

GENDERING MEN:
RE-VISIONS OF VIOLENCE AS A TEST OF MANHOOD IN
AMERICAN LITERATURE

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In the end, it will be easier for men to
revise the way they live their lives if we can
help them recognize the possibilities of
what they might become.

—James D. Riemer ‘Rereading American
Literature from a Men’s Studies
Perspective: Some Implications’ (1987)

This article provides an introduction to the study of masculinities in American culture and literature. It begins by introducing masculinity studies in general and continues with an overview of the more specific studies of (American) literary masculinities. So as to illustrate the applicability of masculinity studies to literary theory, the paper analyzes the construction of masculinity and violence in two American short stories: ‘An African Story’ (1954), by Ernest Hemingway, and Richard Ford’s ‘Communist’ (1987), which exemplify two radically different visions of male violence. While Hemingway’s story depicts aggressive behavior as a proof of manhood, Ford challenges the traditional Hemingwayesque equation between virility and violence, which he re-presents as a (self-) destructive force for both women and men. By analyzing Ford’s innovative re-vision of male violence *vis-à-vis* Hemingway’s more conventional representation of the subject, the article attempts, ultimately, to illustrate both the traditional construction and the possible deconstruction of male violence in American culture and literature.

Keywords: masculinity, violence, masculinity studies, American literature, Ernest Hemingway, Richard Ford

1. Introduction to studies of masculinities

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 one of the main mechanisms which determine the distribution of power in our society (Kimmel and Messner 1998: x-xi).

Traditionally, gender studies have 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, have started to show how gender, as Kimmel and Messner (1998: x-xi) elaborate, shapes not only 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 1991: 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 (1998: x-xi) have concluded, 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 (Easthope 1986; Robinson 2000).² Because masculinity tries to retain its hegemony by passing itself off as normal and universal, rendering masculinity visible becomes essential for its analysis and critique.

It is true that, in a way, men are already visible enough. 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*,

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² Robinson identifies 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” (2000: 194).

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.

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*. (1997: 1-2)

Rather than gendered, then, men seem to have been constantly universalized. Women's studies have 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 add 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, which Harry Brod has defined as "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" (1987: 40).

Masculinity studies thus aim 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, these studies analyze 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, studies of masculinities are particularly concerned with showing how manhood, like all human constructs, can change.

In revisiting men's lives from the perspective of gender, then, masculinity studies are contributing to the expansion, and redefinition, of existing gender studies scholarship in highly innovative ways. Moving beyond the traditional equation of gender studies with women's studies (or gay and lesbian studies), masculinity scholarship is increasingly incorporating men, particularly heterosexual males, into gender studies, which had traditionally remained an exclusively female domain. Scholarship on men and masculinities is showing how the analysis of men's gender

issues becomes absolutely essential in order to gain a deeper insight into the social construction, as well as the possible de-construction, of gender relations. In their recent edition for the World Bank of *The Other Half of Gender: Men's Issues in Development* (2006), Ian Bannon and Maria C. Correia, for example, have underlined the imperious necessity of including men in gender work, insisting that such inclusion becomes indispensable in terms of gender equality. In their view, addressing gender issues, including those that disadvantage women, requires understanding the perceptions and positions of both women and men. Actually, their work on gender in developing countries is showing how, unless men's gender issues are properly addressed, both men's and women's progress and happiness will be impaired. In their own words, "women's well-being cannot improve without including men because gender is relational; it concerns relationships between men and women that are subject to negotiation" (Bannon and Correia 2006: xviii-xix).

2. Studies of (American) literary masculinities: an overview

As part of this recent emphasis on studying men and masculinities, there has lately been a dramatic increase as well in the number of works on (American) literary masculinities.³ In this respect, Michael Kimmel has noted that while the first masculinity studies in the 1970s and 1980s usually came from the fields of psychology and sociology, since the 1990s masculinity scholarship seems to be paying special attention to cultural and literary representations of masculinity (Carabí and Armengol 2005). This growing interest in literary men might have important social benefits, since analyzing fictional representations of masculinity may help to better understand its social construction. After all, it is widely recognized that "gender is (a) representation" and that "the representation of gender *is* its construction" (De Lauretis 1987: 3). It follows, therefore, that studies of cultural and literary representations of (the masculine) gender are particularly relevant to the analysis of the social, institutional and/or personal constructions of masculinity.

Despite the growing body of texts on literary masculinities, the field remains, however, generally unexplored in academia. While the feminist analysis of literary women and femininities has already become part of the academic curriculum, and is often familiar to *both* female and male students, the feminist analysis of literary masculinities remains largely unknown. As literary critic Berthold Schoene-Harwood explains: "Ask any discerning male student to write an essay on Jane Austen's representation of women, or the straitjacketing impact of patriarchal gender politics on the women in Shakespeare's comedies, and the result is often clearly and cogently argued. However, ask them to comment on the representation of men and the response is often a mixture of discomfort, nervous agitation and silence" (2000: viii).

