Limited Masculinities:

The Aging Male in Contemporary US American Literature

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This dissertation is dedicated to all of you—and to all men.
It is never too late to question, unlearn, and change the trajectories of toxic masculinities.

LIMITED MASCULINITIES:

THE AGING MALE IN CONTEMPORARY US AMERICAN LITERATURE

CONTENTS

1. Introduction: Setting the Stage for the "Old *White* Man"

> "The era of unquestioned and unchallenged male entitlement is over."
>
> —Kimmel, *Angry White Men* (xi-xii)

Sadly, this book must begin with Donald J. Trump. Despite the overwhelming number of books written about Trump since 2016—*The Guardian* counted more than 4,500 English language books (Madigan) only one year into his presidency[1]—there is no way around the most polarizing head of state in U.S. history when examining cultural representations of "old white men." In 2020, *The New York Times* also reported on the unending upsurge of political publications, noting their enormous commercial success, which is unusual, for "[b]ooks about politicians and government are not considered surefire commercial hits" (Harris and Alter). Moreover, journalist Carlos Lozada published *What We Were Thinking* (2020)— another book *about* Trump. This one, however, reflects on the most relevant work written and published, including studies by political scientists, historians, philosophers, and literary critics (Lozada 3-4). Lozada explains that the most important publications are not the ones that reveal the most egregious scandals, but those that "enable and ennoble a national reexamination" (7). These books ignite serious contemplation and self-reflection on a collective level. My work contributes to this growing body of scholarship by investigating the theoretical intersections of aging masculinities and hegemonic powers to understand how literary representations of the "old white man" have shaped the discourse on masculinities in U.S. American culture.

My analysis of aging masculinities in literature was largely conceived during Trump's presidency and is without a doubt influenced by recent discussions surrounding toxic masculinity, Baby Boomers, whiteness, conservatism, and, most notably, the MeToo movement. And it was shaped by theories on gender and aging, as well as the rising visibility and normalization of masculine hegemony and white supremacy in recent years. This study, however, does not provide a political analysis of Trump's presidency. Instead, it draws on the symbolic meaning of the presidential figure, using Trump as a cultural reference point, a representative example of how contemporary perceptions of masculinities, hegemony, and aging intersect, particularly as these themes emerge in literary narratives. Drawing on my literary and cultural studies background, I focus on contemporary U.S. American fiction by

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[1] In his somewhat humorous 2018 article "After the Fire and Fury: What's Next for Books About Trump?," Andrew Madigan highlights some of the bestselling books that explore the life and presidency of Donald J. Trump as well as the rising interest to write about him.

well-known (white) authors to analyze how these texts construct cultural narratives around the "old white man" and engage with dominant narratives of aging and hegemonic masculinities.

Limited Masculinities, first and foremost, explores fictions of manhood. In a culture in which images of physically fit white cisgender men still outnumber representations of diverse masculinities in the mainstream, aging-man tropes have surfaced and are widely debated, not least because the most visible "old white man" became the 45th President of the United States. As political and social dynamics evolve rapidly, older white men have become increasingly central in public discourse and media representations. Within this context, the U.S. American novel functions as a cultural product that captures the nuances, dichotomies, antagonisms, and even potential reconciliations embedded in these shifting narratives.

In the preface to his 2010 book *The American Novel Now*, Patrick O'Donnell writes: "[W]e live in an increasingly complex world where language and the distortions of language, identity and its discontents, speech, object and affect are only apprehensible in their specificity and within the particular contexts they inhabit" (viii). The value and reach of fictional narratives are significant in a culture unsettled by post-truth movements. And by exploring distinct spaces that provide unique insights into humanity, whether they are presented in realistic or exaggerated form, we come closer to comprehending these moments in time. With this work, I aim to contribute to a growing intersectional scholarly discussion that bridges experiences of aging with constructions of masculinities. This field acknowledges fiction narratives as valuable cultural texts that not only reflect but also critique broader social developments.

This project investigates contemporary U.S. fiction novels that depict heteronormative (white) aging cisgender masculinities. I will show how the literary category defining the "old white man" has been established in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries through the work of John Updike and Philip Roth—two key figures in this type of writing.[2] Their texts paint the (white) aging male as a victim of mortality and bio-medical bodily developments—the victim of aging—largely disregarding that aging is not exclusively a bio-medical process but also a gendered experience that is socially constructed. Rüdiger Kunow, for instance, recognizes "old age" as "a cultural script, a biomedical condition, and a social-political status" ("Chronologically Gifted" 24) and stresses the importance of reading

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[2] Roth certainly complicates this simplistic understanding of whiteness and Americanness with a large body of work that reflects on Jewish American culture and experiences precisely pertaining to this ethnic group. Nonetheless, much of his writing, particularly his late texts, has contributed to building a notion of a U.S. American masculinity in which his character's Jewish identities are either concealed or obscured, foregrounding an "all-American" identity such as in *Everyman*. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter two on Roth's *Exit Ghost*.

and understanding cultural texts about "old age" beyond the framework of biomedicine. Building on this, I aim to examine the hegemonic ideologies that pervade these texts— ideologies that confine aging male characters to pitiful and self-destructive behavior, thus leading them to view themselves as tragic figures. Overwhelmed by growing bodily impairments, these fictional characters experience the limits of their internalized masculine ideals as grave losses. Yet I argue that it is not aging itself that renders these characters as doomed. Rather, it is their rigid conception of gender and masculinities that bars them from imagining an alternative self that might be better equipped to fit the challenging, but also multi-faceted, experience of aging.

To approach the subject, I investigate these texts through the lens of normalized "decline narratives" as formulated by Hanne Laceulle in *Aging and Self-Realization* (2018). Such narratives think of aging and individuals experiencing aging within a predominantly bio-medical and death-focused frame (Laceulle 14). The "cultural master narrative" of decline associates aging with bodily decay and subsequently "creates problems for experiencing later life as […] meaningful" (Laceulle 29). Decline narratives of aging, which the selected fictions have helped to establish, render the aging male as worthless in an aged body and nostalgic about an able-bodied, idealized past self that cannot be retrieved. Moreover, the texts reveal that the beneficiary of white hegemonic privileges is a victim of hegemonic masculine ideologies that are unattainable in old age, even if the characters are foremost constructed as victims of equity-driven cultural and political developments, often conceptualized as "crisis."

At this point, it is important to note that my study does not seek to discredit aging male writers, fictional characters, or aging men in general. Nor does it strive to expose these real or fictional men as misogynists or sexists, which other critics have done vociferously in the past. Instead, I look at how aging masculinities are designed in fictional texts by celebrated, canonical male authors within a contemporary U.S. literary context to better understand how these constructed narratives function on a larger cultural and social stage. This knowledge allows critics and readers to grasp the potential impact of such cultural texts.

The main texts I selected for my analysis, which will give insight into the literary category of the "old white man" in U.S. American fiction are John Updike's *Toward the End of Time* (1997), Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost* (2007), and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001). Compared to the texts by Updike and Roth, I read *The Corrections* as a divergent text that introduces new tropes and narrative functions to this mode of writing and slightly opposes the deeply personal lamentations of the aged and failing man that we find in Updike and Roth. All of these fictions exist in and comment on cultural dynamics; hence, they are a reaction to the discourse surrounding male aging and provide telling but also complex versions of a trope ("old white man") that now carries largely negative connotations. And

while all of the novels explored here were published before the election of 2016, this is a trope that today seems inextricably linked to a real-life persona: President Donald J. Trump.

Mapping the Real "Old White Man"

Donald Trump has been celebrated by his neo/conservative allies as embodying an archaic version of U.S. American masculinities, usually discussed under the term "traditional masculinity." He has been revered by his supporters in right-wing media outlets and in conspiracy circles like QAnon, where he is worshipped, most simply put, as a messianic figure or a long-awaited white savior—even if the hype has dwindled since the 2022 Midterm Elections. Regardless, Trump has also been the subject of relentless satire. He continues to be mocked and ridiculed in political cartoons, satirical sketches, short fiction, and various visual representations. Fictional renditions of Donald Trump have appeared across many media platforms, including popular television shows such as *The Simpsons*, *Sesame Street*, *American Dad,* and *Family Guy*. Most of these parodies focus on Trump's economic failures, distinctive bodily or character traits—in *Sesame Street,* he is parodied in the character "Donald Grump"—or characteristic catchphrases, such as "You're fired," which he popularized on his reality TV show *The Apprentice*, running from 2004 until 2017.

In a clip from *The Simpsons*, the iconic escalator scene, which marks the beginning of his election campaign, is reinterpreted with playful mockery and cynical criticism.[3] On a more serious note, Trump has increasingly come to represent the stereotype of the "old white man," a concept that has gained prominence throughout his presidency, especially alongside the rise of the MeToo movement and the "Green New Deal" proposed by progressive Democrats. Subsequently, the catchphrase "Ok, Boomer," which parodies the attitudes and behaviors of the Baby Boomer generation, has resurfaced in response to the negative reception of a 2016 Pew Research Center study highlighting Millennials' living conditions.[4] For many critics, Trump embodies precisely the figure of the "old white man": an ignorant and sometimes arrogant Boomer who, among leftists and progressives, is identified as the defender of hegemonic powers. He is viewed as a neo/conservative agent of capitalism,

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[3] In a 2015 parody of Trump, the creators of *The Simpsons* released a short *YouTube ("Trumptastic Voyage")* clip that depicts a bizarre encounter between Homer Simpson and Donald Trump's hairpiece. Homer is picked up by a recruiter who offers him 50 dollars to stand in the crowd and cheer on Trump, on the day he comes down the escalator in Trump Tower to announce his 2016 presidential run. Accidentally, Homer ends up behind Trump on the escalator. He is hypnotized and then sucked into Trump's hair, where he romanticizes and admires the hairpiece while flying over Trump's skull. The clip alludes to the cult-like nature of Trumpism and the allegations about the recruitment of audience members.

[4] See the *Pew Research Center* study "For First Time in Modern Era, Living with Parents Edges Out Other Living Arrangements for 18- to 34-Year-Olds" (2016) by Richard Fry.

seemingly ignorant to issues such as man-made environmental changes, racism, sexism, and other structural forms of discrimination, while strongly advocating for Christian heteronormative family values.

Trump's reign ignited widespread anger toward the Boomer generation, as it made visible the otherwise invisible powers that hegemonic masculinities hold globally. On a political level alone, according to data from *Rutgers*, political power was still concentrated in the hands of white middle-aged and aging men in the second half of 2022. Only 27.5 percent of congressional seats were held by women, 24 percent of the 100 seats in the Senate, and 28.3 percent of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives. The House of Representatives experienced a slight upturn in 2022 and, of course, "Kamala Harris (D) became the first woman to hold the office of Vice President on January 20, 2021" (*Rutgers*). Nonetheless, the U.S. Supreme Court remains majority male, and 41 out of 50 state governors are men. Similar numbers are reflected on state legislative and local political levels. Most decision-makers in the U.S. are still white males.

As we reflect on the 45th president of the United States and the implications of his first, and hopefully only, term, it becomes difficult to ignore the bitter irony of the parodies surrounding him. These parodies often distracted media and content creators from the serious regressions Trump set in motion in areas such as social justice reform, environmental policy, and equality. Just a month before the 2020 election, amid West Coast wildfires, protests against police brutality, the rise of white supremacy and militant militia groups, Trump's baseless claims that the postal service was rigging the 2020 elections, the president voiced his refusal to ensure a peaceful transition of power if he lost the election against Joe Biden. This defiance, once again, made public his intent to expand authoritarian control. The "January 6 riots," then, stand as a failed but serious endeavor to uphold the claim to dictatorial power.

These few significant events marking the end of Trump's presidential term exemplify not just the expansion of individual authority but also a broader conservative shift that has taken place across the entire Western world in the second decade of the twenty-first century. His presidency symbolically stands for a general reaction, observed within gender studies and other academic disciplines, that is particularly evident among defiant, often openly racist and sexist white males who perceive their elevated position in society as being endangered primarily by women and migrants. This perception of the disadvantaged male is similarly reflected in literary portrayals from the twentieth century. These portrayals foreshadow a broader cultural discussion that has emerged regarding the concept of "masculinity in crisis," which has gained attention in popular and academic circles.

As these narratives unfold, they often reflect a growing societal concern, captured by the phrase "masculinity in crisis." The catchphrase has gained prominence and increasingly permeated social media platforms as well as scholarly research. Following Trump's inauguration, the crisis metaphor surfaced with renewed urgency, appearing, for instance, as an immediate reaction to the 2017 Women's March, which took place one day after the ceremony, and to the rise of the #MeToo hashtag that evolved into a significant movement in October 2017. In 2022, "masculinity in crisis" once again flooded the web as well as mainstream media, following inflammatory comments within right-wing and conservative circles, voiced among others by Ben Shapiro and Jordan Peterson.[5]

The crisis metaphor thus reflects a pressing need to challenge and dismantle white patriarchal conservative assumptions about sexuality, reproductive rights, the gender pay gap, as well as broader social rights issues, including systemic racism based on ethnic backgrounds, skin color, and religion. Consequently, in 2017/2018 and again in 2022—amid growing visibility of women's rights issues, racial discrimination, and climate change activism, all met with a wave of conservative backlash—more and more news outlets asked somewhat provokingly: Is masculinity in crisis? And one glimpse at Donald Trump, his cabinet, and his followers' resistance to progressive change invited a seemingly simple and sensationalist conclusion: Masculinity is in crisis.

Evaluating the Crisis Metaphor

What do we mean when we speak of "masculinity in crisis?" And how does this *crisis* relate to the resurgence of conservatism in U.S. culture during Trump's presidency? A closer look at the phrase and its origins suggests that "masculinity" could be apprehended as being in constant crisis because there are always groups or individuals in a society that are, for some reason, renegotiating their masculinities due to, for instance, geopolitical circumstances. In *The Conundrum of Masculinity: Hegemony, Homosociality, Homophobia and Heteronormativity* (2017), Chris Haywood sums up an accepted observation in critical masculinities and gender studies regarding the popular phrase: "It is suggested that concerns about men and masculinity, often sensationally called 'crises of masculinity', have occurred across history and have taken many forms but appear to take shape when societies undergo rapid social and economic

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[5] The recent debate surrounding the crisis of masculinity was sparked by an opinion piece written by David Brooks in *The New York Times*, titled "The Crisis of Men and Boys" (2022). This discussion has been further fueled by recent statements by conservative, right-wing commentators Ben Shapiro and Jordan Peterson. See "The Current Crisis of Masculinity" and "The War on Manhood" for more insights into this recent turn to the crisis metaphor and how it is negotiated in conservative circles.

transformations" (1). He gives several examples to support his claim: "[I]n the late nineteenth-century United States, there was much concern about men losing their masculinity as they migrated from rural to urban spaces" (1-2). The loss of what, during industrialization, were understood as "basic masculine drives" is depicted as a significant moment that challenged prevailing notions of manhood—these assumptions about the emasculated urban male persist in some cultural contexts.[6]

The same applies to progressive eras, such as the suffragette movement and the women's rights movement in the 1960s and onwards. And myriad other moments in history resulted in a renegotiation of manhood: wars, changing demographics due to migration, the rise of technology and white-collar culture, other social justice movements, the rise of secularism, and so on. Haywood identifies these significant moments of renegotiation as "flashpoints" and notes further that "these cultural flashpoints become ways to understand the conundrums that surround men and masculinity as they shine a light on the cultural expectations that underpin gender relations" (2). Binary gender relations are pivotal in the construction of masculine roles, but not exclusive to it, for dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinities also rely on the juxtaposition of masculinities—racism and anti-gay bias are two crucial driving forces in the construction of hegemonic masculinities.

In 2000, Sally Robertson published her insightful study, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis,* in which she discusses the visibility and invisibility of white male bodies in literature and culture, and how the notion of "masculinity in crisis" relates to identity politics. Robertson claims that "[i]mages of wounded white men, manufactured traumas, and metaphorical pains abound in post-sixties American culture" (6). These elements are particularly stressed in fictions of male aging, as I will show in the following chapters. The sixties are here primarily acknowledged as a significant "flashpoint" (in Haywood's sense) that brought forth representations of normative masculinities in a state of grave dilemma. Robertson contends that "[w]hite masculinity most fully represents itself as victimized by inhabiting a wounded body, and such a move draws not only on the persuasive force of corporeal pain but also on an identity politics of the dominant" (6). Her work, therefore, counters the widespread myth that white men are victimized by and never "participants in[…] identity politics" (4).

Robertson draws on fictional texts by popular white authors such as John Updike. She references a statement Updike makes in his 1989 nonfiction work *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs*, in which he expresses concern about the precarious position of white men during the era surrounding the war in Vietnam. This text passage has been subject to previous

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[6] For a nuanced insight, see Ken Moffatt's *Troubled Masculinities: Reimagining Urban Men* (2012).

scholarly scrutiny, such as in Mary O'Connell's study *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma* (1996). Updike thus writes in *Self-Consciousness*:

> My earliest sociological thought about myself had been that I was fortunate to be a boy and an American. Now the world was being told that American males—especially white, Protestant males who had done well under 'the system'—were the root of evil. Law-abiding conformity had become the opposite of a refuge. The Vietnam era was no sunny picnic for me. (*Self-Consciousness* 146)

Omitting the mention of the "Vietnam era," the same comments appear in mainstream media or on social media platforms throughout Trump's (as well as Biden's) presidency. Especially Updike's observation that "law-abiding conformity […] become[s] the opposite of refuge," reflects the 2020 conservative outcry for a reinstallation of law and order during the long protest period in honor of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, only two among many African Americans who became the victims of a racist system that operates with unjustified violence and utmost brutality against black Americans and people of color.

The crisis that Robertson depicts at the turn of the twenty-first century is the same crisis Updike laments in the sixties and seventies, and it is the same crisis that men claim to be experiencing in 2020 and 2022. Robertson argues back in 2000: "The white male victim—personally, individually targeted—is the emblem of the current crisis in white masculinity" (5)—a notion that appears equally true today. And she sums up her observations as follows:

> From the late sixties to the present, dominant masculinity appears to have suffered one crisis after another, from the urgent complaints of the 'silent majority' following the 1968 presidential election, to the men's liberationists call for rethinking masculinity in the wake of the women's movement in the 1970s, to the battles over the cultural authority of 'dead white males' in academia, to the rise of a new men's movement in the late 1980s. Each of these moments comes clothed in the language of crisis, and the texts produced out of that crisis use a vocabulary of pain and urgency to dwell on, manage, and/or heal the threats to a normativity continuously under siege. In post-sixties American culture, white men have become *marked men,* not only pushed away from the symbolic centers of American iconography but recentered as malicious and jealous protectors of the status quo. (5)[7]

Considering the many "flashpoints" Robertson identifies, and extending the historical timeline into both the past and the future, one could argue that in every moment when white man's power is slightly challenged—for which one could point to an example from every decade in the twentieth century at least—masculinity is viewed as being in a state of crisis. The sixties are usually named as one determining point in time, because liberal change was

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[7] Robinson quotes from *The Male Dilemma* (1983) and discusses this new invisibility, which affects the normative male. She argues: "Throughout *The Male Dilemma*, Steinmann and Fox make liberal use of the figure of the 'shadow' to describe the paradoxical condition in which white men find themselves vis-à-vis the revolutionary movements of their time: at once invisible behind the 'underdogs' who have taken center stage, and newly visible as the 'enemies' of change and liberation, middle-class white men become a shadowy presence-absence on the American scene" (332).

pushed through the simultaneous activist endeavors of many previously disenfranchised groups. One unique outcome specific to this time, however, was the rise and development of the "men's movement," a movement that historically staged itself in light of feminism and changing gender politics as the ultimate victim.[8] Abigail Solomon-Godeau describes the movement as "a defensive backlash against uncongenial social and economic realities" (70).

Before I turn to analyzing representations of the aging male in contemporary U.S. fiction and investigate the extent to which the selected texts align with Robertson's observations of the "victim narrative," I will first discuss the crisis metaphor and its relevance within critical masculinities in more detail. One key academic text frequently cited in connection with the crisis trope is Solomon-Godeau's essay "Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation" (1993), along with her later book of the same name. In the essay, Solomon-Godeau explains that the women's movement, which made hegemonic masculinities more visible and a subject to academic interest, initiated a "destabilization of the notion of masculinity such that it forfeits its previous transparency, its taken-for-grantedness, its normalcy" (70). "It is doubtless this loss of transparency," she contends further, "that underpins the now frequent invocations of a 'crisis' in masculinity" (70). Solomon-Godeau pinpoints a crucial issue that has become a cornerstone of critical masculinities in the past decades: making masculinities visible (not only hegemonic masculinities), challenging the normalization of specific forms of masculinities, and uncovering the hegemonic power structures they uphold. This academic focus developed during the transformative decades of the 1970s and 1980s, a time when feminism actively called out men's roles in creating and maintaining gender hierarchies in society.

Yet, Solomon-Godeau goes a step further at this early point in the studies of masculinities and refuses to dwell on the notion of a temporal crisis. Instead, she states: "I am uncomfortable with formulations that imply some utopic or normative masculinity outside crisis. In this respect, I would argue that masculinity, however defined, is, like capitalism, *always* in crisis" (70). While a more recent academic position supports the turn to the plural "masculinities," foregrounding the notion that there have always been multiple types of masculinities, some more hegemonic than others, some corresponding to dominant normative versions, some always other to the accepted status quo of the time and

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[8] While the men's movement, also referred to as the men's liberation movement, has several adverse branches, some of which are strong opponents of sexism and the maintenance of a patriarchal system, other groups still voice their concerns over being victimized by gender equality demands and feminist endeavors. Jonna Eagle examines the development of this movement, which occurred at the end of the twentieth century: "As the men's rights discourse became more virulently antifeminist, men were claimed as the victims of traditionally feminist concerns such as domestic violence, pornography, prostitution, and sexist media stereotypes" (303).

environment, the common public perception, to this day, remains that a *singular masculinity* is in crisis whenever voices grow loud around questions of "manhood." There is, however, even in popular public debate, no consensus about what exactly constitutes this *one* dominant form of masculinity.

Solomon-Godeau's observations thus coalesce with my theories about the crisis metaphor during my early research. Consequently, I side with her assessment: "[G]iven that almost all anthropologists and ethnographers agree that masculinity appears transculturally as something to be acquired, achieved, initiated into—a process often involving painful or even mutilating rituals—there is ample evidence to suggest that there never is, never was, an unproblematic, a natural, a crisis-free variant" (71). And while the term "natural" bears complex and questionable allusions to theories on biology, an unproblematic or crisis-free variant of masculinities is without a doubt a utopian construct that serves a political purpose whenever necessary, such as propagated by various branches of the men's movement.

In his criticism of the crisis metaphor, Chris Haywood proposes to replace crisis with "conundrum." By investigating and foregrounding hegemony and shedding light on patriarchy as a firm holder of power, Haywood's study tries to unravel the mystery behind "masculinity's" supposed conundrum. Even though the term "crisis" has set in motion valuable scholarly and cultural debates, I find both expressions misleading. "Crisis," for instance, feeds into the assumption that masculinity is a single fixed position (much in line with the previous notion of "natural" masculinity) and has run into some sort of danger—a problem that needs to be resolved urgently—when, in fact, masculinities have been constantly transformed, challenged, and renegotiated throughout the history of humanity. The immediacy that the term "crisis" carries calls for a quick fix. The enigma that is innate to "conundrum," in contrast, implies that there might be no fixing if the puzzle is too intricate and/or impossible to solve, which is a possibility inherent in the meaning of the term conundrum.[9] This potentially results in a mystification of masculinity.

This mystification of manhood and the practices of masculinities are severely counterproductive endeavors because they reinforce the belief in gender hierarchies instead of creating a more balanced, equity-driven view on gender. The notion of mystique is mirrored in Haywood's introduction, where he proclaims that all discussions on gender in current times lead to one core base that seems to steer and determine all other trends. He argues that recent developments in gender studies have "intensified one of the most-pressing gender conundrums in contemporary society: What does it mean to be a man?" (1) Without

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[9] *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines conundrum as "a. [a] riddle in the form of a question the answer to which involves a pun or play on words: called in 1769 *conundrumical question*" and "b. [a]ny puzzling question or problem; an enigmatical statement."

diminishing the relevance of this inquiry, in an attempt to demystify questions of manhood, I would instead propose that masculinity has never been in crisis at all. Masculinity has always been in flux. The role of men has continuously evolved with their agents adapting to new geopolitical environments, whether that meant plowing fields or transitioning to factory work on assembly lines. The more pressing and relevant question, however, concerns how these changes are framed: it foregrounds the narrative constructed around specific performances of manhood—narratives that have repeatedly served to preserve hegemonic power in male hands. Thus, we need to ask: Who benefits from the invention and dissemination of the crisis metaphor?

On that note, we must acknowledge that the widespread claims circulating in mainstream media and countless online platforms—that men must be experiencing some sort of crisis at the beginning of the twenty-first century—are largely unfounded and lack solid evidence. While it is a true and dire fact that suicides are more often committed by cisgender men than cisgender women, this cannot be identified as a new phenomenon, one that results in a *new* crisis. From the very beginning of the statistical count of suicides in the United States, the numbers show that white men have always resorted to suicide more often than white women. Out of 993 documented suicide cases in 1860, 789 were white males and 204 were white female victims (Shields et al. 310). Throughout the twentieth century, the total number remains substantially higher on the male side.[10] A similar development can be observed when it comes to statistics on violent crimes or life expectancy. Discounting the disruptive times of the two world wars, data shows that from the fifties onwards, there were no periods in which the life expectancy of white men was higher than that of white women (Medina et al. 3).

While I am not at all suggesting that these numbers are entirely disconnected from societal phenomena and the cultural construction of manhood and gender, I maintain a critical stance toward the "crisis metaphor." This phrase often resurfaces and circulates rapidly alongside statistics about suicide and life expectancy. Although it can generate a productive urgency that advocates for a renegotiation of largely outdated forms of masculinities, it also creates a similar urgency for those defending hegemonic masculinities. As we have observed during the Trump era, these defenders are willing to resort to violent measures to uphold their sense of masculine entitlement.[11] The problem is not that white American men have been unable to "find work" or that women have succeeded in entering

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[10] Note that these statistics rely on a gender binary and do not specifically refer to white individuals.

[11] In August 2022, the *Southern Poverty Law Center* reported on the rise and "mainstreaming of far-right extremism" in "Five Years Later: Progress Slow but Steady Against Violent Extremism Since Deadly 'Unite the Right' Rally in Charlottesville."

traditionally male-dominated professional sectors, which is one of many recurring arguments.[12] In his book *Angry White Men* (2013), Michael Kimmel asserts that "[t]he 'enemies' of white American men are not really women and men of color. Our enemy is an ideology of masculinity that we inherited from our fathers, and their fathers before them, an ideology that promises unparalleled acquisition coupled with a tragically impoverished emotional intelligence" (9). The real dilemma lies in their inability to rethink their roles as men in society and to envision themselves outside of what has traditionally been categorized as male work sectors—or traditional male roles at large.

Narrating (Aging) Manhood: Creating Images

While the "crisis metaphor" has proven remarkably potent in public discourse, mainstream media also presents a range of responses that challenge dominant ideas about masculinities, including personal accounts and broader cultural critiques. In October 2020, *The Guardian*, one of many globally acclaimed news media platforms that frequently show interest in U.S. American men, launched an online project, titled "The State of Men." This project presents essays and reports that explore the complexities of contemporary U.S. American masculinities. The lead article "What Does it Mean to Be a Man in 2020?" starts with the premise that "males in the US without work are more unhappy than their peers in other wealthy nations, and experts warn that the upheaval in traditional social and economic roles will erode men's self-esteem and undermine their mental health" (Rowland et al.). Here, man is created—deliberately or not—as a victim of social change, echoing the sentiment of a recent *New York Times* op-ed, entitled "The Crisis of Men and Boys." Both pieces suggest that U.S. men, as opposed to men socialized in other cultures, are particularly vulnerable to toxic masculinities and the perils of an equity-driven society. Yet, while *The Guardian's* piece provides familiar statistics on suicides, it ultimately shifts the focus from "crisis" to vulnerability and healing. The included entries address body shaming, silent suffering, and the experiences of ethnic minorities with hegemonic masculinities.

On top of that, *Guardian* journalists Adam Gabbatt and Tom Silverstone take their audience on a "man camp" weekend in a short video entry. The camp is put together by a small group of male-only organizers who call themselves the "Sacred Sons" and claim on

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[12] In *Angry White Men*, Michael Kimmel responds somewhat polemically to this talking point: "[T]he truth is that white men are the beneficiaries of the single greatest affirmative action program in world history. It's called 'world history.' White men so stacked the deck that everyone else was pretty much excluded from playing at all. When those others did begin to play, the field was so uneven that white men got a massive head start, and everyone else had to play with enormous handicaps" (8).

their website to be "[c]o-stewarding the return of the father archetype to this planet through men's gatherings, circles, and trainings." They aim to "help men heal and awaken to their true power," striving for a "healthy masculinity." Only a few years prior, in 2016, *VICE* released a video on their *YouTube* channel, titled "The New Wave of American Masculinity." In the report, correspondent Gavin Haynes takes his viewers to one of these men's circles, called "The Brave Heart Men." The group vows to help men experience and challenge their masculinity in a nature/adventure-like environment, in the company of other men or "brothers" to dismantle the "lone wolf" myth—a reference both groups make, promoting their workshops.

These practices evoke the mythopoetic men's movement that emerged in the 1980s as a "respon[se] to women's calls for equality" (Peretz 499). Among several masculinist movements, Peretz also lists "the Boy Scouts of America" and the misogynistic online movement "Men Going Their Own Way" (499). The mythopoetic men's movement, as Peretz explains, "brought groups of men together for spiritualist retreats to perform rituals and find a tribalistic 'deep masculine' and reclaim power they perceived to be lost to feminism, post-industrial capitalism, and modernity/post-modernity" (506). Eagle argues on a similar note that

> [t]he mythopoetic movement eschewed any concrete social or political agenda, focusing instead on a therapeutic program of workshops, conferences, and wilderness retreats through which men who had become soft and unassertive in the face of feminist challenges and the lack of male role models could redress the wounds of masculinity and reconnect with a deep masculine essence." ("Men's Movements" 303)

While the contemporary "man camp" examples seek to heal their relationships with women, the parallels are striking.

Present-day groups make use of stereotypical tropes that tie masculinities to nature and adventure, emphasizing themes such as quest, the open road, and the spirit of pioneering and exploration. These staged elements and settings are steeped in symbolism, representing an ideal form of "American" manhood, rooted in a U.S. frontier masculinity. This approach has significantly contributed to the reinforcement and preservation of hegemonic masculinities in American society over time. While one circle often relies on the metaphor of a secluded cabin in the woods, the other similarly employs outdoor imagery, depicting their organizers and coaches in earthy looks, wearing western or outdoor hats, while they hold on to long wooden trekking or hiking sticks. A notable difference, however, is that the historical figure of the lonesome trapper or mountain man, portrayed in popular films like *How the West Was Won* (1962), is now encouraged to see himself as part of a community of

like-minded men. These men are willing to explore their vulnerability by embracing it and allowing other *men* to bear witness.

In the past decade, gatherings for men have become quite popular, but more importantly, they signal a departure from previous norms that are often understood as toxic and detrimental to men's ability to fully embody their masculinities. The idea has flourished that men need to shed certain toxic aspects of their masculinity to become more productive and valuable members of society, which they believe can primarily be achieved through a return to nature. This back-to-nature approach contrasts oppressive and limiting forms of masculinities with the notion of a "natural" version, which is presented as an "unproblematic" version of "masculinity" in a society that increasingly critiques men. This analogy is fundamentally flawed; it perpetuates the belief that there is a natural state of "masculinity" that connects men to nature and heavily relies on images of quest and conquest—of warriors, hunters, and gatherers—ultimately blending native and colonial spirits.

Exclusive circles are working to construct new playbooks or narratives for men in the twenty-first century that encourage them to embrace their emotions, which society often teaches them to suppress. However, these efforts frequently rely on dominant scripts that are deeply rooted in well-known U.S. American mythology. Particularly, the "frontier myth," as Heike Paul contends in *The Myths That Made America* (2014), is imbued with stereotypical images of the male explorer, the pioneer, and the cowboy, as later embodied in the Western genre by John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. It was frequently utilized for the legitimization of a political agenda and political power. Paul observes: "[P]residents, presidential candidates, and others seeking or holding office have often fashioned themselves as farmers, cowboys, or pioneers, and employed the rhetoric of the frontier myth" (343). The prominent male actors who came to embody this dominant version of the prototypical American man in U.S. culture were promoted as ideal examples of manhood, representing one stereotypical branch of U.S. American masculinity.

Alongside Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and many other politicians—Republican governor Brian Kemp, to give an additional example outside of presidential ranks—President Trump also made use of the American West metaphor in 2017 at a White House product showcase, where he was launching his endeavor to bring manufacturing back to the U.S. and promote the "Made in America" label.[13] In a video snippet that circulated widely, he enters the conference stage where some of these U.S.

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[13] In *The Wimp Factor* (2004), Stephen J. Ducat explores the images created around presidential or political masculinities and how theses correspond with archetypal, often hyper-masculine ideals such as the cowboy, the he-man, the jock, and the superhero (48ff).

products are displayed. He stops at the manufacturer of cowboy and Western headwear, who is positioned in the very front and center of the stage as a final stop in the president's explorations of products. In a presumably scripted scene, Trump bends over to the lectern to try on the bright beige/white cowboy hat, for which he is applauded by the audience.[14] At the moment he tries on the hat, a symbol of traditional U.S. American masculinities, the president creates an associative image of himself as the beloved American hero: the cowboy.

Through the circulation of cowboy imagery, as in the example of Donald Trump, or through ongoing portrayal in popular media, this type of masculinity is continuously pushed and endorsed, whether or not it is slightly repurposed, such as with the Sacred Sons.[15] In her encyclopedia entry on the U.S. cowboy, Jonna Eagle stresses the meaning and reputation of the cowboy figure and notes:

> Few figures have had as powerful and persistent an impact on representations of American masculinity as the cowboy. Popularized and romanticized during the late nineteenth century in dime novels, frontier melodramas, and Wild West shows, the cowboy became an enduring icon in the twentieth century through the influence of fiction, film, television, and advertising. [...] the cowboy has embodied the image of a rugged and authentic 'all-American' masculinity. ("Cowboys" 115)

The cowboy is just one prominent figure in American culture that has fostered the need for white male leadership. This representation of masculinity undeniably relies on a certain physicality and the demonstration of physical strength—aspects that have been frequently debated within the study of masculinities. Moreover, this type of masculinity is commonly associated with the lone wolf archetype, an image that men's circles are purportedly working to dismantle. Closely tied to this notion of the lonesome male on a quest for freedom, justice, and prosperity stands the drive for individuality that the concept of "self-made" manhood[16] relies upon, which I will explore in more detail in the following chapter.

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[14] To access the full video, see the clip "President Trump Participates in a Made in America Product Showcase" on the White House *YouTube* channel.

[15] Various examples from U.S. visual culture demonstrate a repurposing of the cowboy image that challenges the idea that this figure is confined to a heteronormative, white male context. Notable works include *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Django Unchained* (2012), *Westworld* (2016), or *Godless* (2017).

[16] In *Manhood in America* (2006), Kimmel defines the self-made man as opposed to previous dominant masculinities that are tied to landownership: "At the turn of the nineteenth century, American manhood was rooted in landownership (the Genteel Patriarch) or in the self-possession of the independent artisan, shopkeeper, or farmer (the Heroic Artisan). In the first few decades of the nineteenth century, though, the Industrial Revolution had a critical effect on those earlier definitions. American men began to link their sense of themselves as men to their position in the volatile marketplace, to their economic success—a far less stable yet far more exciting and potentially rewarding peg upon which to hang one's identity. The Self-Made Man of American mythology was born anxious and insecure, uncoupled from the more stable anchors of landownership or workplace autonomy. Now manhood had to be proved. This 'self-maker, self-improving, is always a construction in progress,' writes cultural historian Garry Wills. 'He must ever be tinkering, improving, adjusting; starting over, fearful his product will get out of date, or rot in the storehouse'" (6).

But where, in this current landscape of old and new representations of the masculine, does the aging male stand? Do public images of masculinities make no room at all for male aging experiences? Where in society is aging made visible, and for what purposes? And can aging then only be conceptualized outside the categories of "masculinity," as noted within academic discourse in the past?

A look at the currently most prominent representatives of this category—Joseph R. Biden and Donald J. Trump, who competed for the highest political office in the U.S. in 2020—reveals how both shaped their public identities around ideals of youthful masculinities. This raises the question of whether aging is still regarded by men as a shameful fate, to be concealed for as long as bio-medical bodily realities have not evidently eroded the facade of a vital and youthful male persona. In the long months leading up to election day/week, both Trump and Biden were frequent targets of negative commentary about their physical and mental fitness, prompting public debate over whether either candidate, given their ages and health, was suitable for the presidency in the first place.[17] Before them, Bernie Sanders, then one of the oldest presidential candidates, had similarly been criticized as 'too old to run.'[18] In line with this broader national conversation on aging, and despite critics' vocal insistence that their concerns were not rooted in ageism, a parallel discourse unfolded on social media, particularly on *Twitter* and *TikTok*. The catchphrase "Ok, Boomer" turned into an international phenomenon and constitutes the viral expression of a generational conflict that is said to have turned into a proper war of generations (Filipovic 1). The internet exploded with "Ok, Boomer" memes.

Ok, Boomer: Caricature/s of the Aging Male

The *white* male Boomer has perhaps been the most visible "old man" since November 2019 and has since left a negative footprint globally.[19] While this Boomer-criticism in the form of

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[17] Joe Biden has been portrayed as a dement, aging figure before he won against Bernie Sanders in the 2020 primaries. Soon after he emerged from the primaries as the Democratic presidential candidate, mainstream media struggled to find a balance between debating Biden's stamina or applauding his endurance in comparison to Trump's.

[18] Renowned media organizations such as *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Boston Globe* have not only substantially contributed to the "too old" debate in politics but have essentially painted Sanders in an extremely negative light. A February 2020 article by Kevin Cullen, for instance, is titled "In This Discontented Winter, Bernie Sanders Isn't Too Left. He's Too Old."

[19] While there are certainly other Baby Boomers (particularly white cisgender females), who have shared the stage with their male counterparts, they have not been examined individually in critical discussions. Several factors might explain this oversight, such as the fact that political power is predominately held by older white men in the U.S. or the fact that it was an older white man who originally set the Boomer "shitstorm" in motion in the first place.

witty/sarcastic memes erupted on *TikTok* and was carried to several other social media platforms, it is not an entirely new discourse, nor is it one that can be chiefly tied to the 2019 *TikTok* meme. Instead, the Boomer generation has been at the center of critical attention for at least a decade, if not longer, and Boomers have, among other things, been accused of denying climate change, systemic racism, and the gender pay gap. But the catchphrase "Ok, Boomer" only became a viral phenomenon after a young TikToker used it in response to a video featuring an older white man who claimed that Millennials suffer from the Peter Pan syndrome, which prevents them from growing up and taking responsibility.[20] The Boomer-blame, however, surfaced at a time when "old white man" disparagement was growing stronger in society due to President Trump's contested environmental, immigration, gender, or health care policies. Donald Trump, though not the only aging politician who was acting against the interests of a rising Millennial workforce, became the number one Boomer and arguably caused an even greater rift, or, as it was exaggerated in U.S. media, a generational war.

In an attempt to contextualize the phrase and perhaps initiate a dialogue, Jill Filipovic's 2020 book *OK Boomer, Let's Talk* uncovers the more serious side of Millennial frustration with the Boomer generation. She points out that Millennials have come of age in precarious circumstances: Among many other things, they enter the job market with enormous student debts, they had to live through one economic crash only to be hit by a global pandemic, and their "financial lives have been stymied by the slowest economic growth any American generation has ever seen, while opportunities for Millennials of color have been further constrained by widespread incarceration, the methodical thwarting of generational wealth-building, and systemic discrimination in hiring and pay" (Filipovic 10). In summary, Filipovic notes: "'OK Boomer' […] is a final, frustrated dismissal from people suffering years of political and economic neglect" (12).

This is a generation severely affected by the decisions of those who hold political and financial power, predominantly well-off white conservative men. But the Boomer memes, as well as the "old white man" generalization, have also been rebuked as an ageist practice that relies on stereotypical mimicry of aging traits and goes beyond political and cultural criticism; these outcries have been most emphatic in *Fox* media and right-wing conservative outlets. In reaction to the phrase going viral, conservative radio host Bob Lonsberry, for instance, declared in a tweet that "'Boomer' is the n-word of ageism." He was rightfully met with opposition and reprimand for drawing this vile comparison. Nonetheless, Filipovic explains

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[20] For further information on the video and its response, see Taylor Lorenz's *New York Times* article "'OK Boomer' Marks the End of Friendly Generational Relations" (2019).

that this is an expected reaction from a right-wing think-tank and reflects the anti-Millennial bias that *Fox News* has been promoting on its network over the years (13).

Criticisms from Millennials and the following generation, which has become increasingly engaged in political matters (youth voter turnout surged in the 2020 election), are certainly reasoned. However, the largely negative viral representation of older men and the Baby Boomer generation could significantly shape perceptions of old age and aging in the years to come. The elderly, predominantly "old white men," are filed away and stigmatized as scapegoats. And the image that is generated and reproduced, disregarding the nuance of class and ethnic or religious backgrounds, generally fuels the victim narrative of the disenfranchised "old white man" that has heavily relied on the long-existent and frequently revived crisis metaphor. Historically, representations of aging men in culture have often been negative, portraying them as tragic caricatures and ultimately leading to their invisibility. In today's cultural landscape, the Boomer-meme might provoke even more antagonisms, especially coming from the neo/conservative camp that associates with Donald Trump. The memes are a sometimes fitting, sometimes inflated reaction to years of public Millennial bashing and rebuking (Filipovic 14-15). Finally, they also perform a stigmatizing function on a heterogeneous group of elders who have been perceived negatively throughout history.

The stigmatization and over-representation of the aging male in public spheres, however, stand in contrast to the removal of aging bodies that have been subject to scrutiny within aging studies. The twenty-first century has made aging male bodies more visible than they have ever been. Yet, this century has not only brought out critical representations of the "old white man," it has, for the most part, provided society with a plethora of stereotypical aging representations in cinema and on streaming sites, occasionally offering a more complex portrayal of aging masculinities inspired by a growing demand.[21] The recurrence of old-day heroes like Indiana Jones and Luke Skywalker, the revival of iconic hyper-masculine characters like Rambo or Rocky Balboa, as well as the invention of new overly-masculine characters like Randy Robinson in *The Wrestler* (2008), or all the figures in *The Expendables* franchise, has boomed since the millennium. These cultural texts depict the return of the American hero, aged but still in excellent shape; this, to some degree, includes late-life performances by Clint Eastwood in *Gran Torino* (2008) or, more recently, *The Mule* (2018).

Alex Hobbs observes specifically regarding the action genre: "While *The Expendables* boasts more and older action stars, it pays little attention to issues of aging beyond a few

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[21] Alex Hobbs explains how the aging Boomer population has created a shift in cinema productions. Hollywood, although slightly more delayed than other industries, has finally recognized the market value in aging cinema (11-12).

wisecracks about their older bodies" (Hobbs 13). Other genres like romance, family, but most notably drama, have allowed for more intricate representations of male aging that try to grapple with "old age" concerns. Alexander Payne's highly acclaimed film *Nebraska* (2013), for instance, serves as a window into late-life struggles: dementia and other bio-medical bodily issues, retirement, financial dependency and shortage, nursing facilities, immobility, relationships, the need for social interaction, and much more. The film thus positions itself as a counterexample to the artificial hyper-masculine and fast-paced illustrations of aging in action and adventure genres.[22]

As the Baby Boomer generation reaches old age, markets have recognized the financial potential of depicting aging. A similar trend can be observed in literary fiction, where the industry has made strides in representing aging characters, particularly through the works of pre-Boomer novelists like John Updike, Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Saul Bellow, John Barth, and Alan Isler—all of whom, except for Bellow, were born in the 1930s. These writers often focus on themes related to aging masculinities. Additionally, Ernest Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* (1952) functions as an early example of a literary genre centered on the experiences of aging white males and mirrors the private contemplations of white male U.S. writers as they approach or enter old age.

Hobbs categorizes these fictions as "Late Writing," also referred to as "Late Style." This term describes "a creative period that has been considered largely in terms of composers and artists rather than writers" (27).[23] While she acknowledges that there are well-known aging male writers whose late fictions are not primarily concerned with themes surrounding aging masculinities, the most iconic U.S. novelists such as Updike, Roth, McCarthy, or DeLillo have increasingly incorporated topics related to aging into their writing as they themselves aged. This trend has resulted in predominantly "biographical readings" by critics (27ff). Based on these fictional portrayals of aging masculinities, writers who belong to the Boomer generation, like Richard Powers, Paul Auster, or Jonathan Franzen, continue to explore the themes of male aging in their own texts as they move further into the twenty-first century. Hobbs lists the latter under "[a]nticipating old age" and examines their fictions by applying the "Well Elder"/"Frail Elder" tropes to the aging men depicted in their works.[24]

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[22] For more insights into popular media representations of aging masculinities at the beginning of the twenty-first century, see Alex Hobbs' book *Aging Masculinity in the American Novel* (2016).

[23] Edward Said's "On Late Style" is perhaps the most important text that defines the concept of "Late Style," illustrating this category with various examples from music and the visual arts.

[24] The tropes were first introduced in the anthology essay titled "Shakespeare Teaching Geriatrics: Lear and Prospero as Case Studies in Aged Heterogeneity" (1999) written by Kirk Combe and Kenneth Schmader. In their analysis, they categorize aging characters in Shakespearean texts in two groups: those who are vital and active (Well Elder), and those who are unwell and marked by bodily deterioration (Frail Elder).

Though Hobbs makes a categorical distinction between the "two" generations of writers, their fictions about aging do not differ dramatically from each other and are difficult to separate because they make use of the same tropes, themes, and narrative elements. They can be understood as part of a genre that constructs male aging through the category of the "old white man" trope. And this construct, on the one hand, relies on stereotypical representations of senescence that are strictly tied to memento mori symbolisms of time, decay, death, and evanescence. But they are equally bound up in conventional ideas of hegemonic masculinities and the presumption that older men are devoid of "masculinity," thus outside of the constructed normative category of masculinity. Recent theoretical developments in both aging and critical masculinities—along with emerging intersectional approaches—aim to better understand how these socially constructed categories interact and manifest in social environments. This work has led to more critical examinations of hegemonic masculinities and ageism.

Becoming Visible: Aging Studies and Gerontology

The bio-medical field has shown an interest in aging bodies since the nineteenth century. However, according to Heike Hartung and Rüdiger Kunow, it is not until the early twenty-first century that U.S. American studies and cultural studies began to establish aging theory as a formal discipline (15f). Since then, a significant body of critical work has emerged that explores how aging is represented in cultural texts and, consequently, how it is perceived in society. Aging studies aim to challenge established notions of aging and the negatively connoted category of "old age." Kunow proposes several politically correct alternatives for this term, including "chronologically gifted," "senescence," "later life," or "elderhood," though none of these have gained widespread acceptance in academic discourse ("Chronically Gifted" 23).[25] Accordingly, "[t]he cultural experience of senescence has often been organized around practices of neglect, invisibility, even outright denial. […] Old people are perceived (and often wrongfully so) as either having or being withdrawn from the overall interactional processes of society and culture" (Hartung and Kunow 16). They are constructed as "other," classified as unproductive, and ultimately shunned or ridiculed.

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[25] Kunow elaborates that certain terms are "suggestive, symbolically dense signifiers that merge the descriptive with the prescriptive and in doing so perform important cultural work. Moreover, they are also saturated with affect: Very few people speak about 'old age' (their own or another person's) with equanimity" ("Chronically Gifted" 23). While some of these proposed terms have gained traction within aging studies, the use of "old age" has persisted. Although this term may carry negative connotations, the critical fields that deal with aging have yet to reach a consensus on alternative terminology.

Furthermore, Hartung and Kunow explain the historical development of the field and the process of "othering:"

> While senescence became an ever more sharply demarcated characteristic of the life course in EurAmerican modernity, and the power of defining it shifted from religiously sanctioned traditions and institutions to various forms of scientific inquiry (gerontology and biomedicine) and social management (care regimes, entitlement programs), the predominant negative valuation of old age remained almost unchanged. (16)

Aging studies subsequently attempt to uncover and understand these processes and the attitudes that society assumes toward its elders. The field examines how "[i]conographies and representations mark changes in social and cultural perceptions and have very real consequences in terms of social, political and cultural practice" (Kriebernegg and Maierhofer 9), for instance, concerning city planning, pension plans, and health care.

Ulla Kriebernegg and Roberta Maierhofer also point to the general negative view of old age or aging that is conceived in opposition to the young and youth. Drawing on Kathleen Woodward's book *Aging and Its Discontents* (1991), they state that "[c]ultural representations of age remain locked in primarily negative stereotypes, whereas youth, subjectively speaking, remains a remarkably fluid and seemingly almost infinitely expandable category, it is a moveable marker" (10). This notion echoes Susan Sontag's earlier thoughts on aging, a category that is constructed in a capitalist twentieth-century context geared toward generating more production and consumption. "Youth," Sontag exclaims, "is a metaphor for energy, restless mobility, appetite: for the state of 'wanting'" (31). Consequently, "[t]his equating of well-being with youth makes everyone naggingly aware of exact age—one's own and that of other people" (31).

In contrast, old age is often perceived as life-less, marked by stagnation or a slow decline toward death. Society tends to perceive the "old" as unable to contribute to the productivity of the state or consume at the same levels as before, due to economic challenges, such as small pensions or immobility.[26] Sontag compares the experience of the aging female with the aging male, challenging the notion that aging is more difficult for men. Her reflections not only validate the feminist-driven approach in aging studies but also bring to light that aging is inherently a gendered experience. This experience is shaped by socio-political realities as well as bio-medical challenges associated with the body. While different genders experience aging in distinct ways, it remains debatable whether one experience is more significant or demanding than the other.

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[26] Online shopping, however, has facilitated limitless consumption available for people at all life stages. In what ways this expanded access has changed older people's consumer-based decisions has not yet been fully examined within academia.

Representations of aging and old age have increasingly entered mainstream culture, driven by the market's response to a growing elderly population. Additionally, aging studies and gerontology have become more involved in critiquing and analyzing the ways older individuals are perceived and depicted in U.S. culture. Research on male aging usually notes that feminism granted visibility to the aging white female, but that aging men remain invisible at the end of the twentieth century and have only slowly, with the rise of studies on masculinities, been subject to academic scrutiny. In "Imagining the Aging of Men" (1995), Jeff Hearn outlines:

> Concerns about older people have […] frequently remained ungendered. When gender has been 'brought in', it has often been in terms of the growing numbers of older women. Less often has there been an explicit focus on the category of 'older men'. This applies in policy debate, and in popular discussion, and indeed in sociological and other social science literature. (98)

"Ungendered" obviously hints at a previous discriminatory practice through which older people, especially older women, were perceived as genderless. According to this misleading view, older people are all concerned with the same issues, despite their gender, race, or class.

Subsequently, this raises the questions: How is this genderless standard measured and determined? Is the white male considered the standard in such a reductionist model? Have aging masculinities ever been invisible, or have they always been visible, merely concealed behind the normalizing linguistic term: old people? Thus, I assume that pre-aging studies, whenever science spoke about "old people," it referred to old men. While this is a speculative claim based on comparisons with similar practices in fields like medicine, and observations by scholars such as Alan Petersen,[27] Hearn is correct in asserting that the "old man" has received relatively little media and scholarly attention at the end of the twentieth century, especially when compared to the rising visibility of aging women in academic circles.

Hearn attributes the increased focus on representation to the ongoing demographic shift, hence, a growing population of the elderly. He notes: "The issue of older people is of growing political importance. Contemporary concerns come partly from governmental interest about the aging population—and their cost" ("Imagining the Aging of Men" 97). More than two decades later, this is still predominantly the case. Pre-Covid, the *United States Census Bureau* predicted that "in 2030, when all boomers will be older than 65, older Americans will make up 21 percent of the population, up from 15 percent today"[28]—a

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[27] Petersen notes in *Unmasking the Masculine: 'Men' and 'Identity' in a Sceptical Age* (1998) that "since the nineteenth century, the bodies of white, European, middle-class and heterosexual men have been constructed as the standard for measuring and evaluating all bodies" (16).

[28] The numbers I refer to were reported in 2017. For more information, see the *United States Census Bureau* website.

dramatic growth in total numbers.[29] Nonetheless, the numbers primarily reflect the basic needs and necessities of the elderly and indicate the social duties a democratic government must fulfill to provide for an aging population. They reveal little, however, about the lived realities of aging. While cultural representations of older adults have multiplied, whether in film or series, on magazine covers, on television, on social media, the core discussion on aging bodies remains centered on technicalities like pensions, health care, and other governmental worries, such as how to provide care for the elderly in the twenty-first century.

Globally, the Covid crisis has demonstrated how far governments are willing to go to protect their older populations, who were early on recognized as the group most at risk of dying from the virus (e.g., Italy). This newfound responsibility is a rather recent phenomenon in the Western history of the treatment of elders. In her famous but also much-criticized book *The Coming of Age* (1970), Simone de Beauvoir traces the historical changes in the treatment and perception of the old. Her study is based on the premise that "[t]he economy is founded upon profit; and […] the entire civilization is ruled by profit. The human working stock is of interest only in so far as it is profitable. When it is no longer profitable it is tossed aside" (6). This statement and study, which is later repeated in Sontag's research, provided a fruitful ground for aging studies or gerontology to emerge and insist on the development of societal structures that ensure a more compassionate treatment of the elderly, painting aging in a more positive, or at least not in an exclusively negative light.

Along similar lines, but specifically concerning the aging male, Hearn examines changes in the labor market in light of industrialization and states that, among other things, the introduction of state pensions has contributed to a shift in the perception of aging men's roles in society. Once accepted as patriarchs and hegemons, post-industrial older men appear to have lost their former standing. In pre-industrial societies, Hearn notes, "'maleness' and 'age(dness)' were usually mutually reinforcing and reaffirming as means to power. The age of men is often related to both the generalized power of men, and men's power over descendants and dependents" ("Imagining the Aging of Men" 100). The installation of a retirement system "has formed a 'subclass' of older men" (100). Although retired men have historically been, and still are, financially better off than retired women, "the occupational structuring of 'retired' older men has been greatly complicated by 'early retirement', 'voluntary severance', 'retirement at 50', and 'no jobs for life'" (101). As a result, older bodies are increasingly set in opposition to younger, more productive ones, and due to men's lower life expectancy compared to women, "[o]lder men are constructed as pre-death" (101).

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[29] Whether Covid contributed to repressing this trend is to be examined in the coming years, depending on the total deaths in connection to the virus and how it affects older demographics.

Hearn concludes that older men have become "relatively redundant, even invisible, not just in terms of paid work and family responsibilities, but more importantly in terms of life itself" (101). This negative perception of older men has been further reinforced by public discourse, which continues to center around themes of "retirement and redundancy" (103). Within this framework, younger—or what we might now call middle-aged—men are often seen as the holders of hegemonic powers, in stark contrast to the "old man," who is increasingly perceived as lacking agency and authority. This dynamic has significantly contributed to the ongoing negative perception of old age.

In her earlier research on aging, de Beauvoir provides valuable insights into the development of gerontology, a field not only concerned with the bio-medical conditions and what she terms the "pathological," but also with "the ageing process itself" (23). To this, we might add the social components, including perceptions, representations, and lived experiences of the elderly. She also sketches a "history of old age" (88), drawing on mythology, representations in various cultural texts, and other historical data to illustrate how different societies have treated their elders over time. Importantly, she explains how difficult, indeed "impossible," it is to provide a complete history of global aging: "The written evidence that we have very rarely mentions them [elderly]: they are included in the general category of adults. In mythology, in literature and in representative art we do obtain a certain picture of old age: this picture varies according to the century and to the place" (88). Hence, she argues that much of what we know comes from "privileged classes," which distorts the "real" image and experience of aging (88). Nonetheless, de Beauvoir's work gives a comprehensive account of the best-studied periods in Western culture, exploring depictions of aging in Roman times and the Middle Ages through to the mid-twentieth century. Her ultimate assessment of the situation is stark: in the second half of the twentieth century, "the condition of old people […] is scandalous" (216). Within this context, she identifies the "old man" as "defined by an *axis*, not by a *praxis*: a being, not a doing. Time is carrying him towards an end—death—which is not *his* and which is not postulated or laid down by any project" (217).

