

## SEX AND TEXT: RE(DIS)COVERING MALE SEXUALITIES IN AMERICAN FICTION

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Most discussions about representations of (male) sexualities in American literature go back to Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960). His main thesis is that, over two hundred years, American literature, particularly novels and fiction, has consistently represented men's struggle to avoid women and (hetero)sexuality. From Cooper, to Melville and Twain, to Hemingway, to Saul Bellow, the theme of men's escape from women and sexuality, which usually takes the form of bachelorhood and male comradeship, recurs in much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature. In Fiedler's own words, "where woman is felt to be a feared and forbidden other, the only legitimate beloved is the self. Pure narcissism cannot, however, provide the dream and tension proper to a novel; the mirror-image of the self is translated in the American novel [...] into the comrade of one's own sex, the buddy as anima" (348). All-male loving couples such as James Fenimore Cooper's Natty and Chingachgook in the *Leatherstocking Novels*; Herman Melville's Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby Dick*; Mark Twain's Huck and Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; or Hemingway's Jake Barnes and Bill Gorton in *The Sun Also Rises* serve to illustrate Fiedler's point.

Fiedler's argument was particularly subversive for several reasons. He concluded that the male avoidance of (hetero)sexuality in American fiction was a sign of the American writer's lack of psychological maturity. In his own words, "it is maturity above all things that the American writer fears, and marriage seems to him its essential sign. For marriage stands traditionally [...] for a compromise with society, an acceptance of responsibility and drudgery and dullness" (338).

Moreover, Fiedler posited male homoeroticism as a central and recurrent theme in American fiction (at a time when homosexuality was still considered an illness by the American Psychological Association). As he himself explains, homoeroticism lurks behind the fictions of male bonding in “all the classic American books we have been examining” (349). “In some,” Fiedler qualifies, “buried deep beneath the ken of the authors themselves, in others moving just beneath a transparent surface” (350).

Several theoretical explanations have been put forward that try to account for the (presumed) absence of (hetero)sexuality from American literature (Massa 1-2). It has long been pointed out, for example, that the absence of sex in American literature derives from the American Experience itself. From its discovery, America was defined as a virginal land. The New World was often described by its colonizers in Utopian terms. As Massa explains, “the New World’s [...] Edenic connotations have implied an unfallen America” (1). So, the American writer, burdened with the responsibility of being spokesman for a new society striving to be better than most, has gone beyond everyday relationships, including the sexual ones (Le Vot). It has thus been argued that, in trying to promote the vision of a virginal America, American literature has relied on a limited choice of female roles, usually reformed and sexless, and a tendency to create individualistic, lonely frontiersmen, who prefer male comradeship and violent adventure to the world of women and (hetero)sexuality. According to some scholars, the absence of sexuality in American literature has also resulted from the Puritan influence on American culture. For example, William H. Shurr’s *Rappaccini’s Children* (1981) suggests that the Calvinist perception of God and of good and evil has influenced writers as diverse in space and time as Eugene O’Neill and Edward Albee, Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens, Mark Twain and Henry David Thoreau. In Shurr’s view, all these writers have been shaped by the Puritan association of sexuality with sinfulness.<sup>1</sup> Thus, much literary criticism (Bercovitch; Chase) seems to support, as Ann Massa (3) has concluded, Leslie Fiedler’s influential view of American literature as dismissive of (hetero)sexuality.

Despite their enormous influence on American literary criticism, Fiedler’s main theses have not gone completely unchallenged. Literary criticism has since questioned his view of American fiction as asexual, as well as his description of a heterosexual model based on angelic or devilish women characters. Responding to Fiedler’s views, much feminist literary criticism has indeed highlighted the centrality of sexuality to American fiction, showing the plurality as well as the irreducible complexity of sexual relationships in American novels. For example, Ann Massa’s edition of *American Declarations of Love* (1990) has set out to contest Fiedler’s “arresting assertion” that American fiction is “either evasive or

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Samuel H. Coale’s *In Hawthorne’s Shadow* (1985) explores the Puritan feeling of sexual guilt in the works of Faulkner, McCullers, Styron, Updike, Cheever and Gardner (Massa 3).

perverse in its treatment of love” (Massa 4). According to Massa (5-6), Fiedler’s opinions are undermined by his own interpretive work. In her view, Fiedler’s choice of texts is arbitrary. For instance, Dashiell Hammett is made to seem as important as William Faulkner. Moreover, while Fiedler discusses British works such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Vanity Fair*, he omits other key works such as *Wuthering Heights* or *Persuasion*, both of which spill with sexualities. In Massa’s view, Fiedler seems to be implanting, rather than detecting, his own opinions about women and sexuality in literature. He seems to identify in literature the types of women he believes exist in real life: saints and liars, angels and whores, fair and dark women. For example, he makes Henry James’s good Isabel Archer -“her hair [...] was dark even to blackness”- a blonde, and Mme. Merle, her blonde antithesis, a brunette (Fiedler 284). In Massa’s own words, “Fiedler’s sexism, his unsupported assumptions, his random examples, his perversions of texts and characters and his ultimately unconvincing forays into comparative literature make it impossible for him to support his case convincingly” (6). While acknowledging some of Fiedler’s valuable critical insights into American literature (“the thrust of this volume is not to dogmatically deny other ways of reading American literature” [Massa 8]), Massa’s edition of *American Declarations of Love* attempts, therefore, to “add” to them and on occasion to “temper.” Thus, most of the contributions to the volume challenge Fiedler’s critical view of American literature as asexual, showing the central and multiform role played by sexuality in U.S. letters. For example, Brian Harding’s essay on Hemingway describes him as “a wonderfully acute observer of human interactions” (114), including the sexual ones. Challenging traditional critical (mis)conceptions of Hemingway’s fiction as unemotional and asexual, Harding argues that Hemingway created an aesthetic that allowed him to convey “emotions and states of mind ignored or despised by complacent believers in sexual stereotypes” (114). Thus, he concludes that Hemingway had a gift for conveying the power and complexity of adult heterosexuality by the minimal techniques of an art that could select moments of loss and failure.<sup>2</sup> While T. Daniel Young’s essay explores the issue of love and sexuality in William Faulkner’s fiction, other essays in the collection focus on the representation of sexuality in the poetry of Walt Whitman, Robert Lowell, and Bob Dylan, among others. As Ann Massa concludes from all this, “there is, then, a good case to be made for the existence of a rich and varied American literature, for writing which,” despite Fiedler’s views, “does not evade” sexuality “but which remarkably confronts [it]” (12).

