

Bad Chemicals and Toxic Masculinity: The Post-War Crisis of Manhood in *Breakfast of Champions*

A recent article in the *LA Times* reported that the “American Psychological Association has issued its first official warning against toxic masculinity” (Schladebeck n.pag.). According to the piece, the APA is cautioning men to beware of the “masculinity ideology,” which it defines as “a particular constellation of standards [...], including: anti-femininity, achievement, eschewal of the appearance of weakness, and adventure, risk and violence” (Schladebeck n.pag.). While this article and the wording of the new APA guidelines express themselves through the more socially aware lexicon of early twenty-first-century cultural discourse, anxieties about masculinity have been a prominent feature of American society for decades, even centuries. The post-World War II period, in particular, witnessed an immense recalibration of the American economy and cultural arena that transformed popular conceptions of masculinity and drastically altered what it meant to be a man in modern America. As a result, a host of new social discourses emerged, warning of the decline of American masculinity and threatening a catastrophic feminisation of the modern man. Over the course of this paper, I will argue that Kurt Vonnegut’s 1973 novel *Breakfast of Champions*, as well offering what critic Peter Messant calls a widescale indictment of the numerous flaws in American life, specifically satirises pervasive cultural anxieties about waning American masculinity and, through the character of Dwayne Hoover, hints at the dangers of adhering to rigid constructions of manhood. Moreover, I believe that by doing so Vonnegut anticipates contemporary cultural conversations about the dangers of toxic masculinity and aggressive performances of maleness.

The decades following the Second World War were a time of transformation and tumult. Not only did the United States emerge from the ashes of war as a newly dominant political superpower, but the social landscape of America was radically altered as thousands of returning veterans were enabled to enter university, enmesh themselves in a white-collar industry and purchase a suburban home, all under the auspices of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (informally referred to as the GI Bill). Consequently, not only did America witness the birth of a new, synthetic middle class, but the US economy was itself transformed: major industries shifted away from manufacturing and production to an economy of ideas and information. By the mid-1950s, increased access to third-level education and the demands of a newly affluent nation created an economy in which white-collar office or managerial workers outnumbered blue-collar labourers for the first time in American history. This epoch also witnessed the unprecedented growth of immense organisations within both the public and private sectors. For many observers, the immediate post-war period was defined by a bureaucratisation of American culture, as the organisations that spread so prolifically across the United States were, for the most part, large, labyrinthine and impersonal.

Published in 1973, just as America's post-war economic boom was contracting, an inevitable victim of the global oil crisis that began the same year, *Breakfast of Champions* is situated firmly within this crucible of social and economic ferment. The landscape inhabited by Dwayne Hoover, Vonnegut's ostensible protagonist, reflects the growth of gargantuan corporations during the post-war period. Dwayne himself is implicated in this new economy as he lays claim to a veritable phalanx of thriving businesses – car washes, fast food restaurants, a Holiday Inn, a Pontiac dealership. Significantly, however, none of these businesses are individual small businesses; rather they are franchises, tiny cells within a

larger corporate organism. Each one is identical to every other unit in the franchise, there is no room for individualism or innovation in this economy – only conformity and mass-produced homogeneity. When Dwayne stays overnight at the Holiday Inn in which he owns a share, we are told that

"he adored his room. It was so new and cool and clean. It was so *neutral!* It was the brother of thousands upon thousands of other rooms in Holiday Inns all over the world".

(Breakfast of Champions 78)

Dwayne is the archetypal post-war subject. He not only profits from the expanding mid-century economy, but he also relishes its uniformity, its promulgation of sameness and its eradication of individualism. This affinity for the uniform is not, however, unique to Dwayne Hoover. Rather Dwayne himself is symptomatic of a changing cultural landscape wherein the growth of vast, homogenous corporate entities served to create a culture of belongingness, a site where individuality was increasingly viewed as abnormal and conformity became the new ideal. In his influential sociological text *The Organization Man*, published in 1956, William H. Whyte argued that post-war American society was different from previously existing societies because it was guided by "a belief in the group as the source of creativity; a belief in 'belongingness' as the ultimate need of the individual; and a belief in the application of science to achieve the belongingness" (22). Whyte attributed this trend to the growth of large corporations, noting how many of these companies required obedience and conformity from their employees.