³ See, for example, Michael Flood's annotated bibliography on masculinity studies (2002), particularly his bibliographical section on 'Masculinities in culture and representation', as well as his subsection on 'Literature and literary theory'.

There are several reasons for this. On the one hand, the analysis of the images of women in literature, which began in the 1970s, has a fairly long history within feminist literary criticism, while the feminist analysis of literary masculinities, which only really started in the 1990s, is a relatively recent addition to academia. Except for a few critics like Fiedler (1960) and Leverenz (1989), men have just begun to analyze masculinity in contemporary American culture and literature. As Peter F. Murphy indicates, “more recent, and sometimes more radical, books have been written by sociologists, psychologists, and historians, not literary or cultural critics” (1994: 4). Furthermore, there are very few texts that suggest how an analysis of literary masculinities could proceed, and it does not seem to be enough for masculinity studies simply to adopt and start imitating the perspectives, aims and resolutions of women’s studies. In order to deal with the specific dilemma of the masculine condition, masculinity scholarship, as Schoene-Harwood (2000: ix) elaborates in this respect, must try to develop its own counter-discourse against patriarchy.

Although we still lack a critical vocabulary pertinent to the analysis of literary masculinities, a men’s studies approach to American literature may prove beneficial for several reasons. First of all, just as the erroneous assumption that male experience equals human experience affected American literary criticism’s treatment of women as characters and authors, so it has limited our perceptions about men in literature. Thus, a men’s studies approach to American literature shifts the focus of criticism from the manner in which men’s lives reflect abstract, universal issues to a more intimate, personal concern with how cultural values, particularly those related to ideals of masculinity, affect men’s lives on a personal level (Riemer 1987: 293-95). Rereading, for example, a supposedly universal and genderless issue like violence from a men’s studies perspective may help illustrate, as we shall see, how masculinity ideals affect, and often restrict and complicate, men’s lives in American culture and literature.

Another implication of re-reading American literature from a men’s studies perspective is the possibility of analyzing a significant part of American literary works as social documents reflecting American society’s conceptions of masculinity.⁴ Since American society is plural, rather than monolithic, men’s studies, as Riemer (1987: 290) indicates, are centrally concerned with showing the multiple conceptions and representations of masculinities in American fiction. Such multiplicity tends to be greater when we contrast representations of masculinity from disparate historical epochs. One need only compare, for example, the traditional representations of male battles between Indians and cowboys in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) by James Fenimore Cooper, on the one hand, and the innovative and subversive images of homosexual baseball players in *Take Me Out* (2001) by contemporary American playwright Richard Greenberg, on the other hand, to see how manhood ideals have been radically transformed over the years.

Like social concepts of masculinity, then, literary concepts of masculinity are culture-specific and context-bound. Moreover, cultural and historical changes in the meanings surrounding masculinity often result in – and reflect back – changes in

⁴ Certain social historians, most notably Michael Kimmel (1996), have already made such a sociological use of American literature, although on a limited scale (Riemer 1987: 290).

literary representations of masculinity. Thus, the relationship between studies of literary masculinities and the larger field of masculinity studies has been described as a reciprocal one (Riemer 1987: 291). Just as re-reading American literature for what it says about social conceptions of masculinity widens the base of men's studies knowledge, information obtained from other fields, such as sociology or psychology, can illuminate our re-reading of American literature in new and interesting ways by affecting the shape of literary criticism itself (Riemer 1987: 291). From what has been pointed out so far, one could conclude, then, that the aim of a men's studies approach to American literature is 'Re-vision', which the writer and essayist Adrienne Rich beautifully defined as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (1971: 18). In studies of American fictional masculinities, this revision entails analyzing both traditional and alternative literary models of manhood: "To change men's lives [one needs] more than recognition of the limitations and negative effects of our present ideals of manhood. There also must be a recognition and reinforcement of positive alternatives to traditional masculine ideals and behaviors" (Riemer 1987: 298).

Admittedly, there are not many 'positive' or 'alternative' images of masculinity in American literature. The American literary tradition has provided us with men who embody any number of traditional masculine ideals, and men who fight the burden and limitations of those ideals. Seldom are we provided with positive images of men who represent alternatives to those traditional ideals (Riemer 1987: 298). There are, however, some 'positive' images of masculinity in American letters. For example, in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) George and Lennie fight economic hardship and social isolation by developing a close friendship pattern which, as has been suggested, proves unusually intimate, supportive and generous. Similarly, in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) Milkman Dead, who becomes more and more relational and other-directed as the novel advances, moves beyond his father Macon's individualistic, self-centered and competitive masculine values. In several short stories in Richard Ford's *Rock Springs* (1987), such as 'Communist', the male protagonist moves away, as we shall see, from the influence of male violence, embracing a new, alternative, non-violent model of manhood. Making us aware of these innovative literary texts might thus be one of the most significant contributions that a men's studies approach to literature can make. "For, in the end, it will be easier for men to revise the way they live their lives if", as Riemer (1987: 299) suggests, "we can help them recognize the possibilities of what they might become".

