

GENDERING MEN :
THEORIZING MASCULINITIES IN AMERICAN CULTURE AND
LITERATURE

José María Armengol Carrera

Directora: Dra. Àngels Carabí Ribera

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INTRODUCTION

A man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male.

—Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex* (1949)

Si el feminismo fue la gran revolución del siglo XX, el cambio del varón podría ser una de las más importantes revoluciones sociales del siglo XXI.

—Victoria Sau “Nueva(s) paternidad(es)” (2003)

For several decades now, feminist scholars have shown how gender -the cultural prescriptions that each society attaches to one’s biological sex at a particular time- is a central component of social and political life.¹ Along with other factors such as race, class and sexuality, gender is now understood as one of the essential aspects which shape our lives, as well as

¹ It might be relevant to note that the notion of *gender*, as we understand it, was introduced in 1969 by a male scholar, Robert Stoller, to illustrate how *gender* could differ from *sex*. However, the term was popularized by Ann Oakley in the early seventies (Segal *Slow* 66).

one of the main mechanisms which determine the distribution of power in our society.

Traditionally, gender studies has focused on women. Politically, this is as should be. It is women (and girls) who have undergone —and still undergo, especially in non-Western countries— the most detrimental effects of patriarchy. It is women who had to make gender visible as a political category for the first time. However, masculinity studies, especially in the last two decades, has started to show how gender does not only shape women but men as well.

From the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, the historical constructions of gender, race, and sexuality were exclusively associated with the “marked” bodies of woman, the colonized or enslaved, and homosexuals, respectively. Thus, men (especially white heterosexual males) remained largely invisible or “unmarked” in gender terms (Haraway 210). In Western patriarchal discourse, the universal person and the masculine gender have traditionally been conflated. While women have usually been defined in terms of their sex, men have thus been considered the representatives of a universal and genderless personhood. Nevertheless, (white heterosexual) men *are* also gendered and this gendering process, the

transformation of biological males into socially interacting men, is a central experience for men. As Kimmel and Messner (Introduction x-xi) have noted, men always come to see themselves and the world from the perspective of gender, although they often act as if they ignored it.

Very often, men do indeed appear to remain unaware of their gender, probably because the mechanisms that make us privileged beings tend to remain invisible to us. Nevertheless, the traditional conception of masculinity as the “invisible” norm only helps perpetuate social and gender inequalities. After all, invisibility is the very precondition for the perpetuation of male dominance, since one cannot question what remains hidden from view (Robinson; Easthope).² Because masculinity tries to retain its hegemony by passing itself off as norm-al and universal, rendering masculinity visible becomes essential for its analysis and critique.

² Robinson talks about two different kinds of *invisibility*. On the one hand, we have the invisibility of the marginal, of those who inhabit the margins of society, history, and culture. On the other, we have the invisibility of the powerful. “Whereas the former are invisible in the sense of being underrepresented, the latter are invisible behind a mask of universality” (194).

It is true that, in a way, men are already visible enough.³ After all, most scholarship, in the traditional sense, has been about men. However, masculinity scholars insist that such scholarship, in a more significant sense, has not really been about men at all. For example, masculinity recurs as an implicit category in many sociological studies which often take men for granted as the dominant gender. Most texts by sociologists such as Marx and Durkheim draw on concepts such as “society,” “working-class,” and “organization,” all of which implicitly stand for men. However, few scholars seem to have explored masculinity *explicitly* as a gender category and, as a result, the dynamics as well as the history of (American) masculinity remain largely unexplored. As Michael Kimmel famously proclaimed:

American men have no history. Sure, we have libraries filled with the words of men about the works of men -stacks of biographies of the heroic and famous, and historical accounts of events in which men took part, like wars, strikes, or political campaigns. We have portraits of athletes, scientists, and soldiers, histories of unions and political parties. And there are probably thousands of histories of institutions that were organized, staffed, and run entirely by men.

³ Just as Robinson distinguishes between different connotations of the term *invisibility*, she also describes two different meanings of *visibility*:

Making the normative visible as a category embodied in gendered and racialized terms can call into question the privileges of unmarkedness, although visibility can also mean a different kind of empowerment, as the history of movements for social equality in the United States has taught us. Identity politics -what Peggy Phelan refers to as “visibility politics”- is largely based on the assumption that invisibility is both the cause and effect of political and social exclusion. (2)

So how can I claim that men have no history? Isn't virtually every history book a history of men? After all, as we have learned from feminist scholars, it's been *women* who have had, until recently, no history. In fact, if the book does not have the word *women* in the title, it's a good bet that the book is largely about men. Yet such works do not explore how the experience of being a man, of manhood, structured the lives of the men who are their subjects, the organizations and institutions they created and staffed, the events in which they participated. American men have no history of themselves *as men*. (*Manhood* 1-2)