As a consequence of this fetishised conformity there was a growing concern, especially amongst writers and intellectuals of the period, that individuality was being effaced in favour of a culture of mass-production and adherence to broad cultural norms. In *The*

Organization Man Whyte is careful to emphasise how the culture of conformity that defined the post-war era was something of an unusual development in the United States. After all, American culture had always been defined by notions of self-reliance and individualism – think of the heroes who most exemplify America’s foundational mythopoeia: the Pilgrim Fathers, the heroes of the frontier, the mythic self-made man. Their defining traits are individualism, an enterprising spirit and a courageous disregard for the mediocrity of the crowd. According to Richard Slotkin,

“In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who [...] tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness – the rogues, adventurers, and land-boomers [...]” (Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 4).

As we can see, there is a connection, deeply woven into the fabric of US identity, between individualism and the American self. Throughout history, as this individualism has been threatened by increased bureaucratisation or expanding industry, critics have always been quick to malign the disappearance of the authentic American man. In the 1950s, Whyte likewise admonished the immense paradigm shift that he viewed as responsible for the deindividuation of American men:

"A very curious thing has been taking place in this country almost without our knowing it. In a country where individualism -- independence and self-reliance -- was the watchword for three centuries the view is now coming to be accepted that the individual himself has no meaning except as a member of a group." (Whyte 18)

However, while Whyte's concern may couch itself in the language of what Timothy Melley has described as agency panic – a terror of how large-scale institutions manipulate discreet selfhoods – the broader implications of the post-war culture of conformity were conceived of as inhering in their tacit assault on manhood. Americans, therefore, worried about how corporate culture was beginning to erode traditional notions of masculinity, which had for so long been soldered to the ideal of rugged masculinity. The manner in which the post-war decades prized conformity over individualism alongside the growth of sedentary office jobs led many to worry that the post-war decades were witnessing a feminisation of American men. In 1958, *Look* magazine went so far to publish an article series entitled “The Decline of the American Male”, which stated:

“[S]cientists worry that in the years since the end of World War II, [the American male] has been changed radically and dangerously; that he is no longer the masculine, strong-minded man who pioneered the continent and built America's greatness.” (qtd. In Cohan 6)

It would of course be fallacious to believe that this post-war panic about diminishing manhood was unique to post-war America. As David Buchbinder has observed,

“Despite the evident belief that masculinity and femininity are unchanging and inevitable properties of male and female bodies, respectively, these attributes are in fact culturally specific and historically conditioned.” (4)

Thus, masculinity is not a static, immovable and tangible entity; rather it is a fluid and dynamic set of ideas and associations that are constantly being reimagined and renegotiated across cultures and epochs. While the title of this paper refers to the “post-war crisis of American masculinity”, it is imperative to note that such crises were and are

multiple, and have proliferated across diverse cultures at different times and in different ways. Post-World War II concerns about waning masculinity can therefore be seen as simply one in a series of crisis points during which dominant cultural constructions of gender appeared to be in flux

Like previous panics, the post-war crisis of masculinity clustered around new technologies, changing fashions and new economic models. In the years following World War II, it had become increasingly difficult to define manhood according to ingrained templates. Masculinity was no longer rigidly separated from femininity via the careful delineation of the public and private spheres, nor could it be understood as the ability to use one's physical strength or prowess to provide for and defend one's family. Within such an anxious context, as deindividuating bureaucracies and suburban ease seemed to undermine ingrained ideas about manhood, it is hardly surprising that individuals and American society as a whole would endeavour to cling to traditional notions of masculinity while becoming ever more suspicious of anything that threatened this construction of maleness. *Breakfast of Champions* engages with and satirises post-war anxieties about shifting conceptions of masculinity. And, indeed, for the remainder of this paper, I would like to analyse the myriad diverse ways in which *Breakfast of Champions* attempts to undermine normative constructions of masculinity while also highlighting the destructive nature of hegemonic American masculinity.