3. Constructions of masculinity and violence in American literature

American men constitute 92 percent of all persons arrested for robbery; 87 percent for aggravated assault; 85 percent of other assaults; and 82 percent of disorderly conduct (Kimmel 2000: 243). Moreover, the United States has among the highest rates of rape, domestic violence and spousal murder in the industrial world. Nearly 40% of all women who are murdered are the victims of husbands or boyfriends; every six minutes a woman in the United States is raped; every 18 seconds a woman is beaten, and every

day four women are killed by their batterers. As Kimmel himself has concluded, in the United States “male socialization is a socialization to the legitimacy of violence” (2003: 811-12). It is little wonder, then, that one of the most recurrent images of men in American literature is that of the violent male. Recurrently, American fiction does indeed seem to have reinforced the connection between masculinity and violence, usually by means of the adventure story. Significantly, the American adventure story has been generally addressed to men, who have used it to learn to run risks, fight, defeat and dominate others. In American culture and letters, adventure, masculinity and violence thus seem to remain three inseparable terms. Most adventure stories raise the question of violence, which, more often than not, is enjoyed by men as “a corrupt excitement” (Green 1984: 6). That is, indeed, the view held by Martin Green in his influential work *The Great American Adventure* (1984), which analyzes adventure stories from Cooper’s *The Pioneers* (1823), through Twain’s *Roughing It* (1872), to Roosevelt’s *Autobiography* (1913), to Hemingway’s *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935), to Faulkner’s ‘The Bear’, (1942) to Mailer’s *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967). Green’s study has shown how, in most American adventure stories, masculinity remains inseparable from violence. In his own words: “Adventure (the experience) has been the great rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, as in the Boy Scout movement; and...adventure (in books) has been the ritual of the religion of manliness, which was the unofficial religion of the nineteenth century, if not of the twentieth. In mainstream books it quite displaced the Christian values. Adventure experience was the sacramental ceremony of the cult of manhood” (1984: 6).

It would seem, therefore, that the image of violent adventure as a test of manhood has influenced American literature since at least the nineteenth century. In twentieth-century American fiction, the image may be traced back to Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902), which celebrated and made increasingly popular the literature about the bloody battles between American cowboys and Indians, and has since continued to pervade, as Martin Green (1984: 6) has shown, the fiction of twentieth-century American writers such as Hemingway, Faulkner or Norman Mailer, among many others.

Even though the combination of violent adventure and masculinity recurs in the fiction of uncountable (canonical) American writers, the present article will use Ernest Hemingway as an example for the traditional conception of violence as a test of manhood in twentieth-century American literature. While it is far beyond the scope of this study to carry out an in-depth analysis of male violence in Hemingway’s numerous and complex novels and short stories, this article will explore the representation of masculinity and/as violence in one of his posthumously published short stories, ‘An African Story’ (1954).⁵ While Hemingway’s notion of violence as a test of masculinity recurs in most of his fiction about war, bullfighting, boxing, etc., ‘An African Story’ represents his specific idea of hunting as a symbol of virility and heroism, which seems to have been radically questioned, as we shall see later in this article, by contemporary American writer Richard Ford. Hemingway’s short story will thus be used not only as

⁵ ‘An African Story’ was written in 1954 and first published in 1972. It appeared as a story within a story in Hemingway’s *The Garden of Eden*, a novel also published posthumously, in 1986.

an example of his literary association between masculinity and violence, but also, and above all, as a contrast to Ford's subversive re-writing of the traditional Hemingwayesque conception of hunting as a proof of manly daring.

While there are numerous works on gender in Hemingway's literature, the specific relationship between masculinity and violence in his fiction remains largely unexplored. Much of the existing Hemingway scholarship on gender seems to have pursued two main critical lines. The first, as exemplified by Judith Fetterley's study of Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* (1929) in *The Resisting Reader* (1978), focuses on revisiting Hemingway's female characters, who had often been neglected by critics, and the representation of patriarchal gender relations in his fiction. The second, as illustrated by Mark Spilka's *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny* (1990), underlines the centrality of androgyny and sexual ambiguity to Hemingway's life and works.⁶ Generally speaking, then, criticism on Hemingway and gender has been dominated by two (opposite) critical trends. While the former has long denounced Hemingway's sexist biases, the latter has set out to re-read his life and works as marked by androgyny, homosexuality or sexual ambiguity. Nevertheless, the specific question of masculinity remains largely overlooked. Of course, much has been written about the role played by machismo in Hemingway's life and works. However, when we talk of gender in Hemingway's fiction, we generally mean women. If men are discussed at all, it is usually in relation to their (patriarchal) relationships with the female characters, rather than men's gender issues in and of themselves. While acknowledging the necessity of continuing to explore Hemingway's women, long neglected by traditional criticism, this article aims to incorporate men's specific gender issues, particularly the traditional cultural construction of violence as a test of manhood, into Hemingway scholarship. As Ian Bannon and Maria Correia have argued, "the inclusion of men in gender work is not about transferring benefits or attention from women and girls to boys and men, but rather making [feminist] interventions more meaningful" (2006: xviii).