In line with this critical example, then, the rest of this article will continue to re(dis)cover sexuality in a selected number of U.S. fictional texts, ranging from Henry James’s *The American* (1877) through F. S. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) to Richard Ford’s *Rock Springs* (1987). By exploring sexualities in texts

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Resisting Reader* (1978), Judith Fetterley has also reread Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* as a passionate, albeit frustrated, love story.

written in the nineteenth, early-twentieth, and late-twentieth centuries, respectively, the study will try to show how Fiedler's argument about the "virginity" of American literature, put forward in 1960, is not only inapplicable to contemporary fiction but may also be questioned when discussing classical American texts.

In exploring literary constructions of sexuality, the study will be particularly concerned with revisiting the (fictional) connections between masculinity and male (hetero)sexuality in American fiction. While the representation of women's and homosexual men's sexualities has recently been subject to numerous critical studies by feminist and gay scholars, respectively, the literary re-vision of male (hetero)sexualities, as well as their connection to masculinity ideals, remain largely unexplored. Borrowing from the selected works of Henry James, F. S. Fitzgerald and Richard Ford, all of which concern themselves with heterosexual male protagonists, the article will try to show, first, how American literary men have recurrently drawn on (hetero)sexuality as a proof of virility and, second, how it is both possible and desirable to re-write the traditional conception of male (hetero)sexuality as a reaffirmation of manhood. After all, James, Fitzgerald and Ford are all similarly concerned, as we shall see, with questioning the patriarchal notion of women and (hetero)sexuality as symbols of manhood. Moreover, Ford's collection of short stories, in particular two tales in the volume titled "Children" and "Winterkill" respectively, not only subverts the stereotypical view of sex as a test of manhood but also seems to point, as will be argued, to new, alternative, non-phallic representations of male (hetero)sexualities in contemporary American literature.

In recent years, numerous scholars have set out to question the widespread assumption of Henry James's fiction as asexual, analyzing its varied representations of (male) sexualities, both homosexual and heterosexual. Challenging the common assumption of James's supposed abstinence from any form of sexual activity, Hugh Stevens's *Henry James and Sexuality* (1998), for example, has shown how, though veiled, the issue of same-sex desire recurs in most Jamesian fictions. As is known, Foucault identifies 1895 as the birth of the modern homosexual. Thus, Stevens acknowledges that it is difficult to apply modern medical labels and psychoanalytic terms like "homosexuality" to discuss novels like *Roderick Hudson* (1876), written before 1895. However, this scholar insists that Rowland Mallet's intense affection for Roderick in this novel continually blurs the boundaries between same-sex friendship and desire. For example, at the end of *Roderick Hudson*, Rowland mounts a long vigil over his friend Roderick's dead and "admirably handsome" body. Describing what looks like the end of a passionate love affair, the narrator tells that "this most rational of men was for

an hour the most passionate [...] Now that all was over Rowland understood how exclusively for two years, Roderick had filled his life. His occupation was gone” (James *Roderick* 386-387).<sup>3</sup>

While much scholarship has focused on James’s representation of male homoeroticism and same-sex desire,<sup>4</sup> several scholars have also begun to revisit Jamesian re/presentations of male heterosexualities. In *Sexuality and Textuality in Henry James: Reading Through the Virginal* (1988), Lloyd Davis, for example, has argued that far from diminishing (hetero)sexuality as is commonly assumed, James’s fiction is “pervasively sexual” (1). It is true that much of James’s fiction concerns itself with the figure of the virgin male and/or female. Nevertheless, Davis contends that the virgin is never depicted as asexual (6). For example, in James’s *The American* (1877) Christopher Newman’s virginity is charged with highly (hetero)sexual connotations. Throughout the novel, James associates money-making and sex. Newman had been working very hard as a businessman with a view to marrying. He had focused his (sexual) energy into a socially valued activity. However, Newman feels “now that he stood well outside of it, the business of money-getting appeared extremely dry and sterile” (114), suggesting that his life was lacking in sensuality. Thus, Newman gives up his former business life and turns to the idea of marrying. Though Newman lived a virginal life as a businessman, money marks him as sexually able, allowing him to interact first with Noémie Nioche and afterward with Claire de Cintré. In Davis’s own words, “James presents money-making and sex in a synchronic relationship” (71). Newman himself can only think of sexuality and marriage in financial terms. He describes his money-getting as a key stage of his sociosexual development, the phase in which he became potent, that is, capable of purchasing his desired sexual object:

“I want a great woman. I stick to that. That’s one thing I *can* treat myself to, and if it is to be had I mean to have it. What else have I toiled and struggled for all these years? I have succeeded, and now what am I to do with my success? To make it perfect, as I see it, there must be a beautiful woman perched on the pile, like a statue on a monument [...] I can give my wife a good deal, so I am not afraid to ask a good deal myself [...] I want to possess, in one word, the best article in the market.” (James 71)

Newman thus con-fuses the sexual and the material. He objectifies both women and sexuality. So, Newman is not “purely” virginal. As Lloyd Davis (79)

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<sup>3</sup> Just as Rowland feels immediately attracted to Roderick in *Roderick Hudson*, Hyacinth in James’s *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) soon takes a fancy for Muniment, “something in [whose] face,” on their first meeting, gives Hyacinth the “desire to go with him till he dropped” (131).