Rather than gendered, then, men seem to have been constantly universalized. Women's studies has already shown how the patriarchal elevation of *man* as male to *Man* as generic human has often led to the dismissal of women's specific experiences within an eminently androcentric society. However, masculinity studies adds that our understanding of men and masculinities has also been diminished by universalizing notions of manhood. Just as the erroneous assumption that male experience equals *human* experience affected our treatment of women, so it has limited our perceptions about men. Hence the need for masculinity studies,⁴ which Harry Brod has defined as

⁴ In fact, Brod uses the term *men's studies*, not *masculinity studies*, which is preferred here. Though widespread, the use of the term *men's studies* is ambiguous. It is not clear, for example, if it refers to studies *by* men or studies *about* them. Hence Kimmel's claim that we should drop the term altogether and begin to use instead the name *studies of masculinities* (Carabí and Armengol *Debating*). Henceforth in this

The study of masculinities and male experiences as specific and varying social-historical-cultural formations. Such studies situate masculinities as objects of study on a par with femininities, instead of elevating them to universal norms. (“Case” 40)

Masculinity studies has shown how, while *seemingly* about men, traditional treatment of generic man as the human norm in fact excludes from analysis what is unique to men *qua* men. In other words, it does not only distort our understanding of what, if anything, is really generic to humanity, but also precludes the analysis of masculinity as a *specific male* experience, rather than a universal model for *human* existence (Brod “Case” 40). In this sense, then, masculinity studies aims to provide new perspectives on men’s lives and personal dilemmas as gendered beings, transforming supposedly universal human experiences into ones that are specifically masculine. Moreover, masculinity studies analyzes masculinities as socially constructed, context-specific, and culture-bound. Like most women’s studies practitioners, the majority of masculinity scholars share the assumption that masculinity and femininity are social and historical, rather than biological constructs. Thus, masculinity, like all human constructs, can change.

study, then, I will use the phrase *studies of masculinities*, instead of *men’s studies*, and sometimes *masculinity studies*, simply for abbreviation purposes.

In line with these main arguments, then, the present study will try to demonstrate the thesis that men, like women, are also gendered beings, who have, therefore, undergone specific cultural and historical gendering processes. By defining gender as a cultural and historical construct, rather than an inner or immutable essence, this study starts off from the critical assumption that masculinity can, and does indeed, change. What was culturally constructed can also be culturally de-constructed. Masculinity is neither universal nor eternal. Masculinity, like femininity, is culture-specific and context-bound, that is, it varies from culture to culture and from time to time.

It might thus be pertinent to begin this study of masculinity by defining its specific cultural and historical scope -namely, the critique of masculinity in contemporary American culture. While several chapters of this study include some sections on the historical roots and evolution of masculinity, the emphasis is on contemporary versions of American masculinity. After all, it is since the 1980s, and thanks to the influence of the feminist and gay movements, that American masculinity has undergone, as we shall see, some of its most significant and interesting changes or “crises.” The present study will thus be focused on the analysis of

contemporary American masculinity, particularly its dominant -i.e. white heterosexual- model. As a multicultural society, the contemporary United States is informed by many different cultural concepts of masculine identity, which vary according to factors like race, ethnicity, and sexuality, among others. It becomes impossible, therefore, to carry out an in-depth analysis of the many different cultural, ethnic, and sexual patterns that conform American masculinities. While acknowledging, then, the multiplicity of ethnic and hetero/homosexual masculinities in contemporary American culture, this study will focus on the analysis of white heterosexual masculinity. Admittedly, this is only one version of American manhood, albeit the dominant one (Kimmel *Manhood* 6).

The present project is thus centrally concerned with exploring the construction of white heterosexual masculinity, particularly as embodied by white heterosexual males. This might perhaps be regarded as contradictory or even essentialist. After all, this study posits that masculinity is not a biological or inner essence, but a socio-cultural construct. It follows, therefore, that women, as Judith Halberstam has shown in *Female Masculinity* (1998), can also be masculine, just as men can be feminine. As a gender construct, not a biological inner essence, masculinity can be

performed by both women and men. In her own words, “masculinity in the 1990s has finally been recognized as, at least in part, a construction by female- as well as male-born people” (Halberstam 13).

While recognizing, then, the effect of masculinity on both “sexes,” this study centers on the influence of masculinity on male bodies, defending, as Halberstam does, the relevance of the sexed body to the construction of gender. The very title of Halberstam’s text, *Female Masculinity*, suggests her specific material or bodily approach to the subject of masculinity. In other words, Halberstam’s work posits that while masculinity does certainly have an influence on both women and men, it affects males and females differently, and has different connotations in male and female bodies. In her own words, “many...lines of identification traverse the terrain of masculinity, dividing its power into complicated differentials of class, race, sexuality, and *gender*” (2; emphasis added). While Halberstam centers on female (particularly lesbian) masculinity, the present study will thus be focused on the specific dynamics of male (in particular white heterosexual) masculinity.

