

MEN IN QUESTION:  
RETHINKING WHITE MASCULINITY AFTER THE SIXTIES

A Senior Honors Thesis

by

SAMANTHA JANE MARSH

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs  
& Academic Scholarships  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE  
RESEARCH FELLOWS

April 2001

Group:  
Humanities

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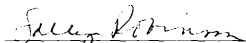
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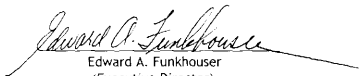
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April 2001

Group: Humanities

## ABSTRACT

Men in Question:

Rethinking White Masculinity after the Sixties. (April 2001)

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The social and political movements of the 1960s created a contemporary crisis in white masculinity. The civil rights, women's liberation, and counterculture movements all challenged traditional notions of white masculinity by shattering conventional paternal authority, creating men as violators and no longer protectors, and causing deep personal insecurities in men's lives. Creators of both literary and cinematic representations before 1980 recognized the destruction of traditional white masculinity and the crisis therein, and their works suggest a need for men to rethink masculinity in order to reform it. Later, authors and directors reflect the 1980s ideas of white masculinity, while rewriting the history of the crisis as a way to reconstruct a more traditional ideology of white masculinity for a new society. By examining the representations of paternal authority and the issues that accompany it, such as responsibility and honesty, the image of men as violator and later the return to the protector role, and individual versus collective disorientation, changes within the depictions of the contemporary crisis in white masculinity emerge in novels and films.

This project is lovingly dedicated to my parents,  
Howard and Evelyn,  
without whose support my dreams would never materialize.  
As my greatest friends and most influential mentors,  
you have given me the greatest gifts of  
aspiration and inspiration.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Sally Robinson for her wisdom, patience, and guidance.  
Your teachings have inspired me and given me new confidence.

Thanks also to the other influential professors of my undergraduate career:  
Victoria Rosner, for showing me that I was capable  
of achieving beyond what I had ever expected;  
Douglas Brooks, for making me smile and for the endless encouragement;  
Terry Anderson, for giving me a new perspective  
on history as well as life;  
Drew Vastano, for being a confidant and helping me realize my potential.

And much gratitude to Ms. Frances Weeg  
for her friendship, nurturing, and teaching.

Many thanks to my friends and colleagues  
whose interest and assistance  
is very much appreciated.

And a special Gig 'em and much love to my sister,  
Mary Scibetta,  
whose love of teaching continues to influence me.

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## INTRODUCTION

A contemporary crisis in white American masculinity emerged in the late 1960s in response to challenges against traditional white male authority. The uprisings of the Sixties, including feminism, civil rights and gay liberation movements, the new youth culture and counterculture rejected the conservative dogmas of older generations. Because of this rejection, insecurity arose within white masculinity. Questions such as "what makes a man?" and "how should a man retain his authority?" became harder to answer in light of this crisis. The 1980s attempted to remedy this crisis by seeking a return to family values and more accepted roles of masculinity.

The argument that follows consists of differentiating between pre-1980 and post-1980 literary and cinematic representations of white masculinity. As societal views of white masculinity changed from the 1960s to the 1980s, the ideas of men presented in both novels and films changed. Authors and directors do seemingly align their views of masculinity with those of the American public. Furthermore, pre-1980 creators represented white masculinity in such a way as to coerce men first into recognizing the destruction of traditional roles of masculinity and then to suggest that they rethink their roles as men in order to anticipate future challenges to their masculinity. In contrast, the post-1980 authors and directors again represent the crisis in white masculinity, but they represent the reconstruction of white masculinity in new terms for a new generation.

The following chapter on "The Sixties and American Masculinity: Effects, Influence, and the Contemporary Crisis in White Masculinity" follows the creation of American masculine ideology in the twentieth century from its beginnings with the idea of the "self-made man,"

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This thesis follows the style and format of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.

through the Depression era crisis, to the WASP ideology of the prosperous post-war 1950s. Further, it outlines specific references to movements and ideas that threatened traditional white masculinity in America. A concerted front established itself as a rejection of conservative ideas of manhood with the civil rights, women's liberation, and gay liberation movements. The counterculture and new outspoken youth culture provided a greater push against the more accepted ideas of their fathers. These groups essentially rejected and then proposed alternatives to more conventional white masculinity.

The next three chapters expose how the shifts in the contemporary crisis in white masculinity are represented in literature and film after the 1960s. Because of the vast amount of work in this period, three categories were established in order to more closely examine the differences between pre-1980 and post-1980 works. The first category examines novels and films concerned with the effect of the Vietnam War on white American soldiers, and the second section looks at changes men confronted in their families and homes with the growing independence of women and the new challenges of fatherhood. The final division covers both a novel and film that rely on broad historical evidence to background the crisis men face in their roles as father figures, providers, friends, and husbands.

In the "Men in Combat" section, the novels Dispatches and The Things They Carried and the films Coming Home and Platoon are respectively compared as contrasting representations of white masculinity after the Vietnam War. Whereas the pre-1980s works of Michael Herr and Hal Ashby show the loss of paternal authority and the image of men as individual violators in a very honest manner, the later works of Tim O'Brien and Oliver Stone attest to the 1980s desire to rework history as a way to recreate white masculinity. As such, men of later novels and films return to paternal authority and responsibility and collective victimhood as a means to combat their insecurities and fears.



"Fatherhood and Family" considers the contrasts between pre-1980 and post-1980 portrayals of men as fathers, in particular those between *The Nuclear Age* and *White Noise* and the films *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Three Men and a Baby*. The challenges to paternal roles as posed by women's liberation and new youth provide much of the basis for comparison. The reclaiming of the strong yet kind father figure, who is more capable of adapting to sudden change in the family structure is a post-1980 reconstruction of traditional masculine ideology. Where once they were to blame for failed marriages and poor relationships with their children, men of later depictions become victims of circumstance who take it upon themselves to remedy the crisis of the household.

Finally, by examining *Rabbit Redux* and the film *Forrest Gump* in the section titled "Losing Effective Fathers and Gaining Good Sons," we again see the transformation of insecure white males into men more able to come to terms with their responsibilities as men, be it through relationships with other understanding males, the greater acceptance of new paternal roles, or simply due to a rewriting of history.

In essence, by exploring the issues of paternal authority and familial responsibilities, including those of honesty and patriotism, the idea of man as first violator and then as a victim, and individual or collective responses to the social and emotional disorientation of men, we see the distinction between pre-1980 and post-1980 literature and films representing the contemporary crisis in white masculinity that emerged as a result of 1960s culture. Pre-1980 works reflect the destruction of traditional white masculine ideology and suggest that men must rethink masculinity in order to remedy the crisis, but they provide no solution as how best to repair white masculinity. In contrast, the works after 1980 reflect the new conservative ideas of white masculinity while their authors seek to reconstruct white males as authority figures for a new America.

CHAPTER I  
THE SIXTIES AND AMERICAN MASCULINITY:  
EFFECTS, INFLUENCES, AND THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS IN MASCULINITY

A certain traditional white masculine ideology once constituted the backbone of American society. The ideal man guided his country with an intelligent, firm, and patriotic hand. Young men aspired to become their fathers, with similar jobs and homes. The white male considered himself superior to women, children, and people of other races because he dominated the professional sphere, acted as the sole breadwinner for his family, and lived in neighborhoods where others could not. The American man had "the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us;" hence, it is this very fear that led American men to seize a relatively unspoken supremacy over those they deemed inferior whether in intelligence, ability, or desire (Kimmel 6). Even though this masculine ideology has remained relatively stable, various pressures have over time pushed men into crises with their masculinity. The contemporary crisis is therefore only the latest in a historical series of crises in white American masculinity.

Since the beginning of the United States, the idea of the "self-made man" has remained an integral part of the white masculine ideology. He depended on no one to help him achieve his goals. And simply because he accomplished these dreams without the help of others, he should lead others with his knowledge and experience. This "self-made man" controlled the entrance of others into the realm of American success and differentiated himself from others by proposing that he epitomized the realization of the American dream (Kimmel 9).

During the Depression era of the 1930s, a crisis in masculinity arose as a result of men's insecurities about their inability to adequately provide for their families. Since they had believed in the concept of the supreme, successful male as the head of society, they felt challenged and disheartened when they could not remedy the problems for which they, in some

sense, were responsible. But with the entrance of the United States into World War II, a new feeling of confidence overshadowed earlier frustrations (Stearns 127). These men were once again the brave defenders of their country -- proud, honest, and successful. When they returned victorious to their former professions and homes, many women who had helped in the war effort also returned to their previous occupations. Men, therefore, did not feel extremely threatened by the increase of women into the workforce since many gladly relieved their employment to their male counterparts.

The post-war economic boom produced a 1950s era of consumerism and conservatism in which males returned to their roles as the sole breadwinners and women once again subscribed to what Betty Friedan termed in 1963 a "feminine mystique." American society established a kind of balance between men and women, blacks and whites, rich and poor. The 1950s introduced mass production of television, cars, and appliances for the happy housewife. Suburbanization was on the rise, with conforming white males leading the race to success (Anderson, The Sixties 7).

During this prosperous period the WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) idea became common as what attributes one should have in order to be the most successful American. These were the Eisenhowers, the men in the "grey flannel suits," the producers and contributors to this post-war prosperity. American people seemed to rely on white males as the definitive guide to the country. As such, presumably white men and other groups suggested that the "ideal American man" be composed of certain characteristics; for example, he should subscribe to the WASP ideal, be urban, married, heterosexual, decent-looking, employed, patriotic, somewhat athletic, and therefore, successful (Goffman, qtd. in Kimmel 5). A degree of anonymity accompanied this concept, but men who could attain above and beyond these requirements were by no means expected to remain ordinary. For example, men like Audie Murphy and John Wayne exemplified the roles of the American soldier while John Kennedy (though not completely

fulfilling the WASP requirements, as he was Catholic) exuded the typical 1950s youthful idealism. Actors like Marlon Brando portrayed the firm but chivalrous gentleman, and Elvis Presley made hits out of tales of love and loss, victory and God. As such, the WASP ideology and its proponents gave a 1950s rebirth to traditional roles of white American masculinity that many had questioned in light of the Depression era. Nevertheless, the success was short-lived, for the Sixties and the new attitudes the decade ushered in generated a rebellion against that recovered white masculine authority.