According to RW Connell, hegemonic masculinity is the idea that "at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted." (77) That is, notions of legitimate, acceptable or ideal masculinity change across cultures and historical epochs. Within the context of mid-twentieth-century America, for example, certain forms of rugged,

heterosexual, aggressive masculinity are valorised, while other forms of masculinity – queer masculinities, for instance – are demonised.

In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut is critical of this kind of hegemonic masculinity, which he sees as defined by aggression and the suppression of emotion. At numerous points throughout the novel, his satire focuses on traditional signifiers of masculinity, as often romanticised exemplars of manhood are unveiled as paragons of violence and destruction. When describing a character who is a graduate of West Point, Vonnegut describes this institution as “a military academy which turned young men into homicidal maniacs for use in war” (153). Similarly, he does not praise football-players as heroic or manly, instead he likens the game to the brutality of war. Throughout *Breakfast of Champions* expressions of hegemonic masculinity are conceived not as symbols of strength to be praised and emulated; rather, they are reconfigured as loci of violence and aggression. *Breakfast of Champions* is a wide-ranging satire, and Vonnegut identifies unhealthy, or in contemporary parlance, toxic, expressions of masculinity in all areas of post-war culture. He draws attention to the ubiquity of sexual violence, financial and economic competitiveness, and the prevalence of unaddressed mental health problems amongst men. However, it is in his protagonist, Dwayne Hoover, that we find Vonnegut’s most incisive critique of what the APA refers to as the “masculinity ideology” and what has become known in popular culture as toxic masculinity: that is, a construction of manhood defined by anti-femininity, extreme competitiveness, aggression, and a contempt for the appearance of weakness. Dwayne is a successful businessman, he lives in the most desirable residential neighbourhood in Midland City, and while his wife passed away some years ago, he is currently having an affair with his beautiful co-worker Francine. On the surface, Dwayne appears to be thriving. His adherence to traditional notions of independence, inner-direction and extreme competitiveness have

made him the most affluent individuals in his town; he is popular, successful and well-liked. Yet, we are told early on in the novel that Dwayne is suffering from an unspecified mental illness. Vonnegut explains that his brain is manufacturing bad chemicals which are slowly eating away at his sanity. Dwayne's madness remains hidden from his community and those around him for much of the novel until it explodes in a spectacular display of violence in the novel's climax. Although Dwayne is prominent figure in his community, he is alienated. He cannot express his feelings or share his mental turmoil with others. Dwayne's suffering cannot be articulated due to cultural prohibitions that prohibit men from displaying emotion or vulnerability. His struggles go unnoticed because his society is one that associates masculinity with strength and a lack of emotion. Moreover, as is evident by the repeated references to traditional, physical expressions of manhood, like the military and football, Dwayne's society clearly views violence as the only legitimate outlet for men's feelings. It is therefore unsurprising that Dwayne's mental illness remains invisible until it finally manifests in physical violence.

In their newly issued guidelines for treating men, the American Psychological Association describes the many ways in which the so-called "masculinity ideology" damages the physical and mental health of men: "Though men benefit from patriarchy, they are also impinged upon by patriarchy" (Pappas n.pag.) The pressure to adhere to normative modes of masculinity is destructive, with the APA noting that men "commit 90 percent of homicides in the United States and represent 77 percent of homicide victims" (Pappas n.pag.) At the same time, men are "3.5 times more likely than women to die by suicide" (Pappas n.pag.) Dwayne Hoover in many ways embodies the destructive potential of attempting to adhere to a rigid construction of manhood grounded in physical and emotional strength: he is unable to express any real emotive grief about the death of his

wife; he is estranged from his son, Bunny, whose homosexuality he both fears and resents; and he is unable to connect emotionally or sexually with his mistress Francine. While the post-war period was defined by an anxiety about the increased feminisation of American men, the dominant archetype of manhood, to which men were expected to adhere, was still defined by physicality, aggression and stoicism. Consequently, it can be argued that Dwayne's desire to emulate this mode of hegemonic masculinity results in his alienation from those around him, his turn towards violence and the invisible deterioration of his mental health. Indeed, the recent APA report on the dangers of the masculinity ideology noted that "men who bought into traditional notions of masculinity were more negative about seeking mental health services than those with more flexible gender attitudes" (Pappas n.pag.) Dwayne's silence is therefore emblematic of a cultural paradigm that conceives of manhood as defined by strength and views any expression of weakness or pain as a contravention of normative masculinity.

