Spring 1-1-2016

Man 'o War: Collisions of Masculinity and Patriotism in American Sniper

Taylor Margaret Cannon
University of Colorado Boulder, taylor.cannon@colorado.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/cmci_gradetds
Part of the Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons, and the Visual Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Cannon, Taylor Margaret, "Man 'o War: Collisions of Masculinity and Patriotism in American Sniper" (2016). College of Media, Communication, and Information Graduate Theses & Dissertations. 2.
https://scholar.colorado.edu/cmci_gradetds/2

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by College of Media, Communication & Information at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Media, Communication, and Information Graduate Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
Man o’ War:

Collisions of Masculinity and Militaristic Patriotism in *American Sniper*

by

TAYLOR CANNON

B.A., Hollins University, 2013

A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

University of Colorado in partial fulfillment

of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

College of Media, Communication and Information

Department of Media Studies

2016
This thesis entitled:

Man ‘o War: Collisions of Masculinity and Militaristic Patriotism in *American Sniper*

written by Taylor Cannon

has been approved for the College of Media, Information and Communication

Department of Media Studies

(Dr. Polly McLean, thesis chair)

(Dr. Elizabeth Skewes)

(Dr. Robert Buffington)

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
ABSTRACT

Historically, dominant masculinity has occupied a crucial position within the construction of American military and patriotic culture. The relationship between these ideologies runs deep, and evidence is found in popular culture representations of war films. American war heroes depicted in mainstream media are consistently dominating men whose identity as such is a prevalent component of their identity and efficacy as soldiers. This thesis utilizes the 2014 Clint Eastwood film American Sniper as a case study to examine the portrayed connectivity of dominant manhood and American militaristic patriotism through the text’s protagonist, Chris Kyle. Kyle is widely credited as the most deadly sniper in United States military history, and thus was a renowned public figure prior to the premiere of this film.

However, his notoriety was thoroughly debated in mainstream media, particularly after the publication of his autobiography, due to possible exaggerations and fallacies about his past contained within the book. Kyle is famous for being a lethal killer, so it is natural that his fame would face some public derision, but the tales he told about himself also constructed him as an indestructible, dominating man who demonstrates remarkable nobility while remaining completely unyielding. This thesis argues that he is depicted similarly in American Sniper, and is portrayed as a man who fulfilled modern American notions of both a true patriot and a “real” man, and consequentially, even Chris Kyle himself was unable to live up to such a public image.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project is a result of the efforts of a number of dedicated, supportive people that I am privileged to have in my life. First, I must thank my advisor, Dr. Polly McLean, for her guidance in completing this endeavor in a timely and minimally-stressful manner. I’d also like to give special thanks to my other committee members, Dr. Robert Buffington and Dr. Elizabeth Skewes, for their intellectual stimulation and advisement of this project, as well as for the time they spent reviewing and critiquing it. Next, I am eternally appreciative of the bountiful encouragement provided to me by my exceptional family, and for the curiosity they instilled in me. And finally, to my brilliant and supportive friends, I owe my deepest gratitude for the love and patience showed me as I turned my focus to this project.
CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM.................................1

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.................................................................7

Masculinity: Defining the Challenge............................................................7
The Power of the Medium.............................................................................10
Manhood in Film.........................................................................................16
Feminist Perspectives on Gender.................................................................18
Significance of Ideological Patriotism...........................................................19
Men at War..................................................................................................22

III. RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY.........................................27

IV. FINDINGS..................................................................................................32

Historical Context.........................................................................................33

   Reality Check: Who was the Real Chris Kyle? ........................................34

   Prevalence of American Imperialism..........................................................39

   The Rise of the Morally Superior Soldier....................................................40

   American War Movies Over Time...............................................................48

   American Sniper: A Narrative Text Analysis..............................................59

   Fatherhood and the Family: Generational Patriarchy...............................59

   Kyle at War.................................................................................................65

   Image of the Sniper.....................................................................................68
Chapter I:
Introduction and Statement of the Problem

The year is 2004. A meaty, grizzled soldier peers through the scope of his McMillan TAC-338A semi-automatic rifle as a cloaked woman and a young boy leave a building and step out onto the dusty streets of Fallujah. The soldier dons a backwards baseball cap and a focused grimace. He is accompanied by a fully-outfitted Marine, who provides glib commentary on the situation unfolding on the ground below. The woman hands the boy a Chinese grenade that she has been hiding beneath her burka, and he begins to run forward. He does not get far before the squinting soldier fires his weapon and watches through the scope as his bullet pierces the boy’s skull. He falls to the ground in a bloody heap. The woman quickly retrieves the grenade and as she throws it at a troop of American soldiers, she too is slain by the soldier’s fire.

This is the gripping scene that begins Clint Eastwood’s American Sniper (2014). A version of these events are also featured in the opening of the book on which the blockbuster film was based, which was an autobiography written by the sniper himself, Chris Kyle. This incident introduces Kyle to the audience as a veritable war hero. Physically, he is built like a Marvel comic book hero, complete with broad shoulders, a chiseled jawline and a steadily confident attitude. He makes an excruciatingly tough call with no fuss or expression of regret. He is stoic, decisive and humble. Over all, he is powerful.

Chris Kyle’s character in this film embodies popular American perceptions of what it means to be both a good man and a good soldier. Of course, war and manhood have historically been inextricably connected. Men wage war, and it is men that are traditionally sent to fight on the front lines. The gendered perception of the soldier is one that has deeply permeated American consciousness; the quintessential image of the patriotic warrior is invariably male. Clearly, the
identity of the soldier is shaped by socialized gender constructions, but how are gender constructions shaped by war and the duty to serve one’s country? More specifically, how are masculinity and manhood shaped through the identity of the soldier?

The identity of the male soldier is not separate from, but rather intricately tied to a view of masculinity that has been a major feature of media representations, popular understanding and scholarly literature in recent years. A purported crisis of masculinity has emerged within the context of shifting gender norms (Horrocks, 1994, Whitehead, 2002), and the effects of these changes are arguably manifold. According to the Centers for Disease Control, in 2015 men committed 77.9% of all suicides and are almost four times more likely to kill themselves than women. Feminist news outlets like Ms. Magazine draw connections between the sharp spike in American mass shootings and traditional notions of what it means to be a man. In 2008, Michael Kimmell published Guyland, decrying the rise of the perpetually juvenile nature of the contemporary American man. Just a year later, an online media company calling itself The Good Men Project emerged from this fray to address this purported cultural disaster, proudly claiming to “. . . search far and wide for new stories and new voices from the front lines of modern manhood. And we do it without moralizing and without caricaturizing our audience; we let guys be guys, but we do it while challenging confining cultural notions of what a ‘real man’ must be.” (The Good Men Project, 2009, para 4). The Atlantic Magazine’s inflammatorily-titled piece The End of Men asked whether, due to drastic social and cultural shifts in gender dynamics, men now occupy a subjugated position in relation to their female counterparts.

Amid this fray of anxiety surrounding the shifting social status of men, the American Sniper film premiered. The controversial biopic is based on the autobiography of the same name written by United States Navy SEAL Chris Kyle, who is widely credited as being the deadliest
sniper in U.S. military history. The film opened in theaters in a year in which the box office was inarguably dominated by women-driven films. In June, National Public Radio reported “more than half of the top 10 box-office hits- six of them- center their stories on female characters,” (Mondello, 2015, para 7). *American Sniper* was greeted by an array of intense public debate and discussion, surrounding not only the character and narrative of Chris Kyle, but also the validity of his story and its meaning in the greater context of American militarism. The film’s apparently conservative values were considered a deviation from what many view to be Hollywood’s typically left-leaning productions (Kiersz & Walker, 2014), and this stark contrast helped to push *American Sniper* to the forefront of American popular culture consciousness.

War films such as this are reflective representations of prevailing cultural notions of military action and violence as related to gender. In these texts, masculine identity is defined and shaped through the subjects’ identification as soldiers, by their relational positioning of women and in terms of their hierarchical relationships with other men. The purpose of analyzing *American Sniper* is to gain an understanding of how the connection between dominant masculine identity and military service is portrayed in popular culture. The film’s main character is involved in the post-9/11 invasion of Iraq, a conflict that is representative of American imperialist pursuits in a region of the world replete with strife over its oil resources. Embedded in his character are numerous tropes consistent with dominant masculine identity. He wields this aspect of himself as a component of his power and efficacy as a soldier.

Studies of gender and American militarism are particularly relevant in the contemporary era: as women become increasingly integrated into the ranks of the armed forces, questions of equality between men and women in the military are often raised. Although women are now permitted to enlist in the military, it is still very much considered a male-dominated cultural
phenomenon. The issue of sexual assault within the ranks of the U.S. military is a hotly contested issue in the contemporary age, and many men do still make the decision to enlist for reasons of family tradition. Furthermore, as increasingly more women enlist, the centuries-old cultural link between patriotic duty and masculinity will need to shift considerably, and studying the representations of this relationship in mainstream films will be useful as popular culture both reflects and shapes societal values.

A study of portrayed masculine identities in film is also significant in gender and media research because it will explore a relationship between masculine identity and patriotic duty in a culturally prominent text that has not yet been extensively critiqued within the realm of academia. An understanding of the public perception of patriotism is imperative to an accurate conception of contemporary nationalism and the values inherent therein in America. Patriotic and masculine identities are in flux due to the recent policy changes that allow women to serve in positions that place them directly in combat, adding further import to my work. Additionally, while much has been written on feminine identities as portrayed in mainstream media, scholarly meditations on portrayed connections between American patriotic duty and patriarchal masculinity in texts focusing on the American invasion of Iraq are thin.

*American Sniper* is an ideal focus for this study for two prominent reasons: (1) it came out fairly recently and was a huge financial success funded by a major studio, and (2), it has been the focus of considerable public discourse. The controversy surrounding the film had a lot to feed off of: the autobiography of Chris Kyle on which the film is based has been called into question in terms of its adherence to reality (Nicholson, 2015, Raymond, 2015, Zurcher, 2015). Further, critics of the film complained that it failed to give enough attention to the political climate leading up to the Iraq War, that it valorized a man who killed hundreds of people without
expressing ambivalence or a trace of remorse for lives lost and that the film minimized many of the problems plaguing veterans returning from the War. In 2014, the year *American Sniper* premiered, a CBS News reported that just 18% of Americans felt that the War had been worth the lives lost and sacrifices made (Dutton, De Pinto, Salvanto & Backus, 2014). Many commentators chastised the movie’s filmmakers for focusing on the human interest story of one individual soldier and his challenges without spending any time providing political background. One critic claims, “Sometimes a story is meaningless or worse without real context, and this is one of them,” (Taibbi, 2015, para. 31). These viewers problematize the act of telling a story about an individual war hero because it draws attention away from the political leaders who were responsible for the war and the damage done by the invasion.

While the ample discourse concerning the film provides some validation for an analysis of the text, the film’s relative newness presents a challenge: scholarly work about *American Sniper* has yet to be explored thoroughly within academia. Work analyzing media representations of the War in Iraq from a distinctly post-War perspective are not yet dense either due to the recentness of the United States’ decision to withdraw from the country. Therefore, this thesis uses other studies of masculinity in war films as well as a historical analysis to locate the film’s timely significance to inform its analysis.

In the following thesis, I first present an overview of the methodology I employ in this study and my reasons for doing so, which relate to their utility in answering my research question. I then explore the relevant scholarly literature that informs my study and identify the gap the current research that I hope to fill through conduction and discussion of my analysis. Subsequently, I execute a historical analysis of the relationship of masculinity and American patriotic militarism and the historical representations of this linkage in mainstream media. This
exploration is followed by a textual analysis of *American Sniper* that aims to both apply the historical context established in the previous chapter and additionally dissect the representations of masculinity and militarism that are found in the film. Finally, I discuss my findings and their relevance to the broader academic field of cultural studies.
Chapter II:

Review of Literature

Masculinity: Defining the Challenge

Looking at a film as commercially and critically popular as American Sniper is particularly relevant because of its presence at the forefront of American consciousness. In conversations addressing such gender inequalities, an analysis of masculinity is indispensable. A dominant masculine ideal is harmful to not just women, but to men as well, as it allows for only one singularly specific form of masculinity as acceptable.

Kimmel (2002) claims that,

The invisibility of masculinity reproduces gender inequality, both materially and ideologically. Thus, any initiative to improve the condition of women must include efforts to involve men. . . Of course, most initiatives towards gender equality must, and will continue to, focus on women’s empowerment; but achieving the vision of gender equality is not possible without changes in men’s lives as well as in women’s, (xii).

Curiously, while the dominant masculine ideal promotes itself as powerful, muscular and unyielding, it is in fact a strikingly fragile construct. In some ways, it would appear that the more dominant the performance of masculinity, the less secure in his manhood is the performer. Men who derive a sense of masculine identity from sources not inherently linked with hegemonic power structures feel, according to Kimmel (1996), more stable in their manhood. He writes,

Men who feel powerful in their lives do not need to wear ‘power ties’ or eat ‘power breakfasts’ or ‘power lunches’ as did yuppie arbitrageurs in the 1980s. Power is not
something to be applied like a fashion accessory; it is both an inner confidence and security, as well as referring to a real hierarchical position. This kind of power American men still did not feel (p. 292).

Kimmel (1996) cites the plot of certain contemporary literature that re-creates “the western novel of the turn of the century and the popularity of the male-bonding war movie of the 1950s and 1960s,” (p. 311). Similar to depictions of dominant masculinity in war films, the male protagonist is testing his manhood in a context that is external to society.

It is imperative that a conclusive understanding of the sociological significance of manhood is reached for the purpose of this argument. Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) offer relevant thought on this subject. In their piece titled Men, Masculinity and Manhood Acts, their approach to the study of masculinity is in accordance with sociological notions of gender that construct it not as a descriptor for individuals, but as a way to identify certain cultural behaviors that both differentiate men from women and additionally position men as advantaged at the expense of women. They write,

For an individual male to enjoy the benefits that derive from membership in the dominant gender group, he must present himself to others as a particular kind of social being: a man…To be credited as a man, what an individual male must do, in other words, is put on a convincing manhood act (p. 279).

This requires mastering a set of conventional signifying practices through which the identity ‘man’ is established and upheld in interaction.

Identifying clearly as a cisgender male within the confines of Western society is a way to establish social acceptance or validation. But in addition to this basic human need, masculinity as
a dominant identity also allows its members to wield power or dominance over other gender identities. Further, posing gender identification as a choice rather than a naturalized trait assigns responsibility for this power on the subject. This argument aligns with Judith Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity. She posits that gender identification is executed through a series of acts that position an individual as being easily recognizable as either male or female.

