



Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

33 | Autumn 1999

Varia

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/245>

ISSN : 1969-6108

Éditeur

Presses universitaires de Rennes

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 septembre 1999

ISSN : 0294-04442

Référence électronique

Marilyn C. Wesley, « The paradox of virility: Narrative Violence in a Modern Anthology », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [En ligne], 33 | Autumn 1999, mis en ligne le 21 octobre 2008, consulté le 03 décembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/245>

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The paradox of virility: Narrative Violence in a Modern Anthology

Marilyn C. Wesley

- ¹ In 1936 Charles Grayson collected thirty-five short stories by "contemporary masters... each dealing with a different phase of the actions and activities of men" (ix). Published in 1944 under the title *Stories for Men: A Virile Anthology*, these stories, recovered from their original appearances in magazines from 1925 through 1935, provide a window into popular literary constructions of American manhood in the period just after World War I and into World War II. In the stories, which center on work experiences defining masculinity, although violence is the inevitable solution to problems of power, it proves inadequate to thematic necessities of masculine identity and male development. Although the practice of violence is plotted as a necessary response to the conditions of modernity, it generally destroys rather than develops protagonists. The violence of the stories also introduces the strain within competing definitions of masculine identity in the modern era. The paradoxical collocation of violence, paternal induction, and the impossibility of progress in these representative modern texts characterizes what I define as the "Paradox of Virility," exemplified in stories of the prototypical masculine occupations of criminality, construction work, and war.

Criminal Identity

- ² The manly "actions and activities" of *Stories for Men* include poker-playing, gambling, boxing, hoboing, bull-fighting, cock-fighting, motor-cycle racing, ranching, sailing, soldiering, engineering, digging tunnels, flying planes, sports, and crime. But among the diverse occupational fantasies that constitute modern manhood the predominant category is criminality, which is significant as incident or background in twelve of the thirty-five stories. There are evident historical reasons for the burgeoning popularity of the crime story in this period. The experiences and ideologies of the First World War challenged conventional conceptions of morality, Prohibition made violation of the law a common experience, and the widespread deprivations of the Depression may have

made criminal activity seem like an expedient solution. John G. Cawelti observes that during the 1920s and 30s the narrative representation of crime shifted from traditional admonition to aesthetic celebration of the criminal act, romanticization of criminal motivation, and scientific explanation of the social genesis of crime (*Adventure*, 54-58). The depiction of crime in *Stories for Men* suggests another important psychological and social use for the emerging genre: the expression of masculine predicament.

- 3 "Dressing Up," a 1929 short story by W. R. Burnett, whose *Little Caesar* (1927) provided one of the movie archetypes of the era, presents the essence of the problem and solution of modern male identity. Surprisingly, the plot does not focus on the illegal acts of the criminal protagonist, who is instead primarily engaged in buying and wearing the expensive clothing which symbolizes his imagined accession to a higher order: "I'm gonna dress from the hide out," he explains to an unctuous salesman, "and you can throw my old duds in the sewer" (48). Resplendent in silk lavender underwear, and fitted out with the kind of munificent wardrobe the hero exhibits in *The Great Gatsby*, he summarizes his new status: "Here I am, old Blue, riding the Century, dressed up like John Barrymore..." (52).
- 4 The second significant action in the story is a brief account of his murder, retribution for betrayal of another criminal. This truncated plot encapsulates several key factors of what I will call the paradox of modern virility: 1) the overwhelming and destructive power of forces beyond the individual male self, represented here by the avenging violence of the criminal community; 2) the absolute need for positive masculine identity, represented here in the acquisition of haberdashery; and 3) the employment of violence (Blue ruminates about a recent murder he has committed) as a means of self-creation.
- 5 Although Blue seeks a masculine identity borrowed from the standards of his own culture, as represented by movie heroes, clothing, and railroad travel, violence is not a means to that end. In his story there is no effective connection between the hero's goals and capabilities and the economic and social priorities of the broader community, a difference that distinguishes it from the popular narrative of the preceding Victorian era in which masculine identity is frequently secured through alliance to social institutions and sanctioned practices.
- 6 In "Dressing Up" the possibility of constitutive connection is rescinded by a plot structure permeated by betrayal. Blue betrays his criminal community and they betray him, and the patronizing attitude of the clerks during his sartorial metamorphosis, which signals the impossibility of his transposition into a successful man on their class terms, betrays even his illusions. The physical violence in the story--Blue's previous actions and the revenge that kills him--functions paradoxically to signal both means and limit. The similarity of violent world and violent man does not signal a confederation but instead operates to effect a separation between Blue and the overwhelming forces that surround him. Apparently, personal violence is a stopgap that cannot institute permanent private authority, fix the terms of masculine identity, or protect the limited individual from larger powers.