While de Beauvoir anticipates a demographic shift and underscores the increasing governmental responsibilities in caring for the elderly, she also notes that "[o]ld age has become an object of a policy" (222), which is later reiterated and highlighted in Hearn's observations. Crucially, de Beauvoir offers a detailed exploration of the status and experience of "old men," particularly the implication of their loss of power. She examines a variety of areas such as housing, labor conditions, financial standing, family relations, retirement, and so on. On what appears to be one of the most important topics, namely retirement, de Beauvoir elucidates the dramatic turn that the old man (as well as the old husband)

undergoes. "Retirement brings a radical break into a man's life," she writes. "[H]e is entirely cut off from his past and he has to adapt himself to a new status. This status does bring certain advantages such as rest and leisure, but also serious disadvantages—it makes him poorer and it disqualifies him" (262).

Emphasizing her reading of the consequences of retirement, she alludes to prominent American writer Ernest Hemingway in a text passage that captures the essence of *The Old Man and the Sea*: "Hemingway said that the worst death for anyone was the loss of what formed the centre of his life and made him what he really was. […] Whether we chose it or whether we were compelled by fate, retiring, giving up one's calling—the calling that made us what we were—was the same as going down to the grave" (262). More recent research looks back on the notions that de Beauvoir explored in her early study. The research and the growing scholarly and public debates generated a cultural awareness of retirement and the stigmatization of old age, and resulted in the installation of pensions.

In one such recent study, at a time when aging studies gained traction, Arber et al. provide knowledge on the role retirement plays in the life of an older man. They sum up the discourse as follows:

> Retirement from paid employment has been described as the transitional period between paid work and death following withdrawal from familiar occupational and social worlds inhabited as a 'full' member of society. Leaving the occupational 'breadwinner' role, and the concomitant loss of a community of co-workers, can serve to weaken a man's sense of his male identity. In addition, possible loss of sexual potency, diminishing physical strength and the onset of ill health can further reduce his esteem in both his own eyes and those of society. For older men, the traditional discourse of masculinity has perforce to be realigned to accommodate the changing roles and relationships created by altered life circumstances, particularly retirement. (5)

And though their research comments on the possible implications of retirement, it also points to several other aging-related issues that may affect male self-perception and create a devalued view of aging masculinities. The scholars note possible losses in old age that stem from bio-medical aspects of aging, such as impotency or the decline of physical strength. These losses have become increasingly relevant in studies that seek to bridge aging and masculinities, often serving as markers of change and physical limitation. Investigating aging as a gendered experience not only explicitly renders the aging male visible and his experience valid, but also invites critical reflection on the masculine ideal—an ideal that aging male bodies often fail to fulfill. Subsequently, Hearn suggests that "a focus on older men may problematize dominant forms of men and masculinities, including hegemonic masculinities" ("Imagining the Aging of Men" 98).

To conclude this survey, Anna Tarrant's contribution to the 2020 *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* proves helpful. Tarrant sketches the past twenty-five years of theory on aging masculinities and declares, in contrast to Hearn's mid-nineties outcry over the lack of scholarship, that the field is now fully established (192). By now, "a modest and increasingly coherent interdisciplinary literature has addressed men's experiences of ageing as a gendered process, refining theories of ageing masculinities that better explain some of the contestations of older men's identities as they are enacted and experienced in a diverse range of arenas of social life" (192). Yet she also outlines that in the case of critical masculinities, it has been a long way from a field that exclusively focused on young male bodies to one that takes aging experiences into account, even centers on them (193).

Aging studies have historically focused more heavily on the female, as pointed out by Hearn, Sontag, and others—recent work has begun to address the underexplored experiences of older men. In this context, Tarrant examines the cultural representations of older men, particularly in advertising. She critiques the ageist notion of "successful aging," which is primarily shaped by an "anti-aging" rhetoric that frames aging as undesirable—something to be resisted or concealed. This critique also contributed to the ongoing critical discourse within aging studies regarding representations of "positive" aging. Tarrant further addresses health concerns specific to aging men, examining how their experiences with illness and health issues are informed by their self-perception in relation to dominant notions of masculinities. She discusses various topics, including community, care, sexuality, and the implications of retirement or losing one's job. All of these topics are crucial in understanding aging and masculinities and will be explored in greater detail in the next section on theories relating to critical masculinities.

Hegemonic Masculinities and Aging

Like the research on aging, theories of masculinities have come a long way. What began with a narrow focus on "hegemonic masculinity" has expanded into a broader field that is now concerned with the analysis and scrutiny of diverse forms of masculinities (in the plural).[30] This diversity gives voice to those who have been marginalized or negatively impacted by circulating dominant ideals—ideals that remain largely recognized as heteronormative, white, youth-centered, economically accomplished versions and that set the tone throughout most of the twentieth century. But the concept of hegemonic masculinity is not exclusively tied to these dominant Western notions of manhood. And today, scholars agree that, in fact,

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[30] See, for instance, Connell's discussion of the field and the terminology in *Masculinities* (2005).

"hegemonic masculinity should not be considered a fixed, transhistorical concept; instead, it is 'constituted by an amalgam of practices, values and meanings and realized in particular places and contexts'" (Tarrant 194).

Therefore, we cannot speak of *one* dominant version of "masculinity." Instead, there are, of course, multiple forms of masculinities that are manifested as ideals—oftentimes fixed in a singular form—against which men define their masculine identity, their gender roles, their value and standing in socio-political contexts. One of the most prominent scholars in the field, alongside Raewyn Connell and Michael Kimmel, is Jeff Hearn. Hearn outlines that there are many ways to practice critical masculinities based on varying motivations, and one of them can be to stress masculine voices and theoretically uphold a dominant position. From a more critical, perhaps equity-oriented standpoint, he proposes to rename the discipline from "masculinity studies" to "Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities" (CSMM) because "[i]nstitutionally, CSMM, not just any old studies on men and masculinities, are now deeply articulated with, and at times integrated into, Women's and Gender Studies, Sexuality Studies, Transgender Studies, and Critical Race Theory" ("So What Has Been" 57).[31]

Despite the rebrandings and theoretical expansions of the field,[32] the concept of hegemonic masculinity remains crucial for the (sub)discipline focused on masculinities. Any discourse on manhood is ultimately inseparable from configurations of power structures. While the concept has been widely debated among scholars, Connell adheres to its value and importance: "In my view we still require a way of theorizing gendered power relations among men, and understanding the effectiveness of masculinities in the legitimation of the gender order. This is necessary if theories of masculinity are to connect with wider theories of gender and are to have any grip on practical issues such as the prevention of violence" (*Masculinities* xviii).

This position is reiterated in Richard Howson and Jeff Hearn's recent essay "Hegemony, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Beyond" (2020), in which they offer a fresh view on the theory. They pick up on the notion that "hegemony and hegemonic masculinity […] are both considered as social constructions, and therefore neither exists because there is something essential that enables their constitution. Further, neither is ever stable and

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[31] In "Is Everything Compatible? A Feminist Critique of Hearn's Composite Approach to Men and Masculinity" (2018), Kalle Berggren critiques Hearn's perspective on masculinity studies for not adequately addressing feminist viewpoints of the field, particularly regarding the deconstruction of terminology such as "man/men." Hearn's 2019 essay can be read as a response to such critiques. I propose naming the field "critical masculinities" instead, to focus on masculinities in Connell's and Messerschmidt's sense as "configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action" (836), thus avoiding allusions to definitions of biological sex.
[32] Throughout this project, I refer to the scholarly discourse concerned with the study of masculinities—especially those grounded in feminist, intersectional, and anti-hegemonic perspectives—as "critical masculinities." This terminology emphasizes the field's sustained critique of dominant gender norms and its efforts to interrogate the political, social, and cultural constructions of masculinities.

coherent, and, as such, neither can claim to be universal and/or continuing" (41). Their analysis introduces the concept of the "*foundationalist* position," which constitutes "the existence of 'something' essential, stable, even universal, about masculinity that enables men to act within a continuous system of gendered privilege/importance/authority that cannot and so 'should' not be questioned" (41-42). Hegemony, in this view, relies on the belief in an innate and unquestionable superiority presumed to be natural to the group or individual in power: the hegemon. This unshakable assumption has kept hegemonic masculinities in positions of privilege in society, permeating all private and structural levels of political and social organization. Patriarchy was successfully established as a key gatekeeper in maintaining and legitimizing male authority.

The quasi-unwritten law sketched above helps illuminate the perceived crisis many U.S. American men are currently experiencing—what Michael Kimmel terms "sense of entitlement."[33] In *Angry White Men* (2013), Kimmel explores the historical development of straight white male privilege in post-WWII U.S. society and argues that rage now manifests as a primary response to the loss of privilege. Kimmel notes that white U.S. American men find themselves more often in diverse and pluralistic spaces, and he predicts that "the sense of entitlement—that sense that although I may not be in power at the moment, I deserve to be, and if I'm not, something is definitely wrong—[…] is coming to an end." (*Angry White Men* xiii-xiv). What he identifies as "'aggrieved entitlement'—that sense of entitlement that can no longer be assumed and that is unlikely to be fulfilled" (xiv), reflects a collective response to the loss of a sociopolitical and economic order in which straight white men were long the main beneficiaries. According to Kimmel, this previously domineering group reacts to the feeling of "dispossession" with anger and rage. "Aggrieved entitlement," he explains further,

> is that sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by unseen forces larger and more powerful. You feel yourself to be the heir to a great promise, the American Dream, which has turned into an impossible fantasy for the very people who were *supposed* to inherit it. And where did they get the idea that it actually *is* their 'God-given right' to begin with? (18)

At this point, the notion of a "*foundationalist* position" and "aggrieved entitlement" complement each other and give insights into the ideology that has guided men time and again to ratify their hegemonic position. This ideology has certainly become visible and more

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[33] Kimmel defines "sense of entitlement" as follows: "[It] seems to be specific to middle- and upper-class white men. It exposes something important about these legions of angry white men: although they still have most of the power and control in the world, they feel like victims. Although it's true that everyone needs to be a victim to even stand a chance of being heard in today's political arena, the white-man-as-victim comes with a certain self-righteous anger that makes it distinct" (*Angry White Men* 17).

militant during the Trump administration. In this context, critical masculinities or critical studies on men and masculinities (CSMM) function as a "discursive space in which is contained a set of tools capable of critically exposing, examining and evaluating the social conditions that produce and sustain men and masculinity" (Howson and Hearn 42).

In the endeavor to fathom the position and experiences of aging men, theories of hegemonic masculinities and aggrieved entitlement are crucial analytical tools for the interpretation of cultural texts. It is essential to examine how aging masculinities are situated within the broader gender order and whether they, too, experience marginalization and displacement from hegemonic status, thus joining a long list of "othered" or socially devalued groups. The position of the "old white man" appears to be one betwixt and between. Historically, a principal beneficiary of white male privilege—he does not experience a complete loss of that privilege—the old white man is increasingly pushed into a subordinate status. He is devalued through several occurring social and physical losses commonly associated with old age, such as the loss of purpose or direction, professional identity, physical vigor and vitality, bodily function, economic means, and time. These cumulative losses mark his shifting status and complicate his relationship to traditional hegemonic masculinity.

These accumulating losses at the threshold of old age thus expose the limitations of masculine hegemonic rule and suggest that "hegemonic masculinity" is a constructed category that relies on continual maintenance and the active regulation of membership. As aging progresses, the characteristics and abilities that define most accepted Western forms of dominant masculinities—such as physical strength, professional authority, sexual potency, and economic independence—are gradually eroded. What remains is a figure increasingly perceived as a "pre-death" version of the masculine ideal, caught in a state of lamentation and aggrieved entitlement. And while the "old white man" experiences structural disadvantages in later life, it is precisely his symbolic fall from this historical power category that fuels ideas of crisis and victimization.

In her 2006 essay "Never-Aging Stories," Gabriela Spector-Mersel places particular focus on "lifespan time." In her study of aging masculinities, she proposes to "define masculinities as culturally evaluated scripts that offer life-guidelines to individual men, in a particular society and historical time" (71). Her study is driven by the premise that the notion of time remains underrepresented in scholarship on aging masculinities and she stresses the importance of this category: "The assessment of how much time is behind us and how much time we are left with, is the basic prism through which we evaluate our lives, interpret our past and plan our future" (70). Accordingly, she claims that "masculinities are bound to social clocks that ascribe different models of manhood to different periods in men's lives" (70).

Spector-Mersel situates these evolving models within the frame of a "narrative" (script or plot) that offers a more nuanced, temporally grounded understanding of masculine identity as it unfolds across the lifespan.

In this theoretical body of work, Spector-Mersel suggests the use of what she calls "hegemonic masculinity scripts," which she defines as "cultural exemplary-plots that draw social clocks for masculinity, determining diverse contents of desired manhood at different points in a man's life" (71). Her theory tries to bridge aging masculinities with narrative theory while elevating time as "one of [the] key definers [of masculinity]" (70). Narration is positioned as a significant and highly influential element in the construction of identities. This mirrors a prominent discourse within narratology studies on how the self is, for instance, shaped by and constructed through cultural narratives.[34] Finally, Spector-Mersel applies her theory to aging masculinities and concludes that "Western masculine scripts are not designed for elderly men, and thus are concluded somewhere before 'old age'" (73).

In my project, these reflections on the functions of narratives are of central importance. It is helpful to reflect on Hanne Laceulle's work here as well, who discusses the notion of self-identification through cultural narrative in her 2018 study, *Aging and Self-Realization: Cultural Narratives about Later Life*. In the book, she examines dominant narratives of decline or "[c]ultural (master) narratives and their role in identity-building" (64). Laceulle understands cultural narratives as "agglomerates of stories, imaginaries, meanings, representations, archetypes, views and stock images existing in a certain culture about a social group." These narratives "are disseminated in a given culture through various means, and they pervade our lifeworld in a sometimes conscious, but also often largely unconscious manner" (64). The constant confrontation with these narratives shapes how we view ourselves and others (64-65). Consequently, she states that these "narratives are thereby indispensable meaning-generating resources without which we cannot form a viable identity" (65).[35]

On that note, it is crucial to point to the power of "decline narratives," which "equate the aging process with an inevitable and steady decay" (79). Decline narratives are reductionist, framing aging—not as a neutral or varied experience—but through negative associations that reduce "older people's life experiences to a saddening story of inevitable

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[34] To get a concise idea of how narration and identity intersect, see the "Identity and Narration" entry by Michael Bamberg on *the living handbook of narratology* website.

[35] Laceulle points to Lindemann Nelson's definition of "master narratives" and explains accordingly: "Any given culture harbors a diverse array of cultural narratives, but some narratives have a more dominant position than others. Lindemann Nelson (2001) describes these as 'master narratives.' [...] [C]ultural master narratives [are] [...] 'the stories circulating in our culture that embody socially shared understandings" (65).

decay" (80-81). While Laceulle discusses decline narratives in a more general context, I will apply her theory specifically to my selected texts to analyze how the depictions of the "old white man" in U.S. American literature both reflect and potentially reinforce cultural decline narratives, thereby shaping societal images of aging masculinities. As I examine these later works by prominent U.S. American authors, it is important to engage with both theoretical approaches, especially since the recent surge of aging representations marks a relatively new focus within cultural discourse.

Even though representations of aging have shifted in recent years, Spector-Mersel's assumptions remain deeply intertwined with the rise and development of ageism. In line with de Beauvoir, Sontag, Hearn, and other scholars in the field, she recognizes significant force in the reorganization of human value in light of modernization, industrialization, and capitalism, which she couples with the occurrence of gerontophobia (74). "Above all," she claims, "ageism is a result of Western values" (74). Within this value system, older individuals were increasingly marked as "others," while "the young" were manifested as an ideal (74-75). This generational juxtaposition—between the idealized young and the marginalized old—is another recurring feature in literature on aging masculinities, as I will demonstrate in my discussions of the U.S. American novels explored in this study. Spector-Mersel further critiques the existence of one homogeneous plot and states that "[i]n terms of the lifespan time, the hegemonic gender scripts are severely interrupted. While in relation to younger phases of life they provide clear recipes of how to be a 'true man' or an 'ideal woman', the fundamental contrast between old age and Western ideals does not allow for the elaboration of such formulas for later life" (75). In addition, she reviews the cultural and scholarly invisibility of the aging male at the turn of the century, echoing and building on Hearn.

While Spector-Mersel's criticisms were particularly salient more than a decade ago, scholarship at the intersection of gender and aging has since made notable strides. For instance, recent research now differentiates between different phases of old age and elaborates more on specific temporal points in late or (concerning masculinities) post-retirement life. In our current moment, where "old white men" have become increasingly visible in cultural as well as academic discourse, Spector-Mersel's theoretical framework needs to be revised to fit the contemporary context of detested Boomers and forgotten elders. In this revised context, the role of decline narratives plays a crucial part. With these developments in mind, her theory can be a valuable tool for evaluating widely read fictional narratives as masculinity scripts—scripts that either remain in circulation and thus reinforce previous assumptions or open fresh perspectives on aging masculinities. Ideally, such readings will underscore that growing old is not a singular or monolithic experience.

Fictions of Male Aging

The fictions of male aging that I analyze in the following chapters exhibit thematic and structural features that reflect the intersections of aging and masculinities. These fictions are culturally situated within the broader framework outlined in this introduction, engaging with the socio-political and ideological conditions that shape aging male identities in U.S. American society. By tracing the challenges and trajectories of aging masculinities, these texts contribute on various levels to a deeper understanding of fictional lifeworlds and their real-world counterparts, particularly in relation to gendered power dynamics and configurations of masculinities. On one level, these narratives function as identity scripts that may influence aging male readers by prompting internal self-evaluations. At the same time, they shape cultural perceptions of aging men as a specific social group. Moreover, they serve as windows to individual and community struggles, inviting reflection on how society treats its elders and constructs normative identities for these elders to fit into.

Certainly, categorizing these texts is a sensitive undertaking. "Academic debates about genre have from time to time been heated among the researchers of texts, expressions and meanings," write Kaarina Koski Frog and Ulla Savolainen in *Genre—Text—Interpretation* (2016). And they suggest that in a general sense, "the term 'genre' now normally implies a technical distinction of some sort and it is regarded as a term suitable as an analytical tool" (17-18). Referring to Bakhtin, they contend further that "'genre' is not used for just any 'assemblage of objects': it is particularly reserved for assemblages of texts that are products of human expression" (18). Hence, the texts analyzed in this study require a flexible and context-sensitive approach to genre, one that considers their thematic nuances and cultural positioning.

I understand genre, in the context of my study, as a tool to categorize and fathom the similarities and differences between contemporary male-authored texts that depict aging masculinities in U.S. American literature. I agree to the established notion of genre as a form of "family resemblance." As Frog and Savolainen explain, "[t]he category becomes understood in terms of the constellations of features that form similarities among its members which reciprocally allow the recognition of associations with the category through appropriate constellations of features" (25). Accordingly, I identify recurring features—such as the crisis metaphor or the "old white man" trope—as core elements that constitute the genre and from which different texts may branch into different directions. Particularly, the "old white man" trope, which draws on both a real and imagined victim position, lies at the heart of these narrative texts and is constructed through a range of narrative techniques, evident in numerous late works by canonical white male U.S. American writers. These texts

repeatedly grapple with perceived losses or limitations that are tied to bio-medical processes of aging, and they frequently position youth and old age in contradiction. In doing so, they highlight a dynamic of self-identification that is central to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinities—a process through which aging men measure themselves against an accepted normative ideal.

The novels I aim to investigate in my study are canonical texts produced by renowned U.S. authors, each celebrated within American literature and culture. These "great" novelists that endowed U.S. culture with "great" novels, supposedly capturing the essence of "America," need to be revisited and reconfigured from a critical post-MeToo perspective and understood as texts that capture specific experiences within a growing multicultural society that comprises the United States of America. These texts can no longer be approached and cited as fictions devoid of gender markers, when aging as a gendered experience is unmistakably at their narrative center. The "American" novel, then, may have to be reframed as a masculine text in its early traditions and understood not as capturing the "American" experience but *one distinct* "American" experience—namely that of the white, heteronormative male.

Linda Wagner-Martin outlines how "[t]he American novel had become synonymous with a window into the land of financial—and artistic—supremacy" (6) in the early twentieth century, listing a majority of male-authored texts by, for instance, Earnest Hemingway, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and John Dos Passos. Definitions of the "American" novel were built upon the works of these and other white male writers of the era. As Wagner-Martin further observes, these narrative texts became the dominant global model for the fiction novel and, in doing so, contributed to fixing and solidifying a general understanding of "Americanness" through a constructed male—predominantly white—gaze.[36] All other modes of writing and established categories were subsequently conceived in relation to these idealized versions. This privileging of male-authored narratives within the publishing industry and literary institutions at large mirrors the systemic workings of hegemonic masculinities, which extend into all private and public sectors of society.

In "Manhood and the Early American Novel" (2011), Milette Shamir traces depictions of masculinities in the "American" novel to its early forms and outlines how notions of fatherhood and patriarchal ideology as well as later developments of self-made

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[36] Wagner-Martin points at the example of African American literature how, even as late as the 1960s, comparisons still excluded African American texts from the canon, despite the rich tradition of writing established, for instance, during the Harlem Renaissance. She highlights Richard Kostelanetz's *On Contemporary Literature* (1964) and Marcus Klein's *The American Novel since World War II* (1969) as two prominent negative examples (58-59).

manhood[37] contributed to shaping the genre in opposition to female writing and minority literature. Accordingly, Shamir explains that

> [m]uch of the self-made man's negotiation between striving to be 'attached to nothing' and 'longing to be connected to someone' took place in the novel, the middle class's most important form of literary representation. Since the novel was itself a relatively recent phenomenon, still seeking full cultural authority and often experimenting with genres, themes, and forms, it served as a testing ground on which the ideas and emotions surrounding self-made manhood could be laid out and explored. (201)

This complicated position between the socially committed and the detached individual, once again, finds expression in the fictions of male aging, as I will show in my analysis. The isolation experienced in old age, I argue, is deeply rooted in a frontier and explorer version of "American" masculinities, which are tied to conquest and hegemonic powers. It is thus no surprise that the texts I analyze turn to realism to convey the experience of male aging around the turn of the twenty-first century, when a century prior, white male writers discarded romantic and sentimental modes of writing as "aesthetically and emotionally cheap" (Elliott 291).

William Dean Howells' propositions are particularly striking in this context as outlined by Michael A. Elliott in "Realism and Radicalism: The School of Howells" (2011). Howells "sought to associate the realm of literary realism with a masculine professionalism and lambasted sentimental novels for their emotional excess and melodrama" (291). Subsequently, "Howells believed that the sentimental romance had a corrupting effect on its female readers, who were too likely to mistake fiction for the world in which they lived. He was equally skeptical of male-authored sensational fiction and the aesthetic decadence that he found emanating from England" (291). Ironically, the fictional lamentations of the aging male evoke, to a certain degree, notions of the melodramatic and supposed feminine, despite the aging male character strongly attempting to define himself as opposed to the female. In

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[37] Shamir explains self-made manhood, pointing to the production of literature as follows: "Self-made manhood—the term itself was coined by Henry Clay, who lauded in 1832 'the enterprising and self-made men, who have whatever wealth they possess by patient and diligent labor'—was advanced during the Jacksonian era by a number of prominent myths. There was, to begin with, the near-mythic status of President Andrew Jackson himself, who came to be regarded as the epitome of independent, self-generated manhood. No less significant was the growing popularity of frontier fiction. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has shown that tall-tales such as those in Davy Crockett almanacs helped promulgate the progressive ideal of the free-floating, autonomous male who defies paternal control and embraces the violence of the wilderness. This ideal received fuller treatment in frontier novels, which constructed American manhood in contrast to both European paternalism and Native American tribalism" (195).

turn, the female is often constructed as a predator, such as in the shape of, for instance, a *femme fatale*—she is construed as a threat to his hegemony.

I read John Updike's novel *Toward the End of Time* (1997) as a model text that reflects the structural and thematic patterns of narratives representing aging male experiences. The retired protagonist, Ben Turnbull, embodies the stereotypical Boomer character—an "old white man" grappling with his loss of hegemonic powers in an eroding society, increasingly threatened by female figures as well as younger male bodies that exhibit no signs of bio-medical bodily disintegration. Chapter One examines Updike's post-apocalyptic novel through the lenses of crisis and the "old white man" trope, both of which are central to this emerging narrative form. Updike's tale of male aging—one among several in his oeuvre—revolves around recurring themes and motifs that construct aging as a mournful and visceral experience, conveyed through a deeply intimate first-person perspective. The novel imagines a post-apocalyptic scenario in which the aging, retired white male protagonist is steeped in perpetual grief about the passing of time and nearing death. He exists in a state of paranoia, haunted by female antagonists and perceived threats to his authority. Through the act of writing, he both frames himself and is framed as a victim of old age. Key features of the text include its excessive use of pastoralism and the symbolic link between nature and temporality, as well as the construction of binaries: the aging male body is constantly juxtaposed against, and positioned in competing with other, more *able* bodies.

Like Harry Angstrom in Updike's famous Rabbit series, Ben Turnbull is "a perfect example of phallocentric and misogynous narcissism" (González-Etxeberria 23). His superiority is challenged by physical impairments tied to aging processes, which weaken or emasculate him in the eyes of other players within this constructed universe. In line with Sally Robertson's notions of the "Middle American," I read Turnbull as "the 'average Joe' [who is] […] represented as speaking for 'traditional' (patriarchal) values. 'Traditional values' are linked with a white masculinity that escapes the 'softness' pervading American culture in the wake of the 'permissive sixties'" (Robinson 335). The techniques applied in this novel closely relate to the narrative methods that Philip Roth uses in his large body of fiction novels. I identify these two writers and the selected texts as a unit that exemplifies a narrative mode operating at the intersections of aging masculinities. While Roth certainly complicates the notion of "whiteness" that is represented in Updike's fiction, his characters are nonetheless constructed within—and at times retreat behind—the privileges historically afforded to the white American male.

Chapter Two investigates Philip Roth's novel *Exit Ghost* (2007) and maps out the similarities and differences between the two narratives that are driven by a shared interest in representing aging male experiences in U.S. American culture. *Exit Ghost* (2007), one of

Roth's late works, illustrates the core elements of his later writing and makes use of similar tools as Updike to convey the aging life of Nathan Zuckerman—one of Roth's recurring characters. While Updike's protagonist similarly faces the challenges of impotence and prostate cancer, *Exit Ghost* positions the illness—and subsequently the medical procedure that is supposed to reinstate Nathan Zuckerman's "masculinity" by curing his incontinence/impotence—at the core of this narrative. Zuckerman, also a first-person narrator and scripter of his own experiences and storyworld, finds new hope in the promise of a cure, energized by the vibrations and currents of the urban space, here represented by New York City. The novel constructs its fictional world through a series of juxtapositions: young and old, man and woman, urban and rural, self and other.

Zuckerman, however, unlike Turnbull, complicates the conception of privilege tied to whiteness, by periodically foregrounding his Jewish American identity—an identity that, nonetheless, recedes at times behind a constructed heteronormative masculinity. Zuckerman's final performance in New York centers on failure and the loss of potency and sexual prowess in a cultural environment marked by the reelection of Conservatives Bush and Kerry in 2004. The political stage is designed as a source of danger and instability to the young liberal writers' circle that Zuckerman seeks to enter. The generational divide, his status as a famous writer, and his age paint him outside of a "future" discourse in which the young characters participate. Moments of elation and optimism continuously collapse at the emergence of ineffective medical treatments, resulting in a forlorn desire to retreat into solitude and wait for death to arrive. Though both texts, Updike's and Roth's, stage the bio-medical consequences of aging as the main culprit of their characters' miseries, they fail to openly acknowledge that aging is not simply the sum of bodily impairments but an interplay of constructed assumptions and embodied, bio-medical experiences. Thus, these characters' lives obsessively revolve around the many "losses" that constitute the assumed, artificial limits of hegemonic masculinities.

Chapter Three revisits Jonathan Franzen's famous novel *The Corrections* (2001) and examines this text as a potential alternative to the deeply personal lamentations of losses and limitations depicted in other fictions of male aging. In addition to analyzing narrative elements, I also consider the critical reception of Franzen's celebrated work and how the discourse surrounding *The Corrections* corresponds with the crisis metaphor and the prevailing representations of aging masculinities. As several scholars have noted, the novel's protagonist, Alfred Lambert, embodies the fallen patriarch and hegemon in old age. Yet the hegemonic structures he represents do not disappear with his decline; rather, they reverberate through and are subconsciously upheld in the network that Alfred builds and surrounds himself with: the nuclear family. Franzen constructs Alfred Lambert as the key player in the

Lambert universe, set against a U.S. American landscape that is increasingly diverse, capitalist, and globalized. The rise of suburban culture plays a crucial role in the construction of heteronormative masculinities and gender structures, and *The Corrections* presents this environment in crisis, at the brink of collapse, symbolized most vividly in the physical and mental deterioration of the "old white man."

Though *The Corrections* employs similar narrative tools to portray the fall of the patriarch, its detailed descriptions of Alfred's wife and children grant the novel a broader socio-critical potential compared to the more insular texts by Roth and Updike. *The Corrections*, therefore, depicts male aging in the U.S. as a collective experience, one that impacts not only the aging individual but also an interconnected network of bodies shaped by the declining hegemon and earlier, more dominant iterations of masculinity. While Franzen's text is neither fully subversive nor a clear alternative to the male-centered narratives by Roth and Updike, it rather aligns with other contemporary texts—such as Paul Harding's *Tinkers* (2008) or Colum McCann's *Thirteen Ways of Looking* (2015)—that move beyond the confined, lamenting perspective of the aging male. Instead, *The Corrections* repositions the narrative vantage point to capture aging as "a cultural script […] and a social-political status" (Kunow "Chronologically Gifted" 24), encompassing a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and experiences.

My study of aging masculinities investigates how these multiplicities are either made visible or concealed within the restrictive framework of hegemonic masculinities presented in the fictions of male aging. Through an intersectional analysis of these narratives, I highlight the complexities inherent in the dynamics of hegemonic masculinities. In contrast to the constructed hegemonic ideal, the experience of aging is predominantly associated with decline. This ideal is further scrutinized through the vulnerabilities of the aging hegemonic figure and their interactions with the bodies that conform to, question, or resist the system—including the figure of the "old *white* man." Ultimately, this study contributes to a larger understanding of how gender, age, and power intersect in contemporary U.S. American literature written by acclaimed male authors. Subsequently, it calls for a more nuanced reading of aging as a culturally and politically charged experience. In doing so, it repositions the "old white man" as both a product and a symbol of shifting cultural narratives, providing insights into gendered anxieties at the heart of late male-authored U.S. fiction.

2. At the End of Things: Configurations of Aging Masculinities in the Fictions of John Updike

2.1 John Updike and the Making of "America"

Literature written by heteronormative male writers is caught in a critical cultural moment. Works by prominent authors, such as John Updike, are undergoing thorough academic scrutiny since the advent of the MeToo movement. Despite previous feminist critiques, Updike has been mostly celebrated in the U.S. literary scene, as well as globally, and is still frequently listed among the greatest U.S. novelists of the post-war era. He is praised as a "literary giant" alongside legends such as William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway. Donald J. Greiner, for instance, declares Updike a "master of the elegantly lyrical sentence," and claims that "[i]n the second half of the twentieth century, Updike and Saul Bellow inherited the mantle of 'literary giant' that William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway wore in the first half" (McTavish). Greiner equates Updike with earlier canonical writers who are still today considered the backbone of "American" literature.

On a similar note, James Schiff sums up the author's life and career: "By age sixty, Updike […] had collected most of the literary prizes; and was heralded by fellow novelists and critics as one of the major literary figures of his time" (Schiff 250). Loreta Ulvydiene underlines Updike's long and prosperous career, stating that he "was one of the most financially successful of post-war American writers and established a reputation of a keen observer of contemporary American life" (102). Concurrently, Philip Roth has been applauded in the literary arena and awarded every literary honor, except for the Nobel Prize. Critics and scholars agree that his extensive body of literature similarly captures the heart and essence of middle-class "America" of the late twentieth century.

Unsurprisingly, Updike and Roth are usually mentioned alongside each other, whether in literary scholarship or journalism. John Schiff points to Updike's long, influential career and claims that he "has stood as a major figure in the American literary landscape since the 1950s—of his contemporaries, only Philip Roth has been there as long" (Schiff 250). Schiff goes on to defend Updike against contemporary critics who reduce his achievements to generalized categories and regard Updike "as a known commodity—for example, a conventional realist, a blatant sexist, a writer consumed with sex and self—when the reality is that his writing is more nuanced and ambiguous" (251). According to Debra Shostak, Roth has also left a robust mark on U.S. American literature and displays a variety of "modes, forms, and styles" ("Philip Roth" 281) in his fiction novels. Shostak explains that Roth is part of a group of post-war writers interested in exploring "American" as an identity marker for nation and individual. "Those writers, Roth among them," she adds, "did not stray far from their nineteenth-century forebears, such as Hawthorne, Twain, or Melville,

who wrested a literary culture from the unique landscape and history by seeking an American idiom and subject matter" (280).

For a long time, the identity position portrayed in the works of white male writers has been perceived as ungendered and classified within cultural discourse as part of the main canon. The canon is defined as "a traditional body of texts deemed by the literary establishment to be authoritative in terms of literary merit and influence" (Cuddon 102). These fictions, however, formally categorized as texts of extreme cultural value, need to be reexamined through the lens of critical masculinities in this moment of renegotiation of traditions. A reevaluation is crucial for understanding how masculinities and gender dynamics have shaped interpretations and appreciation of canonical male texts over time.

Questions about masculinities and manhood are central to these literary explorations of the "American" experience, with aging and old age becoming key themes in the late fictions of well-known post-war writers (Hobbs 27). And between ardent calls to decolonize curricula and recent practices of "Boomer bashing," the question arises: Why is it important to read and understand the works of canonical white male voices today, if their fictions are caught stylistically and thematically in the restrictive realms of predominantly white patriarchal structures? These fictions usually depict the lives and struggles of "old white men," fixing them as prime representatives of an imagined notion of "America." On top of that, progressive critiques increasingly point to the potential disadvantages of a predominance of white masculine voices in the education system or the literary mainstream. This raises important questions, such as: What should we do with the classics? How should we approach them in academic discourse? Ultimately, what is their cultural value today? Such questions have become more urgent against the backdrop of shifting gender dynamics.

In the middle of this dilemma, viewed from a diversity-oriented perspective, prolific and acclaimed writers like Updike and Roth represent a pre-MeToo approach to literature. They are part of the tradition of U.S. American literary pioneers who set the stage for "American" contemplations of self and surroundings. But, "America" today is more diverse and multifarious. And a white heteronormative middle/upper-class male voice can no longer be considered the sole representative of an overarching "American" condition.[37]

I firmly believe that these texts possess cultural and aesthetic value and that it would be shortsighted to exclude them from educational curricula and discourse. In light of recent

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[37] In August 2021, the *United States Census Bureau* reports on recent demographic shifts, highlighting an overall increase in racial and ethnic diversity according to their 2020 statistics. The summary article notes about ethnic and racial diversity in particular: "The two or more races population (also referred to as the Multiracial population) has changed considerably since 2010. The Multiracial population was measured at 9 million people in 2010 and is now 33.8 million people in 2020, a 276% increase."

monumental cultural shifts, such as the MeToo movement, Trump's presidency, and the renewed focus on "masculinity in crisis," it is imperative to reevaluate and revisit the late fictions of canonical writers who were previously celebrated for their representations of a universal concept of "America." Their representations continue to hold strong relevance and circulate widely. Thus, analyzing these texts is important to ensure that critical discourse continues in both education and scholarship.

I have chosen Updike and Roth as key representatives and aim to analyze some of their "late" texts, examining their functions as literary works and cultural products. My focus will primarily be on representations of gender and aging. These texts remain prominent due to their canonical status, ongoing distribution, and sustained academic and media interest that periodically revises them and further cements their importance.[38] Though the criticism is growing louder and the market is paying increasing attention to literature produced by and about women and minority groups, texts by Updike and Roth continue to mirror a social truth: political and economic power is still concentrated in the hands of those represented in canonical fictions that are produced by the heteronormative male.

While this is an important truth, which also relates to the publishing industry and the marketing of books and authors, I want to take a deep dive into the selected texts to explore the structural elements they contain. In this chapter, I will focus on Updike's *Toward the End of Time*, and in the following chapter, I will examine Roth's *Exit Ghost*. My aim is to discuss and understand how their novels are woven stylistically, structurally, and thematically. Both texts foreground the voice of a heteronormative aging male and share similar formal characteristics that I classify as part of the literature of aging masculinities, which centers on the "old white man" trope. This is particularly interesting given that Philip Roth's ethnic background and work complicate the notion of "whiteness." Finally, I will examine how said texts relate to contemporary discussions about the literary canon, masculinities, and old age, demonstrating how they subscribe to stereotypical narratives of male decline and aging.

John Updike's Legacy

John Updike's literary fiction has contributed to creating a U.S. American self-perception, a self-image from a non-diverse, normative view, at a time when literature arguably had a larger

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[38] One of the latest publications in the field includes the anthology *Aging Masculinities in Contemporary U.S. Fiction* (2021) edited by Josep M. Armengol. The essay collection revisits, among other prominent works, Updike's Rabbit series, Roth's autobiographical text *Patrimony* (1991), or Paul Auster's complex second-person narration *Winter Journal* (2021), and gives equally insight into a variety of diversity-focused aging and masculinities topics.

impact on culture. Sally Robinson remarks critically on the role of white masculinities in her analysis of Updike's "Rabbit" series:

> Updike's novels, widely thought to give voice to who 'we' are in post-war America, are symptomatic of a cultural shift in which the visibility of white masculinity is both resisted and welcomed. Updike's novels tell the story of a shift in the status of white heterosexual masculinity away from its position as the self-evident (and invisible) standard against which all identities are measured and found to be 'different.' ("'Unyoung, Unpoor, Unblack'" 333)

Robinson makes a crucial observation about hegemonic forms of U.S. American masculinities and states, with the example of Updike, how these dominant masculinities have been invisibly knotted with the normative in literature. Equally, she points to a significant cultural shift that took place post-WWII when white masculinities, previously disguised in the normative, became visible and are approached as "problematic," for instance, in that they contribute to and uphold the hegemonic practices of *othering*. More specifically, Robinson argues that these canonical texts have constructed the figure of the "'Middle American' as white and male and [...] as the spokesperson for a normative American identity unmarked by gender and race" (332-333). In her book *Marked Men* (2000), Robinson expands on the notion of an invisible norm, exploring it in greater detail. She reflects a widely accepted argument within critical masculinities, which posits that white male dominance relies on being invisible and thus successfully "escapes surveillance and regulation" (1).

These views align with Mary O'Connell's analysis of "Rabbit" in her work, *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma* (1996), as well as with current discussions on "masculinity in crisis" and "masculine entitlement." These debates are rooted in the conviction that one group has a "natural" claim to power. The discourse surrounding a *perceived* singular "masculinity in crisis" has resurfaced due to the production and consumption of cultural texts and shifts in political landscapes, particularly with the rise of Trumpism.[39] Within these struggles over power, literature must be read and acknowledged as a ground that builds or questions identities, mirrors developments, and comments on crucial cultural events or cesuras. And who holds the rights and privileges to build narratives that shape public discourse is a central question in literary publishing and is certainly tied to the politics of canonization.

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[39] Trumpism, as Kyle McGee explains, is a complex phenomenon that marks a logical shift away from the neoliberal economic politics of the Clinton and Obama administrations. But it also contains contradictions, as it "portends a fusion of neoliberalism and a traditional nationalist model of sovereignty" (17). McGee further contends that Trumpism is inherently fascist-oriented and operates within a global "right-wing nationalist/anti-globalization" context. "[I]t is not easily explained by class, race, ethnicity, gender, or other conventional 'socioeconomic' markers" (17). Trumpism has arguably allowed for a Renaissance of Robinson's "Middle American," an "angry white man" who is upset about the perceived loss of political and socio-economic power. Despite the growing multi-ethnic population, however, hegemonic powers remain predominantly white and male (and oftentimes fundamentally Christian).

Linda Wagner-Martin reviews the history and significance of the "American novel" on several occasions in her academic career. On the one hand, she points to the general escapist potential of reading (6). On the other hand, she explains that "[t]he canon of any literary study during the 1950s was developed around the male character's ability to persist toward his goal, no matter what adversity he faced" (12). Regarding modernist writing, she notes that "[t]he American novel had become synonymous with a window into the land of financial – and artistic – supremacy, and its world readership benefited from an interest that was as much cultural as aesthetic" (6). In this context, an author like Updike holds great power. Through academic analysis and aesthetic evaluation, he has been established as a relevant voice in U.S. culture. Consequently, his texts continue to be read, taught, and celebrated as windows into social realities that are negotiated at specific points in history.

Male entitlement and the fear of losing invisible social privileges are central themes in Updike's literature. Robinson argues, addressing notions of U.S. American individualism, how "[t]he tension between normativity and individualism [which] is at the heart of the crises in white masculinity […] [is] also at the heart of Updike's Rabbit series" (342). In the Rabbit series, the protagonist "Harry Angstrom is constructed both as a representative of 'America' and as a unique individual" (342). Ironically, in one moment, he is the beneficiary of white privilege, in the next, he feels deprived of his power. In *Rabbit Redux* (1971), "Harry feels as if he has been made 'invisible' and […] this anxiety over invisibility produces bodily, as well as political, insecurities. At the same time, he has been made visible as a gendered and racialized body and this, too, causes problems" (342). Robinson's insights into Harry Angstrom reflect the crisis-fueled post-war American literature, where the concept of "Middle America" becomes culturally significant.

Referencing Richard Lemon's *The Troubled American* (1970), Robinson addresses a concept that Kimmel later labels as "aggrieved entitlement." She asserts: "What defines Middle American white men in this period is a sense that they have lost what was rightfully theirs; they experience a 'deep alienation from a social system which, by rights, they ought to dominate'. Part of that lost entitlement is the power to represent America per se, and to determine the terms of American normativity" (335). I interpret Updike's aging characters through the lens of this perceived loss of masculinity and the idea of aggrieved entitlement to highlight the mechanisms of white male privilege as represented in these works of fiction.

To that effect, I propose an approach to these fictions that makes gender and race visible because it mirrors the central themes and concerns of these texts, which are distinctly white and male. On top of that, it bundles them stylistically and structurally within a more specific mode of writing, one that holds a heteronormative male voice at its center. The categorization is necessary because it helps to "interrupt[…] the stubborn equation of white

masculinity with Americanness itself" (50), as Robinson insists. This "stubborn equation" has continued into the twenty-first century, notably within critical race theory, and is exemplified by the damaging counter movement known as "All Lives Matter." While it can be argued that categories create further divisions, the question of whether a new category is necessary and useful is certainly a valid point for discussion, especially considering the intense debates around identity politics in recent years within U.S. culture. Nonetheless, new categories also clarify essential distinctions and speak to different cultural and social experiences. Thus, the politics of genre-making, which are part of a discourse focused on diversity in the production and categorization of literature, are relevant to understanding my study of narratives surrounding aging masculinities.

In her late-nineties essay and later in *Marked Men*, Robinson critiques the normalized assumption that literature written by authors like Updike tries to capture a constructed version of universal Americanness and belongs to the general field of "American" literature. The critique is still relevant today. It relates to the ideas of "serious" literature that deserves to be included in academic discourse and the construction of a canon that favors heteronormative white male voices as noted by Wagner-Martin. These "male" texts are chiefly categorized in overarching gender and race-free boxes like realism, science fiction, suburban middle-class fiction, detective and crime, and so on. Hence, Updike, like Roth or Franzen, as we will observe in the following sections of this study, is celebrated as an "American" writer composing "American" fiction. And this ultimately shows how the normalization of heteronormative white masculinities also works on an external level, creating an understanding of their fictions devoid of gender and race markers. This literature is produced and marketed as literature for a constructed universal "American" majority.

Within a category of writing that predominantly deals with the cultural struggles of the heteronormative white male figure, the idealized or normalized "American" man, like the "Middle American,"[40] a sub-section emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. This section places aging male experiences at the center and exaggerates masculinity-related struggles and the loss of power tied to aging processes through the narrative frame of "crisis." To map out fictional texts that focus on and delineate the experience of aging heterosexual and privileged male protagonists in the U.S. American cultural context, I read Updike's late

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[40] While gender and race boundaries are impenetrable, class boundaries are less restrictive when it comes to defining the concept of the "Middle American." Typically viewed as an "average Joe" from the working or middle class, the category of class is more fluid. As Robinson notes, "[t]he blurring of class boundaries in the discourse on Middle American alienation serves an important purpose in polarizing white against black Americans" (336). She further explains that "[t]he focus on the racial animosities motivating Middle American resentments enables the disappearance of differences between or among white Americans and works against the creation of alliances across race" (336).

fiction not in the sense of Said's "late style."[41] Instead, I interpret Updike's novel as an early example in the construction of a literary sub-category that establishes aging as a marked transitory moment initiating the fall from (normative) masculinities or, as suggested in some of these texts, eradicates "masculinity" altogether. Thus, I propose an approach that recognizes these texts as exemplifying a "male" writing style, reflecting a mode of masculine expression. I suggest that they should be classified as part of the literary genre of *white aging masculinities*, rather than being seen as works that address universal "American" struggles.

For my analysis of Updike's fiction, I have selected a lesser-known novel that received mixed reviews and was not praised as much as, for instance, his Rabbit series. David Leigh points out that *Toward the End of Time* "caught […] [Updike's] critics off guard" and explains how the criticism ranges from "a failure of genre, awkwardly mixing realism with science fiction" over "fascinating in parts but full of undigested excursions into alternate universes and loathsome anatomical descriptions of old age" to "attack[ing] [the] narrator as a repulsive, inconsistent, and socially blind misogynist" (51). And though comparably, *Toward the End of Time* gained only little attention, it provides valuable insights for a study of aging masculinities and bears many similarities with the more prominent precursor, *Rabbit At Rest*. Both texts take on a realist approach to writing about aging male experiences. However, as I noted with reference to Leigh, *Toward the End of Time* brings in a science fiction angle, set in a somewhat dystopian end-of-the-world scenario, in which this specification takes up an imperative position, particularly when looking through the lens of aging.

Toward the End of Time was published in 1997, a decade of waning feminist endeavors, driven by the false assumption that equality had been achieved.[42] The novel concentrates on a troubled heterosexual white cisgender male protagonist, who is trying to come to terms with his masculinity while confronted with the bio-medical realities of an aging body. Ben Turnbull, like Updike's aging "Rabbit," is caught in a retirement phase characterized by cliché topics that frequently come up in the literature of aging, such as the passing of time, retirement, evanescence, religion, growing bodily impairments, disease and illness, impotence, or broadly speaking, the accumulation of losses. Leigh argues: "With this late novel, Updike ventures into a fictional world that plays with the images and concepts from a theological treatise of the 'last things,' namely apocalypse and eschatology" (52).

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[41] My analytical focus does not center on the personal experience of the writer, even though the author's identity and experiences certainly play a role in understanding and establishing this literary category, as notes in Alex Hobbs' comments in my introduction. To avoid biographical interpretations of these texts, I want to concentrate on the thematic, structural, and formal elements that define this literature.

[42] In *Popular Culture, Political Economy and the Death of Feminism* (2015), Penny Griffin discusses how popular media prematurely declared the Woman's Movement dead. Major media outlets like *TIME* and *Harper's* "wasted no time declaring the death of feminism," when, in fact, the movement was still active and growing (97).

Moreover, the narrative world is constructed through the eyes of the main character, using a first-person perspective in the form of a diary or journal. This approach establishes an intimate connection with the reader and reveals the character's deeply personal thoughts, offering insight into his emotional landscape and private mindset. And in this example of a dystopian future, the setting (geographically, socially, culturally) mirrors and aggravates the lamenting internal position by raising it to a macro level that is all-encompassing and structurally relevant. I read Updike's end-of-time scenario as an allegory for aging. The protagonist is transitioning into a phase of life that is culturally framed by death, which, in turn prolongs and magnifies the crisis faced by the heteronormative white man in old age.

The following analysis consists of close readings that draw occasional references to noteworthy cultural concepts and phenomena, while demonstrating how the example text by Updike operates within the literary context of white male aging narratives. *Toward the End of Time* is not the first nor a particularly early text that helped develop the literary category. Yet, it is a narrative that carries immense weight in that it functions as a text-book example for an established mode of writing—one that grew more popular toward the shift into the twenty-first century, arguably (for instance, with the look at "masculinity in crisis") a time of slight recuperation for the "Middle American" character.

Nonetheless, Ben Turnbull, too, is bound up in his entitlements and his grievances over the loss of masculine power in a narrative world that seems oddly stable for an apocalyptic setting, which I want to explore in more detail in the first part of this chapter. The first part (2.2.1), then, focuses on the formal aspects of the genre, such as narrative perspective and structure, while continuing the discussions on canonization and categorization introduced in this study. The second part (2.2.2/2.2.3) outlines the main themes of this literary category, which is shaped by an overbearing heteronormative white male voice entrenched in the all-consuming experience of aging and old age.

2.2 Exploring Losses, Aches, and the Masculine Dilemma in John Updike's *Toward the End of Time*

2.2.1 Building Fictional Worlds—Time, Place, and the Male "Scribbler"

"Time is thick and complex, not at all linear and single-stranded" (Bal 66).

Toward the End of Time begins with time. Updike's protagonist, Ben Turnbull, starts his journal with an ambiguous notion, implying that time is both a linear passage and a circular orbit. The opening line reads: "FIRST SNOW: it came this year late in November" (*Toward* 3). The

first two words of the novel, "FIRST SNOW," carry an inherent suggestion of sequence. The word "first" establishes an expectation for a second, third, and so forth. "Snow," on the other hand, while it carries sequential meaning, evoking the idea of "last things," it also highlights the repetitive character of the seasons. This is simultaneously one of the main threads that takes us through the book. Finally, the "first" and the "last" are juxtaposed in this coupling of capitalized initial words. The first evokes a beginning and mirrors the act of journaling, the beginning of the text, but also the beginning of something new, a shift, a change, perhaps a new perspective. Whereas (particularly first) snow, with reference to the final season, symbolizes closure, the end of things, potentially the end of life, or the end of a narrative that just began, foreshadowing a dire outcome.

This first sentence alone is packed with symbols and allusions that continue to surface throughout the novel and are tied to the protagonist's experiences of aging and masculinity. The seasons are a reference to the seasons of life and the passing of time, both of which allude to nature and biological aging. "[A] written text is linear," writes Mieke Bal about the sequential ordering of narrative time. "One word or image follows another; one sentence or sequence follows another; and when one has finished the book or the film is over, one has sometimes forgotten the beginning" (68). At the same time, "deviations in sequential ordering" increase possibilities in interpretation and enhance narrative complexity (68-69). Turnbull's first journal line ends with "November"—a month that represents the gradual movement toward the end of the year, and a deeper entrance into the cold season; but November also means not quite there yet, not quite at the end. Both chaos and order are present in the opening line and plague the protagonist from beginning to end.

While time in this narrative certainly intersects with themes of the life course and aging, it is beneficial to first examine how Updike applies time structurally. After that, we can focus on the specific ways that the passage of time, particularly in relation to age, intersects with gender and retirement. These factors are undoubtedly interconnected, and I will explore them further in the following sub-chapters. Nonetheless, this very first line gives useful insight into the usage of time and how the novel plays with expectations of temporality, creating layers that respond to the perception and construction of time within the narrative world as well as outside of it. Scheffel et al. note that "[b]roadly defined, time is a constitutive element of worlds and a fundamental category of human experience. Strictly speaking, time is not observable but it becomes manifest and thus perceivable in various changes (e.g. event)." Measuring time in seasons, months, numbers, and days, as in the very beginning of *Toward the End of Time*, is a way of mapping out the larger circumstances that surround the protagonist/narrator. It also provides a first look into the experience of the narrator, whose story begins *in medias res*. And with that, the text immerses the reader into a narrative world

that emphasizes time and temporality, establishing these elements as essential components of his story.

"Gloria and I awoke to see," Turnbull carries on and observes the thinly snow-covered "oak branches" that are contrasted with "leaves still unraked" and "grass still green" (3). Time becomes visible through a transitory moment, the moving from one season into the next, from autumn to winter, from green grass and fallen leaves to the barrenness of snow-covered surfaces.[43] That the two characters, male and female, awaken to a new day is significant, for it signals hope and a form of enlightenment. Equally significant is the notion that during the act of journal writing, Turnbull is contemplating his past experiences, reliving them, through the use of the past tense. The focus on the past breaks with the slightly optimistic outlook. This highlights the complexity of the writing process on multiple levels and illustrates how time is manifested in literature.

In addition, this first passage evokes a form of nostalgia that Updike also ties to time and gender representations. Turnbull is aggrieved about his lost youth and laments: "I looked into myself for a trace of childhood exhilaration at the sight and found none, just a quickened awareness of being behind in my chores and an unfocused dread of time itself, time that churns the seasons" (3). In this instance, Updike creates a moment of nostalgia in his aging male character, where he longingly tries to hark back to a youthful experience but fails to conjure the desired effect of a pleasant memory.

In *World Literature, Non-Synchronism, and the Politics of Time*, Filippo Menozzi explains that "[n]ostalgia feeds on a perception of the present as hopeless, unstable, insecure and puzzling; it nurtures the longing for stable, clear and solid old times" (2). The longing for a past childhood (boyhood) self that is free from responsibility is evident, and Turnbull's perception of time as a dreadful force adds to the significance of temporality in this novel. The character constructs his circumstances as overwhelming, and the time of the year, the change of season, as agitating. This, however, is contradictory because the representation of time also bears a notion of stability, considering the seasons' circular nature.

The opening passages are rich with deictic expressions of time—a technique that is continued to the very end of the book. Initially, the tone is largely somber, but it shifts to a moment of exhilaration when the protagonist, Turnbull, discovers his "new orange plastic shovel" (3). This shovel represents his desire to clear a pathway amidst perceived chaos. His sudden euphoria and the detailed description of this "cleaning" object, an item he will use to reestablish order in this perceived chaos, leads him to conclude: "The world does not only get worse" (3). After all, *Toward the End of Time* is a post-apocalyptic novel. And all markers

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[43] This continues throughout to complete a full year's cycle at the end of the novel.

of story time must be read in relation to its larger dystopian frame. John G. Parks points out that "the post-apocalyptic perspective gives rise to an exploration of the implications of entropic forces on the individual's quest or yearning for something truly out of this world" (Parks 152). Parks' analysis of the novel focuses on representations of nature and religion—two elements that scholars have frequently examined, as they are key themes Updike explores throughout his long and prolific career as a writer. As a result, Parks concludes: "*Toward the End of Time* is an essentially post-historical work, where Ben is a kind of ultimate Protestant facing a godless cosmos alone. The novel is thus a secular apocalypse, a nightmare about spiritual, if not physical, disaster" (156).

James Plath explores a similar angle and looks at the similarities between Updike's texts and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). He points to the split characteristics of Updike's figures and that his texts often explore conflicts between the body and spirit, reminiscent of Puritan themes (Plath 123). Turnbull, too, illustrates a type of "divided self" (Plath 125), a concept frequently observed in Updike's fiction. Scholars like James Plath often connect this idea to Updike's closeness to Hawthorne and the Puritan struggle between flesh and spirit. But these academic inspections are largely conducted through a misleading universalist lens. Today, it is essential to reconsider these themes from perspectives related to gender, race, and aging.

Turnbull's understanding of time in his journal and storytelling is informed through his socialization as a cisgender heteronormative white male in the U.S. American context. This perspective influences not only how he perceives nature and religion but also how he constructs ideas of masculinities within this cultural framework. According to Kimmel, this is an inherited position, "an ideology of masculinity that we inherited from our fathers" (9), and that intersects with all branches of existence. Looking at scholarship on Updike, *Toward the End of Time* remains at the periphery of academic scrutiny and largely untouched, especially when it comes to matters of gendered aging. In a very brief excursion into the novel, Josep M. Armengol identifies Turnbull as one of Updike's "male characters trying to stay 'forever young' through predatory sexual conquest and performance" (159), which will be a significant aspect of my analysis at a later point. Comparably, "Rabbit," the better-known and more popular character, has continued to receive a much greater amount of scholarly attention.[44]

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[44] Juan González-Etxeberria, for instance, revisits "Rabbit" in his 2021 essay "Harvest Time for Updike's Rabbit: Sex Dies Harder Than Gender," which appeared in Armengol's anthology *Aging Masculinities in Contemporary U.S. Fiction*.

