trying to lead the rest to the ax. . . . They had a jackal look of discontent and cowardice, a hungry look that said you kill while we loot, then all will be right with the world" (29). In studied contrast, Hammer demonstrates a form of masculinity that is visibly male, interested in women, and loyal to his country.

Mike Hammer also values his ability to take punishment—physical, emotional, or gastric. He smokes; he eats fried foods; he drinks constantly and with ease. Hammer clearly sees the ability to absorb hard liquor as a masculine trait and says so: "He handed me a *man-sized* slug of the stuff [bourbon] and set up one for himself. I poured mine down in one gulp" (*I, the Jury* 23) [emphasis mine]. In Hammer's view, only a man would be tough enough, or have the gastric competence, to imbibe really large amounts of liquor. Women are too frail to absorb the amount of alcohol that a truly masculine person can.

Hammer is able to function while in severe physical pain, and his tolerance signals proof of his masculinity. Mike can take any amount of punishment and be up and fighting quickly.<sup>31</sup> In *Kiss Me, Deadly*, Mike is caught by the Mafia and tortured: "It

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<sup>31</sup> In discussing the warrior mythos, Robert Bly explains the ability of the warrior to take punishment: "When a warrior is in service. . . to a True King—that is, to a transcendent cause—he does well, and his body becomes a hardworking servant,

was a pain that turned my whole body into a mass of broken nerve ends that shrieked their messages to my brain. I lay there with my mouth open sucking in air, wishing I could die, but knowing at the same time I couldn't yet" (476). After a lengthy session of torture, Hammer strangles the torturer, breaks the neck of the guard outside his room, and hits a third Mafioso in the head until he dies. This sort of ability is typical of Hammer.

Sherlock Holmes never had to face this sort of difficulty. The Victorian reading public did not require their heroes to demonstrate this level of physical toughness. Holmes used the tools of science to reason his way to a solution. He had no need to beat a confession out of a villain or withstand villainous torture. The post-WWI generation had come to a recent and graphic understanding of the frailty of the human body and mind, and they did not equate heroism with survival and revenge. Thus Lord Peter Wimsey does not find himself in the hands of torturers either. Mike Hammer's generation, however, was so frustrated by its inability to find the evil lurking under society that they needed a hero who could find and punish that evil directly. The American public, insecure in its own power to fight, required a hero who could absorb any amount of physical punishment and then return it.<sup>32</sup> Hammer is such a hero, and he represents the masculine extreme in his ability.

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which he requires to endure cold, heat, pain, wounds, scarring, hunger, lack of sleep, hardship of all kinds" (151). Hammer follows the cause of justice, one he clearly feels is transcendent; therefore, he is able to absorb punishment and continue fighting.

<sup>32</sup> Believing that there are no winners in a nuclear war, the American public feared to begin a war with the Soviet Union. Having recently won WWII, Americans felt

In contrast, less masculine characters demonstrate physical frailty. Mike punches a homosexual, George Kalecki, in *I, the Jury* who promptly vomits and offers no further resistance to Mike's questioning. Kalecki later shoots at Mike from cover to avoid a direct physical confrontation and fails at that as well. When Mike confronts any less masculine characters, he wins; he also wins when less masculine men confront each other. Hammer attends a country house party in one novel and witnesses two men fighting under his window:

Directly beneath me two underweight males were having a hair-pulling match while four others egged them on. What a place. The two boys hit the dirt together and followed by a slap or two. I grinned. A couple pansies trying to decide who would be Queen of the May. I drew a pitcher of water from the sink and let it go on their blonde heads.

That ended the fight. They both let out a falsetto scream and got to running. ( *Jury* 123-24)

In Hammer's view, real men can fight, and anyone who cannot fight is not really a man. They are nearly all characterized as gay—as if homosexuality and an inability to absorb punishment or throw a hard punch were linked. A man who cannot fight fails as a man. Just as Hammer links all forms of "perversion" together and assumes that a person who has one has all, Mike also links any one failure in the standard of masculinity to a failure in all.

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that they had the best fighting force in the world. However, neither navy nor army could prevent a nuclear strike at home or the devastation that huge amounts of radiation in the atmosphere would cause.

As a masculine man, not only can Hammer absorb physical punishment, but he can also absorb great emotional pain. Mike survives World War II with his emotions intact, or at least under his control. He is not disabled by his experiences, and his emotional stability is viewed by Hammer and by other characters as a sign of true masculinity.<sup>33</sup> Even the villain of *I, the Jury*, Charlotte Manning, sees Mike as a man's man who draws out a corresponding femininity in her. Even though she is a trained psychologist with a full work schedule, Charlotte makes fried chicken for Mike after work one evening. At that dinner in her apartment before he has realized that she is the villain, she tells him how she feels about him:

"When you came in to see me I saw a man that I like for the first time in a long time." She sat down and continued. "I have hundreds of patients, and surprisingly enough, most of them are men. But they are such little men. Either they have no character to begin with or what they had is gone. Their minds are frail, their conception limited. So many have repressions or obsessions, and they come to me with their pitiful stories; well, when you constantly see men with their masculinity gone, and find

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<sup>33</sup> All generations seem to view the ability to survive war without an emotional breakdown as a sign of extreme masculinity. Holmes's generation required warriors to come home proud of their actions. Wimsey's generation expected that men with any degree of sensitivity would have difficulties in surviving the more horrifying aspects of war, but they were supposed to hide their feelings while dealing with polite society. Nonetheless, those few men who evinced little to no sign of mental breakdown were characterized as extremely masculine.

the same sort among those whom you call your friends, you get so you actually search for a real man."

"Thanks," I put in.

"No, I mean it," Charlotte went on. "I diagnosed you the moment you set foot in my office. I saw a man who was used to living and could make life obey the rules he set down. Your body is huge, your mind is the same. No repressions."

I wiped my mouth. "I got an obsession though."

"You have? I can't imagine what it is."

"I want a killer. I want to shoot a killer." I watched her over a drumstick, chewing a mile a minute on the succulent dark meat. She tossed her hair and nodded.

"Yes, but it's a worthwhile obsession." (*Jury 52*)

Charlotte desires a man who can take strong action without being hampered by internal pain; she clearly equates masculinity either with insensitivity or with an ability to put pain at a distance. She considers a burning desire to kill someone a sign of strength appropriate to masculinity.

This attitude that men should not crumple emotionally under the pressures of war reflects the same attitude of post-WWI Britain. Lord Peter Wimsey faced the same societal attitude, but the men in those novels who had actually been through WWI displayed an emotional vulnerability that is lacking in the veterans of the Hammer novels. In stark contrast to Wimsey, Hammer seems to have come out of the war with an ability to kill people and a desire to do so.



## Reflection of Culture

Just as Holmes used the scientific principles that became popular during the Victorian era and Lord Peter Wimsey sought to justify his right to send anyone to his death, Mike Hammer faces the particular problems of his generation and culture. Hammer deals with those who hide behind the mask of respectability and behind America's laws to engage in societally destructive activity. This hunter must discover who the real enemy is before he can exact payment. Hammer faces many of the same dilemmas as a person that America faced as a nation during that time.

In 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan to end World War II. The European war had ended two months before, and the United Nations had its first official meeting in San Francisco. The conquering nations were jubilant. However, American servicemen were sent home only to find the homes they left changed beyond recognition. Women had jobs and weren't particularly willing to give them up. Europe faced serious economic deprivations because of the lengthy war on its soil.

In 1946, the concerns of a heavily armed nation shifted. The U.S. had won a war on two fronts and suddenly couldn't trust one of its Allies. The U.S. military was displeased with the postwar conduct of the Soviet Union. As their familiarity with each other increased, so too did their suspicion. America had no desire to pull out of Europe only to see it fall to another aggressor. That year Churchill made his now-famous Iron Curtain speech, and the Cold War began in earnest. In the U.S., fear of the Soviets encouraged further tests on atomic bombs, and the Bikini Island test was conducted.

In 1947, the same year that *I, the Jury* was published, the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency were both formed, and the House Un-American Activities Committee went after Hollywood. The famous Hollywood Ten hearing took place during this year, and the defendants were sentenced to various penalties, including jail time, for having been members of or affiliated with the Communist Party—or worse yet, for refusing to name names in their own defense.

To combat this feeling of imminent threat both at home and abroad, America needed a hero. Spillane created Mike Hammer, another iteration of the hunter ideal. The most important traits of this hunter, though, were those of the earliest of society's protectors—aggression, stamina, and a willingness to face danger. He faced difficult dilemmas which the law could not help him overcome, and his choices parallel those of his parent nation.

At the time, there was a public outcry about the uses of the atomic bomb. Information about the effects of the bombs dropped on Japan had begun to become common knowledge. Pamphlets about the effects of alpha, beta, and gamma rays were being circulated among the population, and there was an upsurge of public feeling which included public demonstrations as early as 1946.<sup>34</sup> America was beginning to realize the enormity of the destruction it had caused. In most wars, civilians are avoided

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<sup>34</sup> See [www.atomicarchive.com](http://www.atomicarchive.com) for a timeline of nuclear testing and political reactions. The early demonstrations were against atomic testing on American soil rather than for dropping bombs on enemies. Nonetheless, the public was becoming well acquainted with the biological consequences of nuclear war.

as targets, most damage being reserved for the military. However, the civilians took the most damage in the Japanese bombings.<sup>35</sup>

Mike Hammer has the perfect attitude for this sort of dilemma, and he has the attitude of a great many soldiers who had fought in the Pacific theater: The bomb was ugly, but it worked. Hammer is much more concerned with results than he is with ethical means. He actively desires to avoid a trial by jury because it does not bring justice. Soldiers in the Pacific who had seen Japanese atrocities were not concerned with the political ramifications of a nuclear arms race.<sup>36</sup> They wanted justice for fallen comrades. They wanted to drop a bomb, not go in for an extended ground war. They wanted their enemy annihilated. Mike Hammer is very good at annihilation, and he justifies the ugliness of his methods with a defense that would have been attractive to soldiers and their loved ones: It works.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Approximately 130,000 were killed at Hiroshima and 75,000 at Nagasaki.

<sup>36</sup> Dr. Leo Szilard, one of the physicists who proposed the development of the atomic bomb to Franklin Roosevelt, later argued against dropping it on the grounds of mass destruction and because it would be likely to begin a nuclear arms race with Russia. Paraphrased from an article in *U.S News and World Report*, Aug. 15, 1960.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Fussell, literary scholar and WWII veteran, writes in defense of those bombings in an article for *New Republic* (August 1981). Fussell states that no man who has not gone to war can truly understand the fear, horror, and desire to avoid it. He emphasizes the impulse to run away from battle and calls war "a struggle about manhood as well as a struggle to keep from being hit by flying metal" (qtd. in Rustin, 7, 20.)