By concentrating on the dominant model of masculinity, instead of “Other” ethnic and (homo)sexual masculinities, this study might be accused

of universalizing, and expanding on, the analysis of a model of masculinity that is already hegemonic in social, political, and cultural terms. Nevertheless, it must be remembered, as has already been indicated, that although white heterosexual masculinity dominates in socio-cultural and political terms, it remains, paradoxically enough, largely invisible in gender terms. Since its invisibility only contributes to reinforcing its prevailing (and often oppressive) influence, making white heterosexual masculinity visible becomes fundamental for its critical analysis.

This thesis has been divided into two main parts: Part I (Preliminary Theory) and Part II (Themes). While Part I (chapters 1-2) provides an introductory and fundamentally theoretical approach to the study of masculinities, in general, and of white heterosexual masculinity, the focus of this study, in particular, Part II (chapters 3-5) attempts to apply the existing theoretical work on masculinities to the analysis of two specific themes: emotions and violence. This second part will thus be mainly concerned with analyzing and demonstrating the influence of masculinity on men's emotional lives as well as on their attitudes to violence. Given the specific cultural focus of this study -white heterosexual masculinity in *American* culture-, Part I concentrates on American theoretical perspectives on men

and masculinities. Similarly, the two topics discussed in Part II have been selected taking into consideration their centrality and relevance, as we shall see, to contemporary American society and culture, as well as to American masculinity scholarship. In order to try to demonstrate and illustrate the important influence of masculinity on these two (apparently genderless) topics, this second part applies an (eminently American) interdisciplinary corpus of masculinity studies (formed by sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis, anthropology, philosophy, history, literature and literary theory, etc.) to the analysis of emotions and violence in contemporary American culture.

The study as a whole consists, therefore, of two main parts, and five chapters. The first chapter will explore the origins of masculinity studies in the United States, as well as its development and politics. As we shall see, most contemporary studies of American masculinities, in general, and this study, in particular, rely on feminist theory, which has traditionally been associated with women. Thus, chapter 1 will also analyze the (apparent) contradictions and implications of men adopting a feminist approach to masculinity studies. The chapter will conclude by looking at the new directions of masculinity studies in the United States, particularly the

repercussions of poststructuralist thought on the latest masculinity scholarship. While masculinity studies is focused on the analysis of masculine identity, poststructuralism has recently challenged fixed notions of identity, including gender identity. Questioning a number of binary oppositions such as man/woman or masculinity/femininity, poststructuralism has thus shown gender identity to be far from stable and fixed.

In deconstructing stable and rigid notions of (gender) identity, poststructuralism has also questioned, as we shall see in chapter 2, the internal coherence, as well as the very existence, of (American) white heterosexual masculinity, the focus of this study. While queer theory, for example, has revealed heterosexuality as a precarious and often contradictory historical construct, whiteness studies has shown the “white” race to be a historical and political invention. Influenced by Michel Foucault’s pioneering work on sexuality, masculinity scholarship has also argued how the biological concept of *maleness* might itself be a discursive construct which becomes completely meaningless when removed from culture and social discourse. Thus, poststructuralism has shown white heterosexual masculinity to be an artificial, contradictory, and perhaps

inexistent gender construct. Despite poststructuralism's innovative views on gender and masculinity, however, feminist scholarship has recurrently argued that poststructuralist work on men and masculinities emphasizes the very instability, precariousness, and internal inconsistencies of masculinity, while neglecting its political and often oppressive aspects. Nevertheless, chapter 2 will contribute to the current debate by trying to demonstrate how it is both feasible and desirable to reconcile feminist politics with a deconstructive analysis of (American white heterosexual) masculinity's internal contradictions.

While Part I will thus provide an introductory theoretical perspective on the study of (white heterosexual) masculinity in the United States, Part II will, as has been suggested, draw on an (eminently American) interdisciplinary corpus of masculinity studies to try to demonstrate the influence of masculinity on the construction of emotions and violence in contemporary American culture. The order in which the two main themes of this second part are presented is not (totally) arbitrary. The issue of emotions is, as we shall see, a central aspect of human life and also affects violence in a number of ways. For example, men's fear of emotions might lead them to resort to violence as a (socially legitimated) form of masculine emotional

expressivity.⁵ Thus, it is (at least partly) inaccurate to claim, as several masculinity scholars have (see, for example, Seidler *Unreasonable*), that men cannot express their emotions. It might be more appropriate to argue that men have been taught to repress *some* emotions, particularly those showing vulnerability, but have been socially encouraged to express other feelings such as anger through violence. Given the emotional component of violence, then, the chapter on emotions will precede, and somehow introduce, the final chapter on male violence.