Hemingway's obsession with violent adventure as a test of manhood seems to derive from his own biography (Minter 1996: 138-41). Hemingway's father was a violent and abusive man who insisted that his sons learn to hunt and then eat what they killed, even if it was muskrat. Violations of his code meant punishment, often with a razor strop, after which his children had to kneel and ask God for His forgiveness. Besides hunting, Hemingway's father also had his son prove his masculinity through boxing. In both the music room at home and at a friend's house, Hemingway set up boxing rings in which he practiced the manly art of self-defense (Minter 1996: 139).

As he grew up, he became increasingly attracted to violent contexts and activities. During the First World War he volunteered for the Italian front and, while serving with the infantry, was invalided home seriously wounded. This experience not only inspired his novel of the Italian front, *A Farewell to Arms* (192), but was used to display and reaffirm his masculinity and virility. As David Minter explains, Hemingway "exaggerated his war experiences, including the combat he had seen, the wounds he had

⁶ Following the posthumous publication of Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden* (1986), which is peopled with transvestite characters, numerous critics (Lynn 1987; Comley and Scholes 1994; Aguilera 2005) began to re-read him as subconsciously androgynous or homosexual.

suffered, and the heroism he had displayed” (1996: 141). Besides the Great War, the writer was also attracted to other violent spheres, such as Spanish bullfighting, which recurs in novels such as *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) or *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), and big-game hunting in Africa – which he represents, for example, in novels such as *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) and in many of his short stories.

Hemingway’s lifelong involvement in violent conflicts and activities seemed, therefore, to serve two main (complementary) purposes. On the one hand, he used violence to test his own masculinity and manly daring. In David Minter’s words, Hemingway seemed to see the world as an eminently hostile place “he had been put on earth to test himself against and overcome” (1996: 138-39). On the other hand, Hemingway’s personal obsession with violence as a test of manhood was transformed into one of his main fictional subjects. In *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), for example, the snobbish Brett Ashley is fascinated by the manly Romero, a nineteen-year-old Spanish bullfighter, who is represented as the epitome of male bravery and heroism. Fishing and hunting excursions that result in male violence provide another theme. Whereas stories such as ‘Big Two-Hearted River’, originally published in *In Our Time* (1925), focus on aggressive fishing expeditions that pit the heroic male protagonists against nature, violence in Hemingway’s fiction is also commonly associated with heroic males engaged in bloody hunting expeditions. Inspired by his own safaris in Africa, short stories such as ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro’ (1935), ‘The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber’ (1936) or ‘An African Story’ (1954), concentrate on adventurous heroes who test their masculinity by killing powerful wild animals like African lions, buffaloes and elephants. In these stories, as in most of Hemingway’s fiction, violence is often synonymous with masculinity.

Although women may occasionally be associated with violence, as is the case of Mrs. Macomber in ‘The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber’ (1936), they are then demonized as killers and destroyers of men. As will be recalled, Mrs. Macomber, feeling the erosion of her power and influence over her own husband, finally kills Mr. Macomber, whose “blood sank into the dry, loose earth” (Hemingway 1987: 28). Whereas male violence in Hemingway’s works is associated with bravery and heroism, female violence is thus related to murder. In Hemingway’s (sexist) fictional universe, then, violence seems to have completely different connotations in male and female contexts.

In general, however, violence in Hemingway’s fiction is masculine, simply because, as Leslie Fiedler famously proclaimed, “there are no women in his books!...he returns again and again to the fishing trip and the journey to the war – those two traditional evasions of domesticity and civil life” (1998: 316-17). Certainly, the protagonists of violent hunting and fishing expeditions such as those described in ‘An African Story’ or ‘Big Two-Hearted River’ are always men, and the same is true of Hemingway’s war fiction. The narrator and protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms* is Frederic Henry, an American student of architecture who has enlisted as a lieutenant in the Italian army’s ambulance corps. Similarly, the main character of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is Robert Jordan, a university instructor of Spanish from Montana who has come to fight for the Spanish Republic in the mountains north of Madrid. As Ray B. West has argued,

Hemingway's novels recurrently explore "the condition of a *man* in a society upset by the violence of war" (1970: 15; emphasis added).