In 1948, while the critics condemned *I, the Jury* for its violence and the public bought it in great and unforeseen numbers, the U.S. and the Soviets increased their aggression toward each other. At home, the U.S. faced more paranoia. Officials viewed the Communist Party in America as a threat to the government. In fact, the paranoia ran so deep that anyone who had been a member of the Communist Party had great difficulty holding a job. By 1949, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) expelled all Communist-led unions. The following year showed a severe restriction of civil liberties because of an outbreak of known Soviet spies. Klaus Fuchs and Alger Hiss were both accused of espionage.<sup>38</sup> However, the combination of those two caused the government to break out in restrictions like a rash, and Joseph McCarthy began his search for Communist sympathizers.

Corruption in high places immediately became the focus of much public attention, and the Mike Hammer novels were no exception. Through information gained by the murder victim, Mike Hammer discovers a prostitution ring in *My Gun is Quick* that serviced the highest officials in his state. Hammer finds corruption in high places and relishes cleaning it out:

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<sup>38</sup> Klaus Fuchs was a German-born physicist, educated in the UK, who worked on atomic bomb testing in the U.S. He was tried and convicted of selling atomic secrets to the USSR (Feklisov 228-64). Alger Hiss, a prominent State Department official, was named in the trial of Whittaker Chambers as a person who had passed secrets to the Soviets. The statute of limitations on Hiss' espionage had run out, so he was tried and convicted of perjury (Ruddy 205).

There in the trunk was her [the murder victim's] reason for living, a complete exposé of the whole racket, substantiated with pictures, documents, notes that had no meaning at the moment but would when they were studied. There were names and familiar faces. More than just aldermen. More than just manufacturers. Lots more. The lid was coming off City Hall. Park Avenue would feel the impact. (338)

Mike is part of the whole purpose of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and other such paranoid groups; he could uncover corruption in high places, and lawbreakers could no longer be protected by their positions in the government. The comforting thing about Mike Hammer, to a nation faced with powerful men selling the secret of its destruction, was that he could do something about it. All of his talk in *I, the Jury* about being unconstrained by rules has a real payoff. He can, and does, simply shoot the villains.

The villains of the first three Hammer novels showed the American public that deviants were everywhere, masquerading as normal, not to mention nice, people. Charlotte was a doctor, Juno a model, Berin-Grotin a member of American nobility. If these people could be deviant, who else might be?

By the time *Vengeance is Mine!* came out, America was concerned with problems at home as much as with problems abroad. The Communist Party at home was being ferociously attacked by Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy was condemning anyone in high office that he could get his hands on and causing widespread paranoia. The trials of Klaus Fuchs and Alger Hiss added to the feeling that Communists had effective spies planted in the highest and most secret places in the government and that

war, probably nuclear, was imminent. In the same year, the North Korean Communists invaded the capitalist South, and the Korean War broke out. The Cold War became hot.

The following year, 1951, Spillane published another two Mike Hammer novels, *One Lonely Night* and *The Big Kill*. The second deals with yet another blackmailer, but the first deals with Communist corruption in government. The villain of *One Lonely Night* is a Communist sympathizer who also happens to be a U.S. Senator. He publicly attacks the freedoms allowed to Communists in America, yet he feeds secrets to the Soviets and maneuvers Communists into the government.<sup>39</sup> This level of betrayal could only be met with death. Because Oscar Deamer has used one of America's most sacred offices, the Senate, and one of her most sacred rights, free speech, to lie to American citizens, Hammer is patriotically furious: "You, the little man whom the public loves and trusts . . . you who are to lead the people into the ways of justice . . . you who shouted against the diabolic policies of the Communists . . . you are the biggest Communist of them all!" (172).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Actually, there are co-villains: the Senator is Lee Deamer and the villain is his identical twin, Oscar. Oscar first blackmails Lee into placing Communists in government and overlooking highly-placed spies. Oscar later escapes from a mental institution, shoves Lee under a train, and begins to use Lee's identity to continue the Politburo's agenda.

<sup>40</sup> While many critics over the years have pointed up the similarities between McCarthy and Deamer, it does not seem likely that Spillane was targeting him. In 1951, McCarthy was still riding a high tide of popularity.

Communists and their sympathizers come under serious fire in this novel, in every sense of the word. Mike vilifies them in speech and shoots them down like mad dogs. At one point in the novel, Mike has possession of some documents that the Communists want. They capture Mike's secretary Velda and try to torture the information out of her. Mike, of course, finds her, frees her, and exacts his revenge:

They heard my scream and the awful roar of the gun and the slugs tearing into bone and guts and it was the last they heard. They went down as they tried to run and felt their insides tear out and spray against the walls. I saw the general's head splinter into shiny wet fragments and splatter over the floor. The guy from the subway tried to stop the bullets with his hands and dissolved into a nightmare of blue holes. (*Night* 164)

The carnage continues for several graphic paragraphs as Mike machine guns a room full of Communists and laughs at them as they die.

Such graphic violence is shocking even to today's hardened audiences. Reviewers at the time were less than thrilled with the level of carnage. Hillis Mills of the *New York Times* called it "overheated, unbelievable, disorganized and preoccupied with violence for violence's sake" (qtd. in Collins 24). Nonetheless, the public loved it and bought it in large numbers.

Hammer is protecting America. The fact that he does so in such graphic terms should show the current generation how very serious the Red Scare was. People were not mildly frightened, or they would not require and enjoy such a violent solution to the problem. And if this violent a solution were not what Americans wanted, they would not have purchased the novel in such numbers. Spillane tapped into a very real fear.

The Korean War proved that Communist aggression was an actual threat. Americans took deep breaths and assured themselves that restrictions of civil liberties and McCarthy's angry tirades actually made them safer. McCarthy was angry, violent, and abusive; so was Mike Hammer. The American public may have felt that these men made the world safer for the truly innocent (i.e., neither homosexual, Communist, blackmailer, nor murderer) by getting rid of threats that the average man had no ability to take on.

Jesse Berrett suggests also that this public fear might be the reason that Spillane garnered such serious criticism. The liberal element of America became afraid of HUAC as they saw their civil liberties receding and feared that Hammer had become a real possibility in their world: "By inflating Spillane into a social menace and then attacking that menace, his opponents made all the more plain their own interpretations of and fears about the directions American culture was taking" (3).

The other Mike Hammer novel published in 1951, *The Big Kill*, attacks blackmailers, but it also goes after Hollywood. The villain is another blonde beauty, Marsha Lee. She is a former Hollywood actress who receives the documents to blackmail many prominent citizens in a fan letter. (The sender mixed up his envelopes.) Through several scenes in the book, Marsha makes it obvious that all actresses, but particularly those who work in Hollywood, are immoral. Mike visits the set of her upcoming stage production and witnesses several women in various states of nakedness. None of them tries to cover up, and Hammer equates their comfort in undress with certain promiscuity. Marsha seems the least promiscuous of the lot, but we later discover that she has her own vice; she is a blackmailer.



This attitude toward Hollywood was popular at the time. HUAC had hit the city with a vengeance in 1947, prosecuting the famous Hollywood Ten. There was strong feeling in the nation that Communists concentrated in Hollywood and tried to take over the nation by presenting pro-Communist films. The general feeling seemed to be that the insidious traitors were trying to take over good American minds through entertainment. The recoil of the nation was strong, and many men who had been very loosely affiliated with the Communist party, to the point of having been to only one meeting, were blacklisted in an effort to prevent the movie-going public from avoiding the entire industry.

In addition to attacking immoral theater people, *The Big Kill* shows innocence triumphant. Marsha Lee is not killed by Mike Hammer but by the toddler son of a man she had killed. Young William Decker has been trying to get his hands on Mike's gun for the duration of the novel, and at the last moment succeeds. He merely touches it, and it goes off: "And in that extra second of time she gave me his fingers closed around the butt safety and trigger at the same instant and the tongue of flame that blasted from the muzzle seemed to lick out across the room with a horrible vengeance that ripped all the evil from her face, turning it into a ghastly wet red mask that was really no face at all" (*Big Kill* 346). The irony is heavy-handed. Marsha's mask of innocence is shot away by true innocence.

True innocence was in short supply in 1951. The nation was at war with Korea, and General MacArthur led the combined forces of the United Nations in a cold and ugly war. The Communist Chinese, as well as the Soviets, came in on the side of North Korea. MacArthur wanted to at least blockade the Chinese, and for his preference

would have attacked them directly. Because of his strong feelings in this matter, he was removed from command. To many Americans, the removal of MacArthur was a nod toward Communism. He was still held in great esteem because of his actions in World War II; Americans knew his position against the Chinese. To many, MacArthur's removal proved that bureaucrats sympathetic to the Communist agenda were taking over the military and weakening the country.

At home, the Rosenberg trial dominated American thought.<sup>41</sup> In 1951 the two were tried and sentenced to death. Despite the domestic setting of the crime, there was a direct link in the minds of many Americans between the Rosenbergs and the war in Korea. Even the judge made the connection in his sentencing statement:

I consider your crime worse than murder. Plain deliberate contemplated murder is dwarfed in magnitude by comparison with the crime you have committed. In committing the act of murder, the criminal kills only his victim. The immediate family is brought to grief and when justice is meted out the chapter is closed. But in your case, I believe your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb years before our best scientists predicted Russia would perfect the bomb has already caused, in my opinion, the Communist aggression in Korea, with the resultant casualties exceeding 50,000 and who knows but that millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason. (Kaufman)

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<sup>41</sup> Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were tried for espionage in 1951. The two were accused of passing secrets of nuclear weapons to the Soviet Union, convicted in 1951, and executed in 1953. (Meeropol 350).

At this time, many Americans were busily building bomb shelters and practicing civil defense drills in anticipation of nuclear war.

The same year Spillane published *The Big Kill*, a novel with a villain more frightening than any Mike had previously faced. It is not a single individual, but a Hydra; Mike takes on the Mafia. Because of the death of a woman who seeks Mike's protection, Hammer decides that he will kill every Mafioso he sees until he finds out what she was trying to hide from them. The interesting thing about the Mafia as a target is that Mike is the only person not afraid to go after them. Other people are afraid because there are so many of them and because most people do not know who the upper level are. But Mike will stand up for Americans even against this threat: "I was dreaming of a slimy foreign secret army that held a parade of terror under the Mafia label and laughed at us with our laws and regulations and how fast their damned smug expressions would change when they saw the fresh corpses of their own kind day after day" (*Big Kill* 380).

In its anonymity and unknown numbers, the Mafia is very like the Communist Party. The idea in both cases is that the upper echelon is secret and that only the small fry will be caught by the authorities—small fry such as the Rosenbergs. There is also a strong feeling that for every head the authorities cut off, two more will grow in its place. This Hammer novel speaks directly to that American fear. But Mike says that the Mafia is still made up of individuals and that if he starts killing them off, he will scare the big players out of hiding. Mike refuses to be cowed:

In a sense though, it was funny. Someplace at the top of the heap was a person. From him the fear radiated like from the center of a

spiderweb. He sat on his throne and made a motion of his hand and somebody died. He made another motion and somebody was twisted until they screamed. A nod of his head did something that sent a guy leaping from a roof because he couldn't take it any more.

Just one person did that. One soft, pulpy person.

I started to grin a little bit thinking how he'd act stripped of weapons and his power for a minute or so in a closed room with someone who didn't like him. I could almost see his face behind the glass and my grin got bigger because I was pretty sure of what I was going to do now. (382)

Mike then proceeds to decimate the Mafia.