As will be argued in chapter 3, in Western culture reason and “objectivity” have traditionally been considered superior to the world of emotional experience and “subjectivity.” As a result, emotions and sentiments have often been diminished and considered of secondary importance. However, chapter 3 will try to demonstrate that emotions do often complement and supplement rationality. Moreover, they can act as a powerful source of energy and change, promoting the consciousness of equality. Emotions have played a key role, for example, in encouraging women to work together for gender equality (Fricker), or in the African-American political struggle for racial equality (Schneider). As David Eng

⁵ See chapter 5 for a more detailed study of male violence.

(Carabí and Armengol *Debating*) has argued, most socio-political human projects are “affected projects.”

Taking up Eng’s views, chapter 3 of this study will thus explore the specific relationship between masculinity and the politics of emotion in contemporary American culture. While emotions have traditionally been considered feminine,⁶ this chapter will try to demonstrate that the association of emotions with femininity is a specific cultural and historical construction. This implies, on the one hand, that masculinity and emotions have not always been mutually exclusive and, on the other hand, that what was socially constructed can also be socially and culturally de-constructed. Thus, the chapter analyzes the close, though often veiled, relationship between masculinity and emotion in American culture and history, with a view to demonstrating and illustrating the political potential of profeminist men’s emotions to transform masculinities and gender relations. Chapter 3, then, aims to demonstrate the thesis that profeminist men might use their sentiments not only to explore and express their emotional inner selves, but also, and above all, to contribute to the feminist struggle for social and gender equality.

⁶ See, for example, Chapman and Hendler (Introduction); Shamir and Travis (Introduction).

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of studies devoted to analyzing representations of masculinities in American literature.⁷ While the earliest American studies of masculinities in the 1970s and 1980s usually came from the fields of psychology and sociology, the latest masculinity scholarship in the United States is increasingly paying attention to literary representations of masculinity. As Michael Kimmel (Carabí and Armengol *Debating*) has argued, the center for masculinity studies in the United States seems to have moved from the social and behavioral sciences to anthropology, to literature and the Humanities. In line with the latest trends of masculinity studies in the United States, then, the last two chapters of this study will also incorporate literature into the discussion of American men and masculinities.

Literature has always played a crucial role in the representation of masculinity's internal conflicts and contradictions, for (gender) ideology, as Sedgwick has noted, "is always at least implicitly narrative" (*Between* 14-5). In line with this view, then, Chapter 4 will try to explore the role masculinity studies can play in (American) literary theory and criticism. The

⁷ See, for example, Michael Flood's bibliographical section on "Masculinities in culture and representation," as well as his subsection on "Literature and literary theory" (*The Men's*).

chapter begins with an overview of studies of American literary masculinities, analyzing their origins and development. While the beginnings of studies of literary masculinities in the United States will be traced back to literary critics such as D. H. Lawrence and Leslie Fiedler, the field has rapidly developed and expanded in recent years, incorporating, as we shall see, innovative contributions from feminist, ethnic, and queer studies. Besides highlighting these new critical approaches to the analysis of literary masculinities in the United States, Chapter 4 will also point to some of the theoretical implications of re-visiting literature from a men's studies perspective. As will be shown, studies of literary masculinities may be helpful not only to challenge patriarchal concepts of masculinity, but also to look for new, alternative, non-hierarchical models of men and masculinities in (American) culture and literature.

Moreover, the chapter explores, and defends, the male participation in feminist literary criticism. Just as men's participation in feminism has been repeatedly questioned,⁸ their involvement in feminist literary criticism has also been found suspicious by some scholars, who have claimed that such a

⁸ See chapter 1 (section 1.4).

critical practice is, by definition, *by* and *for* women.⁹ Nevertheless, chapter 4 will try to prove that just as some men are embracing feminism, they can also adopt a feminist critical approach to the study of (literary) masculinities, in the same way as male writers can use, and have sometimes used, their literary works to rethink traditional patriarchal masculinities and gender relations.

All these (eminently theoretical) arguments about literary representations of masculinities will be developed, exemplified, and put into practice in chapter 5, which incorporates American literature into the discussion of the links between masculinity and violence in contemporary American culture. While (male) violence is, as we shall see, one of the main problems of contemporary American society, the close relationship between masculinity and violence in American social life has often been naturalized and so remains largely unexplored. Chapter 5 will, therefore, focus on two main aims. First of all, the chapter will try to explore the specific social, cultural, and historical construction of the links between masculinity and violence in the United States. Secondly, by analyzing male violence as the product of social and historical, rather than biological or essentialist, factors,

⁹ See, for example, Braidotti; Scholes.

this chapter will also attempt to demonstrate how it is both possible and desirable to start to de-link and de-construct the common association between violence and manhood ideals in American culture.