<sup>4</sup> See also Bradley.

has concluded, Newman “is not outside or antithetical to the dominant socio-sexual discourse. Rather he reveals the virgin as inevitably related to it through his/her own necessarily sublimated demand.” Moreover, Newman’s materialistic view of women and sex reveals his patriarchal desire for mastery through marriage and possession. In other words, Newman (ab)uses women and sexuality to prove and reaffirm his masculinity. In James’s novel, the protagonist is thus not only fully sexualized, but also makes use of the traditional patriarchal conception of women and sexuality as markers of virility. Or so he tries. After all, it must be remembered that, at novel’s end, Newman remains single. Having failed to marry either Noémie or Claire, who finally decides to marry an aristocratic British Lord rather than an American businessman, Newman finds himself obliged to return to the United States alone. As a *nouveau riche*, Newman is finally denied access to the old British aristocracy. Ultimately, then, James’s novel shows how money, at least Newman’s, fails to fulfill his patriarchal desire for mastery through marriage and proves insufficient, therefore, to secure his masculinity.

Of course, the current critical project of re(dis)covering sexualities in American fiction is affecting other classical novelists as well, including F. S. Fitzgerald, whose works, as in Henry James’s case, had seldom been analyzed from the viewpoint of (male) (hetero)sexuality. Actually, the three main critical approaches to F. S. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), for instance, have systematically diminished the importance of sexuality in the text (Fjellestad 74-5). While the “narrative approach” deals with Nick Carraway’s (un)reliability as a storyteller, focusing on the contradictions between Nick’s assertion of his own objectivity as narrator at the beginning of the novel and his commentaries thereafter, the “documentary-historical” approach discusses the novel as a portrait of the twenties, a picture that is at once romantic and critical. For example, Ronald Berman’s seminal text *The Great Gatsby and Modern Times* (1994) sees Fitzgerald’s text as an interpretation of the society of the 1920s with its obsession with material wealth. The “mythic-ideological” approach to the novel, on the other hand, links its protagonist to the masculine pursuit of the American Dream. Lionel Trilling sees Jay Gatsby as an embodiment of the American Dream, and Hugh Kenner also suggests that “the central myth of the Book has to do with Appearances made Real by sheer luck: the oldest American dream of all” (38). Thus, the issues of gender and sexuality have usually been considered irrelevant to the interpretation of Fitzgerald’s novel. Of course, this should come to us as no surprise. After all, both Lionel Trilling and Leslie Fiedler, two of the most influential critics of Fitzgerald’s works (and of American literature, in general), insist that there is little sex in Fitzgerald’s novels. In *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Leslie Fiedler contends, for example, that

For Fitzgerald, “love” was essentially yearning and frustration; and there is consequently little consummated genital love in his novels, though he identified himself with the sexual revolution of the ’20’s thought of as their

special subject. The adolescent's "kiss" is the only climax his imagination can really encompass; and despite his occasionally telling us that one or another of his characters has "taken" a woman, it is the only climax he ever realizes in a scene. In his insufferable early books, the American institution of *coitus interruptus*, from bundling to necking a favorite national pastime, finds at least a laureate; and even in his more mature works, his women move from the kiss to the kill with only the barest suggestion of copulation between. (316)

Despite Fiedler's influence on much criticism on Fitzgerald, his arguments have not gone completely unchallenged. For example, Fjellestad insists that when Fiedler writes that there is "little consummated genital love" in Fitzgerald's novels, he ignores the relationship between Tom and Myrtle Wilson; the existence of Daisy and Tom's daughter; and Gatsby's parties, which are virtual sexual orgies (82). Similarly, in his seminal article "The Sexual Drama of Nick and Gatsby" (1992), Edward Wasiolek reminds us that Tom sleeps with a chambermaid shortly after his marriage; the Buchanans leave Chicago because of one of his affairs; and Nick has an affair with a girl from Jersey City. Moreover, Wasiolek, unlike most critics, contends that Gatsby's love for Daisy is not Platonic or sublime, but "real love, that is, a love with a sexual basis" (15). Last but not least, the novel ends in an image that is sexually explicit, as Myrtle kneels in her own blood with her naked breast partly severed and flapping (Wasiolek 15-6).<sup>5</sup>

While much criticism has thus started to underline the centrality of sexuality to Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, little attention seems to have been paid to the specific relationship between masculinity and male (hetero)sexuality in Fitzgerald's novel.<sup>6</sup> It is my contention, however, that Fitzgerald's text illustrates very clearly the traditional conception of male (hetero)sexuality as a reaffirmation of masculinity. In *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (1990), American anthropologist David Gilmore argues that masculinity is not a natural given, but a

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<sup>5</sup> Clearly, this image, as Àngels Carabí (personal communication) notes, reveals Fitzgerald's misogynist biases whereby adulterous women like Myrtle must be (sexually) punished. After all, most of Fitzgerald's male characters seem to embody a model of masculinity that diminishes women, associating them with death and corruption. For an in-depth analysis of Fitzgerald's misogyny, as well as its clearly autobiographical roots in his failed marriage to Zelda Sayre, see Fryer; Fedo; and Carabí.