Several scholars have, however, commented on the dystopian elements in *Toward the End of Time*. Scott Dill, who is mostly interested in aspects of Christianity in Updike's fiction, notes that "[t]he aging protagonist, Ben Turnbull, finds himself in a near future where the government has ceased to function but Americans still go to church on Easter Sunday" (Dill 33). In line with this analysis, Parks observes that "post-apocalyptic elements are sprinkled throughout the novel but really do not play a crucial role in the narrative, except to displace or dislocate the story from contemporary history to an essentially post-historical situation" (Parks 152). And subsequently, he mentions how "[d]espite the war, life for Ben and his class goes on pretty much as before—they play golf, bridge, buy new cars, travel, visit one another on holidays" (152).

Turnbull's comments on the general post-war condition align with these scholarly considerations, as the narrator writes: "[T]here is oddly little in contemporary America to recall the global holocaust of less than a decade ago […] Business as usual is the pretense and the ideal" (*Toward* 206). While Parks' and Dill's views are valid and clearly expressed within the novel, a gendered understanding of aging requires us to attribute greater significance to this dystopian scaffold. We should interpret it as a mirror of pre-death conditions, illustrating a bodily state that continues to mask the reality of increasing physical restrictions.

There is no mention of war conflicts at the very beginning of the novel. Nonetheless, the melancholic depictions of time and nature in these first scenes make the orderly structure of a hopeful morning, with chores being tackled and a successful FedEx delivery, appear suspiciously tidy. Following the shovel scene, Turnbull points to the sprawling plants he observes through the window and reveals that the yews "planted by the previous owner beneath the windowsills […] [had] over the years grown to eclipse the windows and darken the living room" (4). "Nature refuses to rest," Turnbull deduces in this paragraph. The combination of spatial and temporal dimensions—chronotope in Bakhtinian terms[45]—contributes to the construction of an eerie morning and suggests an overall state of instability.

The impression of enigma and an underlying sense of the uncanny intensifies when Turnbull contemplates the traceless delivery of a FedEx envelope. "How did the envelope—containing some bond slips I was in no hurry for—get there?" (4), he wonders and continues, almost in an investigative manner, to fabricate a narrative that would explain the mysterious appearance of this item. He does not recognize the footprints and even speculates about

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[45] Bart Keunen defines chronotope as "an imaginal construct or entity representing a temporal process that occurs in a spatial situation. It is exactly because of the fact that every activity, every development of time, is expressed through spatial changes that we should consider chronotopes to be the essence of narratives" (13).

supernatural beings: "Had a giant invaded my terrain? An angel dropped down from Heaven?" (4-5). This brief excursion into mythical spheres suggests that Turnbull is grappling with a persistent subconscious anxiety about the state of the world and his own circumstances, which remain concealed from the reader at this point in the novel.

In these passages, Updike applies a detective mode that is typical for the crime and mystery genre and is associated with what Wagner-Martin describes as "United States 'escape' literature" (151). Wagner-Martin further notes about the genre: "Early [Science Fiction] […] created readers' interest in both the utopian and dystopian worlds, in the futuristic employment of science and technology, in alien cultures, in space and time travel, in abnormal mental states and particularly in alternative existences" (113). Science fiction is (generally speaking) entangled in mystical struggles and envisions alternative worlds that help rebuild order in a total state of chaos. The influences of science fiction are pervasive in *Toward the End of Time*.

Though Turnbull claims to have "solved the mystery" (5) of the footprints outside his house, he remains drawn to the uncanny. "[T]he idea of a visitation by a supernatural being stayed with me, as I clumped into the house and spread the mail" (5). This mundane, everyday task is paired with the imagination—a desire perhaps—of the ghostly or celestial and constitutes a form of escapism.[46] Wagner-Martin notes that "[t]he genre of science fiction made escape possible – and encouraged not only would-be science fiction writers but all writers to play with various imaginative tropes" (113). In the late twentieth century, science fiction developed into a category where, among others, feminist struggles were negotiated.[47] In earlier versions of the genre, Wagner-Martin states, "the understanding was that authors of these books were men, and men who knew a great deal about science" (114). Updike's text largely corresponds with this notion of time travel and escapism, featuring a male "expert voice" that explores alternate universes informed by various scientific and technological advancements. In addition to supernatural elements, the novel depicts masculine textbook

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[46] *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines escapism as "[t]he tendency to seek, or the practice of seeking, distraction from what normally has to be endured" ("escapism"). *The Book of Literary Terms* lists science fiction alongside romance and mystery as a type of "escape literature" which is "[e]asy reading, meant to take the mind off one's own everyday concerns" (151). And John K. Limon suggests in his recent work *Escape, Escapism, Escapology: American Novels of the Early Twenty-first Century* that "[e]scape is one way of dealing with real dangers, escapism is a failure to deal with real dangers, and escapology invents techniques to deal with artificial dangers" (5).

[47] Wagner-Martin clarifies that writing within the constrictions of the genre was a way for female writers to dodge "the pejorative commentary on 'feminist fiction' that tended to undercut reviewers' attitudes about serious novels by women" (114). She notes further, referencing Larry McCaffery, how "science fiction, especially that written in the late 1950s and 1960s by feminists, provided avenues for the tumultuous, and increasingly radical, 1960s populations to follow. Unless hundreds of protestors were going to be held in prison, there was little enough action to be taken in questioning racism, protesting the war, and winning rights for women: literature was a means of stepping into the fray" (113).

excursions into different sciences. This serves as a significant aspect of the narrative, which I will analyze in greater detail later.

Updike's Male Escapist Writer

Turnbull escapes on several occasions throughout the novel. He inserts meta-texts that catapult the reader to different historical times and situations that are, at first glance, not connected to his narrated reality of post-apocalyptic life in rural Massachusetts. These texts open new dimensions within the narrated world, which also pertains to literary categorization. On top of that, sci-fi/adventure elements add more temporal layers to the text and complicate the understanding of Turnbull's reality, provoking the reader to add a postmodern ontology to the reading of Updike's dystopian realism. Parks notes that though the novel is "obsessed with time, it shows little interest in real history or in society" (155). Whether or not these two elements should be aligned is debatable. In any case, Parks is right to observe that

> [i]nstead of remembering real history, Ben imagines living in various imagined moments of the past: he becomes one of two Egyptian grave robbers stuck in a tunnel on the way to the inner treasure room, he is John Mark the gospel writer in a debate with St. Paul over taking Christ to the gentiles, he is a young monk in Ireland slain by a Viking invader, he is a Nazi guard killing a Jew in 1944 Poland, and he fantasizes being on a planet that is dominated by an immense fungus. (155-156)

These moments of escapism, however, are infused with eerie encounters and gruesome depictions of death/demise—though some of the scenarios leave open whether the presented character dies at the end of the scene. Parks suggests that "[e]ach of these scenes enables Ben to further his description of life's futility and ultimate death" (156).

On a similar note, David Leigh explains the inserted scenes as follows: "Updike's views of time and eternity are […] filtered to the reader through several puzzling passages in the novel that have baffled most critics—the passages in which the narrator becomes identified with four time-travelers" (54). Leigh offers a slightly different view on these passages, attributing greater significance to them. He cites David Malone's essay on the novel, which explains that "these passages [serve] as examples of times of historical transition—the dying of one power and the emergence of a new one. But all four passages involve religious transformations as well, changes that occur as both time and human power bring about violent change but not annihilation" (54-55).

In the first scene featuring the two Egyptian grave robbers, it is important to remark that a five-page segment is visually separated from the main text with a short line. This distinction spatially separates Turnbull's life in Massachusetts from this excursion into the

past. The text establishes a clear spatial and temporal break with the use of an em-dash or a light horizontal line, which functions as a visual marker symbolizing a mental shift. While this is not the first instance of such visual cues in the novel, this one creates a particularly abrupt and perplexing jump—not to a different scene around the house (as previously), but an entirely different historical context. It is worth noting that not all time jumps are marked with such concrete visual breakpoints.

Leigh makes an interesting observation: "As he impersonates the speaker in each passage, Ben seems to be trying on historical possibilities for facing the end of time" (55). This jump begins as a textbook expedition into the history of Egyptian grave robbery, evoking a scenario reminiscent of a classroom setting where Turnbull asks an imaginary audience: "What do we know about the Egyptian grave robbers?" He then turns to a first-person perspective and, as Leigh claims, impersonates the character he creates, thereby catapulting himself out of Massachusetts into a different historical situation.

An escapist, Lars Konzack explains, is "a person who indulges in a mental process of emotional diversion by means of entertainment or other kinds of leisure activities to avoid or retreat from what is considered an unpleasant or unacceptable reality" (246). Literature or writing "as a way to escape from the world" (246) has been practiced for as long as people have written fiction, but the term escapist (or escapism) only goes back to John Crowe Ransom's contemplations in the 1930s.[48] Murray Krieger addresses the question of why people have a desire to understand "unreal stories about unreal individuals" (Krieger 335). He echoes Northrop Frye's analysis of fictional worlds, stating that "desire arbitrarily creates its imaginative forms as the world in which it chooses to live, preferring its made-up order of words to the grim given order of nature in which, without imagination, it would be doomed to live" (335-336). Ben Turnbull constructs a new order in these (at least) four fabricated meta-narratives that he scatters across his journal.[49]

These insertions act as moments of reflection within the realm of (what the text insinuates is) life writing, where Turnbull addresses profound questions about life and death. Through the construed identities and viewpoints, he seeks to make sense of concepts like nihilism, resurrection, immortality, judgment, and death (Leigh 55). According to Leigh,

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[48] Konsack explains the origins of escapism by examining Ransom's early definition: "Ransom attributed three properties to this escapist people: First, he perceives them as having a general illusion of personal and collective power; second, as taking on work as an anesthetic or anodyne; and, third, as exhibiting infantilism in the pathological sense of the word. Following this logic, Ransom portrays escapism as a combination of illusionism, anesthetic, and pathological infantilism—the latter probably referring to Freudian psychoanalysis, though only implicitly so" (246).

[49] While these four constitute obvious diversions, some parts of the main text that depict Turnbull's Massachusetts experience, also contain questionable moments that can be interpreted as fantasy fabrications. See the disappearance of Gloria in chapter 2.2.2.

these impersonations can partly be interpreted as opportunities to escape one's own perspective, one's own time. I suggest, however, that these diversions also serve as contemplative extensions of Turnbull's narrated reality. From a distance, he tries to make sense of his own experience in a post-apocalyptic context, confronted with rising disorder and the gradual accumulation of losses in an aging male body. This ability to view himself from a different temporal and spatial dimension enables Turnbull to reflect on his perceived condition. It contributes to the perception and framing of old age as a burdensome experience, compelling him to examine it from various temporal and spatial perspectives and through the lens of a different body.

"Scribbling" the Aging Perspective

The narrative perspective that Updike uses to depict Turnbull's cosmos is characteristic of a writing style commonly found in texts that give insight into male aging experiences, focusing on deeply personal lamentations of loss. Ieva Stončikaitė explains that "[m]any life stories that focus on the meaning of life and aging are often found in first-person narratives that can shape our identities by providing understandings of selfhood in particular cultural and social environments" (2). Memoirs, autobiographies, essays, and other forms of life writing are often preferred modes and genres to convey private experiences related to aging (2). She argues, highlighting the memoir:

> The use of the memoir format allows one to explore the complexities of growing older, make sense of our past and present experiences, and connect the readers beyond their own life experiences by merging their personal feelings with sociocultural trends. Couser (2021) observes that memoir, in contrast to other literary genres like fiction, drama and poetry, allows writers to enact and maintain human relationships and identities, especially those that are often underrepresented. (2)

In *Toward the End of Time*, the journal/memoir (or life writing) is simulated to achieve this form of intimate reflection and pull the reader into the troubled inner world of the aging protagonist.

In "Ageing, Agency, and Autobiography," Rahel Rivera Godoy-Benesch suggests that "texts about old age are not characterised by the urge to narrativise the past but by their strong concerns with the present and future because the problematic part of life – that part in need of the mediation of narrative – is happening in the here-and-now, with its most traumatic event, namely death, lying in the future" (93). And tied to this idea, Stončikaitė contends that "memoirs that focus on illness and disability, in particular, help depathologize the conditions that they depict, and make the vulnerable more visible in cultures that hinder weakness, failure and aging" (2). Ben Turnbull's private reflections are also a means to make

aging male struggles visible and critique ideal notions of white U.S. masculinities that expire in old age.[50]

The first time Turnbull reflects on the process of writing is early on in chapter one, titled "The Deer." In this scene, he mulls over his task to kill/shoot/shoo[51] the deer that continues to vandalize his wife's flowers. "After my wife went off to work—she still works, in a gift shop of which she owns a third, while I languish about the house, writing these paragraphs now and then as if by dictation—I did dutifully keep a lookout for the deer" (13). The scene evokes a domestic situation in which the diarist, arguably historically female,[52] reflects on the status and societal role/functions through writing. "Diaries are often referred to as women's traditional literature, presumably traditional because they were the only form women were allowed to practice. Diaries then became excluded from the literary canon for two reasons: they are composed by that 'inferior' sex, women; and they are only written if their creator is prevented from achieving the exemplary status of author" (9-10), explains Cynthia Huff in her 1989 essay on the diary as an essentially feminist genre.

Updike, however, reverses the positions and places the female, the wife, into the culturally elevated position of the "breadwinner." As a business owner who has important dealings outside the marital home, she holds economic power. The husband, in contrast, as the text suggests, "languishes about the house," trying to fulfill his formulated "domestic"[53] duties. Ironically, the duty is imbued with the constructed gender expectation that the male is ordered to bring down game almost in a "neanderthal" way. The construction of the home space also needs to be considered. The text passage implies that the "home" is a space in which the individual languishes, which alludes to containment and slow deterioration. To

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[50] Looking at the diary from a slightly different angle, Plath notes (while referencing Hawthorne, which also applies to Turnbull's case) that "[d]iaries are highly personal, especially the ones which divulge sexual escapades and masturbatory episodes" (Plath 131). Hawthorne, like Updike, positions the reader as a voyeur (131), confronting the reader with extremely explicit descriptions of bodies, sexuality, lust, pleasure, and sexual acts. One might even argue that this renders the reader complicit to some extent.

[51] The wife's true intentions remain ambiguous. Turnbull's accounts switch from killing to shooing away, reflecting his subjective interpretation of her intentions.

[52] Cynthia Huff suggests that "[d]iaries are about community, not hierarchy, about communication, not authority. Hence, their inherent generic qualities are subversive to the literary establishment and to the patriarchal social order that it perpetuates in its privileging of texts and genres, each ranked according to unquestioned standards. It is no mistake when Adrienne Rich refers to the journal as 'that profoundly female, and feminist, genre,' for like feminism as literary and social practice, the diary questions by making connections and establishing community and communications among previously separated parts of experience" (6). The diary distinguishes itself from "male" modes of writing and deliberately avoids reiterating "the patterns privileged by male dominance of the pen in art and criticism" (8). Additionally, Huff echoes Virginia Woolf's observations about the nature and value of the seemingly mundane: "Instead of magnifying the so-called great events of life, stressing the deposing of kings or the fighting of battles, the diarist and the critic focus on the everyday, the suffering of bodily pain, the eating of food" (9).

[53] Here, the term "domestic" should be understood in reverse. Rather than performing tasks like laundry or cooking, his duty is to hunt the deer that damages the gardens.

languish, according to the *OED*, is to "[t]o live in an oppressive or dispiriting place, situation, or condition."

Furthermore, the notion that Turnbull is "writing these paragraphs now and then as if by dictation" (13) appears equally relevant in this passage. Though historically the "writer" as a profession as well as a literary figure relates to the male—and this image aligns with other intellectual tropes such as the professor or the philosopher—the domestic setting and Gloria's role as the active provider, construct the male "writer" as a feminine "scribbler," or typist. Despite the initial backlash against women entering white-collar sectors in the late twentieth century,[54] the growing business sector required laborers who were ready and qualified to "transcribe, collate, and file the masses of paperwork" (Keep 403). And "[m]iddle-class women served as an ideal solution to this problem: not only were they an inexpensive source of educated labor, but they maintained, if not the masculinity of the office space, then at least its bourgeois respectability" (403). The woman typist or "Type-Writer-Girl," Keep illustrates, "like the typewriter itself, was an American export" (405). Updike's protagonist reduces the act of writing to an instructed "typing," reminiscent of typical female labor from the twentieth century. Nonetheless, he goes a step further by suggesting that "female" domestic writing is purposeless, perhaps even useless, when compared to the purposeful and important work that is conducted outside of the domestic "home," such as keeping a shop or hunting prey.

The idea of futile scribbling is continued throughout the novel. On several brief occasions, Turnbull exposes the act of writing or journaling; this act is repeatedly coupled with frustration and a sense of worthlessness. The word "scribble" is used on three different occasions, either related to him or his male grandchild. In chapter one, Turnbull laments in one of the myriad moments of existential reckoning: "What is wrong with me, that I want to leave a trace, by scribbling these disjunct and jumpy notes concerning my idle existence? Spoiling paper—no worse and no better than scribbling on a bridge pad" (25-26). And toward the end, the text generates a similar idea when Turnbull declares: "The post-equinoctial sunlight comes at me from unexpected angles, as if liberated. It lies, flecked with

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[54] Christopher Keep explains that the first official typewriting courses for women were offered in New York in 1981, which was followed by "a public outcry that female office workers would lower working wages and displace the men who had previously held such posts" (401). Furthermore, these women were viewed as symbols of a larger impending crisis: "[T]he collapse of the family" (401-2). Thus, "[w]omen typists," Keep concludes, "were felt in many quarters to be a danger not only to themselves, but to the moral integrity of the nation as a whole, for it was in women's hands that the superior values of 'civilization' chiefly lay" (403).

dirt from the windowpanes, on the page I am polluting with these scribbles, and blinds me as I rinse my cereal bowl at the kitchen sink, so that I nearly drop it, as if slapped" (287).[55]

In chapter two, "The Dollhouse," which centers around the "young female" trope and Turnbull's failure to build a dollhouse for his daughter, the act of writing becomes a harsh and arduous exercise because it is connected to memory and the materialization of failure. Making the past visible in the form of words and ink manifests the past as real and impactful. He closes the section before a pause with the following reflection: "Building the dollhouse for my daughter in the cellar—at the memory, my pen becomes impossibly heavy in my hand" (79). The new order Turnbull attempts to create by collecting it on paper, the past, the present, and the future, he tries to make sense of, dissolve into woeful recollections and bleak prospects. Through these constructed acts of writing, Turnbull's masculinity is renegotiated, which raises questions about the sustainability of hegemonic masculinities when confronted with aging and old age.

What remains, however, and perhaps to some extent defies this "feminized" writing of guilt and defeat, is his flight into the "textbook" and into science. Hence, life-writing (the diary or journal) is coupled with a more "masculine" form of text production that secures Turnbull's societal value in Foucauldian terms and elevates him from the abject position to a still productive member of the "state," producing in the early traditions of detective and science fiction.[56] In one of his space-time travels, Turnbull assumes the role of John Mark, a missionary who followed Paul the Apostle and Christian disciple Barnabas on their journeys/adventures. Turnbull closes the section with the following announcement by John Mark: "This I, John Mark, set down on parchment, where it cannot be changed and will endure forever" (134).[57] The temporal marker, albeit in a parallel narrative strand, echoes Turnbull's loud appetite for continuation or a form of timelessness. In another instance, Turnbull pairs his scientific explorations (which often blend with the philosophical and personally existential) with "writing" or "text."

In chapter three, titled "The Deal," Turnbull reflects on the idea of multiple universes and alternate worlds. He concludes: "[T]he universe in only the most preliminary sense exists,

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[55] Note how the entry into this revelation begins with scientific language and then transitions into a mundane kitchen scene in which the narrator is "slapped"—thus punished.

[56] Both philosophers, Julia Kristeva and Michel Foucault, provide theories that explore how societies devalue bodies considered unproductive and worthless. Foucault's concept of bio-power or biopolitics is linked to "economic processes" (Foucault 141) and addresses, among other issues, the marginalization of the disabled within a system that privileges the able-bodied. Kristeva's notions of the "abject," which she elaborates in "Powers of Horror" (1982), can also be applied to aging bodies, as they represent that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4).

[57] Similarly, Turnbull constructs his third assumed character, St. Peter, in the act of professional writing, which manifests again as an attempt to make sense of the world and to document and maintain order (*Toward* 173).

somewhat as a play or script exists in textual form as a precondition of its being acted, its sets knocked together, and its lighting projected in three dimensions" (152). He again emphasizes the significance and power of the written word, suggesting that order can only be maintained through prolific and steady documentation.[58] The alternate timeline in which Turnbull turns into a Nazi officer aligns perfectly with his theme of establishing order through record-keeping. This text passage plays with the notion that the Nazi regime perpetrated its horrific operations through the practice of manic documentation and filing.[59]

Writing is also a way for Turnbull to track the past and maintain a sense of time. In chapter four, titled "The Deaths," he reveals: "I write my description not ten days after the event in order to fix my own memory, but even so, doubt has crept in" (233). The confidence and "correctness" of the scientific textbook are opposed to the notion of writing for the sake of personal self-preservation when facing deteriorating mental processes. This aligns with Stončikaitė's observations on life-writing in old age, and it once again places Turnbull's "writing" in tension with the professional, meaningful "writing" of his alternate characters/selves. Pertaining to aging studies, it also mirrors the much-discussed social and cultural disappearance of the old. And in the context of critical masculinities, this passage represents Turnbull's attempt to preserve a past state of white masculine power as manifested in the act of documentation and written recollection/observation. Additionally, Parks observes that "Ben's journal is no theodicy, but rather a personal lament for lost consolations, for things no longer believable to an enlightened people." (156) He thus extends Turnbull's lamentations of loss to a macro-level, where he contemplates his loss in relation to the decline of an established social order. Ironically, Turnbull partakes in the corruption of this order by becoming part of a small criminal organization that settles illegally on his property.[60]

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[58] In the same chapter, he attempts to negotiate with a group of young men in his woods, who have set up camp on his property, driving out the previous private security (*Toward* 166ff). Their first interaction takes place in a comedic context, given the dystopian lack of bureaucratic state order. Turnbull insists on seeing valid "documents:" "'The fact that they're not here,' I said, 'doesn't prove that you are their agents. Show me a written power, a document that Phil has signed'" (166).

[59] In their book, *Networks of Nazi Persecution: Bureaucracy, Business, and the Organization of the Holocaust* (2005), Feldman and Seibel provide a detailed examination of the enormous organizational apparatus responsible for the "final solution." They reveal how "coordination took place in a hierarchical as well as a cooperative way and, just as the differentiation of power within the regime or between the occupying power and domestic authorities played a role, so did the interdependence of a variety of agencies beyond formal rules of cooperation" (19).

[60] In chapter three, titled "The Deal," the teenage "gang" is first introduced in a mysterious manner through dreadful "sounds and signs of activity in the woods" (154). They are branded as "interlopers" and "youngsters" (154). It is only later that we discover they actually pose a deadly threat.

Altogether, Updike creates a fictional universe in *Toward the End of Time* with a complex spatial and temporal dimension that, in some moments, appears coherent and ordered or soundly predictable. This is, for example, manifested in nature with references to vegetation and the cycle of the seasons. In other instances, both time and place seem fluid and slippery, such as in the spatio-temporal excursions into alternate worlds and the philosophical contemplations of the universe (alternate universes) with its supposedly endless possibilities. The domestic home or "house" serves as a grounded point of stability and possible departure or return. From there, time is observed, measured, recorded, and filed. But this refuge is also shrouded in an eerie atmosphere, as seen with the mysterious FedEx envelope. The place is constantly plagued by pests, weeds, and criminal human activity, hence, at every step, emanating a potential for crisis. The aging mansion situated deep in the Massachusetts woods is a refuge from the war far outside the Turnbull's residence and far away from their conscious reality. Subsequently, it harbors dangers that affect the aging protagonist, both coming from within and from outside his body. One such danger is embodied in "the female."

In various roles—such as the second wife Gloria, the ex-wife Perdita, the sex worker Deirdre, the teenager Doreen, or one of his daughters-in-law—the female characters represent an overpowering force that can be both friend and foe. Much like the "house" itself, these women are often depicted as traps, blamed for tempting and manipulating their male victim, Ben Turnbull. The depictions of these threatening female figures echo the baseless idea that the female, or more specifically, the feminist, is to blame for masculinity being in crisis.

In my next sub-chapter, I will explore the idea that the decline of the male hegemon is grounded in the emancipation of the female, examining how this concept is presented in Updike's male-centered narrative. Rather than labeling Updike as a misogynist, my aim is to identify a common feature in these texts that utilizes female tropes, shedding light on how gender and aging intersect in literature that foregrounds male aging.

2.2.2 Women on the Loose—Masculinity and the Female Menace

> "[F]erocious female nagging is the price men pay for our much-lamented prerogatives, the power and the mobility and the penis" (*Toward* 13).

Despite the blatant sexist portrayals of women and graphic depictions of sex and sexual fantasies tied to the female body, the most egregious scene in *Toward the End of Time* occurs

in chapter four, titled "The Deaths," when Ben Turnbull assaults fourteen-year-old Doreen in the woods. In literary scholarship, this scene is often downplayed or ignored. While there is an obvious ironic undertone and a sense of postmodern playfulness typical of many of Updike's works, the scene in the woods represents an extreme form of transgression that can no longer be explained and interpreted through irony.

Doreen appears in the second half of the narrative in a troubling depiction of pedophilic lust and physical transgression. This portrayal metaphorically stands for a masculine desire to revert to a younger state in old age. Doreen is one of four female protagonists in Turnbull's main universe, written into existence through his journaling. Each of these characters somewhat corresponds to the "archetypes" identified by Kathleen Verduin in Updike's texts, namely the "earth mother, seductress, and witch" (61). In many instances, they embody a combination of these tropes. At the center of the story is Ben Turnbull, who exemplifies a typical Updike male in crisis: "[A]rrested by a fear of death, they assert Christian orthodoxy, usually to a religiously indifferent audience" (62). Verduin suggests that this type of written reflection traces back to "heroic mythologies," where the hero is conceived as the sun—the center of the solar system (63). The women surrounding Ben Turnbull, whether represented as motherly spirits or threats, are constantly linked to nature and fertility—a "primordial Nature" to borrow from Verduin, once again (63).

It is no surprise that Doreen first appears and then mysteriously disappears in the forest that belongs to Turnbull's property. Like the other females, she is shrouded in a mystique that obscures her personal background information and provokes readers to question whether she exists in the principal narrative world or is merely another product of Turnbull's imagination. No other character outside this narrative branch sees Doreen or interacts with her.[61] The teenager exerts power over Turnbull—he obsesses about her from their very first encounter—and in his perception, she intensifies his sexual cravings to the extent that he loses control. The abuse in the forest stands in as a form of social, moral, and legal transgression that is constructed as the only way for the "victimized" male to reclaim control; his hegemonic control is gradually chipped away in previous interactions with the other three women, all of whom seem to overpower him.[62]

Kimmel's concept of "aggrieved entitlement" comes to mind when reading these scenes. The loss of a power to which the male feels entitled can ultimately result in physical

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[61] The only characters Doreen interacts with are the three young males who are part of a criminal group that allegedly blackmails Turnbull. Initially, Doreen is part of the group. However, it is questionable whether this entire enterprise altogether exists in the main narrative of the protagonist.

[62] Similarly, the three young males represent a hierarchy that the protagonist feels forced to submit to; and Doreen, being the weakest link in the organization, is the only member he can control. This dynamic allows him to reestablish his hegemonic masculinity within the established societal hierarchies.

violence and is a way to combat emasculation. In *Angry White Men*, Kimmel explains that violent revenge

> is the compensation for humiliation. Humiliation is emasculation: humiliate someone, and you take away his manhood. For many men, humiliation must be avenged, or you cease to be a man. Aggrieved entitlement is a gendered emotion, a fusion of that humiliating loss of manhood and the moral obligation and entitlement to get it back" (75).

Sexual violence constitutes a re-erection of gender power laws in a patriarchal system. Jeff Hern notes accordingly in *The Violences of Men* that "[i]ndividual violent acts of individual men, including assaults, rape, incest, murder, and so on, can thus be understood as gender class actions of men over women within the differential contexts of patriarchy" (32).

Although the scene in the forest does not turn physically violent, the opening interaction between the characters suggests a power imbalance. The teenager's compliance is influenced by her awareness of her precarious situation and the role assigned to her. The implication of potential violence or other severe consequences if she were to refuse is implied in the third-person pronoun. "She took a breath, momentarily erasing the crease on her belly. 'They [the other gang members] said,' she said, 'you could touch me wherever you wanted, but no penetration'" (236). "They" refers to a male criminal organization that governs the (young) female body. Masculine power is manifested in (albeit small) governing structures and mimics the systemic implications of patriarchy and the nation-state.[63] Penetration is constructed as the ultimate breach which in turn relativizes other sexual acts that occur, labeling them as *not so bad* in comparison and echoing the still ongoing legal debates of what constitutes rape.[64]

Turnbull's reaction is significant in that he acknowledges Doreen's dilemma and even asks: "And what do *you* want, Doreen? Not to be touched at all, I imagine." "Maybe I wouldn't mind too much," Doreen responds and succumbs to the circumstances (236). Though Turnbull poses the question, which suggests that he is aware of the power imbalance

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[63] *Roe v. Wade* is arguably one of the most contested moments in U.S. history, during which the female body was publicly scrutinized and women gained self-control over it through national jurisdiction. Kimmel explains that for women, this legal right to "maintain control over their bodies—[was] a right that men had been assuming for themselves since the Founding Fathers guaranteed men a sense of property in their own person" (180). He emphasizes that this legal recognition included much more than the right to abortion, legal protection, and autonomy. "Women," he adds, "not only had the right to work but the right to sexual agency, a right to desire itself—perhaps, even, a right to orgasm" (180).

[64] In *The Relativity of Deviance* (2000), John Curra gives insight into the complexities of legal definitions and reforms related to rape and sexual violence. Curra explains: "Rape is not a set of concrete actions that can be objectively and uniformly identified no matter what. Its definition—the construction or interpretation of it—varies from one observer, audience, or group to another; from one society to another; and from one historical time period to another. Simply put, different audiences define rape in different ways, and it matters a great deal exactly *who* is doing the defining" (212).

and the wrongdoing, he does not refrain from demonstrating dominance by violating the teen. Turnbull, even though the nation-state is technically in a post-apocalyptic disorder, embodies here the hegemonic masculine structures that are still in place. The young female is deprived of her sexual agency.

Interestingly, the implied innocence of their first "negotiation" is complicated in the following paragraphs, where Doreen's adolescence is partly invalidated, and she, in single moments, turns into a full-grown seductress in Turnbull's eyes. In preparation for the sexual acts, he observes her transform as she rises from her chair. "She stood up, taller and more womanly already, her blue jeans insolently tilted on her jutting hip bones and so low-slung they bared the hem of powder-blue underpants" (236). An excruciatingly detailed description of her sexualized body follows the opening of the transgression, and Turnbull alternates between constructing a sexually experienced female against an innocent child. [65] This depiction calls to mind the idea of the "virgin/whore dichotomy" (Synnott 57) that, once again, alludes to Christianity.

The reader perceives Doreen's objectified body with utmost precision and becomes part of the act through Turnbull's vision—his gaze. Ultimately, Doreen even tries to talk him into sexual acts that he refuses—a "renunciation" for which he rewards himself with more groping. "'A hand-job wouldn't be penetration,' Doreen said. 'It would penetrate my soul,' I said. 'I would become a love-crazed pest'" (*Toward* 237). For the sake of keeping order, he rejects her offer, simultaneously blurring the line between victim and perpetrator. Turnbull thus frames himself as a victim of innate carnal desire, suggesting that he cannot restrain himself if provoked. He invokes the concept of the "savage male," one who is tempted by female exposure, referring to himself as "a primitive man" (29) on another occasion.

In *American Manhood*, E. Anthony Rotundo explores the origins of the unhinged, sex-crazed male in U.S. American culture. He traces the concept of the male predator back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, highlighting the contrast between women, who were seen as pure, and men, who were viewed as wild and uncivilized. He explains that "[t]he turn-of-the-century movement for social purity was rooted in the belief common to most women 'that man is bestial' when it comes to his sex drives" (230). The narrative was established that "even 'the slightest departure' from sexual reticence by a woman would turn men 'into 'wild beasts'" (230). And in turn, "this 'brutish' side of his nature also expressed his manliness" (231). Michael Kimmel observes this ideology in another "male crisis"

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[65] The character resembles Nabokov's nymphet figure, a seemingly seductive "girl" who, as Enikő Bollobás describes, is caught in a state of metamorphosis between girlhood and womanhood (175)—which ultimately fascinates and attracts Turnbull.

moment, the civil rights era, and thereafter, focusing on conservative thinker George Gilder. Anti-feminists like Gilder believed (and still believe)[66] that "[m]en […] were biologically driven toward aggression, competition, and violence […] and if women followed feminist ideals, they would abandon their traditional role as moralistic constraints on men's antisocial natures, and all hell would break loose" (*Manhood in America* 181). Turnbull's lust for the teenager appears manic, and a complete loss of control is inevitable if provoked further. The choice of wording here is significant; the violation disappears behind the term "love," which makes the assault almost seem justified. Once again, moral and legal boundaries become blurred, echoing Hearn's observations about males' perception/definition of sexual violence; these are still largely in place today. Hearn notes that "[a]part from legal rape following arrest and charging, men rarely define coercive sex and pressurized sex as violence" (*The Violences of Men* 117).

Updike establishes Doreen as the "other," a subject that holds power over Turnbull by evoking bodily desires through her mere existence in the world, as he does with all the women in the novel. This construction of the female teen reinforces the assumption that the young female is to blame for the masculine dilemma faced by men at the end of the twentieth century in these "male" literary texts. Doreen's description reduces the subject to mere text on paper, which may rationalize her power and potentially diminish its impact. Verduin maintains that the "threatening Other—heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Antichrist—must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked" (74). It is through this act of recognition that Turnbull constructs himself in opposition to the perceived other. And while both the gaze and the textual reproduction/charting already function as means to domesticate the female at an early age, right before she can turn into an uncontrollable menace, it is the act of touching the young body that constitutes her ultimate fall. In this instance, Turnbull briefly turns into a "confidence man" and applies a "soft touch" to control his victim. Curra suggests, referencing Maria Konnikova's *The Confidence Game*, that "confidence men never intimidate, force, demand, threaten, physically control, or physically injure their victims. Instead, they employ a soft touch. Victims are led gently and with the victims' own assistance down a path that will eventually lead to their downfall" (80).

Touching and being touched is political, Anthony Synnott contends. It is "an expression of power" (Synnott 167). He further notes that "[p]hysical violence is indeed the ultimate method of enforcement of the status hierarchy. Whereas the 'feminine touch' is

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[66] On the conservative talk show *Man Rampant*, hosted by evangelical pastor Doug Wilson, George Gilder makes the same claims about the nuclear family, masculinity, and gender roles that he propagated in the 1970s and 1980s. In 2021, the 83-year-old Gilder sat down for an interview with Wilson to "discuss Sexual Suicide, Men and Marriage, and their relevance today" ("Sexual Suicide | Doug Wilson and George Gilder").

equated with nurturing and artistic creativity, the 'man's touch' is often equated with firmness and discipline and, in the last resort, with violence, against both men and women" (169). Thus, the touch in Updike's rape scene constitutes a form of escape for the aging character from the impending loss of social power. And, tied to this, it is an attempt to reestablish the traditional or pre-apocalyptic power order.

In the closing passage, Turnbull abruptly flees the scene of his crimes, overcome by a mixture of guilt and excitement. "Abandoning Doreen with her jeans not yet tugged up, I hurriedly climbed the slippery hill, away from this low part of the woods. I was panting and tumescent. I had become anxious to reinsert myself back into the slowly turning works of my orderly world" (237). The unlawful forest and its inhabitants are juxtaposed with the lawfulness of the home or house to which Turnbull flees to escape the threat posed by nature, embodied in this case by the teenager. He returns to civilization. In the forest environment, tempted by the allure of youth, Turnbull violates the rules of order. He commits sexual assault and adultery in a short passage that spans only about three pages, framed by the thin horizontal lines the writer frequently applies to indicate a shift or break in his telling/writing. The scene is designed to stand out. And it is reminiscent of the biblical Garden of Eden, where transgressions occur within God's natural order— a prominent and recurring theme in Updike's writing that I will revisit in the following parts of my study. Ultimately, the question arises: Who, in fact, is committing the crimes?

The Hegemon's Return Home: Gloria Turnbull

The rape scene in *Toward the End of Time* is concluded in a typical return-of-the-husband moment, who is consumed by the fear of being caught. Turnbull reveals:

> Gloria must be home by now. She mustn't see me like this, hot and bothered. One icy-eyed question would lead to another, and there was no re-sealing the pit of truth once it was open. […] The island of repetitive safety I had carved from the world seemed abruptly precious. I spit the acid taste of honeysuckle from my tongue, and emerged from beside the barn with my husbandly smile already prepared. (*Toward* 237-238)

Guilt and secrecy are also typical features of Updike's fiction and point, once again, to Hawthorne's Puritans and Christian morals. James Plath explores these tropes in *Couples*, which was in his view "partly responsible for introducing graphic sex into the American literary mainstream" (123). Unlike in *Couples*, however, *Toward the End of Time* deeply intertwines adultery with the assault of a minor. And it is difficult to conclude whether Turnbull's guilt stems from the cheating or from his awareness that the sexual acts he commits in the forest are immoral and unlawful, at least from a pre-apocalypse societal

understanding of morality. In a sense, Turnbull becomes a kind of Adam who "feels guilty for committing a forbidden act while simultaneously experiencing invasion by an overwhelming force from without" (Kearney 84).

Gloria, in contrast, is presented as the gatekeeper, the supervisory body who threatens her husband's standing if the *truth* were to be exposed. She guards the marital home and will, if necessary, confront him with her "icy-eyed" glare. But Gloria does not fit the typical stereotype of a "housewife" who "manages or directs the affairs of her household" (Oakley 136) in a traditionally feminine way. Although she occasionally embodies this constructed historical persona, she primarily represents a more complex role. In this dynamic, the domestic space becomes a contested environment, with Turnbull as the main occupant of the marital home in a post-retirement state. It is a space ruled by a supposedly authoritarian wife, where the male struggles to recover his lost authority. The domestic, to some degree, turns into a site of emasculation and castration for the retired hegemon, which stands opposed to the "remasculinization" he seeks in the secrecy of the forest.[67]

Though the marital home is depicted as "precious" and an "island of repetitive safety," in this instance, ironically, the narrative frames the wife as a potential peril. In summary, Gloria is staged as an ambiguous character whom Turnbull constantly suspects of deceitfulness and malice. Though it is more subtle in this scene, in countless others, the second wife is constructed as an antagonist, always conspiring against Turnbull. At this point, it is essential to return to the very beginning, to chapter one, "The Deer," as this is where Gloria's ambiguous character is fully established and continues to resonate throughout the novel. Compared to other chapters, the opening most precisely sketches and defines the relationship between husband and wife. Gloria's image abruptly switches from the partner who awakens to a new day with the narrator ("Gloria and I awoke"), to assuming the role of a predator/killer who is after Turnbull and wants him dead (*Toward* 6).

Gloria, too, embodies the archetypal female often found in Updike's fiction, consistently associated with notions of nature and death. She acts as the guardian of the garden, the gardener who plants and waters, cares and protects. In nearly every scene, Gloria is mentioned in relation to a specific plant or flower, or fertilization. And to protect the plants, she must eliminate the pests: the deer. Though the deer and the wife stand opposite each other, they symbolize a manufactured idea of women as natural (as opposed to

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[67] Sally Robinson observes a similar type of remasculinization in James Dickey's celebrated "American" novel *Deliverance*, focusing particularly on the first-person narrator, Ed Gentry. Robinson argues, a point that also rings true for Updike's text: "[*Deliverance*] attempts to recover a biologistic essence of maleness that has been tamped down, or blocked, by civil society. Ed gets revitalized and remasculinized in the woods, and can come home to his wife's 'normalcy' having incorporated the experience of violence into his own body" (*Marked Men* 167).

cognitive) beings, and at the same time, referencing Eve, harbingers of death or catastrophe. In contrast, Turnbull constructs himself as belonging to the world of reason with his regular excursions into scientific theories from history and philosophy to astronomy—disciplines still largely dominated by men.[68] Parks observes this nature-reason dichotomy, noting that "Ben Turnbull […] abandons theology for nature, and accepts the explanations of contemporary science for what it is. Yet, while there are beautiful descriptions and observations of nature throughout the novel, Ben finds little solace in nature" (153). It appears that he is trying to make sense of nature, like he is trying to make sense of women.

On the other hand, these explorations of nature overshadow his usual demonstrations of reason. It remains unclear whether they stand metaphorically for his endless examinations of the female or if he somewhat desires to be/become part of nature in a similar way, a quality that is often ascribed to women. On several occasions, he imagines himself as the deer that invades Gloria's garden. Turnbull concludes the opening passage with a dramatic announcement. He frames Gloria as a deer/man-killer in a nervous tone, which simultaneously constructs the domestic as a death trap as opposed to the domestic sphere he escapes to after assaulting Doreen.

> My wife wants the deer killed. She gets on the telephone, searching for men with rifles or bows and arrows and an atavistic hunger for venison and the patience to stand for hours on a platform they will build in the trees; she has heard rumors of such men. […] My wife is a killer. She dreams at night of my death, and when she awakens, in her guilty consciousness she gives my body a hug that shatters my own desirous dreams. By daylight she pumps me full of vitamins and advice as if to prolong my life but I know her dream's truth: she wants me and the deer both dead (6).

As mentioned earlier, Updike's female characters are archetypal constructions confined to stereotypical roles. As a result, "Updike's portrayal of women has […] angered some readers as predictably reductive: he 'consistently reasserts the worn dichotomy […] that a woman is sexual and stupid (human) or that she is frigid and intelligent (inhuman)'" (Verduin 61). Verduin argues that "Updike's women do indeed evoke gender patterns archaically entrenched in Western culture" (61). Gloria appears to be all of the mentioned stereotypes combined—"earth mother, seductress, and witch" (61). Jack De Bellis mentions her alongside several deceived females in Updike's fiction, "[d]iscarded women of adulterers" who are "wretched […] and sometimes vindictive" (6).

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[68] In 2021, for instance, *The United States Census Bureau* reported that "women are nearly half of U.S. workforce but only 27% of STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] workers." Although "women made gains […] men still dominated the field."

The text establishes Gloria early on as a cruel and cunning figure whom Turnbull greatly fears—one that, according to him, "urges," "races," and "commands" (*Toward* 6-7). In contrast to the female *carnivore*, Turnbull views himself as a victim, embodying the notion of "masculinity in crisis." He feels he is being preyed upon and believes his downfall is inevitable. Extending this idea, the deer killer also represents a man-killer; this angst-inducing depiction reflects Turnbull's loss of authority in the world—a loss that recurs in discussions of the "male crisis" in culture. David Leigh notes that Gloria is constantly connected with death. "The moral dimension of death had first appeared in the novel when Ben had early on imagined his wife as a 'killer' who wants to destroy the deer that is eating their flower garden - and who also wants him to die (so that she can play the part of a widow)" (Leigh 57).

Turnbull equates himself with the deer that is on many occasions referred to as a female doe (whether or not Turnbull is aware of the animal's sex). On top of that, the doe is sexualized and toward the end of chapter one, she "becomes as she eats a young lean-bodied whore, whom I invite into the house" (*Toward* 35). Turnbull continues to portray himself and his wife as rivals, but he finds himself in an inferior, subdued, but also physically fragile position that mirrors the fragility of the easily scared animal. At her demand to run out in his pajamas to kill the deer, Turnbull notes: "Obedient, I yet thought of my years, my heart. Gloria makes my heart race, once with appetite, now with fear" (7).

Gloria is also depicted as a comedic and unpredictable figure, best described as an eccentric and raging wife, alluding to stereotypical representations of the psychotic female. "She raced to the closet under the stairs and from its hiding place there she brought her basket of my old golf balls. She keeps them to throw at the deer" (7). These old golf balls that are worn out and no longer in use are also symbolic of Turnbull's testicles, hence suggesting the age-related loss of sexual prowess. The idiom "to have s.o. by the balls" comes to mind, further emphasizing the image of Gloria as a fierce man-eater and predatory figure.

This portrayal of the wife alludes to known depictions of the dangerous female in literature and film, such as the *femme fatale*.[69] Following Yvonne Tasker, the *femme fatale* is, first of all, seductive and powerful. More importantly, she is ambiguous and opaque, an "enigma" that is "typically located within an investigative narrative structure which seeks to find 'truth' amidst the deception" (Tasker 120). Turnbull's ambition to solve the mysteries he senses in and around the house follows fundamental patterns of detective narratives. And the

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[69] De Bellis unmistakably categorizes Gloria as "one of Updike's femmes fatales" (458). Nonetheless, he explains by comparing her to Rabbit's Lucy Eccles: "[Y]et she cares for Turnbull when he contracts cancer* and tries to persuade him to avoid the trap of personalizing everything" (458).

depictions of Gloria alternate between alluring and suspicious. In Turnbull's world, where Gloria once attracted him sexually, she now cares for his health and provides "vitamins and advice" (*Toward* 6) only to achieve her *true* goal: She wants to bait him. Turnbull claims to have unraveled her concealed intentions: "[S]he wants me and the deer both dead" (6). On several occasions, he describes her teeth as an alluring enticement, as "her foremost charm, brilliant and broad" (259). But those "perfect" teeth (259) are, at other times, coupled with notions of duplicity and death: "Symmetry, fine white teeth, and monomaniacal insistence upon her own concept of order mark her impress upon the world. Hunting and tracking and plotting an enemy's death become her, like fur at her throat" (8).

The demise of the hegemon, along with the fear of being replaced or eradicated, haunts Turnbull at every step. "She kissed me with a killer's ardor" (15), he states, and continues to frame Gloria as a death trap. Parks suggests that in his struggles to make sense of time and human evanescence, Turnbull both sexualizes and *others* the female. "With the vertical dimension obliterated, Updike's heroes have always turned to the horizontal, which is to say, to sex, to the great mysteries of women's bodies, eros as antidote for death" (Parks 155). David Leigh adds to this thought: "These complex attitudes toward death are compounded at the end of the novel when his wife Gloria actually hires a man from Maine to stalk down and kill the offending deer" (57). The heroic man, a hypermasculine hunter character, is what Turnbull desires: to embody a type of idealized hegemonic masculinity in old age that is tied to physical strength and able-bodiedness, capable and admired by all women. This wish for admiration, however, is always intertwined with a deep-seated fear of death.

Turnbull's fear is so colossal that it grows to the point where he physically erases Gloria at the end of chapter one. However, she reappears and takes charge again in chapter three, titled "The Deal." Her sudden disappearance is puzzling and raises questions for both the reader and narrator, leading to speculation about whether she might be dead. Turnbull writes: "It is not clear to me that Gloria is dead; I have a memory of wheeling and shooting her with Charlie Pienta's shotgun through the living-room window, but when I went back inside there was no body" (*Toward* 41). A little later, he laments her absence: "With Gloria gone from my side, the bed seems huge and cold at night" (46). He goes on to contemplate, even doubt the potential loss of the wife and thus mythologize her once again: "But I did not yet quite believe that she was gone. She existed in my brain and in my dreams" (49). He fantasizes about her brutal death: "Sometimes in my dreams I find her bloodied and even headless corpse on the living-room carpet—" (49). And in his conversations with the sex worker Deirdre, he refers to Gloria as his "late wife" (55), indicating he has no doubt that she is, in fact, dead.

Like the different branches or alternate universes that Turnbull writes himself into, he creates multiple narrative possibilities by casting doubt, here on Gloria's disappearance. This uncertainty reflects both an apocalyptic state and the fear of complete demise. However, it can also represent the anxiety of aging men confronted with bio-medical bodily changes and the loss associated with such transformation, as well as a cultural shift in which men must renegotiate their value within an increasingly feminist society. Scott Sanders suggests that the individual, the self that narrates the post-apocalyptic state, is "crush[ed] […] by the system" (Sanders 15). This scenario is typical of post-war science fiction, and the disappearances of material bodies that occur (not only concerning Gloria) align with genre conventions. Likewise, the protagonist's dissolution into a perceived new order holds no place for the aging male.

The Aging Male Fantasy: Sexualizing the Female

In Gloria's absence, Turnbull commits adultery and has an "affair" with a younger woman named Deirdre, who is a sex worker. He invites her to stay in his (and Gloria's) home and occupy (together with him) the mysterious top floor of the house (*Toward* 59). Deirdre is a rebellious female. Turnbull cannot resist her, but he cannot tame her either. She is depicted as direct and loud-mouthed. She contradicts and curses him vociferously. Their dialogues are riddled with obscenities and microaggressions. Through Deirdre's remarks and retorts, Turnbull's age and reduced prowess become more visible. She expresses her disdain for men, referring to men like Turnbull as "rich leech" and "creeps" (55-56). In Turnbull's view, Deirdre is consumed by a "feminist rage" (53), and he bemoans the fact that she chooses to express this rage instead of "submitting to his sexual whims" (53).

In the beginning, he appears to have the upper hand—Deirdre depends on him financially and engages in sex for money. However, the boundaries of their sex agreement begin to blur as we enter chapter two, "The Dollhouse," where she takes him to the "Peabody mall" (76) and Easter Sunday mass (112). In the attempt to domesticate her, Deirdre disappears, and Turnbull returns from Boston, "finding the house dishevelled" (137). Deirdre takes some of Turnbull's and Gloria's valuables and leaves a note that concludes: "We took some nice things but left you plenty, Phil said you owed me something, it's part of women's rights" (138).

The rebellious young female also provokes Turnbull to confront a fear tied to "women's genitalia."[70] The myth of the vagina dentata is particularly highlighted in relation to the "feminist" character. After a verbal exchange in which Deirdre exposes Turnbull's preference for anal sex, he notes:

> Her vagina, Deirdre's unspoken accusation ran, was less favored by me than these two orifices designed for other purposes, for ingestion and excretion, and to this extent I was a pervert. My own sense of it is that, at age sixty-six, I am still working up to the vagina—that Medusa whose sight turned ancient men to stone, that scared several-lipped gateway to the terrifying procreative darkness. (54)

This passage calls to mind Stevie Simkin's observations in *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale* that "[i]deological constructions of women such as the *femme fatale*, the Medea-like murderous mother or the female monster are very often, and very swiftly, mobilised against women who seem to transgress cultural norms" (7-8). In Turnbull's main universe, Deirdre embodies exactly this type of woman. And though all four women somehow infringe on societal norms, Deirdre stands out as the loud, outspoken "feminist." This type of female continues to be the target of violent misogyny today, coming especially from advocates of conservative masculinities and male liberalists.[71]

"The *femme fatale*," Simkin goes on, "is a conventionally beautiful woman who lures the male hero into dangerous situations by overpowering his will with her irresistible sexuality" (8). The temptation that is evoked in the male spectator is linked to the sight of genitals categorized as biologically female. In her analysis, Simkin examines the meanings of the vulva—often mistakenly referred to as the "vagina" throughout history, by analyzing the famous exposure scene from *Basic Instinct*. Additionally, she discusses the Freudian Medusa-myth to provide a broader context for her observations:[72]

> The vagina/Gorgon represents the fear of castration but the spectacle is also petrifying: for Freud, the 'sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone'; struck dumb with fear, at the same time the erection reminds the male that 'he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures

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[70] I acknowledge that my reference to women and female genitalia is not inclusive, reflecting Turnbull's perspective. I do not intend to deny individuals without a vagina their right to identify as women.

[71] In digital dating culture, the incel movement stands out as a group that targets feminists as well as women in general. Chris Haywood explains that "'incels' (involuntary celibates) blame women for their sexual disenfranchisement, using sexual violence and rape as legitimate ways to rightfully claim what is theirs" (265). In *The Incel Rebellion*, Lisa Sugiura argues that "although incels are an extreme manifestation of misogyny, their problematic attitudes are not contained to the online spaces they frequent, rather they are symbolic of structural misogyny and patriarchal systems of socialisation. Moreover, the ideology espoused within incel communities is interwoven with the wider socio-political climate. This type of extremist behaviour is not confined to online spaces but is exacerbated by digital technologies" (31).

[72] Citing from Ovid, Simkin explains that "Medusa was a woman of renowned beauty, 'the jealous hope / Of many a suitor, and of all her charms / Her hair was loveliest' (*Metamorphosis,* Book 4, 883–5). After Medusa was raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple, Athena punished her by transforming her hair into serpents and giving her a face that would turn men to stone" (Simkin 22).

him of the fact.' One could hardly imagine a more appropriate metaphor to express the conflicted urges of desire and terror that the *femme fatale* provokes in the unwary male. (190)

This fear of female sexual organs is reiterated in a scene where Turnbull's grandchildren and the spouses of Gloria's sons, Marcia and Carolyn, visit the Turnbull residence. After a lengthy passage in which he describes and sexualizes the women—stating "Marcia and Carolyn stir me a bit" (*Toward* 20)—Turnbull becomes fixated on Marcia, a university instructor who co-teaches a course titled "Systemic Decompensation in Patriarchies, with Special Emphasis upon Slave Narratives." She successfully dodges the "glancing kiss" on the cheek that he, as the stepfather-in-law, feels entitled to receive (20). Turnbull concludes his observations about his daughter-in-law: "She gets headaches, and puts on wraparound sunglasses to ease the pain. I wonder if 'headaches' is a code for menstruation pains. It disturbs my retired calm, having a menstruating female in the house again" (20).

Robert Boyers explains that "Ben is most recognizably a standard Updike male in his sexual obsessions. He rightly describes himself as 'like some horn-brained buck.' Ben's erotic fantasies include a decidedly sadistic component: he is turned on by thoughts of desecration and enslavement. He is regularly aroused by the exposed shoulders of a stepdaughter or a glimpse of a daughter-in-law's thigh" (64). Similar to the symbols of nature and death, Turnbull's sexual desire and the lust for the female body are consistently associated with stereotypes, as illustrated by the troubled perception of the menstruating female. Ultimately, this calls to mind a wider societal discomfort with female sexuality and the nuances linked to it.

On the one hand, the novel sexualizes the women surrounding the aging hegemon, husband, father/in-law, lover, client, and perpetrator. On the other hand, it presents Ben Turnbull (or he stages himself through life writing) as a victim of female oppression, particularly through the depiction of menstrual fluids, the source of male fear and disgust. Adrianne Rich famously illustrates the dichotomy of menstruation and the cycle, demonstrating how it carries two contrasting meanings: "[O]ne, […] the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contaminations, 'the devil's gateway'. On the other hand, as mother, the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood—that same body with its bleedings and mysteries—is her single destiny and justification in life" (34). In Updike's text, Deirdre and Doreen stand out among the women. Deirdre is classified as the first figure, while Doreen may not fit into either category. From a feminist view, the idea of the Medusa has shifted over time, reflecting both positive and negative interpretations (Simkin 22f). In Updike's version/s of the Medusa, the text perpetuates the

idea of the monstrous, castrating female by reiterating the negatively connoted narrative of the Medusa. And the text suggests that this perceived threat can only be controlled if violently subdued.

Turnbull's first wife, Perdita, is one of the four main women he reflects on throughout the novel. She is mostly framed as a figure from his past. The novel introduces Perdita at the beginning of chapter two, titled "The Dollhouse." In this chapter, Turnbull takes a nostalgic journey back to when he was a student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He is only nineteen in the road sequence that includes a "white '69 Pontiac Trans Am convertible" (*Toward* 68), which evokes a romantic road context loaded with symbolisms of freedom, masculinity, and "Americanness." Turnbull is portrayed as the "all-American male," and alongside him, "wearing a wind-whipped red bandana and a squint that makes the planes of her face look romantic and detached, like a lean Indian squaw's," was his "girl and first wife, the fair Perdita" (69). In this first encounter, Perdita is exoticized and admired. Parks observes that "it is with a sense of great loss and waste that Ben remembers his life with his first wife, the significantly named Perdita" (155).