In line with these two main objectives, then, the literary texts discussed in chapter 5 have been selected to illustrate the construction and, especially, the possible de-construction of the traditional view of violence as a symbol of masculinity in American culture and literature. Given the interdisciplinary -rather than specifically literary- focus of this study, the number of writers and literary texts selected and discussed is necessarily limited. Moreover, this thesis does not attempt to carry out a detailed thematic or formal analysis of these writers and their literary texts, but explore the aspects that illustrate and exemplify the main theoretical arguments about men and masculinities presented in chapter 5. Because the number of literary texts discussed in this study is necessarily reduced, the arguments presented in this chapter cannot be expected to be exhaustive or conclusive. Hopefully, they will be corroborated, qualified, and/or refuted by future research on the (de-)construction of male violence in American culture and literature.

Trying, then, to offer literary examples for analyzing the construction and, above all, the possible de-construction of the traditional association between masculinity and violence, chapter 5 will focus on contemporary literary re-visions of the conventional conception of violence as a proof of masculinity. While male violence remains, as we shall see, deeply ingrained in American cultural and literary history, there exist several contemporary fictional works, such as Russell Banks's *Affliction* (1989) and Richard Ford's *Rock Springs* (1987) and *A Multitude of Sins* (2001), that do indeed appear to pose a radical challenge to the conventional association between manhood and aggressive behavior in American culture and letters. The author of ten novels, five short story collections, and four poetry collections in a writing career spanning five decades, Russell Banks is considered a significant spokesman for the working-class life in contemporary American literature. Moving away from the postmodern influence on contemporary American fiction, Banks has been acclaimed for his realism, which is centrally concerned with depicting economic hardship, racism, and drug addiction in contemporary American society.¹⁰ In Banks's fiction, most of

¹⁰ It must be acknowledged, however, that, in an interview with Francisco Collado, Russell Banks himself has argued that his fiction does not represent so much an example for traditional realism as "a useful return...to realist premises, freshened and informed by that [postmodern] inquiry of the 60s and 70s" (Collado 89). See Collado for a deeper analysis of both the distinction and connections between

these social and economic problems are shown to evolve into violence. Set in Ausable, New York, Banks's *Rule of the Bone* (1995), for example, focuses on the problematic life of Chapman "Chappie" Dorset, a teenager from a lower-class family who ends up descending into the criminal underworld. Whereas Russell Banks's *Cloudsplitter* (1998) (finalist for the Pulitzer Prize) portrays racism as leading to the cruel martyrdom of anti-slavery activist John Brown, *The Darling* (2004), Banks's latest work, depicts both colonial/racial oppression and economic hardship as the main causes of the violent revolution in Liberia. Much of Banks's fiction, then, seems to represent socio-economic conflicts leading to violence, which, in most of his works, is associated with men and masculinities.

That is, indeed, the case of *Affliction* (1989), a novel which will be discussed in chapter 5 as a paradigmatic example for Russell Banks's recurrent depiction of economic hardship as resulting in (male) violence. Like several other working-class male protagonists in Banks's fiction, for example Chapman Dorset in *Rule of the Bone*, Wade Whitehouse in *Affliction* finds himself in an extreme situation at the bottom of the socio-economic system. As in the case of Chapman Dorset, Wade's economic

postmodernism and realism in contemporary American fiction, in general, and in Russell Banks's works, in particular.

difficulties, combined with other personal and familial problems, finally lead him, as we shall see, to violent and criminal behavior. While *Affliction* thus seems to illustrate the traditional connection between (working-class) masculinity and violence, Banks's novel, as will be shown, also questions and re-reads male violence from particularly innovative perspectives.

By selecting Russell Banks's *Affliction* for discussion in chapter 5, then, the present study attempts, on the one hand, to analyze the recurrent association between (working-class) masculinities and violence in American culture and literature and, on the other, to explore Banks's literary re-vision of male aggressive behavior as a (self-)destructive force for both women and men. While literary texts by (American) women writers have long denounced the detrimental effects of patriarchal violence on women's lives, Banks's *Affliction* has been selected for his insightful meditation on the (self-)alienating influence of violence on men's own lives. Besides denouncing the terrible consequences of patriarchal violence for women's lives, the novel does indeed seem to represent male violence, as we shall see, as a form of self-annihilation, thus offering a particularly subversive re-writing of the patriarchal conception of violence as a reaffirmation of masculinity and virility.

