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RELATED ENTRIES

Advice Literature; Artisan; Fraternal Organizations; Immigration; Industrialization; Leisure; Male Friendship; Men's Clubs; Middle-Class Manhood; Republicanism; Self-Control; Sports; Suffragism; Temperance; Urbanization; Work; Working-Class Manhood

—Walter F. Bell

ALGER, HORATIO, JR.

1832–1899

Author

The author of over one hundred novels, Horatio Alger, Jr., has come to be associated with a rags-to-riches narrative that combines moral uplift with social mobility. In the majority of his novels, a young, destitute street boy is discovered by an older, wealthy man who enlists the boy's services, offers assistance and guidance, and enables him to ascend the social ladder. Alger's novels address the consequences of urbanization and economic transformation for changing notions of manhood in Gilded Age America.

Alger's emphasis on paternalistic relations as a means of uplift may have a biographical background: In 1866, Alger had to leave his post as minister of a Unitarian church in Brewster, Massachusetts, over charges of having sexually abused young boys. Upon arriving in New York, Alger befriended several of the street urchins that served as inspiration for his novels. Later in his life, Alger appears to have assumed the role of wealthy patron of street boys, entertaining and helping hundreds of these boys.

Alger's stories present a concept of republican manhood that predates the emergence of market capitalism. As such, they emphasize homosocial, paternalistic nurture, rather than celebrating the ideals of self-made manhood and entrepreneurial masculinity encouraged by the laissez-faire capitalist marketplace of the late nineteenth century. Lacking in formal education, Alger's protagonists have a strong moral sense and work ethic, and they tend to disrespect any social hierarchy not based on merit. Frequently defying an arrogant superior, Alger's protagonists willingly and eagerly respond to the offer of guidance and assistance from nurturing wealthy men, usually business owners.

On the other hand, Alger, his stories, and the model of manhood he represents are implicated in the late-nineteenth-century

capitalist marketplace. As an author of popular fiction, Alger's own livelihood was uncertain, and he had to cater to mass-marketing structures and an emerging commodity culture in order to succeed. While his stories often celebrate the small producer values of a bygone past, the sentimental relation between the wealthy patron and the plucky boy in Alger's stories, which have a decidedly homoerotic tone, can be read as a support of capitalist class and market structures. By providing guidance and counsel and opening a path toward economic opportunity, the businessmen in Alger's stories almost always uplift and assimilate the "gentle boys" (who are also potential future members of "the dangerous classes") into the ranks of the petit bourgeoisie. As their reward, the protagonists achieve a modest degree of social mobility offered by an emerging corporate, capitalist order, but never gain great wealth, for which they do not express a desire. Excluding women from the plots, Alger's stories affirm capitalism as a male enterprise and the marketplace as a male domain. The masculine bond between patron and street boy follows capitalist structures of exchange, while protecting both from the marketplace's exploitative aspects.

Alger's tales reflect the close relationship between economic change and shifting articulations of masculinity in Gilded Age America. Torn between a celebration of pre-market small-producer values (and paternalistic nurture) and an acceptance of capitalist market structures, Alger's narratives exhibit an ambivalent relation to capitalism and its mechanisms of exchange.

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RELATED ENTRIES

Advice Literature; American Dream; Boyhood; Capitalism; Gilded Age; Homosexuality; Individualism; Male Friendship; Middle-Class Manhood; Republicanism; Self-Made Man; Urbanization; Victorian Era

—Thomas Winter

AMERICAN DREAM

The phrase “American Dream” refers to a set of promises and ambitions closely identified with national identity, particularly economic opportunity and prosperity, wealth and land ownership, and equal access to the “good life.” This concept has also been closely associated with American ideals of masculinity, and the notion of America as a land of opportunity has nurtured an enduring cultural ideal in which success—not only as an American, but also as a man—has been measured in predominantly economic terms. Furthermore, it has reinforced a race- and class-based ideal of manhood, for white men, through their domination of the nation’s power structures, have been most able to define, pursue, and fulfill the terms of the American Dream.

The interdependent relationship between masculinity, American identity, and material success can be traced back to what the German sociologist Max Weber identified as the Puritan origins of American capitalism. Although the doctrines of the first Puritan colonies—and the vision of America as a religious utopia—were short-lived, the practical tenets of the Puritan lifestyle left an indelible stamp on conceptions of the American Dream. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Weber argued that, removed from their religious context, Puritan values of diligence and thrift

contributed to a rationalized lifestyle that made capitalist development possible. Although women could enact these values within the private sphere, men involved in the public arenas of politics and the market gained material success through their demonstration of these qualities.

The Colonial Period

The explicit formulation of the American Dream began in the eighteenth century. Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* (written between 1771 and 1789), which has established him as the colonial era’s archetypal self-made man, led Weber to identify him as the personification of the capitalist work ethic. Through his own example, Franklin promoted an organized and virtuous lifestyle as the best means to secure wealth in an expanding commercial economy. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur offered an agrarian counterpart: Touting the promise of American agrarian life, he suggested in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) that the availability of land in America promised the individual who worked hard the opportunity to become a “new man.” Configured as a product of character and self-determination, the American Dream of wealth and success thus became a defining aspiration for white American men.

The Nineteenth Century

If Franklin and Crèvecoeur embodied formulas by which economic success could be achieved, the market revolution, urbanization, and industrialization, provided many Americans in the nineteenth century with the conditions necessary for its fulfillment and prompted the emergence of a middle class that associated manliness with character and the achievement of success. The United States’ rapidly expanding cities offered business and industry as paths to the American Dream, and Horatio Alger’s stories of impoverished urban male characters rising to positions of affluence encouraged a belief in economic mobility, the myth of the self-made man, and the notion that hard work would assure business success. Meanwhile, western expansion reinforced the association between manhood, agrarianism, and the American Dream by bolstering American men’s aspirations to land ownership. By 1893, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner could affirm that the interrelation between land availability, economic opportunity, and manhood was the defining feature of American history and the basis of American national identity. In Turner’s view, the availability of land in the West provided men with a chance to succeed, while the practical experience of western life reinforced qualities of individualism, self-reliance, and perseverance, all considered essential to both success and manliness.