It is interesting to note that Hammer assumes a deviant, or at least an unmasculine man, as the Mafia leader. Hammer expects a coward who hides behind his front men, as if a Mafioso could not be a strong man capable of beating Hammer in a fair fight.

In the book version, the Mafia is searching for a shipment of heroin stolen from them, and they think Mike knows where it is. There is also a movie version, released in 1955, in which the object of the hunt is uranium. In the book, Mike figures out where the heroin is hidden; in the movie version he fails. The beautiful villainess finds the uranium and causes a nuclear explosion (Hill 147). The movie plays on more than the fear of Communists hiding among decent Americans; it taps into the fear of nuclear holocaust at the same time. As such, it is probably more revealing of the mindset of the time.

## Personification of Empire

The focus of empire shifted during World War II as England lost her preeminence in world affairs. The country took an economic beating during the war, and it was slow to recover. The United States, however, gained in economic power and became more politically influential as a result of the war. Because of this shift in power in Western culture, the idealized masculine became American. Other than the shifts in time and enemy which both countries experienced, the primary difference between the American and British heroes is one of social effect. As an American, Mike Hammer focuses less on personal appearance and good manners than his British counterparts; he is also much less conscious of social class.

Hammer, as the personification of the new American Empire, faces some difficult decisions just as America did. The U.S. had solid war allies—England, France, Greece. However, the Soviet expansion at the end of World War II, its desire to absorb as many countries close to it as possible, caused a panic. They might bomb the U.S. at any moment, and other nations were encouraging America to join organizations, such as the UN and NATO, that would almost guarantee another war.

The U.S. had the choice of defending their allies, the friends who had bled alongside them, or of leading a peaceful domestic life with the knowledge that they had allowed a killer loose in the world. Mike confronts the same choice in *I, the Jury*. He could marry Charlotte Manning, the woman who killed the friend who had lost an arm in Mike's defense, and loathe himself, or he could kill her and loathe himself.

The dénouement is fascinating. Attempting to distract Mike from his purpose, Charlotte removes all her clothes while Hammer steels himself to shoot her in the gut,

just as she did his friend. When Charlotte peels off her last layer and wraps her arms around Mike, he shoots her. Earlier in the novel Charlotte had accepted Mike's proposal of marriage, telling him that she sought domestic peace. It is clear from her actions, however, that she really wanted her own freedom, safety, power, and wealth. Mike's choice of justice for his friend's murder over the promise of domestic comfort is difficult for him, yet Mike believes he is making the right decision.

Upon exploring the room after Charlotte's death, Mike discovers that she was not trying to embrace him but to reach a gun hidden in the pot plant behind him. He sees that a life of peace was never Charlotte's intention. The domestic peace that she was promising Mike was false, just as many Americans assumed the Soviet claim of domestic peace to be. While Hammer is not able to see through Charlotte's deception, he still chooses correctly by avenging his friend and, as a result, saving his own life. Nonetheless, Hammer deliberately killed the woman he loved, accepting the emotional damage to himself as the price of keeping society safe.

At the time of publication, the U.S. was still taking damage for the Allies. The Marshall Plan outlined a policy of economic aid for allied nations in Europe. The Nuremberg Trials allowed revenge on those who had made those nations, and America, suffer. But the Truman Doctrine was an essential part of the process. Without it, the U.S. left former friends open to Communist aggression and a loss of the liberties all had spent years fighting for.<sup>42</sup> Mike Hammer's choices are essentially the same as those of

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<sup>42</sup> The U.S. instituted two major policies to contain Communist aggression in 1947. That year Turkey and Greece faltered in their war against takeover by the Soviets. Their countries were nominally aided by the U.K. However, because of

America, and his position is much the same. Willing to suffer physically and emotionally to uphold his code of right behavior, Hammer does what he believes to be right regardless of the consequences to himself.

#### Social Position

As an American, Hammer does not feel pressured by social distinctions. In this iteration, the idealized masculine takes pride in his commonness. Where Lord Peter Wimsey is viewed by the lower classes as innately right, good, and wise because his brother is a duke, Mike Hammer views that attitude as outdated and wrong. This hunter just gets the job done, using whatever methods are most effective. Hammer doesn't care if he is speaking to a rich and influential American because he finds more value in a man's actions than his breeding. Hammer shows that he does not evaluate any man solely on his social position as a part of his code of masculinity. Since a *real man* makes his own decisions without influence, Hammer expects that all *real men* will follow the same code whether they were born into wealthy families or not. Hammer also

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England's severe bomb-damage during the war, they could no longer afford to send funds or troops. The U.S. decided that no country should fall to Communism if we had the power to stop it. Consequently, the Truman Doctrine was established to outline the American Cold War policy of containment. The U.S. promptly sent \$400 million in aid to Turkey and Greece. At the same time, Truman saw that Europe was not going to recover economically in any reasonable time period without help, so the Marshall Plan was approved to dispense economic aid. The Eastern bloc countries, those taken over by the Soviets, were not allowed to participate in this aid and thus took longer to regain their pre-war footing (LaFeber 1).

emphasizes the American work ethic as part of his masculinity: *A real man* must value his own work and his independence from the opinions of others. Thus Mike is the more masculine for being unimpressed by great wealth and social position.

Because he is American, Hammer's social status does not limit his access to the rich and influential as it would in a more rigidly structured society. In fact, in *My Gun is Quick*, Hammer is hired by a wealthy, influential man whose family could be traced back to the Four Hundred.<sup>43</sup> As the novel progresses Mike discovers that his employer, Mr. Arthur Berin-Grotin, is blackmailing prominent citizens to support his own position in society. Mike also learns that Berin-Grotin disowned his own granddaughter and then had her killed to avoid a social scandal. Because of his money and social position, Berin-Grotin would likely have never faced trial. He has influence among those who make laws. He could call in personal favors from judges and mayors. Berin-Grotin also manages to have most of the incriminating evidence against him destroyed; it could not be proved to anyone's satisfaction but Mike's that he had had his granddaughter Nancy killed. But Mike knows, and it is enough for him.

Hammer does not allow Berin-Grotin any special privilege for his superior social status and wealth. In Hammer's view, Berin-Grotin squanders his own money because he lacks a decent American work ethic, and then he becomes guilty of betrayal, hypocrisy, and murder. Mike's condemnation makes Berin-Grotin seem like something that should be squashed under one's shoe:

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<sup>43</sup> The " Four Hundred" is a phrase coined by Ward McAllister in the 1860s and referred to those people in New York who "really mattered" to society (McAllister 158).



Pride. Pride did it to you. In the beginning you were a playboy and spent all your dough, but your pride wouldn't let you become a pauper. The smart operators got hold of you and then you fronted for them until you squeezed them out and had the racket all to yourself. You could work the filthiest racket in the world, but your pride wouldn't let you take back your granddaughter after she made a mistake. Then your pride kept you from letting her interfere with your affairs. (*My Gun is Quick* 342)

When Mike shoots Berin-Grotin, the reader feels that Mike has done the world a favor. Social position alone clearly does not make a person trustworthy. It is just another mask for criminals to hide behind. Mike, as a good American, is not overly impressed by mere social position and great wealth. He intends to bring Berin-Grotin to justice, to make the man pay for his murderous action. Mike shows that righteousness is in no way tied to social prominence.

#### Justice v. Law

The first Mike Hammer novel, *I, the Jury*, is a story of revenge rather than a search for justice. Hammer intends to murder the person who murdered his best friend, Jack Williams. He states his intention of dealing with the matter himself early in the novel: "I'm going to get the louse that killed you. He won't sit in the chair. He won't hang. He will die exactly as you died, with a .45 slug in the gut, just a little below the belly button. No matter who it is, Jack, I'll get the one. Remember, no matter who it is, I promise" (7). This speech reveals more than mere solidarity for a compatriot who lost his arm in defense of Mike; it reveals a man who distrusts the ability of a system of law

to exact justice. Mike must pursue justice himself because the law cannot be trusted with it. Like Holmes, Hammer hunts outside the law.

John G. Cawelti deals much with this concept in his comparison of the hard-boiled detective to the Western hero in American fiction. The two are generally outsiders who pursue justice from outside the matrix of law because the law has either broken down or cannot deal with the magnitude of the problem (183). There is a great deal of difference, though, between the independent cowboy of Holmes's generation and that of Hammer's. Jefferson Hope of *A Study in Scarlet* is a vigilante killer who Holmes tracks and apprehends. Because he has taken the law into his own hands, he is pitted against the protagonist Holmes even though Holmes has some sympathy for him. Mike Hammer is the vigilante killer in his novels, and the law is seen to be ineffective and therefore reasonably ignored.

Early in *I, the Jury* Hammer expresses his disdain for the mistakes that can happen in a lawful system of government and his own place as a dispenser of true justice:

People. How incredibly stupid they could be sometimes. A trial by law for a killer. A loophole in the phrasing that lets a killer crawl out. But in the end the people have their justice. They get it through guys like me once in a while. They crack down on society and I crack down on them. I shoot them like the mad dogs they are. . . . (14)

Hammer is not contemptuous of the police so much as sure that following the rules doesn't get the right results: "I don't underrate the cops. But cops can't break a guy's

arm to make him talk, and they can't shove his teeth in with the muzzle of a .45 to remind him that you aren't fooling" (10).

Because the criminals in Hammer's society masked themselves as law-abiding citizens, truly innocent citizens required protection of a type that they could not provide themselves. The only kind of person who could provide it was not overly concerned with the rights of those he saw as villains. The real life version of Mike Hammer was Joe McCarthy. McCarthy prided himself that he "did not play by the Marquis of Queensbury rules" and enjoyed his ability to trample the civil rights of anyone suspected of Communism (Fried 2).

Hammer does not play by the rules either and is constantly at odds with the District Attorney's office for the way he obtains his information. Having proven that the police lack the ability to obtain confessions or follow up leads in a useful manner, Mike also circumvents the judge and performs his own executions. He is his own jury; he weighs evidence and then exacts what he believes to be just payment. But unlike Holmes and Wimsey, Hammer metes out only death. Some of the reason for his behavior is that Hammer only deals with the crimes that the sheltered public cannot face and certainly cannot deal with themselves.

#### Emotional Life

Whatever emotions he feels, Mike Hammer only articulates three emotions: Lust, anger, and self-contempt. All of his actions can be traced to one of those three emotions. Mike lusts after various women in the novels to various degrees. Some women inspire a temporary feeling in Mike that quickly dissolves after he sleeps with them. Two women inspire such lust in Mike that he wishes to have them under his

permanent control, so he proposes marriage to them. The first is Charlotte Manning, villain of the novel *I, the Jury*; the second is Mike's beautiful secretary Velda.