The American Sixties have become a decade known best for the massive cultural, social, and political upheavals, including the sexual revolution, the civil rights, gay liberation, and women's liberation movements, the multiple assassination of the country's leaders, and the conflict in Vietnam and the debate at home over American involvement. These "revolutions" were instigated by youth culture, idealism, a growing freedom of expression leading to protest, inspiration from Asian religions, rebellion, changes in sexual and personal relationships, and the creation of a counterculture. To leftist idealists, revolution was at hand, and they glorified in the possibility of changing a society in which many felt trapped in unfulfilling roles; but to the right, it became known as an era of subversion and moral corruption, causing right wing conservatives to fear for the stability of their long-held beliefs (Marwick 3). What images we commonly recall as instances of 1960s popular culture, for example the hippies, are actually the result of revolts against the very mainstream flow of culture. Those movements set in motion in the 1960s questioned things such as McCarthy-like fanaticism, "in loco parentis" rules on college campuses, and in essence, the white male Protestant breadwinner ethic under which parents had raised children (Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* 100). Members of movements desired greater representation for more diverse groups in American culture, to speak out against authority without such great fear of repercussions, and to discover a world in which they "fit."

The rumblings of the civil rights movement began in the mid-Fifties with Martin Luther King, Jr. and other black leaders espousing their belief in a need to increase the lot of black Americans. Black men felt "the world is a hostile, dangerous place -- a jungle. It is uncompromising territory where a man is either the hunter or the hunted...since black men's relationships to power and sense of manhood has always been challenged in this land, we must always be on the move" (Simmons 267). Perhaps the challenge of blacks to white male authority began with the Montgomery bus boycott or lunch counter sit-ins, but it became a nationwide issue when the Freedom Rides began in 1961 and in 1963 with the march on Birmingham (Anderson, *The Sixties* 15, 29, 35). The reactions to the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the assassination of Medgar Evers, and the integration of the University of Alabama all frustrated particularly segregationist white males (Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* 72), but the "I Have a Dream" speech and the passage of the Voting Rights Act made it abundantly clear to all white males that the time of their supreme dominance over the nation was dwindling (Anderson, *The Sixties* 38, 71).

New voices were shouting for recognition, and the evolution of civil rights protests into the Black Panther party of Bobby Seale and Huey Newton as well as the more radical measures of Malcolm X proved to whites that while the "slavery experience had 'stripped the Negro male of his masculinity' and 'condemned him to a eunuch-like existence in a culture that venerates masculine primacy,'" these new black males were no longer content to remain passive (Marable 21). Their challenges for greater political representation, increased education, and eliminating Jim Crow segregation in the South and de facto segregation in the North succeeded in severely frustrating the typical white American male who once found security in his unchallenged ability to effectively rule his country and peoples he considered inferior to himself. By questioning conservative ideologies protecting the dominance of white males in American society, black leaders caused a crisis in white masculinity. White males faced a greater opponent than the

Depression or World War II in blacks intent on demanding increased representation within the American system.

The gay liberation movement further disturbed the established tenets of white masculine ideology when the movement's members, like those of the civil rights movement, sought a stronger foothold in America. Though not necessarily seeking political representation or social acceptance per se, they believed a necessity existed for acknowledging those who differed from typical American males. As a result, the question of "what makes a man a real man?" became more difficult to answer. Certainly homosexuals do not adhere to socially accepted behaviors, but many considered whether their differences were enough to alienate them from society. However, the movement did indeed produce social recognition of homosexuals as another diverse group in America. But as a response to openly homosexual behavior, homophobia developed (particularly among males). As a result of male homophobia relying on gross misconceptions of gay men (for instance, the femininity of both their dress and speech), these false claims became the basis upon which American males judged other males (Lehne 237). Most importantly, the gay liberation movement, the responsive recognition of homosexuality and the advent of homophobia, evidenced to many men the need to rethink traditional ideas of masculinity. John Lennon said "isn't it time we destroyed the macho ethic?...Where has it gotten us? Are we still going to have to be clubbing each other to death? Do I have to arm wrestle you to have a relationship with you as another man?" (qtd. in Kimmel 293). To interested observers (both male and female), it seemed that men must rid themselves of barriers posed by sexual orientation in order to have more fulfilling relationships with other men. Again, as men were reveling in the successes of the post-war era, groups demanding liberation challenged them to redefine basic ideas of American society.

Other ethnic liberation movements fought for greater political and social representation, while the growing youth culture sought removal from the inhibited lifestyle of 1950s parents. In

two distinctive ways the younger generation rejected the pressures of upholding the WASP and supreme masculine ideology. Within the counterculture that embraced greater sexual freedom and drug use, they deliberately disobeyed the ideas of accepted behavior. Time proclaimed 1964 "The Year of the Kids," and followed with 1967 and the "Summer of Love" (Anderson, The Sixties 97). The kids embraced Timothy Leary's "tune in, turn on, drop out" during the Summer of Love and continued it in 1969 with Woodstock (qtd. in Unger 178). Where the members of the hippie culture rejected the beliefs in white paternal authority, other youths fought for political representation in a system dominated by white males. Student rebellions like the Berkeley Free Speech movement and the protests at Columbia seemed responses of white sons to absentee fathers (Farrell 157, 166). Because their fathers had tried to assert a dominance over their lives without maintaining a meaningful relationship to them, these youths felt a need to speak out against a white male authority that would not associate with them as responsible and anxious members of the American population.

Moreover, protests against the war in Vietnam were in essence also responses to the actions of America's white male leaders. The teach-ins, the Moratorium of 1969, the organized resistance against the Selective Service, the formation of anti-war groups, and Johnson's plummeting approval rating attested to the dissatisfaction of the American people, particularly the outspoken youths, with the destructive tendencies of the democratic system in the hands of white males (Anderson, The Sixties 65, 174, 87, 107). Even veterans questioned the rationale of the nation's leaders by resisting combat first at Hamburger Hill and later throwing their medals at the Capitol (Anderson, The Movement and the Sixties 320, 380). The Vietnam War not only signaled a defeat of American idealism but a deeper loss of trust in white male authority. The capability of political leaders to act as men came under scrutiny when the public attempted to rationalize America's loss in the war, the actions taken in response to protesters like those at Kent State, and even the objectives of leaders; when no sufficient answers surfaced, the

American public inevitably concluded that the once successful white American male was struggling to be a leader and a protector.

The women's liberation movement had by far the most impact on American masculinity. The increased women into the workplace, the legalization of birth control in 1960, and the Equal Pay Act of 1963 upset the general tone of babyboomer generation ideals (Anderson, The Movement and the Sixties 312). Other movements provided arenas for women to take on new roles of leadership. But the protest at the Miss America pageant of 1968, the enforcement of Affirmative Action, and the growing debates over the Equal Rights Amendment brought women's liberationists to the forefront of the challenge against typical patriarchal power (Anderson, The Movement and the Sixties 228, 337, 359). These women viewed men as "all powerful, misogynist oppressors" (Hooks 578). The Redstocking Manifesto of 1970 proclaimed that "men have controlled all political, economic, and cultural institutions and backed up this control with physical force...men receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy" (Hooks 579). This statement most profoundly describes the general attitude of the revolutionary Sixties against traditional white male authority. Since women's liberationists rejected the most basic roles in which men placed them (i.e. mothers, daughters, wives), they succeeded in undermining the stability of masculine authority in the home, where society expected men to exert the greatest amount of control and confidence.

By rejecting the traditional dogmas of American culture in favor of increased personal liberties and rights for more diverse groups, movements of the 1960s altered the extent to which white males could effectively govern their home and country. Losing the ability to assert control and demonstrate confidence with previously accepted ideas forced white American men into a period of crisis. These men needed a revised conceptualization of masculinity to return to their positions of respected authority within society, but as they were disempowered, many failed in their rash attempts to remedy this crisis. By seeking a return to family values and tradition in



the 1980s, conservatives resurrected the strong male figure for America, but not without painstaking changes to incorporate an appreciation for diversity, respect for women, and new methods by which to better adjust to challenges into the traditional masculine ideology.

## CHAPTER II

## MEN IN COMBAT:

DISPATCHES AND THE THINGS THEY CARRIED & COMING HOME AND PLATOON

Since the 1960s the Vietnam War and its inherent destructiveness has fascinated American society and art. This is sometimes attributed to the constant alterations in the roles and definitions of gender (Jeffords 53). In particular, what Michael Kimmel deemed the "resurgently masculinist" 1980s witnessed a rebirth of interest in a conflict that in many ways transformed the public's idea of the typical white American soldier into the image of an angry and insecure male (Kimmel 270). In particular, the novels Dispatches and The Things They Carried are profound representatives of the contrasts between pre-1980 and post-1980 interpretations of white masculinity. The picture of white American masculinity that emerges from these contrasting novels is very similar to the differences one finds in Coming Home, directed by Hal Ashby and Platoon, directed by Oliver Stone. We can see that the pre-1980 authors and directors of Vietnam literature and film were representing the destruction of traditional roles of white masculinity. Further, through their images of white American soldiers who were disempowered by the American public's response to their actions in Vietnam, powerless to control the situation, and confused enough individually not to seek any remedy to this new crisis, they reveal the instability in contemporary masculinity. These representations are efforts to induce men to rethink masculinity in new terms so that masculinity (or some ideal of it) may be saved through reform. The brutal honesty, loss of paternal roles and rejection of masculine standards they consider shattered, the image of the soldier as victimizer, and the independent disorientation of characters build the need for men to assert themselves outside of their former selves.

Post-1980 Vietnam literature and film reflect the current standards of masculinity emerging in the masculinist 1980s. By essentially rewriting the Vietnam experience, authors and directors created men who were still dysfunctional but who were managing to come to terms with the challenges against them and their new status as men. This man has difficulty in fulfilling his obligations to his family and country to act in particular ways, and this becomes a mark, not of his failure as a man but of his victimization by forces beyond his control. Paradoxically, this victimization enables a reconstruction of male authority whereby the image of a white soldier is complemented with a new sense of victimhood. Once he is a victim of circumstance, collectively disoriented but capable of upholding his responsibilities and reforming himself, he is an authority figure for the new 1980s masculinity.

Like no other book written during the Sixties about the horrid and unrelenting nature of the war in Vietnam, Michael Herr's Dispatches (1968) provided the American public with the absolute picture of what America's fighting men were experiencing and what brutes they were becoming. This novel is particularly important because unlike other viewpoints, Michael Herr relied on a journalistic perspective, thereby enhancing the validity of the awful truth he was giving to Americans at home. Herr actually "merged with the 'reality' of the war by accepting its consensus, assuming its voices" (Jeffords 27). The characters of Dispatches are men who recognize the destruction of their traditional roles of masculinity, and Herr concludes that masculinity must be reconsidered in order for men to adapt to the challenges posed to masculinity by the Vietnam war and the protests against it.