It is necessary for the purposes of this study to determine a coherent definition of hegemonic masculinity. Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985) offer a particularly concise one in their piece titled *Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity*. They state,

The ability to impose a particular definition on other kinds of masculinity is part of what we mean by ‘hegemony’. Hegemonic masculinity is far more complex than the accounts of essences in the masculinity books would suggest…it is, rather, a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance (p. 592).

Carrigan, Connell and Lee’s thinking holds that hegemonic masculinity is, at its core, about dominance and power over the “Other.” The agency it provides (to one distinct sect of society in opposition to those who do not conform to its norms) is what makes it harmful and problematic.

As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) point out in their piece *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept*, issues of gender identity cannot be accurately addressed without fostering a holistic perspective that considers not only masculine constructs, but forms of femininity as well. They advocate for acknowledgement of subordinate groups as well as dominant ones, in addition to awareness of the mutuality of recognized conditioned social norms between the sexes.
Relatedly, Connell and Messerschmidt determine that hegemonic masculinity is a social construction that allows groups to manage and cope with tensions between genders. They write, “Gender relations are always arenas of tension. A given pattern of hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic to the extent that it provides a solution to these tensions, tending to stabilize patriarchal power or reconstitute it in new conditions,” (p. 853). Further, Connell and Messerschmidt allude to a “positive hegemony,” or a hegemonic masculinity that is open to equality with women, as a key concept in the movement towards reform of systems of gender inequality: “The concept of hegemonic masculinity was originally formulated in tandem with a concept of hegemonic femininity…Gender is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) or femininity,” (p. 848). Because manhood is defined in contrast to womanhood, relational systems of hierarchy between genders is important to consider.

The Power of the Medium

Aside from the construction of dominant masculinity in American culture, researchers have explored the relationship between the power of the media to shape aggressive behaviors in children (Blumberg, Bierwirth & Schwartz, 2008). Although children are certainly more vulnerable to influence than adults, such work addresses the potential for media content to shape the behaviors of consumers, which gives some validation to a study of the power of masculine representations in film. In her article “Media and Children’s Aggression, Fear, and Altruism,” Barbara J. Wilson (2008) presents strong evidence that consumption of violent television programming can contribute to aggression in children. While these results do, of course, vary according to age, gender and individual perceptions of media, they are also suggestive of the significance of the agency that mainstream entertainment media producers have over audiences.
Wilson’s article additionally concludes that from a young age, children begin to prefer and identify with certain characters and real people featured within the media that they consume.

In one survey, nearly 40 percent of teens named a media figure as their role model—nearly the same share that named a parent or relative. Consistent with social cognitive theory, children are more likely to learn from those they perceive as attractive role models. Strongly identifying with violent characters, for example, makes children more likely to learn aggression from the media (p.109).

Such findings advocate for the idea that cultural representations with which audience members identify do resonate with them long after viewing the content. Wilson’s work indicates that audiences who viewed *American Sniper* are impacted by what they see in the story, even if this takes place subconsciously. It is also evident in her study that in terms of aspirational figures, characters in media content are akin to family members in the eyes of children. This signifies that even vastly exaggerated and completely fictional portrayals have the potential to leave a dramatic impression on the minds of media consumers.

In contrast, audience-effects models have significant flaws that need to be considered. The question of whether media actually stimulate certain behaviors and ideologies or if they simply reinforce pre-existing tendencies in audiences has been explored extensively within the field of media studies. Even after copious studies and observations, results are inconclusive when it comes to determining the degree to which media consumers are affected specifically by their media consumption (Livingstone, 1996).

Fortunately, the audience-effects perspective is not the sole tool with which scholars can theorize on the power of media. Hall’s (1993) theories concerning audience reception shed light
on the encoding and decoding of institutional values and hierarchies upon audio-visual media. This model enables the scholarly exploration of the social and cultural contexts of the audience in the exchange of information. It acknowledges that an individual will interpret a media text differently depending on an array of variables that make up that person’s cultural background. Thus, a text’s meaning is more nuanced than its intended purpose, because of the variety of ways in which it is likely to be interpreted.

Hall’s theories suggest that a common, widespread meaning of a text will arise among members of a community who have all been consumers of that text. People who are likely to have the same cultural factors that determine their understanding of a text are apt to share a common interpretation of it. Thus, the “encoded” message, or the message intended by the creator of the text does not always align with the “decoded” message, or how the audience understands the message. Hall divides possible decoding positions into three camps: the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position and the oppositional position. Each position takes a different perspective on a text in relation to its creator’s intention, and in a full-bodied textual analysis, it will be important to consider all of these possible perspectives.

In constructing an argument concerning effects of film on its consumers, it is necessary to consider audience relationships with specifically audio-visual media such as television and film in order to come to an understanding of how the minds and behaviors of media consumers can be swayed or changed by the content they consume. A particularly appropriate instance of this is found in Coats and Hoover’s (2011) article studying audience effects of media on masculine identities as relative to religious identities. While media exposure did not result in consistently negative effects on male identification, it could either perpetuate or disrupt their existing self-identity. As they explain,
Their appropriations have a kind of elasticity. They can take on board what they see to be positive role models and positive representations and identify with them directly. At the same time, they can constructively use representations that they consider to be ‘negative’ as ways of being distinct through their own codings of them. Further, they can use their particular combination of these decodings as a way of claiming an identity that is mapped onto both the context of the broader ‘common culture’…Thus, it appears that the media are a salient resource for self instead of a direct challenge to it, at least for these informants (p. 891).

In other words, media consumption provides its audiences with means by which to reinforce pre-existing notions of reality or social norms. These may clash or perpetuate existing ideologies possessed by the individual.

Therefore the problem with media that idolizes the hegemonic, traditional ideal of the hyper-masculine, unemotional man as a hero is not that it plants a positive image of this stereotype in the minds of the viewers, but that it holds great potential to perpetuate that which already exists. If, prior to entering the cinema, audience members subconsciously understand from their family and community that to be male in the normative sense is to be insensitive, protective and dominant, this idea can be strengthened and heightened by viewing American Sniper. Likewise, if a media consumer fosters personal qualities of emotional sensitivity and empathy, this film communicates that those traits are signifiers of femininity (which translates to inadequacy and weakness in the realm of a patriarchal culture). As American Sniper would have it, there is only one type of masculinity that is worth aspiring to, and all others are lacking.

Further, as Escholz and Bufkin (2001) state, males (who are, for cultural reasons, the likeliest gender to relate to war films) may be more susceptible to media effects than females;
they begin by stating that violent media and aggression in children are decidedly linked, as referenced by previous studies in psychology and social psychology. One of the circumstances that make audience members particularly vulnerable to media effects is the gender of that media consumer, because studies show that media effects on aggression as manifested in children are stronger in boys than in girls (Comstock, 1978). This knowledge makes *American Sniper*’s content especially powerful because it is targeted toward the male population (it is an entertainment feature about a man, featuring uniquely male struggles in traditionally male-dominated roles).

Another scholarly film analysis that informs this thesis is an expansive one that focuses on the representation of the Iraq War in 50 films released between 2001 and 2012. Blackmore (2012) argues that although the films that are the subjects of his study were not financial successes, they were intended to operate as a form of propaganda. He applies the theories of Jacques Ellul (1965) to his analyses in order to explore their persuasive functions. Most valuable to the study in this thesis, Blackmore provides a series of tropes that enable an understanding of how these war films avoid addressing controversies and problems that are so often consequences of war.

Of the six Degrees listed by Blackmore, five are applicable to an analysis of *American Sniper*. Degree 1, which Blackmore titles “Dear John,” incorporates a love story into an action/adventure setting. Female love interests are posed in opposition to patriotic military values and as a threat or alternative to the soldier’s commitment to serve. Next, Blackmore lists Degree 2, “Some History.” This trope encompasses movies that skim over the realistic reasons behind the war of the story’s focus; “Rather than focus on causes or the complexities of political background, the films stare resolutely at the soldier” (p. 300). Degree 3 is called “The Army as
the Hero,” and it eroticizes military service by positioning it as an exclusive club into which all should wish to be accepted. Blackmore writes that these tropes often feature a protagonist who becomes interesting and powerful through military service. He writes, “An action hero rooted in the military has that much more clout: He or she is a normal person but, in joining the military, taps the hero’s astonishing resources of strength that each member of the mass audience suspects it has, even if it cannot locate it just this moment,” (p. 303). This was inarguably the case for Chris Kyle’s character in Sniper—prior to enlisting, he is a regular blue-collar Texan, but after he joins, his persona shifts from unremarkable working man to a talented military marksman, full of potential. He soon meets and woos Taya and begins his successful career in the armed forces, with a wife and baby at home. These elements fall into place only after making the transition from civilian to soldier—a near parallel evolution to that of boy to man.

Similarly, Blackmore’s Degree 4 is called “Technical Wizards,” and refers to films with narratives that tell the story of how the protagonist made the transition from young man to soldier, including key formative events that serve as rites of passage in this evolution. The battlefield itself is the ultimate test of the soldier’s skills and moral fiber. This trope stresses the soldier’s ability to make tough decisions under great duress. Then, Degree 5 is “War Crimes Policy”, which is less useful to a study of American Sniper than Degree 6, “Crazy Familiar Vets.” This type of film considers the mental and physical effects of war on the men who served. As in American Sniper, the former soldiers who suffer most severely from these negative consequences are portrayed as being less resilient than those who do not seem to experience the same side effects. Blackmore writes, “Despite an enormous increase in education about [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder], it is still depicted as something that happens to the weak,” (p. 310). Kyle does experience some initial mental anguish that could be categorized as a type of PTSD,
but his troubles pale in comparison to those of other wounded veterans. Furthermore, Kyle’s successful method for dealing with these symptoms is to assist other former soldiers who have been wounded worse. He expresses no regrets—only frustration at being unable to continue to save lives as a civilian.

**Manhood in Film**

Scholarship on representations of masculinity in entertainment media tends to acknowledge the widespread portrayal of an archetypal independent, silent, and often pugilistic male character. The depiction of masculinity that considered in this thesis is discussed comprehensively by Tim Edwards (2013). He applies the ideologies of renowned feminist Laura Mulvey to three box-office hits starring this archetype in the lead role. In particular, Edwards uses Mulvey’s theory predicting the subjective male figure as the gazer in opposition to the female figure as the object of the gaze in order to analyze how popular social constructions of masculinity exist in relation to women through representations of leading men in mainstream movies.

Given the ubiquity of the strong, silent male hero in popular culture, Edwards’ findings are unsurprisingly applicable to *American Sniper*. His work serves to strengthen the argument that the perpetuation of this type of masculine social construct is harmful to both sexes. He writes of male protagonists that are “. . . passive, often silent, and put in situations that should provoke enormous reaction yet frequently do not,” (p. 49). Although the film character of Chris Kyle endures immense pressure to serve his country, provide for his family and protect his comrades from harm, he emerges from war relatively unscathed. Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are only alluded to on a few minor occasions, and these seem to stop completely once Kyle begins to direct his attention to helping other veterans to re-adjust to civilian life. His
emotional expression is minimal throughout the film’s duration, although the challenges and moral quandaries he faces are great.

Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985) aim to fulfill a need for a new, modernized version of masculinity that they claim has value in contemporary social contexts. The authors contemplate reasons for the perpetuation of that strong, silent, dominant, patriarchal ideal of masculinity within contemporary film, and how that resonates in mainstream societal norms:

Most men do not really act like the screen image of John Wayne or Humphrey Bogart; and when they try to, it is likely to be though comic…yet very large numbers of men are complicit in sustaining the hegemonic model…The overwhelmingly important reason is that most men benefit from the subordination of women, and hegemonic masculinity is centrally connected with the institutionalization of men’s dominance over women, (p. 592).

Hegemonic masculinity is inherently linked to the subordination of women, because it requires that men exert dominance over the opposite sex. It is this fact that makes these gendered portrayals within entertainment media harmful to the greater society, and therein lies the question of ethicality.

In textual analyses of a narrative medium such as film, recognition of categorically-organized characters and persona is imperative. American Sniper has a clear hero and a villain who are at odds to one another throughout the course of the plot, and the tension between them is a canvas upon which Kyle can perform his masculine identity. Anderson (2008) sees these binaries found within narrative to be indicative of how masculinity is constructed within the context of a story. She concludes that villains and heroes are labeled as such in order to negotiate
the moral politics of violence. Separating actors into “good” and “bad” categories is helpful in encouraging audiences to empathize with one character while demonizing the other.

The positioning of men to their guns is representative of their vulnerable relationship to their manhood and the power that comes with it. Traditionally in film studies, the onscreen image of a gun can translate to a phallic metaphor (Nelmes, 1996, Pollock, 2013). Such an analogy adds another dimension to war films that exists outside of the readily presented narrative, and provides ample opportunity to read interpretations of sexuality in a film text. In American Sniper, Kyle’s rifle is fired often and a symbol of his impenetrable masculinity. Kimmel (1996) writes of war films as posing the battlefield as an arena for men to demonstrate and test their manhood, and the character of Chris Kyle certainly puts on a show. His gun is simply another method with which he demonstrates or performs his masculine power.

**Feminist Perspectives on Gender**

Modern feminism posits that polarized, hegemonic representations of patriarchal masculinity are harmful to the greater social system because it positions women as the “other” (Schippers, 2007). According to this thinking, depictions of the powerful figures as almost exclusively straight, white and male are problematic because they rationalize dominant behavior that oppresses minority groups within the culture. A particularly compelling feminist argument for the eradication of patriarchal norms is that these gendered hierarchies are harmful to everyone within a society. bell hooks (2013) emphasizes the importance of drawing a clear line between the issues that inherent in patriarchal masculinity, and the concept of masculinity itself. She writes,
So far in our nation visionary feminist movement is the only struggle for justice that emphasizes the need to end patriarchy. No mass body of women has challenged patriarchy and neither has any group of men come together to lead the struggle. The crisis facing men is not the crisis of masculinity, it is the crisis of patriarchal masculinity. Until we make this distinction clear, men will continue to fear that any critique of patriarchy represents a threat (p. 5).

In order to effectively address the problems of patriarchal masculinity, men must be complicit. In a critique of gendered representations in media, it is important to acknowledge that manhood itself is not the point of contention, but rather the patriarchal values and expectations that have come to be so conflated with masculine identities.