Mike becomes engaged to Velda in *Kiss Me, Deadly*, the sixth book in the series.<sup>44</sup> Because of his engagement to Velda, Hammer manages not to sleep with every beautiful woman he comes across in this novel. He doesn't even sleep with Velda although he promises at the end of the novel that "Tomorrow I'd get her. The way she wanted it. Tomorrow she was going to belong to me all the way" (*Kiss* 513). But tomorrow doesn't come. At the end of the novel, Mike rescues Velda from her torturer and makes sure she gets away. However, Mike is shot in the side with a .45 and then sets fire to the villain and the room where the two of them are fighting. The reader cannot tell whether Mike will live or not; logically, he would not, and so he dies without consummating his relationship with Velda.

Mike's sexual frustration is a prominent feature of both of these novels—the first and the last of Spillane's initial Hammer phase. In both cases Mike is engaged; in both cases he desperately wants to have sex with his fiancée but chooses not to do so until after they are married. In both cases, his lust goes unrequited. Where Sherlock Holmes conducts his sexual affairs, if he has them, out of view of the reader and Lord Peter Wimsey is known to keep the occasional mistress on the Continent, also out of

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<sup>44</sup> This is the last book before Spillane took a twelve year hiatus from Hammer. During the years between the sixth and seventh books America underwent another cultural shift. The later books still present Communists, blackmailers, and Hollywood people as villains, but Velda becomes much more aggressive and more of a partner than a secretary.

view of the reader, Mike Hammer is partially defined by his sexual relationships. He either has sex or wants to have sex with every unmarried and marginally attractive female he encounters. His lust seems to drive many of his actions.

With this lust comes a need to dominate these women. Hammer appears to be equally driven by lust and by anger. When he holds women, he leaves bruises. When he kisses them, their teeth collide and hurt. Even though Hammer seduces by grabbing, bruising, and ripping clothing, the women in these novels respond to his behavior by melting into him and swearing undying love. Mike is so virile, so strong that his masculinity oozes out of his pores and makes him bruise his sexual partners. Because Hammer feels all things intensely, even passion succumbs to Mike's *modus operandi*: Mike squeezes, kisses, and seduces too hard. And his technique is evidently successful, for women in every novel respond willingly to his overtures or try to seduce him. Mike is the kind of man they admire.

Hammer is their ideal of masculinity because he is tough, aggressive, opinionated, independent, and violent. Because he can protect them from enemies such as Communists masquerading as neighbors and high-level government traitors, the defenseless women in these novels throw themselves at Hammer. And society in general felt that certain characteristics were interlinked. Just as Mike feels a person guilty of Communism, homosexuality, blackmail, or murder would be equally guilty of all the others, society in general felt the same way about Mike. If he is violent enough to peel the layers off City Hall, expose blackmailers and murderers, exterminate the Mafia, then he would be equally violent in his love-making. Mike is a real man, many characters say, and they all have an idea of manhood that involves consistent

violence.<sup>45</sup> And if Hammer were to be a nurturing lover, sooner or later someone would accuse him of being soft (a euphemism for a gay, Communist blackmailer).

In keeping with his status as a *real man*, Mike never feels anger without doing something about it. Usually his anger provokes Mike to something extremely violent. When he is angry because of a perceived attack on his country, Hammer machine guns rooms full of people (*One Lonely Night*). When he is angry because an innocent has been murdered, he shoots villains in the stomach so that they will suffer (*I, the Jury*). When he is angry and hurt because a female under his protection has been killed, Hammer becomes more hands-on and bashes heads into pulpy masses (*The Big Kill*). There is no case in any of the Hammer novels in which Mike feels angry and fails to take violent action.

This violence leads both to self-loathing and to self-justification. *One Lonely Night* opens with Hammer standing alone on a bridge in a winter night. He is loathing himself because a judge had rather accurately described him before the court:

He had to go and strip me naked in front of myself and throw the past in my face when it should have stayed dead and buried forever. He had to go back five years to a time he knew of only secondhand and tell me how it took a war to show me the power of the gun and the obscene pleasure that was brutality and force, the spicy sweetness of murder sanctified by law. That was me. I could have made it sound better if I'd said it. . . . I

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<sup>45</sup> Charlotte Manning refers to Mike as a "real man" in *I, the Jury* (52). Connie in *Vengeance is Mine!* admires Mike's style of flirtation even though it involves bruising her (381) as does Ethel of *One Lonely Night*: "My fingers hurt and she didn't care" (61).

had gotten a taste of death and found it palatable to the extent that I could never again eat the fruits of a normal civilization. (6)

Hammer is less than pleased with this description of himself, not the least because he believes it to be accurate.

Hammer embodies one of the singular role stresses of 1950s masculinity—loneliness. In protecting society from evil, Mike has made himself unable to live in it. In this way, he is much like the cowboy hero of Western film. Since Hammer is tough and violent enough to combat evil, he is too tough and violent for civilized society. He makes himself an outcast by protecting the societal traits that he values but does not himself possess.

Through the rest of the novel, Hammer periodically returns to this feeling of self-loathing. He sees himself as an overly violent and fairly disgusting human being, and he tries to figure out why he is what he is and whether he has any place, even tangential, in a lawful society. His conclusion is very interesting. Mike has spent the entire novel agreeing with the judge's assessment of him as a man with no good in him. Hammer feels that he enjoys killing too much to be a part of normal society. However, Hammer has an epiphany when he is rescuing Velda; he realizes his function when he is preparing for a mass slaughter of Communist agents:

I lived only to kill the scum and the lice that wanted to kill themselves. I lived to kill so that others could live. I lived to kill because my soul was a hardened thing that reveled in the thought of taking the blood of the bastards who made murder their business. I lived because I could laugh it off and others couldn't. I was the evil that opposed other evil, leaving

the good and the meek in the middle to live and inherit the earth! (*One Lonely Night* 164)

Mike Hammer exists so that good may have a place and because good, by definition, cannot adequately defend itself.

### Brotherhood

The first Mike Hammer novel is a story of revenge for the death of Mike's friend, Jack Williams. Jack lost an arm in the South Pacific while defending Mike from a Japanese soldier. Mike feels such a tie to Jack that he kills his own fiancée when he discovers that she is the one who killed his friend. Mike has other justifications for shooting this woman, to be sure, but this is a tale of the strength of brotherhood over love. Hammer could have turned his evidence over to the police; he was not afraid of Charlotte's wriggling out of a conviction. But Mike had promised Jack's corpse that he would find Jack's murderer and kill her. Even though Mike falls in love with Charlotte, he kills her because of his greater love for Jack and because of his code of honor.

The other Mike Hammer novels do not deal particularly with Mike's friendships. Some men are mentioned tangentially as former soldiers with whom Mike served. Hammer finds himself in the room with a dead man, Chester Wheeler, at the beginning of *Vengeance is Mine!*, whom Mike had met in 1945. At the time, the man was in the Air Force and Mike was in the Army, and that was their only former contact. Because the two did not serve together, Mike is less driven to find Wheeler's murderer than he had been to find Jack's. Nonetheless, Mike feels a bond and decides to find Wheeler's killer.



Mike Hammer has one close friend—Pat Chambers. Pat is a complement to Mike in every way, including their names.<sup>46</sup> Not only are they Pat and Mike, they are Chambers and Hammer. The name *Chambers* evokes the idea of judicial chambers, and Pat is just that sort of man. He follows the law and enforces it as a homicide captain in the New York Police Department. He deals competently with the red tape of a government system without needing to shoot anyone. However, Pat might also represent the chamber of a gun. He is the steadying force that encapsulates a cartridge after the gun hammer hits it so that it can travel in the right direction. Where Mike just bludgeons his way along, Pat directs his investigation in the proper channels and helps Mike find the villains. He consistently funnels correct information to Mike.

However, Mike and Pat are often at odds. Pat wants Mike to stay within the law because he values Mike and doesn't want him put in jail but also because he values the law for its own sake and seeks to bring criminals to justice. Mike is nearly always hunting a villain who he feels cannot be correctly punished by the law, so he uses the information that Pat gives him in unlawful ways. Unlike the smooth partnership of Lord Peter Wimsey and Scotland Yard's Charles Parker, Mike and Pat are often angry at each other and competing to see who finds the villain first. The intensity of Hammer's version of masculinity prevents a stronger bond with his friend because he must refuse help from anyone.

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<sup>46</sup> James Traylor deals with character names in greater detail in "Characteronyms in Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer Novels"293-95.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FEELING MASCULINE: KATE MARTINELLI

All the reasons of a man cannot outweigh a single feeling of a woman. --Voltaire

To say that a great deal happened in American culture between the publication of the Mike Hammer novels in the 1940s and 1950s and the Kate Martinelli novels in the 1990s would be a strong understatement. Accordingly, a female detective can serve as an especially timely representation of the positive characteristics of modern masculinity.

In *The Changing Definitions of Masculinity*, Clyde Franklin details the stereotypical:

aggressive	feelings not easily hurt
independent	adventurous
unemotional	makes decisions easily
hides emotions	never cries
objective	acts as a leader
easily influenced	self-confident
dominant	not uncomfortable about being aggressive
likes math and science	ambitious
not excitable in a minor crisis	able to separate feelings from ideas
active	not dependent
competitive	not conceited about appearance
logical	thinks men are superior to women
worldly	talks freely about sex with men
skilled in business	direct
knows the way of the world	

While these are the characteristics of stereotypical masculinity, I would argue that a predominately feminine person can display some of these characteristics and that the characteristics themselves are still masculine. A very feminine woman may still be an excellent leader and skilled in business, but I assert that the qualities that make a person skilled in modern business include an aggression and subsuming of one's home-life to the degree that they are more traditionally associated with masculine behavior.

## Masculinity

Because of the Women's Movement begun in the early 1960s, the American public has changed its thinking about stereotypical roles for men and women. Women are no longer confined to hearth and home, and those who enter the workforce may legally rise to any position that their abilities allow. However, just because women can lawfully hold certain jobs does not mean that great numbers of them do. For instance, women choose jobs in police and fire departments at a far lower percentage than men; less than ten percent of the police force in the United States is comprised of women, according to the Department of Justice.<sup>47</sup>

The job that the police do in modern America requires a great many of the masculine characteristics detailed by Franklin. A police officer must be willing to face danger on a daily basis, to confront violent criminals bent on harming the innocent (or not) in society. A police officer has no choice but to "know the way of the world" because he or she is confronted with it every day. In dealing with the public, the police are required to be objective and unemotional; they are not expected to have feelings of their own but to face violent emotion from others without getting worked up themselves.

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<sup>47</sup> The percentage of women in local law enforcement has risen steadily but has never been high. Approximately 7.6 percent of the police force was female in 1987; by 1990 it rose to 8.1 percent, with a rise to 8.7 percent by 1993, just before *A Grave Talent* was published. Reaves, Brian A, "Local Police Departments, 1993" *Bureau of Justice Statistics Executive Summary* 1996. U.S. Department of Justice. 5 Feb. 2007. <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/lpd93ex.pdf>.

They are taught not to react to the emotionally-charged statements of witnesses or suspects.

Kate Martinelli is a cop. The reader first meets Martinelli when she is promoted to homicide detective in the San Francisco police department. She has been promoted a bit ahead of what would be her normal schedule to be part of a team investigating the murders of six-year-old girls. She is slightly appalled that the department is sending her because they believe "that women, even those without their own, [are] somehow 'better with children'" (*A Grave Talent* 12). Nonetheless, she takes the promotion and determines to do her best to justify the department's trust.