On the other hand, Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried (1990) presents itself as an elaborate personal narrative. In this way, it makes the harshness of the war seem less real to the public. The stories, admittedly not true accounts, lead one to believe that this facade of "fiction" is really masking "fact." In this novel, O'Brien's characters refer to the idea that "war makes a man" (O'Brien 87); it is not simply an obligation one must fulfill as a dutiful citizen but

a necessary element to the maturation of a healthy white American male, thus supporting the 1980s reconstruction of masculinity that in many ways returns to the idealism of the 1950s. Moreover, it is Tim O'Brien's undertaking to reconstruct masculinity within his characters, showing that men involved in the Vietnam War are capable of adjustment to new standards of masculinity, and therefore, can once again be successful.

Within the novels themselves, we see several shifts between pre-1980 and post-1980 representations of white American men in Vietnam and what each suggests about masculinity. In Michael Herr's novel, male characters reinforce the idea that conservative paternal authority has disintegrated because of these sons' rejection of their fathers' traditional notions of masculinity. He attributes this rejection mostly to the problem that "most Americans would rather be told that their son is undergoing acute environmental reaction than to hear that he is suffering from shell shock" (Herr 91). For the men of *Dispatches*, Vietnam provided the impetus for the demise of respect for the paternal figure, in a sense echoing the same removal from the father's authority occurring within the United States as a result of uprisings such as those against "in loco parentis" rules on campus in which students asserted their rights against predominantly male administrations. Their fathers placed their sons in a precarious position by expecting them to serve in a war that so many deemed not only unnatural but also unnecessary. These soldiers recognized that their own fathers could not understand the destructiveness of the forces they were confronting. For instance, one young man who stated that his father wrote to him about "how proud he was that I'm here and how we have this duty to do...I'm gonna have to do all I can from killing [my father]", resents his father's principles (29). Hence, by repudiating former ideas of paternal authority, the men of *Dispatches* abdicated their own future responsibilities to the family. Through these acts of disavowal, Herr suggests that men must reconsider the ways in which they assert their authority as father figures.

But in Tim O'Brien's chapter "On the Rainy River," the strong influence of a paternal figure reemerges. Young Tim points to this idea when he states, "courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in infinite quantities, like an inheritance" (O'Brien 43). Such an inheritance for bravery and 'doing the right thing' comes from the dominant figure in a young man's life, his father. O'Brien forces himself to enter a war to which he is opposed because he feels that he has a responsibility to preserve the influence of men as protective father figures. For example, O'Brien writes about considering leaving for Canada in order to dodge the draft, but he says "I could almost hear [my father's] voice...I feared losing the respect of my parents" (48). Therefore, instead of behaving in a manner such as the earlier characters of Herr, O'Brien's character presents the newfound obligations of the post-1980s representative. He portrays a strong dutiful son who goes to Vietnam in order to preserve the more traditional paternal authority of his father. By responding to the wishes of his father, O'Brien's character helps support the new masculinity of the 1980s where men reconstructed paternal authority to include greater kindness but to also renew the strength of the father figure.

As part of the return to more traditional fatherly roles, Tim O'Brien substitutes lies for truth in order to protect his family. What is pertinent about this lack of honesty in post-1980s works is that the creators wanted to reaffirm the role of the strong paternal figure, the man who decides what is best for his family and gives and withholds information accordingly. O'Brien's character lies to his daughter on several occasions when she asks him "did you ever kill anybody?" (O'Brien 204). In this case, untruthfulness is substituted for honesty so that he is capable of maintaining his role as a decent and moral figure in his household, as he would not have been able to do had he admitted "I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief...[because] his jaw was in [the] throat [of the man I killed]" (203). By exposing his daughter to portions of his experience by taking her on a trip there, O'Brien reveals a certain amount of remorse. However, her experience is not a true one since her father stresses only

what was done to him and not what he did, thus supporting the new idealization of the white American male, particularly Vietnam veterans, in terms of victimhood. This victim figure is a 1980s attempt at the rehabilitation of white masculinity and an explanation for these men's inadequacies, both present and past. What Vietnam veterans had experienced, in essence what was *done to them*, became much more important than what *they did to others*. Susan Jeffords writes of the Vietnam veteran being transformed into a victim figure upon the discovery of the numbers suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress disorder, the effects of Agent Orange, and the dedication of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier by Ronald Reagan in 1984 (Jeffords 125).

Norman Bowker best represents the victim figure of The Things They Carried in his own words, "it's almost like I got killed in Nam...That night when Kiowa [a close friend] got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him...Feels like I'm still in deep shit" (O'Brien 178). O'Brien goes on to defend Norman, who "did not experience a failure of nerve that night [when Kiowa died]" (182). But O'Brien laments that he has been far more able to adjust after the war while men like Bowker could not and "hanged [himself] in the locker room of a YMCA" (177). Because of his suicide, Bowker epitomizes the idea of the veteran as a victim. Far from seeing returning Vietnam veterans as victims, Americans in the late 1960s viewed vets as hypermasculine violators. By establishing these men as victims in later rewritings of Vietnam, the public sees veterans as victims, unfortunate products of violent circumstance.

In correlation with prevailing attitudes of the late 1960s public that white American soldiers in Vietnam were simply finding outlets for rage and animalism, the men of Dispatches reacted to confrontation and inquiries by their families with a much more honest approach. For example, when Orrin discovers that his wife has been unfaithful, he responds by resolving to kill her when he returns home (Herr 127). What Herr proves here is that even though Orrin appears as a lunatic to Americans at home, thereby reinforcing their idea of the Vietnam soldier as a violent and angry male, he is lucky in the eyes of his comrades for wanting to having a reason to

survive. These feelings are not hidden from either his comrades or his family; Orrin is just one example of the new masculine crisis in which men relinquished their responsibilities to act as protectors and authority figures. Earlier representations of Vietnam do not support the "man as victim" theory, but reinforce the need to rethink masculinity in response to the public's growing distrust of the soldiers in Vietnam. And like other men of the period, Orrin is considered not a victim of circumstance but a repressed man who discovered an outlet for his intense anger.

As Herr relates early in his novel, "it was great if you could adapt, you had to try, but it wasn't the same as making a discipline, going into your own reserves and developing a real war metabolism" (Herr 14). The men of Herr's adventures were indeed much less concerned with the preservation of the image of the soldier as the brave protector of freedom. Instead, they were candid about their fears, the loss of control, and the general psychological fallout that was taking place within all of them. Evidenced in statements such as "I was scared every...minute, and I am no different from any body else!" and "the only thing left standing that looked true was your sense of how out of control things really were," the brutal truths Herr's company espoused showed to what extent these men had forgone the standard for bravery which society had attached to them (27, 48). This standard had thus been replaced with a model embracing openness about fear of death; hence, these men were less likely to conceal anxiety because of fear of shame. Their powerlessness was encompassing, even in this respect, for they were unable to control their fright when confronted with the constant threat of death. Beyond this, these soldiers reacted in various ways to threats placed upon them. Herr tells us that "a lot of men found their compassion in the war, some found it and couldn't live with it, war-washed shutdown of feeling...people retreated into positions of hard irony, cynicism, despair" (58). There was little regret for violent actions, and even less regret in showing fear of dying. These very reactions, as reported by Herr, contributed heavily to the construction of the powerless, dysfunctional white American soldier that emerged in the late 1960s. Coupled with this new

powerlessness was the idea of a hypermasculine reaction, mainly through violence, to the frustrations of war. As these men were less concerned with preserving the WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) image of their fathers, they became more concerned with survival by any means necessary. Survival included not thinking immediately about how to remedy the crisis of masculinity in response to the current destruction of traditional masculine standards.

It is this necessity of survival that is evident in both *Dispatches* and *The Things They Carried*. Nevertheless, the characters of the post-1980s Vietnam novel do exhibit the fear of shame, in many ways a fear of being less than masculine, not readily prevalent in the earlier works. As O'Brien writes, "some carried themselves with a sort of wistful resignation, others with pride or stiff soldierly discipline or good humor or macho zeal. They were afraid of dying but they were even more afraid to show it" (O'Brien 19). These men acted with "perfect balance and perfect posture" so that the others like them could not see their instinctive desire to hide (20). As O'Brien best explained, "it was courage, exactly; the object was not valor. Rather, they were too frightened to be cowards" (21). Unlike Herr, O'Brien idealizes these young men as frightened but even more scared of letting others know they have these fears of embarrassment.

The soldiers blamed themselves for things not under their control; for instance, O'Brien writes "the boy was explaining things to an absent judge. It wasn't to defend himself. The boy recognized his own guilt and wanted only to lay out the full causes" (O'Brien 192). Even O'Brien's character admits his own cowardice, his actual entry into the war (63). This representation supports men who avow weakness in such a way as to retain a proximity to the masculine ideals before them. These young men of post-1980 works reflect the new ideas of masculinity, such as bravery and renewing traditional masculine standards as protectors. But again, this supports the later reconstruction of white men as dysfunctional as a result of their



experiences in Vietnam. They are victims of an order to which they did not subscribe, namely old constructions of white masculinity that were destroyed as a result of the 1960s uprisings.

The insecurities of the white American soldier in the Vietnam jungle led to what Michael Herr concludes was a "huge collective nervous breakdown" (Herr 71). The actual diversity of the groups serving in Vietnam amazed Herr -- "incipient saints and realized homicidals, unconscious lyric poets and mean dumb motherfuckers with their brains all down in their necks" (30). Despite the suggestion that this fallout was a community event, the men of Herr's reports show that even with a certain amount of camaraderie between the soldiers and the journalists, a tremendous amount of disgust and anger filtered between individuals. An illustration occurs when Herr and his journalist comrades surprise a Marine with the idea that they are in Vietnam voluntarily. The Marine's "terrifying, evil smile...turned now to the purest hatred" (205). Collectively, these frustrations tied the individual members of the group together but also caused them to not be dependent upon anyone other than themselves and even, in Herr's case, to resent others not directly involved because they did not understand. What this suggests is that there was no common effort in accounts written during the war to rethink masculinity as a way to remedy the disappointment and rage that affected these men, and thus, left them feeling individually disoriented. But Herr, as an author with an agenda about the war and masculinity, felt that these young men must reconsider their positions as white American males but not if that meant sacrificing survival. Such a collective reconsideration was a project for the future; for the present time, the men of *Dispatches* had to struggle alone with their own frustrating emotions.