The concept of gender and its deviation from sex is naturally a heavily discussed notion across feminist theory. Butler (1990) defines gender as “…the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being,” (p. 33). Thus, masculinity is a series of performed behaviors that an individual does to self-identify and be identified by others as masculine.

Knowledge set forth by entertainment media is absorbed by audiences (even subconsciously), and shapes the consciousness of those audience members. This concept is important in terms of gender identity because gender is performed as a series of roles and behaviors that allow one to be socially accepted as either male or female (Rakow, 1986). Therefore, the gender norms to which an individual may choose to abide are molded by the images of the social world that he or she consumes through mass media.
It is imperative to consider the ways that war and gender concepts translate in popular media. Jeff Akeley (1994) took a look at the same hyper-masculine phenomena in a filmic format from a strictly financial standpoint. *American Sniper* is decidedly more serious and pensive than an action-adventure film like *Universal Soldier,* which Akeley examined, but they do share a target audience and can attribute their success similarly. Of films such as these, Akeley writes, “…it entraps the desire of the moviegoer, leaving his desire to imitate unsatisfied and ready to spend more money on gym memberships, kickboxing classes and [action hero Jean-Claude] Van Damme movies,” (p. 8). Akeley’s vision of the economic impetus behind the creation of films that capitalize off of the valorization of apparently invincible, hyper-strong men is apt to the financial success enjoyed by *American Sniper’s* producers.

**Significance of Ideological Patriotism**

The term “ideology” is used in varying situations to communicate different meaning, so it is important to carefully define its use within this thesis. The definition of ideology most useful for the purposes of this analysis is provided by Croteau (2013), who conceptualizes the term in media studies contexts to be related to the values, worldview and belief system fostered by a subject: “It refers not only to the beliefs held about the world but also to the basic ways in which the world is defined” (p. 160). Croteau stresses the importance of examining the wider system of meaning in which the analyzed media depictions exist. In an ideological analysis, he writes, it is less important to focus on individualized or specific details and necessary to explore what those details might indicate about the broader culture. Thus, in considering the depictions of American Patriotism in *American Sniper,* this analysis will move towards a conception of the meanings that these depictions might implicate about American popular culture.
Associations with patriotic ideologies are stable predictors of behaviors such as the choice to enlist in military service. Parker (2009) draws from other authors to muse on the distinctive difference between what are termed “blind patriotism” and “symbolic patriotism”. He writes,

Symbolic patriotism taps one’s affective attachment to the nation and its core values through symbols. Blind patriotism, on the other hand is aligned with a more cognitive (i.e. ideological) perspective on the relationship between the individual and the nation in which unconditional support for the nation, its institutions, and its chauvinistic policy preferences represents the norm (p. 97).

Much criticism of *American Sniper* touches on the notion that Kyle’s character seems to have enlisted in the Navy SEALs without expressing much awareness of the greater international conflicts in which the United States was engaged. The concept of “blind” patriotism will assist me in unpacking Kyle’s identity in relation to nationalism and loyalty to his country as manifested in his choice to join the military.

In analyzing this text, a full-bodied understanding of the significance of patriotism within contemporary American society is useful. Ishio (2010) offers quantifiable evidence that dominant groups within a society are most likely to strongly identify with patriotic values. According to the research conducted, white Christians demonstrate the highest emotional connection to patriotic values. Since Chris Kyle clearly exists within both of these groups, such a study is valuable to an exploration of patriotism in *American Sniper* in order to perceive the larger trend of which he is representative.
Within the structures of patriarchy, war is planned, executed and encouraged largely by men (Hutchings, 2008). Hutchings muses on this linkage, how it came to exist and whether or not it remains useful. She suggests,

…the persistence of masculinity as the lens through which war is viewed has much more to do with the formal than with the substantive properties with which it is associated. To be possible at all, war requires the institutionalization of a range of beliefs, skills, and capacities, which shift according to context... Identifying war with masculinity provides conceptual recourses that can authorize such discriminations (p. 401).

Therefore, the polarization of good and evil that makes a sniper’s job possible is connected, Hutchings would argue, to the masculinity with which acts of war are associated.

**Men at War**

Broader theories on the issues and events occurring in battle are valuable to an exploration of *American Sniper* to foster comprehension of the stress and quandaries that arise in such dire situations. Von Clausewitz (1968) writes of a “fog of war,” or the series of decisions and actions that are made by soldiers in battle in dire situations and without certainty. The fog is depleted by intensive strategic planning and through the training of military officers to react in premeditated ways that can be predicted (and therefore controlled) by generals. This concept is useful to a study of masculine performativity within the context of a war film because against the notion of such situational ambivalence that is so ubiquitous in battle, the quick decisiveness of a valorized sniper seems particularly stark.
As men pursue status as the ideal, dominant manly man, a notion of an ideal warrior also exists in social consciousness. Barkawi, Dandeker, Wells-Petry and Kier (1999) muse on the development of the identity of the soldier. They write,

The identities of combat soldiers incorporate a definite set of values that can be understood in ideal-type terms as ‘warrior masculinity.’ In many ways, these values are comparable across social and historical contexts, and embody the supposedly timeless ‘brotherhood of soldiers’ that informs the personal code of many military professionals. (p. 184).

Thus, masculinity and soldier identity can interplay and form cohesively. This is again evidenced in Chris Kyle’s character; he is a dominating but relatively aimless young man prior to enlisting in the Navy. His understanding of the war is shallow, but he feels as though he can help to protect his country by joining the military and does so. It is then that the rest of his life falls into place - he meets his future wife and feels fulfilled and valued as a soldier.

Men are not born soldiers. Rather, through training and certain bonding rituals, the identity of the soldier is constructed over time, and as has already been stated, is often inherently linked to identities of gender and sexuality. Boyhood experiences are powerful predictors of the behaviors and beliefs that the mature man will perform. Similarly, the association between serving in the armed forces and a status of honor and bravery is also an ideology that is culturally ingrained at a young age. The character of Chris Kyle, for example, is shown hunting deer in the woods with his father at a young age. This is exemplary of the ubiquity of dominant masculinity as portrayed as being indispensable in the mindset of an effective soldier. It is a notion connected to ideologies of the men’s movement: many of the movement’s leaders associate virility with nationalistic ideology - powerful, muscular, sexually potent leaders (Kimmel, 1996). For these
activists, in order to operate as a successfully imperialistic country, a nation must foster a position of aggression and dominance, and these traits are associated heavily with masculine identities. It is therefore unsurprising that the ideal warrior, the actor of national imperialism on the ground level, should exhibit these features.

In the vein of gender ideologies developed in childhood, latent separation between boy and mother is a reason provided by the mythopoetic men’s movement for the rise of a less dominant and more passive form of masculinity. Kimmel (1996) writes of Robert Bly’s perception of this shift,

Masculine authenticity was destroyed by the Industrial Revolution, Bly argues, because fathers abandoned their sons and went to work in factories. Mothers have also retained an incestuous dedication to their sons, excluding the father and keeping the boy dependent on her long after he needed to break away, (p. 317).

In contrast, the feminist argument, according to Kimmel, is that men are too separated from their mothers. “The project of Self-Made Masculinity, of a manhood constantly tested and proved, becomes equated with a relentless effort to repudiate femininity, a frantic effort to dissociate the psychological basis for sexism,” (p. 318). With this move, men become more and more divided from emotionality, nurturing skills and sensitivity, and the need to perform masculinity becomes urgent.

The relationality of females and males to one another is essential to any exploration of gender meanings. Men cannot assume a dominant position in society without being aware of the relational position of women. Schippers (2007) writes that the social effects resultant from embodying a dominant gender ideal are the real proof of gender inequalities. She states,
This suggests that simply asking people what the ideal characteristics for women and for men and then deciding how the characteristics line up as complementary and hierarchical will not be enough. We would have to see which features of femininity and masculinity are put into practice, deployed as rationale for practice, and institutionalized to establish and naturalize hierarchical and complementary social relationships between women and men and those who do not fit either category, (p. 100).

Therefore, in the context of *American Sniper*, because Chris Kyle truly does embody the dominant ideal of the hyper-masculine American soldier, it is the rewards and consequences that he faces as result of that embodiment that inform the gender inequalities that are read therein.

The traditional reward for demonstrated manhood is the beautiful woman (Kimmel, 1996), and female roles in *American Sniper* is indicative of this. Chris Kyle’s wife, Taya is the voice of good, down-home values beckoning Kyle home while he defends his country and battles his demons in Iraq. Taya also acts as Kyle’s reward for his masculine performance. When they first meet, she has just dismissed another man and entices Kyle to earn her affections. The concept of the exchange of women being foundational to gender relations (Rubin, 1997) is useful here. The ways men interact with women are, in these media texts, indicative of the social potency of their manhood. Men circulate women as a way to cultivate relationships amongst themselves. A man’s sexual history and ability to seduce a conventionally attractive woman is treated by society as evidence of his heterosexuality and manhood, as is apparent in *American Sniper*. Kyle’s conquering of Taya and demonstrated ability not only to have sex with her but to marry her is further confirmation of his ability to perform his masculinity to the highest degree.

Because the military has historically been open only to men, it is a breeding ground for male bonding and social relationships. Friendships are important because they provide a testing
ground for social skills and help individuals to self-identify, set personal boundaries and express feelings of intimacy (Nardi, 2007). But bonds that blossom in a conservative, single-sex environment may have other functions as well. Kimmel (1996) argues that “homosocial preserves” like a military environment constructed specifically and singularly for straight men do not just function to foster close relationships between men, and that they additionally offer preservation of male privilege.

Bonding rituals and relationships between men are, unsurprisingly, a significant aspect of military service. In most positions, soldiers must work as a team in order to achieve a goal, so the strengthening of relationships between them is beneficial to the functionality of the unit as a whole. The bonds between soldiers are so intense that they may not be as socially acceptable in a civilian environment, because sexual attraction may be assumed. Nardi (2007) notes that friendships between men possess varying meaning depending on social context, and environments that were constructed specifically for heterosexual males offer a vastly different context from mainstream society.

Further, friendships between straight men in the contemporary era are increasingly rare and strained, mitigated by the fear of being seen as homosexual (Kimmel, 1996). Arenas that foster male bonding and male relationships are almost solely those that exclude women and gay men altogether, and it is only in these venues that men can seek camaraderie and some semblance of emotional support with other men. Nardi (2007) describes the import of certain social elements that interact with one another and combine to create an environment in which men are inhibited in the ways that they can demonstrate and express feelings of friendship intimacy with other men. He writes,
As issues related to homosexuality, masculinity, and sexuality in the post-Freudian era became part of the public discourse, men’s friendships in particular became more limited in scope. Romantic friendships, especially for men, were less visible and not a topic typically to be discussed in poems and literature. True friendship, in the early twentieth century and continuing to this day, emerged as something only women were capable of experiencing (p. 50).

Male friendships are limited to sharing activities: a man can have a hunting buddy or a golfing friend, but he is less likely than a woman to call this friend in a time of emotional vulnerability in search of support.

As media functions both as a reflection and a stimulator for societal norms, mainstream war films like *American Sniper* are important popular culture representations of meanings behind masculinity and militarism in the United States. *American Sniper* presents a depiction of the ideal soldier and successfully performed masculinity. Within this text, meanings are shaped through men’s respective relationships to war, female characters and other men.
Chapter III: 

Research Question and Methodology

My thesis will study the relationships between American patriotism and dominant masculinity in *American Sniper*, which chronicles the adult life of an Iraq war veteran. I aim to explore the ways in which masculinity and patriotism (manifested in a feeling of responsibility to serve one’s country) are inherently linked within the context of this film. I discuss the ways in which these two ideologies shape one another, and particularly how the interplay between them is represented in popular culture.

I intend to address the following research question:

**RQ#1: How do the prevailing cultural norms of dominant masculinity and militaristic patriotism collide and interplay in the context of American Sniper?**

A mixed analytical approach using a combination of both historical and narrative textual analyses will be helpful in exploring my research question. I will need to consider the historical and political contexts of the invasion featured *American Sniper* in order to adequately comprehend how and why the film was produced and the way that the audience received it at the time. A narrative textual analysis will allow me to look at the representations of masculinity and patriotism in the film and the meanings and values that they communicate. Again, here an historical analysis will assist me in achieving an understanding of what masculine identities mean within the context of the American invasion of Iraq.

This thesis aims to apply historical context to a narrative text analysis in order to situate the findings in the broader picture of cultural and socio-political progression. To do so, I
consider relevant literature and social science scholarship, some of which is reflective of past eras and other work that is an original account from the time period itself. The historical research pertaining to this study entails tracing histories of the American soldier and the sniper in particular, as well as consideration of representations of the male American solider in film over the past century. This approach permits a view of historical research that allows for acknowledgment of popular critiques of media representations over time, thereby historically situating an analysis of *American Sniper* among them.

Of course, implicit in any analysis of historical nature is an element of interpretation and dissemination of the relevant historical facts. Significant meaning is found in those facts that are included and those that are abandoned or ignored, as well as how these facts come to be understood through the conduction of analysis. But in order to attain a holistic comprehension of the connotations behind representations of masculinity and military values in contemporary popular media, it is crucial to consider how these portrayed ideologies have evolved over time (Berger, 2000). History provides vital context in the pursuit of a complete picture of the significance of any culturally-ingrained ideology.

Further, historical context provides meaning to analytical research that colors its power in broader society and culture. The historical context section of this thesis works toward an understanding of the significance of the past connection of dominant manhood to the identity of the American solider, and how that link situates the subsequent narrative analysis. Yet it is necessary to allow for the emergence of a pattern without imposing one on the relevant research. As Berger states,

> A random collection of facts about some topic doesn’t tell us anything. Neither does a simple chronology. The question that must be asked is whether historians impose a
pattern on the material they are dealing with (because of their theories about how to interpret historical data and other material), or whether they elicit from this material or, to be more precise, discover in this material, a pattern. Are historians ingenious thinkers who impose their conceptual theories on past events to explain what happened, or are they gifted analysts who find in past events the pattern that helps explain them? (p. 136).

To mitigate the construction of a historical connection between dominant masculinity and American militarism, it is crucial to consider some research that does not consider the relevant material from the gender studies perspective. This method will effectively assist in the pursuit of unbiased critical consideration of historical research and an informed analysis of a film text.