In chapter three, however, Turnbull catches a glimpse of the aged Perdita at a school event for their grandchild. The romantic image he once had of her is now marked as part of a bygone era. Instead, he describes her as a "gaunt old witch," yet, he acknowledges that she "contains a beauty that […] [Turnbull is] one of the last on earth to still decry" (*Toward* 46). He mourns the loss of her "beauty" and concludes in his usual somber tone: "To me she will always be that maiden on the shore, whose wet bare feet shed drying sand grain by grain in the cupped warmth of a back dune" (146). He also observes how "Perdita possesses that strange faculty of first wives being instantly intelligible" (147). This elevates the first wife to a glorified status. While he mourns the past, he fears the present, which is embodied by Gloria.

As he returns from the school event, Gloria asks about Perdita, revealing herself to be the jealous and inquisitive second wife: "How was the precious Perdita? […] Still anorectic?" (148). Like in this instance, the four women are constantly compared and pitted against each other. In a single, concise paragraph discussing sleep, sexuality, and awakening, he manages to intertwine his mother, Perdita, Gloria, and Deirdre, creating a web of interconnections and differences (91). Turnbull analyzes and juxtaposes their personality traits, quirks, and bodies, which ultimately reveals more about himself and his perspective through these detailed descriptions than about the women. Parks identifies the three females—Gloria, Deirdre, and Doreen—as "corresponding to Robert Graves's typology of the crone, Venus, and maiden" (155). In contrast, Turnbull describes Gloria as "a systematic

woman," noting that "there was a residue of Perdita in our life that struck her as an impurity—dirt in a corner as it were" (*Toward* 149).

Parks explains that "Deirdre is the Venus whose body Ben worships as a kind of carnal church" (155). However, Turnbull expresses relief when Deirdre vacates the house, stating with Gloria's return, order has been restored: "Under Gloria's impassioned care the violated house is healing. Soon there will not be a single telltale scar of my transgressions" (*Toward* 150). This passage suggests that Turnbull feels violated by Deirdre and, once again, seeks the safety of the marital bond. Perdita stands apart from this categorization; she symbolizes a nostalgic image of youth and timelessness, echoing the initial notion of nostalgia and longing for a youthful self. Turnbull shares most of his life with Perdita and has five children with her. The children of Turnbull, along with their future grandchildren, secure his genetic legacy and immortality.

In summary, the interactions with and descriptions of the female characters in *Toward the End of Time* depict the type of hegemonic masculinity embodied by Turnbull as being in turmoil. The hegemon confronts various stereotypical female figures—such as the seductress, wife, witch, and Eve—each of whom challenges the established gender order that the male protagonist strives to maintain. However, due to his physical and mental decline, the new roles and responsibilities he faces in this early retirement phase, and the external threat posed by a declining nation-state, the hegemon's ability to uphold an established self-image rooted in gender hierarchies is called into question. In this crisis moment, the female figures are portrayed as threats that fuel male fears and accelerate their downfall. In some instances, this decline appears to be a socially constructed endeavor, while in others, the narrative suggests that the hegemon's downfall results from a cunning strategy orchestrated by a network of interacting female forces.

Ultimately, the novel constructs a network of female characters that contribute to the erosion of normative masculinities. In line with this observation, the final sub-chapter will outline how aging and biomedical processes associated with it contribute to the concept of "masculinity in decline" and the figurative castration of the hegemon.

2.2.3 Retired Manhood: Old Age, Youth, and the Castrated Hegemon

"Potency is real, and the loss of potency" (Boyers 65).

The opening of *Toward the End of Time* presents a mature and reflective picture of Ben Turnbull through his poignant observations of time and nature. Shortly after, he reveals his

reality as a retired man in an afterthought at the kitchen table, sorting through his mail: "Perhaps the world is not 'spiritual' but 'social' or 'contractual'—since my retirement from the Boston financial world I would go for days without talking to anyone but my wife" (*Toward* 5). In this scene, Turnbull contrasts the spiritual—possibly hinting at the supernatural—with the secular. He simultaneously exposes some of the profound losses often explored in the literature about aging masculinities: the loss of an established social world, the loss of economic responsibilities, and the reduction of the male provider's role to the domestic space of the wife. This juxtaposition frames his reduced circumstances as a burden, prompting him to seek purpose and meaning elsewhere.

The text contrasts mundane office tasks with a transcendent spiritual state that the protagonist aspires to achieve in retirement, hoping to reconnect with nature: "I once enjoyed the resources of faxing and e-mail, but when I retired I cut the wires, so to speak. I wanted to get back to nature and my own human basics before saying goodbye to everything" (5). It remains uncertain whether this "cutting of wires" is a voluntary choice or an inescapable outcome of retirement. Regardless, this dramatization of the post-retirement experience is another key characteristic of Updike's protagonist. In search of a meaningful purpose before death, he ventures into natural, supernatural, and spiritual spheres. There, he contemplates the existence of magnificent large creatures before confronting the intense dilemma of dealing with the deer that his second wife, Gloria, wants to have killed. The challenges of his reorientation were discussed in the previous chapter regarding women and post-retirement sexuality.

It is no surprise that the first chapter of Updike's end-of-time fiction is named after and revolves around an animal that can be viewed as either a nuisance—devouring the flowers—one that carries significant symbolic meaning. This animal reflects Turnbull's desire to connect with and perhaps become part of the primal nature that he obsessively paints throughout the narrative. In one instance, his second wife, Gloria, transforms into the animal, prompting scholars to question: "Did Ben Turnbull* actually kill his wife, or did she transform into a deer?" (De Bellis 311). In other instances, Turnbull sees himself reflected in the deer, suggesting that he perceives it as a mirror image of himself. This interpretation becomes particularly intriguing at the end when the doe is killed. Turnbull rushes outside with his soaked diapers and "[w]ithout the patience for socks" (*Toward* 322) to look at the carcass. Turnbull concludes: "[A]mong the four of us, my affinity was with the deer" (324). The deer, commonly associated in Western cultures with nature, as well as innocence, fear, and alertness, is designed in Updike's text as a complex, multifaceted creature that blurs gender-binary lines and constantly oscillates between friend and foe, fascination and

repulsion. "Deer haunt our property," Turnbull exclaims, describing how Gloria pursues them for eating the flowers and destroying their gardens (5).

The storyline is concluded in the last and shortest chapter of the novel, "The Dahlia," where the professional hunter that Gloria employs finally manages to shoot and kill the deer—a doe, as we learn in the end. Turnbull humorously refers to the hunter as the "deerslayer" (302) and continues to compare himself to this man. "He is another of Gloria's saints. Her father was a saint of propriety; this man—named, like her father, John—a nature saint, blending selflessly with the trees, and brush, and rocks" (303). The ironic undertone suggests a sense of envy. More significantly, the name John appears on several occasions throughout the novel and, as hinted by the reference to "saint"—carries biblically connotations while also being deeply rooted in U.S. culture. The most notable Johns in the novel include John Mark, John Grisham, John the father, and John the masculine hunter.[73] The name even evokes arguably the most influential John in U.S. history, one of the first colonists, John Winthrop. Parks observes: "Ben sometimes refers to his house as the Hill, a reference suggesting John Winthrop's City on a Hill and the Puritan covenant community. The old covenant has been broken, the old faith in shards, and we face a nullity of our own making" (152).

In his first encounter with John the "deerslayer," Turnbull notes:

He hunts them with a bow and arrow because of the sport—he is, like me, retired; more happily, it would seem: he once climbed poles and read electric meters for a living, which may have encouraged habits of stealth and quick observation—and because he and his wife love venison. I had never heard before of a woman liking venison, but, then, in many ways I am still innocent, especially about women" (*Toward* 303).

The phrase "like me" creates a notion of commonality between the two opposing characters, despite their differences. However, the viewpoint here is crucial. Turnbull views the vital hunter, John, through the lens of his aging body, which is afflicted by illness. Although they are about the same age and both have entered a post-work retirement state, Turnbull's experience of retirement is characterized by biomedical and existential suffering. In contrast, John's retirement phase may not differ much from his pre-retirement life as a hunter, at least according to Turnbull's perception of him.

The final chapter is significant because it closes with the death of the deer—an animal onto which Turnbull has projected a substantial amount of meaning from beginning to end. In contrast to the "deerslayer," Turnbull fails in his attempt to kill the deer at the beginning

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[73] In *A Dictionary of First Names*, Patrick Hanks et al. look at the frequent recurrence of the name "John" and explain the religious meaning, noting that "[i]n its various forms in different languages, it has been the most perennially popular of all Christian names."

(16). The act of killing the deer is rich in masculine symbolism and alludes to the notion of the Neanderthal male that Turnbull reads about in *Scientific American*, which he later reflects on in his journal. In this extensive textbook exploration of Neanderthal history, Turnbull romanticizes the sturdiness and strength of this extinct male body: "They were so strong that their muscles, knitted to our bones, would snap them. Their own bones are often found broken, perhaps in battle with giant elk, bison, and those long-horned extinct oxen called auroch (plural)" (26). The idealization of Neanderthal masculinity symbolizes Turnbull's fear of both larger societal and personal bodily transformations.

He contrasts this form of hegemonic masculinity with one that has supposedly replaced the Neanderthal version on a global economic stage. The Neanderthal male—represented mainly by John—is not portrayed as an intellectual. Initially, Turnbull positions himself as superior, but he later reminds himself that he, too, will vanish one day and fade into obscurity. "Most Neanderthal men died before they were half my present age. Some day I will be as forgotten, as dissolved back into the compacted silt, as your typical grunting, lusting, hungry, broken-boned Neanderthal man" (28). This complex juxtaposition is grounded in a crucial commonality: hegemony. A young Turnbull is suggested to embody an ideal form of hegemonic masculinity, one that is linked both to physical strength and intellectual prowess.

Idealized Masculinities

The character of John, the "deerslayer," who hunts deer using a "bow and arrow" (*Toward* 303) and always carries a "knife" (306), represents a return to this idealized image of the hypermasculine hunter or frontiersman. I have previously outlined this archetype in relation to contemporary man-camp culture and frontier masculinities. This raises the question of whether these masculinities can be sustained in old age. Additionally, we may ask how societal changes influence the perception of these "traditional" masculine roles over time.

Bettina Uppenkamp traces the development of the muscular and exaggerated body type back to antiquity. She explains: "During antiquity, three ideal types of the male nude figure developed: muscular, hypermasculine bodies, associated with the heroic strength of Heracles; athletic-masculine and yet adolescently graceful bodies, typified by Apollo; and finally, the fragile, pretty, but graceful body of the adolescent, embodied in the figure of Narcissus" (437). Deevia Ghana suggests that hypermasculinity "is often conceptualised as exacerbated enactment of manhood and is considered to be the ultimate way of earning power. The expression of hypermasculinity involves the denigration of femininity and alternate sexuality and is misogynistic" (180).

John represents an archetypal masculinity reminiscent of frontiersmen like Daniel Boone, who "was transformed into a legendary embodiment of the masculine ideals of a new nation experiencing westward expansion, the market revolution, and urbanization" (Carroll 61). Through biographical retelling, Boone, as a mirror image of this ideal, became "a symbol of heroic American manhood" (61). In Turnbull's view, John embodies precisely this type of masculinity, despite the irony and sarcasm present in his observations. Carroll further elucidates this type of masculinity, linking it to whiteness: "Although the Boone ideal included a 'wild' masculinity associated with Native American men and the American natural environment (particularly athleticism and hunting prowess), it also reflected most nineteenth-century Americans' association of manhood with whiteness" (62).

The hunter or frontiersman has deep roots in U.S. American culture and is always closely linked to physical strength and physical abilities. Only the fittest individuals could conquer the wilderness and face the challenges of nature while moving westward. Jay Mechling explains that "[h]unting wild animals has been a primary male undertaking and a source of masculine identity throughout human history" ("Hunting" 220). However, in early settler communities, the connection between hunting and manhood was not as pronounced. Instead, masculinity was often associated with farming and agriculture. The ideal of the hypermasculine hunter emerged alongside the westward expansion of the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (220).

Mechling adds that "[i]t was during the early nineteenth century that white settlement of game-rich western frontier land, romanticization of Native American male hunters, and a decidedly masculine nationalism encouraged the association of hunting with manliness and American identity" (220). This version of the outdoor adventure masculinity was tied to concepts of national identity and patriotism, which also involved militarism. It effectively erased or overshadowed Native American masculinities and entire tribes while promoting the strategic expansion of territorial possession. This narrative significantly contributed to the making of "America." It remains a recurring theme today, appearing in advertisements, films, political campaigns, presidential speeches—and in literature.

In the twentieth century, a notable shift occurred with the rise of white-collar work and the growth of urbanization. This transformation also affected gun culture and hunting in the United States. Accordingly, Mechling explains: "[I]ts chief cultural significance, whether done for subsistence or sport, has been its function as a primal drama for the initiation of boys into manhood and for the ritual bonding of the male hunters" (220). By the end of the nineteenth century, hunting, fishing, and other survival rituals were primarily practiced within male club culture. This shift emerged as a way for "middle-class men [who] could escape what they perceived as the increasing feminization of society" (221). A similar

concern reemerged at the end of the twentieth century with calls for men's liberation. "The mythopoetic men's movement, in particular, promoted a link between hunting and the actualization of masculinity, and some hunting organizations and clubs have made explicit connections with these men's movements" (221). This feared "feminization" of society is consistently highlighted in Updike's prose and constitutes a central feature of white male texts that seem preoccupied with significant societal changes.

The narrative world is shaped by a sense of crisis and impending doom, similar to what is often found in apocalyptic fiction.[74] The material body serves as the site where these changes are manifested through illness metaphors. Sean Heuston discusses idealized physical masculinities, noting that "bodily strength and vigor became highly important measures of manhood in the late twentieth century" (58). This emphasis led to a "male body anxiety" (58), which arose during the "crisis" period of that era. The era saw the introduction of plastic surgery and sexual enhancement drugs like Viagra (58). Heuston further explains that "[a]ll of these disorders and anxieties became included in late-twentieth-century discussions of a 'crisis' of masculinity. As American men sought to define manhood in a postmodern culture, critics argued, they were being presented with an unattainable hypermasculine physical ideal while being told that they might achieve it through weight-training equipment, surgery, and pharmaceutical products" (58).

The aging male body undergoes severe biomedical changes that can lead to serious health issues, such as prostate cancer. In this context, the crisis is perceived as an end-of-the-world moment, particularly as depicted in Updike's fiction, where these changes appear phenomenal and irreversible. Messerschmidt and Messner explain that "[h]egemonic masculinity is […] constructed in relation to what Connell identifies as four specific nonhegemonic masculinities" (38). Among these are "*subordinate*" and "*marginalized*" masculinities. Ben Turnbull constructs his own identity through storytelling or "telling," and by constantly juxtaposing his "old" self with a "new" self, in relation to those surrounding him, both male and female. He appears to long for a type of masculinity represented by the

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[74] *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2006) defines apocalyptic literature in relation to biblical themes and contexts "[a]s a kind of systematized prophetic writing [that] […] takes a wide view of human history, which it schematizes and periodizes, and an especial interest in eschatology, in the 'latter days', the end of historical time, the last judgement" (Childs and Fowler 9). Furthermore, these texts are often interpreted as responses to periods of crisis in society (9-10). Richard Gray, in his book *A History of American Literature* (2012), highlights various contexts and eras in U.S. American literary history where apocalyptic themes and modes of telling resurface. For example, he discusses literature about the Great Depression and the works of authors like Hemingway and Fitzgerald (319), as well as more recent reflections in literature following the 9/11 attacks (822).

hunter, John, whom he reduces to his physical abilities and instincts. This longing may stem from the physical loss he experiences after prostate surgery, which dominates the latter parts of the novel. However, he also associates the physically superior male body with an intellectual and strategic idea of the self-made man tied to economic success, as opposed to mere survival in nature.

Both of these perspectives represent versions of hegemonic masculinities, as noted earlier, and they correspond with Darwinian notions of the survival of the fittest—another primary theme in the novel. Matthew Dudgeon discusses the relationship between Darwinism and gender:

> Darwinism contributed directly to concepts of masculinity, arguing that men arose from animals rather than a moment of divine creation, that men and women had evolved differently, and that competition is crucial to the progress and maintenance of men and society. Darwinism thus problematized static views of relations between sexes and races, but helped define a normative masculinity that emphasized men's competition and their pursuit of heterosexual reproductive sex and that justified the interests of white middle- and upper-class men. (205)

He explains further how "Darwin's account of organic evolution by natural selection challenged prevalent religious and philosophical conceptions of humans' and in particular men's place in the universe" (203). These new revelations shook sturdy religious pillars, essentially "contradicting biblical accounts of Eden and the Fall" and thus "destabilizing existing gender hierarchies based on biblical accounts of creation" (203).[75]

Updike's portrayal of an anxious male character, which includes direct references to Social Darwinism,[76] reflects a significant shift that occurred at the turn of the twentieth century. Jay Mechling notes: "Many forces in the closing decades of the nineteenth century contributed to the sense that white, middle-class masculinity was in crisis. Social Darwinism suggested that one of the costs of modern, evolved society was a loss of men's connections with their more natural, primitive condition, and that the effect of modern society was to

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[75] Dudgeon elaborates on the more problematic sides of Social Darwinism, stating: "As revolutionary as Darwin's theories were, Darwinism nonetheless naturalized many of the race and gender relations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Darwinism suggested the possibility that different racial groups represented different stages of evolution, reinscribing existing racial hierarchies. Darwinian theory explains general differences between sexes as a result of sexual, or mate choice. Darwinists used the general parameters of sexual selection to argue, for example, that men were more evolved intellectually than women, or that men and women had evolved for different roles—men for competition and work outside the home, women for child care and homemaking. Such arguments, which essentialize 'man' and 'woman,' were often used to bolster the status quo, limiting women's educational opportunities and political rights and justifying men's sexual needs and pleasures" (203-204).

[76] In a provocative exchange with Deirdre, Turnbull responds to her question "Why are men so cruel?" with the following explanation, quoting from Psalms 37:11: "'Natural selection,' I tell her. 'The killers survive, the killed drop out of the genetic pool. Same reason,' I go on, 'women are masochistic. The submissive ones get fucked and make the babies and the scrappers don't. The meek inherit the earth'" (53-54).

'soften' and otherwise feminize the male" ("Boy Scouts" 99). Parks observes that this reflection of uncertainties in a changing world is also evident in Turnbull's construction of universes and the philosophy surrounding Hawkins' quantum theory. Parks sums up Turnbull's contradicting ideology: "With the Big Ben came the Great Expansion, which may have reached its end and we are getting ready for the Great Contraction; drawn by gravitational pull, the universe will collapse back to nothingness" (154).

All musings on origin and nothingness lead to an end-of-the-world outlook that is clearly tied to a fear of bodily extinction, reflected through common narratives such as the Fall of Eden, ancient mythology, Medieval land-grabbing, modern science, and, subsequently, the "death of God," as well as late twentieth century gender discussions. Ultimately, Updike's protagonist recounts human history to make sense of his seemingly insignificant and temporary existence in a world that is in constant flux. As feared by the aging male, entire groups go extinct if they cannot or refuse to adapt to what is culturally perceived as a "sea change."

The notion that "Social Darwinism emphasized the importance of competition between individuals, and in particular between men, in the progress and maintenance of society" (Dudgeon 204) aligns with the development of the self-made man myth in U.S. American culture. The development heavily relied on the rise of marketplace competition, especially during the nineteenth century. "American men, particularly those of the emergent middle class, increasingly tied masculinity to their own ability to succeed in a competitive economic arena" (Hessinger 412). Robert Wuthnow suggests looking at the narratives that promoted this idea: "Stories of self-made men whose hard work and common sense took them from rags to riches are a prominent thread in the American mythos. During the nineteenth century these stories circulated widely in textbooks and popular literature" (104-105). He goes on to say that

> [t]he broader significance of the self-made man has not been lost on observers of American history and culture. 'The legendary hero of America […] is the self-made man.' It is the accomplishments of this figure, however fictional, that singularly reinforce Americans' patriotic pride […]. The message of the self-made man is that America is a good and just society. (105)

Turnbull visits Boston several times and frequently mentions his former firm, "Sibbes, Dudley, and Wise." His visits evoke a sense of nostalgia for the self-made man, reflecting on how retirement and old age have distanced him from office culture. With Deirdre, he shares details about his poor upbringing and stresses how his financial success is entirely his achievement (*Toward* 55f). The firm embodies an "American" way of life, which became the dominant and desirable ideal of the twentieth century, particularly in the white collar context. Traditionally, white-collar culture was male-dominated, and women only entered these

spheres as typists in the post-WWII era. However, the white-collar office has remained a predominantly male space until very recently.

In addition to hunting, the text represents the game of golf as another main activity of the white middle-class male. After his surgery, while Turnbull is still in recovery and physically confined to his marital home, his golf "buddies" come to visit (*Toward* 303f). He mentions "Red and Ken" alongside the term masculinity. With his urine leaking "onto the silk-damask-covered seat cushion of [his] […] favourite wing chair" (304), he is contrasted/contrasts himself with these two men and does not recognize them as a mirrored self: "It was hard for me to believe that I had ever experienced ecstasy in the company of these men" (304). As he navigates the consequences of illness and physical impairment, Turnbull's masculine identity further undergoes transformation.

This moment is preceded by the introduction of the "deerslayer," creating a juxtaposition between seemingly opposing types of masculinities—one version abruptly breaking into the other. But Turnbull does not belong to either category. He is neither a man of the outdoors, physically strong and conquering the wilderness like an "American" frontiersman, nor a representative of white-collar masculine culture, who moves from one business deal to the next, finds solace on the golf course, and returns to the world of money—arguably another frontier.[77] Instead, he laments the loss of physical freedom and his daily pursuits while gazing at his golf clubs, which evoke a notion of masculinity he no longer identifies with. This is symbolized by fabrics, texture, and bodily fluids: "The masculine pungency of sweat-impregnated grips and often-worn leather shoes swept out at me; hundreds of hours of my life had left their redolent film on this equipment" (304).

In the past, the golf course was a familiar place for him, where he could assert a sense of superior masculinity even in retirement and at an older age. In the first golf-related passage of the novel, his ability to play and prove himself on the course is emphasized, with the game intertwined with sexual fantasies and male sexual prowess. Parks notes, "[h]is age has not dimmed his lust" (155). Thus, Turnbull expresses his admiration for the golf course with the following words: "But there was golf, on a course that was all rounded hills, grassed-over links—an opulent succession of freshly exposed breasts and thighs, little hill upon hill, with comforting swales and clefts and bulges between them" (*Toward* 39). This initial celebration of the landscape later turns into mourning, suggesting that it can only be "comforting" if he is able to participate and thus *perform*. "It was lovely to be out swinging" (39), he continues

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[77] The two visitors appear indifferent and not in the slightest empathetic. "Ken […] kept looking like an airline logo […] falling into a silent stare" and "Red had brought his flip phone in his pocket and it kept ringing" (304).

to delight in the sport and the experience that is suffused with language related to sex and sexuality, such as comparing the golf course hills to "freshly exposed breasts and thighs."

However, his enjoyment of golf is overshadowed by the post-war scenery, a rare sight in Updike's supposedly dystopian narrative. On their drive back from the course, he observes the abandoned buildings and reflects on the "post-war desolation" in a "senile world" (40). The choice of words here is deliberate, foreshadowing Turnbull's personal feelings of abandonment and bodily decline. It also raises the possibility of Alzheimer's or dementia as another possible branch in the reading of the aging protagonist. When Gloria returns, he asks somewhat "timidly:" "'Where have you been?' […] I was unclear as to how long she had been gone; as I age, holes in my memory develop, and because they are holes it is difficult to gauge their size" (141).

In another scene, Turnbull and his retired male friends, referred to as "fun-seeking retirees" (96), spend time at a ski resort where aging and sports are explicitly connected. Reflecting on his winter sports experience, Turnbull initially feels insecure and unskilled "until [he][…] remembers that skiing *is* falling, a surrender to the unthinkable and the fearful" (97). This realization provides him with a sense of liberation, and he reflects on the process of aging: "We rise as we age; the older we get, the longer and more treacherous the distance to the earth becomes" (97). Turnbull further comments on the pain in his "legs […], knees, the quadriceps" (97), concluding that "[t]he years move into us" (97). Then again, he mentions his limbs and reduced physical capabilities; for instance, he notes that "when I stand holding an infant in my arms, my knees go weak" (106).

In these passages, Turnbull epitomizes Updike's "Middle American." Robinson describes the typical "Middle American" as follows: "The prevailing image of the Middle American is of a wounded white man who aggressively speaks up for his 'natural' rights and entitlements, even as he trumpets his own 'silence' and invisibility" (359). But his anger and bitterness are directed not only at the others but also at him/self. This past self is overshadowed by the retirement stage, which invalidates his previous authority (a state he cannot maintain), and ultimately by prostate cancer. Turnbull's downfall then manifests itself as both a physical and metaphorical castration.[78] De Bellis suggests that

> Turnbull witnesses the collapse of aspects of federal and local order, his home and his body. His prostate cancer reduces his lust to suckling. Cancer is sometimes described as an 'irrational' action of cells, and Turnbull's metaphor for the disorder within him and around him is nature's incomprehensibility, which he describes through quantum physics,* a science that explores the counterintuitive behavior of subatomic particles. (448)

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[78] This is a theme that I want to explore further in Roth's *Exit Ghost*.

The theme of youth versus old age is prominent throughout the narrative, particularly through the character of Turnbull, who appears to age significantly over the course of a single year.[79] This contrast is made visible in various ways, such as through the women he has sexual experiences with that become younger and younger, as well as in the relation to his children and his grandchildren. Turnbull's aging is a focal point, both explicitly and implicitly.

At the story's beginning, Turnbull refers to himself as an "aging man" (*Toward* 5). The physical realities of aging become apparent during his interactions with the sex worker, Deirdre, who notices an unusual smell. "I blushed, answering, 'Only myself. That's the smell of old age'" (76). In the mall scene, he continues to contrast "young couples" and "[e]lderly women" (77), and he reflects on his role as grandfather. Initially, he romanticizes this experience before drifting into a somber contemplation of demise: "It quickens my senile tears to think of them all marching—toddling, creeping—into the future, lugging my genes into the maelstrom of a future world I will never know" (78). Through this perspective, Turnbull provides a bleak view of retirement, depicting the retired individual who spends time wandering the mall:[80]

> The mysterious people who dwell in these valleys were out in force at the mall, in their windbreakers and blue jeans, […] and their barbarically ornate running shoes. Retirees—who all seemed ancient to me, but some were perhaps younger than I— lounged in a daze of early Alzheimer's on the benches the mall provides, waiting for their shapeless wives to come claim them and lead them to the car. If they had a thought as we passed, it must have been that Deirdre was my daughter, or a hard-faced young escort from the nursing home. (76-77)

Following this depressed observation, Turnbull perceives Deirdre as a "young person […] trying to grow, to learn, to orient herself in the world." He tells her, however, contradicting this hopeful union of youth and future: "I don't much care what happens in the world. I've had my years in it, by and large. You've arrived as a late kicker, one last joy, and I'm grateful. But time is running out for me" (121). This moment clearly manifests his experience with Deirdre as one of his final sexual pleasures and highlights his waning ability to perform his sexuality. Boyers discusses the impact of prostate cancer and impotence, noting that "[h]is postoperative impotence is affecting because we feel that he is lost without the faculties that are most real and important to him, but Updike does not permit us to forget who and what this man is" (Boyers 65). This unavoidable experience of loss aligns with David

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[79] The novel comes full circle, beginning and ending in November. In one year, Ben Turnbull undergoes dramatic bodily shifts that mirror the social changes he describes through his storytelling, even though his surroundings remain largely the same.

[80] Turnbull remarks about American malls: "Malls have become a public habitat soaked in slovenly intimacy; its customers step naturally from huddling around television in their living rooms to cruising these boulevards of superfluity, where fluorescent-lit shops press forward temptations ranging from yogurt-coated peanuts to electric- powered treadmills" (*Toward* 77).

Leverenz's observations in "Aging Beyond Masculinities, or, the Penis as Failed Synecdoche," an essay that becomes increasingly relevant when reading Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost*. Levenrenz argues that "for most aging men […] the limp penis becomes a private synecdoche for their failing powers" (64). The "mourning" for these lost abilities—more so for the loss of hegemonic powers—manifests in "[a] nostalgic yearning for youthful self-confidence" as well as in the desire for "young women" (65).

Like *Rabbit At Rest*, *Toward the End of Time* is an elegiac text. González-Etxeberria notes about Rabbit what equally applies to Turnbull: "[T]he novel can be interpreted as an elegiac moment when most of the protagonist's experiences are transformed by his diminishing ability to perform his gender role, and the reader discovers an aging man behaving the way Alex Hobbs characterized old age: '[I]t is a time for reflecting on previous growth'" (González-Etxeberria 16). He expands on this thought by saying: "When Updike was preparing his Rabbit's fourth part, he was conscious about both the national and the gender crisis. Certainly, 'the novels stand as the story not only of a man but of a nation, which, like its hero, is in decline'" (20). With Turnbull, Updike revisits a national crisis and propels it further into the future, embedding it within a post-apocalyptic scenario that symbolizes the downfall of "man." Similar to Franzen's hegemon, Alfred, in *The Corrections*, published at the turn of the millennium, "Turnbull sardonically witnesses the triumph of materialism in America, the emasculation of men, the pandering to youth and the unheeded dangers of technology. He notes that his children had raised themselves with the help of television* and corporations trying to sell them something" (De Bellis 448-449).

The melancholic state in *Toward the End of Time* serves as a hallmark of male-centered fiction from the turn of the century. This type of fiction has often been celebrated as "American" fiction because it addresses themes that reiterate common myths and gender norms. However, these narratives are portrayed as being universally American, free from substantial considerations of race and gender. In reality, they are closely tied to idealized concepts of white, able-bodied, and heteronormative masculinities. The following chapter on Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost* will expand on this discussion and outline additional features of typical aging male narratives.

3. Reading the Repellent: Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost* in a Post-Me-Too-pocalypse

3.1 Aging Masculinities Between Misogyny and Cancel Culture

In 2021, W. W. Norton & Company published the much-anticipated book *Philip Roth: The Biography,* which generated significant controversy and was later withdrawn amid sexual misconduct allegations against biographer Blake Bailey. The book did not remain in print for long. *The Guardian* recalls in July 2022 that "WW Norton took it out of print and pledged to donate money to sexual abuse organizations equaling the advance it had paid to the biographer." The same article also discusses Bailey's memoir, *Repellent: Philip Roth, #MeToo, and Me*, which came out in response to the sexual abuse allegations. Bailey, who was granted unique access to the private life of Philip Roth during his research for the biography, went on to publish both the biography and his memoir with Skyhorse, a publisher known for its work with controversial white male writers who promote conspiracy theories and anti-Semitism. Jessie Gaynor notes in her satirical article for *Literary Hub* on Bailey's memoir and the publisher he found: "While we do not, under any circumstances, have to hand it to Skyhorse, publisher of Sandy Hook deniers, anti-vaxxers, January 6th conspiracy theorists, and Woody Allen—their brand is *extremely* consistent." This alliance within the publishing world is particularly troubling, considering Roth's Jewish American background.

Although Gaynor's comedic critique targets Bailey and his publisher, one cannot help but notice the bitter twist posthumously involving Roth. Philip Roth remains a contested literary figure to this day, with or without this *new* association. Some praise him as one of the most influential U.S. American writers, while others criticize him as a blatant misogynist. In a 2021 interview with *Vulture*, when Bailey still had a public platform, he shared that Roth's greatest fear was being canceled as a writer in a post-MeToo world.[81] It seems that Claire Bloom's memoir, *Leaving a Doll's House: A Memoir* (1996), which offers an unflinching portrayal of their troubled relationship and Roth's shortcomings, was already difficult for Roth to accept. "Claire Bloom's book devastated him," Bailey notes in the interview. "He never responded publicly, but he never got over it." Ironically, Roth will now forever be linked to Bailey—the biographer he carefully selected out of a pool of potential candidates—who was himself canceled for sexual misconduct in a post-MeToo landscape. What

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[81] In April 2021, Matthew Schneier interviews Blake Bailey for *Vulture*. During the conversation, Bailey mentions Philip Roth and the impact of the MeToo movement: "Toward the end, he lived long enough to see Me Too, and I think it terrified him." However, it is important to note that this is Bailey's interpretation based on his discussions with Roth and the insights he gained into Roth's private life. Bailey elaborates further: "We never discussed Me Too, per se. Certainly, we exhaustively discussed his controversial sex life and how he thought he was perceived because of that."

implications does this connection have for Roth's legacy? And how will it affect the perception of his work in future discussions, classrooms, and literary criticism?

The New York Times, which has extensively reported on the making of the biography and the scandal surrounding it, states in June 2021 on the topic of Roth's legacy that

> [w]hile Bailey has found a new publisher, his [Roth's] biography is now inextricably linked to controversy. The accusations he faces have intensified a parallel conversation about Roth's treatment of women, adding fuel to the questions of whether Bailey's account of Roth's sexual and romantic relationships was overly sympathetic and oversimplified.

This article also includes perspectives from several of Roth's acquaintances who support him and address the misconstructions and inaccuracies in Bailey's biography. Roth passed away before the biography was published and did not have the opportunity to respond to Bailey's portrayal of himself. But his involvement with Bailey and the fact that he gave his biographer exclusive access may negatively affect future discussions of his literature. The *Times* cautions that "Roth's efforts to control his posthumous reputation may have backfired." And it remains uncertain whether the forthcoming publications—many of which adopt more sympathetic views of Roth and emphasize his literary legacy—will be able to counterbalance or undo the reputational damage caused by the biography.

In light of these recent developments, *Exit Ghost* emerges as a significant text that warrants a critical examination of its gender representations. The novel, typical of Roth's late style, captures a moment of "crisis" in a post-9/11 era, reflecting a nation in distress. Through the metaphor of terror, it also comments on gender configurations and the perceived decline of hegemonic masculinities within U.S. culture. The anxieties Roth expresses in his early twentieth-century narrative resurface today in the controversies surrounding "masculinity in crisis" and the idea that "masculinity," much like the writer's *masculine* legacy, needs protection. Roth's work represents a male angst that the writer himself experienced at the end of his career, confronted with the biographical re/telling of his life. The debates surrounding Bailey's textual interpretations of Philip Roth are not only addressed to some extent in the fiction novel, but also symbolize ongoing and normalized social practices still prevalent in U.S. culture, such as the objectification and abuse of women. These practices are rooted in the structural manifestation of hegemonic masculinities in society, finding expression in cultural representation, as seen in the fiction novel.

The aging male is central to this narrative of decline and serves as a symbol of both real and perceived losses among men. To amplify the experience of loss, the text contrasts the aging male intellectual/author with the young male biographer. This juxtaposition not only foreshadows real-life conflicts arising with the biography by Bailey but also highlights existing gender dynamics, showcasing two seemingly opposing masculinities that the text

constantly pits against each other. And the notions evoked in this narrative about hegemonic masculinities, power structures, and age-related illnesses give insight into significant cultural developments of the past decades that appear to be boiling over today—at least according to scholars of critical masculinities and reports in the media.[82] The text depicts the struggle to define one form of masculinity in opposition to a constructed dominant ideal and echoes, like Updike's *Toward the End of Time*, a male anxiety and fragility that have been prevalent in U.S. society since the Second World War. Michael Kimmel articulates this sentiment in his book *Angry White Men*. And in alignment with Kimmel and other critics' observations from critical masculinity studies, I argue that this fear can be summarized most poignantly in one profound loss: the loss of hegemonic powers.

Thus, I want to approach *Exit Ghost* through the vexed metaphor of crisis to demonstrate that crisis as a term is inadequate for discussing societal changes pertaining to gender, particularly regarding masculinities. This critique builds on the terminology issues I outlined in the introduction of this study. Additionally, I aim to emphasize that the limitations faced by the aging protagonist are gendered experiences tied to the perceived loss of a normative masculinity. As mentioned in previous sections of this work, the crisis metaphor recurs in texts about male aging, and unfortunately, it perpetuates the misleading notion that gender equality and the emergence of inclusive forms of masculinities—such as non-competitive, caregiving, or queer—somehow contribute to a decline in masculinity.[83] An analysis of how power—political, economic, and social—is allocated in U.S. society challenges this claim.

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[82] The discourse surrounding a perceived crisis in masculinity resurfaced in 2022, cautioning the U.S. American public through various media channels and positions that "masculinity" is in decline and that U.S. American men are at a loss, compared, for instance, to the advancements women have made in the work field in recent years. In his op-ed for *The New York Times* titled "The Crisis of Men and Boys" (2022), David Brooks outlines the many struggles that men and boys are confronted with today. He highlights the situation in the workplace: "Men are struggling in the workplace. One in three American men with only a high school diploma—10 million men—is now out of the labor force. The biggest drop in employment is among young men aged 25 to 34. Men who entered the work force in 1983 will earn about 10 percent less in real terms in their lifetimes than those who started a generation earlier." The article generated substantial commentary and raises the important question about whether labeling these challenges as "crisis" without offering viable solutions or nuanced perspectives might just add more fuel to the fire. In academic discourse, Katarzyna Wojnicka reflects on the "crisis metaphor" in her 2021 essay "Men and Masculinities in Times of Crisis: Between Care and Protection." She discusses potential benefits linked to the crisis trope. Wojnicka argues alongside academic consensus that the crisis trope "should not be framed as a scientific concept" because it remains "negatively charged" (1). Nonetheless, she argues that "the notion of crisis itself is still useful in the scientific discussions around gender, but when framed as specific historical event" (1).

[83] To gain insight into theories on inclusivity and masculinities, coined by Eric Anderson as Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT), see his 2009 book publication *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities* and the 2018 essay, titled "Inclusive Masculinity Theory: Overview, Reflection and Refinement," in which he revisits and updates the theoretical approach.

This experience of masculinity at loss is a trope that Roth popularized throughout his long career as a fiction writer. He explored this theme within Jewish American contexts, as well as on more normative or heteronormative grounds, which allows for some of his characters to be interpreted through the lens of normative (and thus *white*) "Americanness." In "The Uncontrollability of Real Things," Daniel Ross Goodman explains that "[s]ince the passing of Philip Roth in May of 2018, a great deal of discussion concerning Roth's legacy has centered upon the question of defining Roth as a writer—and whether he can even be classified at all" (40). I do classify Roth as a writer who captures a masculine angst that continued to grow in the second half of the twentieth century. This angst is connected to the idea of the victimized male, a concept tied to men's liberation movements, which at various moments in history culminated in both personal and political crisis. Roth's work reflects the complex interplay between 'what we expect men to be' and the individual's struggles within those limitations. In the upcoming chapters, I will offer a comprehensive analysis of the different representations of masculinities found throughout Roth's large body of work. And following that, I will concentrate specifically on the themes of gender configurations as presented in *Exit Ghost*.

The Masculine in Philip Roth Studies

Philip Roth continues to receive frequent scholarly attention, and his books are still widely celebrated for their wit and aesthetic bravura, despite ongoing controversies. A recent academic contribution by Esther Zaplana reexamines Roth's deeply personal account of his father's bodily decline in *Patrimony*. Zaplana observes that "[i]n the search for literary representations of aging males and masculinity, Philip Roth's *Patrimony* (1991) offers one of the most poignant portrayals of the author's elderly father and his harrowing experience prior to his death due to brain tumor" (95). This work is one of many that focus on aging masculinities, providing a voice to a male protagonist who comes undone in the eye of the hegemonic gaze. "Albeit mediated through Roth's memory," Zaplana further notes, referencing a narrative feature that I link to the writing of aging masculinities, "Herman's [Roth's father] first-person voice addresses the reader in a borrowed confessional mode that welds together his most private experience with the individual identifications engendered in the American Jewish community to which he belongs" (97-98).

But Herman's body is also a "national" body, she points out, echoing scholar Ann Basu, who argues that Philip Roth's late novels "register[…] national disturbances taking

place within the person of the protagonist" (6).[84] Herman's understanding of old age and masculinities is informed by persisting social constructions. "Values attached to the masculine patriarchal standard, such as courage, entrepreneurship, relentlessness, and faithfulness are highlighted in the context of forthcoming decline, loss, and the very prospect of death" (98). The image of a father in decline, slowly and brutally crumbling away in the presence of his son, symbolizes the growing disorder of both the private physical body and national patriarchal structures. I intend to explore this representation in more detail in my analysis of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*.

Patrimony, however, is just one among many texts that depict a struggling father or, more broadly, a struggling heteronormative male character. *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), for instance, one of Roth's earlier novels, addresses themes of male aging and its implications regarding bodily limitations. This text perhaps most clearly depicts the resistance to falling from heteronormative masculinity through its ridiculously hypersexual aging protagonist, sixty-four-year-old Mickey Sabbath. Although he is deeply troubled by thoughts of suicide, his obsessions with sex and masculine prowess permeate every page. Goodman analyzes Mickey Sabbath through the lens of the voracious Shakespearean character of Sir John Falstaff, asserting that *Sabbath's Theater* is a "propulsive, dynamic novel" (41). Like *Exit Ghost*, Goodman describes the text "Falstaffian" because it presents a "full-bodied, fleshy man who, like Falstaff, protests against death and condemns the curse of human mortality by clinging, in the most carnal of matters, to life, and to the sexual dimension of existence that makes life possible" (41-42).

Goodman also contends that as Roth aged, "when mortality occupied a central place in his thoughts and in his literature," he became more inclined to include Shakespearean tropes and intertextual references, foregrounding suicide and death as central motifs in his writing (41). Consequently, it is not surprising that Sabbath occasionally references and resembles King Lear (42). However, despite these resemblances, Goodman notes that "on a deeper, visceral level, the Shakespearean character with whom he shares the most strands of literary DNA is Falstaff" (43), due to "his insatiable appetites, his incorrigible comic impulse, his manic energy, his ever-present wish to always be 'going to the king's tavern' […], his verbal and theatrical *jeux d'esprit*, and his indefatigable drive for life" (43).

In "Queering Philip Roth," David Brauner highlights the Jewish identity of Roth's characters and examines several of his narratives through the lens of queer theory, as well as

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[84] In discussing Roth's late characters, which echo the evolution of Updike's aging protagonists, Basu notes in *Senses of Trial* (2015): "They probe a symbolism of bodily wholesomeness generated by nation-building narratives such as pastoralism and Adamism that seek to link the American male individual to the nation" (6).

theories on Jewish and Jewish American masculinities. Specifically, he inspects the interconnected concepts of emasculation and the effeminization of the Jewish (American) male. Brauner criticizes the fact that most scholarship on masculinity in Roth's fiction has remained "within a heteronormative frame of reference" (86), neglecting to consider these Jewish American characters from queer perspectives. He acknowledges that there are only three exceptions among "fifty-odd books and hundreds of articles and book chapters" of literary scholarship (86-87) on this literary topic. Brauner speculates that "Roth's popular reputation as an aggressively heterosexual, libidinous, masculinist, and in some versions sexist or even misogynist author has determined the parameters of critical discourse" (87). And he further observes that this heteronormative discourse is largely shaped by the fact that

> male sexuality in Roth tends to be associated with promiscuous, priapic adulterers whose perversity, polymorphous though it is, is restricted to heterosexual or onanistic activities: from Alex Portnoy's masturbation with a piece of liver, to Mickey Sabbath's urination over Drenka's grave, to David Kepesh's licking of Consuela's menstrual blood, to Simon Axler's threesome, Roth's oeuvre is full of sexual experimentation, which, however, never extends to male homosexual activity. (87-88)

This analysis of Roth's characters combined with Zaplana's reading of Herman Roth's masculinity as being influenced by "[v]alues attached to the masculine patriarchal standard" (Zaplana 98) helps explain why academia often perceives Roth's characters as white heteronormative figures reflecting white "American" ideas of hegemonic masculinity. In various instances, these characters attempt to hide or suppress their Jewish identities in favor of a much larger and idealized notion of "Americanness" (Connolly 654).

Brauner has every right to voice this critique, for Roth's characters are more complex and cannot simply be categorized under a broad notion of "American" hegemonic masculinity. I propose an approach to these texts, particularly focusing on the example of *Exit Ghost*, that situates the "Rothian" aging character within a heteronormative cultural context. This context clearly operates within and relies on patriarchal and hegemonic masculine structures. However, in certain social situations, these characters challenge the boundaries of the heteronormative framework and are portrayed as religious alterity. They are particularly othered in contexts where white and youthful masculinities and power hierarchies are dominant, making their differences more visible.

The aged Nathan Zuckerman, a recurring character in Roth's fiction, is perceived as "othered" when compared to the young, white, heteronormative male archetype. This contrast highlights his identity as a Jewish American and his status as an aging man. I argue that this distinction is elevated when juxtaposed with the fictional biographer Richard Kliman in *Exit Ghost*, representing a double loss for an aging Jewish American character who

sometimes manages to pass as simply "American" and able-bodied. In some instances, Zuckerman constructs himself as an authority figure, drawing on his status as an economically affluent and intellectual male. This is evident in his interactions with Jamie Logan, a thirty-something aspiring writer whom Nathan desires sexually. Thus, I approach Nathan Zuckerman from an intersectional viewpoint that examines the complexities of gendered aging while at the same time acknowledging that this character's identity is complex and multifaceted. It consists of elements that both conform to and are complicit with hegemonic masculinities. Then again, in specific contexts, it stands outside this accepted normative frame. These characteristics often affirm one another, yet they also exist in a constant state of tension with each other and their surroundings.

Other texts that explore the struggles of gendered aging, along with the internal and external conflicts tied to Jewish American masculinities, include *The Dying Animal* (2001), *Indignation* (2008), and *The Humbling* (2009). However, one particularly valuable and insightful work that remains somewhat overlooked in scholarly research is *Everyman* (2006). I argue that *Everyman* most notably illustrates the interplay and frictions of these identities. Thus, I side with Gabriela Glăvan, who points to the book's circular structure, stating that "*Everyman* is possibly Roth's most death-oriented novel, as it begins with the protagonist's funeral and it ends with his demise, focusing, between these cardinal moments, on his life story, as reimagined and told by himself. It could be (and it was) considered an exemplary tale of one's confrontation with mortality and, ultimately, with death" (17).

On top of that, David Hadar observes that *Everyman* was "published in the decades after the 9/11 attacks and in explicit and implicit ways mediate[s] the community of the old, sick, and dying through the lens of our era of mass violence and terror. Political violence, of course, began long before the 9/11 attacks, but these acts of terror came to exemplify globally our contemporary era" (93). Hadar further points out, analyzing mortality and melancholia in Roth's work, that "[a]s others before me have shown, death, disease, and depression have appeared as themes in Roth's fiction from the early days of his career but became more prominent as he grew older, culminating in Everyman and three other short novels collected under the title of Nemeses" (93).

Hadar examines the themes of seclusion and loneliness in *Everyman*, highlighting how these representations subvert stereotypical assumptions about lonely aging. "[A]loneness," he states, "is presented as a mixture of universal, social, and personal predicaments, reflecting how hospitals separate the sick away from others and how retirement communities draw older adults away from other social ties" (95). While Hadar tries to construct this argument using a largely non-gendered discourse of aging, effectively critiquing the stereotypical depictions of loneliness, seclusion, and illness in old age, he disregards the fact that the

linguistic entity "everyman" in a post-MeToo society can no longer imply a false notion of inclusiveness, merging all genders into a masculine linguistic norm. Hadar might have a point in saying that "[o]ld age has rarely been a prominent concern of humanities scholarship, though this tendency has been changing over the last few decades with the growth of Age Studies" (96), thus, calling out the historical neglect of aging characters in literary scholarship in the past. But an intersectional analysis of these literatures provides more precise insights into the cultural and social practices surrounding the experiences of aging. By adopting an intersectional approach to these texts, we can better understand the social and political developments that shape how aging subjects are perceived and integrated into contexts related to their gender identities. It is important to recognize that loneliness in old age is also a gendered experience, shaped by normative assumptions, ideals, and power structures. As a result, we see that Roth's characters are exaggerated representations of gender, both in youth and old age.

Glăvan makes an excellent point in her scholarly analysis of aging in Roth's fiction. She argues that "the burden of the aging body is one of the allegories that anchor Roth's interest in individual destiny in the vast soil of contemporary history and the condition of modern man" (16). Following this argument, it is important to remark, as she does, that "[r]ather masculine than universally human, the writer's perspective could be read as an ironic elegy hesitating between bitter nostalgia and cynical resentment" (16). Roth's characters often feel disadvantaged as men in a social framework that they perceive as unstable, rendering them worthless in comparison to the young, the female, and the able-bodied. They seek to escape, but the only viable escape that occurs is death. Glăvan's assertions echo what many other scholars have recognized about Roth's work: "Aging and mortality are two of Roth's arch-themes, spanning the last two decades of his literary career, when the real biography of the older writer often mirrored itself in the fictional life stories of his male main characters" (16). One could argue that the author's literary legacy rests on the intertwining of mortality and sexuality. Hence, "Roth's aging protagonists," Glăvan observes, "are men of unusual vitality that paradoxically obsess about death with obstinate passion" (16). These obsessions are so pervasive and deeply entangled with carnal desires that sex and death always accompany and complement each other.

Like Simon Axler in *The Humbling*, Glăvan maintains, echoing Alex Hobbs, how "the unnamed protagonist of *Everyman* revisits his erotic past in order to validate his virility and turn it into an argument of physical strength and endurance" (16). Zooming in on sexuality and virility, she adds that "[a]s Everyman [...] grows older, not only his health erodes, but also his erotic success plunges, reaching unprecedented levels of ridicule" (16). This disconnect from a normative able-bodied masculinity, embodied by the "common man" or

"everyman," mirrors the experiences of several characters created by Roth. Moreover, it highlights a broader representation of the post WWII plight of heteronormative U.S. American men. In this context, everyman embodies the archetype of an aging male in crisis after the war. Glăvan further observes: "Despite the young wives, his permanently wandering eye and a constant openness to sexual adventure, Roth's Everyman is painfully aware of his inability to fit into the paradigm of ageless, eternal vigor" (18). The text reveals the unsustainable nature of hegemonic masculinities when confronted with the reality of biomedical aging, depicting the gradual decline from the normative ideals associated with economic power, virility, sexual capability, procreation, physical fitness, and intellectual dominance.

In this way, *Exit Ghost* exemplifies a typical "late" Roth narrative. The story explores the numerous hardships faced by the aging "American" man, addressing a long list of struggles linked to normative masculinity in decline, particularly in relation to the difficulties of aging. Nathan Zuckerman often oscillates between the desire to reclaim vitality—most notably represented by his sex drive, and attempts to reverse impotence—and a growing impulse to accept the finality of retirement. He is torn between longing for the past, resisting the passage of time, and a recurring temptation to withdraw into seclusion and solitude. Andy Connolly suggests that "[i]t is this sense of wanting to be both embodied and disembodied—present in the world and absent from it—that continues to leave Zuckerman's writing and personal life crippled by divisions throughout *Exit Ghost*" (647). Zuckerman is a troubled persona, which also makes him an archetypal Roth character. His deliberations on mortality, the human condition, society, and politics are consistently intertwined with reflections on gender roles, masculinities, and carnal lust.

Unlike *Sabbath's Theater* and *Everyman*, *Exit Ghost* explores these fluctuating divisions through a first-person focalizer that adds another powerful dimension to the perspective of the aging male. The retired writer, much like Updike's Ben Turnbull, is consumed by existential and philosophical questions. He often fashions himself in contrast to his surroundings, sometimes unconsciously positioning himself as the "other," and at other times, asserting himself as a superior intellectual authority. This character serves as a counter-image to both the reader and other characters within his story world.

As time and memory appear to slip away, the narrator/protagonist becomes unreliable. The novel employs elements of life writing as a way to escape the loss of self, particularly in connection to age-related illnesses such as dementia or Alzheimer's. I analyze *Exit Ghost* in a manner similar to Updike's post-apocalyptic, turn-of-the-century narrative, viewing it as a stereotypical example of heteronormative literature focused on male aging. However, unlike Updike, Roth's depiction of the Jewish American male challenges the

conventional markers of *whiteness* present in this genre, demonstrating that dominant masculinities rely on manufactured identity markers and boundaries that do not align with the lived experiences of cisgender male individuals.

In the following chapter, I want to establish the aging male protagonist within the cultural setting constructed by *Exit Ghost*. Space is essential in defining the retiring male writer's identity, as he is depicted in a vexed state of liminality between the urban and the rural. Additionally, the precarious political climate marked by the reelection of George W. Bush and the nervous atmosphere of post-9/11 New York City significantly influence the protagonist's decision to return to the seclusion and quietude of provincial life. The unsettled nature of New York City echoes the disordered and anxious condition of the aging male who is at the brink of retirement and grappling with the consequences of prostate cancer. The losses that Nathan Zuckerman faces are framed as monumental, comparable to a national crisis, and seem unfixable, ultimately leading to the hegemon's demise.

3.2 Configurations of Aging Masculinities in Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost*
3.2.1 Narrating Crisis: Urban and Rural Divisions in *Exit Ghost*

Like many of Roth's "late" texts, *Exit Ghost* is preoccupied with themes of death and bodily decline. Gabriela Glăvan notes that "[a]lthough present in many of his novels, aging and the pitfalls of diminishing physical ability dominate the background of Roth's late novels" (16). The losses experienced by Roth's protagonists are manifold, yet they are all somehow tied to an overarching loss of masculinity—a disjointed, culturally fixed notion of masculinity that appears to exist only in singular form. It is fitting that *Exit Ghost* opens with the closing line from Welsh poet Dylan Thomas' poem "Find Meat on Bones" (1936).[85] This choice carries immense symbolic weight, contrasting beginnings and endings, birth and death, and the first and last in a way reminiscent of Updike's post-apocalyptic scenario in *Toward the End of Time*. The line from Thomas, which reads, "Before death takes you, O take back this," foreshadows the profound bodily struggles that Roth's readers will encounter. Thus, Roth's novel centers on the pathological aspects of aging and the seemingly inevitable search for a cure against a condition that affects men, aligning with what Hanne Laceulle discusses as the "master narrative" of aging.

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[85] Read more about Thomas' poetry in Imogen Cassels' 2021 essay "Against Explanation: Dylan Thomas and Smudginess." In "'The Uncontrollability of Real Things': Operation Shylock, Sabbath's Theater, and Philip Roth's Falstaffian Theology of Judaism" (2020), Daniel Ross Goodman briefly references the epigraph, highlighting the significant point that both *Sabbath's Theater* and *Exit Ghost* "are framed by the thought of death" (41).

The theme of loss is one that Philip Roth has frequently revisited throughout his long career, primarily as a fiction writer. This theme is often present in texts written and told by aging male voices within the U.S. American literary canon. As discussed in the previous section of this chapter, both Roth and John Updike have increasingly explored this experience in their later works. Debra Shostak recognizes a notable shift towards death-focused themes in Roth's fiction from the twenty-first century onwards, and she rightfully contends:

> Roth's fiction of the twenty-first century focuses on loss, as his protagonists confront their mortality. Although Roth shifts from scatology to eschatology, the central fact of human desire remains undimmed among his mortified and death-obsessed characters. From the aging figures whose physical or mental powers diminish in *The Dying Animal* (2001), *Everyman* (2006), *Exit Ghost* (2007), and *The Humbling* (2009) to youths destroyed by folly or chance in *Indignation* (2008) and *Nemesis* (2010), Roth peers unsparingly at the paltry gestures humans make against our common biological end. The many 'nemeses' his characters face in these novels—illness, memory loss, sexual and professional incapacity, small-minded conservatism, warfare—all lead to the same conclusion: memento mori. ("Philip Roth" 287-288)

Through Shostak's study, we see, once again, how many novels Roth dedicated to this topic, especially in the later stages of his career. Death is such a pervasive element in these texts that much of the scholarly analysis revolves around universal questions of mortality and existentialism. However, the experiences of these predominately heteronormative male protagonists are gendered experiences set within constructed worlds that rest on an invisible patriarchal foundation. While some of these experiences engage with universal themes and find expression in diversity-focused textual representation, ignoring gender identity in these "male" texts overlooks the distinct realities tied to cultural privilege. This perspective risks reinforcing the male viewpoint as the default narrative, suggesting it represents *everybody*.