Dwayne Hoover embodies a transitional moment in American culture. He is the product of a time when ingrained notions of masculinity were undermined by new economic and social realities. Moreover, *Breakfast of Champions* takes place in the early 1970s, in a period when dominant constructions of manhood and the default privileges afforded to white men were beginning to be challenged by the cultural changes ushered in by Second-Wave feminism, the civil rights movement and the push towards LGBTQ liberation. In particular, this era represented a shift away from the conception of white, heterosexual, cisgender manhood as the norm, or default setting. In *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*, Sally Robinson notes that, prior to the proliferation of liberationist movements in the 1960s, white men were afforded a degree of power due to their status as "unmarked" (qtd. in Buchbinder 20). Prior to this cultural shift, terms such as "gender"

seemed to solely refer to women, while “race” was associated only with people of colour. White manhood seemed exempt from notions of race and gender due to its status as the cultural norm, a natural identity to whom these categories did not speak. Robinson observes that the growth of civil rights movements in the 1960s forced white men to think of themselves in terms of both racial and gender identity as public discourses on these subjects became increasingly ubiquitous. It is, Robinson claims, for this reason that post-1960s fiction began to feature more and more images of wounded masculinity and damaged white men. Dwayne’s excess of bad chemicals, his incipient madness, exists within a social and literary context in which white manhood is no longer the sole, “natural” identity, but simple one form of masculinity amongst many (qtd. in Buchbinder. 21) And while, white manhood still occupied, and continues to occupy, a privileged position, the proliferation of other identities further exacerbated cultural anxieties about American masculinity. Throughout *Breakfast of Champions*, Dwayne’s white, heterosexual masculinity is repeatedly positioned in opposition to other forms of masculinity. Often Dwayne’s masculinity is represented in contrast to the queer masculinity of his son Bunny, whom he exiled to military school at the age of ten for vocally expressing a desire to be a woman, as well as that of his gender queer co-worker Harry LeSabre. Significantly, we also see Dwayne’s white masculinity depicted in opposition to the masculinity of a young, disenfranchised black man, Wayne Hoobler, for whom manhood can never connote dominance or economic success. Consequently, *Breakfast of Champions* dramatises the manner in which hegemonic masculinity, in order to exist as the dominant mode of manhood, must always exist in opposition to modes of masculinity that are diminished and rendered subordinate to the one, socially acceptable norm or standard.

Vonnegut, however, does not simply depict the manner in which the existence of a single, hegemonic mode of masculinity is contingent upon the subordination of other forms

of masculinity, such as queer or racialised masculinities, he also portrays the destructive nature of hegemonic modes of masculinity. In the violent rampage that comes as the novel's crescendo, Dwayne attacks and injures some random people. However, it is significant to note that many of those harmed by Dwayne's violent attack are queer men like Bunny and Harry and men of colour like Wayne. The implication here seems to be that the pressure to adhere to dominant constructions of masculinity does not simply damage those who, like Dwayne, attempt to replicate the ideals of strength and independence associated with white, heterosexual manhood, but it also marginalises and victimises those who because of their race, gender identity or sexual orientation are excluded from acceptable masculinity. Through his depiction of Dwayne's isolation and silent suffering, as well as his portrayal of how hegemonic masculinity brutally oppresses those who are unable, or unwilling, to abide by its rigid strictures, Vonnegut anticipates contemporary conversations about toxic masculinity. *Breakfast of Champions* depicts a cultural arena in which conceptions of masculinity are changing and evolving, a result of both new social and economic models and a product of the liberationist movements of the 1960s. However, the novel seems to warn against clinging to a single, overarching definition of manhood, particularly one defined by aggression, alienation and emotional detachment. Rather, the novel warns against such rigid constructions of masculinity and depicts the multitudinous ways in which they harm both individual men and the wider community.

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