Narratives such as those found in film need to be dissected and interpreted in order to be used as social science data (Riessman, 1993). Therefore, conducting a close narrative analysis will allow me to elucidate meanings from the journeys of the film’s characters, and the adversity that they encounter. I will produce detailed records of my observations which will encompass visual elements as well as plot and character-based notes, allowing me to achieve a deep understanding of the text’s main themes and their significance in the greater social structure. Such a reading of American Sniper will allow me to make cohesive claims about the intersections of patriarchal masculinity and American patriotism in the film.

More specifically, my analysis will be thematic in nature, meaning that it will emphasize the text’s content rather than its form (Riessman, 1993). I will work towards identifying key patterns and themes within the film that will elucidate the research question I aim to address. These recurring motifs will emerge from the meanings behind the story that American Sniper weaves and the ways that narrative is likely to be interpreted by media consumers. Such an
analysis will facilitate an understanding of the implications that such media representations of American nationalism have for the broader society in which they are viewed.

Critical studies concerning gender inequality and hegemonic gender representations as reflective of these societal values are incomplete without consideration and application of modern feminist thought. In this thesis, I employ feminist theories to effectively unpack and explore the social and cultural relationships between militarism, patriotism and masculine identities within the context of a gendered, patriarchal society. Feminist discourses and perspectives are valuable in consideration of the structures of gender inequality that are reinforced and perpetuated by systems of oppression inherent in militarism. Feminist theory endeavors to explain how these systems came to be dominant, and advocates for equal representation of feminine values within the larger social strata.
Chapter IV: Findings

This chapter first explores the historical context relevant to the narrative text analysis of dominant masculinity and American militaristic identity in *American Sniper* that is to follow. As part of this historical research, I briefly compare facts about the decorated veteran Chris Kyle upon whom the film is based to his depicted character in the movie. I then apply the historical rise of American imperialism to the depicted Iraq War, and explore the notion of the morally superior American soldier. The section concludes by tracing changes in portrayals found in American war movies over time.

The next portion of this chapter consists of a cohesive narrative text analysis of *American Sniper*. It first considers the film’s depiction of Kyle in relation to his family and the ways in which the ideological values he fosters are shown to be passed on generationally. Next, Kyle’s portrayed role in battle is analyzed, as well as the significance of the image of the sniper in a film narrative. Then the film’s handling of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as inflicted by battle is discussed in combination with its negotiation of the aspect of dominant masculinity that dictates that a man must be stoic and emotionally inexpressive. Finally, the chapter explores the way the film depicts Kyle’s death as a great American tragedy.
Historical Context

In order to arrive at a holistic understanding of the ideological prevalence of masculine identity and its portrayed connection to militarism in contemporary Western popular culture, consideration of historical context is necessary. Particularly in order to understand foreign policy decisions and their social resonances within American society, it is vital to understand from where such policy originated. This is uniquely relevant in studies pertaining to nations like the United States, with long histories of colonization and imperialist impulses. Boggs (2005) writes,

Of course the U.S. legacy of colonial power reaches back to the earliest days of the new republic. Yet the current historical situation is best understood as both rooted in the past and a significant amplification of that past, marking an epochal shift in global politics, (p. 1).

The American military is a staple of American identity. According to the 2014 Tax Receipt distributed by the White House, National Defense was the second biggest expense for American taxpayers in that year, with 23.91% of citizens’ income taxes going towards the defense budget. In the same year (incidentally the year of American Sniper’s premier), NBC news reported that, “The U.S. spent more on defense in 2012 than did the countries with the next 10 highest defense budgets combined,” (Koba, 2014). It is clear that militarism is one of the most significant American values of the contemporary age. But have Americans always been so militaristic? How did we become a nation of fighters? To provide a satisfactory answer to such quandaries, a brief study of U.S. military history is crucial.
**Reality Check: Who Was the Real Chris Kyle?**

In an analysis of a biographical text like *American Sniper*, a brief exploration of the work and life that inspired it is helpful. This is particularly important when the original public figure and the text he wrote about his life and military career, along with the help of Scott McEwen and Jim DeFelice, is the subject of such heated controversy. Both the book and Chris Kyle himself had a significant popular following even before the film premiered. He was and remains a polarizing figure: Democrats tend to hate him for his dehumanization of Iraqis and ardent support for the Iraq War even after the knowledge that Iraq never possessed weapons of mass destruction came to light, and Republicans tend to hold him up as a war hero and patriot for the contemporary era. He was unarguably a controversial figure for a number of reasons, and in this analysis it is necessary to acknowledge the parts of the real story of Chris Kyle that were included in the film and those that were left out.

Further, the argument exists that *American Sniper* can serve as an anti-war film, because it highlights the moral ambiguities and difficult decisions made in war time. Such a notion is understandable until consideration of the movie’s derivative text and human subject are taken into account. The film’s screenplay was adapted from Chris Kyle’s 2012 autobiography of the same name, and it cannot be accurately claimed to be an anti-war text. One striking but hardly unusual passage in the book describes his reaction when, while deployed in Iraq, he receives news that he and his platoon are about to be sent out to fight: “*Man, this is going to be good, I thought. We are going to kill massive amounts of bad guys. And I’m going to be in the middle of it.*” (p. 131). Throughout the book, he repeatedly identifies himself as a “guy who likes to fight”, and his pugilistic nature seems both something of a point of pride and a personality trait that he sees as constant.
Like his on-screen iteration, the real Chris Kyle clearly used polarization and categorization of his opponents to prime his mindset for efficacy in battle. The book’s prologue, for instance, is titled “Evil in the Crosshairs,” and introduces readers to his black-and-white perception of the war in which he is so crucially involved. Kyle openly labels his opponents as “evil” and explicitly states that he feels no guilt for the lives he took, because he feels sure that the kills he made saved American lives. He writes,

Savage, despicable evil. That’s what we were fighting in Iraq. That’s why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy ‘savages.’ There really was no other way to describe what we encountered there, (Kyle, 2012, p. 4).

The book also offers a telling of events that are often unverifiable. Many of his accounts have been called into question. A defamation lawsuit against him recently succeeded in court, awarding the plaintiff close to two million dollars. That particularly outlandish tale featured Kyle, once again and unsurprisingly, as the hero: he claims first in his book and then in subsequent interviews that he engaged in a physical altercation with former Minnesota governor and WWE fighter Jesse Ventura in a bar in 2006. Kyle alleged that Ventura made derogatory statements about Navy SEALs that led to the fight. Ventura filed the suit against Kyle shortly after the book’s release and claimed repeatedly that the events in question never occurred. He continued with the lawsuit even after Kyle’s death, and eventually a jury ruled that Ventura’s story had more merit.

Another example of Kyle’s fabulist tendencies is found not in his autobiography itself, but in recorded interviews made after its publication. To multiple fellow SEALs, he claimed to have travelled to New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and stood atop the Superdome, taking down looters and other criminals with his rifle. This story seems dubious for
many reasons, so unsurprisingly, Nicholas Schmidle investigated the incident for his story on Kyle for *The New Yorker*. According to Schmidle, a spokesman for U.S. Special Operations Command claimed that he had no knowledge that there were any West Coast SEALs deployed to Katrina. Further investigation proved to be futile, and still no evidence has been found to support Kyle’s claim.

But the tall tales did not stop there. Kyle also claimed in an interview with Michael Mooney of *D Magazine* that he had shot two men in Texas who had tried to highjack his truck. This was a story originally told to friends of his and then repeated to the journalist when specifically asked about it. Kyle alleged that after shooting the two men, police officers arrived at the scene. When they ran his driver’s license, he states, they were instructed to call a number at the Department of Defense and were allegedly told that they were in the presence of one of the most skilled soldiers in U.S. military history. Again, when Schmidle made attempts to confirm this story, he made no progress. Sheriffs from all the counties that cover the region where this incident supposedly happened knew nothing about it and were adamant that it could not have occurred in their county without their knowledge (Schmidle, 2013).

Later in the book, Kyle describes frustration with his Commanding Officer for withdrawing his platoon from the action and pulling them back to the base when he felt there was more work that they could have done. He expresses frustration towards military leaders who he felt were getting unfairly lauded for work that was actually being done by soldiers on the ground. He writes,

They got the glory. Bullshit glory. Bullshit glory for a war they didn’t fight and the cowardly stance they took. Their cowardice ended lives we could have saved if they
would have let us do our jobs. But that’s politics for you: a bunch of game-players sitting around congratulating each other in safety while real lives are getting screwed up (p. 94).

Kyle’s faith in his ability and the abilities in his comrades to dispense justice effectively is evidently much deeper than the faith he has in authority figures to govern as they should. His propensity for taking justice into his own hands is clear in his actions and suits his position as a sniper: he often needed to work alone and make difficult decisions about life and death without the help or assistance of his peers. But proof of his vigilante tendencies is also found in his valorization of the anti-hero graphic novel character called The Punisher. He was created by Marvel comics in the 1970s. The character’s real name is a Vietnam War veteran named Frank Castle whose family was killed by the mob as collateral damage in a New York shoot-out. In a predictable act of vengeance, Castle first slays his family’s murderers before becoming a full-time vigilante dispenser of justice. The Punisher uses an array of war weaponry to carry out his deeds. He is an imposing, muscular figure, complete with bulging biceps and square jawline. He is merciless in the face of evil.

The Punisher’s emblem of a white skull against a black background is a symbol with which Kyle often identified, and proudly so. He had it spray-painted onto his battle uniform and vehicle. Later, after he returns from the war, a version of the symbol became the logo for his combat training consultancy firm, Craft International. The symbol is present in the film, too, and is difficult to miss on Kyle’s baseball cap in interviews following the release of his autobiography. In his book, he explains,

We called ourselves the Punishers. He’s a real bad-ass who rights wrongs, delivering vigilante justice. We all thought what the Punisher did was cool: He righted wrongs. He killed bad guys. He made wrongdoers fear him. That’s what we were all about. So we
adapted his symbol—a skull—and made it our own, with some modifications. We spray-painted it on our Hummers and body armor, and our helmets and all our guns. And we spray-painted it on every building or wall we could. We wanted people to know, *We're here and we want to fuck with you.* (p.189)

Kyle saw his job in the line of duty as “killing bad guys.” Critics have picked up on his somewhat disturbing idolization of the character. The symbol of The Punisher, for many who are familiar with comic books and its significance, is a disturbing emblem for any military personnel to don. In 2014, Alan Yu wrote for *Medium* that Kyle’s association with the character signifies a frightening melding of fantasy and reality in the mind of the soldier, as if he truly fights as though playing a video game. It is profoundly indicative of Kyle’s perception of the battlefield as existing starkly in black and white. His ability to ignore the details, circumstances and humanity surrounding war runs deep. Interestingly, as *Time Magazine* recently reported, the symbol of *The Punisher* is now being used by Shi’ite militias fighting against the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria despite their tendencies for anti-American sentiments (Collard, 2015). Clearly associations with the comic character can be wielded as an expression of merciless power regardless of circumstances.

Naturally, it can be difficult for critics and audience members alike to distinguish between the on-screen version of Kyle and who the man himself seemed to be. In 2014, film critic for *Slate* Amy Nicholson acknowledges the quandary that Kyle’s well-publicized fabrications left filmmaker Clint Eastwood to reconcile. However, she still takes him to task for not just skirting around the lies, but pretending that they never happened altogether:

The falsehoods in *American Sniper* are dangerous because a lot of audiences leave the theater thinking that Chris Kyle was a role model. But *American Sniper* convinces
viewers that Chris Kyle is what heroism looks like: a great guy who shoots a lot of people and doesn’t think twice about it. Watching American Sniper, I kept wondering who Kyle himself had been imitating (para. 6).

Again, here, The Punisher comes to mind. Kyle’s book more than suggests that he fancied himself as a real-life incarnation of the comic book character, doling out justice according to his own moral code.

**Prevalence of American Imperialism**

The position of snipers in the U.S. military has historically been shaped and changed by imperialistic compulsions. Particularly, after the Vietnam War, the military began using snipers more strategically and training them more thoroughly than they had in the past. The complexities of a sniper’s job increased as troops were stationed in military strongholds around the world to occupy less aggressive positions than they had in the past. Pegler (2007) writes,

> Every location was different and each held its own surprises, with the snipers needing to learn quickly and absorb new lessons, particularly as many of these actions were now no longer considered straight military intervention, but were termed ‘policing’ or ‘peacekeeping.’ As a political consequence, rules of engagement for all troops, and snipers in particular, had become far more complex since the days of white sneakers in Vietnam, where the orders were simply, ‘If the enemy is holding a rifle, shoot him,’ (p. 207).

A sniper’s job in the post-Vietnam era is more complex than it was prior, due in part to the War’s heavy coverage in the media and public opinion of what is and is not permissible in battle. Kyle’s responsibilities include making difficult judgment calls, often for which he alone will be held accountable. This increases the power that a sniper wields in the war environment;
he operates less as a cog in a machine who is simply following orders than a great decider who
determines who will live and who will die.

As evidenced by U.S. military spending, the American military complex is deeply
 ingrained in the makeup of this country’s national identity. The relationship between the U.S.
and its armed forces is believed by some scholars to be rooted in Wilsonian interventionist ideals
about how a world power should conduct itself on foreign soil. As president, Wilson initiated six
major foreign interventions in Latin American and an additional mission in Russia. His world
view advocated essentially that the rest of the world assimilate to American ideals. These
decisions may have done more to shift the future of American international relations than any
other president (Bacevich, 2005, Boggs, 2005).

But ample evidence of this sort of mindset can be found in American foreign policy well
before the 9/11 attacks set the wheels in motion that would eventually lead to the invasion of
Iraq. Bacevich (2005) offers that this prevailing perspective was pre-existing from the Wilsonian
era and that the attacks only added impetus and direction to its power. A revival of this power
occurred with the election of President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, who was able to finally
stimulate peaceful closure with the Soviet Union. Clinton’s subsequent reign, although labeled
by Democrat ideals, brought a certain amount of stagnancy in terms of foreign policy. Finally
George W. Bush was elected and, soon thereafter, faced a country left both enraged and shaken
by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As Bacevich states, “The fin-de-siecle Wilsonian revival simply
represents the full flowering of ideological claims asserted and reasserted by American statesmen
throughout most of the last century,” (p. 13). The imperialist agenda that Bush set into motion
with the Iraq War was not new, but rather a rebirth of ideals that had previously dictated foreign
policy. Subsequently, this rebirth brought with it the resurgence of the socialized duty to defend one’s country that is evidenced by the numbers of men who chose to enlist to fight in Iraq.