The isolated disorientation felt by the men of *Dispatches* was not an issue in *The Things They Carried*. These men acted in ways more conducive to bonding, creating the image of men who were destroyed while parts of a group. They enjoyed the same games, particularly checkers, that had a definite strategy whereas the war did not. Moreover, they shared common feelings of distaste for the war. Like others, O'Brien's character "held them personally and

individually responsible -- the polyestered Kiwanis boys, the merchants and farmers, the pious churchgoers, the chatty housewives," and this allied him with other men who felt the responsibility to his family and country to fight (O'Brien 48). They were playful, almost kid-like at times, sharing death pacts and pictures, stories and unseen fears. Thus, in the post-1980s an evident shift towards the creation of the 'war buddies' image occurred, elaborating on ideas of male soldierly camaraderie as a source of renewed support. Men of the later representations were joined in brotherhood again, reconstructing the idea of male bonding as conducive to individual strength.

The pre-1980 film that most fully presents the point of view of soldiers as violent and insecure is the Academy Award winning Coming Home (1978). Luke (Jon Voight), an embittered Vietnam veteran, suffers from weakness due to the loss of physical ability but regains some strength through his later protests against the war. Meanwhile Bob Hyde (Bruce Dern) experiences a comparable transformation from the normal white American male to the disturbed veteran. As a work of the 1970s, this film reflects the devastation of traditional white masculine roles and the instability that men faced as the public questioned their previous roles as protectors, but more importantly, it forces men to rethink their masculinity so that they may be more able to reform it.

The film Platoon (1986) depicts the charge of young men to uphold the traditional roles of white masculinity within the new terms of victimhood. This film represents prevailing 1980s opinions about white masculinity, especially with respect to the effects of the Vietnam War on young American men. The main character, Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), voluntarily enlists for the war. Once he arrives, he bonds with a set of the men and finds a new father figure in Elias (Willem Dafoe). Decency is key to survival, and the responsibility to one's family are altered in some respects, but Platoon does, like other post-1980 representations, suggest that the

experience of war leads to a maturation other experiences may not provide. Like later works of the Vietnam experience, *Platoon* focuses on what happened to these young men and less on what destructiveness they embraced. Oliver Stone's film reconstructs white masculinity in response to earlier films like *Coming Home*, presenting men as more capable of adjustment to challenges and with a renewed sense of dignity.

What one sees in the pre-1980 film representation is again the rejection of traditional masculine values and roles as father figures and protectors. For example, Luke of *Coming Home* has forgone the cultural necessity of maintaining a calmness he embraced before the war. He exudes bitterness, hostile anger, violent tendencies, and a cynicism very well understood by the other men at the VA hospital. Luke says "they treat us like nobodies" during one of his early episodes, thereby signifying the intensity of his feelings that no one who has not been directly involved with the conflict is capable of comprehending the strain under which he has been placed. The figures once relied upon for stability, namely fathers (one might presume in the image of doctors in this particular film), are consequently incapable of abating his sense of helplessness. Even Bob Hyde, who initially was excited about being charged to serve his country in Vietnam, returns with many of Luke's same feelings about the lack of true interest in or compassion for the plight of the American soldier. His saying that "I just want to be a hero" shows that he tried but failed in his efforts to effectively serve as a confident representative of white American soldiers. As such, in the characters of Luke and Bob, the contemporary crisis of white masculinity is realized; the Vietnam War has not only caused them to change internally but forced them to recognize that their previous status in American society is no longer functioning. Moreover, their experiences imply that because there is a crisis occurring in which men are unable to maintain their former obligations to their family as powerful, confident models (and presumably models for their own sons), men must reconsider the traditional structure of masculinity they have embraced.

In contrast, *Platoon* supports and even advances the theory of a new masculinity emerging, one with serious obligations to family and country, echoing 1980s ideals of patriotism and family values. Hence, a new form of white patriarchy comes forth in the conflicts between Barnes (Tom Berenger) and Elias. Barnes recreates for the post-1980 audience the hypermasculine soldier who overthrows conservative morality for survival tactics and appears more often in pre-1980 works; he is authoritative, stern, violent, and what at one point Chris refers to as "our Captain Ahab." Elias, on the other hand, remains the epitome of post-1980 white soldier images, the one that Chris chooses to adopt; a "crusader," he immerses himself in a semblance of concern and sacrifice. Chris Taylor's soliloquy at the end of the film explains how he felt the two were "fighting for possession of my soul. There are times since I have felt like the child born of those two fathers." Seemingly, Chris has replaced the family at home with the obligation to his newfound family, with Elias as the figurehead. It is after Elias's murder that Chris's duty to his "family" becomes evident. His killing of Barnes essentially harkens back to the traditional liability of a son to exact revenge for his father's death. Though cynical and transformed, Chris retains throughout an obligation to uphold more conventional ideas of masculinity, including an element of a patriotic patriarchy, but what alters is the embodiment of fatherhood. His paternal figure is "nobody" by the end of his term in Vietnam, but Elias has become a spiritual father figure. Thus *Platoon* retains the post-1980 obligation to family within its reconstruction of white masculinity.

Chris Taylor's relinquishing of his family at home is pertinent not only in relationship to the return to a semi-traditional ideology of white paternalism but also because it signifies his lack of complete honesty with his family. In order to maintain the post-1980 renewal of paternal authority, he must protect his family, even if honesty is sacrificed. For instance, he writes in his first letter to his grandmother that "hell is the impossibility of reason" and "staying alive" was now his primary objective. In the course of the film, however, Chris gravitates to a position of

ambiguity in his letters, telling his grandmother to tell his parents, "well, just tell them," and finally to not writing home at all. This evidences his responsibility to shelter his loved ones from the awful truth, a necessary element in the reorganization of white masculinity in the 1980s period.

Bitter honesty consumes both Luke and Bob in Coming Home. In contrast to Chris, these two men allow their anger to run unbridled even when expected to behave as upstanding veterans. Neither attempts to shield Sally Hyde (Jane Fonda) from the horror of war; first, Luke cruelly suggests that Sally should expect Bob to return in a body bag, and then Bob has no reservations about relating to her in explicit detail his dreadful war stories. When Bob returns home, he remains removed and retains the violent nature he embraced in Vietnam; in essence, he feels that he does "not deserve" and does "not belong." This honesty, though hurtful in some ways to Sally, truly represents the instability of the masculine ideology in the late 1970s and demonstrates that these films see traditional masculinity as dead but leaves the duty for resurrecting more conventional ideas of masculinity for a later period.

Furthermore, at no point in Coming Home do either Luke or Bob suggest that they feel extreme remorse or regret for their actions while in Vietnam; rather, they rationalize, like other pre-1980 characters, by emphasizing the importance of survival over any other need. Like the others, they are, too, more capable of showing fear and in the aftermath, explaining their fears to others without the previous frustrations of maintaining a particular image that they knew now was no longer possible to uphold.

Chris of Platoon reinforces the new image of masculinity with the return of the white soldier to a protector role when he stops others in his company from raping a young Vietnamese girl. This simple action reinstates the protector facet of masculine dogma, providing for the 1980s expanded conception of masculine identity to include tenderness among other qualities such as strength. With a return to more traditional values, Chris's action in preventing the rape

allows him to disavow earlier ideas of hypermasculinity and instead lets audiences label him as a representative of the renewed protector role in masculinity of the 1980s.

Viewers can in many ways consider Platoon yet another example of the post-1980 "buddy politic" movie (Fuchs 198). In this picture, Chris Taylor finds much less opposition in seeking brotherhood than his counterparts in Coming Home. The group initiates Chris through drug use, restrained violence, and even the aforementioned acceptance of Elias as their father figure. There does exist a major division between those men who follow Elias and those who follow Barnes, but this one division still supersedes the more isolated responses to disorientation in earlier films. This collectivism is itself a response to the need to rework white masculinity; this thinking implies the idea of "safety in numbers." With a group's support, one is more readily able to respond to changes in his environment and consequently stay a moral and responsible man.

Coming Home does not subscribe to this collectivism the way post-1980 works do. The men, particularly those at the VA hospital, share a kind of brotherhood with other veterans due to common experiences, a "need to justify," and even a lack of feminine influence. But even in this collectively frustrated community, the men are separated from each other by the transformations of each individual. Notable are the veterans who appear disgusted and angry with Luke's displays of outrage. In another instance, one sees a brotherhood between Luke and Bob, but they remain distant not simply because of an aversion to each other as a result of Sally's affair with Luke but most importantly because Luke has already recognized his new limitations and found strength in his protests against what has crippled him. Meanwhile, Bob experiences no transformation from his immediate post-war self until the end of the film when he runs into the ocean in what seems an effort to cleanse himself of post-war confusion. These differences in time and experience and even reaction make the men unable as a group to find a remedy to the many afflictions they each have and thus confine them to isolated frustration.

What is evident in both comparisons is that the pre-1980 works portray the image of the powerlessness of white American men who have been forced into a newfound crisis with their current standards of masculinity, specifically because of the protests against the war, the experience of war itself, the questioning of principles such as patriotism and the loss of traditional paternal power. These representations are efforts on the part of the creators to rethink masculinity in order to reform it; however, these works do not suggest that male characters have yet considered what is necessary to remedy this crisis in white masculinity. Herr and Ashby concede that traditional ideas of white masculinity cannot be saved but their works do not seek to destroy traditional white masculinity either. In opposition, the post-1980 authors provide us with a conception of the new white masculinity that is arising in America twenty years after the Vietnam War. Though the male characters remain dysfunctional, the new image of the white American soldier affected by Vietnam is that of one who is coming to terms with his earlier frustrations; he has a responsibility to society to maintain his positions. In his final monologue in *Platoon*, Chris Taylor says "those of us who did make it have an *obligation* to build again, to teach others what we know and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to this life." The picture one sees emerging is that of white American men seeking a reconstruction of masculinity within new terms in response to the earlier period of rethinking. O'Brien and Stone suggest that masculinity must change in order to preserve some semblance of earlier roles, particularly those in which men act as capable and strong protectors.