Moreover, male violence in Hemingway's fiction is, as has been suggested, often described as heroic. While it is true that war-castrated Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* seems notably passive and non-heroic, men in much of Hemingway's fiction do indeed seem to be irremediably attracted to violence to prove their masculinity, bravery and heroism. As Robert Jordan tells one of his fellow soldiers in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, "stop making dubious literature about the Berbers and the old Iberians and admit that you have liked to kill as all who are soldiers by choice have enjoyed it at some time whether they lie about it or not" (Hemingway quoted in Gray 1992: 37).⁷

'An African Story' provides a paradigmatic example of his common representation of violence as a symbol of virility and heroism. The story focuses on three men – David, the protagonist, his father and their African guide, Juma – on an elephant-hunting expedition in Africa. Predictably, then, the story concerns itself with (male) violence, which is clearly represented as a proof of masculinity and heroism. Despite the hunters' purpose of killing the elephant for its tusks, the hunt is also shown to be a violent test of manhood. As the (omniscient, third-person) narrator explains, hunting "made the difference between a boy and men" (Hemingway 1987: 547).

The story begins by emphasizing the strength and majesty of the old elephant, whose shadow was so huge that it "covered" the men, and whose left tusk was so long "it seemed to reach the ground" (1987: 545). According to Juma, the native guide, who had already wounded the elephant but had failed to kill him five years ago, the animal was "bigger than anything" (548). By celebrating the extraordinary qualities of the animal, then, Hemingway depicts the elephant as a worthy adversary that can only be defeated by equally worthy, heroic men. While both Juma and David's father are depicted as expert hunters who were "very sure of themselves", David is represented as a younger hunter, although he also shows his dexterity in killing two birds. David is congratulated by his own father on his improved hunting skills: "You were splendid today...I was very proud of you. So was Juma" (549). Thus, 'An African Story' represents the three men as equally worthy adversaries of the old elephant.

The hunt proves extremely violent and bloody. When the three men eventually find the old elephant and shoot at him, the animal attacks Juma, who is seriously wounded, "the skin of his forehead hanging down over his left eye, the bone of his nose showing and one ear torn" (552). Nevertheless, Hemingway's hero seems to prefer death to humiliation. Thus, Juma, limping and bloody, shoots at the animal again, which is finally killed and transformed into "a huge wrinkled pile" (552). In Hemingway's story, then, hunting seems to be represented as a form of pitting man against nature, which is finally submitted and tamed by male violence. By engaging in dangerous and bloody hunting excursions, Hemingway's male characters can test

⁷ Hemingway never gave up exploring the figure of the soldier-killer, who resurfaces in later, less successful novels such as *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950). Unlike *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, however, this novel, as Svoboda (2000: 166) reminds us, is not set in the midst of war, but in the recollection of war by an embittered and aging American infantry colonel, veteran of the violent Hurtgen Forest battles that Hemingway covered as a war correspondent in 1944.

themselves against nature and overcome it, thus proving their superior and heroic masculinity. As the narrator of 'An African Story' explains, "Juma and his father and he [David] were heroes...and the men who had carried the tusks were heroes" (554).

It is true that David, unlike his father and Juma, finally appears to acknowledge the death of the elephant as unnecessary and unjust. As David himself reflects, "my father doesn't need to kill elephants to live" (550). Thus, David seems to show his sympathy for the old elephant, which he describes as "his friend" (551). Nevertheless, 'An African Story' offers no real challenge to the traditional conception of violence as a proof of masculinity and heroism. On the one hand, Hemingway writes that David "had no love for the [old] elephant...He had only a sorrow that had come from his own tiredness that had brought an understanding of age" (551). Moreover, the emphasis of the story is not on David's 'dissident' comments on hunting, but rather on the celebration of the hunt as a spectacle and performance of beauty, masculinity and heroism. As the narrator explains, "he [David] did not know that nothing would ever be as good as that again" (551). In Hemingway's life and works, the preoccupation with death and killing was always secondary to his more meaningful concern with representing his violent passions, particularly hunting and bullfighting, as expressions of beauty, (male) courage and heroism.

For example, in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), which may be described as Hemingway's guide to the 'art' of bullfighting, he explains that on going to his first bullfight he "had expected to be horrified and perhaps sickened" by the killing of the picadors' horses (1960: 1). However, he did not mind these actions at all. In focusing on "the tragedy of the bullfight" and its ritual celebration of male courage and heroism, "the minor comic-tragedy of the horses" seemed totally irrelevant and insignificant (1960: 8). Moreover, Hemingway insists that there is no moral standard to separate those who are affected by the killings from those who are not, claiming that the former are "capable of greater cruelty to human beings than those who do not identify themselves readily with animals" (1960: 4-5). In Hemingway's view, then, sentimental people like animal lovers may be crueller than callous ones like himself.