**The Rise of the Morally Superior Soldier**

While politicians made grand proclamations about defending Americans from the threat of terrorism through military presence in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War were waged largely to protect Western oil interests in the region (Boggs, 2005). Although the significance of war has shifted in contemporary American foreign policy to function predominantly to preserve economic dominance, the cultural perception of the morally superior young man who risks life and limb for his country still prevails. Many of those who serve still feel that they are doing their civic and patriotic duty as such.

Bacevich draws connections between the political religious right in the U.S. and strengthened ties between God and military service. He writes that, “militant evangelicals imparted religious sanction to the militarization of U.S. policy and helped imbue the resulting military activism with an aura of moral legitimacy” (p. 124). Men who serve or have served historically (with the exception of Vietnam veterans) a level of respect and honor within their communities, compared to those men who have remained civilians.

A particularly bold aspect of the persona of the morally-superior soldier is closely related to the notion and value of patriotism in society. The valor associated with fighting for one’s country is a powerful undertone in *American Sniper* and one that is important to explore in an analysis of the text. In pursuit of constructing a coherent and utile definition of patriotism, knowledge of how the term has been defined in the context of film in the past is vital. Kuiper
(1964) conducted an analysis of Civil War films from 1897-1961 and the significance of patriotic values therein. He defines the term as the following, for the purposes of his study:

Patriotism was defined as including all forms of screen heroism and cowardice including specific acts of heroism and cowardice, which, incidentally are always related to the honor of a family or of the nation. This basic theme also includes deaths produced by the demands of honor and specific acts of honor not covered by heroic deeds, (p. 106-107).

Chris Kyle repeatedly demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice all that he has, including his own life, for his country. The audience is initially cued in to his ardent desire to serve early in the film, when he first sees images on television of the impending conflict in the Middle East. The newscaster describes deaths of innocent women and children, and Kyle is visibly angered and perturbed- his fists seem to clench, he stops listening to what his brother is saying even though they are in the midst of a conversation, and he stares unblinkingly at the screen. If viewers somehow made it into the theater without knowing that it protagonist becomes a decorated war hero, they certainly have an inkling now.

Although Kyle’s decision to enlist is never clearly articulated, it is obvious that he feels a sense of duty to defend the U.S. from its enemies. When explicitly asked by his future wife, Taya, why he is willing to go to war, his response is vague:

Kyle: “I’d lay down my life for my country.”

Taya: “Why?”

Kyle “Because it’s the greatest country in the world and I’d do anything I can to protect it.” (16:21)
This implies that patriotic values are a significant part of his moral code, and that he makes major life decisions according to this code. It indicates that Kyle felt an ideological duty to defend his country, and that doing so was not just a morally sound choice to make, but an elevated one. Kyle’s verbalized simplistic perception of war and military service, at least at the film’s commencement, suggests that pursuit of honor and valor played a major role in his decision to join the armed forces.

Such a mindset harkens back to earlier times in U.S. history, when men either joined or were drafted into battle and those who resisted the call to do so were marginalized. During the first two World Wars, the decision not to risk one’s life in defense of his country was viewed, by American society at large, as cowardly and morally illegitimate (Bacevich, 2005). Patriotic values were steeped into the foundation of American identity, and these values dictated that they be proven through a show of dedication. The most honorable way to demonstrate patriotism was to risk one’s life in defense of his country.

Consideration of this patriotic past suggests that Eastwood, in his valorization of Chris Kyle as a true American hero, was garnering a rebirth of patriotic values the likes of which Hollywood cinema has not seen since his 2006 production, Flags of our Fathers. As the Iraq War was winding down at the time of the release of American Sniper, and public opinion of the War was at dramatic low, Americans who have previously identified as patriots were likely hungry for a reason to reify their nationalistic impulses. American Sniper allowed for just that, through the very personal story of a recently slain veteran who boasted at least 160 kills in defense of the U.S.

Imperialist nostalgia is a concept with connections to moral superiority that has been present in popular culture over the past century. American Sniper engages in a unique form of
imperialist nostalgia, because it does not do so through portrayals of pre-war Iraq as a place of rich culture and exoticism, but rather through its more subtle reference to a time when distinctions between heroes and villains seemed more clear. This type of imperialist nostalgia upholds American activist foreign policy by framing it as a moral duty. Kyle’s relationships to the subjects of his firearm are almost paternal—although they clearly cannot hear him, he quietly pleads for them to back away from the grenade or weapon so that he will not have to shoot them. But when his hand is forced and he must fire, he knows unequivocally that he did what had to be done, because savages do savage things and these actions must be punished or prevented. More than once, Kyle explicitly refers to the Iraqis he is fighting as “savages.” This term, too, has roots in U.S. imperialistic pursuits (McKenzie, 1986, Rosaldo, 1989). Circumstances are unimportant. In order to do his job effectively, Kyle must see Iraqis as the colonists viewed the Native Americans so many years ago—as uncivilized savages.

A vibrant theme in American Sniper that stands out in many critiques of the film is its polarization of good and evil, resulting in its oversimplification of war. A film critic for Rolling Stone elaborates: “The problem of course is that there's no such thing as "winning" the War on Terror militarily. In fact the occupation led to mass destruction, hundreds of thousands of deaths, a choleric lack of real sanitation, epidemic unemployment and political radicalization that continues to this day to spread beyond Iraq's borders,” (Taibbi, 2015, para. 20). This is unsurprising when current historical-political context of the period to the film’s focus is considered. President George W. Bush vow to ‘rid the world of evil’ is representative of the prevailing good-versus-evil mindset of the day (Bacevich, 2005).

The tendency of leaders to draw lines between “good” and “evil” is not new. Rampant polarizing rhetoric has had an ample presence in arguments concerning gun control in the United
States for decades (McClurg, 1992). Such categorization permits the speaker to disregard the nuance in a situation, or even the humanity of whoever falls under the label of “evil.” It is a major rhetorical corner to cut, because it requires very little explanation for action of “good” against “evil.” Details and circumstances surrounding a conflict are deemed moot, and support can be more efficiently garnered for a cause—because what self-respecting citizen would wish to align him or herself with the forces of evil?

Such polarization serves a similar purpose in American Sniper. Admittedly, donning blinders and mentally stripping his target of a mind or soul or life is a necessary part of Kyle’s job. In order to pull the trigger when he needed to, dehumanization of his victim was necessary. But Kyle takes this ritual a bit far, working it into his regular social exhibitions of power and of his applied military knowledge and explanations for the necessity of the war being fought, rather than restricting it to the times when he needs to demonstrate decisiveness in morally foggy battle situations. For instance, when his comrade, Marc expresses doubts about their service and its necessity to American national security, Kyle doesn’t miss a beat before giving a stern reply:

Marc: I just want to believe in what we’re doing.

Kyle: There’s evil here. We’ve seen it (1:01:00).

And for Kyle, that truly is enough. Later in the film, after Marc is killed in combat, Kyle confides to Taya that he believes Marc’s doubts were the ultimate reason for his demise. This, too, is further proof of the importance Kyle puts on his own convictions and moral code. The implication is that should he allow doubt or concern for the enemy’s humanity to penetrate his subconscious, his ability to fight would be compromised.
Here, it is relevant to consider the way that snipers view their own work and how that perception of self is shaped through the assimilation back into American society, post-war. Pegler (2007) states that some former World War II snipers had difficulty adjusting to civilian life after the war, which was much less exciting than their posts in the military, and therefore found work as mercenaries working for any government or organization who would pay for their skills. He writes,

One ex-Vietnam veteran working in West Africa in the 1970s was offered a very large sum of money to kill a senior ‘friendly’ general whose loyalty was suspect. He refused on the grounds that he was a paid soldier not a contract killer. For snipers it was a fine line but an important one, for they needed to believe that the work they did was both professional and also necessary to help save the lives of the comrades they worked with, regardless of their cause. It can be argued that this line existed only in their minds, but belief is nothing if not subjective and most managed to retain their professional integrity (p. 201).

Further, Pegler notes that without the ardent believe in the morality of their actions, these snipers would be unable to live with themselves and their actions in the past. He becomes unable to cope with the stress and ethical ambiguities of his career, which results in consequences in the longer term as the veteran grapples with his conscience.

Similarly, in American Sniper, Kyle is unable to cope with the monotony of his life after his service ends. Even during the periods of time when he is home on leave from Iraq, for holidays or the births of his children, he has trouble coming to grips with the vastly contrasting realities of war and life at home. Taya notices a difference in his behavior: he rarely wants to leave the house and seems to be constantly on edge. She is nine months pregnant at the time, and
tells her doctor of her worries about Chris when the couple go in for a regular appointment. The doctor takes Chris’s blood pressure and sees that it is abnormally high. Kyle feels frustrated and annoyed with Taya, and the following dialogue occurs on the way home from the appointment:

Kyle: You sabotaged me back there.
Taya: What was I supposed to do? You’re not talking. You act like it’s all okay.
Kyle: It is okay. I’m fine.
Taya: You’re not fine, Chris, alright. Your blood pressure is, like, fuckin’ 170 over 110. It’s like…
Kyle: Babe, I’m drivin’ down the freeway. It’s sunny, it’s 72 degrees. I’m fine. There’s a war goin’ on. There’s people dyin’ and no one’s even talkin’ about that. It’s like it’s not even happening. We’re all on our cell phones, livin’ our simple, simplistic lives. It’s not even on the news. No one cares. There’s a war goin’ on and I’m headed to the mall (55:23).

He is torn by the discomfort of knowing that he could be helping in the war effort, but cannot because he is stateside. As a sniper, Kyle was responsible for protecting his comrades from what they could not see. It was a burden that he undertook every day of his service, and when a mistake is made and Americans are killed, he cannot contain his frustration with whoever is responsible.

When he finally decides to end his military career and return home for good, he has been in Iraq for nine months straight without seeing his family. Yet upon his arrival in the U.S., he has trouble adjusting to civilian life. He lashes out with aggressive behavior at inappropriate moments and is unable to relax. When he finally does see a doctor, he expresses unease at being comfortably stuck in the U.S. while his fellow soldiers are still dying abroad. He wishes he could
do more. Kyle’s dysfunction in American civilian life aligns well with Pegler’s predictions about snipers and the problems they face in trying to adjust to normal lives as veterans. Pegler writes of snipers as men who have channeled aggression into morally-acceptable behaviors that they are able to view as noble. But once their service has ceased, the excitement and hefty responsibilities that once weighed them down are no more, and without that objective, their lives lack that purpose.

American War Movies Over Time

Reproduction of a war in major motion picture texts is common particularly in the years during and directly following that war. For example, of films released in Hollywood between 1942 and 1944, between a quarter and a third featured some aspect of World War II in their plots (Jones, 1945). Because a war being fought by American citizens is often at the forefront of public consciousness, it is likely to be depicted in main stream popular culture. Additionally, the notion of war as a brave, valiant pursuit that is exciting and dramatic contribute to public interest in media concerning the subject.

American Sniper fits well with trends from war films released during other eras innumerable ways. The film’s depiction of a stoic hero who quells the enemy solo, without assistance from comrades or superiors is typical of films released at similar stages in relation to the war of their focus. Also unsurprising within filmic historical contexts is Sniper’s lack of attention paid to the political factors that resulted in war. Jones (1945) discusses such portrayals as those that premiered during and in the wake of World War II, and the reputation for putting on nationalistic airs that such films earned the United States, even then. She writes,

Films about our fighting units were played strictly as melodrama-blood-and-thunder stuff usually without one glimpse of understanding about the meaning of the war itself. In such
films there was often a swashbuckling American hero who conquered single-handed. This particular type of arrogance won us much criticism abroad, where we were accused of underplaying the contribution of our allies and exaggerating our own role in this war, (p. 11).

Chris Kyle fits the image of a lone wolf hero, perched aloft in his sniper’s nest making decisions about who lives and who dies based on the working combination of his extensive military training and his personal moral code. The choices he makes are his and his alone - never does he seek asylum from this position as ultimate decider. If, as Jones suggests, such a protagonist serves as a symbol internationally of American military arrogance, Kyle certainly could fulfill such a role. It is his judgment that shapes the course of the lives of anyone who enters into the crosshairs of his weapon. When he does decide to kill, the action is carried out with near reluctance and an implication that the victim of Kyle’s shot has proverbially pushed his hand. An almost paternal sigh can be heard, as when a child misbehaves and as a consequence of such deviance, the parent is forced to resort to physical punishment.

A main prevailing issue with *American Sniper* that has been the focus of much public controversy is the film’s lack of political context concerning the war in Iraq. It minimizes the problems plaguing many veterans returning from fighting in Iraq that have, in part, contributed to a negative popular opinion of the American invasion of the region (Dutton, De Pinto, Salvanto & Backus, 2014). According to Jones, this was a problem that plagued films pertaining to World War II as well. She posits that filmmakers themselves did not fully comprehend the reasons for entering into the War and therefore could not effectively incorporate such context into their work and that, “They lacked experience in making films dealing with actual social problems,” (p. 13).
Interestingly, Jones’ article (written at the end of the Second World War) concludes on a hopeful note, exalting the progress that Hollywood has made in terms of depicting war in a more honest, accurate and holistic light. She offers that Hollywood may be moving in the direction of an industry willing to take on a certain amount of public responsibility, rather than operating solely to entertain and turn a profit. Jones cites films that were made in months leading up to the publication of her article that included more positive portrayals of minorities and realistic depictions of American life. She hypothesizes that with an increasing number of filmmakers who have served in the armed forces, movies will come to offer a more well-rounded picture of military service. (Incidentally, director of American Sniper Clint Eastwood was, in fact, drafted into the army during the conflict in North Korea and completed basic training, but was never called to in battle). It is likely that were Jones to view American Sniper, she would acknowledge its recognition of the difficult decisions that are necessities of battle and the painful havoc that war can wreak on the minds of veterans returning from combat. But it is also probably that she would be disappointed in the filmmakers’ failure to consider the damage done by mistakes made on the frontlines and the sometimes irreparability of the damage done to soldiers’ lives. In American Sniper, much of the polarization of good and evil still exists and results in an extremely simplified and dramatized depiction of war.

Consideration of other films about American soldiers fighting in the Middle East in recent years offers valuable and more contemporary historical context to American Sniper. Jarhead (Sam Mendes, 2005), for example, takes place during the Persian Gulf War, which was the United States’ response to the Iraqi army’s occupation of Kuwait in the early 1990s. This decade marked a shift in American foreign policy; Boggs (2005) writes,
As Noam Chomsky argues, the 1990s witnessed a new phase of international relations: shrouded in moralizing discourses of peace and human rights, American policy makers, setting themselves up as guardians of the world system, reached a point of flagrant disregard for global laws and conventions seen as standing in the way of their own interests, (p. 8).