Martinelli is extremely ambitious, a trait stereotypically associated with men. One hundred years ago a woman with ambition was ambitious for someone else, never for herself. She was ambitious for her sons' futures, for her daughters' marriages, for her husband's career. In the 1990s, a woman such as Kate Martinelli could be ambitious for herself without denying her femininity. A woman who wants to be a police officer is no longer considered a woman who desires to be a man, but I would argue that the desire for promotion, authority, and power is still a masculine characteristic. Martinelli is ambitious to the point of irritating her fellow officers, as she well knows. She began in the San Jose police department, and her urge to competitiveness and her ambition earned her rapid promotion: "She had also pushed and scrambled and sweated the books to work herself into an early promotion off the streets, knowing the resentment and mistrust her single-minded ambition would cause" (*A Grave Talent* 90). Once she transfers to San Francisco, however, she plays down her normally competitive nature to blend in better with her fellow officers.

In doing her job correctly, Martinelli displays many masculine characteristics. Through rigorous training, she has learned to control her emotions, or at least her face, when confronted by the public. During one episode in *To Play the Fool*, Martinelli is sent to question a homeless man about a murder. He is not a suspect at the time, but he is known to the homeless community in which the murder victim lived. When she finds him, the man, Brother Erasmus, is speaking outside the buildings to a group of divinity students at Berkeley. Although Martinelli is wearing street clothes and standing on the edge of the group waiting patiently for the end of his talk, she is startled when Erasmus throws a toy badge at her. He has evidently discerned that she is a police officer. Martinelli is next shocked by the suspect's offering his wrists for handcuffs: "Kate stared for several seconds at the thin pale wrists with their fringe of black and gray hairs before the automatic cop reflex of *never react* kicked in" (55). She controls herself admirably, though, just as her training dictates.

Kate Martinelli defines herself primarily by her job. Knowing the qualities that are required of a police officer, Martinelli finds that she is most comfortable and most herself as a cop. She continually defines herself this way to her life partner, Lee, and Lee defines herself in relation to Martinelli's job when she explains her own fears for Martinelli: "I'm often frightened for you, you know, when you go all silent about a case, and I know it's coming to a head. It's the cop's wife syndrome, that's all" (*A Grave Talent* 289).

Martinelli identifies herself with her job to the point that she obsesses about her cases and allows herself almost no leisure time at all. Peter Stearns describes this desire for a defining job in *Be A Man!* when he explains the 1990s' male as "devoted to

a work role and uncomfortable to the point of despair when this is not available, eager for sports, convinced that restraint (if no longer labeled thus) is essential to manhood" (177). In the first Martinelli mystery novel, Martinelli is continually woken up by the phone in the middle of the night, leaves for work before dawn, and comes home in the wee hours.

She is also frustrated when she cannot participate in the details of a case, such as questioning suspects and tracking down leads. When Martinelli is assigned to guard Vaun Adams in *A Grave Talent*, she is extremely frustrated by her inactivity. As a guard, Martinelli cannot track down the killer herself, and the reader is informed that she "would have preferred to bleed to death rather than miss this part of the case" (*A Grave Talent* 266). Martinelli knows the Vaun is in danger from a man who has been killing six-year-old girls; he is a sociopath who believes that by killing these children he can hurt Vaun deeply. Martinelli is part of a police operation to use Vaun as bait to catch this killer, but waiting for the killer to come to Vaun forces Martinelli into a position in which she feels useless.

This desire to be in the center of the action, working hard to effect solutions, highlights other characteristics that would normally be considered masculine. Kate is an athlete, a runner. In the first novel, Martinelli's detective partner, Al Hawkin, asks her to run through some woods from one house to another to see how long it would take and if the suspected killer could have done it in the time that they know the killer had. In running four miles through woods recently pounded with cold rain, Martinelli becomes bruised, filthy, wet, and cold. The following day she is required to run back up that trail to the suspect's house and falls, gouging her thigh badly on a tree limb. She then has

the prospect of trying to cross a plank bridge which is partially underwater because the creek it spans is flooded. Looking at the fifteen feet of dangerously swift water that she has to cross, Martinelli balks.

At this point in the novel, Martinelli is feeling masculine role stress. As a cop, she is expected to apprehend her suspect. She is also expected to be tough enough to hike four miles in the dark up a rain-soaked mountain towards a possible killer. While Martinelli has the masculine qualities of ambition, athletic ability, physical hardiness, and determination in abundance, she is still daunted by the prospect of a river in flood. Her comments to herself, however, are very revealing of her self-identification: "There'd be no failure in turning back now, no cowardice; even a man would say that pile of floating sticks was no bridge, certainly not passable. . ." (*A Grave Talent* 115). Martinelli speaks to herself of failure and cowardice; she is concerned that she be identified as successful and brave rather than cautious and intelligent.

And she does attempt the bridge, nearly drowning herself in the process. She is rewarded at the end of her hike with justification for her risk; she arrives at the suspect's house to find that the woman is unconscious and may have poisoned herself. Although Martinelli had to break a window and scrape her back severely in order to get in, she refuses to leave when the helicopter comes to take the suspect, Vaun Adams, to the hospital. She tells Al over the radio that she does not like the look of the crime scene but that she needs to sleep before examining it further.

When Al arrives in the morning, Martinelli can barely move, but her stubbornness is rewarded: She and Al determine that Vaun was poisoned by someone else. Martinelli's decision to brave the river allows her to save a life and clear a suspect of

murder. Martinelli's masculine characteristics are well-suited, even necessary, to success in her masculine job, and Al praises her for her tenacity. Hawkin's praise is particularly welcome to Martinelli because she feels that she was promoted to detective too soon and because Hawkin is substantially senior to her. For Hawkin to tell Martinelli that she made the correct decisions validates her actions to herself. Martinelli values her personal well-being less than the solution to a mystery, less than doing her job. She intends to affix blame for the murders of several young girls to the person who truly murdered them, to protect society by getting a murderer off the street and into prison where he belongs.

#### Reflection of Culture

Current American culture distrusts the white male. Many reasons for this distrust, legitimate and not, have altered the cultural perception of the white male. By the 1960s, women had become successful political activists, gaining important rights in the workplace. In 1963, the Equal Pay Act guaranteed women and men equal pay for equal work. Also in that year, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, which challenged the idea that a woman should feel fulfilled as a full-time homemaker. That book is often credited with sparking second-wave feminism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In its wake, Betty Friedan and twenty-seven other men and women founded the National Organization for Women.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> NOW currently claims 500,000 members with chapter in every state and the District of Columbia; it is the largest organization of feminist activists in the United States.

([www.now.org](http://www.now.org))



Much was written in the 1970s about the white male's abuse of a traditionally held power over all other social groups.<sup>50</sup> In 1972, the Watergate scandal broke, showing the American public that not even the President could be trusted. Various laws were enacted in the next two decades to empower minorities in America; however, the white male continued to lose respect in the eyes of the public as further abuses of power were revealed. One of the most noteworthy was the overly violent arrest of Rodney King in 1993; the acquittal of the arresting officers sparked four days of rioting in South Central Los Angeles.

One reason a contemporary detective novel merits consideration is that Kate Martinelli exhibits positive masculine qualities without being a man. Martinelli is sent on her first detective assignment because the department has "to have a woman on it"; the victims are children and someone will have to question the parents (*Grave Talent* 6). The San Francisco Police Department is trying to show some sensitivity to the pain of the victims' families by sending a societally non-threatening representative. Martinelli also feels that the police department is doing its best to garner some political gain out of

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<sup>50</sup> In *The Changing Definition of Masculinity*, Clyde Franklin lists a series of authors who define masculinity as "inimical to themselves, other men, and women"(51): Warren Farrell, *The Liberated Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974); Marc Feigen Fasteau, *The Male Machine* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974); Herb Goldberg, *The Hazards of Being Male* (New York: New American Library, 1976); Herb Goldberg, *The New Male: From Macho to Sensitive, but Still All Male* (New York: New American Library, 1979); Jack Nichols, *Men's Liberation* (New York: Penguin, 1978).

the situation. In *Night Work*, Martinelli is sent out when a detective is needed to interview abused women so that the battered ladies are not confronted with male authority figures that might intimidate them. Even the homeless witnesses to murder in *To Play the Fool* respond well to Martinelli because short women are less threatening than tall men.

Despite the department's desire to have a woman do certain jobs in the misplaced hope that biology dictates sympathy and tact, Martinelli has almost no maternal qualities. In one instance, she is asked to help transport some possible witnesses to be questioned. As she is sitting in a truck full of these witnesses, Martinelli's true feelings about small children are revealed:

Kate found herself wedged between Hawkin and a very large, damp young man who smelled of dog, and with an even damper and more fragrant baby on her lap. After ten minutes a high voice from somewhere in front asked if anyone had Ivanhoe.

"Is that a disease?" wondered Kate aloud.

"It's my baby," the voice answered.

"Is it hairless and wet?"

"Probably."

"Then it's here."

"Oh, good. I just wanted to make sure he got in. You can keep him until we get to Tyler's."

"Thank you," said Kate gravely, and tried to decide whether the bouncing was from the ruts or from Hawkin laughing, and if the latter,

what she should do about it. In the end she did nothing. (*Grave Talent* 30-31)

A deeply maternal woman would be unlikely to describe a baby to his mother as "hairless and wet." Martinelli has no instinct to cuddle the child nor see to his comfort; she wants to be rid of a wet and smelly mess.

In *Night Work*, Martinelli must question some ladies who are living in a shelter for abused women. She tells the shelter's lawyer that she is sympathetic to the situation and that she will keep her voice down and leave her male partner out of the interviews. In this, she reflects her culture's awareness of abuse and the desire to protect those who need assistance. But while Martinelli understands these women intellectually, she feels primarily frustration and impatience that they persist in these abusive relationships. She wonders to herself why these women don't just fight back.

Another key element of the Kate Martinelli books is the treatment of homosexuality. Where male homosexuals are vilified as unmasculine deviants in Mike Hammer's generation, the lesbian of Martinelli's generation can exhibit positive masculine qualities. Martinelli is a lesbian, a fact that the reader does not discover until page 192 of *A Grave Talent*. The Kate Martinelli novels are by no means the first mysteries to have a gay or lesbian main character. The first police detective novel to feature a gay main character was George Baxt's *A Queer Kind of Death*, published in 1966; the first with a lesbian main character was Katherine V. Forrest's *Amateur City*, published in 1984.<sup>52</sup> While the Martinelli novels are not unique in their subject matter,

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<sup>52</sup> Judith Markowitz treats this subject thoroughly in *The Gay Detective Novel: Lesbian and Gay Main Characters and Themes in Mystery Fiction* (Jefferson, NC:

they do include the first novel with a lesbian main character to win the coveted Edgar award for mystery fiction. Additionally, the few critics who address the Kate Martinelli novels do so within the context of homosexuality, and those critics who address female masculinity, most notably Judith Halberstam, also do so within the context of alternate sexuality.