<sup>6</sup> However, several gay scholars have tried to identify and explore male homosexuality in Fitzgerald's fiction (Wasiolek; Andrés). Edward Wasiolek, for example, contends that in *The Great Gatsby* "Nick loves Gatsby" and feels sexually attracted to him (16). In Wasiolek's view, there are several passages in the novel -as when Gatsby, for example, seems to "mistake" a penis for a lever in the elevator scene- that point to the protagonist's homosexuality. While some feminist critics have shown the existence of women and (hetero)sexuality in many classic American texts, a number of gay/queer critics have thus moved from Fiedler's suggestion of homoeroticism to the very identification of homosexuality in classic American literature. Personally, however, I believe that Wasiolek's argument about Gatsby's homosexuality is unsupported by textual evidence.



cultural status that must be constantly proved and reaffirmed. In Gilmore's view, masculinity frequently reveals an inner insecurity that demands dramatic proof. In most cultures around the globe, boys need to prove their masculinity to be considered "real" men by their communities. In Gilmore's own words, "among most of the peoples that anthropologists are familiar with, true manhood is a precious and elusive status beyond mere maleness, a hortatory image that men and boys aspire to and that their culture demands of them as a measure of belonging" (17). Elaborating on that, Gilmore contends that although manhood tests may vary across cultures, sexuality and the public display of socioeconomic status are two of the most recurrent forms of proving and reaffirming masculinity in most cultures worldwide, including the United States. "So, although there may be no 'Universal Male,' we may perhaps speak of a 'Ubiquitous Male' based on these criteria of performance" (Gilmore 223). In Fitzgerald's literature, both of these main strategies of proving masculinity, sexuality and wealth, seem to be significantly conflated. Much of Fitzgerald's fiction, including *The Great Gatsby*, concerns itself with the theme of the poor boy in search of the golden girl. Like Jay Gatsby, Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise* (1920), Anthony Patch in *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922), and Dick Diver in *Tender Is the Night* (1934), to name but Fitzgerald's most famous protagonists, are all poor guys irremediably attracted to beautiful and wealthy girls. In *The Great Gatsby*, it is Daisy Buchanan who stands for the golden girl. Most of the novel does indeed focus on Gatsby's obsessive pursuit of Daisy, a beautiful girl whose "voice is full of money." For Gatsby, Daisy represents not only sexuality, but also economic power and social status. Ultimately, Gatsby's pursuit of the American Dream, his dream of Self-Made manhood, is synonymous with his pursuit of Daisy, who represents the American Dream itself. As Leslie Fiedler has argued, "Daisy is [...] the girl who lures her lovers on, like America itself, with a 'voice [...] full of money' [...] she is [...] the [...] symbol of an imperialist [...] America [...] the phallic woman with a phallus of gold" (312-3).

In Fitzgerald's prose, sexuality and money thus seem to be inextricably linked. Fitzgerald's recurrent association between sex/women and money in his fiction appears to have resulted from his own biographic background. The son of an unsuccessful manufacturer in the Midwest, the writer was always haunted by the obsession of upward mobility, which was fuelled by his mother, a woman of aristocratic ambitions. While at Camp in Alabama, Fitzgerald fell madly in love with Zelda Sayre, a wealthy and beautiful young woman. Scott moved to New York to work in an advertising agency to earn enough money to marry Zelda. However, she broke off their engagement for fear of poverty. Nevertheless, when Fitzgerald began to make money and be well-known as a writer, Zelda reconsidered the engagement and married him.

As has been argued, Fitzgerald's autobiographical experience seems to be directly reflected in his fiction, where poor guys seek to re-create their masculinity



through the pursuit of money and social status, represented by the golden girl. In Fitzgerald's fiction, however, man's pursuit of woman as the ideal embodiment of wealth tends to prove a failure, for "the central tragedy of the Fitzgerald hero," as David Fedo has argued, "is that the ideals he holds concerning women (and life) are corroded and finally destroyed" (27). Influenced by his own traumatic marriage to Zelda -which was characterized by financial instability, drunken excesses, and numerous infidelities-, Fitzgerald's fiction does in effect tend to demonize women as destroyers of men and as agents of corruption. In *This Side of Paradise* (1920), for example, Blaine is abandoned by his wife Rosaline when his wealth is diminished by his mother's death. Similarly, Anthony Patch in *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922) eventually discovers that his beautiful wife, Gloria, is a careless, materialistic woman who despises him for having abandoned the business world and for pursuing his romantic ideals of becoming a writer. For his part, psychiatrist Dick Diver in *Tender Is the Night* (1934) finally goes to ruin when he is abandoned by his wealthy patient and girlfriend, Nicole Warren, who leaves him for another man after recovering from her illness. And, in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby is similarly disappointed and destroyed by his idealized vision of Daisy Buchanan. As Fiedler has noted in this respect:

Possessed of the power of wealth, Fitzgerald's women, like their wealthy male compeers, who seem their twins rather than their mates, are rapists and aggressors. Of both Daisy and her husband Tom, Fitzgerald tells us, "they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money." (313)

It seems clear, then, that women in Fitzgerald's fiction are recurrently demonized as destroyers of men and as agents of corruption, which clearly reveals the writer's misogyny. Nevertheless, a feminist re-vision of Fitzgerald's fiction, in general, and of *The Great Gatsby*, in particular, suggests that while it is true that Fitzgerald's women tend to be represented as corrupt, his male characters are also incapable of moving away from an instrumental and materialistic conception of women and sexuality.