*Jarhead*’s plot is centered in the eye of this tumultuous rebirth of imperialistic national philosophy. Like *American Sniper*, this film tells a story set within a conflict that is representative of American military pursuits in a region of the world rife with conflict over its oil resources. The film focuses on the experiences of marines, one of which is its protagonist, Tony Swofford. Swofford joined the ranks of the armed forces without being drafted, largely because his father served and it seemed like a patriotic and morally-sound decision to make. Also similar to the film of this study’s focus is the fact that *Jarhead* was based on the written autobiographical work of its protagonist and his experiences being groomed for battle and then serving abroad.

As a movie that has aged over a decade, scholars have had the opportunity to critically explore *Jarhead* and its portrayals of the military and of masculine identities. Godfrey, Lilley and Brewis (2012) conclude that the film presents the soldier’s reality as being in stark opposition to expectations of the military experience, due to technological advancement. They write,

The punishing routines and endless exercises, the control of activity, the ritual humiliation and constant need to assert one’s military masculinity are always based on the promise, the expectation that the military will offer the kinds of extreme and unique
experiences that could never be achieved in civilian life. But the promise can no longer be guaranteed (p. 559).

For example, for the first third of *Jarhead*, Swoff and his peers undergo extensive training to prepare them to shoot to kill when the need arises in battle. As young men who are the children and grandchildren of men who were drafted into the armed forces to fight in defense of their home country, sometimes against their will, these soldiers of the 1990s had great battlefield expectations of guts and glory. But in this era of wars fought in the name of American economic dominance rather than for human rights, the battlefields looks drastically different from those occupied by U.S. armed forces in World War II or even in Vietnam (Kellner, 1992). So primed are these Marines for that anticipated moment of necessary violence that they anticipate it with impatience that increases and eventually turns to frustration over the course of the film. Godfrey, Lilley and Brewis (2012) muse that,

> They have been, in a sense, made impotent, unable to shoot their load. They are unable to prove themselves as warriors and as such central aspects of their masculinity - which have been disciplined into them since they first entered the military barracks - are stripped from them. What is a warrior who cannot fire his weapon? (p. 558).

This frustration becomes debilitating, even causing Swoff to experience a mental breakdown, because for all of the time and energy spent in preparation for the release of a bullet, no one in his platoon is permitted to actually fire their weapon in combat.

As Chris Kyle’s manhood is much defined by his ability to effectively and accurately fire his weapon, so are the masculine identities of the Marines featured in *Jarhead*. Thus, they must perform their manhood in other ways; Swoff’s voice, as it narrates the film, also informs the
audience that one of the main ways the marines in his unit killed time was to masturbate. This is one of their only outlets for expressing or performing their masculinity. Without the presence of women, the men have no other outlet for their sexual frustrations (homosexuality is never alluded to) and this is worsened by their inability to fire their guns. The form of traditional masculinity with which these men identify requires that they exhibit their manhood through performance, but the avenues of performance for them are debilitating limited. They are not permitted to be violent, although they have been thoroughly trained to kill. They cannot position themselves as more powerful and dominant than women due to the very absence of the opposite sex. And if not performing their identities as men and as soldiers, what are they?

In order to garner public support for first the Persian Gulf War and the subsequent War in Iraq, political leaders framed the conflicts in binary terms: us against them, American soldiers against militant Iraqis. The news media, too, perpetuated this dramatic and over-simplified notion of good versus evil in pursuit of good ratings (Kellner, 1992, Pillar, 2006). This is reflected first in the battlefield disappointments experienced by the characters in Jarhead; combat, as it turns out, is much less cut-and-dry than the American public had been led to believe. Evidence of this widespread polarized perspective on the invasions in the Middle East is found, too, in American Sniper’s depiction of a lone-wolf military hero and his fight against the Iraqi enemy.

In contrast, in American Sniper, Kyle’s rifle is fired often and a symbol of his impenetrable masculinity. Kimmel (1996) writes of war films as posing the battlefield as an arena for men to demonstrate and test their manhood, and the character of Chris Kyle certainly puts on a show. His gun is simply another method with which he demonstrates his power and
manhood—precisely in ways that the soldiers in *Jarhead* were dreaming of. He makes life or death decisions regularly, and his peers envy his skill with the gun.

Evidence of the exchange of women (Rubin, 1997) is also clear in the context of *Jarhead*. The soldiers are obsessed with the fidelity of their wives and girlfriends, constantly teasing one another about whose girl is cheating on him. Swoff and his comrades trade descriptions and photos of civilian wives and girlfriends that they have left at home. They taunt one another by suggesting that one man’s wife is having sex with someone else while he is away with the Marines, and the men gain respect and admiration from one another due to the attractiveness of their girlfriends and wives. When one Marine proudly shows off a photograph of his very pregnant wife, the other men are repulsed, but when Swoff passes around the picture of his young, lithe girlfriend in a suggestive pose, he is rewarded with only positive reactions.

The way in which women appear in a text in relation to men is indicative of the structure of masculine identities, as manhood is asserted through demonstrations of power (among other things). Historically, war movies tend to feature female characters that serve the purpose of a romantic love interest to the male protagonist (Blackmore, 2012). The women in *Jarhead*, for their part, possess power strictly in the form of sexuality. Because women have the ability to accept or deny sex, they are responsible for male anguish due to sexual deprivation. Kimmel (1996) writes,

In the real world women and men occupy the same cosmic planes— and they work desk to desk. Accessing an inner king that ignores or reduces woman’s role— as wife, lover, friend, colleague or mother— seems like a celebration of the usurper or, at best, a benevolent despotism, (p. 320).
This contextualizes the battlefield as a place for men to be men without the presence (or threat) of femininity. This aligns with the idealized image of war that the soldiers in *Jarhead* discuss anticipating prior to their deployment. It is in stark contrast to the reality that they face; unable to fire their weapons or express their sexuality, their masculinity becomes muted rather than amplified.

The genre of war films can perpetuate the idea that strong friendships between men are harmful to society. Kimmel (1996) writes, “Male bonding, we are told, is certainly not a good thing for women- and it may not be a very good thing for men either, promoting excesses of violence and brutality, groupthink imperatives that obliterate individual responsibility, and an idealization of the warrior,” (p. 322). Such perceptions only build greater constraints around ways that are socially and culturally acceptable for straight men to express affection and feelings of friendship for one another.

The male relationships in *Jarhead* during the height of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy exemplify this in some ways, in the male relationships that propel the storyline. The policy was enacted in 1994 by President Clinton and dictated that while self-identified homosexuals would still be banned from serving in the military, officers would no longer be permitted to ask questions pertaining to sexuality in the recruitment process. The result was that gay men were formally still not allowed to serve, but that calling a man’s heterosexuality into question was also not admissible. Prior to the enactment of this policy, homosexuals were simply and explicitly prevented from becoming soldiers- a particularly visible manifestation of the institutional nature of American homophobia.

The Marines in Swoff’s unit are, in keeping with the anti-homosexual policy, all self-identified straight men. They taunt each other, play together (football is a popular pastime of
theirs) and undergo rite of passage rituals. Such rituals seem to provide a safe space for the men to maintain a hierarchical order and demonstrate their acceptance or rejection of one another, without implications of homosexuality (as often occurs when men foster close friendships).

Exemplary of this is that when Swoff first joins the Marines, his comrades immediately tie him up and pretend to brand him with a hot iron that spells out “USMC.” Swoff passes out and realizes upon awakening that he was never burned. Another marine solemnly informs him that this is because the brand is something that must be “earned.” Exactly what must be done to “earn” the burn is never explicitly disclosed, but later in the film a soldier does receive the esteemed brand after learning that he will be discharged from the Corps. The reason for the branding may not matter as much as its function as an expression of affection between the soldiers. They brand one another to leave a permanent unifying mark that can be proudly displayed, but it is also an acknowledgment that the soldier receiving the branding is strong enough to endure the pain.

In the case of studies of masculinity in the military, the prevalence of heterosexuality is impossible to ignore. Steven Maynard (1998) exalts the importance of acknowledging both the distinctions between gender and sexuality and the inherent connectivity of the two facets. He states, “The challenge has been to make a space that allows for some analytic distance between gender and sexuality while at the same time insisting on their interrelations,” (p. 189).

This is particularly poignant in recognition of the fact that President Clinton’s 1994 “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was enacted between the periods in which *Jarhead* and *American Sniper* take place. When analyzing the import and power of masculine identities as portrayed in recent war films, it is necessary to acknowledge the relationship between gender identity and sexuality. A relatively widespread way in which to verbally condemn or debase one’s manhood
is to call his heterosexuality into question. In a culture that fosters male dominance as deeply as the ranks of the American military does, this is an especially powerful tactic for tearing down masculine power. When it is noted that at the time of the Persian Gulf War, no man identifying as homosexual was permitted to join the military, it is clear that heterosexuality was (and arguably still is) a vital facet of the male soldier’s masculine identity.

Thus, consideration of sexual undertones between men is necessary for a holistic understanding of male relationships, especially within an all-male military environment. The close-knit nature of heteronormativity and the social and political status-quo is linked to this rejection of homosexuality in the military. It is part and parcel of the underlying idea that the United States receives much of its power from power structures rooted in heterosexuality. Maynard (1989) also studies the social constructs of manhood and masculinity pertaining to working class history in the West. He cites incidents when sex between men was discovered to be taking place within all-male environments, like the military or in all-male professions. This, he points out, directly contradicts the notion that capitalism turns on a fulcrum of heterosexuality. Of these single-sex environments, he writes,

The military, particularly during wartime, would remain an important force well into the twentieth century in creating opportunities for same-gender liaisons. Be it military service or the rise of a system of wage labour, both provided some people—many more men than women—with the ability to live outside both the heterosexual nuclear family and the ‘reproductive matrix’ of sexuality, (p. 168).

It is worth pointing out that homosexual undertones are not explicitly alluded to in either *American Sniper* or *Jarhead*, although homosexuality in the military is certain to exist. The deep bonds between men, the ubiquity of sexual frustration and the close physical contact maintained
in the ranks likely produce some sexually-charged interactions. Yet if the heterosexuality of a character whose identity is so deeply entwined with his manhood, questioning that heterosexuality would provoke an entirely new crisis of character. Chris Kyle, acting as a brave and lone conqueror representative of the nationalistic impulses of his country, would lose his status as a dominating, patriarchal warrior wielding great power over his enemy.
American Sniper: A Narrative Text Analysis

Fatherhood and the Family: Generational Patriarchy

Social conceptions of what it means to be a man are significantly impacted by the understandings of gender that have been fostered by one’s parents. The traditional, patriarchal nuclear family structure is one in which the opinions and values of a powerful father figure take precedence over those of the mother. The father’s identity as a man is distinctly related to his dominance over the other members of the family. Young boys in particular are likely to idolize their father and seek to emulate his position of dominance within their own future families. It is these notions that make the relationship between Chris Kyle and his father so impactful within American Sniper.

In affording audiences a glimpse into Kyle’s childhood in order to explain how he became the man that he is, the filmmakers made a definitive choice to show the ways in which his father influenced Kyle’s future values and decisions. His father is depicted as being the clear head of the Kyle household in a traditional sense. The film features multiple flashbacks to Kyle’s boyhood days, the first of which includes his father teaching him to hunt for the first time. After killing a deer, Kyle’s dad lectures him about the importance of gun safety, and then tells him that he has a “gift”- presumably for shooting. It is clear that hunting is a way for father and son to bond: an activity through which Kyle’s dad can give him life advice that will resonate well into adulthood.

Wayne Kyle, played by the imposing Ben Reed, is a tall, broad-shouldered man who radiates firm stoicism. It is he who teaches Kyle to use a rifle and instills in his son the value of aggressiveness and the responsibility that comes with it. One memorable scene includes Kyle’s
father, while sitting at a dinner table with his mother and younger brother addresses an altercation between the boys and a bully at school through a meaningful allegory:

There are three types of people in this world: sheep, wolves, and sheepdogs. Some people prefer to believe that evil doesn't exist in the world, and if it ever darkened their doorstep, they wouldn't know how to protect themselves. Those are the sheep. Then you've got predators who use violence to prey on the weak. They're the wolves. And then there are those blessed with the gift of aggression, an overpowering need to protect the flock. These men are the rare breed who live to confront the wolf. They are the sheepdog. (Eastwood, 2014).

Wayne Kyle categorizes people as either evil or good. Within the “good” category, though, exists two subcategories: those who protect, and those who cower in ignorance and fear. He has high moral expectations for his boys to fulfill roles as protectors, and it seems initially as though Kyle is well equipped to take on such a position. The above dinner table lecture was initiated by an incident in which Chris’s younger brother Jeff was bullied and Chris intervened by “finishing it.” His father quietly lauds Chris’s efforts to protect his baby brother, and subsequently, Chris continues to serve as Jeff’s loyal protectorate throughout the course of the movie. Once he determines that Kyle’s involvement in the incident at school was to lash out at his brother’s bullies, Kyle’s father lauds him for his actions and states, rather emphatically “Then, you know who you are. You know your purpose,” (6:20). Thus, Kyle’s identity as a man who asserts honor and social agency through protective acts of aggression is born.

Jeff is depicted as being more meek than his older sibling, less brave and resilient. After he is deployed to Iraq, Kyle sees Jeff on a military tarmac and approaches him. It is clear that although Jeff has been serving in the armed forces for a shorter period than Kyle, he is already
psychologically shaken by the realities of battle. Kyle appears shaken when Jeff dejectedly expresses his misery and frustration with the war environment, stating powerfully but quietly “Fuck this place,” as he walks away from his brother and back to his platoon’s hangar. In contrast, it seems as though Kyle, having served longer and occupied a sniper position during his tours, has surely seen at least as much death and destruction as Jeff, but clearly deals with these experiences in a way that permits him to continue to function more or less as usual in his job and family life. Jeff, on the other hand, appears to be too sensitive and weak for the realities of war. Jeff’s vulnerabilities provide yet another avenue for Chris to assert his dominant and morally correct manhood.

Later in the film, Kyle is shown taking his own son hunting. As they walk through the woods, the Kyle imparts wisdom similar to that passed down to him from his father. It is deeply resonant of the generational values that are shared by men with their sons throughout the ages, and how protectiveness and dominance become ingrained in male identity.

Kyle: It’s a heck of a thing to stop a beating heart. That’s why we’re gonna do it together for your first time.