CHAPTER III  
FATHERHOOD AND THE FAMILY:  
THE NUCLEAR AGE AND WHITE NOISE &  
KRAMER VS. KRAMER AND THREE MEN AND A BABY

With the threats to white masculinity posed by the Sixties, American families underwent changes that altered the previous constancy of a stable family structure. As a result of the women's liberation movement and other liberation movements that challenged conventional gender roles, we see the role of the breadwinner challenged by the increased entry of women into the workplace as well as the demand that men actively engage in parenting. This provoked a new crisis in masculinity because it subjected men to uncertainty by confronting them with roles they had delegated to women in the past; these men had to adjust to new parenting roles, sometimes acting the role of the father and the mother, while juggling work-related activities. Tim O'Brien's The Nuclear Age (1979) and Kramer vs. Kramer (1979), directed by Robert Benton and a winner of five Academy Awards, present instances of the pre-1980 attitudes about masculinity threatened, respectively, by nuclear war and contamination and then by independent women and new youth. In particular the creators show that men faced new crises, specifically the expanded responsibilities of fatherhood and sharing the breadwinner position. Thus, the challenges men faced compromised their roles as the strong, almost removed, father figure, and men were subsequently powerless as how to employ their abilities to remedy this crisis. These productions suggest that men must change with an altering masculinity; they must reconsider their positions within society as the dominant gender and must accept more responsibility as parents, even if it endangers the dominance that comes from economic power and activity. What emerges in post-1980 works concerned with the family, in this case White Noise (1985) by Don DeLillo and Three Men and a Baby (1987), directed by Leonard Nimoy, is the image of men



able to come to terms with the new challenges of fatherhood. These characters more readily accept their obligations as paternal authority figures with increased confidence and create themselves in the current, softer image of fathers who remain self-assured (Kimmel 293). These aspects show the change in the roles of fathers from the removed breadwinner to the involved parent, a 1980s return to some kind of traditional fathering roles. By essentially rewriting the ways in which men faced crises within the family, they allow men to seem much more confident than earlier characters.

Despite its publication in a period of transition in the perceptions of white masculinity, The Nuclear Age makes a powerful statement about the nature of pre-1980 conceptualizations of men. After internalizing extreme frustrations about his independent wife, Bobbi, and his outspoken daughter, Melinda, and his own deeply personal fears of nuclear annihilation, William Cowling begins digging a bomb shelter for himself and his family. This reaction to his fear of nuclear threat, springing from his concerns as a child of the early Cold War era, as well as his own psychological conflict, constitutes his personal crisis. As a husband and a father, he questions whether or not he is capable of protecting those he loves, or of even becoming a "superman" in their eyes by saving them. He terms this moment of decision and the actions that follow his method of "seizing control." "Call it what you want -- copping out, dropping out, numbness, the loss of outrage, simple fatigue. I've retired. Time to retrench. Time to dig in. Safety first" (O'Brien 8). William Cowling represents O'Brien's concept of current masculinity -- a man who realizes he definitely needs to reevaluate his life and his relationships in order to perpetuate them. His personal life is a seeming failure, and his actions only add to his own daughter's conclusion that he, as a father, is incapable of truly understanding or protecting her. Cowling does formulate a plan to save his family from seeming destruction; in fact, he even refers to John F. Kennedy's statement that "the path we have chosen for the present is full of hazards, as all paths are" (qtd. in O'Brien 39). Indeed, Cowling's path presents him with the

hazard of alienating the very family he attempts to protect, and therefore, his "remedy" is a faulty one and the results of such a solution leave him unresolved.

In many ways the 1985 novel *White Noise* resembles the story of William Cowling. Jack Gladney struggles to keep his semi-traditional family intact in the wake of the "Airborne Toxic Event," a "feathery plume...[of] Nyodene Derivative" (DeLillo 109). Unlike Cowling's "threat," there is an actual danger posed to human life by the Airborne Toxic Event, and during the course of the evacuation, Jack is exposed to the harmful air. But like other post-1980 male characters, Jack has no solution already devised for such an event but relies on instinct as the most productive path. He is more capable of quick adjustment, one might conclude, because he has simply been given adequate time with which to expect crises in the home with outspoken youth, independent women, and even to adjust to the threat of nuclear destruction. Throughout the novel, Jack maintains selfishness in his relationships with his wife, Babette, and his children so that he remains a conservative, distanced father. Beyond this, Jack relies on his creation of a false persona, making him less honest with those around him in order to shelter himself from unnecessary changes. He relies on his creation of "Jack Gladney, respected professor, supportive husband and father" to maintain his paternal authority as provider and protector for his family. Like Cowling, Gladney faces challenges even more intense than a fear of nuclear death, the challenge of children who continually question the status of their family's stability.

One particular commonality of the novels concerns the attitudes of the children. Both sets of children exude confidence that makes them more mature than other children their age. As a consequence, they expect their fathers to react correctly and adequately to changes in the family structure and more importantly, to their own fears. Melinda, of *The Nuclear Age*, is completely honest with her father, wise for her years, and expects a strong father figure of William. He bitterly disappoints her when he fails to provide what she considers proper paternal behavior. Heinrich, Jack Gladney's son, also shows maturity beyond his years. Though moody,

he partially conforms to his father's expectations, but he constantly frustrates Jack by not letting him know whether or not he really desires the traditional father-son relationship. This frustration posed by the hopes of their children against the traditional fatherly role connects William Cowling and Jack Gladney; but it is their reactions to such challenges that separate these two characters.

The Nuclear Age constantly reasserts William Cowling's (and not to mention society's) idea that there are certain responsibilities that men need to fulfill as husbands and fathers; an early illustration occurs with his thought that "I'm a father, a husband, I have solemn responsibilities...I would prefer the glory of God and peace everlasting, world without end, a normal household in an age of abiding normalcy. It just isn't possible" (O'Brien 7). This impossibility Cowling refers to is the very cause of his powerlessness. He says "I was a family man," somehow implying that he has lost his ability to act as such (283). The roles in which he has placed himself are no longer functioning, there is "an erosion of the traditional family structure," and though he is capable of recognizing this dysfunction, he is unable to remedy it (197). Therefore, O'Brien suggests that men like Cowling have rejected traditional paternal roles that they feel they cannot fulfill because of psychological fears and new frustrations of masculine ideology posed by the new youth, the threat of war, and independent women. He states "I was afraid. For myself, for my prospects as an ordinary human being" (29). Melinda considers her father "nutto," and his wife refuses to speak to him anymore; however, it is not the first time Bobbi and William have encountered the threat of her leaving (57). Once before "Bobbi disappeared. She was gone two weeks; her diaphragm went with her" (287). William needs instead to devise new methods of asserting paternal authority and rethink his roles within his family to effectively establish stronger relationships with both his wife and daughter.

Jack Gladney of White Noise opposes Cowling's view by creating for himself a false persona that allows him to uphold paternal authority. To Gladney, the American dream family is

a possibility, but his family does not subscribe to this tradition. Even though they appear to constitute a nuclear family, the family itself is the result of several marriages, and the relationships therein (of brother-sister, mother-daughter) have changed dramatically over years. For him, the key to success within the family is a strong male figure asserting control over his family. Fathers represent "massive insurance coverage," an intrinsic need to shield both children and one's partner from certain devastating issues (DeLillo 4, 25). A strong father who embraces this responsibility of asserting fatherly authority will presumably keep the family from destruction, such as the Airborne Toxic Event. This renewal of paternal authority is an important element in the post-1980 return to semi-traditional masculine ideology; as a redefinition of traditional roles (and in the case of Jack Gladney, not necessarily in traditional families per se), the fathers again lead the family financially but with added responsibilities for providing emotional support, where he finds himself guided by the female partner.

The ability to remain close to and protect the family as a father, as evidenced in *White Noise*, may in some ways be a result of Jack Gladney's closeness to his wife, Babette. She is to a degree a product of women's liberation -- independent, brutally honest, concerned for her family but in some cases, more concerned for her own welfare. Her affair helps her gain access to Dylar, a mysterious drug, and thus exemplifies her seemingly selfish behavior that mimics Jack's own. His "full souled woman" teaches him how to come to terms with his frustrations (with himself as a living fraud, his fear of independent women and children, and the threat of death) through rationalization, how to stay authoritative yet gentle, and how best to shelter those he cares for the most from his own psychological dysfunction, his fears, and even the Airborne Toxic Event (DeLillo 6). But he views her mostly in terms of what viable function she can perform for him. This appears to be a response to her independent nature and the even more liberated nature of his previous wives. Although she gives Jack impetus to perform his duties as a father and husband, he ignores her needs in such a way as to make her inferior to him. Thus, any

instance in which Jack would be concerned about losing Babette affects him deeply because he would lose a source of confidence that he has constructed in his marriage with her, and in such a way that William Cowling is not.

William's reaction to Bobbi's threat of leaving him and then subsequent divorce do stir his emotions. He reacts rashly, almost violently, by locking his wife and daughter in their bedroom. Bobbi's removal from William produces the effect one would expect in pre-1980 works because it seems that his actions, not hers, separate them. O'Brien proposes that such quick action will not provide a successful solution, and that instead, men like Cowling, faced with liberated and independent women and the threats of losing them, should carefully consider what changes they must make within their relationships to remain respected father figures.

Bobbi embraces many of the independent attitudes that emerged from women's liberation. And however great William's affections may be, he nonetheless finds himself threatened by her self-sufficiency. Bobbi is not the first woman in William's life to have threatened his security as a man with her own opinions; the first instance of this occurs in his relationship with Sarah Strouch. She became the leader of the anti-war movement on their college campus, and later, her efforts helped him to dodge the draft. The favors Sarah does for William create in him a sense of disempowerment because a woman takes the control that he as a white male should assert and use properly himself. William himself says "I was gun-shy [literally]. I didn't trust her. Too temperamental, I thought. Too flashy" (O'Brien 101). In the end, William resorts to insults so that he might reempower himself in light of Sarah's ability to find remedies to earlier crises whereas William could not. He tells her "You're unfaithful. Iron deficiency. Anemia of the will" (282). In a sense, Sarah usurps the traditional male power of authority that Cowling loses by either rejecting traditional ideas of masculinity or because of his own fears. These independent women, like Bobbi and Sarah, will never fit the mold of the conservative roles of wife and mother and disturb William's desire for a typical American

household, henceforth making this idea unreasonable. William's digging of the shelter and attitudes towards his family result from his rethinking his masculinity, and while O'Brien does not seem to suggest that this attitude sufficiently remedies the situation, he does idealize a need for distinct alterations to occur in white masculinity after the 1960s.