Besides Russell Banks's *Affliction*, chapter 5 will analyze as well the re-vision of male violence in several short stories in Richard Ford's *Rock Springs* (1987) -in particular, "Communist," "Great Falls," "Optimists," and "Sweethearts"- and *A Multitude of Sins* (2001) -particularly, two stories in the volume entitled "Under the Radar" and "Calling," respectively. The author of five novels and three collections of short stories, and the recipient of the PEN/Faulkner Award for *The Sportswriter* (1987) and the Pulitzer Prize for *Independence Day* (1995), Richard Ford has been heralded both as a novelist and as a short story writer. Born in Jackson, Mississippi, Ford has sometimes been read as a Southern writer, although the author himself has always rejected this label and, indeed, only his first novel, *A Piece of My Heart* (1976), is set in the American South. While Ford's Southern "ethos" thus remains open to questioning, scholars seem to agree on, and underline, the realist bent of his fiction. Resisting the influence of postmodernism on contemporary American literature, most of Richard Ford's works seem to share his stark realism and often minimalist style and, indeed, the author himself has often expressed his admiration for other contemporary American realist writers such as Tobias Wolff and Raymond Carver, among others.

As in the case of Russell Banks, Richard Ford's starkly realist fiction has recurrently focused on depicting stark poverty. Even though he is best known for having written *The Sportswriter* and its sequel *Independence Day*, both of which deal with the emotional isolation of the middle-class protagonist Frank Bascombe, several of Ford's fictional works -for example, *Wildlife* (1990) and, especially, *Rock Springs* (1987)- have also been praised for their insightful representations of the working-class experience in contemporary American culture.¹¹ As Jeffrey J. Folks has argued, most characters in *Rock Springs* are "victims of a harsh, unforgiving economic system, and their condition is intimately connected with internal colonialism and with their status at the bottom of that system" (151).

Moreover, most of Ford's (working-class) narrators and protagonists to date have been men. From Robard Hewes and Sam Newel, the two main voices in *A Piece of My Heart* (1976), Ford's first novel, to Harry Quinn, the Vietnam veteran of *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981), to sixteen-year-old Joe Brinson in *Wildlife* (1990), to Frank Bascombe, the narrator and protagonist

¹¹ The son of a starch salesman, who died from a fatal heart attack when the writer was only sixteen years old, Richard Ford was raised only by his mother, who had to bring him up on her own. When her husband died, Edna Ford began work at what would become a series of jobs, first at a company that took school pictures, then as a rental agent at an apartment complex, then as a night cashier in a hotel, and, finally, many years later, as an admitting clerk at an emergency room at the University of Mississippi Hospital (Walker 3). Given his biographic background, it is little wonder, then, that Ford's fiction usually displays his social conscience and sensitivity to economic hardship.

of both *The Sportswriter* (1987) and *Independence Day* (1995), Ford's novels typically concern themselves with first-person male narrators and protagonists. And this also applies to most of his stories. For instance, the defining viewpoints in "The Womanizer," "Occidentals," and "Jealousy," the three stories included in *Women with Men* (1997), are men: Martin Austin, Charley Matthews, and Larry, respectively. On the other hand, first-person male narrators also tell eight of the ten stories in *Rock Springs* (1987). And, in fact, "Empire" and "Fireworks," the only two stories told in the third person, also seem to "attain intimacy and intensity," as John Wideman has argued, "by being reflected tightly, exclusively through a single [male] consciousness in each story," Sims in the former, and Eddie Starling in the latter. As Wideman has concluded, all the voices in *Rock Springs* "are male. All white. All approximately 25 to 40 years old. Predictably, they speak about gaining, losing or holding on to manhood" (1).

Given Richard Ford's combination of economic hardship and masculinity, especially in *Rock Springs* (1987), it is little wonder, then, that Ford's stories usually explore the issue of male violence, too. In focusing on the harsh lives of socially disadvantaged male characters, Ford has, in effect, analyzed as well the issue of male violence, which, in his fiction, as in the

case of Russell Banks's works, is shown to be closely related to poverty and financial instability.¹² Several short stories in Ford's *Rock Springs* -for example, "Optimists" and "Sweethearts"- explore, as we shall see, the lives of working-class (or jobless) men who resort to violence and criminality due, at least in part, to their economic difficulties.¹³

While criminal behavior thus appears to be strongly connected with men's marginality at the bottom of the socio-economic system, the analysis of "Under the Radar" and "Calling" —two short stories in Richard Ford's latest fictional work, *A Multitude of Sins* (2001), which focuses on middle-class male characters and protagonists— will help illustrate how violence does indeed appear to contaminate both working-class and middle-class men, even as poverty remains, as will be argued, one of the main causes of (male) criminality. Although economic hardship constitutes one of the main predictors of (male) violence, these stories do indeed seem to illustrate, as

¹² In *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981), one of Ford's earliest works, the writer also explored the connection between (male) violence and poverty in Mexico.