As has been argued, Fitzgerald's men often turn to wealthy young girls to try to re-shape their masculinity, which they see as threatened by poverty and deprivation. Since men in Fitzgerald's works often depend on women for self-affirmation, Fitzgerald's male protagonists are destroyed as soon as women (and hence money) fail them or disappear. While Fitzgerald's fiction recurrently blames women for men's final destruction, a feminist-oriented analysis suggests that Fitzgerald's male characters are totally incapable of looking for alternative, non-materialistic, and non-instrumental models of masculinity and male sexuality. As masculinity scholar Àngels Carabí indicates, "Fitzgerald's men appear to be incapable of self-reflection in order to re-create a responsible manhood" (309).

Rather than turn to women for love and affect, Fitzgerald's male characters idealize women as symbols of economic power and, therefore, of masculinity. In Fitzgerald's texts, however, both women and wealth tend to prove corrupt, thus failing to reaffirm the masculinity of the Fitzgerald protagonist. Since the Fitzgerald hero depends directly on women/wealth for reaffirming his masculine subjectivity, the disappearance of this dyadic unit implies, almost inevitably, the death of the hero himself. Unable to look for alternative forms of positive self-affirmation, male characters like Gatsby thus end up disappointed and destroyed by their own fantasies of women as phallic symbols of economic power.

Despite the writer's clearly misogynist biases, texts like Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* might thus be re-read from a feminist perspective as a harsh critique of the traditional (male) dependence on sexuality and money for reaffirming masculinity. Even though *Gatsby* aims to accuse women of ruining men's lives, a feminist revision of the novel suggests that it is men, not women, who are to be blamed for their own fate and (self-)destruction. As Michael Kimmel has argued, "Gatsby's fall is destined by his own illusions about self-making" (215).

Like Fitzgerald's novel, contemporary American literature has continued to re-visit from new perspectives traditional ideas about masculinities and male (hetero)sexualities. As Donald Greiner argues in his path-breaking critical text *Women Enter the Wilderness: Male Bonding and the American Novel of the 1980s* (1991), American fiction of the 1980s, for example, has played a key role in challenging conventional conceptions of men's sexuality. Challenging traditional views of American literature as asexual, Greiner defends the existence of sexuality in several American fictional works of the 1980s, which, according to this critic, provide innovative re-presentations of masculinities and male heterosexualities.

In his study, Greiner does indeed attempt to challenge "prevailing theoretical accounts" of American literature. By these, he means the paradigm of traditional American fiction that shows males abandoning the hearth for the wilderness in order to bond while pursuing an elusive freedom that is equated with an avoidance of women (1). Such a paradigm -identified by critics such as D. H. Lawrence, R. W. B. Lewis, and Leslie Fiedler- represents men in search of what Lewis calls *space*. Women represent domesticity, society, and finally mortality; but men look forward to freedom, wilderness, and, above all else, immortality. According to Greiner, *canonical* novels, novels from Cooper through Hemingway to Saul Bellow and the James Dickey of *Deliverance* (1970), were written by white males who illustrate the paradigm as defined by Lawrence, Lewis, and Fiedler. Greiner acknowledges the canonicity of these writers, as well as the theoretical accounts that have canonized them. In his own words, "Males do bond in canonical American fiction, they do plunge into the territory, and they do try to escape females" (2).

Nevertheless, Greiner insists that more recent novels written by white males in the 1980s accept the first two parts of the paradigm -men bonding and then escaping to the wilderness- but reject the third -women left behind (2). Analyzing the fiction of several American writers of the 1980s, Greiner concludes that Fiedler's thesis can no longer be applied to the latest American fiction. The males in novels by writers like Busch, Irving, Woiwode, and Russo bond as they leave the warmth of the home for an adventure in the territory, but unlike their forefathers in *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, or James Dickey's *Deliverance*, they take the woman with them or find her already there. As Greiner himself concludes, "this is an astonishing change in the gender relationships of the American novel and one that has occurred as the ideas of feminist scholars [...] have helped redirect the artistic consciousness of the culture" (3). Though written by white males and exploring male bonding, the novels of the 1980s examined by Greiner "recognize, accept, and celebrate the importance of women" (4).

That sex plays a central, and oftentimes subversive, role in American literature may be further illustrated by analyzing the representations of male heterosexualities in the fiction of Richard Ford, another white male author who published some of his works in the 1980s. Apparently, Ford's fiction seems to lend further support to Leslie Fiedler's main theses that American fiction is evasive in its treatment of sexuality. On the one hand, Ford's fiction has usually been considered asexual, as several critics have argued that sexuality plays a secondary role in his works. Commenting on Ford's well-known collection of short stories *Rock Springs* (1987), John Wideman, for example, insisted on the utter irrelevance of sex to Ford's characters. In his own words, sex in these stories is sporadic and "as casual as a peck on the cheek" (35). Nevertheless, a closer look at Ford's fiction shows quite a different picture. While several of his works, such as *A Piece of My Heart* (1976) and *Rock Springs* (1987), represent male bonding in the wilderness, he often incorporates women and sexuality into his stories. Furthermore, rather than portray women as sexual objects, Ford tends to depict, as we shall see, strong and assertive women characters. In incorporating women and heterosexuality into his fiction, and in portraying both of them in a new light, Richard Ford seems to confirm, then, Donald Greiner's arguments that white male authors of the 1980s not only include sexual relations in their works, but tend to describe them from highly subversive, innovative perspectives. Even more relevant to our aims in this article is the fact that Ford's fiction is centrally concerned with exploring, and oftentimes re-writing, the traditional connection between masculinity and male heterosexuality in American culture. An in-depth analysis of some of Ford's stories might thus be helpful not only to illustrate the view of male heterosexuality as a proof of masculinity, but also to try to question and re-think it. Moreover, stories like "Winterkill" in Ford's *Rock Springs* subvert traditional patriarchal notions of sexual behavior at the same time as they point, as we shall see, to new, alternative, non-phallic representations of male heterosexualities.