Similar to *Exit Ghost*, the poem by Thomas contemplates the passage of time and the course of life, which is shaped by paternal expectations and societal conventions. The opening paragraph of the novel continues this poetic reflection in a sincere moment of confession from the first-person narrator. He announces his withdrawal from societal currents, expressing it through a deeply personal lament: "I had ceased to inhabit not just the great world but the present moment. The impulse to be in it and of it I had long since killed" (1). This statement is further complicated by the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, which the narrator describes as a caesura, noting, "I […] had rarely looked at a newspaper or listened to the news since 9/11, three years back" (1). This crucial event in U.S. history is mentioned multiple times throughout Roth's text, yet it "remain[s] in the background for the most part" (132), as Aimee Pozorski maintains. The impact of 9/11 marks a major socio-political shift. Pozorski further argues that the repercussions of that day manifested as an

"atmospheric terror" within the text, characterized by a "language associated with terror" (132).

Roth's text evokes the horrific noise and urgency created by circulating images of despair and death on a global stage. This backdrop introduces a narrator/protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman, whose bodily decline and sexual emasculation are metaphorically linked to this significant cultural event—this cultural sea change. Right at the beginning, in the second sentence of the narrative, the narrator discloses an uncomfortable truth: "Other than for surgery in Boston to remove a cancerous prostate, I'd hardly been off my rural mountain road" (*Exit Ghost* 1). Zooming in on the opening sentence, Pozorski contends that this is a "typical Zuckerman reflection." According to Pozorski, "the personal is in the foreground, the political in the background: while the cancerous prostate is foremost in his mind, and remains there, at some level, throughout the entire novel, the national disaster 'three years back' is buried at the end of a long sentence, but packs a punch nonetheless" (138). Zuckerman's journey through New York City is filled with underlying remarks that stir up the horrors of 9/11, prompting readers to perceive the narrator/protagonist as a tragic figure in this post-disaster context.

In this environment, prostate cancer and the resulting incontinence are depicted as common and widespread illnesses affecting "thousands of men" (*Exit Ghost* 2). Science has shown a strong interest in finding cures and solutions through technology (1-2). The protagonist, who remains nameless at this point, immediately dives into this uncomfortable topic, which is considered taboo in society. It is viewed as a shameful issue that constitutes a significant departure from traditional masculine ideals, which are closely linked to normative ideas of bodies, productivity, and reproduction. In "Rejuvenation's Return" (2009), Barbara L. Marshall discusses how impotence and constructed normative masculinities intersect within the bio-medical field. She notes that "masculinity" is often associated with sexual fitness: "To be masculine is to be vigorous, strong and possess the outwardly visible signs of virility" (259).

By introducing this theme at the very beginning of the narrative, the text structurally establishes the "masculine" subject as its focal point, laying the groundwork for a clearly defined thematic core. This core is distinctly male-oriented and revolves around a moment of crisis in which the protagonist seeks solutions through technological advancements. To find this cure, the protagonist must travel into the metropolis and depend on modern medical developments. The groundbreaking procedure he pursues is depicted as a last resort, as he reveals, "I went to New York for a consultation, long after I imagined myself as having adapted to the practical inconveniences of the condition" (*Exit Ghost* 2). We learn that the

protagonist had retreated to the countryside and nearly accepted his fate. Nevertheless, a spark of life remains within him, symbolized by his sexual desire.

In his widely referenced essay "Aging Beyond Masculinities, or, the Penis as Failed Synecdoche," David Leverenz discusses the symbolic value of the penis:

> Across cultures and centuries, the erect penis has been the most basic synecdoche for a man's virility and force. At least to himself, his private part stands for his public firmness. It symbolizes a man's capacity for penetration, insemination, and dominance. It also represents his self-confidence. An erection makes him feel at least twice life size, alive with power and desire. (63)

This statement sums up an accepted observation scholars have made about the symbolism of male genitalia. In "Firming the Floppy Penis," Calasanti and King analyze aging masculinities in advertisement and note accordingly that

> as bodies change, outright predation recedes as an issue and impotency moves to the center of concern. A popular (consumer) culture that figures old manhood in terms of loss hardly departs from any trend in images of masculinity. Men have always felt that they were losing their manhood, their pride, and their virility, whether because their penises actually softened or because women gained status and so frightened them. (19)

Michael Kimmel and Christine Milrod note in the *Cultural Encyclopedia of the Penis* (2014) that "[t]he penis, used in images and texts to carry some definitive cultural meanings, has meant reproductive potency, political power, and invincible manhood" (1). Ann Basu examines the protagonists in Philip Roth's later works, particularly the novels in the Nemesis collection, and comments on the theme of bodily decline by referencing *Everyman*: "All the protagonists of these final novels grow to feel that, 'bodily decay [is] his entire story' as their constitutions face some of their severest trials" (156). The aged Nathan Zuckerman is no exception. I interpret his bodily failures as manifestations of the terrors and anxieties related to the cultural redefinition of gender in the latter half of the twentieth century, which ties into the sensationalist notion of "masculinity in crisis." This perspective aligns with Basu's assertion that Roth's late characters "appear to feel that they face imminent judgment" (156).

Melodramatic Masculinities

Roth explores what is often considered one of the most consequential losses associated with "masculinity:" the decline or complete loss of sexual prowess and potency. He associates this with the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, which arguably represent the most horrific loss in U.S. history. The concept of impotence is linked to an overarching, collective loss of security and safety on a national scale. The loss of "masculinity" is not just presented as an individual issue, but as a collective and national loss with profound traumatic consequences that extend

into the future. This sentiment might encompass the various severe losses that define heteronormative masculinities in old age, depicting men as victims of social turmoil and national trauma. Additionally, this critical moment of crisis in U.S. history mirrors a critical moment of "masculinity in crisis." Roth's text suggests that the erosion of national authority simultaneously signifies the decline of hegemonic masculinity—where the male figure is seen as the failed protector of the state.

In *Apocalypse Man* (2020), Casey Ryan Kelly examines narratives that highlight the self-proclaimed "victimhood of white masculinity" (8). He carves out the connections between masculinities in crisis and the genre of melodrama. Kelly succinctly explains that "[m]elodrama foregrounds agonistic moral polarities, the spectacular yet virtuous suffering of innocent victims, heroic acts of redemption, and overwrought pathos and sentimentality" (8). This performed experience, he argues, can be observed in both fictional representations and "post-9/11 political discourse" (8). While Roth's early twenty-first-century novels utilize this melodramatic mode of telling, it is essential to note that some of his pre-9/11 works also exhibited a similar sense of despair through various narrative techniques.

In his analysis of Philip Roth's works, Gurumurthy Neelakantan investigates the use of melodrama in *Exit Ghost* as a "psychoanalytic style of narration" (95). Neelakantan contends that "these novels," referencing *My Life as a Man* (1974), *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), and *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), "feature protagonists who are compelled to excavate their past and engage with the buried memories that remain the source of their psychic conflict" (95). He thus explains, exploring Mickey Sabbath, that "[s]ignificantly, in sustaining a psychoanalytic narrative, *Sabbath's Theater* conjures an elegiac mood that hovers over the protagonist's trauma on the one hand, and his perpetual mourning on the other" (95). I argue, in contrast (perhaps in extension), that these features highlight a focus on heteronormative (white) male voices. The characters are weighted down by the biomedical realities of aging and their deteriorating bodies. Labeling these texts as merely psychoanalytical diminishes the understanding that the experiences represented are distinct gendered experiences. This perspective fails to consider the distinct gender markers, inadvertently presenting the male viewpoint as the societal norm against which all other genders are measured.

When examining the portrayal of aging men in U.S. American literature, it is reasonable to connect the melodramatic elements with the narrator's contemplations of a changing, gendered self. As I noted earlier with Updike's novel, Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost* similarly immerses the reader in a dramatic and emotionally heavy narrative that affects the narrator throughout. Pozorski utilizes the terms "post-9/11 language" and "vocabulary of trauma" (142) to discuss the textual features that contribute to this melodramatic aesthetic.

Themes of seclusion and loneliness frequently arise, sometimes as conditions imposed on Zuckerman by others and at other times as struggles he imposes on himself due to his perceived inability to remain a participating and productive member of society in old age. Zuckerman's neighbor and friend, Larry, who is sixty-eight and commits suicide after a cancer diagnosis, gifts Zuckerman two kittens to keep him company while living in the country.[86] The narrative suggests that these kittens serve as a means to break with the loneliness inherent in old age solitude.

The novel depicts Larry as a dictatorial patriarch who adheres to traditional gender roles (*Exit Ghost* 5ff). Zuckerman describes him as a "big, square-faced, sandy-haired man" with "crazy […] ice-blue" eyes. He notes that "[h]e had wanted to be the father of one boy and one girl, and only after the fourth girl was born did Marylynne defy him and refuse to continue trying to produce the male heir that had been in his plans from the age of ten" (8). Larry embodies the archetypal white male who fits the idea of an Aryan man as defined by white radical ideology. "Larry's path to power," Zuckerman continues, "was to have complete acquiescence from the beloved in his life—mine was to have no one in my life" (10). Zuckerman positions himself in opposition to the white hegemon, albeit one that chooses to end his own life at the risk of becoming a liability to his family.[87] According to Elizabeth Moran, Larry is "an ambitious, accomplished man, who fixes on death as one last, awful goal" (20). Even in death, he remains in control. The death of his friend Larry serves as a wake-up call for Zuckerman, prompting him to first travel to Boston for prostate surgery and then to New York to try a new medical treatment that promises to heal his impotence and alleviate the uncontrolled urine leaks he experiences since the removal of the prostate tumor.

Despite venturing into the city in search of a cure, Zuckerman remains conflicted about his journey. His presence in the city is intertwined with a sense of inner chaos and unrest. This chaotic state, marked by a grave trauma and loss, along with the ongoing struggle of feeling divided, contributes to the recurring theme of "masculinity in crisis." It portrays the male figure as already defeated, having retreated from significant political events and, as he notes earlier in the novel, from "the great world" (1). Andy Connolly observes that

> [i]n New York, he [Zuckerman] is cast back into the turbulent fray of erotic desire
> and anguished frustration that had so coloured his life and writing prior to the

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[86] It is important to note, however, that Zuckerman rejects the kittens and returns them after a short while, complaining that "[d]uring that time [with the kittens] I did virtually no work on my book" (*Exit Ghost* 10).

[87] In such moments, Zuckerman foregrounds his Jewish identity, positioning himself somewhat as outside of the conceived white "American" norm. In addition, his sense of aloneness, depicted by his need for the company of kittens and his lack of a typical nuclear family, further reinforces this notion of being an outsider or being "othered."

American trilogy. […] [W]hile living in isolation has afforded him a degree of transcendence from the corporeal and contingent aspects of life outside writing, Zuckerman is 'reembodied' by his decision to re-enter the maelstrom of contemporary American life in Exit Ghost. (644)

As seen in Updike's *Toward the End of Time*, this "big world," which stands for "American life," is embodied by the cities of Boston and New York, their financial markets, and the authority they emanate.

In both novels, the financial world is in disarray, shaken by external threats such as war and attacks from outside forces that jeopardize the collapse of these financial capitals, and, by extension, the nation state itself, with its seemingly impenetrable borders and hegemonic power. Michael Sorkin and Sharon Zukin note in *After the World Trade Center* (2012) that "[t]he World Trade Center was the eye of a needle through which global capital flowed the seat of an empire. However anonymous they appeared, the Twin Towers were never benign, never just architecture" (xi). This representation of global loss related to the global economy and world market is used in Roth's text to amplify Zuckerman's bodily decline, which forces him to reconfigure his own value and position in society.

In the first chapter of *Exit Ghost*, titled "The Present Moment," Roth's narrator quickly establishes both Boston and New York as the locations he travels to from his country home for prostate surgery and hospital/clinical care. The cancer he faces works as a metaphor for the chaos within his body, however, informed by external forces that also penetrate physical boundaries from outside. Once in New York, Zuckerman is overwhelmed and wonders "where […] to begin" (*Exit Ghost* 14). He concludes his extensive list of possible starting points with the realization that he is "this eviscerated stranger walking in their midst, a relic of bygone days amid the noises and buildings and workers and traffic" (14). Zuckerman fluctuates between feelings of overload and defeat. He briefly references 9/11 and, for a moment, misleads the reader by saying: "I started toward the subway to take the train downtown to Ground Zero. Begin there, where the biggest of all occurred." And he admits in the following instance that "because I've withdrawn as witness and participant both, I never made it to the subway" (15). Instead of confronting this traumatic event, he retreats to "the familiar rooms of the Metropolitan Museum" (15). His withdrawal from political and cultural engagement is evident in his choice to seek comfort in the familiar rather than face the wounds of the nation state. This avoidance has allowed him to blind himself to these issues for a decade, aging in silence at his country home.

New York City serves as a metaphor for fast-paced life, vitality, and prowess in various literary works that reflect on male aging experiences, such as Colum McCann's novella *Thirteen Ways of Looking* (2015). The aging male character grapples with a notion of

able-bodiedness that he finds increasingly difficult to accept.[88] On the one hand, New York, particularly in the context of 9/11, constitutes a castrated capital that mirrors Zuckerman's chaotic and declining state—characterized by impotence, powerlessness, and helplessness. On the other hand, the capital also figures as a formidable challenge that Zuckerman is eager to confront, as he seeks to reclaim his masculinity through advances in medical technology (15-16). In these instances, the novel constructs New York City as a hopeful place, "a second chance" (Moran 17), where skilled doctors can revitalize the illness-afflicted male and restore his lost abilities. On his first day in the city, after receiving his first "collagen injection" (*Exit Ghost* 15), Zuckerman juxtaposes country and city life, feeling a tentative yet euphoric realization: "In the country there was nothing tempting my hope. I had made peace with my hope. But when I came to New York, in only hours New York did what it does to people—awakened the possibilities. Hope breaks out" (16-17). Later, while dining at a restaurant he frequented in his youth, Zuckerman even recognizes himself as "one among them" (27). A new zest for life reawakens his desire to move back into the city: He responds to an ad in *The New York Review of Books* about a home swap (29f).

The home swap offers Zuckerman a crucial opportunity and a hopeful escape from his illness and disability. It fills him with an illusion that he can revitalize the past by restoring a past body and reentering a community of young, like-minded writers: Jamie and Billie Logen, the couple he exchanges homes with, as well as Richard Kliman, the antagonist biographer. Before embarking on this new yet familiar journey, Zuckerman reflects on his life in the country:

> Not without some hardship, as I've said, I'd conquered the solitary's way of life; I knew its test and satisfactions and over time had shaped the scope of my needs to its limitations, long ago abandoning excitement, intimacy, adventure, and antagonisms in favor of quiet, steady, predictable contact with nature and reading and my work. (30-31)

Moreover, he compares himself to Rip Van Winkle and states: "I turned up on the corner of Sixth Avenue and West 54th with Rip's rusty gun in my hand and his ancient clothes on my back and an army of the curious crowding around to look me over" (15). The buzz of the city is portrayed as superior, and the aging narrator imagines himself in a scenario reminiscent of Rip Van Winkle. Zuckerman sees himself/feels like an artifact from a bygone era, eliciting amazement and wonder from the New Yorkers of the "present moment," in which he

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[88] To gain a deeper understanding of urban representations and the role of New York City in American literature, read *Urban Space and Late Twentieth-Century New York Literature* (2014) by Catalina Neculai. In this work, Neculai revisits Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1987) and explores the ambiguities of the city as well as the characters' precarious endeavors to carve out a stable identity in urban settings.

awkwardly inserts himself. He feels uncertain about where to begin and insecure about his physical presence in this colossal space.

This comparison between the countryside and the city highlights a striking contrast, designing the countryside as a place of rest, quietude, and solitude, while depicting the city as vital, vibrant, and full of life. Pozorski interprets this divide as follows: "Zuckerman sees himself as 'wandering between two worlds'—the world of the past and the world of the future. Stuck in the present time in New York City—precisely where he does not want to be—Zuckerman understands his experience as an 'upheaval'" (145). Simultaneously, his secluded rural home can be perceived as closer to death or potentially symbolizing an entryway to death, at least from Zuckerman's perspective. This mirrors what is often found in literature surrounding aging, where the retirement home is constructed as a final stage in the lives of elderly individuals. In a more negative sense, it is also viewed as a place where the elderly go to die, out of sight from society.[89] In *Exit Ghost*, the country home represents an ambiguous place. On the one hand, it is a retreat where writers can create art, providing the right amount of quietude and distance from the turbulences and distractions of the metropolis. On the other hand, it is a precarious environment for the old, symbolizing the final destination before death, where they may suffer in silence while awaiting the end. For Zuckerman, this rural retreat provides safety and refuge, yet it also marks the conclusion of his career as a fiction writer.

In my view, *Exit Ghost* subscribes to and ultimately helps to uphold what Hanne Laceulle discusses in aging studies and gerontology as the "cultural master narrative" (30). She points out that, in broad terms, "[c]ultural gerontological discourse is probed to arrive at a categorization of two dominant contemporary cultural narratives about later life: decline narratives and age-defying narratives" (30). However, Laceulle also examines counter or alternative narratives that are crucial in breaking with the hardened stereotypes associated with the master narrative. She defines these influential "master narratives" as "agglomerates of stories, imaginaries, meanings, representations, archetypes, views and stock images existing in a certain culture about a social group, for instance women, Muslims, gay/lesbian

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[89] In "Care Home Stories" (2017), Sally Chivers and Ulla Kriebernegg explore the development of care facilities, more commonly referred to as "nursing homes." They point out how, despite significant positive changes, a prevailing negative narrative continues to dominate public perception: "Enormous changes have occurred in how institutional care is structured, adapting models from the poor house through the hospital to the home and the hotel and the village. But the legacies of the poor house and the hospital persist, creating panicked views of the nursing home as a dreaded fate for people who may actually benefit from new living quarters in late life. The paradoxical nature of a space meant to be both hospital and home offers up critical tensions for examination by age/ing studies scholars" (17). Their eponymous anthology investigates various aspects of nursing homes, discussing both the negative issues such as exclusion, abuse, and family guilt, as well as the practical and potentially uplifting experiences that can occur when elderly care is provided in an ideal setting.

people, or aging individuals" (64). Repetition and circulation are essential for building and maintaining these dominant narratives. Since "[c]ultural narratives are […] indispensable meaning-generating resources without which we cannot form a viable identity," they can adversely affect the self/perception of already marginalized groups (65). These narratives dominate on all levels of representation and discourse and are incredibly "resistant to change" (65).

Exit Ghost, like many of Roth's late texts, primarily fits into the category of "decline narrative," which "equate[s] the aging process with an inevitable and steady decay" (79). These types of narratives foreground themes such as the loss of "physical and mental strength and capacities," feelings of purposelessness and vulnerability, and, of course, death (79). On top of that, Laceulle states that "the expected decline extends beyond the biological realm, since decline narratives often also presuppose a decrease in social relations and an increase in loneliness and dependency, as well as a self-evident loss of social roles" (79). She also references the "classic gerontological disengagement theory," which "argues that it is 'natural' and fitting for aging individuals to withdraw from society and gradually accept their decline when nearing death" (79).

Though Nathan Zuckerman is torn between hopeful revitalization and numbing despair, as well as between city and country, his rendition of aging does not break free from the pull of the "master narrative" of decline. He ultimately succumbs to the externally and self-imposed fate of awaiting death in the seclusion of his country home. Once again, crisis is in the limelight. The two settings, alternating between utopian and dystopian mythology, embody the tensions present in the aging male protagonist. They reflect both negative and positive notions of chaos tied to illness and the potential for physical restoration. Health and sickness find expression in urban and rural configurations within *Exit Ghost*. These themes mirror the precarious state of a post-hegemonic male body, juxtaposed with the established hegemonic ideal. In the following subchapter, I will focus on the representation of these two oppositions through the example of Zuckerman, the aging author, and his antagonist Richard Kliman, the young, aggressive biographer.

3.2.2 Retiring Author vs. Upcoming Biographer: Dominance, Masculinities, and Intellectual Rivalry

> "You're dying, old man, you'll soon be dead!
> You smell of decay! You smell like death!" (*Exit Ghost* 104).

In her groundbreaking work *Gender and Power* (1987), Raewyn Connell introduces the concept of "hegemonic masculinity," a theoretical framework that continues to play an essential role in the study of critical masculinities. While the concept has received valid criticism over time,[90] and has been expanded on by Connell as well as numerous other scholars, the core idea of gender power structures—and how they are constructed through interactions, particularly consent—remains crucial for understanding masculinities both globally and in the United States.

In this chapter, I will explore the idea of non-hegemonic masculinities established within the broader concept of hegemonic masculinities, focusing on the interplay between Nathan Zuckerman and Richard Kliman in *Exit Ghost*. These two characters, representing contrasting identities—old versus young, sick versus healthy, weak versus able-bodied, and retiring versus future-oriented—are juxtaposed in every shared textual moment. In most instances, they are defined as binaries or even as rivalries. They embody opposing, and at first glance, antagonistic forms of masculinites that exist in a state of constant tension, testing and provoking one another to ultimately determine who will emerge as the more dominant figure in the end. This friction is depicted as an imbalance that calls for a resolution, thereby establishing a new order within the narrative's fictional universe.

Connell famously proclaims that "'[h]egemonic masculinity' is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. The interplay between different forms of masculinity is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works" (183). She further clarifies the concept of hegemony and consent, stating that "'hegemony' does not mean total cultural dominance, the obliteration of alternatives. It means ascendancy achieved within a balance of forces, that is, a state of play. Other patterns and groups are subordinated rather than eliminated" (184). In her work, Connell coins the term "subordinated masculinities," particularly looking at gay man and homosexuality.

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[90] Messerschmidt and Messner outline significant criticisms of Connell's theory, which "concentrated almost exclusively on the concept of hegemonic masculinity" (39). One criticism, for instance, questions "who actually represents hegemonic masculinity," while another cautions that the concept falls short of addressing structural challenges and is instead often linked to toxic behavioral patterns (39).

Additionally, the aging or "old man," constitutes another category that emerges as an inferior, non-hegemonic version in opposition to the hegemonic ideal.

James W. Messerschmidt and Michael A. Messner build on Connell's ideas by discussing non-hegemonic masculinities that relate to the dominant, normative type. They identify four categories: complicit, subordinate, marginalized, and protest masculinities (38). While complicit masculinities can "realize some of the benefits of patriarchal relations […] *subordinate* masculinities are constructed as lesser than or aberrant from and deviant to hegemonic masculinity" (38). "[M]*arginalized* masculinities," they explain further, "are trivialized or discriminated against, or both, because of unequal relations, such as class, race, ethnicity, and age; and finally, *protest* masculinities are constructed as compensatory hypermasculinities that are formed in reaction to social positions lacking economic and political power" (38).

In my analysis of Nathan Zuckerman, I want to utilize and, to some extent, challenge these seemingly static categories associated with aging men. I will point out how, in specific moments and situations, the aging man may move across category lines, being recognized as subordinate, marginalized, or even dominant. I will argue—this also pertains to other characters in literatures concerned with male aging, as I will, for instance, show with Franzen's protagonist Alfred Lambert—that some heteronormative aging masculinities occasionally break free from the limiting frame of decline and subjection when power dynamics shift in various interactions. This discussion aligns with the revised concepts of subordinated and marginalized masculinities put forth by Messerschmidt and Messner. Following Connell, the scholars suggest "that hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculinities are all subject to change because they come into existence in specific settings and under particular situations. And for the former, there often exists a struggle for hegemony whereby older versions may be replaced by newer ones" (38).

The juxtapositions presented in *Exit Ghost* illustrate the power struggles between the two extremes represented by Zuckerman and Kliman. These competing positions are notable because they depict extreme forms of psychological manipulation, as well as verbal and physical aggression associated with different types of masculinities. Such interactions go beyond mere intellectual provocation and non-threatening demonstrations of power, although expressions of intellectual strength and authority remain significant. Thus, juxtaposition serves as an effective narrative tool to expose the "state of play" that Connell argues is essential to the construction of gender hierarchies and ultimately uphold or establish an accepted heteronormative gender order.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines juxtaposition as "[t]he action of placing two or more things close together or side by side, or one thing with or beside another." This

proximity allows for a detailed examination that highlights both similarities and differences. In *Exit Ghost*, two contrasting representations of masculinities are portrayed as hostile but can also be seen as mirror stages when zooming in on the nuances. "The flip side of Zuckerman is an aggressive, ambitious young man, Richard Kliman, who has embarked on a biography of the now-neglected writer, E. I. Lonoff" (14), writes Elizabeth Moran. She describes Kliman as the "young careerist" (14), and as a threat to the legacy of Lonoff, a late writer whom Zuckerman still admires and whose reputation he sets out to protect.

Investigating the themes of athleticism and masculinities in the novel, Carina Staudte points out that "athleticism turns into a threat in *Exit Ghost*, as represented by Richard Kliman, Nathan's adversary" (64). As Zuckerman faces growing physical impairment, Kliman "reminds him of a life that he can no longer have rather than of a life that he once shared" (64). Subsequently, Staudte suggests that when comparing the aged Zuckerman with younger versions seen in Roth's Zuckerman novels,[91] it becomes clear that for the aged character, "masculinity has become intimidating, whereas he previously admired it. In consequence of this re-evaluation, when Nathan meets Kliman, who displays an energetic masculine behavior and physique, Nathan surprisingly is appalled by it rather than fascinated" (64).

This notion of alarm and dismay is evident in the characters' first physical encounter when Zuckerman spots Kliman "jogging around the oval of the big green lawn" (*Exit Ghost* 95). While Kliman is depicted in athletic motion, Zuckerman approaches "the Central Park bench where […] [they] were to meet" (95) to take a seat and wait for Kliman to finish his run. This movement symbolically represents division between youth and old age, as well as the mobile and the immobile. As Zuckerman seeks rest—a crucial element of this juxtaposition—he shares his thoughts with the reader, reflecting on his reasons for being in New York, describing it as "meandering erratically into a renewal I'd had no idea I had the slightest longing for" (96). This reflection turns into existential musings about his life's trajectory. Zuckerman dramatically reveals: "To disrupt the basic unity of one's life and change the patterns of predictability at seventy-one? What could be more fraught with the likelihood of disorientation, frustration, even of collapse?" (96). This moment not only foreshadows the narrative's tragic outcome but also underscores the existential angst

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[91] Roth dedicated several books to exploring the life of the writer Nathan Zuckerman, similar to John Updike's Rabbit series. He re-writes and develops the character at various stages of life. The "Zuckerman Bound" collection, also known as a trilogy, includes three texts and an epilogue: *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), and *The Prague Orgy* (1985). Other notable texts are *My Life As A Man* (1974) and *The Human Stain* (2000). *Exit Ghost* serves as the final installment that explores the experiences of Nathan Zuckerman, depicting the character in his old age.

embedded in the narrative mode. Anxiety surfaces at times overtly and dramatically in these reflections, emphasizing the protagonist's decline in society. By placing "collapse" as a potential outcome at the end of this passage—just before Kliman interrupts Zuckerman's existential thought with direct speech—it implies that Kliman may play a role in this impending fall.

What follows is a detailed description of Richard Kliman as seen through Zuckerman's gaze. He describes Kliman's appearance, comparing him to another main character in the novel, namely Billy Logan:[92]

> He wasn't a genial, chubby Billy but well over two hundred pounds, easily six-three, a large, agile, imposing young man with a lot of dark hair and pale gray eyes that were the wonder that pale gray eyes are in the human animal. A beautiful fullback built to pile-drive. My first (untrustworthy) impression was of someone also constrained by a generalized bafflement—at only twenty-eight bowed by the unwillingness of the world to submit without objection to his strength and beauty and the pressing personal needs they served. That's what was in his face: the angry recognition of an unexpected, wholly ridiculous resistance. (96)

Staudte observes that the vocabulary used to describe the young antagonist shifts between fascination and alarm. Initially, he is portrayed as having "energetic masculine behavior and physique" (64), but this admiration quickly turns into recognition of him as a "schoolyard menace" (*Exit Ghost* 96). The combination of agile and athletic beauty carries an inherent sense of danger, as this young male body is described as "large" and "imposing." Zuckerman places Kliman within the context of football, depicting him as a "fullback," who is defined as "[a]n offensive player in the backfield who runs the ball or blocks for the quarterback or other running back" (*OED*).

Reading these masculinities through the lens of sports and athleticism, Staudte argues: "Through Nathan's deliberate rejection of the athletic young male it becomes clear that sport and athleticism are now reminders of the loss of power rather than of life and virility" (64). The aging character/narrator contrasts his age (seventy-one) with that of his antagonist (twenty-eight), highlighting his potential "collapse" alongside Kliman's "virility." The text suggests that Zuckerman's failures are inscribed into the physical body. Additionally, the narrative emphasizes the passage, making use of temporal markers similar to those I outline in relation to Updike's *Toward the End of Time.* The intertwining of time and physicality is a significant theme in the fictions of male aging.

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[92] This comparison is significant because Billy is married to Jamie Logan, the young female whom Nathan Zuckerman desires sexually. In addition, she was Richard Kliman's lover in college. Thus, all three male characters are constructed as rivals, competing for the attention of the attractive female. However, it is important to note that the narrative is presented from Nathan Zuckerman's perspective. The chase after the young female body is a product of Zuckerman's imagination/perspective/perception.

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Staudte further explains that "because athleticism still equals a manly aliveness, Nathan forcefully begins to loathe it because he no longer possesses any of it: he is losing his mental abilities and has already lost his virility to cancer" (64). The scene in the park continues to construct these characters as stark opposites through a verbal exchange, a ping pong, that resembles the antagonistic interplay between the aged husband and wife in Franzen's novel *The Corrections*. The intellectual ping-pong between Zuckerman and Kliman culminates in a verbal threat just before they part ways, when Zuckerman sharply asserts: "I'm warning you, Kliman—leave Lonoff alone" (*Exit Ghost* 104).

The physical body is omnipresent throughout the narrative, symbolizing one of the two major losses that Nathan Zuckerman experiences in old age. This loss of virility, physical strength, and able-bodiedness is only one side of the coin, as it is always also coupled with the potential loss of mental capacity and memory. At times, the narrative suggests a clear distinction between mind and body (Moran 14). In addition to the theme of physical decline, another narrative strand focuses on the secrets of the late writer E. I. Lonoff and the book that Kliman aspires to write about him. This thread revolves around the process of literary creation, viewing art as an intellectual product that relies on mental faculties tied to literary production and creativity. It addresses the concept of fictionality within biographical writing and the creative re/construction of a subject's life, as well as the authority over another person's life story.

Andy Connolly explains Zuckerman's efforts to "sabotage" (*Exit Ghost* 103) Kliman's endeavor of writing the biography: "Zuckerman has, once more, become drawn into the confusing and troubling mire of tensions between the 'facts' and fiction that he has sought to escape by living and writing oblivious to the world existing beyond the page" (645). Upon returning to the city, Zuckerman encounters old struggles that resurface, tempting him to become an active participant in the daily struggles of life again. In this context, Kliman constitutes "an antagonist and a double for Zuckerman, highlighting the schizoid quality of the latter's literary style: a mode of fiction that both is tied to and yet seeks to transcend the mutable and prosaic 'facts' of daily life" (645).

The doppelgänger motif appears early in the novel, specifically during the first phone call between the characters. Zuckerman is initially intrigued by Kliman's plan to tell Lonoff's life story and is "curious to see how dogged and smug he intended to be" (*Exit Ghost* 48). In this interaction, Zuckerman recognizes a younger version of himself in the ambitious and spirited Kliman:

> Without its ever turning outright belligerent, the unfaltering forward march of the voice made clear he [Kliman] was prepared to do battle. It was, unexpectedly, a passing rendition of me at about that stage, as though Kliman were mimicking (or,

as now seemed more to the point, deliberately mocking) my mode of forging ahead
when *I* started out. (48)

This comparison, designed as one of Zuckerman's private reflections, emphasizes the excessive contrast often drawn between youth and old age within the narrative. Kliman, regarded as Zuckerman's male rival, is in his late twenties and occupies a position that, in Zuckerman's view, alternates between naiveté and vitality.

This naiveté stems from a lack of life experience, a quality that is often associated with older individuals in certain cultural contexts, yet has diminished in U.S. American culture during the twentieth century.[93] Vitality, on the other hand, is tied to physical abilities and able-bodiedness that youth typically exhibit, as exemplified by the athletic build of the antagonist. Zuckerman observes Kliman's hawkishness and egocentrism, framing him as a know-it-all. He remarks: "There it was: the tactless severity of vital male youth, not a single doubt about his coherence, blind with self-confidence and the virtue of knowing what matters most. […] Everything is a target: you're on the attack; and you, and you alone, are right" (48). The allusions to emulation and mimicry in this passage suggest that Zuckerman is reflecting on his own experiences or essentially discussing himself.

Zuckerman appears to experience a mix of intimidation and aggression when faced with Kliman's hunger for competition. At times, he embodies a dominant and authoritative masculine identity, while at other moments, Zuckerman appears powerless. He regularly points out Kliman's weaknesses alongside his strengths, such as in the park scene. "Nathan […] briefly admits that Kliman's athleticism gives him credibility and even authenticity, but Nathan counters this short burst of admiration by pointing out to himself that Kliman acts unprofessionally when he turns up for their first meeting in 'running shorts, running shoes, and a damp sweater'" (Staudte 64). This observation corresponds with Zuckerman's renewed sense of purpose, which is partially fueled by his confrontations with Kliman. Zuckerman continues to challenge his rival and discloses:

Yet I couldn't stop myself. I was back, I was on a tear, and nothing could have inspired me more than the risk I was taking, because not only was Kliman forty-three years younger than me, a hulking, muscular figure wearing just his running attire, but he was enraged by the very resistance that he could not abide. (*Exit Ghost* 103)

Zuckerman's fighting spirit occasionally resurfaces, as he points out the shortcomings and disadvantages of youth, linking them to a lack of experience, knowledge,

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[93] In "Age-Related Disability" (2014), Sharon-Dale Stone examines the connections of aging and disabilities and explains how these two intersect within Western traditions. In most general terms, Stone observes that non-Western cultures have historically valued old age and aging in fundamentally different ways. Stone argues that "in traditional, non-Westernized cultures, elders tend to be revered for their knowledge about the past. These are societies that value all things old" (58).

acumen, and intellectual insight. This perspective on the "young" from an older viewpoint mirrors the arguments made by Clare Bartholomaeus and Anna Tarrant in their publication, "Masculinities at the Margins of 'Middle Adulthood.'" They suggest that "[l]inking old age and subordinated masculinity appears too simplistic and ignores factors such as status related to old age—whether financial or relating to 'wisdom' and age hierarchies" (356). In this regard, Zuckerman actually has the upper hand. *Exit Ghost* illustrates how power hierarchies are fluid and shift depending on what society (or individuals) values more. Bartholomaeus and Tarrant further contend that some scholars even "position old men's practices as complicit with hegemonic masculinity" (356). They caution that fixing the "old man" within one masculinity category—subordinate or complicit—"ignores fluidity within men's gender practices and the diversity of practices and bodies in the 'old age' category" (356).

The urge to define masculinities and gender power structures in static categories calls to mind the overly simplistic views that Maierhofer and Kriebernegg discuss, drawing on Kathleen Woodward's influential work, *Aging and Its Discontents* (1991). They note: "Cultural representations of age remain locked in primarily negative stereotypes, whereas youth, subjectively speaking, remains a remarkably fluid and seemingly almost infinitely expandable category, it is a moveable marker" (10). Roth's narrative intertwines these concepts, presenting a perspective where the young biographer is overshadowed by financial means and knowledge. He regards his opponent with a sense of aging envy, describing Kliman smugly as "[t]he invulnerable boy who thinks he's a man and is seething to play a big role. Well, let him play it. He'll find out" (*Exit Ghost* 48). In other instances, Zuckerman portrays his competitor as a *mansplainer*[94] who intellectually challenges him but ultimately fails: "I understood him—the uncompromising tenacity, the bluntness, the indomitable virus of superiority (he was going to be kind enough to explain things to me)—but that didn't mean I had to trust him" (*Exit Ghost* 48-49).

Connolly identifies the power struggle concerning Zuckerman as grounded in his confrontation with physical and metal losses and states: "This ambiguous relationship between Zuckerman and Kliman in *Exit Ghost* is situated upon a rotating axis of libidinal desire and impotent frustration that is central to Roth's notion of the connection between fact and fiction, the personal and the aesthetic, body and text" (645). The libidinal desire

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[94] *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as follows: "Of a man: to explain (something) needlessly, overbearingly, or condescendingly, esp. (typically when addressing a woman) in a manner thought to reveal a patronizing or chauvinistic attitude." Rebecca Solnit's widely acclaimed 2008 essay "Men Explain Things to Me" memorably details the behavioral patterns linked to this phenomenon. In her famous text, she succinctly captures the essence of mansplaining with the statement: "Men explain things to me, still. And no man has ever apologized for explaining, wrongly, things that I know and they don't" (7).

Zuckerman experiences is tied to Jamie Logan, the young female he lusts for, who was once Kliman's lover in college. Connolly further maintains that "[t]his faint sense of sexual revival in the company of Jamie is linked to Zuckerman's renewed longing to confront the overlapping mixture of personal and aesthetic challenges posed by the world of 'real' life in New York" (646). He observes how the mind and body intersect within Roth's narrative, illustrating how the writer's physical body is inscribed into the physical body of the novel.

The interpretation of the writer's life, along with the rewriting and reconstructing involved in autobiographical texts, poses a threat to the carefully constructed anonymity of the author figure. Zuckerman recognizes himself in Lonoff, his idol, who also lived a secluded and somewhat secretive life, "a twentieth-century American writer unlike any other" (*Exit Ghost* 20). Hence, he feels threatened by the "young" body eager to rewrite this distinguished literary figure in a contemporary context. Clearly, the allusion to Roth being *rewritten* by *his* biographer in light of the MeToo movement interrupts traditional readings of the fictional and illuminates how new positions make new viewpoints available in a changing society. Consequently, the parameters for analyzing and understanding *Exit Ghost* evolve in response to new critical insights regarding gender, particularly concerning masculinities and how they are configured in literature.

This external and imposed reconfiguration of narrative, content, and story by the biographer is perceived as a risk to the lifelong constructed order of the aging man, ultimately resulting in a loss of control over the self. This fear revitalizes the aging male body and prompts him to leave the security of his quiet, rural isolation and respond to the alluring call to reengage with life: "Back in the drama, back in the moment, back into the turmoil of events! When I heard my voice rising, I did not rein it in. There is the pain of being in the world, but there is also the robustness. When was the last time I had felt the excitement of taking someone on? Let the intensity out! Let the belligerence out!" (*Exit Ghost* 103). In this act of protest, Zuckerman refuses to be subordinated. This climactic exclamation can be interpreted as a representation of the character traits that once defined his masculinity: loud, brash, confrontational, and combative, with a thirst for a feud. The text suggests that the belligerence and intensity had been hidden or subdued by illness and the aging process. This cry for battle serves two purposes: first, it reveals Zuckerman's determination to protect the reputation of the "writer" against dominant interpretations of the young male; second, it signifies his desire to protect himself from the severe consequences of old age and the threat of total obliteration. Thus, he is depicted as fighting against the decline of normative masculinity, trying to maintain the constructed ideal by competing with much younger and more agile expressions of male power.

In their first interaction, Kliman confidently asserts that "old men hate young men. That goes without saying" (50). This comment provokes Zuckerman to reflect on the relationships between the young and the old, leading him to question incontinence: "Old men hate young men? Young men fill them with envy and hatred? Why shouldn't they?" (52). While these thoughts are framed as queries, Zuckerman ultimately demonstrates this form of resentment in the final chapter, "Rash Moments." Having acquired half of E. I. Lonoff's last manuscript,[95] Kliman appears to gain the upper hand, leaving Zuckerman feeling beaten and enraged. He concludes that "[t]ere was no stopping him" (256). Zuckerman discloses his powerlessness and metaphorically shrinks in size: "I felt myself—despite myself—growing progressively smaller the more flamboyant the display of Kliman's self-delight" (256). Once more, the tables have turned; Zuckerman is no longer the superior intellectual, the one who possesses knowledge of the past that the young are desperate to acquire. Instead, he is reduced to merely a representation of his bodily decline, defined by his losses.

Zuckerman is now one of the "no longers" (256), referring to characters who have either died or have physically and mentally deteriorated due to old age. In contrast, Kliman embodies the opposite of those who categorically represent "the old." Zuckerman ultimately reveals, albeit reluctantly: "All of us are now 'no-loners' while the excited mind of Richard Kliman believes that his heart, his knees, his cerebrum, his prostate, his bladder sphincter, his *everything* is indestructible, and that he, and he alone, is not in the hands of his cells" (256). The two characters continue their tug-of-war until the very end, where it becomes increasingly clear that Zuckerman has lost his authority and is compelled to step down within the "old" gender hierarchy.

They meet one last time to discuss the Lonoff manuscript, and Zuckerman comments on his rival's overbearing habitus. He reflects: "People in the coffee shop might easily have thought Kliman was my son from the way I let him go on his self-delighted and domineering way, and also because, at strategic moments, he reached out to touch me—my arm, my hand, my shoulder—in order to drive home his point" (261). Anthony Synnott argues that "touch" is one of "the most common and the most important non-verbal communication channel[s]" (156). Typically, "superiors touch inferiors more than inferiors touch superiors, and not always with tenderness" (167-168). In this instance, the touch

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[95] The narrative leaves unanswered the question of whether Kliman steals the manuscript from Amy or if she (more or less) willingly hands it to him. The novel suggests that her actions may be influenced by a brain tumor, which is detailed in chapter three, titled "Amy's Brain." This ambiguity raises questions about the mental capacities of both Amy and Nathan as they face illness and old age, constructing these two characters as reflections of one another, each grappling with decline.

between Kliman and Zuckerman constitutes a "struggle for supremacy" (168) and is "used to maintain the social hierarchy" (168) or to establish new power structures. Zuckerman, for example, refers to the power dynamics typically found between father and son, despite the fact that they are not related. Since "[p]ower is not only social, it is also physical" (169), the physical exchanges between these two male antagonists help solidify a new hierarchy, placing the "old man" in a subordinated position. His subordination stems from a gradual decline in his abilities. It is important to note that this invalidation is specific to social interaction between Zuckerman and Kliman, who exemplifies a type of normative masculinity that ultimately prevails.

The resentment of "the old" resurfaces in this final chapter, building up into a surge of angry thoughts. Zuckerman describes his antagonist as a force that "steamrolls" him "into believing he [Kliman] was a twenty-eight-year-old titan of literature and I [Zuckerman] should get out of his way" (*Exit Ghost* 263). Following this observation, Zuckerman exclaims his disgust: "I couldn't bear him. I couldn't bear his outsized boy's energy and smug self-certainty and the pride he took in being an enthusiast and a raconteur" (264-265). Zuckerman further characterizes Kliman as "[t]his reckless, hard-driving, shameless, opportunistic young man" (268). And finally, he perceives Kliman as a towering menace: "I watched him, up on his pinnacle, move in on me for the kill. And suddenly I saw him not as a person but as a door. I see a heavy wooden door where Kliman is sitting" (269).

Their final encounter solidifies Zuckerman's defeat when Kliman throws Lonoff's manuscript at his rival's feet: "[H]e dropped it onto the pavement, onto the New York sidewalk only niches in front of my feet, and fled into the traffic" (273). This act manifests as a moment of profound violation, framing it as a crime from which the perpetrator must escape. Previously, Kliman already transgresses by touching Zuckerman; now, he not only abuses the manuscript—a raw piece of literature, embodying Lonoff's final work that holds great symbolic value—but this moment also symbolizes a violation of the aging body, particularly the aging Jewish American body. Zuckerman's Jewish identity, however, remains mostly concealed during these interactions.

In *Exit Ghost,* Nathan Zuckerman frequently reflects on his Jewish identity, such as in the narrative strand that explains his reasons to leave New York for a rural life. This move is prompted by anonymous antisemitic and racist threats against Zuckerman's life, which even involved the FBI. The theme of Jewish identity, however, is most prominently explored in chapter three, "Amy's Brain." In this chapter, Zuckerman tells the story of Amy Bellette, a Holocaust survivor described as a "young Jewish princess" (Connolly 644). Amy, who holds Lonoff's manuscript, is an aging character entwined with the secrets of the past. Elizabeth Moran points out that "Amy lives in the past, trapped by the trauma of the

Holocaust and her intellectual devotion to a husband who has been dead for decades" ("Death, Determination and 'the end of ends?'" 20). Moran identifies Amy as the character who embodies the past—a "no-goner" who pulls Zuckerman toward loss and memories of a long-gone past (20). But Amy is also a vital part of Zuckerman's Jewish community, alongside characters like Lonoff and Billy. His Jewish identity is expressed through the storylines of these characters, despite Zuckerman describing Lonoff as a "contemptible white male" (*Exit Ghost* 102).

Zuckerman's interactions with other characters, especially Kliman, foreground the relationship between the young and the old, as well as the notion of competing masculinities. Connolly points out that previous Zuckerman texts, "mirror Zuckerman's frustrated struggle to discover in high-literary tradition a means of escaping the 'facts' of his Jewish ancestry" (654). Therefore, "[i]t is Zuckerman's own inescapable experiences of traumatic shock and horror […] that are uncannily revisited through the apparently 'unautobiographical' stories that he tells about others in these later works" (654)—such as the character Amy Bellette. His Jewish identity is somewhat repressed and concealed, surfacing only on occasion.

Nathan Zuckerman displays a variety of masculinities that are often in conflict, both with other presented types of masculinities and with himself. The novel illustrates Zuckerman's struggle, in his old age, to reformulate his masculine identity to fit an aging body. Rather than adapting, he finds himself competing against internal and external forces that hinder his ability to conform to idealized notions of masculinities. Notably, the reworked concept of hegemonic masculinity, emerging after initial criticisms from academia, "recognizes the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of hegemonic groups and that includes the mutual conditioning (or intersectionality) of gender with other social inequalities such as class, race, age, sexuality, and nation" (Messerschmidt and Messner 40). The interactions between Zuckerman and Kliman reveal scenarios where power shifts from one player to the other, suggesting that hegemonic masculinities may not always constitute a dominant type. According to Messerschmidt and Messner, "*[d]ominant masculinities* are not always associated with and linked to gender hegemony" (40). While the overarching idea of hegemonic masculinities remains useful for discussing power relations at a fundamental level, especially concerning patriarchal structures, a more nuanced approach is essential for understanding how power is situationally transferred and how specific circumstances can lead to the manifestation of new hierarchies. Roth's novel illuminates this concept effectively.

Zuckerman is often perceived as superior and privileged due to his long and successful career as an accomplished writer and the connections he has made throughout his life. He is admired by a younger generation for his insight and intellect. However, it is this very generation that challenges his status and authority, here in the shape of Richard Kliman.

Other characters, such as Jamie Logan, also pose a similar threat, which I will discuss in more detail in the following subchapter. Zuckerman's age and physical decline symbolize his fall from the hegemonic ideal within the elitist literary circle that once recognized him as skillful and distinguished. Outside of this circle, intersecting categories reformulate his masculinity, rendering him as "other" and inferior, primarily seen as a Jewish man. In chapter five, "Rash Moments," while back in his hotel room before their final meeting at lunch, Zuckerman briefly contemplates whether the anonymous perpetrator from his past, the anti-Semite who sends him death threats, might actually be Richard Kliman (151-152). In this moment, Kliman transforms from merely being a bully accused of stealing Lonoff's manuscript to a potential threat, a racist bigot who might be willing to even kill the Jewish writer. These narrative developments reveal a double form of oppression and othering, which should be analyzed through an intersectional lens. This perspective complicates the notion of white privilege that accompanies Zuckerman throughout the narrative.

In the end, Zuckerman's fall is highlighted by the condition of his body. He increasingly questions the reliability of his memory and experiences a sense of impotence, particularly regarding his bladder control. After the meeting in Central Park, he acknowledges: "I could tell that the pad cradled in my plastic underwear to absorb and contain my urine was heavily soaked and that it was time to hurry back to the hotel to wash and change myself" (102). This theme is echoed in the final chapter, when, after Kliman throws the manuscript, Zuckerman states: "At the hotel, after discarding my urine-soaked underclothes and washing myself at the sink, I phoned Amy" (273). The aging body, reliant on pads to manage an uncontrollable flow of urine, stands in stark contrast to the young, evoking nostalgia for a past self. Zuckerman struggles to maintain his relevance in society despite the bodily changes and losses that force him to retreat to the privacy of his hotel room.

While Zuckerman attempts to assert his intellectual power by guarding Lonoff's story and sabotaging Kliman's endeavors to "taint" the writer's legacy, he briefly follows the call of a "virile man called back to life!" (104). But this call is immediately shattered by the reality of his decline, and Zuckerman admits: "Only there is no virility. There is only the brevity of expectations" (104). The young are vividly portrayed as "savage with health and armed to the teeth with time" (104), positioning the aged closely aligned with death. Kliman brutally declares: "You smell like death!" and runs off, leaving Zuckerman to ponder: "But what could a specimen like Kliman know about the smell of death? All I smelled was urine" (104). The harsh self-reflection resonates with Donna Reeve's discussion of psycho-emotional disablism in disability studies, addressing the internalized self-hatred that can develop among those who are physically impaired.

The final subchapter of this study will zoom in on aspects of aging, continuing the comparisons between youth and old age. However, this section will specifically examine male-female relationships and the decline of sexual prowess contrasted with the revitalization of sexual lust, which is associated with the hope for a cure and the appearance of a young female, represented here by Jamie Logan. Prostate cancer, which can lead to impotence, is a common theme in literature that reflects on aging masculinities. This topic constitutes another significant element within the decline narrative model, which often limits the experiences of aging men to themes of illness and loss.

3.2.3 The "Old Man" Between Breaking and Maintaining the Normative

David Jackson, in his work *Exploring Aging Masculinities* (2016), highlights a significant issue related to the intersection of masculinity and aging: "Changes in the material bodies of aging men […] involve the often traumatic experiences of sudden alteration and loss of physical function and capacity" (4). This observation is reflected in literary texts that depict the struggles of male aging. Such works often feature a tormented focalizer and a prominent use of illness metaphors and themes associated with death that permeate the narrative. Roth's *Exit Ghost* follows this blueprint and imagines a male character who easily slips into a depressive, lamenting mode, overwhelmed by the losses that shape his experience of aging and old age. Roth's old man is presented as an emasculated version, a distortion of "a vigorous, healthy younger man" (*Exit Ghost* 3), occurring as a past self who used to live "on the Upper East Side of Manhattan" (3). His flight into seclusion and his defeat when confronted with the vital and youthful male opponent, Richard Kliman, are frequently explained in relation to the two central topics in the novel: impotence and incontinence.

This subchapter examines how impotence and incontinence are perceived within the fictional universe and how, in the case of Nathan Zuckerman following his prostate surgery, they are presented as two sides of the same coin that symbolize a broader crisis of aging masculinity. I will first focus on the frequent references to bodily fluids, specifically urine, and how the character's self-perception or self-realization evolves as he faces the changes and challenges associated with incontinence. This includes sudden leakages, the use of sanitary pads, and the constant fear of exposure.

Afterward, I will address the depiction of impotence and explore how these two are constantly intertwined, representing the decline or loss of a perceived normative, singular masculinity. Through these medical conditions, the male body is constructed as being in a constant state of crisis. The loss of control over one's physical body manifests as a failure to uphold and maintain an idealized notion of masculinity that is predominantly tied to

physicality and bodily functions. The disruption of the constructed order of the material body also reflects a larger social disorder. Additionally, the text thematically depicts this disorder within the context of a political shift toward conservatism and a nation facing threats from Islamic terror. In this environment, the male body is redefined through a lens of failures and bodily impairments. Idealized forms of masculinities, particularly those associated with athleticism and the able-bodied, can no longer be performed or maintained.

Leaks, Fluids, and Sanitary Pads: Zuckerman's Leaky "Biomedical" Body

Bodily leaks and uncontrollable fluids are primarily discussed within feminist and disability discourses, while they remain less frequently explored in critical masculinities studies. This gap is striking, particularly given the commonly held assumption that "[a]ging and disability are commonly assumed to go hand in hand" (Stone 57). In Western cultures, Sharon-Dale Stone observes that narratives often emphasize "aging as a process of decline into disability and decrepitude" (58). Although more diverse representations of aging have emerged over the past two decades, the dominant cultural lens continues to associate aging with loss and bodily decline.

One notable exception to this trend is the action blockbuster, which revives the hypermasculine action hero in old age—a phenomenon Alex Hobbs discusses in *Aging Masculinity in the American Novel* (2016).[96] However, a text like *Exit Ghost* still conforms to the more traditional portrayal of aging in the early twenty-first century. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the narrative is overloaded with references to physical impairment, particularly concerning bladder function. As I outline in section 3.2.1, the novel addresses issues like prostate surgery and incontinence right from the start. This effectively establishes the theme as a significant concern throughout the narrative. The detrimental effects of the prostate cancer removal shape the development of all other narrative threads and are evident in the persistent allusions to urinary failure.

The younger version of Nathan Zuckerman, though only directly mentioned once in the opening passages, is omnipresent. His lingering influence is made visible through the bodily dysfunctions of the older Zuckerman, such as in the "billowing cloud of urine,"

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[96] Alex Hobbs notes about the action blockbuster how "[a]ction films with older male leads have become more common as the glut of 1980s action heroes reach old age" (13). Hobbs analyzes films like *Rocky Balboa* (2006), *Rambo* (2008), or *The Expendables* (2010), and echoes the findings of Ellexis Boyle and Sean Brayton, who observe that these films "reproduce[…] many of the classic generic conventions of Hollywood action-adventure films" (13) and are little concerned with the explicit experiences of aging. The scholars describe the action genre as "a thinly veiled colonial and 'crisis masculinity' narrative populated by chauvinistic and hypermuscular heroes" (13).

"accidents," "pads," and the seemingly involuntary choice to live a secluded, lonely life "in a small house on a dirt road in the deep country" (2-3). Thus, the young Zuckerman, representing a lived but now inaccessible past, is made visible through the perceived losses by the older Zuckerman. On top of that, the novel constructs the decline or loss of an imagined ideal masculinity and an ideal biomedical body, not only through the absence of able-bodiedness but also through the metaphorical invasion of the feminine. The leaking bodily fluids and the description of "changing pads" and leak-proof undergarments evoke female menstruation, representing the downfall of heteronormative, dominant masculinity. This serves as the portrayal of the ultimate emasculation of the masculine ideal.

In her influential work *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics* (1995), Margrit Shildrick explores the dominant disability discourse taking place at the end of the twentieth century. She draws upon embodiment theory and the ideas of thinkers such as Foucault, particularly his concept of biopolitics, as well as Leder's notion of in/visible bodies. Shildrick discusses a shift away from mind/body dualisms and toward the understanding that "our phenomenological stability is intrinsically tied up with the unified presence of our bodies" (Shildrick 14). This transformation is significant when analyzing turn-of-the-century literature that highlights the struggles of aging male protagonists—often writers or intellectuals—who frequently view their mental reflections as separate from their corporeal, material body. In such moments of failure, the body is conceived as an obstacle, or even as the primary source of harm to man's Reason.

Shildrick elaborates, stating: "The phenomenological claim is that the 'broken' body of sickness has important consequences for our self-perception, such that the loss of a leg or a breast, for example, affects not simply corporeal integrity, but also the sense of who we are" (14). Her analysis emphasizes the female experience, revealing that the female body is "existentially disabled" because "the 'whole' body of phenomenology is intrinsically masculine, […] women, by that token, are never in full existential health" (14). While I do not suggest that the aging male body equates to the same bodily and social "disabled" condition, it is clear that his emasculation redefines him in ways that challenge traditional hegemonic structures.

The opening chapter of *Exit Ghost* immediately introduces the theme of bodily loss of control through Nathan Zuckerman's candid account of his struggles with bladder dysfunction. He describes the daily routines required to maintain bodily order and his inability to adapt to this precarious corporeal state: "[D]espite the dailiness of the routine necessary to keep myself clean and odor-free, I must never truly have become accustomed to wearing the special undergarments and changing the pads and dealing with the 'accidents,' any more than I had mastered the underlying humiliation" (*Exit Ghost* 2-3). This passage

illustrates a body that is disordered and unruly, requiring constant attention to prevent urinary leaks—issues Zuckerman euphemistically refers to as "accidents." The text suggests that this bodily condition creates a relentless sense of "underlying humiliation."