Colton: Alright.

Kyle: Now, remember: You gotta be calm, confident, and you never hesitate (2:01:03).

These qualities of steady impenetrable confidence, stoicism and decisiveness are crucial to the performance of dominant manhood. They are values transmitted from father to son that are fostered over a lifetime and passed down again. This scene speaks to the depth of the gendered nature of these qualities in the subconscious of male identity in the US.
Of course, the image of the dominant man does not require any emotional support from external sources, and Eastwood alludes to the tension that this expectation can cause in family life. Kyle does not visibly seek to confide in any of his fellow soldiers or in his wife. While the typical husband and wife relationship implies intimacy, the most prominent source of the rift that emerges in Chris and Taya’s marriage is his inability to confide in his wife emotionally. Taya’s frequently lamented mantra is “Why don’t you talk to me?” When he is home for the births of their children, she can tell that he cannot seem to dispel the demons of war, even when he is safely ensconced in his sunbathed Texas home with wife and child near. He never truly opens up to anyone in the film about how it might have felt to kill so many people or the stress he might have felt from going in to a war zone day after day.

Taya also functions as another achievement for Kyle. Taya and Kyle meet at a bar, where Taya is approached who are attracted by her beauty and confidence before she swiftly rejects their advances. It is only Kyle who is successful, as he charms her with his lilting Texas twang and avowed dedication to his morals and Patriotic duty. She challenges his commitment to his military service by asking why he is serving, with the implication that he became a soldier primarily for the valor. His response is simple but satisfies her nevertheless:

Taya: I know all about you guys. My sister was engaged to a SEAL.

Chris: Oh, was she? You know all about us? What do you mean?

Taya: What I mean is you’re a bunch of arrogant self-centered pricks who think you can lie and cheat and do whatever the fuck you want. I’d never date a SEAL.

Chris: Wait, why would you say I’m self-centered? I’d lay down my life for my country.

Taya: Why?
Chris: Because it’s the greatest country on earth and I’d do anything I can to protect it (16:27).

He bids her goodnight and begins to walk away, but she calls after him. His response was enough to win her over, to maintain her interest in him. He earned her attentions through his confident and noble answer to her accusatory remarks and interrogative question.

In the following scenes, Taya seems to play hard to get. Kyle calls her at home, presumably to schedule a follow-up date, and although she is shown sitting in her living room, reading a magazine and listening to the phone ring, she neglects to pick it up. He begins to leave a message on her answering machine, and only then does she coyly answer the phone. Her behavior is again suggestive that she is aware of her role as a prize that must be earned by Kyle. She feigns disinterest even though it is clear that she basks in his attention when she allows him to give it. The telephone scene is brief, but it is cleverly followed by one of Kyle back at basic training; he aims his weapon and shoots a target while his sergeant authoritatively explains that if you aim for a highly specific target, your margin of error will be smaller than if you aim for a larger, more generalized area.

On their subsequent date, this pursuer-prize dynamic that defines Kyle and Taya’s pre-marital relationship is further reinforced. The couple is out on a pier, playing carnival games. Kyle plays one that naturally requires him to use a toy rifle to hit a target, and wins Taya a teddy bear. Their conversation is marked by the patterns of his friendly, easy-going and open demeanor, which is abutted by her standoffish, careful responses. Taya again quizzes Kyle about his awareness of what it truly means to serve in battle and have to make life and death decisions on a regular basis.
Taya: “You ever think about what happens when there’s a real person on the other end of that gun?”

Kyle: “I don’t know, I just hope I can do my job when that day comes.” (20:26)

Taya is once again satisfied by this answer. The next scene shows Kyle in training again, and this time he is unable to focus his energy enough to hit the target at all. His sergeant repeatedly berates him for this inability, and the following scene that depicts Taya finally offering herself to him sexually suggests that his deficiencies behind his weapon are supposed to be related to his inability to get laid. Further, when Taya and Kyle do finally have sex, she is so overcome with desire that she is shaking.

Kyle: You’re trembling

Taya: I know it.

Kyle: We don’t have to do this, if you don’t…

Taya: No, I want to. I do.

Kyle: Yeah?

Taya: You just feel real and it scares me (21:22).

It is not long before Kyle has asked Taya to marry him. She expresses concern and ambivalence about their union because they have not gotten to know each other very well yet, but Kyle’s steady sureness persuades her. He has officially won her over- she is happy at being deemed the ultimate prize in his eyes, and he is happy because he has finally claimed that prize. They wed, and before their reception ends, Kyle hears that his unit has been called to fight in Iraq. Taya appears alarmed, mentions that she can feel Kyle’s heart beating rapidly. His response
is that is only worried because he knows he will not be the only one going to war. The camera cuts to an image of Jeff in his military uniform, slow dancing with a young woman. It is clear that Kyle means to say that his concern is only for the life of his baby brother. Fear for Kyle’s own life is not something he can express without placing the social viability of his masculine identity in jeopardy.

**Kyle at War**

The battle and war scenes in *American Sniper* focus primarily on Kyle’s time spent in Fallujah. The Iraqis in the film are his enemies and Kyle refers to them and treats them as such. The details of the war and the political reasons and circumstances behind the conflict are not addressed, over the course of the film. One of the more politically-detailed explanations for the war is the following quote, spoken by Marc Lee who is one of Kyle’s unit leaders:

Welcome to Fallujah. The new wild west of the old Middle East. Aqi put a price on your heads and now extremists from around the globe are flooding the boarders to collect on it…This city has been evacuated. Any military age male who is still here is here to kill you. Let’s bring these boys in safe and get our asses back home (25:15).

It is hardly informative, but rather simple, instructive and polarizing. His statement informs the audience of the current state of affairs in Iraq at the time of Kyle’s deployment, and from this point out is prepared (like Kyle) to be wary of any Iraqi who graces the screen.

Early in Kyle’s unit’s first mission, the audience becomes aware of the existence of an Iraqi sniper who is as successful and infamous for his mercilessness and unfailing accuracy as Kyle will soon be. This sniper’s name is Mustafa, and he represents one of the film’s biggest diversions from reality. He is a former Syrian Olympian gone rogue. In Mustafa’s character,
Kyle finds a true opponent. He is Kyle’s equal in ability and fame, but, of course, he fights for the bad guys. Kyle pursues him ardently throughout the length of the movie.

One of the most iconic scenes in *American Sniper* is when Kyle shoots and kills an Iraqi mother and son who were attempting to throw a grenade at a unit of US Marines. Kyle catches a glimpse of the pair in the crosshairs of his rifle as they leave a building. He speaks with his commanding officer over the radio, who tells him that the decision to shoot or not ultimately lies with him, because command does not have a clear view of the situation. The mother hands the boy the grenade and nudges him forward. He begins to jog toward the Marines, and Kyle shoots him dead before he can throw the bomb. The child falls to the ground, and so does the grenade—but just seconds later, the mother walks forward and picks it up. As she throws it and it detonates, Kyle shoots her as well. In the aftermath, Kyle rebuts the congratulatory response from the Marine stationed with him and refocuses his sniper telescope on the body of the young boy, prompting a moment of reflection for the loss of the child’s life.

This scene briefs the audience on the trials and moral quandaries that Kyle must face as a part of his job. In the film, this scene primes the audience to begin seeing Iraqis as forces of evil and Americans as the proverbial good guys. Later, Kyle recounts his perception of the events that unfolded to a fellow soldier and the following dialogue ensues:

Biggles: Marc Lee came in, said you popped your cherry. Is that right?

Kyle: There was a kid who barely had any hair on his balls. His mother hands him a grenade and sends him out there to kill Marines. Dude, that’s evil like I’ve never seen before (29:20).
It is worth noting, however, that this even does differ from what occurred in reality. In Kyle’s autobiography, as I have previously mentioned, he too begins his story with this dramatic tale. But in the book, the woman is alone—she does not enlist her son to do her bidding. The choice of the filmmakers to make this change in the movie suggests that they felt the need to make the Iraqi woman seem vividly evil, willing to sacrifice the life of her child to kill American soldiers.

His relationships with his fellow soldiers serve largely to reinforce his dominance as a man and as a soldier. They admire his talent for sniping and he responds with characteristic humble stoicism. Kyle eventually earns himself respect among his peers for his talent behind the sniper weapon and his dependability. They look up to him and strengthen his masculine identity and power.

Thus, masculinity and soldier identity can interplay and form cohesively. This is again evidenced in Chris Kyle’s character; he is a dominating but relatively aimless young man prior to enlisting in the Navy. His understanding of the war is shallow, but he feels as though he can help to protect his country by joining the military and does so. It is then that the rest of his life falls into place—he meets his future wife and feels fulfilled and valued as a soldier.

The depiction in American Sniper of Kyle’s post-war years ties into the significance of his soldier identity, as well. After repeated attempts by his wife to bring him home for good, Kyle finally leaves his post as a sniper for the Navy SEALs and returns to his wife and family. However, it is clear that he does exhibit some signs of post-traumatic stress disorder: he has trouble sleeping and overreacts to minor conflicts in his home. Eventually, Kyle does speak with a doctor and attributes his mental health problems to the inability to help more soldiers as a civilian. The doctor recommends that he work with wounded veterans, helping them to adjust to
civilian life. Kyle ultimately is able to rediscover his masculine identity once again with the help of his rifle, through spending time with wounded veterans at the shooting range. It is only then that he seems to be able to return to loving his wife and children and maintaining the dualistic role of protectorate and benevolent patriarch.

**The Image of the Sniper**

Chris Kyle’s role as a sniper in an urban battle environment dictates that physical station is to be perched on the roof of a building, high above his comrades in the troops below, in order to gain a 360-degree view of the action and pick off any enemies that might be sneaking up on unsuspecting soldiers. Kyle’s peers within the ranks of the Navy SEALs even refer to him as their “over-watch,” and the term makes perfect sense for their purposes: he watches over them and protects them from what they cannot see. He decides what is a credible threat and what is not, and it is his aim that determines who lives and who dies.

Thus, the identity of a man with a life-long “savior complex” is born. His urge to protect those he deems as innocents is instinctual, almost a knee-jerk reaction to strife. Yet it is intrinsically linked to the power he wields over those around him, and it is this fact that connects Kyle’s character to systems of dominance. His powerful gaze posits conflict in binaries: good versus evil, black versus white, us versus them. He comes to embody the strong, silent protagonist of the Westerns that director Clint Eastwood made his name portraying. They are misunderstood by women (who are merely inert, innocent recipients of the leading man’s actions) find no value in emotion, and deal with problems by internalizing them. These men are mysteries to all but themselves, which of course only increases their power. Although they appear coarse and unfeeling, we must also know that they are reliable husbands who can provide for their families and brave soldiers who kill without hesitation when necessary.
Emotional Unavailability and PTSD

Kimmel (1996) asserts that the cause of the problem of a fragile and superficial concept of manhood is that it must be constantly proven, and is never fully achieved. For the character of Kyle, while the battlefield does provide ample opportunities for him to effectively demonstrate his manhood, his identity as a man is rooted in a dependence upon his ability to protect or defend the lives of others. So deeply is this need to save ingrained in his psyche that when he feels unable to fulfill that function, he appears to be dysfunctional himself. This, the film posits, is the problem at the root of the psychological discord he experiences in his post-war years.

There comes a point in the film when Kyle does actually emotionally break down. It happens after his last tour of duty ends, and he is shipped back home to his wife and kids. The moment is particularly heart-wrenching because it is in such remarkable contrast to the persona projected by Kyle throughout the rest of the film. He is no longer the stoic wall of firm strength, only hinting at the aggressive capabilities that he possesses. As Kyle sits by himself at a bar somewhere in Texas, he quietly weeps, and the audience cannot help but feel uneasy. His impenetrable demeanor has crumbled. Like the unflappable dominant manhood that is so much a part of Kyle’s identity, his aura of collected, unemotional stability is shattered and his vulnerable humanity is glimpsed, if only for a moment. As he cries on the phone to his concerned wife, in hushed tones he admits, defeatedly, “I guess I just needed a minute.” This scene is so dramatic and striking because it depicts Kyle’s susceptibility to emotional turmoil. As such, it was even featured in the trailer for the film prior to its release.

This scene is one of few in the film that suggest that Kyle may suffer from some Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms. Taya worries because he seems to be constantly on-edge and rarely wants to leave the house. His defenses are constantly up even though he is no longer
at war. Kyle is shown sitting tensely in an armchair in his living room, staring at a television set that has been powered off. Around him, we can hear the sounds of battle, which sharply contrast to the reality of the quiet safety of his surroundings. Shortly, it becomes apparent that a birthday party for one of his young children is being held outside, and the sounds he is hearing are actually the shouts of glee and excitement elicited by the kids while they play.

After joining Taya outside at the party, he appears to have trouble concentrating on the conversation at hand, and gives only minimal signs to show that he is listening. The sounds of the children’s laughter grow louder as the camera zooms in on Kyle’s face, and it is clear that his mind is elsewhere. Eventually, Taya stops speaking and he fails to provide the requisite “mmhmm” that makes up his half of the discussion, and she notices. Suddenly, he aggressively lunges at a dog playing with his child at a neighborhood birthday party, drawing judgmental glances from the other parents. He stops only when Taya, frightened, shouts his name.

Taya is reasonably concerned, and she sends Kyle to a doctor’s office to receive professional help. She informs the doctor about what happened at the party. In the physician’s office, he is asked about his mental state. The following dialogue ensues:

Doctor: Let me ask you a question, Chris. How much time did you spend in-country?

Kyle: Uh, about four tours, so, uh…

Doctor: So, what, a thousand days?

Kyle: Yeah, something like that.
Doctor: Would you be surprised if I told you that the Navy has credited you with over 160 kills? Do you ever think that you might’ve seen things or done some things over there that you wish you hadn’t?

Kyle: Oh, that’s not me, no.

Doctor: What’s not you?

Kyle: I was just protecting my guys. They were trying to kill our soldiers, and I’m willing to meet my creator and ask for every shot that I took. The thing that haunts me are all the guys that I couldn’t save. I am willing and able to be there, but I’m not, I’m here, I quit.

Doctor: So, you wish you could’ve saved more guys?

Kyle: Yes, sir.

Doctor: You know, you can walk down any hall in this hospital and we’ve got plenty of soldiers that need saving. (1:57:27)

The doctor then shows Kyle a room full of wounded veterans and recommends that he work with these injured men, helping them to adjust to civilian life. Kyle ultimately is able to rediscover his masculine identity once again with the help of his rifle and the chance to once again assume the position of defender or savior to others. He heals by spending time giving tips and guidance to wounded veterans at the shooting range. It is only then that he seems to be able to return to loving his wife and children and maintaining the dualistic role of protectorate and benevolent patriarch.