“Children,” one of the stories in Ford’s *Rock Springs* (1987), proves particularly helpful to analyze the traditional connection between masculinity and male heterosexuality, which the writer also seems to reread from innovative perspectives. In this story, George, the narrator, recounts part of his seventeenth year in 1961, when he and Claude Phillips, his half Blackfoot Indian friend, went fishing with Lucy, a sixteen-year-old girl. More specifically, “Children” focuses on the sexual rivalry between the two boys over the girl. The story revolves, therefore, around an erotic triangle, which in *Rock Springs* is “relentlessly present, in all sorts of combinations and permutations” (Wideman 35), and which raises interesting questions on masculinities and sexualities, as well as their interaction, in literature. Most discussions about (male-male-female) erotic triangles in literature go back to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s seminal work *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). In this text, Sedgwick, taking Shakespeare’s sonnets as an example, argues that in any erotic rivalry between two men over a woman the bond that links the two rivals is as intense as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved. In Sedgwick’s view, then, such erotic triangles work, ultimately, to cement and reinforce male homoerotic and homosocial relations, relations between men. Moreover, Sedgwick, herself borrowing from René Girard and Gayle Austin’s schematizations of erotic triangles, contends that the relation of rivalry between the two “active members” of an erotic triangle usually involves “a calculus of power.” In other words, male homosocial relations work to privilege men and to exclude women. Thus, patriarchal male heterosexuality can be best described as another form in the traffic in women. In Sedgwick’s own words, “it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (25-6).

Applying Sedgwick’s ideas to the analysis of Richard Ford’s “Children,” one could argue that Claude and George are also engaged in a homosocial relation of rivalry over Lucy. Throughout the story, it is clear that Claude sees George as a male sexual competitor. As soon as they pick up Lucy for the excursion, Claude adopts a tough-man pose and tries to appear manlier than George. Claude keeps displaying his superior masculinity when they get to Mormon Creek, where he shows off his fishing skills and brags about causing the fish pain. Moreover, he tries to diminish his male sexual competitor by ridiculing George’s parents and by telling Lucy that George’s father was unfaithful to his wife. Ford’s story thus seems to illustrate Sedgwick’s main contention that (hetero)sexuality often serves to establish male homosocial relations, relations between men. In Ford’s “Children,” heterosexuality acts as a male homosocial monopoly in which women have value only in that they serve as the possibility of relations among men.

While Sedgwick’s theses might thus help to partly understand the behavior of Richard Ford’s male characters, they fail to fully account for the representations of masculinities and sexualities in “Children.” Indeed, the erotic triangle in

Ford's story seems to differ in a number of respects from the literary conventions surrounding erotic triangles that Sedgwick identifies in classic English literature. As has been argued, Sedgwick contends that classic male-male-female erotic triangles, as exemplified by Shakespeare's sonnets, reinforce both homosocial *and* homoerotic relations among men. Nevertheless, one should note that, although George and Claude are clearly engaged in a homosocial relation of rivalry over a woman, there is no textual evidence of homoeroticism between the two boys. Indeed, rather than a homoerotic relationship between George and Claude, Lucy seems to trigger a radical separation between the two boys, who become increasingly distanced from each other after meeting her. As soon as Lucy enters the stage, the two boys begin to compete against each other for sex. Instead of promoting male homoeroticism, Lucy seems to stand in between the two males in their ideal homosocial/homoerotic friendship. Male (hetero)sexuality, in Ford's fiction at least, might thus be best described a form of homosocial, rather than homoerotic competition, a means of asserting and proving one's masculinity before and against other men.

Moreover, Sedgwick's argument that male-male-female erotic triangles involve two (male) "active members" and a subsidiary/passive female character, as illustrated by Shakespeare's sonnets, seems equally inapplicable to contemporary American fiction. On the one hand, the two male members in Ford's story are not equally active, since George remains much more passive than Claude (and Lucy). While it is true that Lucy talks to George, rather than Claude, most of the time, which provokes Claude's jealousy, George seems to do little to attract her attention (Ford 86). Moreover, Claude's active attempts to seduce Lucy through his violent and aggressive fishing are repeatedly undermined. Although Claude strives to direct Lucy's attention to the water, she seems to remain indifferent to his fishing skills and simply stays "sitting, smoking her cigarette" (Ford 86). Moreover, Lucy, challenging Sedgwick's description of women as the passive and commodified characters in classic erotic triangles, is described as more active and daring than Claude himself. For example, when Lucy finally tries fishing, she seems much more skilled at it than Claude, who is cut by a whitefish spin (Ford 86).