The author here shows great cultural awareness, engaging the reader thoroughly and making the reader like Martinelli before announcing her sexual orientation. Even those readers who see homosexuality as a perversion will be too caught up in the story to stop reading; thus, the author exposes a wider audience to the major issues of alternate sexuality than those who purposefully choose gay/lesbian literature. Additionally, the author is making it clear that the focus of the novel is not Martinelli's sexual orientation but the mystery that she is solving. She is a detective who happens to be a lesbian.

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McFarland, 2004). Markowitz details stand-alone novels and series that feature gay and lesbian main characters and secondary characters. She also explores the themes of gay marriage, coming out, and homophobia.

<sup>53</sup> Judith Markowitz treats this subject thoroughly in *The Gay Detective Novel: Lesbian and Gay Main Characters and Themes in Mystery Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004). Markowitz details stand-alone novels and series that feature gay and lesbian main characters and secondary characters. She also explores the themes of gay marriage, coming out, and homophobia.

Laurie R. King makes it very clear that the focus of the novels is not Martinelli's sexual orientation<sup>54</sup>, and Martinelli's masculinity is not a function of her orientation either. Martinelli is an innately masculine person, choosing her career in the police force long before she knows that she is gay. She chooses a career that allows her to use her strengths; it is almost incidental that she is a lesbian. Her positive masculine qualities of ambition, independence, objectivity, and so forth do not grow out of her sexual orientation. Additionally, there are other characters in the novels, such as Lee Cooper and Maj Freiling, who are also homosexual and who exhibit mostly feminine characteristics.

Because Martinelli is a lesbian, these novels often deal with issues pertaining to the homosexual community, such as "coming out." In the first novel, Martinelli has not told anyone in the police department that she is homosexual. Her life partner, Lee Cooper, does not think that Martinelli's sexual orientation will be more than "a five minute wonder in a very small circle," but Martinelli vehemently disagrees:

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<sup>54</sup> *A Grave Talent* mostly concerns the issues of artistic genius and the artist's effect on others. The novel also addresses the difficulty of "coming out" in 1994 California, but that is not the central issue. *To Play the Fool* primarily explores the idea of the Holy Fool and the plight of the homeless. *With Child* is the first of the novels to focus mainly on the relationship between Kate and Lee, but their relationship difficulties have to do with Kate's overprotectiveness and Lee's disability rather than their alternative sexuality. *Night Work* explores bride burning and women's rage. In that novel, Kate and Lee are back together and considering their options for becoming parents, but again, their relationship is a side issue rather than the focus of the novel.

I'm a cop, Lee. A woman cop. If we came out, how long do you suppose it'd be before the papers managed to let slip the juicy tidbit that Officer K. C. Martinelli is one of the leather brigade? How long before the looks and remarks start, before I start drawing all the real hard-core shit jobs, before I'm on a call and someone refuses to deal with me because I'm that lez in the department and I might have AIDS? How long before some mama flips out when I try to ask her daughter some questions about the bastard that's raped her, because mama doesn't want that dyke cop feeling up her daughter? (*A Grave Talent* 243)

However, at the conclusion of that novel, a criminal shoots Lee in the spine, and Martinelli outs herself by demanding department benefits to cover Lee's hospital expenses.

Her coming out in such a public manner makes Martinelli national news. So far from staying in the closet, Martinelli feels that she has become the national poster-woman for lesbians in the police force. For the remainder of the Martinelli series, nearly everyone that Martinelli comes in contact with looks at her and asks if she isn't "that dyke cop." When she buys a motorcycle, her fellow officers anonymously leave newspaper articles about "Dykes on Bikes" on her desk (*With Child* 76). The masculine characteristics that make Martinelli good at her job are often taken by her fellow officers as mere extensions of homosexuality; her physical hardiness and enjoyment of weight lifting, running, and martial arts are seen as results of being gay rather than as personal pleasures that fall in line with her choice of profession. Several of her co-workers think

that "the way to demonstrate tolerance for gay women [is] to treat them as one of the boys" (*With Child* 78).

Martinelli's sexual orientation allows the author to explore certain controversial issues in modern America. Because of Martinelli's decision to hide her orientation from her co-workers, Lee accuses her of being ashamed. Both Martinelli's and Lee's families respond badly to their orientation; Lee's mother threw her out because of it and treated her "like a dog that piddled on the carpets" (*A Grave Talent* 241), and Martinelli's family believe that Lee turned her into a lesbian (*With Child* 147). These reactions speak to the stigma of being homosexual in America in the 1990s.

Homosexuality was a particularly charged topic in the 1990s because of the AIDS epidemic. First reported in Los Angeles in 1981, AIDS has since claimed the lives of more than twenty-five million people. At first, many in America believed that the disease was begun and spread in the homosexual community and that it could be acquired through casual contact. This epidemic and the misconceptions surrounding it caused a widespread fear of homosexuals that still pervaded the culture when *A Grave Talent* was published; Martinelli feared the reactions of the general public to her coming out, and with good reason.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> By the latest book in the series, *The Art of Detection*, the topic of homosexuality is much less controversial within the novel itself. Laurie R. King describes the shift in social structure on her website: "In 1993, when *A Grave Talent* was published, it was easy to imagine a lesbian cop in the closet. In 2006, in the world of *The Art of Detection*, that same cop would have to be provided with deep neuroses to

Besides the theme of coming out and its consequences, the Martinelli novels explore several other themes of significance to the homosexual community, such as parenthood. Martinelli's life partner, Lee Cooper, wants to have a baby. She and Martinelli had been discussing this possibility before Lee was shot in the spine and partially crippled, but they revisit the idea after Lee regains a measure of control over her legs. They decide to go to a sperm bank so that Lee can become pregnant.

Parenthood is a charged topic in the gay community. While Lee and Martinelli are discussing their parenting options, they speak to their friends about the emotional issues that they might face. Their closest friends are another lesbian couple, Roz and Maj, who are having their second child. Martinelli tells the others of a flyer she has recently seen in a women's shelter calling for a poisoned capsule to be inserted in the skin of all male children at birth so that they can be "shut down" in case they get out of hand as adults. The other three women are shocked and tell of other such problems they have heard of in the lesbian community. Roz knows a couple who broke up because the baby that one of them was carrying was male and her partner could not "take the conflict of raising a male child" (*Night Work* 57).

While Martinelli is a lesbian and must deal with issues important in the homosexual community, there are other important themes in these novels. *To Play the Fool* covers the homeless community and the way that the general public feels about and reacts to these people. The particular set of homeless people in this book lose their spiritual leader, a man who preaches to them in the park on Sundays, when he is

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explain why she remained behind the closet door"

([http://www.laurierking.com/lrk\\_on\\_kate\\_martinelli.php](http://www.laurierking.com/lrk_on_kate_martinelli.php)).



arrested for murder. Martinelli must interview these people and track their movements. They are homeless for a variety of reasons: Three of the men are survivors of war and have suffered too much mental and emotional damage to function in mainstream society. One woman formerly taught art history at UCLA; three are computer programmers. There are published poets, an astrophysicist, and other university and college professors. Some people have just taken themselves out of mainstream America because they feel trapped by the expectations of others (*To Play the Fool* 132-33).

In questioning the homeless of San Francisco, Martinelli must also deal with the public's reactions to them. Many do not believe that the man Martinelli describes is actually homeless: "He can't be homeless. I mean, he's clean, and he doesn't carry things or have a shopping cart or anything" (*To Play the Fool* 42). Others try to protect the homeless from the police, assuming that the police are harassing them for no good reason. One shop keeper even hides a man from Martinelli's pursuit, basing his action on the feeling that since he looks harmless, the person must be harmless.

With these story lines, the author explores the highly charged world of police confrontation. As a police officer, Martinelli deals with society's dregs and with marginalized communities. As a lesbian, Martinelli lives in the gay community and deals with issues important to that stratum of society. In both cases, Martinelli explores issues that generate fear within contemporary audiences—serial killers, spousal abuse,

hate crimes<sup>56</sup>—but she also enjoys the satisfaction of seeing these offenders brought to justice.

#### Justice v. Law

As a police officer, Kate Martinelli is a proponent of law over justice. Like Holmes, Wimsey, and Hammer before her, she realizes that justice and law are often different things. However, Martinelli upholds the law and merely feels frustrated when she cannot have what she believes to be justice. Believing firmly in pragmatism, Martinelli does what is required within the law in order to catch criminals, despite what might be her personal feelings in a given matter: "A great deal of any police officer's time is spent on the thin line that divides right from wrong. Representatives of Good, cops spend most of their time in the company of Bad, if not Evil, and often find more to talk about with the people they arrest than with their own neighbors. In a fair world, ends do not justify means; to a cop, they have to" (*To Play the Fool* 226).

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<sup>56</sup> According to the Department of Justice, family violence decreased between 1993 and 2002 from 5.4 to 2.1 victims per 1,000 residents. Therefore, when the Martinelli books were published, a large number of the crimes reported in the U.S. involved domestic violence of some sort. "Family Violence Statistics," *Bureau of Justice Statistics*. 2005. U.S. Department of Justice. 8 Feb. 2007. (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/fvs04.pdf>). The FBI reports 7,947 incidents that could be termed hate crimes in 1995. This number jumped to 8,063 in 2000 and 7,160 in 2005. "Uniform Crime Reports," *Federal Bureau of Investigation*. 2006. U.S. Federal Government. 8 February 2007. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>).

The very fact that Martinelli is a police officer speaks to her masculinity. As one of America's most visible proponents of law, Martinelli must use many of the traits in Clyde Franklin's list of stereotypical masculine characteristics, which she does well. Martinelli is logical, fact-oriented, unemotional, and knowledgeable about the way the world works. She makes decisions quickly and easily and feels no discomfort about being aggressive.

Despite the fact that she is well-suited to her career choice, Martinelli does not enjoy many aspects of her job. In *A Grave Talent*, Martinelli must search a suspect's house and reflects that she really dislikes that part of the job (61). Because she is an intensely private person herself, Martinelli feels the intrusion keenly. However, Martinelli is aware that she must complete the task and "ferret about" in other people's underwear drawers. What she finds in searching the suspect's house is that the suspect is the greatly acclaimed painter Eva Vaughn (pseudonym of Vaun Adams).

Martinelli and Lee had previously gone to an art gallery featuring a series of paintings by Eva Vaughn and been struck dumb by the genius the artist displays. They focus on a particular painting in which a man is picking strawberries. Looking at the painting, they see that the man is tired and aching but that he has achieved an inner peace that a man with more choices would not have. Both women greatly admire the artist's clarity of vision and her ability to produce it on canvas.

Martinelli does not understand how an artist who sees souls so clearly could kill a young girl and destroy all the possibilities she represents. Nonetheless, Martinelli must pursue her lawful job even though she would much prefer to protect such gifted artistic insight: "Painful as it was, she knew that her own work, her own humanity, demanded

that she pit herself against the woman who had painted those magnificent visions of the human spirit. It was a bitter thought, as filthy and oppressive as the night outside" (*A Grave Talent* 95).