Hemingway's defensiveness about hunting is, as Mark Spilka (1990: 224) has argued, clearly "overdetermined". The emphasis of the story does indeed seem to fall on the heroic actions of the hunters, not on David's dissident voice. In fact, David himself, despite his critical comments on the killing of the elephant, is eventually seduced by the heroic vision of hunting. At story's end, David, like his father and Juma, cannot resist the temptation to be worshipped by the African natives as a heroic hunter. Finally, David sits next to his father and Juma on the seats of the old, and so most respected, African men, and the three of them are served by the native women and boys, who cannot yet hunt and so are considered inferior to adult men. Enjoying the privileges reserved only to the most honorable adult men in African communities, male hunters in Hemingway's fiction thus seem to be eventually elevated to the category of heroes.

It would appear, then, that 'An African Story' ends up reinforcing Hemingway's traditional conception of violence and hunting as symbols of virility and heroism, which still pervades contemporary American culture and literature. Influenced by Ernest Hemingway's fiction, the "virility school" (Schwenger 1984: 13) in American letters – formed by writers such as James Dickey, Frederick Exley, Norman Mailer, or

Robert Stone, to name but a few – continues to promote the traditional masculine fiction whereby boys become men through stressful tests. As Norman Mailer himself comments, “nobody was born a man; you earned manhood provided you were good enough, bold enough” (quoted in Gilmore 1990: 25). In American letters, as in American culture in general, the heroic image of a violently achieved manhood thus remains widely legitimized. The image, as Gilmore has concluded, is pervasive, “ranging from Italian-American gangster culture to Hollywood Westerns, private-eye tales, the current Rambo imagoes, and children’s He-Man dolls and games; it is therefore deeply ingrained in the American male psyche” (1990: 20).

Yet, despite the recurrent links between masculinity and violence in contemporary American culture and literature, this association is neither universal nor immutable. The rest of this article will thus focus on ‘Communist’, one of the short stories in Richard Ford’s highly acclaimed collection *Rock Springs* (1987), as an example of the possible deconstruction of male violence in contemporary American culture and literature. 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, he 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 dispute, 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 usually minimalist style; indeed, the author himself has often expressed his admiration for other contemporary American realist writers such as Tobias Wolff and Raymond Carver, among others.

While the writer’s Southern and realist influences have thus become a central subject of critical discussion (see Hobson 1991; Walker 2000; Guagliardo 2000), the question of masculinity remains, as in Hemingway’s case, largely absent from Ford criticism. For instance, Elinor Ann Walker’s *Richard Ford* (2000), the major work on Ford’s fiction to date, remains mostly silent about gender, focusing instead on topics such as the writer’s conception of place as well as his relation to Southern literature. Nevertheless, the rest of this article will try to illustrate how Ford, like Hemingway, is centrally concerned with men’s gender issues, particularly, as we shall see, with re-visiting the cultural links between masculinity and violence.

Richard Ford has, in fact, been recurrently compared to Ernest Hemingway (Paul 2001). First of all, both writers are well known for their starkly realistic and often minimalist style. Moreover, Richard Ford’s stories, like Hemingway’s fiction, are peopled with characters who engage in fishing, hunting and boxing. Thus, violence is also a central theme of his stories. As the critic Ned Stuckey-French comments on *Rock Springs* (1987), the “allusion to violence, or the threat of violence...is often there and then the story unfolds” (2001: 106). Moreover, violence in Richard Ford’s stories is always masculine, since Ford, like Hemingway, focuses on the lives of male characters and protagonists.

However, Ford himself has always denied familiarity with Hemingway's work. In his own words, "I never think about Hemingway...I never read Hemingway" (quoted in Paul 2001: vii). In fact, despite the similarities in their choice of activities in which masculine violence is likely to occur, there are significant differences between the two authors, particularly as regards their radically opposed depictions of male violence. Even if Ford's literary men are usually attracted to "sex, violence, crime and sports" (Wideman 1987: 4), their behavior seldom reaffirms their masculinity. Unlike Hemingway's fiction, which repeatedly associates violence with notions like masculinity, virility and heroism, Ford's stories tend to show the gradual demise of this archaic association. In most of the stories in *Rock Springs* (1987), for example, male violence has disastrous effects, often bringing about family dissolution. In 'Optimists', Roy Brinson's murder of Boyd Mitchell leads to the disintegration of his family. In 'Empire', Vic Sims is caught up in risky actions and, meanwhile, loses the opportunity for love and affection: "other people fade in the light of the flame of danger" (Leder 2000: 112). Similarly, 'Sweethearts' shows how Bobby's violent behavior takes him to prison, distancing him from his ex-girlfriend Arlene. And in 'Under the Radar', one of the tales in Ford's latest collection of short stories, *A Multitude of Sins* (2001), Steven Reeves' decision to batter his wife leads to their final separation.