This idea corresponds with Shildrick's perspective on the body as a cultural construct (14). She maintains that "the body is always a discursive construction, marked by environmental processes and by power, but given to us only in our texts" (14). In this context, the textual body of Nathan Zuckerman represents a precarious liminal state, where he intrinsically refuses to accept his corporeal self. He is caught between feelings of loss associated with a younger body and the desire to restore his condition by seeking medical help. He turns to "the urology department of Mount Sinai Hospital," where he is "about to be assured that with the permanent adherence of the collagen to the neck of the bladder I [Zuckerman] had a chance of exerting somewhat more control over my [his] urine flow than an infant" (2-3).

These passages call to mind Mikhail Bakhtin's famous analysis of the grotesque body in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), where he explores the implications of (leaking) bodily fluids. Bakhtin argues that "[t]he images of feces and urine are ambivalent, as are all the images of the material bodily lower stratum; they debase, destroy, regenerate, and renew simultaneously. They are blessing and humiliating at the same time. Death and death throes, labor, and childbirth are intimately interwoven" (151). Zuckerman's reference to the "infant" evokes a degradation of the aging individual to a state akin to infancy, highlighting the loss of control, self-sufficiency, agency, and autonomy. This observation also resonates with Bakhtinian ideas, reminding us of the connection between birth and death. He further contends that "urine and other eliminations (excrement, vomit, sweat) had in ancient medicine the connotation of life and death (in addition to their link with the lower stratum of the body and with earth)" (180). In *Exit Ghost*, beginnings and endings intertwine, as the old coexist with the infantile, the feminine, the emasculated, and the limited. At the end of chapter one, Zuckerman openly contemplates his reduction to a child in a clinical setting and complains: "But that's how it goes when an elderly patient refuses to resign himself to the inevitable travails and totter politely toward the grave: doctors and nurses have a child on their hands" (*Exit Ghost* 63).

The narrative features an old man who exhibits child-like and infantile qualities on several occasions. Zuckerman experiences this frustrating reduction as a calamity and wants to reflect on it in his writing. In the attempt to find a title for his final book project, Zuckerman humorously exclaims: "Or should I just come right out with it—call it *A Man in Diapers. A* book about knowing where to go for your agony and then going there for it" (41). The collagen treatment intended to reinstate bladder functions and cure incontinence,

constantly raises his hopes, only to leave him disappointed and even more frustrated. His regular visits to the urologist in New York City (15f, 18, 41f, 62f, 95f) serve as constant reminders of incontinence and feelings of failure throughout the narrative. On top of the direct excursions into bladder dysfunction and the various treatments in search of a cure, the novel includes implicit references to his medical condition. For instance, the color yellow appears in descriptions like Amy's "old yellow dress" (167), subtly alluding to old age. Furthermore, Zuckerman's interactions with Kliman and the odors he perceives in Amy's apartment building (164ff) evoke the smells associated with aging.

In his final encounter with Kliman, the protagonist observes: "And I smelled again, the odor rising from my lap, very like the odor I'd encountered in the interior passages of Amy's building—and all the while he who had shouted those insults at me continued calmly finishing off his sandwich" (268-269). The pervasive and stinging smell of urine—ambivalent, as Bakhtin suggests—runs throughout the novel, serving as a marker of tension and disintegration. It evokes a feeling of disgust, which, as Bill Hughes suggests, "stems from fear of the messiness of our own intrinsic, organic human constitution and from modern cultural sensibilities that require us to manage the animal orifices that threaten to despoil and defile" (72). It is worthwhile to explore Hughes in greater detail here.

Following Kristeva's renowned theory on the abject, which she discusses in "Powers of Horror," Hughes recognizes a social hierarchy rooted in the stigmatization of the "unruly" body that stands in opposition to the "clean and proper" (73). He further asserts, also referencing Bakhtin, that "[d]isgust is an emotion that derives, ultimately, from the mortal limits of our abject bodies and from the leaky fluids that sometimes escape the boundaries of our corporeal selves but it has a history in which it is muted or exacerbated by specific cultural sensibilities" (73).

Nathan Zuckerman contemplates his condition within a failed body: "To possess control over one's bladder—who among the whole and healthy ever considers the freedom that bestows or the anxious vulnerability its loss can impose on even the most confident among us?" (*Exit Ghost* 19). The loss of control is foregrounded in several instances, along with the wish to escape the limits of a "disabled" body. Zuckerman envisions himself as "whole" and free again: "I closed my eyes in the elevator and saw myself swimming in the college pool" (16). In this imagined scene, he pictures himself swimming alongside the healthy and able-bodied, who are in control in the public pool, as opposed to being confined to his private pond:

> I swim there without a suit, out of sight of everyone, so that if in my wake I leave a thin, billowing cloud of urine that visibly discolors the surrounding pond waters, I'm largely unperturbed and feel nothing like the chagrin that would be sure to crush me

should my bladder involuntarily begin emptying itself while I was swimming in a public pool. (4)

While scientific inquiry emphasizes the material body, it is the cultural frame in which the body exists and is constructed that leads to feelings of humiliation.

In "Psycho-Emotional Disablism: The Missing Link?" (2012), Donna Reeve discusses how individuals with invisible impairments often attempt to pass as able-bodied to avoid discrimination. She notes that trying to appear able-bodied "can protect someone with invisible impairments from experiencing the kinds of invalidation that those with visible impairments (and/or impairment effects) experience, such as being avoided or stared at" (88). Throughout the novel, we observe various rituals of passing. For example, Zuckerman is shown changing his sanitary pads in the secrecy of his hotel room or in restaurant bathrooms. Although the act of changing the pads is depicted as an automated procedure (*Exit Ghost* 30), the frame in which this change occurs is always imbued with a sense of shame and secrecy. Furthermore, Zuckerman never discloses his condition to other characters in the novel. His incontinence remains within a medical and private realm, something he is eager to cloak.

Reeve also contends that the fear or "risk" of being revealed and thus stigmatized as "disabled" might lead to "psycho-emotional disablism when their body dys-appears as they become subject to the prejudiced comments of strangers" (88). And following Carol Thomas, Reeve explains how the fear of exposure "gives rise to the 'negative psycho-emotional aspects of concealment'" (88). Consequently, critical disability studies maintain how

> people with invisible impairments occupy a highly vulnerable position because they are continually managing whether to conceal or disclose information about their impairment. If someone chooses to pass as 'normal' then they will be expected by others to conform to conventional norms of behaviour and stamina – which can be particularly difficult if an invisible impairment is fatigue. (88)

In this discussion, Reeve explores the concept of "internalized oppression," which he describes as a form of "direct psycho-emotional disablism" (81). This phenomenon "happens when a disabled person internalizes prejudices about disability, thereby effectively 'invalidating themselves'" (81).

This form of self-hatred or self-invalidation is evident at every turn in Zuckerman's experience of aging and disability. In his youth, Zuckerman embodies a normative masculine ideal, but in old age, his self-perception is determined by internalized "norms about disability" (81). Accordingly, Reeve points out that "for those people who become disabled in later life one consequence is that they have to overcome their own prejudices about disability, now that they have moved from the included to the excluded group in society"

(81). At the beginning of the narrative, Zuckerman reflects on his condition and admits: "In the years since the surgery, I even thought I'd surmounted the shaming side of wetting oneself" (*Exit Ghost* 2). Throughout the story, this thought is exposed as an illusion, and his hope is shattered by this internalized shame grounded in discriminatory perceptions of disability and constructed norms of able-bodiedness, particularly pertaining to masculinities. Thus, Zuckerman expresses his concern with the question: "What does it matter any longer if I'm incontinent and impotent?" (5). Additionally, the statement "[a]ll I smelled of was urine" (104), which recurs on several instances in the narrative, functions not only as a reminder of disability and a sign of self-invalidation but also as a denominator that repositions the aging male within a subordinated category of masculinity. The perceived decline of masculinity is directly linked to the penis.

In the final subchapter of my study, I will once again focus on normative male genitalia and further illustrate how *Exit Ghost* emphasizes the importance of the penis, establishing the erect or fully functioning penis as a crucial element of hegemonic masculinities. The novel navigates a tension between hope and despair, with the penis symbolizing both capability and impotence. The socially acceptable expression of dominant masculinity depends on the performance of male genitalia, highlighting the significance of the phallus. Roth's narrative explores the decline of male power, which is contingent on the perception of the penis as a symbol of supremacy, particularly through the failing material body of the male protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman.

Breaking the Penis, Breaking the Man

The penis is constantly on display in *Exit Ghost*. Its hypervisibility marks the male member as a critical presence in discussions of illness and aging, imbued with ambiguity. Its value depends on biomedical functionality, sexual potency, and social constructions of hegemonic power associated with the phallus. In her essay "The Essence of the Hard On" (2000), Annie Potts writes that "[w]hile the penis and the man are synecdochically related, the penis and the phallus are metonymically married" (85). This idea resonates with David Leverenz's exploration of "the Penis as Failed Synecdoche," a concept frequently addressed in discourses surrounding masculinity. As I discuss regarding *Exit Ghost*, *Toward the End of Time*, and other literary works that foreground the experiences of aging men (see 3.2.1), Leverenz notes that old men "remain at least partially enslaved to […] [their] imagined synecdoches" (65). This imagined synecdoche is closely tied to the nostalgia for a younger self, one rooted in a past identity that was youthful and able-bodied. Consequently, Leverenz argues: "A

nostalgic yearning for youthful self-confidence intensifies [...] [the old man's] mourning"
(65).

In *Exit Ghost*, the penis is first connected to incontinence and then to personal and
national castration—starting right on the first page with reference to "a cancerous prostate"
alongside the events of 9/11 (1). This notion of castration or impotence is later connected
to the young female writer, Jamie Logan, who is part of the married couple wanting to swap
houses with Nathan Zuckerman. Moreover, the concept of a "penis-measuring contest"
emerges in the competition between Nathan Zuckerman and his adversary, Richard Kliman.
This representation of impotence extends to mental incapacities and the loss of memory,
which ultimately marks the end of Nathan Zuckerman's career as a writer. Thus, Zuckerman
embodies a doubly aggrieved phallus—both in terms of physical capacities related to sexual
function and concerning masculine dominance typically associated with male intellect.

While the penis is prominently displayed in *Exit Ghost* and has a longstanding
presence in Roth's fictions, it is often overlooked in scholarly accounts of the novel. One of
the few academic publications that explores this angle is Jane Gallop's *Sexuality, Disability, and
Aging* (2019). Gallop recognizes the connection between incontinence and impotence in *Exit
Ghost* and asserts accordingly: "The two conditions are in fact so insistently connected in this
novel that incontinence seems to be Roth's way of talking about the worst kind of impotence,
using a figure that makes it more humiliating, less sexual, more castrating" (76). Gallop
further suggests that the treatment of time creates ambiguity regarding whether the aging
protagonist is experiencing "irremediable castration" or a "phallic return" (76). Hence, she
asserts, "*Exit Ghost* dramatizes this conflict between phallic hope and castrated resignation"
(78).

Gallop builds on key theories by Freud and Lacan, which often serve as the
foundation for discussions about the phallus and castration. However, she examines
castration through the lens of temporality and criticizes the absence of this approach in past
discourse. "The phallic binary," Gallop notes,

> has traditionally been associated with gender: men have the phallus but fear losing it;
> women lost it sometime in the past. These gendered associations have made the
> phallus/castrated opposition particularly offensive and led to its falling out of
> theoretical usage. Gendered associations have also tended to cover over the fact that
> this involves temporality, not essences. (104)

Instead, her focus is on "late-onset disability" (104). She argues that temporality is crucial
when considering the idea that "castrated is a figure for disabled or old; [and that] the phallus
belongs to the young and able-bodied" (104). In her investigation of Roth's novel, Gallop
focuses on male-female divisions and interplay, particularly Zuckerman's sexual desires as
they are represented in his interactions with Jamie Logan and Amy Bellette. This perspective

is also relevant to my analysis of the rivalrous masculinities represented through Zuckerman and Kliman. Although her interpretation of *Exit Ghost* emphasizes gender division, Gallop's study primarily explores temporalities and the concept of aging as a form of castration. She notes that the "figuration of disability and old age as castration affects not just those of us who are no longer young, not just those of us no longer able-bodied. It affects every young or able-bodied person who fears disability or the loss of youth (and who fears the loss of youth as disability)" (104). Hence, she advances the theoretical discourse on the phallus and exclaims that "[t]his is the temporality of able-bodied fear of disability; this is the temporality through which the newly disabled adult experiences a loss of ability" (105).

Her approach highlights the efforts of critical masculinities to understand the role of the "old man" within established gender hierarchies. Oswald et al. explore the social order that ranks masculinities based on sexual performance and prowess, referring to this as "penis-centric masculinity." They argue that "[p]arallel to theories of contingencies of self-worth, which argue that people vary in the degree to which their self-worth is contingent on a given domain, we posit that men vary in the degree to which their masculinity is contingent on the penis (i.e., penis-centric masculinity)" (705). Accordingly, they point to existing scholarship on masculinities that emphasize "the penis as central to perceptions of masculinity and manhood status" and discuss among other things the relevance of penis length as well as erectile function or dysfunction (705).

Erectile dysfunction[97] is bound up with all other themes that *Exit Ghost* explores, positioning it as a central issue in the construction and experience of masculinities. In Roth's prose, the penis takes up a key role in negotiating and maintaining gender hierarchies. Shostak asserts that "[e]mbodiment for Roth's male characters is largely focused on their sexuality and, almost inevitably, on the capacity of the penis as literal organ to achieve the symbolic power of the phallus" ("Roth/CounterRoth" 120). The hypervisibility of the penis, and the male body as a whole, contrasts with the often invisible norms surrounding the male body in academic research. Elizabeth Stephens, for instance, calls to mind that "whereas the bodies of women, children and 'others' have traditionally been constructed as objects of analysis, the universalized male body has effaced itself as an invisible norm" (86).[98] While in different

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[97] In "The Essence of the Hard On" (2000), Annie Potts asserts regarding erectile dysfunction and the phallus: "Failure of the penis to become erect signifies the downfall of this phallic economy as it dictates the sexual identities of both men and women. It denotes the deficiency of the man—his failure robustly to represent the phallus. In medicine, this is classified, or diagnosed, as erectile dysfunction" (87).

[98] Elizabeth Stephens adds the following crucial points: "[A]s subsequent critics of masculinity have amply demonstrated, this is not as true of all male bodies as it is of the White, heterosexual male body, which universalizes its sexuality and corporeality precisely by erasing their specificity" (86). In U.S. American contexts, the invisible, normalized body is an adult heteronormative white male body.

contexts, the penis may symbolize power and competition as well as self-worth, in Roth's text, its visibility stems from the realities of aging and the discontent associated with disability.

The novel conveys that the invisible, normalized body is buried within a youthful configuration of the male physique—specifically, a past self that continues to affect the "old man's" experience of the "present moment." This refers directly to the temporal aspects established in chapter one.[99] In contrast, the aging male body in *Exit Ghost* is loud, unsettled, and almost insolent. It disrupts and agitates through the loss of control, loss of ability, and irreversible dysfunction. Zuckerman consistently engages in self-invalidation. In a moment of defeat, as he prepares to retreat to his secluded country home, he degrades himself to "a man bearing between his legs a spigot of wrinkled flesh where once he'd had the fully functioning sexual organ, complete with bladder sphincter control, of a robust adult male" (*Exit Ghost* 109-110). This passage alone invites various points of discussion and illustrates how idealized notions of masculinities intersect with heteronormative sexuality and the construction of a biomedical idealized body. Here, the penis is framed as aged and wrinkled, reduced to a passive function—compared to a tube or pipe that transports fluids, specifically urine. This passive representation contrasts starkly with the active role it once performed in sexuality. Furthermore, the urine flows out unrestrained due to the loss of "bladder sphincter control." Zuckerman longs to be the "robust adult male" he once was; however, this is a category he no longer belongs to.

I do not interpret the hypervisibility of male genitalia in *Exit Ghost* as a method to counter or criticize the historical/cultural policing of penis representation that Stephens outlines in "The Spectacularized Penis." Nonetheless, I do agree with Stephens' reflections on the importance of studying representations of the penis, which I believe extends to the broader examination of heteronormative masculinities. Stephen asserts: "If the absence of representation that surrounds the penis maintains an invisibility that reinforces the system of phallic privilege, then subjecting the penis to closer scrutiny will not perpetuate but rather elucidate the mechanisms of its dominance" (86-87). For this reason, I analyze Roth's realist fiction as a constructed framework that points to specific assumptions about men and masculinities, particularly in old age. This reflects what scholarship indicates about the in/visibility of the penis in culture: "[T]he penis is paradoxically both everywhere— disseminated through the proliferation of phallomorphic imagery and privilege—and

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[99] For a more nuanced analysis of the chapter titles linked to temporality markers (79f), see Jane Gallop's *Sexuality, Disability, and Aging* (2019).

nowhere, its specificity hidden from view" (Stephens 87). In a Bakhtinian sense, exposing what is hidden and feared reveals a social condition that lies in the subliminal.

The penis is often viewed as a symbol of ideal masculinities and is seen as "a synecdoche of a stable and self-contained corporeality" (87), representing power and dominance within a constructed heteronormative structure. However, this requires more nuanced analysis. Stephens cautions that when we examine male genitalia, we must acknowledge that "contemporary representations of the penis on the contrary reveal the extent to which it is both subject to and a source of corporeal mutability and metamorphosis" (87). Her approach echoes academic reevaluations of the concept of hegemonic masculinities and the changing hierarchies related to different circumstances. For instance, the portrayal of the heteronormative aging male character may shift from dominant to complicit, and even to subordinate over time.

To align with the novel's bitter narrative style, the term "atmospheric terror" (Pozorski 132) captures the pervasive mood of melancholy and dread discussed earlier. Zuckerman continues to shame his dysfunctional penis, describing it as: "[t]he once rigid instrument of procreation was now like the end of a pipe you see sticking out of a field somewhere, a meaningless piece of pipe that spurts and gushes intermittently, spitting forth water to no end, until a day arrives when somebody remembers to give the valve the extra turn that shuts the damn sluice down" (*Exit Ghost* 109-110). The striking image of a useless pipe, along with the various terms Zuckerman uses to describe his penis as an inanimate object, emphasizes its lack of control, as it spurts and gushes. The metaphor connects to the practices of urination and ejaculation, highlighting how they relate to normative performances of masculinity, here referencing the notion of precision.

Equally noteworthy is the theme of reproduction, which I will explore in greater depth in the discussion of Franzen's *The Corrections*. However, this remark is pivotal in the current context as it connects idealized masculinities to heterosexuality and patrimony. The absurdity lies in the fact that Zuckerman, if anything, is merely a father of two kittens for a brief moment, rather than to human children.[100] He finds himself pitied, perhaps ridiculed, yet he is positioned in contrast to the father figure, the archetypal patriarch, his neighbor and friend Larry Hollis, whom he describes in chapter one. Regardless of whether this remark is perceived with an ironic undertone, the underlying implication remains: to be perceived as a

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[100] Arguably, he cares for Amy Bellette—though not in a paternal way—trying to rescue Lonoff's last manuscript from Richard Kliman. Investigating Amy's and Zuckerman's relationship, Miriam Jaffe-Foger observes in "Roth's Contribution to the Narrativization of Illness" (2014) that Zuckerman "had eroticized [Amy] in *The Ghost Writer*" and now he "vows to care for her, protect her, and help her defend the reputation of her late husband E.I. Lonoff, who Amy Bellette cared for through his bitter end" (6).

"real" man means being able to procreate, at the very least. The constructed cultural values surrounding fatherhood and patrimony, along with the maintenance of traditions and the passing of DNA, resonate clearly throughout this narrative.[101]

At this point, it is important to explore Drew Leder's theory on the "absent body" while reading *Exit Ghost* through the intersecting lenses of aging and disability studies. Although my brief exploration cannot fully capture the complexity of Leder's work, it nonetheless provides a critical angle that warrants further investigation in future studies of Roth's writing. The concept of the normalized invisible body is understood as a medically and socially "healthy" body, which arguably aligns with the social construction of a normalized masculine body as an ideal. In simpler terms, Simon J. Williams summarizes this by stating, "[i]nsofar as the body tends to disappear when functioning unproblematically, it seizes our attention most strongly at times of dysfunction" (60). Williams further emphasizes a key point that is vividly illustrated in Roth's representation: "[T]he body in pain emerges as an estranged, alien, 'thing-like' presence, separated from the self" (61). In extension, Donna Reeve comments on Leder's concept of the "dys-appearing body," noting that

> [a]t the moment of dys-appearance there is also a psycho-emotional response—which can include feelings of anger, frustration, shame, embarrassment, awkwardness. The previously-absent body comes to the foreground of attention because of the apparent dis-ease in the mind of the stranger, based on myths fuelled by the cultural 'tyranny of perfection.' (84)[102]

Frustrated with the dys-functions of his body, Zuckerman displays feelings of self-hatred and self-degradation, as seen in this and many other passages. His body becomes a target of his resentment, particularly aimed at his penis. However, his frustration is conveyed in a way that can be interpreted as both melancholic and comedic, evoking a sense of the *grotesque*,

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[101] The subject of patrimony also comes up in the narrative strands that give insight into Jamie Logan's and Richard Kliman's family backgrounds. Jamie's father is described as "a Houston oilman with origins as American as American origins could be" (*Exit Ghost* 33). From Billy's perspective, her father is "[a]n authentically coarse tyrant […]. A travesty of a father. Selfish. Thoughtless. Big temper. Utterly irrational. Domineering. Venomous" (77-78). In addition, Kliman, as the text reveals, "grew up with a headstrong, aggressive father," which Jamie Logan discloses in a private conversation with Zuckerman. She explains that Kliman's father was "[a]n entertainment lawyer, a notoriously aggressive one" (112).

[102] Reeves provides a clear and concise summary of Leder's influential theoretical concept: "In *The Absent Body* (1990) Leder uses phenomenological ideas to develop the concept of the 'dys-appearing' body, showing how bodily awareness is absent most of the time (it *dis*appears) and it is only when one experiences pain or stumbles, for example, that the body is suddenly brought to the foreground. The hyphenated term 'dys-appear' is used quite deliberately; although the *dys* part comes from the Greek for 'bad', 'hard' or 'ill' as in 'dysfunctional', in Latin *dys* can mean instead to pull 'away, apart, asunder'. At times of dys-appearance, whether due to illness or as the result of a changing body during puberty, the body returns to the foreground of awareness at the same time as being experienced as *away* or *apart* from the self" (82). The theory of the absent body, however, warrants careful examination. Critics have questioned the notion of disappearance itself and have raised questions about which type of body is being discussed. Additionally, the experiences of bodies that are marginalized in society, such as black and brown bodies, can lead to different understandings of the dis/appearance of their bodies.

especially in terms of aging. In a Bakhtinian sense, this irony also bears great transformative potential.

Alongside the monologues reflecting on bodily decline, impotence is a significant topic in Zuckerman's interactions with the young, "tauntingly aloof temptress" (*Exit Ghost* 38), Jamie Logan. Chapter four, titled "My Brain," begins with one of the "he and she" encounters that Zuckerman imagines between himself and Jamie. While all these constructed dialogues revolve around sexual desires, this particular sequence directly addresses Zuckerman's impotence and juxtaposes it with Jamie, who is depicted as sexually active both as a teenager and as an adult. In this interaction, the thirteen-year-old Jamie is presented as a femme fatale, a seductress who entices her high school teacher, evoking allusions to pedophilic lust. This brings to mind Updike's rape scene in *Toward the End of Time* and his overarching representation of women. In contrast, Zuckerman narrates himself into this fictional exchange, crafting a version that functions as a mirror image of his own experience. He is depicted as sexually inactive, and although he does not disclose his impotence to Jamie, the reader is acutely aware of it. For example, he remarks that not having had sex for a long time is "among the things that are particularly hard" (222). When asked, "Why? Why did you decide to give that [sex] up, too, along with the city," he responds, mixing lament with mystery: "It decided to give me up" (222-223).

Jamie Logan is a central character in the story world of Nathan Zuckerman—both the "real" and the fictional. Gallop highlights the role of the young female writer: "Shortly after having the procedure for his incontinence, still early in the novel, Zuckerman meets Jamie and immediately experiences an intense sexual desire, a desire that motivates his actions through the rest of the novel. Not only does this reinforce the connection between incontinence and impotence; it makes the novel a narrative of post-prostate sexuality" (80). In a text centered on aging masculinities, Jamie functions as the second young antagonist to Nathan Zuckerman, largely because she becomes the object of his obsessive desire. This desire amplifies his impotence and symbolizes the loss of what most profoundly represents hegemonic masculinities—namely, male prowess and the ability to procreate. The fictional dialogues Zuckerman imagines and writes down constitute a form of nostalgia, a yearning for something that lies in the past and is irretrievable. This backward gaze is typical of the aging male perspective, as seen in reference to Updike and several other texts by Roth. That which lies buried in a "functional" past self emerges almost rhythmically and deepens the "old man's" suffering.

The impossibility of engaging in a sexual experience with Jamie Logan, regardless of her potential lack of interest, frequently emerges as an obsessive drive for Zuckerman. This drive symbolizes a desire for the restoration and regeneration of the phallus, both literally

and metaphorically. At the end of the narrative, a visibly crushed Zuckerman laments: "[W]hy couldn't Jamie Logan, instead of being theirs [Billy's and Kliman's], be mine? Why did I have to get cancer of the prostate? […] Why must strength's abatement be so quick and cruel?" (*Exit Ghost* 273). Although frustration ultimately wins, it is essential to highlight the interplay of hope and despair that alternates throughout the text, reflected in the extreme highs and lows associated with the phallic. Gallop observes that "despite his self-criticism, despite the fact that nothing had reversed his impotence, Zuckerman experiences desire, feels the wild force of his libido. While he has every reason to feel castrated, Zuckerman nonetheless, against all reason, feels phallic" (81). This statement aligns well with Annie Pott's discussion on the impotent penis. She maintains: "While the penis may not be able to hold a permanent phallic position, it can hope to have access to the privilege and power of the phallus every now and again" (90).

In essence, *Exit Ghost* represents a somewhat traditional perspective within critical studies of men and masculinities, focusing on the practice of maintenance. In this game of maintenance, the involvement of other players is crucial if dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinities are to persist, despite the perceived threats posed by societal changes to these idealized and increasingly outdated models of what "real men" should be. The preservation of heteronormative gender power structures relies on the "dichotomy and opposition of feminine and masculine" (Connell, "Gender and Power" 112), as highlighted by discussions with Jamie and Zuckerman. Additionally, as demonstrated through the interactions between Zuckerman and Kliman, this maintenance also hinges on the juxtaposition and hierarchical structuring of different masculinities. Viewed as prerequisites for supremacy, Zuckerman, despite his own sense of phallic identity, is depicted as being at a loss, subordinate both to Kliman and to Jamie Logan.

Considering Connell's theory on gender hierarchies and desire, Zuckerman's lust for the young female body constitutes a form of transgression, tapping into socially constructed taboos. These taboos are related to sexuality and common sexual desires (112). Connell, through a psychoanalytic lens, explores the non-normative, outside-of-script desires that society frames as prohibitions. Such desires are evident in Roth's work, particularly in the character of the aging male who is infatuated with a much younger female.[103] Zuckerman's secret longing for Jamie Logan evolves into an increasing obsession, a greed that swells up in the course of the narrative, ultimately revealed in a manuscript Zuckerman writes and keeps hidden from other characters. The desire remains a secret. Toward the end of the story, he becomes completely consumed by his fictional longing for Jamie. Accordingly, Paul

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[103] *Exit Ghost* also thematizes taboo sexual desires such as incest, rape, and pedophilia.

Levy notes that "[t]he tenuous, diaphanous story line is frequently interrupted by dialogs in italics between a 'He' and a 'She:' these are purely imaginary exchanges between Nathan and Jamie, who exercises a strong degree of sex appeal on him. The novel ends on one of these 'conversations,' there is no return to the narrative frame" (2).

Two notable segments in the novel highlight the cultural significance of male genitalia and depict sexual transgressions: (1) the incest scandal involving E. I. Lonoff, which Kliman seeks to expose in his biography, and (2) the implied rape that Zuckerman imagines in one of his fictional renditions of Jamie Logan. Previously considered useless and "dead" in the context of the aging body, the penis in this narrative is demonized, associated with violence, and conceived as a threat. In the final chapter, "Rash Moments," Zuckerman expresses frustration over his impotence and his inability to subdue Kliman. He imagines and writes a disturbing "he and she" scenario in which Kliman forces himself on Jamie. Jamie strongly asserts, "I'm married" (*Exit Ghost* 257) and "Leave me alone" (257), before ultimately shouting, "Get the fuck away from me. Get out of my apartment" (258). Kliman, however, dismisses her objections and urges her to "Yield." He even explicitly links male genitalia and oral sex with aggression, demanding, "I want you to suck the beautiful head" (258). In this passage, the phallus becomes a symbol of sexual violence, with the penis representing the broader harm men inflict on women. The themes of violent masculinities and sexual violence have long been scrutinized within critical masculinities. Jeff Hearn's observations from the late 1990s remain relevant today, especially when considering statistics on violent crimes and ongoing research in the field. Hearn points to the intersections of male violence and power, calling to mind that "[a]n important aspect of men's power and sense of power is the use, potential use or threat of violence. And men's violence remains a major and pressing problem" (*The Violences of Men* 4).

In another instance, Richard Kliman attempts once more to convince Nathan Zuckerman of the importance of revealing the Lonoff secret. Zuckerman, however, still refuses to believe that his idol, writer E. I. Lonoff, committed incest with his sister. This denial prompts Kliman to exclaim his disbelief with loud anger. He shouts at Zuckerman just before throwing Lonoff's manuscript at him: "'I cannot believe this!' he cried, walking beside me and showing me the baffled face of his fury. […] 'You of all people! The man had a penis, Mr Zuckerman. His penis made them criminals in their world for over three years" (*Exit Ghost* 271). Although the incestuous relationship was consensual, the reference to the penis, and by extension the man, frames Lonoff as a criminal. In this context, penetration and the intimacies shared are constructed as a criminal act, one that Kliman describes as shameful and impure. According to Kliman, Lonoff's lost manuscript represents his "long-delayed effort to let the repellent in" (272).

The "repellent" also points to a remark made by Roth on re-reading his novel *Portnoy's Complaint* forty-five years after its publication.[104] This notion of the repellent has been taken up recently by Blake Bailey in his biography of Roth and his own memoir, as well as by numerous scholars examining the transgressions depicted throughout Roth's body of work.[105] The text passage in question, much like Kliman's suggestion of a rape scene, explicitly evokes the image of the male anatomy, and in doing so, reflects scholarly discussions around violence associated with men and masculinities. The penis, here, can symbolize either violence and calamity or defeat. The juxtaposition of young and old masculinities is evident: the power tied to erection, the phallus, strength, and dominance, is opposed to the helpless and weak, despite a secret longing for phallic power that suggests a sense of nostalgia.

Finally, the phallus is linked to the possession or loss of mental capacities. In one instance, Zuckerman reveals:

> By the time I'd decided to seek medical help in New York, the leakage I'd been experiencing wasn't just from my penis, nor was the failure of function restricted to the bladder's sphincter—nor was the crisis waiting to alter me next one that I could continue to hope would isolate the loss in the body alone. This time it was my mind, and this time my foreboding was being given more than a moment's notice, though, for all I knew, not much more). (*Exit Ghost* 162)

Throughout the narrative, Zuckerman experiences mental lapses and self-doubt, which significantly shape his self-perception and his interactions with the world around him. This internal struggle is intertwined with the biographer's ambitions to uncover the mystery surrounding Lonoff, leading to deeper philosophical questions about *truth*, realist writing, and the functions and responsibilities of art and literature embedded in the novel

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[104] Roth's essay "Old Books, New Thoughts" appeared in *The New York Times Style Magazine* in 2014. In this piece, the writer reflects on his experience of re-reading his most famous novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*, and the reception of his controversial work. His remarks raise important questions about the role of fiction, as well as issues of taboos and censorship. This discussion echoes today's debates regarding the responsibilities of art and "cancel culture" as a form of social policing. While this new form of public judgment can be considered valid and necessary in certain situations, Roth defends his work by saying: "One writes a repellent book (and 'Portnoy's Complaint' was taken by many to be solely that) not to be repellent but to represent the repellent, to air the repellent, to expose it, to reveal how it looks and what it is. Chekhov wisely advised that the writer's task lies not in solving problems but in properly presenting the problem."

[105] Elizabeth Moran sums up the heat surrounding Roth's inclination toward the repellent in Roth's favor: "While reviewers proffer Roth everything from a character assassination to a check-up, many academic critics skirmish on a battlefield bounded by the polarities of feminism and a capacious anti-feminism that encompasses the values of patriarchy and misogyny. Yet Roth's unsettling tendencies—his willingness to court the repellent, to provoke, to skewer received ideas and dispatch pieties—refuse simple ideological allegiances. There is surprisingly little acknowledgment that he thinks searchingly about gender, not in the embrace of feminism, but by scrutinizing masculinity in a characteristically skeptical spirit. It is not uncommon for Roth to be caricatured as a great propagandist of patriarchy, but I am struck by how often his protagonists find that the body betrays, rather than constitutes, manhood" (8).

(Christiansen 221f). The dreadful biography and the (half)lost final manuscript of the "legendary author" (implying both Lonoff and Zuckerman) supposedly fill the gaps that time or illness (in Zuckerman's case) have brought about. However, as the narrative suggests, these attempts to fill the gaps are also fictions—interpretations conducted by characters fixed on exposing the transgressions of others.[106] The corporeal body of the writer is entangled with the body of the written text that constitutes his legacy, which may shape all future discourse of his literary accomplishments. Connolly links this idea to the concept of national trauma that resonates in the background:

> This sense of a trauma that repeats itself on the historical, personal and aesthetic levels is made apparent as the novel draws to a close. Zuckerman begins to indicate how the dangers posed to Lonoff's legacy by Kliman's biographical claims may potentially foreshadow similar problems of misreading or misappropriation in relation to his own work. (Connolly 656-7)

Castration emerges as a central and complex theme in *Exit Ghost*, articulated through multiple narrative layers. The biomedical and social configurations of the penis and the phallus are part of a larger discussion on masculinities and the social constructions of normative masculinities, particularly as they relate to the experiences of the "old white man." Roth's portrayal of the "old (at times white) man" reflects the haunting effects of aging on his body, including both sexual prowess and declining mental abilities, all of which are intertwined with the physical experience. Aging manifests itself primarily as an accumulation of losses, resulting in a growing number of limitations that the changing body cannot overcome, even if the will to resist sometimes resurfaces. This struggle occurs in a world that seems unresponsive to the needs of the old. The ramifications of old age and aging are told through a melodramatic mode, using the national trauma of severe historical events to express the individual's suffering.

Nathan Zuckerman's *dys-appearance* at narrative close is a final attempt to cling to a version of himself that he approves of, using fiction as a means of self-construction. It may also serve as his final attempt to fight off reconfiguration through biographical text. Moreover, his flight into the unknown, given that this is the concluding text chronicling Zuckerman's journey in Roth's Zuckerman saga, fixes the aging male body within a space of liminality that evokes possibilities of renewal alongside a non-Christian finality of death. Ultimately, male aging remains largely confined to a frame of precarious liminality and crisis.

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[106] Christiansen discusses the concept of truth in art and argues that Kliman "only wants to expose a transgression, without contributing to the understanding of it. Exposing a transgression, exposing it to a moral outrage, is the domain of contemporary biography, while understanding and comprehending the transgression remains the domain of fiction" (223-224). Whether this perspective also applies to Bailey's interpretation of Roth is open to debate.

4. From Old Disputes to New Insights: Revisiting the Fallen Patriarch in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*

4.1 Contextualizing *The Corrections*—Academic Discourse and Public Perception

Jonathan Franzen does not disappoint when it comes to enraging the critics. In a 2021 article for *The Guardian*, journalist Lisa Allardice writes, interviewing Franzen about his latest family novel, *Crossroads* (2021): "Angry is the adjective most associated with Franzen, who has a history of getting into scraps." His contentious essay, published in *Harper's* magazine, has been debated and critiqued from multiple perspectives for over two decades and continues to influence the literary world.[107] And whenever Franzen publicly exhibits behavior that seems absurd or *clownish*—evoking the portrayal by Chloe Cushman in her *National Post* artwork, which depicts him with a round, red-gleaming clown nose—the Franzen case is reopened, and the criticism escalates again.

One of his more recent, arguably small-scale faux pas is the "10 Rules for Novelists" guidelines he compiled for *Lit Hub*, which nevertheless sparked a significant "shitstorm" on social media.[108] Allardice references the list and notes that "the hostility is noisiest online (just Google 'Jonathan Franzen hate')." However, as Franzen reveals in the interview, he feels misunderstood and states, "I just try to write it like I see it, and that gets me in trouble." While I do not mean to justify hate speech online, it is not surprising that such remarks attract vociferous criticism, given the nature of social media. Central to this criticism is the assumption that Franzen speaks on behalf of a conservative literary elite, which invites critics (and sadly also haters) to regularly revisit his disputed claims about gender and mainstream writing, about the U.S. American novel, and the greater purpose of (U.S. American) literature. Thus, it is also unsurprising that nearly all commentary on Franzen still begins with his novel, *The Corrections* (2001), and the infamous Oprah debacle.[109]

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[107] Franzen's essay "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels" was originally published in *Harper's* magazine in 1996. It was later revised and retitled "Why Bother?" for his essay collection *How to Be Alone* (2002). This non-fiction piece sparked a heated debate both in academic circles and beyond. It initiated discussions on the relevance of the (contemporary) social novel as well as issues related to race, gender, and the literary elite. Critic Madhu Dubey notes that "[i]n his now notorious essay, 'Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels' […] Franzen explicitly racializes and genders - as white and male - the problem of social relevance confronted by late-twentieth century American novelists" (365).

[108] Franzen's writing rules faced widespread criticism online, with *Twitter* users being especially harsh. For more information, see the *BBC* article titled "Franzen's rules for writing mocked on Twitter," as well as Eleanor Ainge Roy's piece in *The Guardian*, "'Ignore this': Jonathan Franzen's top 10 writing tips get gleefully trolled on Twitter."

[109] In 2001, popular talk show host Oprah Winfrey selected Franzen's novel *The Corrections* for Oprah's Book Club and invited him to appear on her show. The author's reaction to the invite sparked controversy, leading Winfrey to revoke her invitation. The conflict unleashed ongoing debates about the distinction between mass-market and elite literature. For more details, see Christoph Ribbat's essay "Handling the Media, Surviving 'The Corrections': Jonathan Franzen and the Fate of the Author," as well as Nina Bostić's "The Dispute Between

My aim is not to participate in heated current debates or to unnecessarily revisit the Oprah-Franzen conflict. Instead, I propose that Franzen's most controversial and celebrated novel, *The Corrections*, possesses greater social significance than previously recognized in scholarly discussions. Critics continue to debate whether *The Corrections* should be classified as a social novel. By focusing on the fallen patriarch, Alfred Lambert, I will demonstrate that the social dimensions embedded in the narrative become visible, particularly when examined against a background of illness and aging, as well as hegemonic forms of U.S. American masculinities.

The declining patriarch of the Lambert family constitutes a focal point for social tensions. The protagonist's physical deterioration in old age reflects, on the one hand, a failure to maintain a constructed ideal of masculinity during a period of both personal and political crisis. On the other hand, it represents the more hopeful idea that the hegemon's obsolete legacy will not be passed on to his descendants. Plagued by a notion of aggrieved entitlement, a concept established by Michael Kimmel that is tied to white masculinities in the U.S. American context, Alfred Lambert's hegemonic position is disrupted in his interactions with his wife and children. Although the Lambert father fails to envision a new order where he shares power equally rather than rules over his family, Franzen's text implies that in moments of sincere reflection within this strictly governed network of bodies, rendered in the form of the nuclear family, hegemonic ideals can be confronted and held accountable.

My interpretation will build upon the work of Kristin Jacobson and Teresa Requena Pelegrí, expanding their explorations of gender identities to include the critical implications of aging and old age masculinities depicted in the novel. Moreover, understanding the conjunctions of social, realist, as well as postmodern writing, and how *The Corrections* complicates obvious classification, requires acknowledging the various ways the text has been perceived, analyzed, challenged, and even rejected by its most critical readers. To better grasp the discourse surrounding Franzen's novel and its place within the body of literature addressing aging masculinities, I will first outline the academic discussions related to the text, followed by a close reading of the narrative through the intersecting lenses of aging and critical masculinities.

Debating The Corrections

Jonathan Franzen remains a prominent figure in literary discussion, both for his work and

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Jonathan Franzen and Oprah Winfrey." While both articles summarize and list most media reactions and explain the circumstances of the Oprah-Franzen dispute, the latter is overly charged with judgment.

his public reactions. Despite the continuous negative attention Franzen receives—largely due to his own actions—his early novels continue to fascinate literary scholars. In 2017, for instance, Jesús Blanco Hidalga dedicated a comprehensive book project to studying Franzen's literary works, titled *Jonathan Franzen and the Romance of Community*. Furthermore, Franzen's texts have been the subject of various reevaluations focusing on themes such as family dynamics, space, consumerism, and pathology. In *The Literary Life of Things* (2014), Babette Bärbel Tischleder examines the significance and trivial nature of material objects in *The Corrections*. Marcel Thoene revisits the spatial dimensions of the novel in *Toward Diversity and Emancipation* (2016), while Teresa Requena Pelegrí investigates themes of masculinity and fatherhood in her essay "Fathers Who Care" (2014). More recent essays that discuss representations of illness include "The Space Between Words" (2019) by Ben Rutter and Rodney Hermeston, as well as "Dementia Mind Styles in Contemporary Narrative Fiction" (2022) by Jane Lugea. Despite varying opinions about Franzen's character, the interest in his fiction, particularly his turn-of-the-century novel *The Corrections*, does not die out. Beyond doubt, this analysis of Franzen's prominent text contributes to that ongoing interest.

The need for another study of *The Corrections* arises from recent socio-cultural developments surrounding the MeToo movement, the rise of Trumpism, and the research conducted within critical masculinities on these phenomena. Additionally, there is a growing visibility of aging bodies in mainstream culture. This need is further supported by the expansion of gender and aging studies in literary and cultural research, as well as the intense debates critics have had, particularly following the publication of Lev Grossman's *TIME* article and the release of *Freedom*, both in 2010. During this period, academic discourse features several studies discussing the trajectories of realism and postmodernism in *The Corrections*. It is also a time when scholarly work—including some overly emotional critiques—has challenged Franzen's attempt to craft a social novel or *the* (next) "American" novel.

The main concern has been to determine not only how to categorize the text but also to establish theoretical frameworks that help measure whether the positive content outweighs the negative aspects. Scholars have questioned whether the story can actually impact U.S. American society and on what basis; they have also debated whether Franzen has, in fact, written an "American" social novel that exists within a critical tradition of protest. Many critics ultimately investigated whether Franzen's work qualified as a social novel and concluded that it did not, despite the author's claim that it was. As a result, his self-proclaimed social narrative was deemed insufficiently engaged with the political realities to qualify as part

of the tradition of protest fiction.[110] The challenge for scholars has been to find a mode of research that goes beyond personal judgment of the author, a challenge compounded by Franzen's significant commercial presence in the media.

James Annesley and Ty Hawkins provide notable critiques of Jonathan Franzen's work by assessing both the author's intentions and the quality of his writing. While their analyses present valid points with detailed evaluations of the text, they seem overly influenced by Franzen's claims and appear geared towards proving him wrong. Hawkins, in particular, questions Franzen's responsibility as a novelist on several occasions. He cites economist Jeffrey David Sachs and defines the social novel as one "that can engage this world" and ultimately "expand[…] readers' sense of human potentiality, variety, and prospect for connection" (63). Hence, Hawkins argues that Franzen fails to achieve this in *The Corrections* and other works because "[he] […] now believes that economic machinations have negated the possibility of such texts by rendering them arcane" (62). Consequently, Hawkins expresses disappointment in Franzen's lack of faith in the power of his own work, concluding his analysis with a motivational appeal for the novelist to do better. He writes: "[A]s a novelist of extraordinary talent, it is Franzen's job to cease his handwringing and show readers what universal love might look like as operative in the world" (85). While Hawkins' essay may represent an extreme viewpoint, it aligns with the perspectives of critics such as Catherine Toal, Madhu Dubey, and Colin Hutchinson. All of them agree that rejecting postmodern experimentation in favor of realist writing does not render *The Corrections* a social novel.

Undeniably, there has always also been a critical camp that supports *The Corrections*, appearing unmoved by the many controversies surrounding the novelist. Works such as Martin Hipsky's "Post-Cold War Paranoia in *The Corrections* and *The Sopranos*" (2006) and Chris Ingraham's "Talking (About) the Elite and Mass: Vernacular Rhetoric and Discursive Status" (2013) focus on the literary aesthetics and the strategic composition of the text. These analyses highlight how the novel successfully engages both the "masses" and art enthusiasts while keeping academia employed.

The Corrections has undoubtedly sparked a lot of unrest. We can only speculate whether the novel would have gained similar levels of attention and acclaim or faced the same degree of academic skepticism if the author had not made several contentious statements surrounding its publication. The whole debate definitely invites speculation. However, it is also true that the narrative has been widely celebrated and often praised as a significant milestone in literature, especially after Franzen was named the "Great American

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[110] See Jonathan Franzen's "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels" (1996).

Novelist."[111] Its intricate storytelling—though not strictly postmodern—and the complex web of interrelated relevant themes within the Lambert family microcosm have contributed to the novel's popularity. As Hidalga asserts, "Franzen's novelistic work raises a series of questions which are central to the understanding not only of modern-day American fiction but also of contemporary culture in the United States and elsewhere" (1). In the opening of his essay on *The Corrections*, Hidalga praises the narrative as a "complex amalgam formed by three basic textual and narrative ingredients: typically postmodernist motifs and concerns, a large-scale attempt at sociocultural analysis of a distinctively realist lineage and a strategic use of narrative elements taken from genres such as romance, *Bildungsroman* and melodrama" (121).

Hipsky notes that Franzen's narrative "abjure[s] the formal experimentalism of Pynchonesque or David Lynch-style 'high postmodernism' and offer[s] instead a distinctively 'accessible' and pleasurable incorporation of modernist flourishes and postmodern play into traditional realist narrative." Both critics recognize that the narrative potential of *The Corrections* outweighs its supposed failure to fulfill social mandates, as pointed out by scholars such as Annesley and Hawkins. Hipsky further argues that by applying these techniques, the novel "achiev[ed] considerable popular appeal among audiences who, long since immersed in the schizophrenic intensities of near-universal commodification, can powerfully 'relate' to the narrative farragoes of psychic fragmentation, the 'decline' of the family, and diffuse paranoia now on general offer."

The swelling sense of disorder, rupturing family ties, and a system subjected to consumption are a few of many societal issues the text foregrounds. Nathan K. Hensley identifies severed relationships and consumer culture as allegorical counterparts that shape the perception of the Lambert universe. He writes, "*The Corrections* is a thickly allegorical work, one that uses a splintering family and the US economy as mutually reflecting story lines, each alternating between metaphor and diegesis, narrated action and figural trope, background and foreground" (289). This blend of oscillating modes creates the urgency that Hipsky refers to as "schizophrenic intensities." In the aftermath of 9/11, the narrative is said to have predicted a collective paranoia in early twenty-first-century America, characterized by a constant oscillation between panic and paralysis—a condition that persisted for at least a decade and may still be ongoing today. Hensley further argues that "[b]oth of those intermixed allegorical 'levels' […] in turn recapitulate at larger scale the slowly degenerating

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[111] On August 23, 2010, Jonathan Franzen graced the cover of *TIME* magazine with the headline "Great American Novelist." In the accompanying article, Lev Grossman celebrates Franzen as "one of the best" living American novelists, praising *The Corrections* for its tremendous success and expressing anticipation for the writer's fourth novel, *Freedom*.

mind of the Lambert family patriarch, Alfred" (289). He describes Alfred as the metaphorical counter-image of a declining "old-fashioned American industry" (289). However, the decline of U.S. American hegemony encompasses more than just the deterioration of an economic or political system. Ingrained in this outdated order is the enduring practice of rigid and recertified forms of gender play and dominant masculinities. While Alfred's steady deterioration mirrors the collapse of the *old* order, his male identity cannot be overlooked in this analysis.

Alfred Lambert is a man. I state this directly and somewhat provocatively because, in my academic research on *The Corrections,* this crucial detail is often disregarded or only marginally addressed. A predominately male-authored body of academic studies has largely ignored the fact that Franzen's suburban mentality in this fictional post-WWII era fundamentally hinges on heteronormative norms within a male-dominated society. By allowing Alfred's gender to be obscured by universal themes that are considered more urgent and seemingly untouched by gender implications, scholars risk perpetuating academic practices that treat "masculinity" as an invisible norm. I have previously addressed this issue in relation to the works by John Updike and Philip Roth.[112] But I do not mention my colleagues' shortcomings to discredit their work; *The Corrections* has inspired a wealth of excellent literary and cultural analyses on various topics, including assessments of the fictional patriarch. Instead, I present this critique from a position of critical opportunity, aiming to highlight problematic cultural practices within and outside my own scientific discipline.

Critical masculinities studies, like critical whiteness studies (CWS), focus on what has been hidden behind the mask of normativity. Scholars, including Jeff Hearn, advocate for naming the discipline the critical study of men and masculinities (CSMM) to highlight the self-destructive nature of hegemonic and dominant forms of masculinities. This field encourages a reevaluation of active stereotypes and accepted assumptions about male bodies, hegemony, strength, potency, dominance, responsibility, fatherhood, and more. In my study, I revisit significant debates surrounding globalization, consumption, and the family as presented in *The Corrections*. However, I will specifically emphasize Alfred's gender, as Franzen's fictional universe is deeply shaped and informed by heteronormative constructions of gender.

When examining gender-focused discussions about the novel, it is essential to

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[112] In "The Feminist as Other," Susan Bordo contrasts the masculine and the feminine, explaining how the feminine is often seen as the "other," while masculinity is generally understood as "neutral." According to Bordo, "man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity" (10).

consider Jonathan Franzen's views expressed in "Perchance to Dream" and his comments regarding *Oprah's Book Club*, particularly those made during his *NPR* interview with Terry Gross.[113] While I do not want to place too much emphasis on Franzen the public figure—who has faced significant backlash online, with many labeling him as sexist and misogynistic—I do think it is important to acknowledge the underlying hegemonic oppressions present in the binaries he frequently revisits in his essays and interviews. For example, he has openly discriminated against female readers during said *NPR* discussion.

These binaries and insightful depictions of gender dynamics are prevalent in his fictional works, including *The Corrections*. In her 2013 op-ed for *The New Yorker* entitled "Oprah Winfrey, Book Critic," Jennifer Szalai recounts key moments from the Franzen-Oprah dispute and concludes by referencing Franzen's anxiety about his readership. She mockingly asks: "When Jonathan Franzen voiced his worry over losing male readers who 'would never touch' a book that was 'meant for women,' wasn't the interesting question why men should feel so threatened by what women were up to?" (Szalai). For now, I will set aside the angst-inducing female figure, which will later become central in the analysis of Alfred's wife, Enid. Instead, I want to point out that Szalai's question highlights broader inquiries about literature specifically targeted at women and literature designed for art enthusiasts, which in this context predominantly suggests "men." While this perspective can be overly simplistic and may overlook factors such as genres and literary trends, it does reflect how Western literature has been historically tied to notions of male intellectualism.[114]

In the following sub-chapter, I will explore the connection between male intellectual dominance and the long-standing philosophical tendencies that have contributed to the subjugation of women, especially as reflected in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. I aim to highlight the philosophical ideology that underlines the fictional universe of the Lambert family and influences the actions and perceptions of father, Alfred. Critic Kristin Jacobson notes that "Franzen's case emphasizes how gendered genres continue to help produce literary and social hierarchies that often exclude or degrade women and femininity" (218). However, she also points out the complex potential of Franzen's popular narrative. Echoing Judith

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[113] In 2001, *NPR*'s Terry Gross conducted a 30-minute interview with Jonathan Franzen in which they discussed the publication of his novel, *The Corrections*, and the debates it set in motion. During the interview, Franzen made problematic claims about the reception of his novel and labels his work as a male-oriented piece, not suitable for a female readership, particularly those associated with Oprah's Book Club.

[114] An insightful essay on this topic that directly relates to the publication history of U.S. American literature is Nina Baym's "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors" (1981). Baym provides a qualitative approach that showcases not only the underrepresentation of women in the publishing industry but also how the academic work of women has been neglected and demeaned through the centuries. This raises questions of intellect and "excellence," as well as how gender bias has created social and economic disadvantages for women. Her discussion of U.S. American literature connects with the gender-based themes explored by Franzen in his famous work.

Butler's *Gender Trouble*, she argues: "As a novel with characteristically feminine and masculine tropes connecting it to both domestic and social fictions, Franzen's hybrid novel 'trouble[s] the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality'" (218). In simpler terms, the Oprah-Franzen feud reiterates preconceived assumptions about gender and literature, where female reading is often associated with simple pleasures, while male reading is linked to more serious and intellectually consequential pursuits. This idea is complicated to some extent within the narrative.

In *The Corrections*, the intellectual figure is most clearly represented by Chip, the youngest son of Alfred and Enid. As a university professor teaching feminist theory, Chip struggles with both academic and literary success. He emerges from the text as a hybrid figure that embodies the concept of "hybrid masculinities."[115] Jacobson suggests that Chip is caught between domestic and anti-domestic aspirations (218). In contrast, Requena Pelegrí offers a more optimistic interpretation, viewing him as the only male character who manages to shed the hegemonic attributes imparted by his father (108). By overcoming his resentment toward his father, Chip seemingly escapes the conservative gender roles associated with his upbringing and environment. Pelegrí concludes her analysis of the "masculine bloc"[116] in *The Corrections* by focusing on Chip, noting that "Chip eventually manages to perform a masculinity that is substantially structured around his compassion for his father as well as the rejection of the hegemonic features he has learned to read in his father's life" (108). Although the narrative constructs Chip as capable of self-reflection and transformation, he also retains some hegemonic traits that are difficult to discard. These traits may not be recognized as such by his father, but they facilitate an active performance of hegemony in a different context: the academic or intellectual realm. References to philosophical thought occur only in relation to the patriarch, Alfred, and his son, Chip.

Several academic texts have explored how *The Corrections* alludes to philosophical themes, with notable contributions from scholars such as Joseph Carroll, Catherine Toal, and Ty Hawkins. Parts of their studies try to understand how Foucauldian theory shapes the (male) character's lifeworld, as well as how Alfred's truth connects with the philosophical

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[115] This recent concept within critical masculinities examines the rise of masculinities that respond to the "crisis" discourse. Messerschmidt and Messner explain that "[h]ybrid masculinities involve the incorporation of subordinated styles and displays (masculine or feminine, or both) into privileged men's identities, in the process simultaneously securing and obscuring their access to power and privilege" (48). By adopting practices typically associated with subordinated masculinities, these hybrid types can actually contribute to the maintenance and support of the existing hegemonic masculine order.

[116] Pelegrí adopts the term "masculine bloc" from Demetriou's reading of Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and explains that the masculine bloc "is a space in which hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities coexist" (100). This theoretical framework allows us to view male characters, such as Chip Lambert, as more complex figures who embody both hegemonic and non-hegemonic qualities.

concepts introduced by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Toal, for instance, examines the father figure through the lens of Foucauldian notions of discipline, arguing that the punishment imposed by the father is manifested in "humiliations" rather than physical violence (315). Carroll shares these assumptions and adds that, in Chip's case, the only reasonable response to these hidden aggressions is "refusal." He explains that "[f]or Chip, the word signifies a refusal of Alfred's domination, hence also a rejection of the values and beliefs that constitute Alfred's worldview" (Carroll 99). Carroll is another scholar who outlines the potential for change in Chip. Hawkins also contributes to this discourse by discussing Alfred's philosophical leanings, stating that he "turns and returns to Schopenhauer's philosophy." Hawkins notes that Alfred frequently highlights his belief in binary oppositions, notably between men and women (87).

Building on the scholarly discussions of philosophy in the novel, this subchapter will focus on the configurations of gender in Western thought and how philosophy figures in *The Corrections*, contributing to the existing discourse. I will examine the portrayal of Schopenhauer's philosophy within the narrative and note that philosophical reflections are predominantly ascribed to male characters, particularly Chip and Alfred. This invites readers to explore the connection between masculinities and the pursuit of knowledge, highlighting the relationship between philosophy and male intellectual supremacy. This analysis can also be extended to address Franzen's problematic statements about gender and literature.