Violent Predicament

- 7 In all of the stories of the collection, individual men are radically disconnected from the greater social and natural powers which control them, yet, whatever the

circumstances, they, like Blue, overwhelmingly make use of instrumental violence as a means of attempting to transform impossible situations and limited selves. The circumstances of overwhelming control are varied. Besides being invested in the criminal community, power resides in varied mechanisms of social control: the criminal justice system in "The Blue Wall" by William Corcoran, a prison escape story; the economy in such stories as "A Cup of Coffee," a Depression study by Louis Paul, which records the desperation of a man who has lost his previous financial security, and "The Bulldogger" by James Stevens, which tells of the heroic work a man endures for the mere chance of financial survival; the force of collective opinion is apparent in the importance of the crowd's response in sport stories as widely different as Ernest Hemingway's account of a bullfight in "The Undefeated" and Horace McCoy's depiction of a "duel" by motorcycle in "The Grandstand Complex"; and social expectation is an important force in James M. Cain's "The Dead Man," in which a young bum unexpectedly confesses to the perfect crime, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's "A Short Trip Home," in which a beautiful virgin is rescued from her willing complicity in a "fate worse than death." The necessity for social approval motivates a young man's willingness to kill in Ross Santee's Western initiation story "With Bated Breath," and the cost of social sanction is the theme of James Thurber's ironic "The Greatest Man in the World," in which a champion aviator is killed because he is an inappropriate hero. Overwhelming power also affects individuals as a result of war in William Faulkner's "Turn About" and "Not in the Ritual" by Georges Surdez, a story of the French Foreign Legion. The overpowering force of nature is exhibited in "High Air" by Borden Chase, which recounts the story of a drowning during the construction of a tunnel, and in "Fortitude" by Albert Richard Wetjen, which recounts the survival of a first mate and his crew after a shipwreck that confines them to a desert island. Of course, different kinds of cultural, physical, and economic authority are also manifested in stories which stage contests between individuals. Most notable in this anthology are Steven Vincent Benet's "Elementals," in which a young couple put their lives and love on the line in a wager to gain economic security, and in the well-known tale of a man-hunt staged for the amusement of a jaded big-game hunter in Richard Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game."

- 8 In twenty-five of the *Stories for Men* violence is a significant element of the situation or the action portrayed, and in addition to defining the power against which the hero struggles, it frequently characterizes an attempt by the protagonist to control his own overwhelming situation. I will examine the operation of such instrumental violence in two exemplary stories which also introduce a final aspect of the paradox of virility as I am defining it: the presence of paternal male figures whose relation to youthful protagonists predicates the expectation of ethical or social progress. "High Air" by Borden Chase and "Turn About"¹, by William Faulkner, both initially published in 1934, exceed the plot appeal and character interest typical of the collection to establish well-developed contexts for action and outcomes.
- 9 The introductory note to "High Air" identifies its author as a genuine "sandhog," or a worker employed in digging tunnels under rivers. But in addition to verisimilitude, Chase brings to his story a fully articulated oppositional structure of gendered values. The "pleasant world" above the river is marked by "sunshine and gentle breezes" (76). This is the world in which young Steve Redman, under the influence of his mother, had been going to college to qualify for the profession of engineer. However, as he confesses

to his father, Joe, a veteran sandhog, the lure of the alternative could not be resisted: "There's something about the tunnel--the high air--the--oh, I don't know what it is. I used to think of all this all the while I was at school. Finally I couldn't stick it any longer. I had to come back" (81).