Ford's stories do indeed appear to condemn all forms of violence. In Ford's fiction, as Priscilla Leder (2000: 100) has pointed out, violent sports like hunting, fishing and boxing always go wrong or result in mindless slaughter. In 'Calling', one of the stories in *A Multitude of Sins*, the protagonist goes duck hunting with his father, which makes him aware of his father's violent instincts. After the hunt, father and son separate and never meet again. Nor do violent sports thrive in *Rock Springs*. In 'Children', for example, Claude's aggressive fishing fails to impress Lucy, who is much better at fishing than Claude himself. In what has been regarded as a "typical Ford twist on male adventure" (Leder 2000: 111), the huge fish in 'Winterkill' turns out to be a dead deer. Finally, in 'Communist' Glen Baxter's cruel decision to let a wounded goose perish on a freezing lake triggers his girlfriend Aileen's separation from him. Even though most stories in this collection are set in the American West, which has traditionally been associated with the cowboy myth and the idealized vision of male violence as heroic, aggressive behavior in Ford's fiction always fails to reaffirm masculinity. As Michiko Kakutani has commented on *Rock Springs*: "Mr. Ford's fictional world is hardly a brave frontier where heroes can test their mettle against nature. Rather, it's another contemporary outpost of rootlessness and alienation, a place where families come apart and love drifts away" (1987: C28).

Set in Great Falls, Montana, in 1961, 'Communist' is one of Richard Ford's stories in *Rock Springs* that most clearly questions traditional conceptions of male violence. This story has been specifically selected for two different, though complementary, reasons. On the one hand, the tale is in stark contrast to Hemingway's representation of hunting, underlining as it does the (self-) destructive effects of violence on men's own lives. Moreover, the story focuses, as we shall also see, on a male protagonist who encounters violence, and finally decides to reject it, by moving away from his violent surrogate father. Thus, this story by Ford seems to prove particularly innovative, and doubly subversive, as it not only challenges and undermines traditional

Hemingwayesque depictions of hunting as a symbol of manhood and bravery, but also seems to point to alternative, relational, non-violent representations of masculinities in contemporary American culture and literature.

'Communist' is told by Les, a forty-one-year-old narrator who recounts a moment in his life when he was just sixteen and was pushed out into the world, "into the real life then, the one I hadn't lived yet" (Ford 1988: 233). Les enters 'the real life' the day he goes hunting with Glen Baxter, his widowed mother's boyfriend. Baxter, a Cold War communist and a Vietnam veteran, as well as a drunkard, invites Les to hunt on a Saturday in November 1961, when he pays a visit to Aileen Snow, Les's mother.

In 'Communist', as in most of Richard Ford's short stories, hunting is an activity associated with masculinity and violence. Les is taught about hunting first by his father, and later by Glen Baxter. Both are described as equally violent men. Aileen describes her late husband as a man who used to "hunt, kill, maim" (218). Indeed, Les's father not only taught him about hunting but also encouraged him to practice boxing, an equally violent sport. In 'Communist' hunting seems to reiterate boxing. While hunting with Baxter, for example, Les cannot avoid remembering his father's boxing lessons:

Then I thought about boxing and what my father had taught me about it...To strike out straight from the shoulder and never punch backing up. How...to step toward a man when he is falling so you can hit him again. And most important, to keep your eyes open when you are hitting in the face and causing damage, because you need to see what you're doing to encourage yourself, and because it is when you close your eyes that you stop hitting and get hurt badly. "Fly all over your man, Les," my father said. "When you see your chance, fly on him and hit him till he falls." That, I thought, would always be my attitude in things. (226)

For his part, Glen Baxter, Les's surrogate father, is also a violent man who believes "most hunting isn't even hunting. It's only shooting" (223). Given Baxter's violent attitude, then, it is hardly surprising that in 'Communist', as in most of Ford's stories, hunting goes wrong. For several reasons, Les's hunting expedition with Glen seems doomed to failure from the start. First of all, Baxter is described as a wicked man who used to shoot monkeys and beautiful parrots in Vietnam using military guns just for sport. Moreover, Baxter, as Aileen warns her son, is keen on poaching: "'Les, Glen's going to poach here', my mother said. 'I just want you to know that, because that's a crime and the law will get you for it. If you're a man now, you're going to have to face the consequence'" (221). Baxter is also shown to be a dangerous man who is hiding a pistol under his shirt against his bare skin and who is willing to kill a political enemy at any time. As Les himself explains:

He said that Communists were always in danger and that he had to protect himself all the time. And when he said that he pulled back his VFW jacket and showed me the butt of a pistol he had stuck under his shirt against his bare skin. "There are people who want to kill me right now," he said, "and I would kill a man myself if I thought I had to". (222)

Given his profile, it is little wonder, then, that Glen Baxter proves totally unable to control his violent drives while hunting. As Les tells us, Glen shot the geese as though he “seemed to want them all” (Ford 1988: 227). Glen Baxter’s cruelty reaches its climax when he lets a wounded goose die on a freezing lake. Les himself cannot understand why Glen does not want to go on and get the wounded goose swimming in circles on the water but unable to fly. After all, it “would’ve been easy”. As Les explains to the readers, “the lake was shallow. And you could tell that everyone could’ve walked out a long way before it got deep, and Glen had on his boots...the...goose...was not more than thirty yards from the shore” (231). In any event, Glen refuses to help the goose and laughs at Aileen’s belief that birds are special things. Furthermore, Baxter does not allow Les to go on and get the wounded goose when his mother asks him to do so.