4.2 Gender, Power, and Philosophy: Reframing the Lambert Family Universe

Definitions of power concerning philosophy have received limited attention in the academic discourse surrounding *The Corrections*. This is noteworthy given that the text builds Western thought, particularly Arthur Schopenhauer's voice, as a guiding and direction-giving echo into the narrative world. The character Alfred Lambert follows these philosophical teachings during his life, and the text suggests that it significantly shapes his worldview. Looking at twentieth-century literature, we see that philosophical principles play a crucial role in framing character insights and developments over the course of the narrative. This holds true not only for philosophical fiction but also for novels and other fictional works that address philosophy in more subtle ways, as is the case with *The Corrections*.[117] By recognizing the

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[117] It is certainly valid to argue that all fiction encompasses aesthetic and moral values, reflecting and reacting to the normative moral principles of the time it represents and/or is set in. All narratives, in some form, address (directly or indirectly) ethical and ontological truths. Nonetheless, my understanding of philosophical fiction here is somewhat narrow; I am specifically referring to works, particularly novels, that more directly and overtly incorporate traces of philosophical teachings and principles. *The Encyclopedia of the Novel* (2011) describes the

intricate functions of Western thought interwoven into Franzen's text, we gain new insight into the characters and the understanding of hegemonic masculinities.

To gain a deeper understanding of the philosophy presented in *The Corrections,* it is essential to consider Genevieve Lloyd's significant work, *The Man of Reason* (1984). In her comprehensive analysis of gender and Western philosophy, Lloyd explores the evolution of thought from Pythagorean times to the late twentieth century. She discusses how the contemporary understanding of sex and gender has been influenced by prominent Western thinkers such as Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel. For each of these philosophers, Reason is portrayed as the center of being or the ultimate goal, which can be viewed as the highest achievement one could aspire to. However, Reason is also recognized as a male construct, often perceived as something attainable only by men.

Accordingly, Lloyd writes: "[F]emale traits have been construed as inferior—or, more subtly, as 'complementary'—to male norms of human excellence" (104-105). The term 'complementary' refers to views held by Rousseau and Kant, who "saw the complementary characters of male and female as together making up a single moral being" (76-77). This moral state, according to them, is only attainable through marriage, where the man "becomes more perfect as a man; whereas the woman becomes more perfect as a wife" (77). Lloyd, however, does not merely highlight the anti-female biases present in Western philosophy. Her study concludes with a discussion of Simone de Beauvoir's "feminist appropriation of the ideal of transcendence" (205). This concept explores how female transcendence, or emancipation, arises from the very male-centered and discriminatory ideologies present in philosophical thought, "a cultural ideal which has defined itself in opposition to the feminine" (105).

Another fiercely debated topic in Lloyd's research is the juxtaposition of Nature and Reason. She claims, citing various philosophers throughout history, that Reason has traditionally been viewed as part of a male ambition and within "his" grasp, while Nature has been predominantly associated with the female. This understanding has yielded an extensive body of research and critical work linked to second-wave feminism. Lloyd explores de Beauvoir's definitions of Nature, which are grounded in mythology, ancient philosophy, Christian religion, and culture, drawing similar conclusions. Judith Butler further emphasizes the contrast between Nature and Reason in *Gender Trouble* (1990) by calling on

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genre as follows: "The philosophical novel can be minimally defined as a GENRE in which characteristic elements of the novel are used as a vehicle for the exploration of philosophical questions and concepts" (606). Beyond doubt, the philosophical novel is a complex genre that defies easy categorization. While I do not classify Franzen's *The Corrections* as a philosophical novel, I want to highlight the pronounced philosophical elements within the narrative. This is especially evident in the protagonist Alfred Lambert, who internalizes these philosophical ideas as a fundamental part of his world order.

anthropologists Marilyn Strathern and Carol MacCormack. The scholars "argued that nature/culture discourse regularly figures nature as female, in need of subordination by a culture that is invariably figured as male, active, and abstract" (48). Butler summarizes this excursion by noting that "in the existential dialectic of misogyny, this is yet another instance in which reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine, awaiting signification from an opposing masculine subject" (48). I will expand on these observations in my analysis of Franzen's text. At this point, however, it is essential to revisit Updike's post-apocalyptic, nature-obsessed fiction *Toward the End of Time*, where a similar logic applies to his portrayals of nature and the female, particularly through his second wife, Gloria, who is framed as the gardener.

Genevieve Lloyd is one of many accredited female scholars who have sought to address the intersection of Western philosophy and gender, reflecting on male dominance within the field. Other notable publications include Karen Green's *The Woman of Reason* (1995), Janet A. Kourany's anthology *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice* (1997), Susan Moller Okin's *Women in Western Political Thought* (1979), and Penelope Deutscher's *Yielding Gender* (1997). In these discussions of feminism and philosophy, Simone de Beauvoir often plays a pivotal role. Her efforts to understand the world around her and the academic landscape she was navigating led to her being recognized as a somewhat contradictory scholar. However, her struggle to confront gender norms and expectations is perhaps most pronounced in her works *The Second Sex* (1949) and *The Coming of Age* (1970).

While Lloyd has faced criticisms from peers who accuse her of portraying male philosophers as misogynists too harshly, the fundamental truth that women have been subjugated in patriarchal systems for centuries is undeniable and certainly extends to the field of philosophy. Women were historically deemed "incapable of doing philosophy" (Kourany 5) and were often held back by dispiriting theories about nature and nurture that prescribed subordinate positions for them in society. While it may be productive to debate the nuances of misogyny in philosophical discourse, I propose, for a broader understanding of Franzen's fictional text, focusing on one particularly pronounced misogynist whose theories have significantly influenced generations of philosophical thinkers: Arthur Schopenhauer.

Investigating *The Corrections* to uncover elements of feminist philosophy is a complex endeavor that reveals the inconsistencies plaguing many of Franzen's characters upon closer inspection. Chip, Alfred, and the oldest son in the novel, Gary, are all constructed in opposition to the female characters, who are often held responsible for their failures and setbacks. At first sight, these male characters seem to suffer from feminist movements aimed at reshaping society (see 3.3). However, when we revisit the intertextual references to Western

philosophy within the novel, we discover that the sons are socialized under a dominant father figure. This father's "identity is founded on a series of static dichotomies" (Hawkins 78), largely shaped by his readings of Schopenhauer.

The philosopher is mentioned briefly in Lloyd's examination of Western thought, but his much-criticized prejudices against women are predominantly displayed in "On Women" (1851), a text referenced by both Lloyd and in *The Corrections*. In the opening paragraph of his essay, Schopenhauer argues that a woman's worth is tied to her fertility, and he claims that both physical and mental labor are beyond women's capabilities. He writes: "You need only look at the way in which she is formed, to see that woman is not meant to undergo great labor, whether of the mind or of the body" (59). He further characterizes women as "childish, frivolous and short-sighted" (59) and reduces their value to mere physical attractiveness. Most importantly, Schopenhauer denies women the capacity for intelligence and reason, a view shared by many of his contemporaries. Accordingly, he alleges that women are "intellectually short-sighted" (60) and that their "field of vision is narrow and does not reach to what is remote; so that things which are absent, or past, or to come, have much less effect upon women than upon men" (60). Schopenhauer's ideology corresponds to what Kourany recognizes as a prevalent understanding of the sexes in the field of philosophy. She observes that

> throughout the history of Western philosophy [...] the knower—the 'man of reason'—has been characterized using whatever symbols and metaphors have been used to characterize ideal masculinity, and excluding whatever has been taken to be characteristic of the feminine. In the modern era he has been thought of as like a practitioner of one of the 'hard' (i.e., masculine) sciences, regulating his behavior according to the ideals of such sciences. Thus, he is said to base his views, his 'knowledge,' on 'the facts,' represented as neutrally there, found not made, and he is held accountable only to those facts. (8-9)

Franzen's narrative is filled with both direct and indirect references to Schopenhauer's work, often inserted into the text like a trip hazard for the reader. In chapter four, "AT SEA," these references appear as indented, italicized quotations in parentheses. Additionally, the name "Schopenhauer" precedes each quote, indicating the source of the information and suggesting that it is an utterance or even direct speech, though it is presented without quotation marks. The direct references come from Schopenhauer's *Studies in Pessimism* (1851) and include excerpts from "On Women" and "On the Sufferings of the World." While scholars have examined several ontological concepts related to the philosopher's understanding of "Will" and "Nature" in Franzen's novel, the role of gender has been largely overlooked. Notably, two out of these six citations drawn from Schopenhauer are taken from "On Women."

The Corrections, for instance, references the introduction of Schopenhauer's essay in

which he argues: "*Woman pays the debt of life not by what she does, but by what she suffers; by the pains of childbearing and care for the child, and by submission to her husband, to whom she should be a patient and cheering companion*" (*Corrections* 306). This statement highlights two fundamental female roles: maternal and marital. However, in the context of the narrative, it also reflects the restructuring of heteronormative gender relations in 1940s and 1950s U.S. culture, as well as the persistence of misogyny well into the late twentieth century. Thus, a single quote, which may initially seem randomly inserted, serves as a window into enduring philosophical maxims that have traveled through time, shaping and augmenting history and society, and informing the present mindset within this fictional depiction of the U.S. In short, the ideology and philosophy of Alfred Lambert are encapsulated in this and a few other similar insertions.

A significant reference to Schopenhauer is tied to Alfred and Enid's only daughter, Denise. Earlier in the narrative, specifically in chapter two, titled "THE FAILURE," Alfred and Enid visit their youngest son in New York City. During this gathering, Denise meets with their parents in Chip's apartment. Inside the apartment, amidst the chaotic scene of their arrival, Alfred experiences an uncomfortable second encounter with a chaise lounge, awkwardly "summoning the courage to sit down [...]. He was afraid to take the plunge" (73). The term "plunge" is directly linked to "free fall" and the "loss of control" (73), emphasizing notions of danger and uncertainty. This metaphorical fall alludes to hegemonic masculinities in decline affected by old age and aging-related illnesses, which contribute to Alfred's diminishing power and agency. His fear of the chair, described as a "low-riding, impractical antique" (73), reflects his physical decline and growing disability as he ages.

The assumption that Alfred may be unable to lift himself out of the chair due to physical impairment demonstrates how the concept of "masculinity in decline" is connected to questions of able-bodiedness. While Enid only calls from another room to inquire about his well-being, Denise enters the room and suggests: "'It's like a sofa [...]. You can put your legs up and be a French philosophe. You can talk about Schopenhauer'" (74). Her comment carries a hint of mockery, especially considering that she has to explain the use of a chair to her father. This reflects a notion of "American" ignorance toward "foreign" objects, or the foreign in general. Equally significant is the implied confusion between a French philosophe and a German philosopher, whose ideas shape the patriarch's perception of himself and others. Ultimately, Alfred can be seen as a twentieth-century version of Schopenhauer, engaging with French philosophers.

Kristin Jacobson explores the link between gender representations in *The Corrections* and the so-called "Oprah-Franzen miff," highlighting how this controversy reveals societal attitudes towards high- and lowbrow art as well as the publishing industry. Jacobson is one of the few academics who have shed light on the problematic portrayal of gender in the

novel, stressing the potential ramifications of a gender divide. The gender divide is evident in the extra-textual discourse, illustrated by the wide, seemingly divided readership attracted to Franzen's "hybrid novel," which blends elements of the "feminine" domestic novel and the "masculine" social novel (216). Additionally, the divide is reproduced within the narrative itself, as observed in previous scenes. Jacobson discusses the concept of "domestic masculinity" (218), suggesting that the novel contains elements of social criticism. She categorizes the narrative as a "transgressive text" (219).

A notable example of this concept is the character Chip, who embodies the notion of hybrid or domestic masculinity. Jacobson argues that domestic masculinity in popular fiction "challenge[s] […] conventional gender dichotomies" (219). She further explains, referencing Judith Butler: "Domestic masculinity in these artistic forms […] heightens an awareness of 'the 'unnatural' [that] might lead to the denaturalization of gender as such' because conventional gender roles consider masculinity already outside, unnatural, or foreign to domesticity" (219). Traditional gender roles often perceive masculinity as separate from domesticity; thus, domestic masculinity breaks with Western philosophical beliefs about male and female spaces, which separates the social worlds of the sexes into male (public) and female (domestic) duties. Jacobson concludes that "'*The Corrections*' hybrid domestic masculinity troubles or otherwise 'queers' conventional gender roles, spaces, and readings, particularly as they relate to men and homemaking" (219).

In examining Lloyd's work, we learn how eighteenth and nineteenth-century Western philosophy has both reflected and reinforced a binary division between genders. This perspective has contributed to the ongoing legitimacy of male dominance and hegemonic masculinities in society. Lloyd references Rousseau, for whom "[t]he containment of women in the domestic domain helped control the destructive effects of passion on civil society, while yet preserving it as an important dimension of human well-being" (78). "Undisciplined" female passion was understood as "a threat to the public life of citizenship"—an assumption that was justified with reference to Sparta's fall (78).[118]

This analogy leads me to another statement by Schopenhauer that is embedded in Franzen's novel. This excerpt protrudes in the way it is represented, in parentheses, italicized, Schopenhauer revealed as the direct speaker, yet again, without quotation marks, and by that

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[118] According to Aristotle, Sparta's fall was attributed to the political failures of women leaders. This myth has been repeatedly politicized to obstruct female emancipation. About a century after Rousseau, Arthur Schopenhauer references the Sparta myth in his highly misogynistic essay "On Women." He echoes Aristotle's view, stating that "the great disadvantage which accrued to the Spartans from the fact that they conceded too much to their women, by giving them the right of inheritance and power, and a great amount of independence" (70).

disrupts narrative flow. However, this inserted text passage does not connect to the preceding or following segments of the novel in terms of content, making it susceptible to being overlooked. The second added slice from "On Women" proclaims: "*The people who make money are men, not women; and from this it follows that women are neither justified in having unconditional possession of it, nor fit persons to be entrusted with its administration*" (*Corrections* 322). On an allegorical level, this statement embodies the patriarchal belief that women should depend on men because they are deemed unfit to administer their own possessions, with money and wealth serving as concrete examples. If we interpret these bracketed insertions as mantras that shape and guide Alfred's thoughts and actions, it becomes clear that he is indirectly influenced by misogynistic philosophical teachings. This notion is reflected throughout the narrative, where Alfred's family members individually deliberate on their relationship with their father and husband, as well as the ways in which he dictated the course of their lives in the past.

The middle chapter, "AT SEA," highlights the notion of capitalist phobia, which suppresses female desires to take financial control, as articulated in Schopenhauer's assertion. Alfred and Enid's cruise experience aboard the *Gunnar Myrdal* is continuously interrupted by flashbacks of their lives and marriage. In one flashback, we learn that Enid, eager to find fulfillment in her marital duties with the birth of their third child, breaks away from her role as the obedient wife and challenges Alfred's authority as the breadwinner (280). The text reveals that "she got sloppy and talked about the wrong thing to Alfred" (280), mentioning topics such as "sex," "fulfillment," and "fairness" as the main "forbidden topics" in the Lambert family household during their youth. However, the real escalation arises from another taboo subject that sends Alfred into a state of distress. Enid, after insisting five times and countering Alfred's dismissive arguments with her request to "buy shares of a certain stock" (280), faces his anger over her persistence in being indirectly involved in their financial decision-making. "He said no in a much louder voice and stood up from the breakfast table. He said no so loudly that a decorative copper-plate bowl on the kitchen wall briefly hummed, and without kissing her goodbye he left the house for eleven days and ten nights" (280). Alfred's forceful "no," a declaration that *corrects* the role imbalance, stipulates her request for financial gain as a transgression, "a *little* mistake" (280) that appears to bear larger consequences.

On a second note, an analysis of this passage seems incomplete if the closing elements of their conflict are neglected. In a fit of rage that makes household items rattle, Alfred exits the scene "without kissing [Enid] goodbye" and disappears for almost two weeks, leaving her pregnant with two young children to care for in his absence. While this may not be unusual for the historical context the novel is set in, it does highlight the burdens

of motherhood in the absence of fathers in capitalist suburbia.[119] Alfred's previous arguments rejecting potential stock investments fall on deaf ears. He asserts that "the stock market was a lot of dangerous nonsense best left to wealthy men and idle speculators" (280). He voices his fear of another "Black Tuesday" and tells Enid that "it would be improper to buy that stock" (280), though he does not specify what he means by "improper." Finally, he claims they "had no money to spare" (280), to which Enid counters by "suggest[ing] that money could be borrowed" (280). This "back and forth" constitutes another moment of "ping-pong diplomacy," echoing the beginning of the novel, where the couple's retirement struggles revolve around an actual ping-pong table—the metaphorical battleground of old age (8). The young couple is juxtaposed with the aged couple, and their roles appear reversed through this mirroring effect. As a young man, Alfred dismisses Enid's requests, demonstrating a lack of desire to engage in discussions about the subject matter.

The treatment of the wife in this context symbolizes her overall role in Franzen's fictional universe, defining her character as a stubborn, nearly childlike female reminiscent of Schopenhauerian ideals. She shows first signs of revolt and needs to be put back in her place and punished, though not necessarily in the same manner suggested in Updike's forest scene. Nonetheless, Enid's passions, echoing Lloyd's observations, require regulation—forcefully if necessary. Alfred denies her the obligatory "kiss goodbye," which serves to validate her worth daily, whenever he leaves the house for work. More importantly, he disciplines her by temporarily abandoning her and the children. At this point, the narrative leaves ambiguous whether the married couple communicates during his absence, which emphasizes this uncertainty.[120]

In *Bodies That Matter* (1995), Judith Butler discusses the concept of hegemonic punishment in patriarchal societies and how heteronormative rule is maintained through regular punishment and "citation" by "the law." The policing of sexuality and sexual practices is a key component of her study regarding this notion of punishment. Specifically concerning women, she outlines the threat the feminine poses to patriarchy, noting that "[f]emininity is […] not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation,

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[119] In "Daddyblogs Know Best: Histories of Fatherhood in the Cyber Age" (2016), May Friedman notes about post-war U.S. fathers: "Specifically, the impact of World War II and, subsequently, in the United States, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, led to a withdrawal of many men from their households. In parallel with these processes, the 1950s saw a concretization of the mythic nuclear family, replete with a hardworking (and thus inaccessible) paternal role model; the stabilization of the family wage congealed the maternal role as homemaker and did not allow for any miscegenation of these roles" (100).

[120] In a later paragraph of the same chapter, we learn that Alfred's absence has a logical explanation. He was actually on a business trip due to a promotion that took him to "inspect every mile of the Eerie Belt Railroad" (*Corrections* 280).

punishment" (232). In this sense, Enid, like many other women in narratives about aging masculinities, is penalized for her transgressions. Later, we will see how Enid responds to this injustice by punishing the aged, disabled male body. This action constitutes a reversal of the gender power structure but does not completely disrupt hegemonic practices.

Alfred's masculine rule is called into question since he is the sole breadwinner of the family and fails to create an environment where both partners share their thoughts about financial matters and are taken seriously in their efforts to maximize their credit. Ultimately, Alfred comes across as a sore loser who is unable to manage his home unit and struggles to control his own emotions. He storms out in anger, displaying a sense of immaturity that mirrors Enid's earlier stubbornness. The characters function as both antagonists and doubles. However, Alfred's abrupt outburst and exit evoke a sense of fear. By this point in the narrative, we have already encountered his many near-violent moods, leading the reader to anticipate that each display of temper might escalate into violence. It is, after all, as Connell writes, "the dominant gender who hold and use the means of violence" (*Gender and Power* 83). In this passage, the reader is prompted to speculate about Alfred's capacity for violence and the possible outcomes of this confrontation. Similar to the themes in *Toward the End of Time*, the insinuation of physical violence looms large (noting that rape constitutes a form of violence). This tension is heightened by the closing single-question paragraph that concludes the scene, hinting at great changes brought about by Enid's "*little* mistake" (*Corrections* 280).

In the narrative, there are several such "past" instances where Alfred tries to exercise his patriarchal powers over Enid, often reprimanding her for her perceived transgressions, either verbally or non-verbally, as seen in the previous example. Later in the same chapter, another significant confrontation occurs when Alfred returns home after a business trip. Their first interaction upon his return manifests as an extension of the previous conflict. Rather than addressing their differences and seeking a resolution, he launches a new verbal attack the moment he steps into the house. The scene reveals their opposing stances and their inability to communicate during conflict. More importantly, it exposes the power dynamics that Alfred is rigorously trying to uphold, while Enid remains determined to challenge him:

> Enid parked her iron on the ironing board and emerged from the laundry room with butterflies in her stomach—whether from lust or from fear of Al's rage or from fear that she might become enraged herself she didn't know.
> He set her straight in a hurry. 'What did I ask you to do before I left?'
> 'You're home early,' she said. "The boys are still at the Y.'
> 'What is the one thing I asked you to do while I was gone?'
> 'I'm catching up on laundry. The boys have been sick.'

> 'Do you remember,' he said, 'that I asked you to take care of the mess at the top of the stairs? That that was the one thing—the one thing—I asked you to do while I was gone?' (287)

Alfred leaves the scene without receiving an answer to his undoubtedly non-essential request, as opposed to the essential information on their children that Enid provides. He escapes to his basement lab, which allows Enid to withhold her answer. The narrative later complicates Enid's position by suggesting that her evasions and potential provocations are not solely motivated by fear; they may also stem from a mix of fear, "lust," and even "rage." The text suggests that Enid, too, has been suppressing her feelings of anger.

Interpreting these interactions on a broader scale, the fictional couple represents the larger structural changes that occurred in the United States during the twentieth century. Both characters find themselves at an impasse, confronted with their gender roles and caught between adhering to social norms and reconfiguring their identities. It is essential to note that Alfred appears to be in a more dire predicament throughout this process. Their erratic interactions and vacillating behavior symbolize a national crisis in which gender roles continued to be reorganized, often painfully, as demonstrated by the Lamberts across multiple narrative levels. It is fitting, then, that economics scholar Claudia Goldin termed the transformation of the U.S. labor market in the late seventies and early eighties a "quiet revolution."

In her 2006 study, Goldin reveals the empirical aspects of twentieth-century feminist efforts for emancipation and explains how the increasing participation of women in the labor market changed societal perceptions of their roles. Notably, the rise in women's income fostered a new understanding of self-worth and what it meant to have a career (12). Financial power, we can conclude, is closely linked to hegemonic power, and the rise of financial independence marked a significant milestone in female emancipation. [121] As mentioned earlier, Alfred embodies Schopenhauer's philosophy, positioning him as superior to his wife. He takes on the role of decision-maker, conveying both verbally and non-verbally that women are not deemed capable of making informed decisions regarding financial matters.

Ty Hawkins is one of the few literary scholars, alongside Stephen J. Burn, who mentions and briefly examines Jonathan Franzen's allusions to Schopenhauer. He explains

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[121] For a deeper understanding of empirical data concerning women in the family and the workforce, consider reading Claudia Goldin's "The Quiet Revolution That Transformed Women's Employment, Education, and Family" (2006) and "Women, Work, and Family" (2018) by Francine D. Blau and Anne E. Winkler. The capitalist market economy in the U.S. has not only provided women with advantages and the chance for independence. For a feminist critique of capitalism, see, for instance, Nancy Fraser's *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (2013), particularly chapter nine, "Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History," in which she revisits the second wave of feminism.

rightly that "[d]iscipline becomes the prevailing order of the Lambert home, given Alfred's internalization of nuggets from Schopenhauer" (Hawkins 79). This assumption ties in with my previous analysis of domestic discipline. However, Hawkins' inquiry leads him to make more general observations that are embedded in the text, where he analyzes Schopenhauer's notions of "Will," while neglecting the important issue of gender power dynamics, which are crucial to understanding Alfred's struggles. Hawkins continues to write: "From all of this Schopenhauer-colored faith in the power of the will [...] Alfred has sunk into a state of deterioration by the time the present action of *The Corrections* catches up with him" (79). Meanwhile, Stephen J. Burn links his analysis of Schopenhauer in *The Corrections* with broader observations about unstable identities in Franzen's fiction (115). He juxtaposes Gary's guiding philosophy of materialism[122] with the depressing principles provided by the German philosopher, concluding:

> Franzen contrasts these two approaches to selfhood not because the novel is heavily invested in exploring any friction between materialism and Schopenhauerian will. Instead, these two scenes are simply illustrations of how two characters have found explanations of human behavior that allow them to remain (relatively) psychically intact in an inhospitable world. (115)

What stands out in this comparison and remains untouched are the similarities between the two male characters. Throughout the narrative, they both experience a similar notion of masculinity at loss or disadvantage, especially when their philosophical guidelines are contrasted with their evolving marital and family dynamics. This is precisely when Alfred's rigid sense of masculine identity is exposed, partially hidden by an emerging notion of millennial identity fluidity.[123]

Alfred's gradual deterioration, which Franzen attaches to what Burn describes a "Schopenhauerian sadness about the world" (115), ultimately figures as sadness over the loss of control and the loss of hegemony—a paternal legacy that all the male characters grapple with to some extent and from individual positions, often adhering to various (sometimes seemingly opposing) philosophical doctrines. Both Gary and Chip, though not always willingly, find themselves trapped in a persistent effort to symbolically cut the umbilical cord

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[122] In his analysis of Gary's materialistic brooding, Burn contends that Gary is a materialist in a dual sense: "[H]e places a high value on possessions," but on a philosophical level, he is also "obsessed with the material basis of consciousness" (117). It is within this interplay of ideas about materialism that Gary constructs his selfhood (117).

[123] Stephen J. Burn sums up the search for selfhood in *The Corrections* as follows: "The novel presents the reader, first, with Chip's Foucauldian self, where subjectivity is shaped by institutional power structures. This is followed by Gary's materialist account of identity, where chemicals in the brain mold mood and behavior, which in turn is set against Caroline's world of self-help psychology. The accumulation of conflicting explanations of selfhood continues as the novel progresses—through Schopenhauer and sentimental selves— with the mode of self-conception shifting according to whose consciousness filters the narrative perspective" (115).

and join their wives, partners, sister, and mother in emancipating themselves from the aging patriarch's strict ideology.

In contrast to the previous chapters and their portrayal of aging in "Boomer texts"—Updike and Roth's post-WWII fictions building the foundation for this study—*The Corrections* does not focus on the aging male experience in the same way as seen in *Toward the End of Time* and *Exit Ghost*. Both of those texts give insight into the struggles of aging men through the perspectives of the writer, inviting readers to follow two narrators who use a first-person focalizer. While Alfred is recognized as the most powerful player, affecting all family members even after his death, his direct voice does not dominate the pages. Here, I am also referencing plot elements that primarily concentrate on Alfred's life and beliefs, as certain chapters are designed to highlight this character. Certainly, Alfred appears to haunt the stories of his family members, depicted as an omnipresent figure who influences all other characters in a ghostly manner.

Every time Alfred's children reflect on their relationship with their father and the ways they try to confront his oppressive nature, his power becomes visible. However, unlike many typical aging male narratives found in literature, the other characters in *The Corrections* possess agency and are not merely described through the eyes of the (fallen) patriarch. By dedicating more pages to Alfred's family members and allowing them to express their struggles through a zero focalizer that mimics their perspectives, Alfred's significance is reduced. We could even argue that by denying Alfred a first-person internal perspective, minimizing his direct speech situations, and creating the narrative world as a pool of diverse voices, the story, to some degree, subverts patriarchy and may even foreshadow its eventual collapse. This approach certainly entertains the idea of a post-patriarchal society.

Once again, illuminating Hawkins' observations of *The Corrections*, it is important to note that Alfred's failure becomes the core feature of his personal narrative. His sense of entitlement does not seem to diminish, even in light of the pessimistic view strongly associated with Schopenhauer's philosophy. Hawkins explains that the fictional patriarch, in his old age, is overcome by a fear that does not stem from a "realization […] that the world is a dehumanizing place or that he must die at some point" (80). Instead, he is becoming increasingly estranged from the idea of an "America" he was socialized to believe represented the "right" way of life. This "America," as Burn suggests, is something Alfred struggles to understand by adhering to a *single* guiding philosophical ideology. Hawkins writes:

> Alfred is unable to fit his experience of a changing America and globe into the model he has derived from his skewed reading of Schopenhauer, the model of my-will-versus-Nature's-Will, the essence of which is a tangible, material battle whose dignity derives from the tragic fact that Alfred is bound to lose eventually. He is confronting not defeat, therefore, but rather is confronting the disintegration of his

> very identity, the dissolution of his ability to point to a self, rational and inviolate, that makes Alfred Lambert unique and separates him from all the other entities in the universe. (80)

This analysis aligns with observations from aging studies related to male aging texts, even though Hawkins does not explicitly incorporate gender and aging studies into his discussion of *The Corrections* or clarify what exactly constitutes "the model." As a result, Alfred is dismantled by the incessant desire to perform power through the practice of hegemonic forms of masculinities.

Masculine entitlement must be recognized as the most significant aspect of identity formation at this time, which ultimately leads to feelings of aggrieved entitlement in older age. As Alfred's body becomes increasingly weakened by negative bio-medical changes, he can no longer fulfill a dominant role in a society that is increasingly validating marginalized voices. Furthermore, Alfred may view time as a burden in this changing environment, a theme commonly explored in texts that capture the experiences of aging men. I agree with Hawkins that it is the rigidity of Alfred's identity that contributes to his downfall. Finally, this "changing America" should not merely be interpreted as a result of globalization, advancing technologies, or the rise of materialism; it must also be understood from a gender inclusive perspective. The loss of power, as evidenced in the previously analyzed interactions between the young couple, is ultimately perceived as a loss of male power.

Overall, Schopenhauer's testimony echoes the firm belief in male hegemony that was evident in the societal and political structures of his time. By incorporating the philosopher's insights as little "nuggets" within one of Alfred's chapters, *The Corrections* reveals the underlying tendencies that corrupt the Lambert universe. This system relies on binary oppositions and rigid categorizations of male and female, where gender is directly tied to biological notions of sex. It reinforces the dichotomy of Nature and Reason, a perspective promoted by prominent philosophical thinkers throughout history, which upholds oppressive constructs based on biological difference. In her discussions on human nature and feminism, Louise M. Antony highlights the persisting doctrine embedded in assumptions about female nature. She examines the views of influential philosophers such as Aristotle, Rousseau, and Kant, explaining the concepts of nature and virtue:

> [D]espite the fact that women's distinctive nature is supposed to yield a distinctive set of virtues, these virtues are clearly viewed as inferior to men's. The upshot is that women can be good only insofar as they are considered *as women*; considered *as human* (i.e., according to the standards set by men), they are *necessarily* inferior. Women are human, but only in the way a broken wing is a wing; they are at best *defective* tokens of the human type. (64)

Keeping the review of philosophical gender ideology in mind, *The Corrections* manifests as a combat zone where the feminine must be governed, monitored, combated, and, if necessary,

punished to maintain the established balance between Nature and Reason, inside and outside, domestic and economic, male and female.

Aristotle is another philosopher who appears in *The Corrections*, and he is also, as Antony and others rightly critique, a philosopher who is well known for the distinctions he made between male and female. Unlike Schopenhauer, Aristotle is mentioned only briefly in *The Corrections*, with a single line that is slightly disguised in the text and not in parentheses. Instead, his line is presented at the end of a series of short descriptive sentences. It is taken from his best-known work, *On the Soul*, and reads: "Aristotle: *Suppose the eye were an animal—sight would be its soul*" (*Corrections* 310). This statement is part of a significant debate about the meaning of the (human) soul, which has been scrutinized more thoroughly by feminist philosophers in the late twentieth century as they sought to uncover gender ideologies in ancient philosophical teachings.

Susan Moller Okin is one of Aristotle's most ardent critics and unearths in her work, *Women in Western Political Thought* (1979), how profoundly Aristotle's theory of the soul was shaped by his belief in a hierarchical order represented within the Greek polis. Okin explains that "in Aristotle's view, the soul of a thing is its capacity to fulfill its function," adding that "a thing can be thought of as having a function only in relation to some other thing or things" (75). She clarifies that these functions are rigidly ranked, for "[h]is entire universe, from the lowliest plant to the human race, and beyond the human race to the heavenly bodies and the gods, is arranged in a strict hierarchy, and it is this that enables him to say, 'In the world of nature as well as of art the lower always exists for the sake of the higher'" (75). Given this framework of rank and societal function, reason is attributed solely to man (75f). Consequently, it follows that "women, slaves, and artisans and traders are all subsidiary instruments for the achievements of the highest happiness of 'man'" (78).

The Corrections does not provide an extensive account of Aristotle's philosophy of the soul. Instead, it embeds this abstract concept within a philosophical illustration that highlights the connection between a house and a soul. Each sentence is structured like a series of interconnected items, where each builds upon the previous to create a complete picture. The design means that each individual sentence works as a single puzzle piece, relying on the others to convey the full meaning.

> Whether anybody was home meant everything to a house. It was more than a major fact: it was the only fact.
> The family was the house's soul.
> The waking mind was like the light in a house.
> The soul was like the gopher in his hole.
> Consciousness was to brain as family was to house.
> Aristotle: *Suppose the eye were an animal—sight would be its soul.* (*Corrections* 309-310)

Evidently, Aristotle's statement serves as a concluding remark that captures the logic surrounding the concepts of house and soul. His voice, as a respected ancient philosopher, can thus be thought of as a seal of approval, an authoritative expression that presents an absolute truth to the reader in a definitive sentence. In suburban U.S. culture, the established authority of the house is closely linked to the breadwinning economic authority of the father and the traditional role of the domestic female household. The passage alludes to this authority, highlighting the mutual relationship between the house and its soul within a larger narrative framework. The family pointed at in this passage contributes to a wholesome image of the house's soul, its most intimate and essential part, which is typically represented by the nuclear family. This heteronormative construct ultimately relies on the hierarchical ideas present in Aristotle's theory on the soul, reinforcing a patriarchal ideology.

In the next subchapter, I will concentrate on the nuclear family and investigate the role of the male in this constellation. Specifically, I will explore how Alfred's life philosophy influences and intersects with his sons' views and visions of themselves and their own families. Chip and Gary do not consciously or eagerly reject their patrimony. While this part of my study has demonstrated and discussed philosophical propaganda against women and how it operates as both a foundation and a means of preserving patriarchy, the next section will demonstrate how this ideology manifests in the microcosm of family life. It will also emphasize the silent internal battles against the dogma of the father, particularly regarding concepts of masculinities. I side with Debra Shostak, who asserts that "the novel never leaves Alfred behind as a governing presence, allowing the reader to trace the spectacle of the father figure's influence and decline" (*Fictive Fathers* 35).

To gain a deeper understanding of the father figure in U.S. American literature, I will briefly survey representations of paternal figures throughout literary history. This will follow the insights from Shostak's 2020 study, *Fictive Fathers in the Contemporary American Novel*, which emphasizes how the father figure has become increasingly prominent in both fiction and non-fiction prose toward the end of the twentieth century. More authors are now exploring paternal constructions in their fictional works and/or addressing their personal relationships in examples of life writing.

4.3 Patrimony, Patriarchy, and Masculinities in *The Corrections*

The figure of the father has become central in the literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Notably, he is rarely found in earlier U.S. writings, as Joseph M. Armengol-Carrera discusses in his 2008 essay "Where Are Fathers in American Literature?" Armengol-Carrera states, "[m]ost canonical authors appear to avoid dealing with the issue

of fatherhood" (211). He cites numerous canonical works and lists prominent writers such as Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Alcott, and Hemingway to illustrate the absence of father figures in their narratives. Building on earlier observations made by scholars like Michael Kimmel, David Leverenz, and Eva Paulino Bueno, Armengol-Carrera attributes this absence to socio-cultural developments and the separation of English settlers from "Father" England. This detachment led to a "rejection of the Fatherland" (215ff). The scholars argue that it was only with the birth of the Constitution and the emergence of George Washington, the most important Founding Father, who emerged as a substitute father to King George, that U.S. American culture was symbolically reconnected with the paternal (215ff).

For Armengol-Carrera, "[i]n the symbolism of the founding fathers, patriarchal authority returned" (217). Whether this theory remains valid when considering factors such as migration demographics, life-span, medical history, age and aging-related issues in pre-constitutional stages of the United States is open for debate. Nevertheless, themes related to fatherhood, particularly paternal absence, increasingly appear in literary works throughout the last century. While Armengol-Carrera maintains his original position, he references various genres and notable twentieth-century texts from Chicana and African American literature, as well as texts by white female authors like Silvia Plath, which prominently address fatherhood concerns. The subsequent discussion suggests that there is a mid-century turn that brings fathers into the foreground and addresses them directly on the page.

In Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost* and John Updike's *Toward the End of Time*, the figure of the father plays an essential role in exploring the struggles and experiences of aging masculinity—an emphasis that is typical of late twentieth-century male narratives. To understand the representations of fatherhood, patrimony, and patriarchy in *The Corrections*, one must understand the broader tradition of fatherhood in U.S. American literature. In earlier literary representations, predominantly from white male perspectives, the father figure often appears absent. However, later portrayals, whether critical or compassionate, present intricate configurations of father figures that are often depicted as difficult to grasp, as seen in works like Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* (1975), Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985), Paul Harding's *Tinkers* (2008), or John Updike's story collection *My Father's Tears* (2009).[124] In *The Corrections*, fatherhood plays a pivotal role, constituting the center of the narrative. By

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[124] In the later twentieth century, a significant number of female-authored fiction and nonfiction texts emerged that explore the theme of fatherhood. Notable examples include Marilynne Robinson's acclaimed novel *Gilead* (2004) and Sue Miller's *The Story of My Father* (2003), which combines analytical insights with emotional reflections on her father's Alzheimer's disease and death. Tanya Ward Goodman's *Leaving Tinkertown* (2013) also shares a similar approach. Increasingly, writers have turned to nonfiction to reflect on their father's mortality. Philip Roth's *Patrimony: A True Story* (1999) and his critically acclaimed essay "My Father's Brain" (2002) are just two among many such accounts.

zooming in on white (Christian) heteronormative strands of American culture, we recognize that escaping patriarchy is difficult as long as this culture continues to prioritize heteronormative family structures. In these structures, the ideal family unit consists of fathers and mothers, while true gender equality remains elusive. Language often reflects power dynamics that favor men, and the concept of God is frequently constructed as male. In such contexts, patrimony cannot be detached from patriarchy.

The Corrections represents a significant contribution to the literary tradition that focuses on fatherhood in U.S. American literature. This work exemplifies the effort to write the father into existence and thus articulate his role and influence. In light of Elizabeth Podnieks' essay collection, *Pops in Pop Culture* (2016), and recent cultural debates about the necessity to reconfigure traditional notions of "fatherhood," I assert that paternal themes will continue to grow in both fiction and non-fiction.[125] On the one hand, *The Corrections* exposes the misogynist philosophical foundations of hegemonic masculine rule. On the other hand, it renders the domination of the father and patriarch, exemplified by the character Alfred, as increasingly unstable in an evolving environment where he appears to be losing authority over his family. Alfred's paternal power is grounded in a gender order that he is committed to preserving, potentially using force if necessary. The narrative suggests that the loss of this paternal authority is a result of growing social tensions, the erosion of working-class tradition, and the growing importance of gender topics in an expanding capitalist and consumption-oriented society. This loss of authority is negotiated in the disintegrating body of the aging hegemon.

In *Fictive Fathers in the Contemporary American Novel* (2020), Shostak argues along the same lines: "Franzen shows in painful detail not the absence of the father as such but his descent from dominion, while also conjuring the many ways in which the father's obsolescent authority inhibits the identities of his family members even while he is in the process of vacating the position of power" (25). The collapse of heteronormative traditions related to the nuclear family finds expression in the collapse of the aging male body. This erosion or instability constitutes both risks and opportunities for the patriarch's offspring. In the coming sub-sections, I want to take a closer look at the aging protagonist, focusing on his paternal role and function in *The Corrections*, particularly the relationship between Alfred and his sons, Chip and Gary. In this moment of perceived crisis, confronted with the disintegration of the father's body—which stands for the disintegration of the father's established order—Chip and Gary are prompted to reformulate their masculinities and their roles as (future) fathers.

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[125] In *Of Boys and Men* (2022), Richard Reeves suggests that the "obsolete model" of the breadwinner must be culturally renegotiated for men to find meaning in fatherhood.

Throughout the novel, the sick and aging Alfred is frequently contrasted with his younger self through the use of analepses, or flashbacks.[126] This technique draws attention to the use of mirroring and juxtaposition found in the works of authors like Roth and Updike. These strategic flashbacks reveal Alfred's youthful aspirations and actions, illustrating both his personal development as the patriarch and his relationships with family members. In this sub-chapter, I will focus on Alfred's relationships with his sons, Chip and Gary, highlighting instances in the novel that disclose (often failed) attempts at parenting. I will interpret the text through the lens of patriarchy as a destructive force in shaping masculine identities, applying Kimmel's insights from *Angry White Men*. Kimmel speaks from a critical male perspective and maintains:

> Our enemy is an ideology of masculinity that we inherited from our fathers, and their fathers before them, an ideology that promises unparalleled acquisition coupled with a tragically impoverished emotional intelligence. We have accepted an ideology of masculinity that leaves us feeling empty and alone when we do it right, and even worse when we feel we're doing it wrong. (9)

I will examine this concept of male entitlement, which Kimmel refers to as aggrieved entitlement, in more detail in the next chapter, focusing on Alfred Lambert in his old age. However, I argue here that Alfred's sons need to overcome this notion of patrimony to build meaningful relationships and develop a sense of masculine identity at the end of the twentieth century. The narratives of the children's lives are presented alongside the demise of the father.

In an extensive analysis of the narrative structure, Stephen Burn identifies two key techniques that Franzen employs in the novel: narrative layering and narrative corrections (102ff). He explains that the layering of the storylines helps readers connect with the complicated mental condition of the aging character, Alfred (102). The gradual disintegration of his body due to Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease is reflected in the structural setup of the narrative. Burn also observes that "the parallel arrangement alerts the reader to the parallels in the children's lives by setting past and present acts alongside each other" (102). I would like to propose that these layers highlight the parallels in the children's lives as they relate to their father. This idea builds on Burn's observations about the "high degree of connectivity" (108) within the novel and how it reflects U.S. American society (108). For instance, it is through Alfred's illness, his slow demise, and his loss of authority over his body and property that the children's lives intersect in the present narrative and equally prompt reflections of the past.

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[126] Stephen J. Burn offers an extensive overview over narrative time and the use of flashbacks in his work, *Jonathan Franzen and the End of Postmodernism* (101-108).

All three children have distanced themselves from Alfred over time for various reasons. However, several significant events—marking both the dawn of the father's dominance and his eventual death—bring them back to each other, if only to handle their father's administrative affairs. Ultimately, they send Alfred to a care facility, where he takes his own life out of despair. Overall, Burn perceives *The Corrections* primarily as a story "about coming to terms with the death of a father figure" (97)—an interpretation that I fully support. Similarly, Shostak explains that "[t]he Lambert father is the source of the crookedness to make straight, the wrongs to right, the character to reform, the disease to cure" (*Fictive Fathers* 35).

While it is easy to identify and draw conclusions from the overlapping storylines and narrative moments, the second technique that Burn mentions complicates straightforward interpretations of the text and makes easy judgment more difficult. The total length of the narrative adds to this difficulty. Burn explains "narrative corrections" as follows: "Franzen has led the reader toward one assumption, only to insert a later scene that forces a correction of their initial supposition" (103). This method is frequently used in *The Corrections*, complicating both readers' positions and perceptions of character relationships. For example, the scene from "AT SEA" that I previously analyzed, which discusses binary gender roles and Alfred's forceful display of power, is later "corrected" almost forty pages on. When the couple reunites in bed after Alfred returns from his business trip, Enid brings up stock investment again, even mentioning that a wife has the right to be kissed goodbye by her husband (*Corrections* 317, 319). In this instance, the previously muted and subdued wife assumes a more assertive position, finding the courage to confront Alfred directly about financial matters as well as spousal duties. She once again makes demands; however, her bravery ultimately leads to disappointment.

Enid comes to a difficult realization before the confrontation in the bedroom: "This was a *bad* husband she had landed, a bad, bad, bad husband who would never give her what she needed. Anything that might have satisfied her he found a reason to withhold" (320). She mentally rebukes Alfred in a way that resembles how children are scolded for their "bad" behavior—note the repetition in her thoughts—but she does not express this in direct speech. The power relations in this part of the narrative are not entirely "fixed." A small correction does, in fact, occur, revealing one of many small but consequential cracks in the patriarchal structure. In result, Burn notes the effect of these narrative corrections: "Just as the stories are *about* the characters correcting their views, so the form of the narrative imitates that procedure, implicating the reader in the book's critique by revealing the readers' tendency to make premature judgments from partial data" (104). This observation shows that a plot-driven literary analysis may sometimes present only one side of the coin. In this specific

example, we learn that the potential for misinterpreting the narrative is built into the narrative structure like a trap.

In examining the intersections of masculinities and aging, Burn provides an example for narrative corrections that casts doubt on the absolute deterioration of Alfred's mind. This perspective suggests that not every scene of mental confusion can be directly linked to aging and dementia. Hence, Alfred's moments of disorientation should not be solely attributed to biomedical deterioration, despite the visible allusions. Looking at Alfred's character in his later years, we find that he is not merely defined by the illnesses that threaten to consume him. Rather, he is the sum of a long life filled with beliefs, ideologies, actions, and experiences that significantly influence the stories of his family members. In Burn's example, the blue-cheeked man that Alfred meets aboard the *Gunnar Myrdal*, and who "seems nothing more than a symptom of his increasing dementia" (103), is later exposed as Don Armour—Alfred's coworker who has an affair with his daughter Denise, a situation that Alfred tries to cover up.[127] Burn explains: "Franzen corrects our view of Alfred as an old man whose manias are scattered and incoherent" (104). While I intend to delve deeper into Alfred's experiences in old age and the losses he faces, it is pivotal to first establish a clear understanding of his character at the peak of his masculine identity, particularly in relation to his patrimony and paternal themes in U.S. American literature.

Western concepts of fatherhood have evolved throughout the twentieth century. While contemporary views embrace more diverse configurations of fatherhood,[128] Franzen's portrayal tends to cling to conservative gender roles that gained traction after WWII. In their book, *Fatherhood in Transition* (2017), Thomas Johansson and Jesper Andreasson examine the history of Western fatherhood. They contrast the "traditional" mid-twentieth-century U.S. manifestations of fatherhood with more recent notions of "gender equal fathers" (7). One significant shift occurred during the 1980s, the scholars note, referencing Lynn Jamieson's study on family relationships and the "sensitive and involved father"[129] (29). This shift

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[127] Burn explains in more detail: "In this structure, Denise is pivotal as Franzen reveals her to be the agent of both the family's current disintegration and its (partial) future rehabilitation: Franzen permits Denise to discover that her affair with Don Armour has instigated the chain of events that controlled Alfred's manias and prompted Enid's money worries, while she also goes on, with Chip's help, to prompt the family's slow reintegration" (107).

[128] Recent reports indicate that the pandemic has negatively impacted equality in parenting. Early in the lockdown, traditional parenthood roles resurfaced, particularly in privileged, heteronormative family constellations. *The Atlantic*, for instance, predicts in mid-March of 2020 that "[a]cross the world, women's independence will be a silent victim of the pandemic," noting how the pandemic has the potential to "send many couples back to the 1950s." This sentiment has been echoed by other major news outlets. Notwithstanding, it remains challenging to predict the long-term effects of the pandemic on gender roles.

[129] The scholars point to the significance of Lynn Jamieson's 1998 study, *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies*. They contend that "[i]n this groundbreaking study of intimacy and families, Jamieson focused on

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resulted in a "redistribution of domestic work between husbands and wives" (30). The development ties in with decades of female struggle for emancipation and efforts to break out of domestic spaces to participate in economic spheres, which greatly contributed to women's liberation in the 1970s and 1980s.

Another significant process that was initiated and took place during this time was the increasing examination of hegemonic masculinities. Critical studies of men and masculinities emerged as a distinct scientific field, with disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, psychology, cultural studies, and literary studies analyzing masculinities from all possible angles. This research aimed to understand how masculinities, particularly hegemonic masculinities, operate structurally within societies.[130] *The Corrections* captures a moment in U.S. history when hegemonic masculinities are gradually being renegotiated by the post-Boomer generation, even as the character Alfred remains unable to reflect on his role in a changing society. His poor self-assessment contributes to his downfall, both physically and symbolically, which is, for instance, exemplified in his idolization of Schopenhauer.

I have previously discussed Chip's role as a hybrid character, whom some scholars recognize as a masculine role model. This character exemplifies domestic masculinity and, by the end of the narrative, successfully sheds his hegemonic heritage—though scholars have differing opinions on whether he fully accomplishes this. In contrast, Gary is more reluctant to divert from his father's path and paternal legacy. He struggles to see himself as an equal partner to his wife and a caring father to his children, often operating within conventional ideas of masculinities and the masculine bloc as proposed by Pelegrí. Gary's transition differs greatly from Chip's; he is initially depicted as his father's double, looking up to him and eager for his father's admiration while growing up. Chip, on the other hand, is represented as conflicted and reluctant to shape his masculinity after his paternal example. Pelegrí exposes two pivotal endeavors that Gary undertakes to prove his "masculinity" to his parents and siblings: 1) he tries to take over the negotiations for a more profitable deal with Axon, and 2) he tries to enroll his aging father in a medical trial (106). He fails in both endeavors, and Pelegrí observes:

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transformations of personal and intimate relationships in modern societies. The sensitive and involved father is discussed extensively, and critically. Through an in-depth investigation of research on fatherhood, the family and work in feminist studies, Jamieson scrutinized the late-modern landscape of intimate relationships, showing that in conventional father-earner households the roles of mothers and fathers have changed dramatically" (29). While the study was conducted in Britain, many of the general assumptions are transferable to U.S. American culture.

[130] For a clearer understanding of critical masculinities, refer to R. W. Connell's book *Masculinities* (2005), as well as the recent essay by Richard Howson and Jeff Hearn titled "Hegemony, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Beyond," published in the *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (2019). Additionally, R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt's article "Hegemonic Masculinity Rethinking the Concept" (2005) offers important insights into the topic.

> The episode […] allows Gary to perform a hegemonic masculinity based on the illusory nature of the power he is allowed to momentarily hold. […] Gary's attempt at replacing Alfred in his role as hegemonic patriarch—a function he is negated as father and husband at home—constitutes another instance of the masculine bloc, of the evident coexistence of hegemonic and non-hegemonic aspects into a hybrid space. (106)

While Gary seems eager to take over his father's negotiations, Chip is depicted as running from his parents both domestically and internationally. Throughout most of the narrative, Chip continues to hide the truth about his professional life and private affairs.

This dynamic between the sons and their father becomes evident in an extended and intricately layered flashback in "AT SEA," when Alfred returns from his business trip. This scene continues or corrects the moment in which he storms out of the house "without kissing [Enid] goodbye" (*Corrections* 280). The interaction that unfolds in the Lambert home upon Alfred's return exemplifies the values of a heteronormative, white, middle-class suburban family, particularly during confrontations at the dinner table. Franzen refers to this moment as "The Dinner of Revenge" (293), which is loosely illustrated on the original first edition book cover and carries essential and layered meanings.[131] This scene showcases family power dynamics and patrimony in *The Corrections*, making it crucial for understanding the relationships within the Lambert family and their origins. Shostak suggests that "Franzen engages the members of the Lambert family in a dense, tragicomic narrative of gestures striving toward all of the senses of *corrigere*. The family's desire for most of the corrections in which they engage originates in the character of the Lambert paterfamilias, Alfred, who hovers over the lives of his three children and wife like a taciturn, disapproving spirit" (*Fictive Fathers* 35). Reflecting on the novel's strategic setup, Burn explains the sons' dilemma as follows:

> [T]he parallel arrangement alerts the reader to the parallels in the children's lives by setting past and present acts alongside each other: both Gary and Chip consciously conceive of themselves as correcting their father's choices, but while one does so in terms of financial aggression, the other seeks a correction in terms of gender roles. (102)

I propose that these spheres coalesce in the lives of both sons; nonetheless, I agree that they remain more significant driving forces on one side or the other.

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[131] In her detailed and critical analysis of the original cover design, where she includes a discussion of the Oprah-Franzen conflict and gendered cover art, Kristin Jacobson describes the book front as follows: "The cover's lower half includes a picture of a 1950-ish white, upper-middle class family dinner scene, with a small blonde boy featured in the left corner. At the beautifully set table we see a woman's hands presenting a perfectly cooked turkey and an older brother in a bright red jacket. The younger brother's petulant look provides the ironic commentary on the otherwise idyllic scene of the carefully presented table. […] The cover art presents a shrewd combination of domestic and masculine codes" (229). The appearance of perfection and purity is fractured in the display of a visibly dissatisfied boy, reflecting Chip's dinner experience in the novel.

The "Dinner of Revenge" serves as a moment of psychoanalysis, allowing the reader to assume the role of a therapist and explore the past to better fathom present relationships. The Freudian implications of repressed childhood trauma are undeniable, particularly in Alfred's overwhelming role as a father. Before the dinner table is set, the boys follow their father around, excitedly sharing their achievements in the Y swimming pool, competing for his attention—Gary does this more enthusiastically than Chip (*Corrections* 290f). However, their communication breaks off several times during the dinner scene when Alfred drifts into thoughts about his own disadvantages at their age, which "[h]is youthful subordinates weren't following" (290). The text reveals that "[f]raternizing had always been a struggle for him" (290). Alfred's struggle in building a meaningful relationship with his sons and uniting them in a male bond is reflected in the narrator's observations and the characters' dialogues. This represents a failed attempt to symbolically become a "new father," as described by Ralph LaRossa, or an "androgynous father," according to E. Anthony Rotundo.[132] Alfred's desire to retreat to his safe space, the "metallurgical lab" in the basement, "which was forbidden territory [for the boys] except when the boss was in it" (290), permeates the dialogue. This desire culminates several pages later when "Alfred retired to the basement with stamping and a slam" (301).

The entire scene revolves around a conflict between father and son that is introduced and only partially resolved nearly thirty pages later, spilling into an ongoing argument with Enid. The dialogue creates a constant back-and-forth, characterized by a chaotic and fast-paced interplay of voices. The children continue to talk about their trip to the swimming pool and the new railroad museum, while parental comments are interspersed throughout. Children's demands are either acknowledged or ignored, and interruptions occur, such as a phone call from the neighbor and Enid moving in and out of the room. Alfred's inner thoughts are triggered by various topics mentioned, with Schopenhauer quotes popping up in between. The tension steadily escalates, turning more explosive with every page. In the midst of this loud and turbulent scene, Alfred repeatedly focuses on his youngest son, Chip, who refuses to eat his dinner. Alfred admonishes Chip many times to eat the food in front of him until his patience snaps, prompting him to shout in capital letters: "RIGHT

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[132] LaRossa and Rotundo both characterize the late twentieth century American father as being more involved compared to previous, more patriarchal types (LaRossa, 1988, 451). The "androgynous" type that Rotundo describes in his 1985 essay "American Fatherhood" is difficult to define at that time, Rotundo explains, but nonetheless, a clear opposite to the early and late post-war patriarchal figure that was established in the traditional suburban home. These types, one must note, predominantly refer to white, heteronormative, working, and middle-class fathers, a perspective often unstated in scholarly discourse. Over time, this notion of "new fatherhood" has been slightly reformulated to emphasize emotional involvement, yet this notion still contributes to the maintenance of a patriarchal system, as the fundamental roles of parenting remain largely unchanged (Randles 518ff).

NOW. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME, OR DO YOU NEED A SPANKING?" (301).[133]

In this chaos, Gary emerges as the model child. He follows the dinner rules and honestly earns his dessert, along with his mother's affection. However, a closer look at Gary reveals that he receives little attention from his father compared to his rebel brother, Chip. One remarkable accomplishment that all three characters—Chip, Gary, and Enid—try to make visible to father, Alfred, is a jail that Gary builds out of Popsicle sticks as part of a school assignment (294). "You want to see my jail I made with Popsicle sticks?" (294), Gary urges excitedly. Alfred's reactions to this achievement, however, are brief and repeatedly inattentive: "'A jail, well well,' Alfred said" (294). Alfred does not agree to see a demonstration of this prison, nor does he provide any significant comments on the details of its making. Although Chip receives shouts of praise from his father, readers learn from Gary's chapter that he, too, has been a victim of Alfred's anger (184-5).