¹³ While Ford's *Wildlife* (1990) also explores the connection between male violence and economic hardship, the novel is simply an extended and adapted version of "Great Falls," a short story already published in *Rock Springs* (1987). In order to avoid commenting on a similar story twice, then, chapter 5 will only focus on the analysis of "Great Falls."

will be shown, how all men, no matter their social class, may be attracted to violence as a proof of masculinity.¹⁴

While much of Richard Ford's fiction thus seems to illustrate the traditional connection between masculinity and violence in American literature, his fictional works not only question the patriarchal conception of violence as a reaffirmation of manhood, but also seem to point, as we shall see, to new, alternative, non-violent models and representations of masculinity in contemporary American culture and literature. Chapter 5 will, therefore, pay special attention to Richard Ford's literature, whose treatment of male violence seems doubly subversive and path-breaking.

On the one hand, Ford, like Banks, denounces the (self-)destructive effects of male violence on both women and men, thus challenging traditional representations of violence as a symbol of heroic masculinity. Moreover, many of Ford's stories in *Rock Springs* -for example, "Communist," "Optimists," and "Sweethearts"- and *A Multitude of Sins* -for instance, "Calling"- represent, as we shall also see, boys and men who move away from violence, for example by rejecting their violent fathers or their

¹⁴ While violence appears to affect men from all social classes, it is usually perpetrated by men, rather than women. Though often crossing class distinctions, violence, as we shall see in chapter 5, seems to remain a clearly gendered behavior in American culture.

equally aggressive (male) friends. Thus, these two collections of short stories by Richard Ford seem to prove particularly innovative, as he not only challenges and undermines traditional depictions of violence as a symbol of manhood and bravery, but also seems to suggest alternative, relational, non-violent representations of masculinities in contemporary American culture and literature.

While chapter 5 will thus focus on the contemporary re-writings of male violence in the fiction of Russell Banks and Richard Ford, American cultural and literary history has long reinforced, as we shall see, the traditional image of aggressive behavior as a proof of masculinity. Thus, Banks and Ford's revisionary depictions of male violence will be preceded by, and contrasted with, more traditional fictional representations of male violence, as exemplified by Ernest Hemingway and Chuck Palahniuk. While it is beyond our scope to carry out an in-depth analysis of Hemingway's numerous and complex novels and short stories, chapter 5 will explore the representation of male violence in one of his posthumously published short stories,¹⁵ "An African Story" (1972), which has been specifically selected for two main reasons. While Ernest Hemingway's view of violence as a

¹⁵ "An African Story" appeared as a story within a story in Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden*, a novel also published posthumously in 1986.

reaffirmation of masculinity recurs in most of his fiction about war, bullfighting, boxing, etc., “An African Story” represents his specific conception of hunting as a symbol of heroic manhood. Hemingway’s depiction of violent hunting expeditions as tests of manhood seems to have been radically questioned, as we shall see, by the contemporary American writer Richard Ford. “An African Story” will thus be used not only as an illustration of Hemingway’s recurrent (literary) association between masculinity and violence, but also, and above all, as a contrast to Ford’s subversive re-writings of the Hemingwayesque notion of hunting as a proof of manly daring.¹⁶

Another work which attests to the continued depiction of violence as a reaffirmation of manhood in contemporary American literature is Chuck Palahniuk’s best-selling novel *Fight Club* (1996). The author of seven novels and the recipient of several national literary awards, Palahniuk has been highly acclaimed for his harsh critique of (post-)modern American culture and mass society. Influenced by writers such as Don DeLillo, Kurt Vonnegut, or Thomas Pynchon, among others, Palahniuk relies on his direct

¹⁶ Moreover, the thesis will focus on Hemingway’s “An African Story” because it remains largely unexplored by literary criticism, which has traditionally centered on the analysis of masculinity and/or violence in other, more popular short stories by Hemingway, such as “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (1935) or “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” (1936).

and often irreverent style of writing to question contemporary American mainstream culture, which he re-presents as superficial, materialistic, depraved, and lacking in moral standards. Combining the tragic with the grotesque, his social criticism does indeed seem to pervade most of his literary works, which have been read as subverting different aspects of contemporary American society, such as the culture of instant celebrity (*Survivor*, 1999), the cult to purely external concepts of beauty (*Invisible Monsters*, 1999), the commodification of sex and the body (*Choke*, 2001), or the overwhelming influence of the media (*Lullaby*, 2002), among other controversial social issues.