*To Play the Fool* involves a man suspected of murder. Martinelli likes him a great deal as well, and part of her job is to get this old, homeless man to confide in her. She is to show him some attention, keep the other authorities from harassing him, and gain his trust. She would seek this of her own will because she likes the man, but feels bad about doing it at the department's direction because she feels like a betrayer. As Peter Wimsey said in similar circumstances, "Feeling like Judas is part of the job" (*Gaudy Night* 332).

In *Night Work* a group of vigilante women take revenge upon some vile men who have committed crimes but been acquitted. One man is acquitted of statutory rape but is caught by the vigilante group. The self-styled Ladies of Perpetual Disgruntlement have his genitals tattooed with the phrase "I screw children" and duct-tape him naked to the window of a building in full view of morning commuters. The police take the official position that such vigilante action is wrong and dangerous, but many of them thoroughly enjoy the revenge that the Ladies enact. Martinelli also enjoys it and feels that most of the vigilante group's actions are justified; however, when she discovers that Maj Freiling is responsible for the ladies' actions, she puts a stop to them. The vigilantes are not lawful, and Martinelli upholds the law, no matter how sympathetic she is to another person's viewpoint.

While Martinelli often sympathizes with lawbreakers, she also finds herself required to enforce justice for the unsavory. When a blackmailer is murdered in *To Play*

*the Fool*, many of the people who knew him encourage Martinelli to just "let him be dead" and not pursue the investigation. Martinelli replies that "even an obnoxious sinner has a right to die in his own time" (64). In another novel Martinelli and Al are sent to question the victim of an assault and find a pedophile whom they would prefer to beat themselves: "Both of them—particularly Hawkin with an adolescent stepdaughter at home and a baby on the way—saw him sitting in the hospital bed and felt a quick urge to grind him underfoot and finish the assailants' job" (*Night Work* 302). Unfortunately, they must protect the man from further attacks whether they wish to or not.

In addition to these incidents, other instances of miscarriages of justice are highlighted in these novels, and it is hard for Martinelli and Hawkin not see "each failure of the judicial system as a personal failure" (*A Grave Talent* 229). The two discuss that failure in reviewing a case in which an innocent woman was sent to prison. They are equally angry and appalled when a child murderer is acquitted on a technicality. Their reaction, that the law does not provide justice, mirrors many of the contemporary public's feelings about the judicial system. When Rodney King was beaten so severely and his arresting officers acquitted, riots broke out in South Central Los Angeles in response. O.J. Simpson was acquitted of murdering his ex-wife Nicole and her friend Ron Goldman; Susan Smith was convicted of murdering her two children but will be eligible for parole in 2025. All of these high-profile verdicts seemed to many Americans to be not only clearly wrong but stupidly wrong.

As a trained police detective, Kate Martinelli chooses law over justice, but her sympathies often lie with the lawbreakers in her cases. She upholds the law, however, and does not seem to second guess her decision. She is not tempted to allow a

murderer to go free just because the victim was a blackmailer. Sherlock Holmes would never have tried to arrest Erasmus, the suspect of *To Play the Fool*. He would have seen the victim as a man deserving of death and not pursued the case. Martinelli makes no such judgments. In this, Martinelli seems a fairly stagnant character, blindly upholding a system that she periodically does not agree with because she sees a value in her job—or at least an identity. Martinelli never discusses her philosophy of justice in these books; she simply does her job.

### Emotional Life

Kate Martinelli does not bring her personal relationships to work a stereotypical masculine characteristic. Part of masculine detachment involves a separation of work and home, and Martinelli fulfills this role comfortably. Her reasons are ultimately the same as those of previous generations of men: She does not wish her personal life to cause embarrassment among her peers and interfere with her job or the camaraderie of the office. Just as Wimsey's generation could not explain their financial difficulties at work for fear of being excluded from the *brotherhood*, so Martinelli cannot reveal her home life and thus sexual orientation for the same reason.

Martinelli is something of a challenge to those people in the department who wish to become close friends because she reveals neither her home life nor her lover, Lee Cooper. When Martinelli is first paired with Al Hawkin, she brings him some coffee in a thermos for their long car trip to the murder site. He admires Lee's coffee, but Martinelli does not correct him about Lee's gender:

"Well, he makes decent coffee, but next time have him throw some packets of sugar in for mine."

Kate opened her mouth, and shut it again firmly. Time enough for that, another day. (*A Grave Talent* 15)

At this point in the stories, Martinelli does not publicly speak about her sexual orientation, and she feels that she does not know her new police partner well enough to tell him. As the stories progress, however, Martinelli and Hawkin become very close friends, and she tells him more of how she feels than she tells to anyone else but Lee.

Lee Cooper is the emotional center of Martinelli's life. *A Grave Talent* details their meeting and friendship while Martinelli is an undergrad at University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and Lee is working on her Doctorate of Philosophy (Ph.D.). The two become lovers and move in together. When Lee is shot at the end of *A Grave Talent*, their relationship goes through a very rough transition. Martinelli tries to help and support Lee through her recovery, and she does it so thoroughly that Lee feels smothered. Lee leaves Martinelli to spend some time regaining her independence, but she does not warn Martinelli that she is going to do so, and Martinelli feels angry and betrayed.

Most of *With Child* deals with Martinelli's emotional turmoil in the wake of Lee's leaving her. Martinelli begins to drink heavily in the evenings, to the point that she fears becoming an alcoholic. She realizes one night that she is drinking too much, but "craving alcohol like a drowning person craves air, she yearned for the world's oldest painkiller to knock the edges off the intolerable day" (*With Child* 59). She chooses hot milk that evening, but she still aches for Lee. She is devastated by Lee's absence, and her life falls into a painful holding pattern: "I can't imagine life without her; it would be like imagining life without air. I love her and I hate her and I'm lost, completely lost

without her, and all I can do is wait for her to tell me what she is going to do with me" (70).

As the months pass with no word from Lee on when she might come home, Martinelli wants more than a mere deadening of pain. She feels a great deal of anger; in fact, she feels rage—a stereotypical masculine response to pain. In the grip of this rage, Martinelli tears Lee's favorite quilt into rags and bursts into tears over it. When she looks up at the doorway, her friend and minister Roz Hall is standing there. Roz comforts her, but Martinelli carries the knowledge of that rage and despair with her. It helps her to understand the abused women that she must question during a later case, but it also underscores her desire to fight back. Not being able to physically strike at Lee, Martinelli rips and shreds a symbol of her.

Strangely, it is Martinelli's friendship with Al's stepdaughter Jules that most helps her during the emotional turmoil of Lee's absence. Martinelli forms a bond with Jules, a remarkably intelligent thirteen-year-old girl with family problems of her own. Jules reminds Martinelli of her younger sister Patty, who was killed in a car accident when she was about Jules' age. Martinelli and Jules begin to spend quite a bit of time together, going out some Saturdays to bowling alleys and pizza places. When Al Hawkin marries Jules' mother, Jani, Jules stays with Martinelli while the newlyweds go on their honeymoon. Martinelli and Jules take a road trip, and Jules goes missing during the night at a stop in Oregon.

Martinelli is devastated by the loss of Jules. At first, Kate believes that Jules has been randomly kidnapped, and she tries very hard to deal with the situation by assuming her cop defenses but finds that these do not help her: "There was no armor



against this, no reserve of professional impersonality to draw from, no protection. If anything, being a cop only intensified the horror, because she knew the dangers all too intimately" (*With Child* 155). Martinelli feels that she is dealing relatively well with the disappearance until the local authorities point out their fears that it could be the work of a serial killer who has been targeting young women with hair like Jules'. Her reaction is more masculine than feminine: "She had not fainted, did not even cry out, but she sat with her head down and bit the side of her hand so hard, there was blood in her mouth" (160).

It is not her concern for the opinions of the other police officers in the room that makes Martinelli sit quietly and bite herself to regain outward control. As a woman with predominantly masculine characteristics, she simply does not want to show a strong emotion to anyone. She certainly does not wish to cry in front of anyone. This hiding of emotion is a stereotypical masculine trait according to many critics. The masculine characteristics that Martinelli is using are still masculine even if Martinelli is a woman; a positive masculine characteristic such as outward control over emotion cannot become a feminine characteristic simply because it pertains to a woman.

When Martinelli first sees that Jules is not in the room assigned to her, she falls automatically into her police routine. She puts her hands in her pockets so that she doesn't foul the crime scene. She looks for what should be there, noting to the police the things that were missing. Martinelli remains outwardly calm. These are masculine reactions—the very positive masculine reactions that demand one express her grief in private so that the business of finding the child can be pursued as quickly and

intelligently as possible. Martinelli's reactions are not the positive feminine but the positive masculine.

If Martinelli were to have an emotional breakdown at this juncture of the story, she would delay the dissemination of information to those who could most quickly locate the missing child. And time is a very important factor in the solution of kidnapping cases. A recent study funded by the Department of Justice puts Jules squarely within the high-risk category: 74% of children abducted were females averaging 11 years old; in 76% of the cases the child was dead within two hours of abduction, and in 88.5% of cases the child was dead within 24 hours (2006 Child Abduction Murder Study). As a police officer, Martinelli must be aware of these general statistics. She knows that keeping calm so that she can more precisely inform searchers could well save Jules' life.

Jules is not quickly found. Weeks later the team leading the investigation catches the serial killer operating in the area, and he declares that he did not kill Jules. He had made video tapes of his killings, and the team found no tape of Jules in his collection; however, the man was clearly insane and swore that he had not killed two other young women that the police know for certain that he killed. They determine that the man's camera batteries must have run out, and that without the tape, the killer could not remember a particular murder. Martinelli mourns Jules, but she cannot seem to give up on the investigation. Lee compares her to a terrier in her obsession with running down details even though everyone believes that the serial killer murdered Jules. In fact, Martinelli believes it as well, truly mourning the loss of the child who kept her sane during Lee's absence.

However, there are details missing in the chain of events, and Martinelli pursues those for months after the official solution to the case. In that personal search, a feminine unwillingness to give up in the face of statistical probability, Martinelli is using one of the positive feminine characteristic that she has. And as she is rewarded for her calm recitation of facts in finding Jules, so she is rewarded for her illogical pursuit of a solved case by Jules' reaction when Martinelli finds her. Jules hugs Martinelli and says, "I knew you'd come" (*With Child* 291).

### Competition

While she is less competitive with her peers than she had been in San Jose, Kate Martinelli is still both ambitious and competitive, and her competitive nature surfaces in various ways. As a detective, her job requires that she solve crimes and arrest those responsible for them. She clearly enjoys this aspect of her job even though she does not taunt those she arrests with her superiority, as Sherlock Holmes did.

In fact, Martinelli is very restrained with her overt enjoyment of winning, but she does enjoy it, especially when she gains ascendancy over those who had previously put her down. For instance, in *Night Work*, Martinelli does an excellent bit of detective work, discovering that a specific Web site has the names and addresses of three murder victims. Martinelli's department is working with the FBI on this case, in particular with an agent named Marcowitz who has a history of taking cases away from the San Francisco police before they are solved and then refusing to give the police any information about the status of the case. Martinelli brings her information about the Web site first to her partner Al, and they discuss the importance of her find:

Al was silent, then said what was on both their minds.

