Male Domesticity and the 9/11-Novel: Jay McInerney’s The Good Life

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Abstract

The essay focuses on the representation of masculinity in Jay McInerney’s The Good Life (2006). With reference to critics’ problematization of a post-9/11 revival of “macho man” (Richard Goldstein), “the manly man” (Susan Faludi), and “phallic power” (Jeffrey Melnick) in the U.S., I argue that McInerney’s text draws on quite a different set of cultural tropes and gender ideas. The essay examines how the novel takes up and refashions literary conventions associated with nineteenth-century sentimentalism to present a “domestic” form of white American middle-class masculinity, paying particular attention to the ideological function of male domesticity and the sentimental discourse in the post-9/11 novel.

During the past years, active discussions about the impact of the September 11 attacks on American ideals of manhood have developed. In what follows I briefly outline a convincing argument that these debates often revolve around, as it is expounded in three crucial texts. I read Richard Goldstein’s article “The Neo-Macho Man” (2003), Susan Faludi’s The Terror Dream (2007), a book-length analysis of 9/11’s effects on gender relations, and a chapter focused on masculinity and femininity from Jeffrey Melnick’s study 9/11 Culture (2009) as three versions of one and the same argument of what I call the “gender backlash thesis”. In his spirited essay, Goldstein describes the intensified dominance of a reactionary masculine ideal in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, namely the rise of the “Neo-Macho Man” to the status of an omnipresent icon. Goldstein traces the sources of this iconic figure to a backlash against feminism he sees as having occurred already in the cultures of the 1980s and 1990s. As a result of masculine anxiety in the face of feminism during the 1990s, Goldstein explains, expressions of “sexual resentment” and a “revolt against feminism” not only became increasingly palatable but even “hip

commodities”. However, while during the 1980s and 1990s alternative images of masculinity abounded, the “neo-macho man” stands more or less uncontested in mainstream U.S. culture since the September 11 attacks. As evidence for his thesis, the author mainly points to a number of widely recognized instances of successful hyper-masculine public self-fashioning by popular and powerful figures in post-9/11 America.

In contrast to Goldstein’s journalist vignette, Faludi’s *The Terror Dream* is a much more comprehensive analysis of 9/11’s effects on gender representations. In a similar vein, however, the author expounds the idea that the disruptive terror attacks have widely initiated a reactionary turn towards traditional ideals of “proper” femininity and masculinity. She understands this trend as a regression to the context of the 1950s, a restaging of Cold War national politics.

The pervasive gender constellation in the aftermath of 9/11, as in the cultural context of the Cold War during the 1950s, Faludi declares, follows the logic of a specific American generic tradition that includes the captivity narrative and the Western movie. The figures of “the manly man” and “the vulnerable maiden” are set up as exemplary forms of masculinity and femininity and ascribed normative value. Thus, several Republican politicians in power, “the men of flight 93”, and “9/11 firefighters”, for instance, serve as icons of traditional male heroism while women are preferably cast as fragile, helpless, and silently suffering victims, and thus ultimately as the “Perfect Virgins of Grief”, to use one of Faludi’s chapter headings.

Explicitly referring to Goldstein’s and Faludi’s earlier versions of the backlash thesis, Melnick analyzes a wide variety of contemporary U.S. popular texts in different genres and media against the backdrop of September 11, from literary fictions to pop songs, from feature films and cartoon movies to TV dramas and series. Based on a close examination of these numerous individual objects, he draws the general conclusion that the 9/11 attacks in American culture were most often seen as “a startling wake-up call for Americans to shore up proper gender behavior and renounce the “liberty” that the hijackers and their backers found so infuriating”. Thus, the author registers a dominant preoccupation of the cultural texts he analyzes with paternal figures, a phenomenon

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2 Ibid.