THEODORE ROOSEVELT: FROM ASTHMA TO THE OVAL OFFICE

Thesis Proposal

The man or woman elected to lead the United States wields immense power. Up until this point, there have been forty-four Presidents. Some of these Presidents have been good for the country and some have not. Some of these Presidents have been good leaders and others not quite. Some Presidents have been physically strong while others have not. Some Presidents have even been born with illness and disease that no amount of money could cure. The 26th President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, seems to fit into all of these categories. Many historians have written books about Theodore Roosevelt’s childhood, and they almost all focus around the idea that Roosevelt’s sickly nature growing up led him to make a conscious decision that he would change his physical and mental abilities. Differences exist between the literatures in who, what event, or why Roosevelt decided that he needed to make a change, but the central fact still remains that Theodore Roosevelt decided that he would earn physical strength and mental acuity, by sheer force of will. Theodore Roosevelt overcoming his obstacles to beat his childhood illnesses and become a great and strong leader and President makes him so fascinating.

Arnaldo Testi’s “The Gender of Reform Politics: Theodore Roosevelt and the Culture of Masculinity” talks about how the precedent and culture that Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency put forth, and how that kept women away from the polls, and therefore kept their voices from being heard. Testi introduces Theodore Roosevelt by showing him as a sickly and delicate child who read too many effeminate books and grew up nervous and timid. Testi goes on to tell the story of Roosevelt being brutally humiliated by a couple of boys he met on the road as his stagecoach took him home. According to Testi, the boy’s crude jokes that humiliated Roosevelt
did not make the difference, but that the boys seemed to take care not to hurt him too much actually hurt the most. Testi argues that this run in resulted in a turning point in the life of Theodore Roosevelt; he then decided he would grow stronger and achieve all of his goals through sheer determination. Throughout Testi’s article he writes about how Roosevelt’s overbearing sense of masculinity seemed to make manliness a prerequisite to be involved in politics. Testi uses examples like Theodore Roosevelt and European heads of state, like Kaiser Wilhelm II, mutual admiration to attempt to make a point that Roosevelt was only concerned with his construction of strength and manhood.

In the book Mornings on Horseback, author David McCullough provides a view of Theodore Roosevelt’s life from his birth in 1858 until 1886. Although McCullough uses the same time frame that Carleton Putnam provided in, Theodore Roosevelt, Vol. 1: The Formative Years, 1858-1886, the two books differ in quite a few aspects. The main difference between McCullough and Putnam’s books lies in Putnam relying strictly on Roosevelt, McCullough delivers a much more in depth look at the entire Roosevelt family. While Putnam mainly focused on Roosevelt and his father Roosevelt Sr., McCullough focuses on the family unit as a whole in how they raised Roosevelt and shaped him into the man he became. As well as focusing on the Roosevelt family unit McCullough also seems to be much more interested in Theodore Roosevelt’s inner self. McCullough focuses on how Roosevelt felt about certain situations where as previous authors have really only written about his tough and rugged exterior. McCullough does focus on Roosevelt’s asthma and how it shaped him physically, but what makes Mornings on Horseback unique results from McCullough taking into account the

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psychological factors at play as a result of this disease and how that shaped Roosevelt’s masculinity.²

My thesis revolves around what effect, if any, Theodore Roosevelt’s childhood asthma, nearsightedness, sleep apnea, and overall sickliness had on his life both in politics and people’s perception of him as a figure of masculinity.

My theoretical approach mainly involves looking at Theodore Roosevelt’s life through the lens of the public’s perception of him, as well as his view of himself as shown through letters, diary entries, and other personal documents. As I examine these views of Roosevelt, I first hope to get an understanding of how, when, and why he made such a physical transformation as he grew up. After gaining an understanding of why Roosevelt changed I will then attempt to gain an understanding of his masculinity. Roosevelt’s masculinity interests me because of the extreme change from the sickly little boy to masculine man. I am also interested in the difference between how Roosevelt saw himself and how the media showed him. While I do not doubt Roosevelt’s belief of the benefits of a “strenuous life,” I do not expect to find that Roosevelt meant to become a model for masculinity. I want to look in to the possibility that the media portrayed Roosevelt as an overly manly and masculine leader to fit some sort of pre-conceived notion of how they thought he should be. As an extension of that possibility I would also like to view the possibility of Roosevelt’s willingness to play this role because it helped him achieve some of his more ambitious political goals, and lead to his policy of “speak softly and carry a big stick” and his nickname, the Trustbuster.


considers Roosevelt the epitome of masculinity, and says that he made “...it possible, for the first time since the eighteenth century, for respectable American men to publicly celebrate male sexuality.” This quote comes from one of Roosevelt’s speeches entitled “On American Motherhood.” In this speech, Roosevelt states his fear of Anglo-Saxon families failing to keep up with the birth rates of ethnic minorities in the United States. Roosevelt’s fear, known as “race suicide” and his stance on this subject shows that his willingness to take a stand against the old views of masculinity; including sexual self-restraint, strong character, and strong power of will, in favor of a new form that included embracing male sexuality as well as aggressiveness and physical force.

I have already completed a good amount of research, and it has been achieved through online databases and simple library searches. When I began my initial research regarding my thesis, I focused mainly on articles and books that gave me a background on Theodore Roosevelt. Some of these articles turned up very interesting pieces of information regarding Roosevelt’s childhood sickness and his upbringing, but a good amount of articles failed to produce any information that I found interesting enough to use in my thesis. After these initial searches, I decided that I wanted to focus on Roosevelt’s childhood illnesses and his growth from sick child to manly man. My next round of searches focused more on keywords like asthma, childhood, illness, and masculinity. These searches turned up results that really sparked my interest, and made me think that the looking at the transformation of Roosevelt from sickly child to masculine man. I have enjoyed the primary source part of my research the most. Looking through Roosevelt’s personal letters, postcards, pictures, diary entries, etc. provide a treasure trove of information regarding Roosevelt’s mindset and health. As I continue in my research, I

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plan on looking at newspaper articles regarding the public’s perception of Roosevelt. I am aware
of some newspapers in New York, the *Albany Register* for example, that will be able to provide a
more localized view of Roosevelt. In addition, I will look into some huge national newspapers
like *The New York Times* to get more of a popular opinion of Roosevelt.

There has been a great deal of literature written on Theodore Roosevelt and his fights
with asthma. While all of the sources I have used seem to agree that Roosevelt was very ill and
physical weak when he was a child, the authors all seem to have differing opinions regarding the
catalyst for this change. While I definitely intend to provide a detailed look into this topic of
Roosevelt’s physical change, I also plan to contribute to this field by bringing in the idea of
masculinity. I am particularly interested in the connection between Roosevelt and the American
people’s view of masculinity. I intend to look at how the traditional view of masculinity affected
Roosevelt and how he in turn affected sparked a move to a more modern view of masculinity.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Theodore Roosevelt Childhood Correspondence, 1868-1906 (MS Am 1454.48). Theodore Roosevelt Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Theodore Roosevelt Additional Childhood Correspondence, 1869-1902 (MS Am 1454.52). Houghton Library, Harvard University.


Secondary Sources