Chuck Palahniuk's first novel, *Fight Club* (1996), has also been read in social terms, usually as his harshest critique of late capitalism and consumer society in contemporary American culture. Even though much scholarship has praised *Fight Club* for denouncing the alienating effects of modern American consumer culture, the novel's focus on violence has been the subject of a much heated -and ongoing- debate. While some scholars have read the novel's emphasis on violence as an escape from the alienating

influence of late capitalism,¹⁷ others have linked the book's focus on violence to the writer's personal traumas,¹⁸ and some have even read Palahniuk's celebration of violence and anti-social behavior as an expression of neo-Fascism.¹⁹ Despite the continued critical attention to the issue of violence in *Fight Club*, the specific links between masculinity and violence in the novel remain, however, unexplored. This would, then, seem to confirm Michael Kimmel's claim that, in American culture, the relationship between masculinity and aggressivity is considered so natural as to raise no questions or debate (*Gendered* 243).

By including Palahniuk's *Fight Club* -where the relationship between masculinity and violence also seems to have been naturalized- in chapter 5, then, this study attempts to provide examples of the often overlooked connection between aggressivity and maleness in contemporary American culture and literature. Moreover, the analysis of masculinity in *Fight Club* might help connect and reconcile the two main critical approaches to the novel, which have focused, as has been pointed out, on the issues of

¹⁷ The (exclusively male) members of *Fight Club* assume that, through pain and violence, they are reviving their masculinity, which, they believe, is threatened, as we shall see, by American consumerism.

¹⁸ One should remember, in this respect, that his grandfather killed his grandmother and then committed suicide. Moreover, his father was murdered in 1999 by a girlfriend's ex-husband, who was convicted and sentenced to death in 2001.

¹⁹ See, for example, Duge.

consumerism and violence, respectively. While Palahniuk's *Fight Club* has been traditionally analyzed (and praised) as his harshest critique of American consumer culture, fewer critics have noted that *Fight Club* also seems to represent violence, as will be shown, as an anxiety-relieving mechanism for the alienated (white heterosexual) male in contemporary American capitalist society. A men's studies rereading of Palahniuk's *Fight Club* might thus prove particularly useful to deepen into the connections between (male) violence and capitalism in the text. While it is true that Palahniuk's novel does not describe violence as the solution to capitalism, much of the novel does indeed appear to celebrate, as will be argued, the soothing effects of violence on the (male) victims of modern capitalism and consumer American culture. In so doing, *Fight Club* seems to end up reinforcing, once again, the traditional conception of violence as a reaffirmation of masculinity. Ultimately, then, Palahniuk's novel, like Ernest Hemingway's "An African Story," also appears to be in stark contrast, as we shall see, to the more innovative approaches to male violence in the fiction of other contemporary American writers such as Russell Banks or Richard Ford.

Taken together, then, the selected texts by Russell Banks, Richard Ford, Ernest Hemingway, and Chuck Palahniuk will serve different but complementary purposes for this study. First of all, Banks's *Affliction* will help to explore male violence, which he represents as one of the direct consequences of economic hardship, as a (self-)destructive force for women and men alike. Ford's short stories in *Rock Springs* and *A Multitude of Sins*, on the other hand, seem to move one step beyond by not only questioning the traditional connection between masculinity and violence, which in Ford's works appears to destroy the lives of both working-class and middle-class men, but by providing as well new, alternative, non-violent forms of manhood in contemporary American culture and letters. Ford's fiction will thus receive special attention for its critique of patriarchal masculinities as well as for its innovative depictions of alternative models of manhood in American literature.

While chapter 5 will thus emphasize the innovative re-writings of male violence in the fiction of Russell Banks and, especially, Richard Ford, these two authors will, as has been pointed out, be preceded by, and set against, the more conventional representations of male violence in the fiction of Ernest Hemingway and Chuck Palahniuk. By exploring Banks and

Ford's re-presentations of male violence *vis-à-vis* those of Hemingway and Palahniuk, then, this thesis will try, on the one hand, to question traditional patriarchal masculinities and, on the other, to contribute as well to the search for new, alternative, non-violent patterns of masculinity, which is, as will be argued in chapter 4, one of the main aims of a men's studies rereading of American literature.

Having thus outlined the main contents and arguments of this thesis, we may now go on to deepen into the study of men and masculinities in contemporary American culture and literature. The analysis of masculinities, as the present study will try to demonstrate, is as interesting as necessary, not only to better understand men's lives but also to be able to rethink them. If feminism was, arguably, the most important social revolution of the twentieth century, change in men and masculinities might very well become, as feminist psychologist Victoria Sau has argued, one of the most significant social revolutions of the new century.