Even though the male characters of *White Noise* are also deeply attracted to independent, educated, religious, and somewhat temperamental women, and in Jack Gladney's case this attraction has led him to four marriages, these men cope more readily with powerful female influence. By taking time to learn to adjust to changes in women's attitudes and behaviors, these men were less likely to feel threatened by the 'newness' of such a movement. For Jack Gladney, complex women represent a danger to his masculinity; hence, his first marriages with more liberated women have failed. For example, he talks about his former wife, Janet Savory, and how "she was always maneuvering. My security was threatened" (DeLillo 87). But his marriage with Babette, a more understanding woman, allows him to escape the problem of liberated women and renew his status as a man. She completes a major part of his persona; Jack believes "we are two views of the same person" (99). His marriage to a woman like Babette is Jack's response to the rethinking of male roles in order to better adjust to the effects of women's liberation. His semi-traditional family allows him to reconstruct his role as a husband and father in terms where he feels less subjected to inadequacy.

Even in the face of destruction, Gladney is capable of maintaining the family that he has constructed. His relationship to Babette, his children, and his personal outlook allow him to create for himself a seemingly stable universe. To support his establishment of this stable universe, Jack discovers a need to live the life of a fraud in many ways. Early in the novel he states that "I am the false character that follows the name around," and then supports this statement by relating to the audience how he rarely walks around campus without his professorial robe and sunglasses, and furthermore, how he cannot speak German even though he

is the head of the Hitler studies department at the College-on-the-Hill (DeLillo 17). Without this mask, Jack would not be capable of maintaining his authoritative position.

We see a correlation between Jack's facade and that of the nuns he meets at the hospital in one of the final scenes of the novel. When the nun explains that "those who have abandoned belief [and traditional ideas] must still believe in us. They are sure that they are not right to believe but they know belief must not fade completely...We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible" (DeLillo 304). What this means to Jack is essentially that, like him, these nuns play traditional roles in which they supply support and comfort, but they too, hide their true beliefs (or lack thereof) from others with a stern face and black garment. Like Jack, these nuns embrace a facade so that the continuation of ideals is possible for others. For Jack Gladney, this cover allows him to maintain his appearance of authority and his responsibilities to his family as a breadwinner as per traditional roles of men. His persona is an inherently faulty solution to maintaining family structure because it is not permanent and will inevitably reveal the fears and inadequacies of Jack. Even though he does not reconstruct himself completely to fulfill his requirements (for example, if he had learned to speak German earlier in his career or if he were more comfortable in walking without a disguise), this mask aids considerably in his efforts to retain his influence as a successful white male.

Since this disguise does not let Jack act in an honest manner with those around him, many of his peers believe he is rather ordinary as a result of the false character that he projects. He is a family man with a career, a caring wife, and children. He resembles so many other men, "big, harmless, aging, indistinct," and even "the sum total of...data" (DeLillo 81,136). Moreover, this appearance of security permits him to reveal his deepest fear, that of death, with only Babette. This fear of death but more importantly a fear of embarrassment, both constant and unresolved, make Jack into a victim figure. In observing the character of Jack Gladney, we find him to be victimized, like other post-1980 representations of men, due to the

restraint of traditional roles upon men. In the wake of the Airborne Toxic Event, Gladney's community "sees its victimhood as the only way to present itself to others" (Conroy 100). It excuses the openness of fear of death for many, and allows the people, including Jack, to realize that victimhood is a method by which to excuse other inadequacies. In Jack's case, he is a victim of circumstances that include his children, his marriage, and his own psychological being. His actions are necessary to maintain the arrangement of stability he embraces, and accordingly, one cannot condemn him for creating this surface appearance but appreciate the effort he has taken to shelter his family within his reconstruction of his own insecure masculinity. For instance, Babette at one point tells him "you're a man, Jack. We all know about men and their insane rage. This is something that men are very good at" (214); by withholding this rage, Jack maintains his authority as a competent figure in his household. But by restraining himself, having this false persona, and the very fact that he is so entirely aware that it is indeed a *false* identity makes Jack seem pitiful. By forcing himself to uphold traditional roles as a father, husband, and breadwinner, Jack has seemingly sacrificed his own person.

In contrast, Cowling fails to create for himself a protective image to help him adjust to the newfound frustrations facing him. His candor produces the conclusion that he, like other men in pre-1980 works, cannot control the feeling of powerlessness with which he is confronted by employing logical solutions. Although he realizes that he "didn't fit," this assertion batters his effectiveness as a strong male figure (O'Brien 34). His reactions, again not preceded by any false pretense, attest to the inability of male characters in this period to adjust quickly and fittingly. In contrast to White Noise, William's lack of a false persona drives his obsession with safety to the forefront of his personality. By believing his own moral of "safety first," William builds in his mind a plan for a steady universe that he feels is essential to his life (92). When he says "if we can imagine a peaceful, durable world, a civilized world, then we might someday achieve it," William erroneously assumes that such a belief is not subject to other forces, such as



the disintegration of traditional family values that he tries desperately to prevent upon discovering that this dogma of will is not sufficient in the modern world (70). His unbridled honesty and unresolved attempts at sheltering his family prove that O'Brien thinks that the time has come for men who struggle with powerful women and their own psychological deficiencies to reexamine themselves in terms of their responsibilities as father figures.

Kramer vs. Kramer, produced in the same year as The Nuclear Age, also presents many of the same reactions to challenges against traditional white masculinity. This story of a single father with very little parenting experience presents the powerlessness of men in this period. Joanna Kramer, a product of women's liberation, relinquishes her responsibilities as "someone's wife...mother...daughter" so that she might identify roles in which she feels more fulfilled. Ted Kramer acts on instinct because he does not prepare himself for Joanna's leaving, but he attempts to reimagine himself in the role of a responsible parent, many times failing and still left apparently unresolved as how best to cope with every situation a parent faces. It appears that Ted's new double role in the Kramer household, acting as both mother and father, confuses him and challenges the idealizations with which he was raised. The conflict between Ted and Joanna, and the following growing relationship between Ted and his son, represent the loss of traditional roles of men in the family (i.e. a removed fatherly perspective) and the possible loss of male prestige as men take on new parenting roles. More importantly, it represents the idea that men of this period who find themselves faced with such conflict should realize the urgent need to reevaluate their roles as husbands and fathers.

Three Men and a Baby attests to the post-1980 conceptualization of masculine identity, whereby men are capable of coming to terms with new challenges much more easily than their pre-1980 counterparts. The three men, Peter, Michael, and Jack, are forced to reevaluate and reimagine themselves in fresh roles when they find the baby Mary on their doorstep. Their obligations soon become centered on fatherhood and protection, shifting away from excruciating

careers and unfulfilling relationships. They more readily embrace their responsibilities as fathers over other commitments. They help to create the 1980s identity of men as kind protectors and in some cases, victims of circumstance who take it upon themselves to remedy any situation. This construction supports the concept of the post-1980 need to rebuild white masculinity in response to challenges of more liberated women and the previous period of rethinking.

What we see in Kramer vs. Kramer is Ted Kramer faced with an unexpected crisis in his household. He is no longer the breadwinner alone, but he must shoulder the responsibilities of a single parent. As such, he realizes during the course of this adaptation that the roles that he created for his family -- himself as the head breadwinner, Joanna as the dutiful wife, and Billy as the good son -- are no longer functioning properly. Such a quick and major transition leaves Ted little time to formulate a plan so that he might remedy the present situation for himself and Billy. He concludes that the best way to work out this frustrating problem is through learning experiences. By reevaluating his own roles, as well as Billy's, they establish a working relationship together (for example, by making breakfast together). Further, by participating in situations that threaten the very stability of their relationship, such as Billy's falling at the park and his walking in on his father's late night guest, they learn the boundaries to which each must subscribe. Ted exemplifies the need men have to examine in detail their roles and relationships in order to avoid potential future conflict and to establish themselves as responsible, caring, and yet firm parental role models.

Three Men and a Baby confronts the issue of a strong yet gentle father figure when Peter, Michael, and Jack are first presented with Mary. With none of them having any previous experience with children, these men quickly formulate a plan and decide that it is indeed their responsibility to protect the welfare of the child. Despite the fact that neither Peter nor Michael is Mary's father, they take it upon themselves to create their roles as breadwinners as well as protectors by quickly seeking out ways to feed, change, and entertain their new guest. As a

result, they are representative of the new 1980s return to family values and hence, a need for parental responsibility, namely those of fathers, in response to the reevaluation of male roles after the 1960s.

The women of *Three Men and a Baby* are not inclined to assume the traditional roles of wife and mother, even when the men request their assistance. They seem to be later products of 1960s movements against traditional roles within the family that would restrict a woman's ability to live her own life. For example, Rebecca, Peter's girlfriend, maintains a degree of independence by dating other men (such as the cellist) and not responding to Peter's appeals for her to act as a mother to Mary, like other women who feel that they have the right to serve their own needs over that of another. Jack appeals to his own mother for help, but again, she refuses because she feels it is his responsibility as a man to take care of his own child. Neither rejection of the men's appeals for help is seemingly harsh; but it does point to evidence that these men were probably expecting more of that kind of response than say, for instance, Ted Kramer was. Thus, the men of this film seem more adapted to self-sufficient women than men of an earlier era because they are more self-sufficient themselves and expected to deal with such change; hence, the obligations of raising children once strictly delegated to women are now shared in a way less frustrating to men of post-1980 works.

*Kramer vs. Kramer* supports the 1970s feeling of masculine disempowerment by women who were affected by the women's liberation movement in its attempt to take the results of such a movement seriously. Joanna Kramer abandons her duties as a housewife so that she might fulfill herself in other respects, namely a career in sportswear design and an independent lifestyle in which she is able to carry on relationships with men other than her husband. She, like Bobbi of *The Nuclear Age*, exudes a new sense of confidence and complexity that deeply troubles the men of her life. Joanna leaves these men with no solutions to the problems that her independence inflicts, and she provides no consolation when she sees her partner frustrated by

sudden changes. But unlike Rebecca and the women of Three Men and a Baby, Joanna obviously still wants to retain some of her motherly duties, as seen when she fights for custody of Billy. This indecisiveness produces the instability in Ted Kramer's life after Joanna's leaving, and beyond that, suggests that men must take it upon themselves, like Ted has done, to find new outlets for their familial duties.