In an interesting article on patterns of sexual attraction among (Spanish) adolescents, Elena Duque has shown how many adolescents find dominant and violent masculinities sexually appealing. Several of the (female) adolescents interviewed by Duque explain that they like pacifist and caring boys *as friends*, but *not as boyfriends or lovers*, since, in their view, good guys are "boring" rather than exciting. Girls, according to Duque, tend to prefer the boys who prove their manhood by showing off their muscles and aggressiveness. In Duque's study, aggressiveness and physical prowess are shown to be essential elements of attraction. Of course, this model of sexual attraction is extremely dangerous, especially for young girls, who might confuse love with violence, and sex with being diminished

and subjugated by men. Nevertheless, the attraction that many female (as well as gay male) adolescents claim to feel to this violent model of masculinity is not natural or “instinctual.” Rather, it is the result of a process of socialization which has long associated the hegemonic definition of masculinity with the concepts of violence and physical prowess. If, as it seems, this model of sexual attraction was socially constructed, then it could and should also be socially questioned and changed. Actually, doing away with this pernicious masculine model of attraction becomes absolutely essential, as Duque has shown, to put an end to gender violence. Eradicating violence against women thus entails not only creating new and more egalitarian masculinities, but also questioning the traditional association of sexual attraction with violent models of masculinity. As Duque herself concludes, “If attraction remains linked to the more aggressive models [of masculinity], the fact of creating more egalitarian models will not bring about significant changes. In this sense, the real challenge consists in dissociating the dominant and violent masculine models from attraction, and in endowing with attractiveness the new masculinities which move away from the hegemonic model” (107; my translation).

In this respect, Richard Ford’s “Children” also proves particularly subversive and innovative, as it radically questions the traditional association of attraction with violence and physical prowess. Even though Claude tries to seduce Lucy by causing the fish pain and by showing off his physical prowess, his aggressive display of masculinity fails, as has been shown, to impress the girl, who seems more daring and skilled at fishing than Claude himself. Moreover, Lucy, as has also been argued, appears to be more interested in George, the quiet and retiring boy, than in Claude’s displays of *macho bravado* for the most part of the story. It is true that, at story’s end, she chooses to have sex with Claude, not George. However, what is important is *not* who she decides to have sex with, but rather that hers is, finally, a free choice, unaffected by masculine aggressiveness and domination. Actually, it is Lucy, not Claude, who finally takes the initiative and chooses to have sex with him, thus reversing the conventional conquest/masculinity vs. submission/femininity binary on which dominant masculinity and heterosexuality have traditionally relied. Whereas Claude tries to seduce Lucy by resorting to violence, Lucy not only remains unimpressed by his aggressiveness, but also leaves him speechless and amazed by her (sexual) assertiveness. As George himself explains, “Claude was smiling at her because I think he didn’t know what else to do” (Ford 93). Moreover, when the girl takes off her dress and has sex with Claude, George realizes that there are red marks and scratches on her back and down the backs of her legs, which he takes as evidence of Lucy’s previous sexual experiences (Ford 93-4). If boys and men usually turn to sex to reaffirm their masculinity, the two boys in “Children” remain virgin, while Lucy, the girl, has already had sex. Even though masculinity has traditionally been considered superior to women and femininity, George and Claude cannot lay a claim



to being superior to Lucy, since they, unlike the girl, lack sexual experience and thus cannot prove that they are “real” men. Because (hetero)sexuality is considered by men a fundamental means of proving their manhood, George and Claude, who remain virgin, continue to see themselves as boys, whereas Lucy, who has already had sex, is seen by the boys as a grown-up woman who could be by herself in the world: “And neither Claude nor I,” as George himself admits, “were anything like that [...] it embarrassed me at that moment -for myself- and I know I looked away from her” (Ford 94). Unable to come to terms with what he sees as his inferior (sexual) status *vis-à-vis* Lucy, George thus ends up feeling embarrassed and ashamed, incapable of looking at an assertive, sexually active woman. In this way, Richard Ford shows, and revisits, the traditional conception of heterosexuality as a reaffirmation of masculine identity for boys and men.

Like “Children,” “Winterkill,” another of the stories in Ford’s *Rock Springs*, also appears to illustrate, and subvert, the conventional view of male heterosexuality as a symbol of virility and manhood. Moreover, this story points, as we shall see, to new, alternative, and non-phallic models of male heterosexualities. Ford’s story thus becomes doubly subversive, as he not only challenges the traditional conception of male sexuality as a proof of masculinity, but also seems to underline the feasibility and desirability of non-phallic (hetero)sexual relations. Since the traditional phallic view of heterosexuality is indissolubly linked to patriarchal notions of masculinity (Brod), Richard Ford’s revision of phallic sexuality in “Winterkill” might actually contribute as well, as will be shown, to rethinking patriarchal concepts of masculinity.

“Winterkill” is a story told by Les Snow, a thirty-seven-year-old narrator. A lower-class man, Les has lost his job and spends most of his time watching T.V. at home or drinking in bars with his wheelchair-constrained friend Troy Burnham, who is sexually disabled. It is precisely while Les and Troy are having a drink together in a bar that they meet Nola Foster, a widow who is described as “not a bad-looking woman at all” (Ford 150). After having a few drinks together, Nola and the two men decide to go together on a late-night fishing excursion by a river.

Once again, then, Ford’s fiction concerns itself with a male-male-female (erotic) triangle. And, predictably, the triangle involves two men engaged in a homosocial relation of rivalry over a woman. Very often, male heterosexuality acts as a form of male homosociality, a way to prove one’s masculinity before and against other males (Sedgwick). In this sense, male sexuality becomes extremely competitive, as men use sexuality to prove not only that they are manly, but also that they are *manlier* than other men. In “Winterkill,” Troy and Les also compete against each other to have sex with Nola and thus prove their superior masculinity.