The application of weapons to the performativity of manhood is a key component of Kyle’s psychological healing, and the healing of the veterans he works to help in his post-war
years. By taking them to the gun range, the men are able to engage in a form of acceptable bonding and friendship cultivation. As Kimmel (1996) notes, it is socially admissible for men to spend quality time with one another only if they are engaging in some form of specified activity—usually one that has been securely deemed masculine. At the gun range, these veterans are able to participate in an activity at which they feel competent. Through shooting, those who are injured can regain some semblance of power, which is integral to the performativity of dominant manhood.

The scene depicting Kyle at a shooting range with a group of veterans includes the following dialogue between Kyle and an injured veteran in a wheelchair named Wynn, after Wynn makes his first shot:

Wynn: Bull’s eye, boy. Damn, if that don’t feel like I got my balls back. Why you spendin’ all this time with us, man? I know you got a family.

Kyle: I heard you had a boot collection before the war? So I was thinkin’, I saw we were about the same size…

Wynn: Seriously, man. Why do you do it?

Kyle: Well, we take care of each other, right? Let’s see if you can’t hit two in a row. (1:59:24).

This interaction is representative of the socially-acceptable ways described by Kimmel that men are permitted to relate to one another without sacrificing the assertion of their dominant masculinity. They can joke with one another and perform powerful tasks like firing weapons at a target together, but there are lines of closeness that must not be crossed. The injured and disabled are viewed in society by the control and power that they lack. They are pitied and condescended
to, whether it occurs intentionally or not. Through shooting and repositioning themselves as the actors instead of victims of tragedy, these men can regain their societal dominance and, subsequently, their masculine identity.

This scene is also indicative of the bond among military veterans that is a deeply unifying factor and possesses significant potential in the process of healing for these men. No one understands what they have been through except for other veterans. But these men are vastly limited in their relationship with one another due to the fact that there are only certain avenues for them to express this bond. Deep emotional bonding is mitigated by the need to systematically prove one’s dominant manhood, because it is a crucial part of his individual identity.

Jonathon Shay, a clinical psychiatrist who has worked at the Boston Veterans Affairs facility is quoted by Nicholas Schmidle (2013) in *The New Yorker* defining combat PTSD as “the persistence into civilian life, after danger, of the valid adaptations you made to stay alive when other people were trying to kill you.” Symptoms of PTSD vary broadly on an individual basis, even among veterans of the same war. Kyle, for his part, appears ready to strike at any time, and is overprotective of his family in times that do not merit such behavior. He exhibits an inability to disengage the behaviors that have, in the past, helped him to save his life and the lives of his fellow soldiers in combat situations.

But here, it is also useful to note a marked difference between the character of Chris Kyle as portrayed on film and the actual man himself, as described in his autobiography. In the book and in subsequent interviews, both Kyle and his wife mention that in the months directly after his return from Iraq, there were times when Kyle had dreams about being in combat, once even accidentally waking Taya by gripping her arm as though poised to break it (Kyle, 2012). Thus, the PTSD symptoms suffered by the real Chris Kyle are slightly more severe than those depicted
in the film. Still, he expresses no remorse or regret for the lives he took during his time at war—only a vehement wish to continue to save lives by whatever means necessary or available.

The choice on the part of the filmmakers to make Kyle’s experiences with PTSD seem more innocuous than they were in reality are telling of the need to perpetuate an image of an infallible, unfeeling, dominant man as a quintessential American war hero. The two archetypes are inextricable from one another here, which is suggestive of the strength of their relationship in contemporary popular culture. Even the real Chris Kyle was unable to live up to the impossible standard of impenetrable dominance and psychological resilience that his character embodies in the film.

This is indicative of the ubiquity of dominant masculinity as portrayed as being indispensable in the mindset of an effective soldier. This is connected to ideologies of the men’s movement: many of the movement’s leaders associate virility with nationalistic ideology—powerful, muscular, sexually potent leaders (Kimmel, 1996). For these activists, in order to operate as a successfully imperialistic country, a nation must foster a position of aggression and dominance, and these traits are associated heavily with masculine identities. It is therefore unsurprising that the ideal warrior, the actor of national imperialism on the ground level, should exhibit these features.

The subtle presence in the film of The Punisher is also worth noting. Its logo is much less prevalent in the movie than in Chris Kyle’s autobiography, perhaps because of its controversial connotations when donned as part of a military uniform. Its first notable appearance is on a comic book being read by Kyle’s peer Ryan Job (referred to as Biggles) when Kyle returns to the base after his first kill. Biggles is stuck inside instead of helping to train Iraqi soldiers like the rest of the unit due to a digestive illness.
Upon closer inspection, it is possible to see that the “graphic novel” (as Biggles calls it) that is in his hands is actually No. 1 of Volume 6 of *The Punisher*, released in January of 2004. This edition was written by Garth Ennis who, according to *Vulture’s* Abraham Riesman (2015), wrote the character with relative ambivalence about the morality of his killing sprees. Of Ennis, Riesman writes,

> He's tended to write Castle as a man who was mentally destroyed during his service in Vietnam . . . a stoic psychopath with something resembling a moral compass, but a psychopath nonetheless. He's way past pursuing justice for what was done to his family — now he just kills people and tells himself he's doing it for a good reason (para. 9).

The particular edition of *The Punisher* that is shown in the film, while still extremely violent, does contain instances of introspection on the part of the main character. He reflects on the death of his family, an accident in a mob shootout, and the fact that many more people have died since then— and that many more will die. He does not, however, question whether or not to continue with his lifelong murderous rampage or explore the reasons behind why he feels such a compulsion to kill. In fact, he even feels more sane and stable after a killing, yet this fact is not analyzed or called into question. A particularly striking excerpt from that edition is shown on the next page.
This very limited perception of his own tendency towards aggression and violence is similar to that of Kyle. He does not question his urge to protect or defend and to do so at all costs, violent or otherwise. These facts may be resultant of mainstream normalization of violence among males. In the Western world, acts of aggression are more acceptable expressions of emotion or frustration in boys than in girls. Boys are taught from a young age that anger is the most acceptable emotion for them to feel and show (Kimmel, 1996), so there is reason to believe that Kyle and his hero, The Punisher, would be relatively unlikely to question these urges when they arise in themselves.
Kyle’s limited understanding of his own aggression and protectiveness as well as his shallow demonstrated knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the war in which he is so passionately engaged are two aspects of his character that relate well to his post as a sniper. Physically, a sniper is perched high above the action of battle, which takes place below. He looks down on his friends and enemies and the conflicts between them and decides who to kill and who to spare. Hidden from view, his own life is in far less danger than the lives of those on the ground, so he is free to make judgment calls without fear of imminent danger for himself. This positioning speaks to the lone-wolf version of moral responsibility that Kyle so nobly takes on. Much of his job requires him to make judgments on the actions of others, which can result in life or death consequences in a matter of an instant- and yet he does not question or problematize his own actions and believes unequivocally in their ethical and moral viability.

Further, while a sniper is able to see a great range of the action, in order to kill, he must look through the telescope of his weapon in order to effectively view and aim at his targets. He cannot pay attention to his surroundings while also looking through his scope, and this makes him ignorant and vulnerable to the events surrounding the person he is aiming to kill. Such a perspective also provides him a front-row seat for the kill. Kyle is not spared the discomfort (or pleasure) of seeing his bullet pierce the neck of his enemy. Thus, while he fails to interrogate his own actions even while judging those of the men on the ground below, he cannot claim disassociation from the deaths he causes. His scope is limited, and he is unable to effectively view the bigger picture, but what he does see, he sees in great detail.

The Death of a Soldier

By the time of his murder by an army veteran in 2013, Kyle was in the habit of regularly volunteering his time and efforts to help veterans recover from the psychosis of war by picking
up a gun again and going to the shooting range. He was fatally shot when a mentally unstable Marine he was mentoring caught him in his crosshairs. The film features real footage of Chris Kyle’s actual funeral, which was a massive fanfare drawing thousands of people and held in the Cowboys football stadium. This portion of the film is moving not only because it concerns the untimely death of a father, husband and veteran, but because it depicts so many American citizens coming together in silent mourning. The lasting impression is one of unity.

But the film’s handling of Kyle’s death also poses the incident as resultant of factors that were beyond his control. Prior to the montage of scenes from Kyle’s real funeral, the following words appear on the screen against a somber black background: “Chris Kyle was killed that day by a veteran he was trying to help,” (2:04:18). The veteran who murdered Kyle suffered from severe and debilitating PTSD, although this is not addressed in the film. The question of whether guns should be left out of the hands of those who may suffer from a mental illness goes unanswered as well. The focus is on Kyle’s dependence upon helping his fellow veterans in order to function in society after the war. His nobility, the film posits, was both his strength and his downfall.
Chapter VI

Conclusion and Discussion

Conclusion

Kyle is depicted as a humble Texas boy who was brought up to value his family and his country over all else. These are much beloved American values that also align with the roles of what is culturally accepted as an archetypal “good” man: he is simple and honest, not demonstrative or emotional expressive, a responsible father and husband and a fierce soldier. Kyle’s character never exhibits signs of fear or even doubt. When he is conflicted, this uneasiness is attributed to a deep, unchanging desire to do the maximum good possible.

Kyle’s only brush with post-traumatic stress disorder manifests itself in anger toward bystanders that he apparently sees (in the moment) as potential threats to his children. It is cured by the suggestion of a psychologist that he direct this energy towards helping other veterans to reintegrate into society after returning from battle (this suggestion is offered after Kyle claims that he feels no guilt for the lives he took- only angst for those that he could not save). Both of these elements add up to an image of a man who fits that of the ideal American patriarch. As emotionality is regarded as weakness, Kyle cannot express any remorse or moral dissonance about his role in the Iraq war. Even after killing a young mother and her son who were poised to throw a grenade at a troop of Marines, Kyle only displays frustration that he had to do what he had to do. This is expressed in anger toward the mother and her son and the role they played in a culture seen by Kyle as savage: because after all, what kind of mother allows her son risk his life killing American soldiers? There is no evidence of ambiguity in his mind. Americans are good, and Iraqis are bad.
Chris Kyle’s character in American Sniper bears a huge burden of responsibility in making life or death decisions in the morally-hazy fog of war. He crumbles psychologically under this weight for a time. The expectation to serve as protectorate, defender of the weak and weary is what ails him, and prevents him from being able to engage in the kind of emotional connectedness that would help him to regain emotional stability after fighting. Where the film goes astray, I would argue, is in proposing that he could be healed by the very thing that ails him: taking on more responsibility for the wellbeing of others. In the end, his dependence upon exhibitions of his manhood and dominance in order to feel secure in his masculine identity is what does him in. Kyle helps veterans to cope with the unease he feels in civilian life because he feels dysfunctional without the purpose of defending, protecting and helping others. The tool Kyle so often used to assert his manhood was implicit in his demise.

This analysis positions militaristic patriotism as another avenue for displays of dominant masculinity to be asserted, according to the theories of Michael Kimmel concerning masculinity as a performance that must constantly be displayed. Themes that play indispensable roles in the depiction of a filmic American patriot coincide and overlap heavily with those that construct dominant masculinity. Over the course of the film, Kyle’s character consistently remains within the borders of what is found to be socially acceptable for a powerful, dominating man. These values were transmitted to him through his father and will be passed from him to his children. Historically too, dominant masculine identity has been integral to media portrayals of militaristic patriotism. Through these historical and textual analyses, I show that dominant masculinity is deeply ingrained in the portrayal of an American war hero that is found in American Sniper.

Further, this analysis suggests that in critical studies of representations of patriotism in mainstream media, an exploration of dominant masculinity is vital. In order to achieve a holistic
understanding of the value of militaristic patriotic ideologies in popular culture, the gendered quality of these ideologies must be addressed. Throughout history, American patriotic identity has been deeply ingrained with dominant manhood. My study of the financially successful and widely distributed *American Sniper* shows that the connection between these ideologies is still prevalent contemporarily.

**Discussion and Limitations**

Historical research is often shaped by the author’s urge to construct the writing in a way that is interesting and engaging to the readers. As Berger (2000) writes, historical accounts that are executed in a narrative format are limited by the content that they emphasize or exclude from the text completely in pursuit of a good story. Oversimplification of historical issues and facts is another problem that must be negotiated by historical narratives, similar to the films considered in the historical context provided above. Berger states,

> Putting materials into a narrative may lead to simplifications or exaggerations or other deviations from the reality of situations being dealt with. Historians writing narratives do not recognize, I would suggest, the degree to which the requirements of historical writing shape their perceptions. If they are legitimate historians, who are trying to be fair and objective, they would not willingly distort things, Of course, some historians are so ideological that they twist things around to make history fit their ideological preconceptions (p. 135).

Films are, of course, entertainment media the likes of which are made by film producers, not usually historians. Therefore, there is significant room for error in the accuracy of the accounts of films like *Jarhead* or *American Sniper* that aim to depict a real soldier’s experience.
Certain facts will be eliminated from the narrative while others are amplified. Such a rift between the narrative’s depictions and what actually occurred cannot be completely and unfailingly filled by supplementary historical research, because in some cases documentation of what really happened does not exist. Such a limitation leads to a level of inaccuracy in historically-informed narrative analyses.

This analysis would have benefitted from an exploration of the public response to the film, and specifically any controversy that addressed the representation of dominant masculinity within it. Such a chapter would have been too cumbersome to conduct for a thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts, but it would have been helpful in gauging the current prevalence of these gendered notions of patriotism in the U.S. contemporarily. A deeper look at social media responses, blog posts and opinion pieces pertaining to masculinity in American Sniper would have contributed to a more expansive perception of the relationship of dominant masculinity and patriotic values today.

This study is, of course, additionally limited in that it looks at only one film. The conclusions reached in this thesis are representative of this particular movie, which did face ample derision for its portrayal of the Iraq War and Chris Kyle. The real Kyle was himself a highly controversial figure who had gained notoriety prior to the completion and premier of this film. A subsequent analysis could consider films with entirely fictional characters and gauge the public response to such a film in contrast to that of American Sniper. Such a comparative critique would illuminate how much of the debate surrounding this film was due to the public perception of Kyle prior to its release, and what parts of the conversation were actually resultant of its portrayal of the life and duty of an American soldier.
References