What one also sees in Kramer vs. Kramer is the unabashed honesty with which Ted faces the destruction of his traditional American family. Such a fast transition in one's lifestyle does not provide for an adequate period of adjustment for Ted, and so, he cannot hide his recent feelings of insecurity. Both his constant calling his apartment to see if Joanna has returned and his waiting by the telephone suggest that he was in no way expected Joanna's leaving. Perhaps since the film presents the transition as such a quick one, Benton recommends that men rethink their roles in the family in order to anticipate these kinds of changes.

These feelings of inadequacy and questioning remain internalized throughout the film, even though he discloses some details to his boss, a man who cannot completely understand the new stresses of Ted's situation, and his friend Margaret. To illustrate Ted's growing disempowerment, we see his boss firing him and Joanna's lawyer mocking his taking a job that pays considerably less than his other job. What we believe then is that the men around Ted do not truly sympathize with his plight. Thus, we again see the isolated male disorientation of 1970s works occurring in this film where Ted neither seeks out to any real extent nor finds sincere consolation or serious advice from other men in similar positions concerning his new predicament even though he repeats over and over "I never thought it would happen to me!"

What makes Three Men and a Baby such an interesting testament to the new collectiveness of men in the post-1980 period is the simple observation that Peter, Michael, and Jack relegate the common problems of the family and fatherhood to a group and not simply individual effort. Their continual playfulness (tossing the baby bottle like a football, singing

oldies to lull Mary to sleep) makes fatherhood in the 1980s seem almost like a team sport. It is this collective effort that has become the method by which these men shoulder the unforeseen obligations of a rather awkward family. They formulated a plan according to the available resources, specifically each other, and instituted a working relationship that allowed them to fulfill their many responsibilities -- as fathers, breadwinners, and supporters. However effective this method of teamwork as fathers may seem, it does not support a complete reconstruction of masculinity in the post-1980 era. Like Jack Gladney's false persona, it is a temporary yet viable resource to responding to the tasks of fatherhood.

Both pre-1980 and post-1980 representatives in novels and films are faced with new and unknown crises in white masculinity when their traditional roles within the family are challenged by increasingly self-confident women most heavily effected by women's liberation, supporting the emergence of the contemporary crisis in masculinity. What we see in the differing aspects of pre-1980 and post-1980 literature and film is that men of the pre-1980 period were not equipped with sufficient time and resources to react properly to changes in their standards. They did not seek out consultation and reacted rashly, sometimes violently, against these changes. These reactions provided no merit since the men were left unresolved and still powerless to control or alter their present circumstances. Furthermore, these characters witnessed the obliteration of traditional family structures, while authors and directors created these characters as efforts to make men reconsider their roles in the family, in some cases to avoid possible similar crises. Post-1980 literature and film of the family shows men coming to terms with these sudden changes, possibly as a result of earlier rethinking and anticipating. In consequence, they are more prepared to maintain and assert their obligations as fathers as well as breadwinners. In addition, they recreate the father as one encompassing both strength and kindness, reasserting a previous role of protector. In essence, the rewriting of the contemporary crisis in masculinity

caused by the breakdown of traditional masculine roles within the family attest to a desire of post-1980 authors and directors to disavow the severity of the crisis.

CHAPTER IV

LOSING EFFECTIVE FATHERS AND GAINING GOOD SONS:  
REPRESENTING IN RABBIT REDUX AND REWRITING HISTORY IN FORREST GUMP

Recognized by audiences and critics alike as two of the most profound representations of the challenges posed to white masculinity by the Sixties, the novel Rabbit Redux and the film Forrest Gump elaborate on earlier attempts by authors and directors to respectively, first rethink masculinity and then to reconstruct it. Both detail the frustrations of white men faced with the war in Vietnam, women's liberation, and personal anguish of seemingly average white men. However, upon closer inspection, we find that John Updike's interpretation of white masculinity and the Sixties varies considerably from what Robert Zemeckis intended in his film. Whereas Updike laments that the Sixties were "'no sunny picnic' for Protestant white males who had now become 'the root of evil' in a major ideological, symbolic, and cultural shift" (*Self-Consciousness* 146, qtd. in Robinson 24), Zemeckis desired "to present [the post-war baby boom] generation without commenting on it" (qtd. in Pfeil 252). Zemeckis admits in his statement that he attempts with Forrest Gump to rewrite history, and in consequence the effects of history on white masculinity, while Updike wanted to first represent the crisis in masculinity, and further, to encourage men to rethink their traditional roles.

John Updike's novel Rabbit Redux (1971) begins with the description of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom as one whose features act as "clues to weakness...verging on anonymity. Though his heights, his bulk, and a remnant alertness in the way he moves his head continue to distinguish him on the street, years have passed since anyone has called him Rabbit" (Updike 269). During the course of this, the second novel in the Rabbit Angstrom saga, Rabbit loses not only his distinction as a former high school athletic hero but also his wife, Janice, to infidelity and his son, Nelson, to the era of new youth. He confronts head on the civil rights movement in the

character of Skeeter, the counterculture and new youth as seen through Jill, and his own insecurities arising from his not serving in the Vietnam war. Throughout every struggle, Rabbit remains passive, even though there is "no sanctuary for Rabbit or a white masculinity that suffers such an intense crisis of cultural, sexual, political authority" (Robinson 37). He finally admits to Janice that he thinks of himself as "nobody," an invisible ordinary white American male (Updike 617). It is Updike's intention to represent the current crisis in white masculinity with Rabbit's frustrations, but he further suggests that white men must rethink masculinity so they can respond to changes within it, such as the change whereby white masculinity was made visible as different from other masculinities.

As one of the most successful films ever, *Forrest Gump* raked in over one hundred million in a mere three weeks of its release, going on to be one of the top ten highest grossing films of all time and winning several Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Actor for Tom Hanks (Pfeil 251). Whether it appealed to those interested in artistic representations of American history or those simply desiring to be entertained with the story of a weak-minded boy who makes good, it took American minds by storm by forcing them to consider their own place in history. It infiltrated historical evidence with Forrest's image with the help of superb special effects, but in a sense, trivialized the importance of many important moments of the twentieth century. In many cases, it denied mention of important movements of the Sixties, in particular the assassinations of black leaders and the effects of women's liberation. For the men of the resurgently masculinist period after 1980, it succeeded simply because of the "genius of its utterly ideological resolution of what a proper white straight masculinity should be" (Pfeil 251). Forrest Gump represents the "new man, egalitarian, sympathetic to the marginalized, and in touch with his 'feminine side'" (Byers 431). He stands for the reconstruction of white masculinity in the post-1980 conservative period. By creating Forrest as a man capable of



protecting, providing, and maintaining his chivalric child-like nature, Zemeckis finds a character who encapsulates the image of a successful white male for a new generation.

As Updike represents the contemporary crisis in white masculinity as a result of the Sixties, he intentionally delves into the destruction of traditional paternal authority. Rabbit loses his power as both husband and father, and later as protector and provider. His wife Janice appears to enjoy her newfound independence and confidence; she seems a representative figure of the effects of the women's liberation movement when he states that "the gypsy look she got from her mother, the dignity from the Sixties, which freed her from the need to look fluffy" (Updike 303). Where she had been taken for granted as a wife, she reasserts herself outside the home with a job at her father's dealership and an adulterous relationship with Charlie Stavros. Rabbit passively dismisses her action as response to "the angelic cold strength of his leaving her, the anticlimax of his coming back and clinging...that justifies her" (296). Her leaving asserts that Rabbit has lost his power as a traditional father figure in his own family; unable to please and threatened by Janice's new power as a breadwinner, Rabbit represents Updike's realization that conservative fatherly authority has lost out to the effects of women's liberation and that men must learn to adjust to new changes within the structure of their household and their authority therein.

Furthermore, his son Nelson becomes a part of the new youth movement Jill brings into his home. Nelson openly acknowledges the loss of his mother, his father's inadequacies, and less and less responds to Rabbit with the more traditional respect a father would expect. The two bond through the loss of Janice (and in a sense, Rabbit's loss of his authority), as seen when Updike writes "the kid is frightened to go home. So is Rabbit. They sit on Mom's bed [to remind them of their loss of her] and watch television in the dark" (Updike 351). Where Rabbit seemingly loses paternal authority over Nelson, he gains a friendship with him. To the new youth, like Nelson, friends become idols, as evidenced when Nelson screams "I want to grow up

like *him*...average and ordinary" (494). When Jill dies in the fire, Nelson blames Rabbit for being an inadequate father by saying "you've let her die," and thus points out his ability to remain a friend but inability to act as a responsible father should by protecting those close to him (544). This further reinforces Updike's reflection of the destruction of tradition and the need for rethinking masculinity.

Rabbit also tries, and inevitably fails, to act as an authoritative father figure to both Jill and Skeeter. Jill, a product of the new youth and counterculture, comes into his home assuming a paradoxical daughter-wife role. She provides food, cleaning, and sex for Rabbit while instructing Nelson on Sixties values and ideas. She points out that Rabbit has "this sweet funny family side. Always worrying about who needs you," but he turns on her eventually, calling her "a sick bitch. You rich kids playing at life make me sick, throwing rocks at the poor dumb cops protecting your daddy's loot. You're just playing, baby" (Updike 387,411). Even to this child-lover, Rabbit retreats from his position as an authoritative figure into one viewed as pathetic, ordinary, and insufficient. He can no longer control to what extent Jill influences Nelson, thereby losing what remaining control he had left over his son to the new sister-mother figure. Skeeter further emasculates Rabbit in his role as a father by challenging the traditional view of history where white men led the country and successfully subjugated the black man. Skeeter, a probable invention on the part of Updike in response to Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice, the definitive manifesto of black power, excites Rabbit as something different. He challenges the norm, speaking loudly and acting even more so to expose the nature of black men. When Skeeter enters the home, Rabbit loses his position as the lover of Jill and thus becomes her inadequate father figure. Further, Skeeter's educational exercises influence Nelson to, in many cases, question the ideals (and hence, the authority) of his own father. Again, through the characters of Jill and Skeeter, Updike repeats that contemporary white masculinity faces an

important issue in losing traditional paternal authority to challenges of new youth, feminism, black power, and the consequent insecurity of white masculinity.

Since it appeared to many critics as "compensation for the white male subject's cultural and political castration [presumably induced by the challenges against white masculinity in the Sixties]," *Forrest Gump* delivers the return of the capable white father figure to the screen (Byers 426). Forrest elaborates on the 1980s return to traditional family values by embracing the "protector-provider" masculine ideology of the pre-1960s period (Pfeil 256). He continually remains the "good son" to his mother, assuming the responsibilities of the man of the house because his father is "on vacation." By relying on her wisdom, such as the perpetually repeated "life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get" and "stupid is as stupid does," Forrest gains a confidence we might not expect in a mentally disabled man. Further, his actions (graduating from college, winning the medal of honor, and playing ping-pong for the national team) promote her pride in her son. But once Forrest has enough experience as a man on his own, he takes over her role as the provider by helping her with expenses and maintaining his homestead.