Troy resorts to violence and stereotypical male behavior to try to seduce Nola, showing off his aggressive fishing skills. In particular, Troy tries to catch Nola's attention effecting quick, jerky movements with his fishing rod, which suggests a phallic symbol. Nevertheless, Nola, like most women in *Rock Springs*, is not keen on violent sports like fishing and pays, therefore, no attention to Troy. Troy's phallic rod fails not only to catch Nola's attention, who thus moves away from the traditional passive role of woman as sexual trophy for the phallic male, but also to retrieve any fish from the water. In a "typical Ford twist on male adventure," Troy ends up catching not fish but a dead deer, which seems to symbolize the defeated, hapless man (Leder 111). In effect, the dead deer seems to stand for Troy himself, who, given the irony of his catch, finds himself the object of ridicule from both Les and Nola. Disappointed and ridiculed, Troy can do nothing but burst into tears as though "it was him who had washed up there and was finished" (Ford 166). Once again, then, Ford rewrites the classic association of sexual attraction with physical prowess and aggressiveness.

Les, on the other hand, tries to diminish the masculinity of his sexual competitor by preying on his sexual disability. As has been argued throughout this article, sexuality has traditionally been regarded as a proof of masculinity. Because males often see sex as a primary means of proving their manhood, men tend to feel pressured to perform adequately in sex. Failure to do so inevitably threatens their masculine identity. Thus, men focus on sexual performance, particularly erection and penetration, as the main features of sex, which leads to a phallogentric conception of male sexuality (Brod 153). Trying to diminish the virility of his friend, then, Les introduces Troy to Nola as an impotent man who "can't do very much" (Ford 151). Troy suffers a paralysis below his waist and so cannot have erections. In this respect, Les explains to Nola that Troy "does not look exactly like a whole man" and that, probably, he has not been with a woman for fifteen years (Ford 156-7).

Nevertheless, Richard Ford's story rewrites conventional phallogentric conceptions of sexuality, especially the traditional view of sex as a proof of masculinity. After all, Troy manages to seduce Nola despite his sexual disability. Although Troy is physically disabled, Les himself acknowledges that Troy is "both frail and strong at once," since he had been "an excellent wrestler" and could still break "his spinning rod into two pieces with only his hands." Even more important is the fact that Troy "always has enthusiasm" and "a good heart" (Ford 151, 167, 152). Because of these positive attributes, Troy ends up seducing Nola.

Troy's final sexual intercourse with Nola is not explicitly described, as it takes place off-stage. At story's end, we see Nola enter Troy's bedroom but, after that, we can only hear "Troy's door shut and the chain go up" (Ford 170). The end of the story thus seems particularly subversive as well. Instead of describing

the sexual scene explicitly, Richard Ford asks the reader to imagine different possibilities for new, alternative, non-phallic forms of sexuality. Rather than simply provide the representation of Troy's sexual relationship with Nola, Ford asks the reader to play an active role in envisioning possible rewritings of heterosexuality away from traditionally phallic terms. In Ford's story, then, the phallocentric view of sexuality, along with Troy's phallic rod, is finally torn into pieces. Moving beyond reductive phallic notions of sexuality, Ford opens up the world of male (hetero)sexuality to infinite bodily pleasures and sensations, as well as to a new world of feelings and emotions.

In this way, Ford's "Winterkill" subverts traditional notions of male (hetero)sexuality, which often reduce male sexualities to the penis and neglect the relevance of other bodily parts as well as the world of feelings to sexual/sensual intercourse. Since masculinity has traditionally been related to reason and the mind, and because the world of the body -as well as its sensations- has long been regarded as feminine, man remains largely estranged from his own body and sexuality, which he often reduces to the phallus. Besides increasing male performance anxieties, the focus of sexual attention on just one organ, the penis, mechanizes sex and diminishes sensuality. By focusing on an instrumental conception of sexuality, man remains alienated from his body and its sensations. The phallocentric view of sexuality desensitizes other bodily parts which might also become sources of pleasure. As Harry Brod has argued, "the basic male sex organ is not the penis, but the skin" (153). Moreover, the phallocentric conception of male sexuality is one of the causes of patriarchal notions of masculinity. It has been proven that phallocentrism enhances masculine individuation and emotional schism. As a result, it prevents men from adopting more open and relational attitudes toward women as well as other men (Pronger 78). Ford's revision of phallocentric notions of male sexuality might thus be said to contribute as well to the redefinition of patriarchal concepts of masculinity.

From what has been argued here, it seems clear, then, that Leslie Fiedler's influential critical view of American literature as evasive in its treatment of (hetero)sexuality remains, at least, open to questioning. American fiction, as I have tried to demonstrate, has not only depicted (male) (hetero)sexuality, but has also revisited it in varied, complex, and often innovative ways. Linked by their shared concern with male protagonists and their specific sexual dilemmas, the literary examples provided by Henry James, F. S. Fitzgerald and Richard Ford are simply suggestive of American authors who have depicted, and re-visited, the dominant gendered meanings attached to sexuality, particularly the traditional conception of male (hetero)sexuality as a proof of manhood. Moreover, Ford's fiction has not only questioned the patriarchal notion of sexuality as a marker of virility but has also portrayed, as has been shown, new, alternative, non-phallic models of male heterosexualities in contemporary American fiction. Since sex

is closely related to gender and masculinity, such innovative literary re/presentations of male sexuality could contribute as well to questioning dominant patriarchal notions of masculinity. Rethinking (male) (hetero)sexualities thus becomes absolutely essential, not only to help heterosexual men re(dis)cover sensuality and the body but also, and above all, to enhance the feminist political struggle for gender and social equality. Only by adopting a model of sexuality and social relations that is relational rather than domineering can men really begin to construct alternative relationships with women as well as among themselves.

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