- 10 Just as Joe and his estranged wife are literally "apart" in the plot, the "man-made" (76) environment of the sandhog is symbolically separate from its feminized alternative: "Only women were missing--the tunnel is a man's game" (77). The underworld of the tunnel is "different" (76), even "mad" (81) in its brutal reversal of "pleasant" conditions of enervating safety and comfort of the world "above the shimmering surface of the river" (76). Scorchingly hot, dangerously ventilated, and physically demanding, it is the supercharged professional arena for a masculine contest against the overwhelming force of engulfing nature: "a man's trade: fighting the river; driving a tunnel beneath the threatening flood; pitting his strength and skill against the elements" (84).
- 11 The sweaty breathlessness of exertions within the confines of the tunnel suggests that the occupational penetration of the earth replicates the male sex role, and the plot introduces the problem of correct technique. Working "the center pocket" (79) together, Steve and Joe enact conflicting procedures: "his father was of the old school. Caution--care--precision--they were things for men to worry about. Speed--that was the order of the day. Drive ahead, make tunnel, keep the shield moving--this was the way of the young sandhog" (83). The contest between mature prudence and youthful impetuosity, more than a divergence in sensual style, also symbolizes the shift in definitions of manhood which developed during the change from the late Victorian to the early modern periods.
- 12 According to Gail Bederman in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, by the turn of the century the definition of nineteenth-century "manliness" was threatened by the modern conception of "masculinity." The earlier system of identification stressed the moral achievement of manly identity through tight control of the passionate impulses, a vitality that was sublimated into the achievement of middle-class economic status. However, as the financial hegemony of the bourgeoisie eroded because of competition from an increasing immigrant population and a more demanding working class, the source of male selfhood shifted to activities and proclivities previously associated with the satisfaction of unrestrained impulses of the lower classes. Occupational sites and recreational activities of working men became sources of "masculinity", a term stressing the universal characteristics of maleness rather than the achievement of self-control denoted by "manliness". In "High Air," the tunnel itself and the Klondike-style saloon in which the sandhogs sweat and gamble between shifts are representative modern locations. By 1930, Bederman observes, the concept of masculinity included the "mix of 'masculine' ideals... familiar to twentieth-century Americans--ideals like aggressiveness, physical force, and male sexuality" (19).
- 13 "High Air" is interesting precisely because it dramatizes the problem of that mix, both the collision and the connection of two competing systems of masculine value. The construction of the tunnel proceeds by the energetic physical work of pick and shovel digging representative of the laboring classes in tandem with the bourgeois ideal manifested through the careful construction of a retaining structure. Thus a precarious balance of pressure between the "high" compressed air piped into the shaft and the dangerous force of the river itself is maintained. It is a balance that also suggests the

difficulty of achieving masculine identity. When Steve's youthful impulsivity causes him to slice through the protective "face" of the tunnel wall, causing the deadly decompression of a "blow," father and son face the emergency together. "[L]eaping into the pocket beside his son," Joe struggles alongside Steve to staunch the escaping pressure as the "gaping hole" sucks all their ballast and tools into the "growing vacuum" of a lethal "whirlpool of muck" (85-86). Finally, Joe takes desperate suicidal action. Lacking any object to block the flow, the father "sprang into the twisting hole" and the "swirling sand packed tightly about him" to bind the break with his own body (87), an act of altruistic but horrific violence that saves the day.

- 14 The rape imagery of the story signifies mutual male terror of maternal vaginal voracity, but the conclusion acknowledges contradictions about masculine development. Steve's precipitous activity has been motivated by the need to prove his manhood to his father: "He seems to think I'm still a kid," he complains to a coworker (84). Nevertheless, although Joe, as the omniscient narration emphasizes, "had worked at a man's trade" and "wanted to die like a man," in his last words he charges his son: "tell [your mother] I sent her boy home" (87). This emphatic differentiation between "man" and "boy" introduces the complicated paradox of virility the *Stories for Men* cannot resolve. The father's sacrificial violence does not solve the problem of the boy's gender identity, for if he goes home to his mother he will never be able to claim adult male status. Although violence is apparently an attribute of the adult male, it evidently also destroys the "man" it "saves." At best a temporary stay against overwhelming counter-force, the instrumental violence of the alternative professional world of men is the only means to masculine maturity, and yet it cannot produce manhood. Further, instrumental violence does not alter the divergence between the two styles of masculine identification embodied in the related and opposing "Red" men. Yet, although literally destructive of the relationship it supports, the father's violent sacrifice is coded by the story as an act of paternal love. Since to be virile is to possess the qualities of an adult male and to be capable of functioning sexually in the male role, it is ironic that the son's pursuit of virility is foiled by the very violence presented as necessary to its achievement. Both essential and impracticable in the double project of controlling overwhelming external power and claiming manhood, the instrumental violence of "High Air" operates paradoxically, and the affectionate bond between father and son, mentor and novice, further complicates this paradox.
- 15 The motif of male induction, in which a boy is guided towards development by a concerned older man, introduces expectations of social or moral progress--a sense that there are lessons to be learned about an existent order represented by the father-figure.² In "High Air" the sacrificial concern of Joe certainly implies the value of paternal example, and he seems to model a possible masculine order which combines Victorian control of passion and modern access to elemental masculine experience, yet, paradoxically, he is actually destroyed, like Blue, by the threatening forces that surround him, so that the literary formula for masculine identity posits the essential connection of virility and instrumental violence by promising the possibility of the former while demonstrating the impossibility of the latter.
- 16 In a comparable story, William Faulkner treats the same combination of instrumental violence, paternal induction, and the possibility of progress. In "Turn About" the fatherly older man is Captain Bogard, a U.S. flyer who almost literally stumbles across a drunken, young British naval officer asleep on a European thoroughfare in 1918. The