Finally, Glen pulls the trigger and kills the wounded goose, shooting it repeatedly like a man gone mad. The bird thus becomes the target of Glen’s anger and violence: “He took his big pistol...and shot and missed. And then he shot and missed again. The goose made its noise once. And then he hit it dead, because there was no splash. And then he shot it three times more until the gun was empty and the goose’s head was down and it was floating toward the middle of the lake where it was empty and dark blue” (232).

Nevertheless, displays of male violence and cruelty are always severely punished in Ford’s *Rock Springs*. Glen’s aggressive behavior cannot, therefore, go unchallenged. When Baxter finally kills the goose, Aileen decides to abandon him, claiming that “a light can go out in the heart” (Ford 1988: 232). In other words, Aileen, opting for moral responsibility rather than violence, realizes that there’s nothing to love in Baxter, whom she describes as “just a son of a bitch, that’s all” (231). Thus, male violence in Ford’s fiction leads to family dissolution. Moreover, Glen’s violent action makes Les himself rethink the traditional association between masculinity and violence. After Glen’s cruel action, Les begins to question the limits of male power and violence. He hates Glen for his action and wants to hit him. However, he finally decides not to hit him, as he feels sorry for him, “as though he was already a dead man”. In other words, Les comes to understand that Baxter was “not a bad man” and that his reaction was just that of a grown man scared of something he had never experienced before, “something soft in himself” (232). As has been argued, masculinity has traditionally been linked to violence. Men are often asked to prove their masculinity by resorting to violence. A ‘real’ man is not supposed to show his emotional vulnerability and so he often uses violence as a socially legitimated form of male emotional expressivity. Although Baxter may feel compassion for the dying bird, he kills it because he is scared of his own ‘softness’ and emotions. Because men often associate emotions and ‘softness’ with women and femininity, Baxter is afraid that if he shows compassion, he will be feminized, he will not be a ‘real man’. As Priscilla Leder has noted in this respect, “violence destroys but compassion risks vulnerability” (2000: 107). Thus, he finally resorts to violence to try to prove his masculinity before Les and his mother.

Les, however, manages to move away from violence. Although he wants to hit Glen, Les resists his own anger and opts for his mother’s moral responsibility. Les’s decision *not* to hit Baxter is highly significant for several reasons. On the one hand, it shows how Les is mature enough to contest his father’s manly ideals, to stay on his

opponent until he falls, an implicit irony since Les's father soon 'falls' himself and his place in his wife's bed is taken by the younger, fitter man, Glen Baxter. On the other hand, it suggests how Les is able to question the manly ideals that Baxter attempts to pass on to him, which, as Folks (2000: 153-54) elaborates, are based on a stoic masculine code that accepts the harshness and violence of the outside world and that stresses the limits of pity. 'Communist' shows, therefore, how masculine violence is indissolubly linked to cruelty and, finally, to family dissolution. Moreover, Les, who sees how his mother leaves Baxter because of his aggressive instincts, learns to mistrust the aggressiveness and stubbornness of the traditional male role. He realizes Baxter uses violence because he is a weak man who is scared of his own emotional vulnerability. In this sense, then, the story seems to move away from traditional patriarchal concepts of violence as a form of male heroism, finally portraying Les as representative of a relational and pacifist model of masculinity. As Les himself tells us:

What I wanted to do was to hit [Baxter], hit him as hard in the face as I could, and see him on the ground bleeding and crying and pleading for me to stop. Only at that moment he looked scared to me, and I had never seen a grown man scared before...and I felt sorry for him, as though he was already a dead man. And I did not end up hitting him at all. (Ford 1988: 232)

From what has been argued here, it would seem, then, that rereading American literature for what it says about cultural concepts of masculinity and violence might, ultimately, have significant repercussions on the social construction of men and masculinities. While feminist scholars have long denounced the detrimental effects of male violence on women and children alike, masculinity scholarship is building on the feminist project by highlighting as well the self-destructive effects of male violent behavior. In so doing, studies of (literary) masculinities might contribute to questioning the conventional view of violence as manly and heroic. Moreover, literary works like Richard Ford's short story seem to emphasize, as we have seen, positive images of boys and men who manage to move away from violence, leaving abusive fathers and aggressive friends behind. By analyzing and underlining these positive representations of men and masculinities, then, studies of (literary) masculinities might also help to open up possibilities for new, alternative, non-violent patterns of manhood in contemporary American culture and literature.

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