As the fathers of the country have a duty to protect democracy and freedom, the fathers of American families assume that by serving in the military they are both protecting the country and their families as fathers. In the film, Forrest embraces patriotism as if it were his solemn duty to serve his country, at no point questioning why he is in Vietnam in the first place or retreating to cynicism and wondering why is not a "fortunate son." During the firefight in which his platoon is destroyed, Forrest becomes a protective figure over the other men whom he retrieves out of the jungle. However, like a good father-son, he embraces modesty by later telling Jenny that he received the medal of honor "just by doing what you told me to do." Thus, Forrest does not support the hypermasculine Vietnam hero-image of other characters but instead keeps promises to those most important to him while protecting them (and his country). And in

this way, *Forrest Gump* supports the 1990s rewriting of masculine history by not representing the earlier destruction of the images of white American soldiers as protective males.

In his own relationship with Jenny and eventually his own son, Forrest, he represents the return to traditional values and a conservative father figure. In the film's rewriting of history, Sixties culture creates deluded, self-destructive figures like the love of Forrest's life, Jenny Curan. With its "excision of feminism," Jenny's dedication to the anti-war movement, the counterculture, cocaine, disco, and several abusive boyfriends seems a result of her childhood trauma (no mother figure, a molesting father) (Pfeil 253). At no point does Zemeckis mention that Jenny may perhaps be a result of the women's liberation movement and women seeking independence from the "feminine mystique" about which Betty Friedan wrote. Throughout the film, Jenny rejects Forrest's attempts at gaining her affections as more than a brother figure. She tells him that "you can't just keep on rescuing me," but to Forrest, it seems his duty as a protector figure. When Jenny finally asks for Forrest to marry her, Zemeckis suggests that Forrest knew all along his duty was to be a protector-provider for Jenny. The film, therefore, presents 1990s white masculinity as "superior to the femininity it is charged to protect and provide for only so long as it holds sway within private life alone and leaves the public world for itself" (Pfeil 256).

The film's final episode shows the father Forrest putting his son Forrest on the bus to school. When the younger Gump introduces himself to Dorothy Harris (the same bus driver as in an earlier scene) as Forrest Gump, the paternal principle that Forrest has strived throughout the film to establish is affirmed. Forrest has succeeded finally in claiming his status "as a father, and hence as whole and potent...he has passed on his name" (Byers 438). By playing ping-pong, fishing, and reading together, *Forrest* participates in normal "dad" activities, and therefore, easily makes the transition into the world of a respectable father. In this post-1980 reconstruction of white masculinity, Zemeckis posits that traditional paternal authority can and

should be asserted by assuming a role as a hero to women and children. By saving Jenny from spending the rest of her life alone and sickly and by becoming a father to the younger Forrest, the national celebrity/football star/war hero reclaims the role as a father figure that was challenged by the Sixties.

In the reclaiming of a shattered ideology of masculinity, the 1990s character of Forrest Gump does not struggle alone. In essence, other men throughout the film, in particular Benjamin Buford Blue (Bubba) and Lieutenant Dan Taylor, share in the confusion and disorientation Forrest faces. Bubba, a similarly mentally disadvantaged but capable black man, initially forms a relationship with Forrest by offering him a seat on the bus in the same way that Jenny did. Because of their mental disabilities and presumable rejection by other Army men, Forrest and Bubba develop a deep friendship that continues into their experiences together in Vietnam where they "watch out for each other." Interestingly enough, neither openly discusses racism, thereby downplaying its historical importance as a threat to white masculinity, but they delve into detail about the shrimping business. Later, neither of the two figurative "brothers" wants to admit that one is dying. When Forrest and Bubba have their last conversation, Bubba asks "why did this happen?" to which Forrest can only reply "you got shot," once again avoiding an open discussion of the actual issues of patriotism and American ideology (Byers 430). Together, Bubba and Forrest remain blissfully ignorant, complementing each other's lack of comprehension, while emotionally supporting each other.

The relationship between Lieutenant Dan and Forrest is not suggestive of friendship *per se*, but Dan finds hope through his association with Forrest and is then capable of reasserting his masculinity. Forrest believed Dan "had a lot to live up to" because he had a male relative die in every American war, and initially it was Forrest who did not want to disappoint Dan, the platoon's father figure. But after the firefight in which Forrest saves him, Dan feels threatened by Forrest's assumption of the role as the protector. With the loss of his legs and physical

ability, Dan retreats into a position of cynicism, feeling that Forrest has cheated him out of his destiny, mainly "to die in the field with honor." In Dan, we see images of Luke from *Coming Home* revisiting the screen; however, Dan finds a solution and peace whereas we do not know whether Luke ever truly found either. When they later meet in New York, Dan shows signs of his bitterness weakening when he promises to be Forrest's first mate on his shrimp boat. By honoring this promise, Dan represents the idea that reaffirming oneself as a man becomes much easier if one's struggles are communicated with others. Their successful Bubba Gump entrepreneurship and entering into the computer business together demonstrate Dan's relatively unspoken thanks to thanking Forrest for saving his life. When Dan appears at the wedding walking on prosthetic legs and with a fiancée, he demonstrates to Forrest how his influence has helped him to regain a spirit for life. We assume that without Gump's innocent idealism, Dan would never have made the effort to recover from alcoholism, be financially responsible, and then take the ultimate step by renewing himself physically and curing his "castration" by finding a supportive fiancée. The effectual friendships between Forrest and Bubba and then between himself and Dan attest to the 1980s male desire for collectiveness as an important element in remedying masculine insecurities and to reconstructing the ideology of white men.

Rabbit Angstrom of *Rabbit Redux* does not have the advantage of facing challenges against his white masculinity with adequate support from other men in similar positions. Even though he works with his father and occasionally shares a beer after work with him, Rabbit grows increasingly frustrated with his father's repeated requests for him to come visit his mother. Furthermore, his father's interest in the status of his failing marriage with Janice, his relationship with Jill, and the effects of Rabbit's frustrations on Nelson alienate Rabbit more from the man closest to him. Rabbit feels his father is "fragile," suggesting that he needs to find role models who can sympathize more with the challenges of work and fatherhood (Updike 282). When Rabbit states "men are strict that way, want to keep their promises to each other,"

he suggests that though he too wants to be the good son, he refuses anymore to make promises he will not keep to his father (311).

Skeeter challenges Rabbit by essentially posing a threat to his sexuality and masculine authority. Even when Rabbit believes he needs Skeeter to regain his status as a man (that white masculinity can be saved in the same ways in which black masculinity became a strong force in the Sixties), he remains "de-balled," discovering that "the price to be paid for the mediation of black masculinity is the knowledge that white masculinity is dependent and fragile" (Robinson 38). With no other white male openly expressing an understanding of Rabbit's predicament, he retreats into a position of passivity and isolation. Updike proposes that men must rethink masculinity on an individual basis in order to reclaim a particular idea of authority; however, turning to the successes of others, such as those of black males, as ideologies to follow will inevitably lead to failure. White men simply need to think on their own terms about their status as men and what remedy will most effectively combat the new challenges to their masculinity.

John Updike's *Rabbit Redux* more candidly addresses the conflicts of the Sixties, including the counterculture, youth culture, women's liberation, and black power, as threats to traditional white masculinity. Rabbit Angstrom finds himself disempowered by all of these forces; "Updike represents his American 'Everyman' as a subject split between a desire to recharge the power of white masculinity and a desire to entertain disempowerment as a positive element in the construction of a new white masculinity" (Robinson 32). But Updike does not suggest that men should make a leap to a solution for the crisis in masculinity, but simply suggests that following older ideologies will probably fail. His novel places the "conception of white masculinity as coextensive with America" at stake, but he never shows Rabbit as genuinely dedicated to the immediate remedy of his own personal crisis (Robinson 38).

Whereas *Rabbit Redux* makes a point of illustrating the devastating effects of Sixties culture on typical white American males, the story of *Forrest Gump* and "hegemonic American

masculinity has moved to remember and recreate itself on a wide range of fronts," suggesting a desire of 1980s and 1990s authors and directors to reconstruct masculinity as a stable, capable source of authority (Byers 424). Forrest regains the paternal authority lost in earlier representations by being both the strong, protective father figure and the nurturing mother. His relationships with Bubba and Dan provide mutual inspiration and influence, with Bubba as the idea-sparking brother and Dan as the former father figure turned disciple. Robert Zemeckis represents the crisis posed to white masculinity by the Sixties as relatively isolated, and therefore, he recreates masculinity in response to the 1980s resurgence of traditional family values and the remasculinization of typical American culture (Jeffords xii).



## CONCLUSION

By examining the history of the Sixties, we have seen how the period's culture created a crisis in a once confident white American masculinity. The civil rights movement challenged the authority of white men as the sole leaders of the country, while the women's liberation movement forced men to take on new responsibilities as parents and increasingly share the role of the breadwinner with women. New youth and the counterculture questioned the ideals of older white males, and the Vietnam experience shattered traditional ideas of masculine behavior. In all, the revolutionary Sixties created the contemporary crisis in white American masculinity.

The novels and films of the post-1960s period both recognize and represent this crisis in masculinity. In essence, by examining the issues of paternal authority and responsibility, the image of men as violators and then the return to the protector role, and finally, individual versus collective responses to social and emotional disorientation provide clues as to what the creators of these works attempted to accomplish by representing white masculinity in the way in which they did. The works that precede 1980, namely Michael Herr's Dispatches, The Nuclear Age by Tim O'Brien, and John Updike's Rabbit Redux, as well as Coming Home, and Kramer vs. Kramer further suggest that men must rethink their roles as men in order to anticipate further challenges against white masculinity. In contrast, works produced after 1980 that include Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried, White Noise by Don DeLillo, and the films Platoon, Three Men and a Baby, and Forrest Gump are attempts on the part of authors and directors to rewrite the history of the Sixties and thereby reconstruct white masculinity in new terms for a more conservative America. In summation, by seeking a rebirth of traditional white masculine ideologies, post-1980 authors and directors responded to the suggestions of earlier works to rethink white masculinity so that they may reform it for a new generation.

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## VITA

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