masculine professional activity is warfare. Taking Claude Hope under his care, the experienced pilot transports him to the American "aerodrome"(166) to sober up. Offended by the callowness of the teenager, who babbles enthusiastically about a competitive game he is engaged in with a shipmate, the captain decides to teach the youth a lesson in manhood before returning him to his own duty: "it would be a shame for his country to be in this mess for four years and him not even to see a gun pointed in his direction" (168).

- 17 The story, related from the third-person limited omniscient point of view, favors the American perspective. Claude is depicted as an effete and incongruous schoolboy at oblivious play in a serious man's world. His obvious lack of manly status is emphasized by the diction: "erect on his long, slim, boneless legs, he looked like a masquerading girl" (158). Claude is denominated as girl-like three times in the first two pages, as a "child" twice in the first section, and as a "boy" throughout. In contrast to his scornful companions, the other airmen under his command, Captain Bogard is compassionate about Claude's assumed deficiencies: "He's just a kid. When you were that age, how much sense did you have?" (164). Assuming direct exposure to the violence of the First World War to be a salutary antidote to the problem of masculine immaturity, the old hand takes the new kid on a bombing mission to Berlin and back. Discounting his obvious skill with a machine gun, the Americans suppose that when Claude continues to lean outside the cockpit throughout the mission, he is being sick with fright. Claude, for his part, is extremely impressed with the apparent courage and craft of the flyers. It seems that only he has noticed that they have flown and landed with a malfunctioning bomb suspended beneath the right wing. "Frightened myself," he explains. "Tried to tell you. But realized you knew your business better than I. Skill. Marvelous. Oh, I say, I shan't forget it" (171).
- 18 Just as Claude misreads error as mastery, the Americans, relative newcomers to the English war, misread Claude's youthful enthusiasm as inexperience, as Captain Bogard learns when he pays a reciprocal visit to the motor launch manned by Claude and three other young Englishmen. The Americans have misunderstood the actual mission of the ubiquitous small British boats: "some kind of aquatic motorcycles... dashing up and down the harbor" (159) like a "male marine auxiliary to the WAACS" (162). Perhaps, they surmise, the flimsy craft deliver "messages" or (162) "ice" to larger vessels.
- 19 In fact, what the motor launches do deliver are large torpedoes. Each exposed crew must bring its thirty-foot open boat extremely close to an enemy ship, manually release the single torpedo by cranking a small windlass, and rapidly scuttle out of the path of detonation. "You mean you aim the torpedo with the boat and release it and it starts moving, and you turn the boat out of the way and the torpedo passes through the water that the boat just vacated?" Bogard demands incredulously just before he witnesses the explosive demonstration arranged in reciprocal consideration for his own tutorial hospitality. And sometimes, as Bogard discerns, after the torpedo is activated, it does not move forward out of the bay as it must, a good example of what young Hope cheerfully describes as the disadvantageous necessity of running "a war with makeshifts" (173).
- 20 The last section of the story reveals that Claude's launch was eventually lost during a mission and that Captain Bogard had almost perished during a daytime air raid behind enemy lines when, without the protection of scout planes, and after obliterating an artillery depot, with "the remaining two bombs, he had dived the Handley-Page at a

chateau where the generals sat at lunch" until he could see the separate tiles of a "slate roof," thinking "God! God! If they were all there--all the generals, the admirals, the presidents and kings--theirs, ours--all of them" (183). Bogard's unprecedented and reckless action, for which he receives a commendation, indicates that he has adapted the example of Claude's brave and heedless style of instrumental violence.