"That takes it out of our hands for sure. Have you called Marcowitz yet?"

"My next call, after I talked to you."

"The feds'll be embarrassed that you found it first," he said, pleased with the idea.

"I thought I might point that out, if they try to cut us out of the loop completely."

"Blackmail, Martinelli? Not nice."

"Just doing my job, Al."

"Sure you are." (*Night Work* 257-58)

And that is as much taunting as Martinelli ever does.

In several instances in the novels, Martinelli is confronted by fellow officers who want to dominate her in some manner. In *With Child*, Martinelli is looking, at Jules' insistence, for a missing boy who lived in a park. She has been searching through bushes looking for his shelter and returns to her car to find two sheriff's deputies waiting for her. They try to dominate her physically, moving up close on either side of her while drawling insults at her. When she reaches into her pocket for her car keys, the two deputies draw their guns on her. She berates them for fools, asking them how long they've been out of the academy and where they thought she'd hide a gun in her jogging shorts and tank top. She then introduces herself as a homicide detective and thoroughly enjoys their discomfiture as they realize that she outranks them: "She was suddenly aware that she felt better than she had in a long time. Happy, even" (*With Child* 38).

In another instance, Martinelli is questioning a suspect with the help of two San Jose detectives. Even though the suspect is an ex-convict, Martinelli admires her for her honesty and offers to shake her hand at the conclusion of the interview. After the detectives leave the woman's house, one of the San Jose men pulls Martinelli aside "in that helpful and avuncular manner that always made her jaw clench" and informs her that she should have been more aggressive with the suspect: "It's just that you can't be really friendly with a witness, especially a shady one. Like that business with the handshake—what if she'd refused to shake? You'd have looked like an idiot" (*Night Work* 321-22). Martinelli replies that she'd prefer to look like an idiot than actually be one and makes the man acknowledge, tacitly, that she is right by leaving the area before she does: "Martinelli stood her ground and waited for Hillman and the others to get into their cars and drive away. Al leaned against their car with his face turned away, so none of them but Martinelli knew that he was grinning at the exchange" (322). This refusal to leave first signals to all the combatants that Martinelli has won the fight and has claimed the field of battle.

### Brotherhood

Kate Martinelli is part of one of the greatest brotherhoods in America—she is a police officer. As one of this group, Martinelli feels a sense of camaraderie and belonging that she does not receive anywhere else in her life. While Lee is her lover and partner and friend, she cannot fully understand the rigors of Martinelli's job the way that other police officers can.

In the first novel, *A Grave Talent*, the reader meets Dr. Lee Cooper<sup>57</sup> and is treated to an account of her relationship with Martinelli as it progresses from friendship to unofficial marriage. In this novel, Martinelli is not "out"; however, she is unwavering in her decision because she fears exclusion from the brotherhood of police officers. Lee is hurt by Martinelli's decision and works to explain it to herself.

When trying to identify Martinelli's reasons for not coming out, Lee lists Martinelli's attributes as if she were a patient and in doing so defines some of the aspects of brotherhood:

Subject puts her body and her mind on the line daily, in exchange for which she is allowed to be a part of one of the most powerful brotherhoods there is, men and a few women who are united in the inhuman demands made on them, a secret society in which superiority is recognized and rewarded, where the bickering and back-biting inherent in any family structure does not weaken the mystique that—give it credit—had sustained Subject for two years until she had been brought up short by the ugly, inevitable end product of distancing herself from the rest of humanity. It is the most public and visible of jobs, with the most stringently demanding code for its members. Is it not understandable that Subject refuses to risk an action that threatens to leave her without support, leave her outside the fraternity? (*A Grave Talent* 244)

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<sup>57</sup> Lee is a licensed therapist who works primarily with the gay and lesbian community.

Lee does not believe that Martinelli's sexual orientation will be a problem in San Francisco in the 1990s, but Martinelli believes that it will. In this particular case, Martinelli is correct. At the end of *A Grave Talent*, Lee is shot in the spine by a sociopath. Martinelli demands both an extended leave of absence to nurse her and that the department's insurance extend to cover unofficial spouses. The results did not cause trouble in the department so much as in the national media as tabloids and more serious news organizations featured her story and talked about homosexuality in the police force. During her next major case, Martinelli is involved in solving the murder of an outspoken lesbian celebrity; the case erupts in scandal, none of which is Martinelli's fault, and the police department comes under fire from the media for incompetence and corruption. Martinelli spends the next five months shuffling papers and enduring "that special brand of hatred and harassment that a quasimilitary organization reserves for one of their own who has exposed the weakness of the whole" (*To Play the Fool* 12). Despite these setbacks, Martinelli continues to be a cop, and, ultimately, she reaps the benefits of being part of a brotherhood.

Support in the brotherhood of police flows two ways, and Martinelli is called upon to support her partner through the trials of missing a new stepdaughter whom he truly likes and the consequent breakdown of his new wife. Martinelli first helps by leaving the scene so that Al can better liaise with the FBI. At this point in the investigation, rumors, mostly aired by the tabloid press, are flying that Martinelli's homosexuality and Jules' disappearance are linked. Al does not believe it, but the FBI make Martinelli's departure a condition of allowing Al to join the investigation. Martinelli leaves. Readers who have followed Martinelli through three novels' worth of investigations know how she feels to

be shut completely out. She is furious, yet she supports Al by doing what needs to be done to help him.

However, Martinelli dreads going to work in her own department, fearing the whispers and rumors that will be circling the building. She is surprised to find that she has the support of her colleagues. One detective explains to her: "The police, perhaps more so than other people, do not care for outsiders tormenting one of their own. Even when that member has not fit in terribly well before, if another group who is perceived as 'the enemy' begins pursuit, we have an extraordinary urge to close ranks around the threatened member" (*With Child* 192).

She also pursues the investigation from another direction and actually solves the case herself. Martinelli is triumphant on all levels: She supports Al; she is supported by her fellow officers; her tenacious attention to detail results in her recovering Jules. Giving and receiving the benefits of brotherhood, Martinelli sustains and is in turn sustained by the generally unspoken code of masculine support.



## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

One of the great things about the detective genre is that the point of the hunt can change without changing the genre. Consequently, the detective can confront different types of problems while still fulfilling his or her role as hunter ideal. Sherlock Holmes lives to solve problems. His primary function is to solve a riddle. Lord Peter Wimsey takes on the moral question of why anyone should detect at all. His stories involve the difficulty of justifying putting oneself in the morally superior position of judge. The Mike Hammer stories treat the difficulty of dealing with criminals who use the law to protect themselves. These criminals have perverted the protections of society, and Hammer must find a way to bring them to justice outside of the law. The Kate Martinelli stories focus more on the victims of crime than on the criminals. Martinelli discovers the motivations that draw a criminal toward a specific victim and explains what it is about certain victims that makes villains want to harm them.

All of these detectives display the traditional traits of Western masculinity. They are hunters; they protect society as a whole. Yet each detective fulfills a certain cultural role that speaks to the specific problems of his or her era, proving that masculinity is a more fluid role than many believe.

Detective fiction highlights those qualities of masculinity that are most valuable to the contemporary culture. In mysteries a cultural context is more thoroughly revealed than in any other genre of literature. Through the crimes, an audience can understand not only the fears of a particular society but also the level of calumny that society assigns to the crime. Through the detective's response to particular crimes, the reader can learn the delineation of forgivable and unforgivable acts.

A close reader of detective fiction can also learn which characteristics of masculine behavior are most valued in that cultural context. The thing that makes Sherlock Holmes masculine, and an ideal masculine, is his dominance in his chosen field; that dominance is produced by his ability to think. Holmes values intelligence above all other qualities without denying the existence or importance of emotion. As a paragon of his time, he values his society and fights to preserve its honor, believing strongly that it has an honor worth preserving. Using reasoning as his primary hunting tool, Holmes helps to create a place of safety for innocence.

In contrast, Lord Peter Wimsey understands that dominance is a role to be played. Having survived World War I, Wimsey is extremely conscious of the emotional and physical frailty of humanity. Wimsey's positive masculine qualities mask his inner insecurities so that he can present a front of imperturbability, and he generously allows the other men he encounters to preserve their own masks. While Peter sees the justice system as flawed, he can see no better alternative, and he firmly believes that some system of order must be maintained. In preserving his flawed society, he embodies the disconnect of his generation between the ideal and what men believed was possible.

To the Victorians, the *real man* had been off to war, a war most likely held to expand the British Empire and bring the wonders of technology and sanitation to those perceived to be savages. The Real Man was impervious to physical discomfort in the pursuit of science: He could be frozen in the search for the North or South Pole; he could be broiled in the sun and humidity of the Congo; he could catch strange and wasting fevers anywhere in Asia. Nonetheless, these men felt that their physical endeavors had value if they furthered the British Empire and the sciences.

The detective of Lord Peter's generation, the post-World War I generation, came out of the war with more affection for his own country and yet less patriotism. He no longer blindly followed anything and often had a nervous condition resulting from his time in the trenches. That version of the Real Man understood that war was not the proving ground of masculinity that his forebears held it to be. He came out with a changed view of masculinity that involved kindness, firm resolve, social manners, and adherence to principles. He admired men who could compete well at games, maintain a decent income, and chat socially and inoffensively with women. The women of that generation, coming into the workforce and the university, preferred a male who did not need to assert his dominance over her. She did not mind if he were clearly her superior, yet she hated if he showed it obnoxiously. And both sexes had a firmer confidence in the police than the Victorians had.

Where Holmes's mind and Wimsey's feelings define them, Mike Hammer's physicality is the greatest definer of his masculinity. The Mike Hammer novels dealt with the most violent and deeply rooted fears of the post-WW II American public. The villains were deviants, all of whom pretended to be something that they were not. As such, they represented the great fear of Americans that Communist spies were watching them, disguised as law-abiding citizens, and selling or giving their secrets to the Politburo. Hammer's ability to deal with these people was comforting. He could use all the violence of angry emotionalism and beat these lawbreakers to a pulp even though the prevailing climate condemned Hammer's level of violence as bestial. Because Hammer was fictional, the public could enjoy his physicality as an outlet for their own frustrations and fears without identifying themselves with his savagery.

From these detectives, the masculine role model took a giant leap in the 1960s and 1970s. As women rose in political influence, it became apparent to the American public that masculine qualities were not limited to males. Kate Martinelli embodies the current American belief that strong, ambitious women are not trying to be men. She enforces the law, in which the current generation of Americans has greater faith than did Hammer's generation. As a lesbian, Kate Martinelli embodies two of America's most outspoken minorities, proving that minorities can rise to positions of power and protection. However, Martinelli's defining characteristic is her control. She is a trained detective; she has gone to school to become one. She is not operating by instinct but through professionalism, and her training is comforting to a public that wants protection.

These detectives model the masculine qualities important to their respective generations. As each generation has needed a particular set of qualities in its defense, so the detective has provided them. Through detective fiction, a careful reader can trace the cultural changes of the Western world and the threats that contemporary generations felt to their societies. These detectives illustrate positive masculinity, proving that fiction has more uses than mere entertainment.

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