- 21 The title, "Turn About," describes the actual maneuver of the motor launch, acknowledges the captain's revised opinion of Claude's status, and also emblemizes the modern reversal of the traditional conception "manliness." In contrast to "High Air," in which abandoning the principle of Victorian self-control is disastrous, in "Turn About" the paternal captain learns that unexamined aggression--the boyish heedlessness and simple enthusiasm modeled by Claude--may be the only appropriate response to the unrestrained destructiveness of modern war. Virility rather than morality is the order of the day. Faulkner's story structures this transposition of male values through the episodic reversals of motifs of the two mirrored missions. For example, although, the airmen assume Claude will get sick, it is Bogard who has this experience. Similarly, the Americans assume Claude's intoxication is an effect of indulgent irresponsibility. But when he administers a bracing drink to the shaken captain, one begins to suspect that the consumption of alcohol by the schoolboy crews of the torpedo launches is the way they adapt to the dangerous impossibility of their missions, an expedience that makes the "makeshift" of the concluding period of the war possible. As Bogard's final mission suggests, manhood, conditioned by modern destructiveness, is a matter of action rather than principle.
- 22 In contrast to "High Air," "Turn About" supports modern masculinity over Victorian caution, but like "High Air" it endorses instrumental violence. The only difference is that in Faulkner's story, the terms of masculine identity are misunderstood by the father-figure rather than the son-figure, and it is the son, rather than the father, who is literally destroyed by an overwhelming external world. As in "High Air," the motifs of male family affection, initiation, and learning suggest that social and moral progress is possible, yet the violent plot fails to secure it.

Modern Masculinities

- 23 As historian George L. Mosse observes, the ideological relation of violence, power, and masculinity is central to modern social experience. Although varying within communities and periods, the concept of masculinity was consolidated in conjunction with the development of the modern world as a constellation of physical and moral traits that consistently embody the established values of a given social group (8). In his study of the evolution of stereotypical masculinity Mosse insists that a consistent manly ideal of force and restraint (15) "played a determining role in fashioning ideas of nationhood, respectability, and war" and "was present and influenced almost every aspect of modern history" (4). And Angus McLaren claims in an examination of legal practices that "confrontational homicide was located not beyond, but within the boundaries of normal masculinity" during the period between 1870 and 1930 (131).
- 24 It is not surprising, therefore, that in adventure narrative of the period violent action conjoins agency, authority, and emergent masculine identity. What is surprising is that *Stories For Men* documents the peculiar maladaptation of narrative violence that reflects changing social definitions for masculine identity in the period between World War I

and II. And, if W. M. Frohack's 1957 study of *The Novel of Violence in America* is credible, the paradox of virility continues to be central to male literature of the post-war period. According to Frohack, the experience of the Second World War created a general atmosphere which made stories of passive heroes "intolerable to read" (3), a new mood better served by the "the novel of destiny" in which the

hero finds himself in a predicament such that the only possible exit is through inflicting physical harm on some other human being. In the infliction of harm he also finds the way to his own destruction. But still he accepts the way of violence because life, as he sees life, is like that: man's fate. Thus the pattern of this kind of novel is in a sense tragic. The hero may be defeated, but he is not frustrated. (6-7)

- 25 Thus the paradox of implied value and actual destruction of the *Virile Anthology* is redeployed as existential tragedy in novels from the 1930s through the 1950s. Despite a variety of historical circumstances and changes in accompanying interpretations of the essentials of manhood, modern literature by and for men has continually connected instrumental violence to masculine identity through the predominant fictional formula of emerging masculine identity, overwhelming forces, and necessary violence and its accompanying ideologies of social and moral possibility. To identify the paradox of such representation in *Stories for Men* reveals the peculiar fact that the very literature which celebrates the definition of masculinity through violent action consistently suggests its failure.

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NOTES

1. This story is titled "Turnabout" in the *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*.
2. See Levinson, et. al., *The Season's of a Man's Life*, 97-101 for a discussion of the mentoring relationship.

RÉSUMÉS

La présente étude examine les nouvelles de *Stories for Men: A Virile Anthology* – une collection de nouvelles "d'intérêt masculin" parues entre 1925 et 1935 – en les considérant comme l'expression d'une transition entre les conceptions victorienne et moderne de l'identité masculine. Les intrigues violentes de la plupart des nouvelles ne parviennent pas à résoudre les tensions entre un modèle bourgeois et victorien de l'homme "mûr", capable d'une maîtrise de soi, et une définition naissante du "masculin" s'exprimant par une action agressive d'origine ouvrière et liée au travail. La difficulté posée par une telle disparité, définie à travers la récurrence d'un paradoxe de la virilité dans lequel une action violente est la réponse inévitable mais inopportune à un environnement violent, se manifeste tout particulièrement dans les intrigues où la violence, bien que s'adressant à des situations menaçantes, ne parvient pas à favoriser le développement masculin des jeunes protagonistes.

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Marilyn C. Wesley est Babcock Professor of English à Hartwick College, Onconta New York. Elle est l'auteur notamment de *Refusal and Transgression in Joyce Carol Oates' Fiction* (1993) et *Secret Journeys: The Trope of Women's Travel in American Literature* (1998). Le présent article fait partie d'une étude plus vaste de la violence dans les oeuvres de fiction d'auteurs américains masculins.