If Chip, as Tischleder suggests in her comments on the "Dinner of Revenge," "is the actual victim of his parents' civil war" (230), Gary may be considered collateral damage due to neglect. Tischleder recognizes the striking parallels between Alfred and Gary, even as Gary "defines himself in opposition to what he believes are his father's errors and shortcomings—the old man's ethic of hard work, his rigid self-restraint, thriftiness and stubborn opposition to financial speculation and consumerism as well as his dreary Midwestern existence" (244). Consequently, Gary pursues a lifestyle that is opposed to his father's, yet he continues to encounter dead ends in both his private and professional life. Susanne Rohr characterizes Gary as follows:

> Gary, who, as a child, had built a jail and an electric chair with Popsicle sticks, is suffering from clinical depression and an addiction to alcohol, yet as he is unwilling to confront his problems, he has no choice but to blindly act them out. Gary's understanding of being in command is to bully those around him, and when it dawns on him that he has never been his parents' favorite, is no longer respected by his sons, and has severe problems with his wife, his need to control reaches a spasm. He tries to meet his growing isolation with the compulsive consumption of luxury items, yet to no avail. (100)

Gary builds his life according to a privileged heteronormative model from the mid-twentieth century, which he seeks to optimize within an increasingly materialistic culture. The metaphor of the "mixed grill" illustrates the blending of post-WWII masculine pride,

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[133] In "The Thingness of the Text: Jonathan Franzen's Rhopography of Obsolescence" (2014), Babette Bärbel Tischleder contextualizes the dinner scene as a crucial point in the "domestic warfare" (222) of the Lambert home, emphasizing the meaning of objects in the narrative. According to Tischleder, "AT SEA" frequently uses analepses, a point that Burn outlines in more detail from a structural perspective. Tischleder acknowledges the flashbacks as providing insights into a "civil war," which will become important in my study when discussing the present time of the novel. For Chip, the "dinner or revenge" constitutes as a traumatic experience, making him "the actual victim of his parent's civil war" (230).

particularly how it relates to masculinities and meat consumption.[134] But Gary's authoritarian masculine patrimony proves unsustainable. "[Gary] was a shouter" the text reveals, "[l]ike his father before him. His father before him who was now depressed. But who, in his prime, as a shouter, had so frightened young Gary that it never occurred to him to intercede on his mother's behalf" (*Corrections* 184). Gary's son, Aaron, in contrast, defies his father to protect his mother, Caroline. Overwhelmed by his responsibilities as a husband and father, Gary metaphorically and figuratively escapes into the basement of his own family home. This retreat is examined by Burn as a manifestation of a "reptilian self-preservation" (121).[135]

The prison that Gary builds as a child alludes to a Foucauldian prison system and symbolizes his upbringing, which results in a conflicted male identity—one that, for instance, allows no room for male vulnerability. From a critical masculinities perspective, Gary, like his father, embodies normalized hegemonic masculine values that prove toxic for both himself and his environment—his son Aaron even pleads with him to stop shouting at his mother (184). And after a long and dramatic episode of self-antagonism and inner discord, Gary admits to his estranged wife, Caroline, that he is depressed. This moment serves as a significant turning point for Gary, a key correcting moment. He is finally able to disclose his own weakness to himself and to others. Nicholas Manai offers a detailed insight into Gary's character development, arguing that "[a]lthough Gary's correction does reunite him with the family dynamic, […] he also regains a sense of his own autonomy" (32f). However, this newfound autonomy is faint, as Manai notes while still recognizing the substantial shifts in Gary's character and demeanor.[136] Finally, the flight from what constitutes the "traditional father" is an arduous undertaking for both sons and represents a broader struggle against an oppressive and dominating masculine ideology represented by Alfred. As a result, readers continue to wait in vain for Alfred's self-correction and his reflection on the patriarchal masculinities of the late twentieth century.

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[134] The metaphor of the "mixed grill" (186ff) appears in reference to Gary Lambert and reveals the character's preference for a meat-heavy meal. He is depicted as typically responsible for barbecuing and preparing the food, while his wife "helped out by bringing home multiple heavy blood-damp bags of meat" (188). The mixed grill is described as both a "family staple" and a joke between Caroline and their son Caleb. This establishes Gary as the typical male figure who embodies the myth of meat-masculinity, which suggests that men who consume large quantities of meat exhibit a higher degree of masculinity. However, the narrative also presents a shift: Gary's obsession with meat is interrupted by the sentence: "[Gary] loved it and loved it and loved it and then all at once he didn't" (188). For further insight into meat masculinity and its connection to the male ecological footprint, see Bob Pease's essay "Masculinism, climate change and 'man-made' disasters" (2016).

[135] For a close reading of the "basement" in relation to Alfred and Gary, see *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2008) by Stephen J. Burn (120-21).

[136] In "Turning Inward: Using Insight as a Catalyst for Change in 'The Corrections'" (2018), Nicolas Manai sheds light on Gary Lambert's break from the paternal and stresses his shift to an autonomous self through the confession of his illness (30-33).

Queering the Heteronormative, Queering Patriarchy

One of the key questions *The Corrections* raises is whether the Lambert characters, in some way, undermine the authority of the patriarch through the narrative. Change is a fundamental characteristic of the American social novel and is seen by many scholars as essential to understanding Franzen's work. While the classification of the novel's genre remains a subject of debate, several studies acknowledge the potential for change within *The Corrections*.[137] Scholars have also sought to identify all the major and minor corrections presented in the novel, tracing them from beginning to end to fathom the impact of decision-making on each character in the Lambert universe. Furthermore, they examine how the characters' decisions relate to one another in a text that relies on a "high degree of connectivity" (Burn 108).

On a most fundamental level, the text is held together by the premise that an obsolete system needs to be fixed, or at a bare minimum, adjusted to better accommodate productive and life-oriented individuals (or *satisfied* consumers). More broadly, *The Corrections* proposes that substantial social change, particularly relating to gender, can only take place if social expectations and norms are thoroughly (at times painfully) renegotiated within the microcosm of each character's life. Each character has a unique story and occupies a significant space in the narrative, playing a crucial role in the plot's development and, by extension, the development of a society. Furthermore, every character—except perhaps Alfred—demonstrates agency or develops it throughout the story. Thus, the text underscores the importance of a democratic order in U.S. American society.

The destructive patriarchal system depicted in *The Corrections* is intertwined with many other significant themes in the novel.[138] The Lambert household serves as a micro-version of this oppressive patriarchal system. Before delving into the character of the aging patriarch, I want to explore the idea of positive social change in more detail and suggest a reading of the novel that emphasizes the importance of these minuscule corrections. I recognize great potential in the accumulation of minor adjustments, which can amount to great societal shifts. While *The Corrections* may not fit the definition of a social novel in a strict sense, it is undeniably socially charged and mirrors the processes of social change. This change often involves long and arduous efforts to overcome rigid norms that have long traditions and are deeply rooted in philosophical or religious ideologies, as suggested previously.

Heteronormativity serves as a resilient pillar that is silently corroding throughout the story. Sexuality emerges as a central theme, particularly through the character of Denise,

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[137] See, for instance, Annesley (2006), Hutchinson (2008), Pelegrí (2013), or Manai (2018).

[138] Key themes include consumption, capitalism, corruption, globalization, power hierarchies, urban versus suburban life, and particularly gender relations.

who, like her brother Chip, is depicted as a sexually driven character. Unlike Chip, however, Denise challenges conventional heteronormative gender boundaries and commits, judging from a conservative heteronormative position, more severe transgressions.[139] Sexuality also plays a critical role in understanding the other characters, who reveal through their actions and thoughts the importance of what is deemed normative or heterosexual. To grasp the significance of both queer and normative sexualities, it is necessary to look to queer theory. This theoretical framework offers valuable perspectives for analyzing the heteronormative assumptions that are foregrounded in the novel and are essential to Christian patriarchal ideology. The novel, in its explorations of sexualities, reflects the discussions that emerged in queer studies at the turn of the twenty-first century. In this sub-chapter, I will focus on the male characters to examine their self-perceptions when confronted with matters of sexuality and to discuss how change, or the lack thereof, is portrayed through the lens of patriarchy's main representatives.

The male characters in the novel do not overcome or overthrow heteronormative patriarchal values. *The Corrections* is not a subversive text within the American literary tradition. While it reveals corrupt practices, obsessive consumerism, and the gradual undoing of the "American" middle class, it does not offer a vision of a non-heteronormative future for its fictional characters. Instead, non-heteronormative relationships are repeatedly portrayed as deviations throughout. However, I suggest that the narrative subliminally outlines the *necessity* for such progress. It does this by frequently testing and confronting heteronormative norms and values, calling them into question and rendering them untenable in a society increasingly oriented toward progressive ideas about gender. One example of these norms being challenged is through the paternal role of Alfred, as well as the paternal in general.

In *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Nikki Sullivan defines the concept of heteronormativity, drawing on Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's 1998 essay "Sex in Public." Both texts discuss sexual practices and how society defines them as normative or non-normative, highlighting the consequences tied to such categorizations. Berlant and Warner's essay, for instance, connects notions of heteronormativity to the political discourse surrounding the fetus, a topic that has resurfaced on both national and global scales following the recent erosion of *Roe v. Wade*. The scholars note that "[i]n law and political ideology, for example, the fetus and the child have been spectacularly elevated to the place of sanctified nationality" (550). But the concept of heteronormativity itself is complex and difficult to

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[139] Susanne Rohr, for instance, describes Denise Lambert as "the youngest child, [who] gets into 'gender trouble'" (99). This female character, Rohr adds, "can experiment with gender performances" (103) outside of St. Jude, she is depicted as bisexual and sexually active.

pin down, as it is defined in relation to, but also "distinct from heterosexuality" (Berlant and Warner 548). Sullivan further adds: "[It] does not exist as a discrete and easily identifiable body of thought, of rules and regulations" (132). Therefore, it is essential not to confuse heteronormativity with heterosexuality, even though these two concepts oftentimes overlap. Instead,

> [b]y heteronormativity [Berlant and Warner] mean the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and the social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. (132)

Sullivan takes an important step further in her survey of queer theory by including Calvin Thomas' insights on goal-oriented sex and reproduction (133). These ideas are further explored by Lee Edelman in his influential work, *No Future* (2004), which centers on and capitalizes "the Child." Drawing on observations by Berlant and Warner, Edelman asserts that the political discourse surrounding heteronormativity became irreversible at the start of the twenty-first century (2). Following this thought, Sullivan argues that "heteronormativity is anti-sexual insofar as its primary aim is in direct contradistinction with [...] the fundamental characteristic of sex, that is, the (at least momentary) loss or destruction of the self and boundaries that constitute it" (133). Against this backdrop, it becomes clear how *The Corrections* tries to challenge heteronormativity, primarily through its portrayal of a declining patriarch. But Franzen's novel also reflects on the value and significance of sexuality and sexual practices outside the realm of childbearing.

It is crucial to examine the sexual practices and relationships in this context, as the characters grapple with their sexual desires amid the pressures of expected heteronormativity. Patriarchy upholds these norms, and Alfred manifests as the novel's most oppressive institution, shaping and regulating the understanding of heteronormativity in the Lambert universe. The patriarch continually emerges as the keeper of order against whom the other characters strive to define themselves. They either conform to or resist his dominance to varying degrees. In the central chapter of the novel, titled "AT SEA," we see a juxtaposition of Alfred's past and present, which provides insights into the failed family relationships. A particularly significant scene defines heteronormativity through the perception of the patriarch's sexuality. This scene follows the marital conflict, after which Alfred "without kissing [Enid] goodbye [...] left the house for eleven days and ten nights" (*Corrections* 280). Without a narrative pause and/or explanation, the flight scene transitions into Alfred's professional life on the road, where he embarks on regular work trips as a newly assigned "assistant chief engineer for track and structures" (280) with Midland Pacific.

In this section, the narrative contrasts Midland Pacific with a failing regional partner, the Erie Belt Railroad. The Ohio-based company is primarily characterized using one particular phrase that reflects the work atmosphere, a phrase that Alfred harshly judges as "effeminate" (281). The idiom "[t]ake it easy" (281) has several connotations in the English language and is commonly used in American culture.[140] However, Alfred interprets it as embodying a "feminine" laziness and inefficiency, representing a negative and supposedly emasculated attitude that he believes contributes to the decline of a long-standing traditional business. Readers learn that for Alfred, "[o]n the high prairie where he'd grown up, a person who took it easy wasn't much of a man" (281). Accordingly, the text notes: "Now came a new effeminate generation for whom 'easygoing' was a compliment" (281). I read this moment as a direct reference to Gary's professional demeanor, which Alfred disapproves of, as well as Alfred's skepticism regarding Enid's financial abilities.

In any case, Midland Pacific, the winning company that Alfred considers himself a representative of—perhaps even its personification—establishes itself as a "manly" business. It adheres to high standards, maintains strict and well-regulated work hours, and presents a neat exterior. Efficiency is associated with normative masculinity. As noted, "The Midland Pacific, by contrast, was clean steel and white concrete" (282). Anything perceived as effeminate or feminine is equated with weakness and failure; it stands in opposition to the strength of steel and concrete. This weakness is described with images of rot and decay, rust, "crumble," and "filth" (281-82).[141] Additionally, "Midpac was based in St. Jude and served a harder-working, less eastern region of the country," and, "[t]he more Alfred saw of the Eerie Belt, the more distinctly he felt the Midland Pacific's superior size, strength, and moral vitality in his own limbs and carriage" (282).

The phrase "[s]uperior size, strength, and moral vitality" carries strong physical connotations and evokes masculine ideals that were established during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This understanding of masculinities is rooted in the physical stamina of the working class, a perception that shifted as white-collar masculinities began to reshape this dominant view of the ideal man. Kimmel highlights the changes that occurred at the

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[140] In American English, the phrase "take it easy" can be used to replace "goodbye," but it is also commonly understood as a reminder for the interlocutor to "relax." It serves the purpose of calming someone down to prevent agitation (*Cambridge Dictionary of American Idioms* 413). In *Informalization: Manners and Emotions Since 1890* (2007), Cas Wouters contends that the "'take-it-easy custom has been interpreted as evidence of the desire of Americans 'to avoid mental and physical irritation and the strain that follows it.' In contrast to the tough-guy tradition, the 'take-it-easy' and 'have-a-nice-day' customs not only function to lubricate social intercourse but also to pacify" (164).

[141] In "All Those Nasty Womanly Things: Women Artists, Technology and the Monstrous-Feminine" (2001), Rachel Gear outlines, looking at visual art that depicts the female (body), how women have been historically characterized vis-à-vis the monstrous. "Woman," she notes "is specifically associated with pollution and bodily wastes such as menstrual blood, which arouses fear and disgust as fluidity threatens to overcome fixity" (322).

turn of the twentieth century, noting that "getting in shape was a manly preoccupation […] as urban men fretted about the loss of manly vigor" (*Angry White Men* 48). "Believing that the body was an instrument of their will," Kimmel further explains, "American men at the turn of the twentieth century bulked up, pumped up, and worked out as never before" (48). In Franzen's text, it is particularly striking to observe the connection between masculinity and sexual prowess, especially as it relates to the comparison of the railroad companies. This theme becomes more pronounced when the narrative shifts to Alfred's nighttime accommodations during his work trip: the motel. During the day, Alfred "flaunted" (*Corrections* 283) his masculine stamina. "[H]ere was a *man*" conducting official and necessary inspections, utilizing his "manly" body to demonstrate efficiency and productivity in the nation's interest (282-3). But "[n]ighttime," the text unveils, "was a different matter. By night he lay awake on mattresses that felt made of cardboard and catalogued the faults of humanity" (283). And with the onset of night, the narrative also delves into what Alfred perceives as the vulgarities of sexual practices.

The narrator reveals that "[Alfred] had neighbors who fornicated like there was no tomorrow" (283). This comedic moment underscores a deeper and more serious loss of control and simultaneously highlights the character's disdain for extra-marital motel sex, likely involving a female sex worker and a male client, at least from his perspective. Alfred, the keeper of order, finds himself surrounded by chaos that he has no control over. On top of that, the term "fornication" conveys a value-free idea of consensual sex between consenting adults as an immoral act. This religiously charged interpretation of intercourse condemns extra-marital and "non-goal-oriented" sexual practices. Within this ideology, the Child—as described by Edelman—is framed as the anticipated goal, with all other sexual practices deemed immoral and seen as corrupting to society. Thus, "the faults of humanity" (283) are attributed to what the patriarch defines as the immoral corruptions of a seemingly "pure" sexual act that should be driven by procreation. In *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (2013), Kyle Harper discusses the emergence of the term "fornication" in Western culture and its clear associations with religiously constructed moralities. He writes:

> Christianity gave a name to the array of sensual opportunities beyond the marriage bed: *porneia,* fornication. Christian spokesmen for a time promoted the belief that the dominance of *porneia* was the sign of a world in disorder, and then, as they accumulated power, they set out, with some diligence, to repress it. The coordinated assault on the extramarital sexual economy marks one of the more consequential revolutions in the history of sex. (3)

Harper elaborates on the historical significance of the Greek term "porneia," which opens more specific meanings related to Christian sexual morality. While the term fornication is

often translated simply as "sex forbidden by the New Testament" or "extramarital sex" (12), "porneia" encompasses a broader concept that includes an entire industry, particularly focusing on sex work and specifically, "prostitution" (12).[142]

Franzen creates a male character who is overwhelmed by judgment and is visibly distressed not only by the industry and the (contractual) partners he hears through the thin motel walls—referring to their encounters as "lewd transactions" (*Corrections* 283)—but also by the sexuality-embracing women around him. He describes these women with phrases like "women who chuckled and screamed" and "a girl in the next room [who] ranted and panted like a strumpet" (283). The term "strumpet" is another derogatory label for a female sex worker, or more broadly, "a sexually promiscuous or lascivious woman" (*OED*). According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, however, it can also refer to "[a] person (or something personified) who is unprincipled, unreliable, or immoral; a person who acts in a debased or corrupt way for profit or advantage." This definition suggests that the term conveys multiple meanings: on the one hand, it depicts the performance of sexuality as a general moral human flaw, and, on the other, it demonstrates a defect that is often specific to women.

A woman who openly expresses her sexual pleasure is often derogatorily compared to a sex worker, which inherently condemns that profession. This comparison reduces private sexual experiences to a condescending view intertwined with the profit-driven nature of sex work. In this context, Alfred embarks on a lengthy mental rant, blaming everyone for his misery: "[T]he girl for taking it easy," "the man for his easygoing confidence," "God for allowing such people to exist," "the motel's architect for trusting a single layer of cinder block to preserve the repose of paying customers," "the motel management," and ultimately "all of humanity" (*Corrections* 283). Yet, he continually returns to blame the female, maintaining a restless focus on them.[143] Additionally, the text reveals that "every waitress in every town had spherical mammaries insufficiently buttoned into a monogrammed blouse and made a point of leaning over him" (284). Thus, "every waitress" is characterized as a seductress or *femme fatale*, seemingly intent on luring Alfred into "sinful" sexual acts or worse. The merging of female sexual pleasure with sex work creates a standard narrative that not only degrades the profession of sex work but also the women who embrace and express their sexuality.

In fiction, as seen with reference to John Updike and Philip Roth, the *femme fatale* is depicted alongside a variety of mystical female characters who symbolize not only moral

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[142] I use the term "prostitution" here primarily in reference to Harper's text and the ancient designation of this profession, while maintaining a critical distance from established value judgments.

[143] While observing Alfred, the non-sexual "paying customer" understands himself as superior to the sexual customer, who has also technically paid for "his" motel stay and for services "he" receives. This "easygoing" and emasculated male is berated by Alfred as a "[man] of ill-breeding and poor discipline," a "slick, worthless fellow" (283).

decay but also death. Kathryn James observes that "[i]mages of the *femme fatale*, the vampire, the woman as monster, and the necrophile have acted again and again over time as pointers to the desires, preoccupations, and fears that characterise the West's relationship with sex and death" (16). In a similar vein, Michelle Ashley Gohr discusses Judaeo-Christian notions of sin and the myth of the "vagina dentata,"[144] noting how "[a]gain and again similar stories are manifested within the most patriarchal cultures across the world, all relating the same story of woman as dirty, sinful, demonic, devouring, vampiric, a temptress, a succubus, voracious, insatiable, and cold" (31). This idea that females possess sexual power over males culminates in *The Corrections*, when Alfred finds himself remembering the many work accommodations where he encountered immoral female behavior. These memories haunt his imagination and dreams, transforming his masculine world of railroad engineering into one infested with sexual imagery.

Like Updike's Ben Turnbull and Roth's Nathan Zuckerman, Alfred Lambert reads and interprets the females that surround him as seductresses, fearing female sexual organs. The following passage from *The Corrections* fixes the female as a threat to men and masculinities:

> And the tracks he saw when he closed his eyes were a zipper that he endlessly unzipped, and the signals behind him turned from forbidding red to willing green the instant he passed them, and in a saggy bed in Fort Wayne awful succubuses descended on him, women whose entire bodies—their very clothes and smiles, the crossings of their legs—exuded invitation like vaginas, and up to the surface of his consciousness (do not soil the bed!) he raced the welling embolus of spunk, his eyes opening to Fort Wayne at sunrise as a scalding nothing drained into his pajamas: a victory, all things considered, for he'd denied the succubuses his satisfaction. (284)

Alfred succeeds in fending off the "succubus," defined as "[a] demon in female form supposed to have carnal intercourse with men in their sleep" (*OED*). When he wakes up in the morning, he feels pleased that he did not ejaculate in his sleep. Nonetheless, this temporary victory does not mean that the dangers have been fully overcome. The text goes on to list more perils that Alfred encounters on the road. Before he can escape to the brittle safety of St Jude, he laments: "[H]ow the world seemed bent on torturing a man of virtue" (*Corrections* 284).

In examining the figure of the female seductress, particularly in the context of economic gain, James points out that "[i]n the Judaeo-Christian narrative tradition, the figure

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[144] Michelle Ashley Gohr provides an overview of "the myth of the toothed vagina" (28) in her paper titled "Do I Have Something in My Teeth? Vagina Dentata and its Manifestations within Popular Culture" (2013). This myth reflects the fear of the female sexual organ and its perceived ability to castrate. Despite various cultural interpretations, Gohr argues that, overall, "[t]he myth of the vagina dentata fits squarely into this group of legends that have ingrained within them a cultural phobia of sexuality" (29).

of the female prostitute has always been a pervasive signifier of potential danger. Here, cultural anxiety is located in the 'excessive' sexuality of the female, making the death of the prostitute a cure, a punishment, or a way to contain the threat she poses to the heterosex and the patriarchy" (16). In *The Corrections*, however, this type of cure never arrives. Instead, Alfred returns home to St. Jude, where he is welcomed by falling leaves and "the season of hurtling, hurtling toward winter" (*Corrections* 285). Rather than freeing him from the imminent dangers noted earlier, the narrative unexpectedly concludes Alfred's life in a single sentence: "Months were rushing him forward on their rigid track, carrying him closer to the day he'd be the father of three, the year he'd pay off his mortgage, the season of his death" (285).

Alfred's sense of order is never fully restored, calling to mind Ben Turnbull's flight into the domestic sphere. The threat posed by female sexuality is never neutralized; in fact, it increases in the presence of the wife. Alfred finds himself trapped in a cycle of seduction and fleeting release, yearning for a "clean" world of "steel and concrete," a world of virtue, while simultaneously grappling with his own sexual needs. In this context, the male orgasm symbolizes the ultimate moment of failure, representing not just the incapacity to perform, but also the age-related impotence reflected in my analyses of Turnbull and Zuckerman, which ultimately signifies the fall of the patriarch.

Young Masculinities vs. Old Masculinities

This notion of the destructive female figure recurs in the storylines of Chip and Gary. Both sons arguably manage to somewhat break free from their father's legacy and see beyond the misconstructions surrounding the deadly female figure that their father has been combating throughout his life. For example, after a tumultuous period of rebellion against his father's established rule, which Colin Hutchinson sums up as "the confused anger of Chip" (204), Chip experiences a major change of heart: "Chip in particular seemed almost miraculously transformed" (*Corrections* 650). His earlier professional and personal failures, including disastrous relationships with women, find relief or redemption, as some critics suggest, in the brief final chapter of the novel, titled "THE CORRECTIONS." In this chapter, we encounter a new Chip Lambert. Hutchinson summarizes this transformation: "Obliged to wear his father's clothes, Chip repairs his parents' house, effectively taking Alfred's place when Alfred is consigned to the nursing home, where he dies. Chip then becomes the father of twins, marries, takes up a teaching post, and continues revising his screenplay" (202). In both a physical and symbolic sense, Chip replaces his father in the Lambert home, stepping into the role of the father and potentially reformulating it within his own family. This is a

hopeful notion that *The Corrections* leaves us with at the end.

Following this hopeful interpretation of Chip, Pelegrí explains his transformation through compassion, stating: "Despite the hostility that has permeated his relationship with his parents, Chip eventually manages to perform a masculinity that is substantially structured around his compassion for his father as well as the rejection of the hegemonic features he has learned to read in his father's life" (108). In contrast, Hutchinson offers a more pessimistic view in his character analysis of the youngest son, suggesting that "[t]he conclusion in Chip's case seems to be that deliberate attempts at correction are doomed but surrender to that doom has, through an acceptance of defeat and humility, brought about a muted success" (202). I find value in both readings and consider compassion as one possible explanation for this character's renewal. This trait is indeed highlighted in the final pages of the novel. However, the text does not provide further details on the newly transformed Chip. Instead, he takes on his father's role, symbolically stepping into "his father's clothes," for reasons that remain largely unexplained to the reader. This lack of insight is interpreted by some analyses as a "muted success" arising from failure.

Analyzing the character through a critical masculinities lens reveals that Chip's failure is a socially constructed loss. In Hutchinson's summary, the new Chip is portrayed as responsible and self-sufficient. He repairs his parents' house, cares for his father, marries, fathers children himself, cares for his family financially, and continues to pursue his dream of finishing his screenplay (Hutchinson 202). However, one crucial development is overlooked in this analysis: Chip does not hold hegemonic powers, nor does he conform to the strict heteronormative ideals formulated by the patriarch. He enters a relationship with "[t]he neurologist, Alison Schulman […] a kinky-haired and rather plain-looking Jewish girl from Chicago" (*Corrections* 650). Furthermore, Chip "move[s] to Chicago to commence an immoral cohabitation with Alison, who had joined a group practice in Skokie" (650). He moves in with Alison and in this relationship, he is neither the primary breadwinner nor the decision-maker.

The text notes that "Chip neither confirmed nor denied that he had no real job and no intention of paying his fair share of household expenses" (650). Unlike his father Alfred, who exhibits a toxic practice of correction during his youth, Chip does not engage in the same behaviors. This suggests a departure from traditional hegemonic structures. By constructing the hegemonic father as a fallen patriarch, diminished by age and trapped in a state of entitlement, the narrative challenges conventional notions of masculinity. The old patriarch cannot uphold the ideal, while the younger generation no longer fully subscribes to it.

Later in the text, it is revealed that Chip initially holds a part-time teaching position

and eventually finds employment at a private school after the couple's twins are born (650f). They even become pregnant before they are legally married, which means that they engaged in premarital sexual acts. This calls to mind the patriarch's disturbing view of immoral behavior and defies Alfred's rules of conduct. However, Chip's "muted success" is only seen as muted when viewed through the lens of hegemonic masculinities and neoconservative notions of the male role in parenting.[145] This conservative perspective posits that men in heterosexual marriages or relationships cannot be considered as truly successful if their wife or partner is the primary breadwinner, leaving the man financially dependent or even unemployed. Additionally, fathers who fully engage in childcare are often perceived as acting contrary to their nature and interest, and therefore, they are not considered *successful, true, real, actual* men.[146]

This assumption aligns with Kristin Jacobson's analysis of *The Corrections* and her reference to Nina Baym's concept of "beset masculinity" (218) in literature. Jacobson argues that "[t]his foundational masculine and anti-domestic story imagines women as 'entrappers and domesticators' and presents the domestic sphere as an impediment to male development and comfort" (218). This argument is certainly applicable to much of the novel; however, by the end, Chip finds himself in a domestic role, primarily responsible for childcare and caregiving. He is financially less successful than his wife, but not discontent. On the contrary, he appears more stable and grounded in his role as a father, husband, and son, able to face his father during his illness and care for him until death. Therefore, *The Corrections* ultimately breaks with the image of the female seductress and instead places a responsible male figure into the domestic sphere. The novel challenges the notion of hegemonic masculinities as embodied practice. Thus, Franzen's turn-of-the-century text reflects "new" ideas about manhood and fatherhood in practice, a topic that Elizabeth Podnieks elucidates in *Pops in Pop Culture* (2016).

Fatherhood has experienced significant shifts, particularly in terms of "gender and […] parenting roles and identities" (Podnieks 2). Podnieks acknowledges that "[i]n light of […] this, it is unsurprising that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries father-

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[145] In their 1999 study, Louise B. Silverstein and Carl F. Auerbach deconstruct the theory of the "essential father." They debunk the neoconservative myth of the essentialist theory, which ascribes an essentialist role to the father.

[146] Randles discusses the concept of "new fatherhood" that emerged in the U.S. during the late twentieth century. "New fatherhood" means that men were eager to construct a hybrid type of fatherhood that allowed them to be emotionally involved without sacrificing their traditional masculine identity or feeling emasculated. Accordingly, she writes that "[t]o meet demands for caring and emotionality without feeling emasculated or ceding authority, men claim masculine identities that merge dominant masculine symbols with feminine aspects of parenting" (520). Some of these strategies combine "sensitivity and toughness" and "draw[ing] on traits such as autonomy and athleticism" (520).

centric outlets and narratives proliferate, with patrifocal images, texts, and performances streaming into the cultural and commercial consciousness within and beyond North America" (2). In *The Corrections*, the next generation of fathers embodies this transition in male identity at the turn of the century. The text suggests a juxtaposition between aging fathers and younger ones, indicating that while old traditions may fade, new traditions can be established.

However, Franzen does not conclude the narrative without allowing the dominant voice to resurface as the century closes. Although Alfred has already lost his agency in the final chapter of the novel, we learn about his disapproving stance through Enid's late rite of passage. Enid is depicted as wrestling with her former self, one who felt obliged to obey her husband and condemn the immoral behavior of her son and partner/wife, and a new self that has gained agency and reflects on her previously inferior and conditioned self. The text reveals that this condemnation "didn't make her feel proud of herself." Moreover, she realizes at Chip's wedding that "it didn't make her feel good about her nearly fifty years of marriage, to think that if Alfred had been with her at the wedding, she *would* have found fault and she *would* have condemned" (*Corrections* 651). The italicized modal verbs underline her certainty in this conviction. Ultimately, the mother becomes an ally to behaviors that Alfred has consistently labeled as immoral and worthy of judgment, or even religious damnation. He spends his life refusing to accept and judging these behaviors in those around him, including his wife and children. Through Enid's internalized position, hegemonic masculinities reemerge at the narrative's conclusion, with previous notions of correction through patriarchal discipline now internalized by the female character.

This brings to mind the motel scene in which Alfred reflects on morality and punishment. Surrounded by immoral sexual acts, he concludes: "If nothing else, he had discipline. The power to refuse: he had this" (284). Shostak discusses the connections between manhood and discipline: "[A]s a young man, Alfred feels sexual desires that do not match his austere self-concept, he represses them with discipline and the 'power to refuse,' defining himself thereby as 'a man' […] and reflexively blaming others for any sign of moral weakness" (38). As noted in the previous subchapter, this blame is directed primarily at women. Ultimately, although his son Chip may not entirely reject the heteronormative expectations of the nuclear family, defined by a conservative Christian viewpoint, represented by the conservative father, he reformulates his path and position as a man in a heterosexual relationship. Overall, "Chip's character arch maps a movement from the anti- to the pro-domestic" (Jacobson 219). However, the novel leaves unresolved whether this transformation is completed or what exactly it entails for the future.

Similarly, Gary does not fully break away from established traditions and rules;

rather, he comes to terms with the fact that his identity as a man and father is shaped within the context of family life, community, and society instead of being solely defined by paternal lineage. It is important to reference Nicholas Manai's analysis of the character at this point. Manai identifies the moment Gary opens up to his wife and admits to experiencing depression as pivotal in his development. In contrast, Joseph Carroll finds that Gary continues to "surrender"[147] and submits to Caroline's authority (33), while Martin Hipsky "writes that Gary regains some 'autonomy,' but labels it 'ineffectual'" (33). Manai, however, views the confession and the subsequent sexual intercourse following Gary's surrender as transformative. He maintains: "The way Gary reasserts his autonomy after growing in self-awareness points out how the self's desires need to be satisfactorily fulfilled with interests and hobbies" (33).

Gary shifts his focus away from the constant effort to maintain hegemonic masculine power and towards desires that bring him personal satisfaction. Caroline is not represented as one of those horrific female figures that Alfred fears; instead, she is portrayed as a concerned and protective partner who addresses her suffering husband "in a lower, more tender voice" before "[s]he came over to him and knelt by the bed" (*Corrections* 271). The non-procreational sexual encounter that follows their initial moment of reconciliation manifests as an act of healing, allowing the two previously fighting parties to unite. In this transformation, Gary manages to distance himself from the constructed ideal of fatherhood by taking two significant actions that Alfred fails to accomplish: 1) Gary admits his weaknesses, and 2) he emotionally/sexually connects with his wife. In the last chapter, we catch a glimpse of an altered Gary who "return[s] to St. Jude with [his son] Jonah a few months after the catastrophic Christmas" (684) and genuinely enjoys the visit. Although he continues to argue with his mother over money and the sale of the house, the intensity of their disagreements has diminished: "He and Enid did bicker about money, but this was recreational" (648).

In the characters of Chip and Gary, whose views oppose Alfred's rigid perception of the female, sexuality, and conservative religious masculinities, we see the potential for transformation within these men. Jacobson argues—though she later takes a more critical

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[147] At the end of chapter three, titled "THE MORE HE THOUGHT ABOUT IT, THE ANGRIER HE GOT," the focus is on Gary, the oldest son, who experiences a seemingly cathartic breakdown. After more than a hundred pages of struggle, Gary finally opens up to his wife, Caroline, and admits to her and himself that he is suffering from depression. "'I surrender,' Gary said" and "as soon as he surrendered […] he not only no longer felt depressed, he felt euphoric" (272). On the one hand, this dramatic revelation marks a departure from traditional masculine expectations associated with fatherhood. However, it ironically suggests that distancing oneself from masculine ideals may result in submitting to feminine authority. This interpretation, in turn, aligns with the stereotype of the "horrifying female." Nonetheless, analyzing this complex male character solely through this lens would be too simplistic.

stance—that "*The Corrections*' hybrid domestic masculinity troubles or otherwise 'queers' conventional gender roles, spaces, and readings, particularly as they relate to men and homemaking" (219). Both Chip and Gary move away from Alfred's ideals and settle in a liminal or transitory state, reflecting the changing nature of fatherhood discussed by Podnieks in her anthology on fathers in twenty-first-century popular culture. The narrative challenges patriarchy by suggesting that a significant change is possible, although it may not be realized by Chip and Gary's generation, but rather by Millennials, Gen Z, or later generations—if it happens at all.

At the same time, *The Corrections* addresses ultra-conservative views on sexuality and complicates the understanding of heteronormativity. It portrays heteronormative rules and practices as subjective and biased interpretations of dominant socio-historical teachings from religion and philosophy. These teachings manifest in the institutionalized form of hegemonic masculinities, namely patriarchy. Part of this patriarchal ideology involves creating stereotypical narratives about women, which men are taught to either conform to or rebel against to maintain the masculine order in society. *The Corrections* suggests that these forms of masculinities are unsustainable in the future, as evidenced by the failures associated with the aging male body.

4.4 Old Age, Aging, Ageism in *The Corrections*

Alfred Lambert embodies a type of U.S. American masculinity that the novel suggests cannot stand the test of time, particularly in the guise of the "fallen father" (Shostak, *Fictive Fathers* 34). However, when considering the cultural and political developments since the publication of Franzen's famous novel, it becomes clear that social progress is not a linear journey. Hegemonic forms of masculinities find ways to persist. *The Corrections* captures a significant moment in U.S. history—the end of the twentieth century—marked by social, political, and economic changes that contribute to a sense of "crisis" in the white heteronormative aging male body. The narrative leaves open whether the toxic masculine behaviors and hegemonic ideals that the "father" seeks to pass on to his sons continue into the future. The characters of Chip and Gary, the hegemon's sons, remain ambiguous and subconsciously divided at the story's conclusion, which coincides with the death of the patriarch.

Nonetheless, the portrayal of the father and patriarch in decline—battling age-related illnesses that strip him of his power and privileges—renders the established concept of hegemonic masculinity unsustainable. Shostak contends that "Alfred's decline describes the flip side of the patriarch's hysterical claim to authority" (*Fictive Fathers* 38). Understanding Alfred's role as a male role model and the impact of restrictive societal gender expectations

on him, both physically and emotionally, necessitates examining him in the context of illness and old age, especially in contrast to the vital, strong-minded man he represents during healthier phases of life, as explored in earlier chapters of my study. Ultimately, the narrative pushes the old man into the spotlight.

A notable aspect of *The Corrections* is its exploration of disorder and death. The character of Alfred, who is sick and aging, is central to this narrative. He not only serves as the backbone of the story but also connects all the different elements within it, structurally holding the narrative world together, comprising both its stem and sides. As the patriarch, Alfred faces the challenges of aging while also serving as the puppet master who has a deep, arguably unshakable influence on his close family members, the network of bodies that surround him, and that he appears to control, at least until the struggles of aging begin to diminish his authority.[148] But the narrative also starkly juxtaposes a young and energetic Alfred with a dying Alfred. This contrast emphasizes that he is not just an elderly man afflicted with dementia and Parkinson's disease; he is a *man* grappling with the loss of memories and abilities that have come to define his masculine identity throughout life.

In this chapter, I will explore the depictions of illness and how masculinities are tied to images of death, dying, loss, and deterioration in old age. I will examine how these images correspond with and differ from the works by Roth and Updike. I suggest that *The Corrections* serves as another example that contributes to the overarching narrative of male aging by utilizing similar tropes and negative depictions of illness and old age, which are intertwined with the notion of "masculinity in decline." However, by portraying the aging patriarch as a major obstacle that must be overcome and foregrounding as well as focalizing the social realities faced by his wife and children, the perspective on male aging gains depth and diverges from other texts in this literary category. In this regard, *The Corrections* presents a more critical viewpoint, as it not only narrates but also challenges the established heteronormative gender order, giving voice to all characters within this fictional setup.

I propose a reading of Alfred that centers on aging masculinities, for it is through this lens that the narrative builds its social critique. Aging functions as a destructive force when coupled with structural oppressions associated with patriarchal values and hegemonic forms of masculinities. *The Corrections* reveals the intersection of aging and masculinities, as well as the power that hegemonic masculinities exert in U.S. society, through the accumulation of diverse voices and detailed depictions of the patriarchal network that Alfred

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[148] This feature calls to mind Philip Roth's famous retired puppeteer, Sabbath, who is "an enthusiastic reader of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche" (Diggory 49). He has "devoted his life as a professional puppeteer to the 'will to illusion'" (53) and serves as another King Lear in male aging literature. Additionally, he is a master manipulator of people (Roth *Sabbath's Theater* 125).

fails to maintain—the nuclear family. The text constructs the conservative order reflected in the nuclear family as a pathological condition that adversely affects both the main agent and his environment. In my reading of *The Corrections*, old age is not the illness that befalls Alfred and leads to his decline; rather, it is his conservative masculine ideology that serves as a main hindrance in his aging process.[149]

Looking Through an Aging Lens

To understand the intersection of aging and masculinities in the novel, it is pivotal to examine how aging is portrayed in literature and what loss and limitation signify within this context. In "Man, Interrupted" (2013), Katharina Zilles outlines a common scholarly observation regarding the representations of male aging in literature: "For aging men, traditional images of masculinity as based on (economical) productivity, virility and agency provide specific challenges to identity. As the aging man encounters the loss of social roles or physical abilities, his masculine self-identity needs to be reshaped and renegotiated" (213). This perspective suggests that male identity relies on performing a normative masculine social role in society. Once the ability to perform this role diminishes, the individual faces difficulties in recognizing himself[150] and is forced to renegotiate his self-perceptions and masculine values. Through her analysis of Coetzee's text, Zilles engages with research at the intersection of aging and masculinities, indicating that these categories should be studied jointly. She draws upon theories by Chris Gilleard, Paul Higgs, Susan Sontag, and Jean Baudrillard:

> At the intersection of masculinity and old age, a category of potential hegemonic affirmation and a category of potential marginalization interact. Loss of physical abilities, health and strength as well as bodily changes related to age(ing) are associated with a loss of a person's incarnate cultural capital, and numerous techniques and measures are offered to confront this 'decline' and prevent the old body from becoming invisible or marked as unattractive.

These men are at risk of disappearing from the social playing field altogether, having lost their "cultural capital" and their status as belonging to the "category of men," as Zilles elaborates with reference to Jeff Hearn (212). Consequently, it becomes increasingly important for aging men to either cling to these defining abilities or, if they experience a loss, to lament it bitterly. Examples from late twentieth and early twenty-first century literature

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[149] My analysis of aging masculinities in this chapter follows the arguments and observations I make in my 2019 essay "Masculinity Beyond Repair: Aging, Pathology, and the Male Body in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*."
[150] I am specifically referring to heteronormative definitions of the cisgender male, which in these narratives excludes gender-binary and trans men. Therefore, I will continue to refer to male representations as "he, him, his."

overwhelmingly show male aging in one-sided and loss-centered ways.[151]

Zilles' analysis includes a discussion of Julia Kristeva's concept of the "abject" and further explores theories surrounding the troubled self, as well as Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about "grotesque" bodies and the themes of otherness and othering of the elderly (212f). I have previously touched on these topics in my study, particularly in relation to Roth. Zilles elaborates that "[t]he tense and problematic relationship between the Self and the abject Other as hinted at by Kristeva is especially clear for the category of age(ing): aging being an inescapable process, the apprehension of becoming Other oneself is always part of the abjection of old age" (214). The aging body is perceived as "other" not only by others but also by the individual experiencing aging. This belief aligns will with Bakhtin's notion of grotesque or "unusual bodies" (214).

Zilles' conclusions strongly support the idea that aging is always experienced within social and cultural contexts, particularly in relation to gender. These contexts create dominant narratives that shape behaviors and reinforce stereotypical assumptions and expectations, which become internalized over time. Rüdiger Kunow highlights that "'old age' marks a subject position in which biology and culture, the corporeal materiality of human life and the set of representations which a community recognizes itself, intersect and interact in important ways" ("Chronologically Gifted?" 24). The social status and cultural perception of aging intersect with the bio-medical bodily reality of the aging or aged person, reinforcing the notion of the elderly as "other." In literature, representations of aging men often portray them as being closer to death than to life, as they are positioned outside of categorizations typically associated with vitality. The aged are constructed as outside of a life-oriented community/society. And *The Corrections* steps right into this practice of disconnecting the aging male body from his social setting.

Main character Alfred embodies the typical heteronormative white aging male found in late twentieth and early twenty-first century U.S. literature. This "American" man, whom Kimmel describes as a "self-made" man, is a primary beneficiary of and a firm "believer[…] in the American Dream" (*Angry White Men* 14). Alfred, the typical "self-made" man, is established as a dual character: 1) he is both young and vital, at the peak of his (working) life, and 2) an older individual, stricken by aging-related illnesses. As the novel progresses, the older Alfred is increasingly losing agency. In her study on dementia and masculinity, Sadie Wearing explores the narrative "disorder" embedded in Franzen's text,

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[151] See Alex Hobbs' *Aging Masculinity in the American Novel* (2016) for a comprehensive list of male texts that lament the losses associated with constructed notions of "masculinity in decline." Among the writers Hobbs examines are Philip Roth, John Updike, Cormack McCarthy, and Don DeLillo. Hobbs highlights how their late texts are primarily concerned with the loss of libido "and the distress and anxiety that can ensue from this loss" (xxii).

particularly through illness metaphors like dementia. She argues that "although it [the novel] does reproduce problematic tropes of abjection and disgust in relation to the character with dementia, it also raises key questions about the nature of self-hood for everyone, linking the person with the condition to others" (44). "The collapse of social meaning," Wearing goes on to conclude, "finds public expression in the narrative of dementia" (44). With this argument, Wearing points to the function of illness metaphors, calling to mind Susan Sontag's groundbreaking work, *Illness As Metaphor* (1978). Subsequently, she emphasizes the constructed nature of the narrative and its functionalities within what she understands to be "'post postmodern' fiction which utilizes a kind of 'knowing' realism. […] It is not formally experimental, but it is a world understood as materialized through language (figuration)" (47). Finally, Wearing questions whether the narrative envisions or represents a "post-patriarchal" possibility by coupling masculinity and aging, or aging-related illnesses, here in the form of dementia.

Wearing presents compelling points in her analysis of the novel, particularly regarding how the characters are bound to Alfred in both health and sickness. I agree with her claim that "the utilization of multiple perspectives on the condition [dementia], stress[es] the interrelated questions of care, autonomy, and dependency" (44). The depictions of Alfred as a sick and old man undermine the foundations of an ancient order that is manifested in the patriarchal reign of the heteronormative dominant father. In this context, dementia serves as a figurative tool to visualize growing chaos and to convey a sense of disarray within the universe. Wearing remarks that the loss of language in the novel is tied to the loss of self; she observes that "Alfred Lambert is struggling to hold on to a thread of thought, to remember what he is doing and how the sentence that he has started with the words 'I am' should finish" (47). She highlights the opening chapter, "ST JUDE," where Alfred and Enid are introduced as they confront the battles of old age in their suburban home.

Wearing also draws on Susanne Rohr's observations on symbolism in *The Corrections*. She notes that "dementia operates on both a narrative and allegorical or metaphorical level as a 'symptom' of a more general decline. The story of Alfred is also the story of millennial US-culture (understood as requiring economic and cultural 'correction')" (49). Rohr's interpretation aligns with Nathan K. Hensley's general observations on allegory in Franzen's text, as discussed in chapter 3.1. However, it is essential to also consider social correction in this context. In contrast, Wearing's intersectional approach highlights the negative tropes of aging and illness metaphors in relation to masculine identity, thereby exposing the influence of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinities on a larger socio-cultural scale. Patriarchy resurfaces as a major factor in shaping culture.

While Wearing prioritizes the analysis and figurations of bio-medical aging, particularly relating to dementia and its implications for community and gender, I aim to foreground critical masculinities and explore the aging protagonist through a masculinities-focused lens. In the following two sub-chapters, I will look at both the bio-medical components of aging as presented in *The Corrections* and the larger allegorical meanings of the text. My goal is to understand the intersections of aging and masculinities within this fiction. I argue that an interpretation of the aging protagonist is incomplete without considering aging as a gendered experience that occurs within a socio-cultural environment. Consequently, the narrative reveals various ways to interpret negative metaphors of aging, blending both narrative and allegorical dimensions.

Limits, Losses, and Viral Threats

The losses that Alfred experiences are numerous.[152] In the opening chapter, "ST JUDE," which is the second shortest at just eleven pages in the 2002 paperback edition, the narrative presents a concise accumulation of the limits and losses that come with aging and illness. I explore the portrayal of aging and masculinity in more detail in my published essay, "Masculinity Beyond Repair," but a key foundation is laid in the novel's opening chapter, "ST JUDE." Though brief, it powerfully introduces Alfred Lambert as an elderly man shaped by loss, illness, and disconnection from his former self. This discourse is heavily influenced by decline narratives, echoing Laceulle's observation that, over time, "aging has predominantly become a biomedical health issue, which enforces its association with decline, dependency and nearing death" (14). Negative language— "cold," "madness," "disorder"—frames old age as pathological, setting the tone for the novel's bleak vision of late life and foreshadowing Alfred's eventual personal and familial breakdown.

In *Intersections of Ageing, Gender and Sexualities* (2019), Andrew King et al. argue that "[r]epresentations matter because they shape discursive possibilities: what can be imagined and what actions seem possible and viable" (65). Their intersectional approach to aging calls for productive changes, but it also reflects a long-standing tendency to portray aging negatively, often associated with notions of time and fading vitality. Such narratives have historically defined and worsened the living conditions of the elderly, while also contributing

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[152] Parts of this and the following two chapters in my study of *The Corrections* build on material previously published in my article, *"Masculinity Beyond Repair: Aging, Pathology, and the Male Body in Jonathan Franzen's The Corrections"* (2021). While the arguments and textual analyses presented here have been significantly revised, expanded, and reframed in the broader context of this dissertation, certain passages—particularly those concerning Alfred Lambert's representation, the "I—" sentence structure, and the symbolic use of darkness and the sea—draw on earlier formulations from that essay. These chapters also incorporates and further develops academic theory on aging and critical masculinities introduced in the essay. Elements from the essay, such as the *ping pong* analogy and the portrayal of the wife as a guerrilla figure, reappear and are further elaborated in this and the following chapters.

to ageism. The negative stereotype of the "smelling" or "smelly" senior, reminiscent of Roth's depictions of the leaky body and Kristeva's concept of the abject body, is evident in the introductory passages of *The Corrections*. Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick explain that this type of imagery "must be understood in terms of a historically-formed 'disgust function', through the development of a heightened sensitivity about bodily demeanour and functions as part of civilizing processes, as well as through the dynamics of the power struggles between the established and outsiders" (5). Alfred Lambert's body, like those of Nathan Zuckerman and Ben Turnbull, exemplifies disorder pertaining to physical and mental abilities. These male bodies are often constructed in opposition to an able-bodied cultural ideal.

The leaky body is just one of many stereotypical images that have come to represent the aged over time. Aging studies scholars generally agree, looking at a more recent span in history, that "[i]n the late nineteenth century in the United States aging began to be seen as a period of decline, weakness and obsolescence" (6). These negative tropes permeate much of recent U.S. American history, including the twentieth century. The increasing idealization of youth during industrialization, along with the growing medical focus on the aging population, significantly contributed to the construction of such predominantly negative images (6ff). It was only around the 1960s that the necessity emerged to introduce positive representations of aging and old age to combat the largely negative discourse (6). In a masculinities-related context, for instance, critics speak of the "Viagra revolution,"[153] in which a turn to more affirming and life-centered imaginings of male aging and sexuality was marketed (Ferrero Camoletto 210). This shift, however, is not unproblematic either.

Cultural narratives play a crucial role in shaping how marginalized identities—such as aging men—are perceived, often influencing self-conception on a largely unconscious level (Laceulle 64ff). Within this framework, Franzen's novel reinforces enduring negative tropes about male aging through its portrayal of Alfred, whose body is rendered as frail,

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[153] In "Questioning the sexy oldie: masculinity, age and sexuality in the Viagra era" (2019), Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto explores the changing perception of the aging male following the invention and early marketing of Viagra, which was approved for medical use in 1998 and is now used to treat male impotence. Following these medical developments, Ferrero Camoletto explains that "[s]o-called 'Viagra studies' have emerged as one of the research streams investigating men's ageing and sexuality within a medicalised frame. The advent of Viagra has triggered a radical transformation in the perception of age-related changes in male sexuality. In the pre-Viagra era a narrative of male sexual decline prevailed, in which ageing was associated with an inevitable reduction of erectile ability. Another marginal narrative was available, the 'progress' narrative, which interpreted the effects of decreased erectile ability as an opportunity to live a sexuality less centered on penetrative potency and to be open to experimentation with different sources and forms of sex. In the Viagra era both these narratives have largely been replaced by the sexy oldie narrative, which follows a forever-functional imperative that connects healthy ageing with lifelong sexual activity. Progress is reinterpreted in terms of the restoration of youthful sexual skills or of the enhancement of hitherto never attained sexual performances" (210-11).

deteriorating, and out of control. The unsettling tone is established from the outset by a third-person narrator who fixates on small, ominous details surrounding the Lambert household. "You could feel it: something terrible was going to happen," the narrator warns in the second sentence (Corrections 3). In this eerie atmosphere—charged with "madness," decay, and "the smell of gasoline" still lingering in the air (3)—Alfred is introduced as a deeply troubled presence. The gasoline scent also becomes linked to the "wicker love seat," which, as later revealed, marks Alfred's final, failed attempt to create something meaningful before his decline.

> He'd been repainting the love seat since Labor Day. She [Enid] seems to recall that the last time he's painted the furniture he'd done the love seat in two hours. Now he went to his workshop morning after morning, and after a month she ventured in to see how he was doing and found that all he'd painted of the love seat was the legs. (5)

The pessimistic outlook is combined with the image of a "love seat" that Alfred repaints. This raises the question of whether there is a potential for renewal or restoration of the marital bond, which seems to have deteriorated, as indicated by the overwhelming negativity of the scene. Furthermore, the decline of the male body is represented not only through the negative imagery but also in the depictions of fatigue and physical struggle that are directly associated with Alfred (3).

In *Exploring Aging Masculinities: The Body Sexuality and Social Lives* (2016), David Jackson investigates the experience of loss related to manhood in old age. Although his research primarily focuses on the UK, his findings are relevant to the U.S. and other Western cultures as well. "Aging men's lived situations," he observes, "often include the experiences of loss, physical disruption and failure. As well as losing social power and status, […] in the changing family and workplace, aging, retired men are typically seen as economically non-productive" (4). This shift reflects an increasingly post-patriarchal state, one that emphasizes and celebrates diversity while showing less tolerance for hegemonic power structures. As the retirement experience expands due to increased life expectancy, aging is increasingly identified as a precarious state (4). In *The Corrections*, we learn that despite Enid's efforts, she "couldn't get him [Alfred] interested in life," except for his painting project (*Corrections* 5).

> When she encouraged him to take up his metallurgy again, he looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. When she asked whether there wasn't some yard work he could do, he said his legs hurt. When she reminded him that the husbands of her friends all had hobbies […] Alfred acted as if she were trying to distract him from some great labor of his. (5)

The painting project is presented, at least from Enid's perspective, as the sole activity Alfred is involved in during this late point in his life. The narrative portrays him as a tragic figure, an "old man" who has given in to his physical ailments and the pain in his legs. He has become a victim of demoralizing physical and social circumstances that prevent him from

completing a "simple" painting task successfully.

Alfred's former passion for conducting metallurgical experiments in his basement, which once kept him busy and distracted from family troubles, no longer sparks his curiosity or drives him. The "old man" has become a ghostly presence, physically diminished and moving slowly from one resting place to another, shifting from chair to chair. He has not only become bodily impaired, but has also lost his once highly valued work ethic (see 3.3.). His former basement "workshop that housed Alfred's metallurgical lab […] was now home to a colony of mute, dust-colored crickets, which, when startled, would scatter across the room like a handful of dropped marbles […]" (8-9). The state of the lab as well as his bodily condition are depicted as shameful, outlined in juxtaposition with a long-gone self: "[T]he quadrupled notebook in which the latest entry in Alfred's hand dated from a time, fifteen years ago, before the betrayals had begun" (9). The gradual loss of abilities is portrayed as bodily deceptions and evokes the concept of body-mind dualism. Shostak explains this duality:

> Post-enlightenment patriarchy depends on the order of reason, resting on the Cartesian opposition of the body to consciousness and the implied hierarchy of mind to material being. When Franzen deconstructs that opposition in Alfred's perceptions and his control over his body, as he descends into the hallucinations wrought by his disease, the novel also deconstructs the masculinist order Alfred seeks to uphold. Alfred's illness, that is, weakens the male body, making it vulnerable and visible. (*Fictive Fathers* 39)

The novel suggests that the aging body often betrays the mind, which reflects notions of Reason and intellectualism.

The scene described is rich with time references and serves as a memento mori—a reminder of mortality. The narrative reveals that "[s]omething as daily and friendly as a pencil still occupied the random spot on the workbench where Alfred had laid it in a different decade; the passage of so many years imbued the pencil with a kind of enmity" (9). These temporal elements magnify Alfred's growing limitations and illustrate how much he has diverged from his younger self, one from "a different decade" who did not see a simple pencil as a threat and may ultimately have succumbed to insanity. Throughout this first chapter, the narrative frequently hints at the vital man Alfred once was. Jesús Blanco Hidalga emphasizes the significance of Alfred's profession, which is closely linked to his experimental work in the basement. As a railway inspector, Alfred is responsible for maintaining the infrastructure (Hidalga 148ff). In *The Corrections,* infrastructure stands for multiple intersecting elements: community, mobility, communication, and prosperity, as well as directive, lawfulness, and order.

The family home, represented as a single-family house situated in suburbia, plays a

pivotal role in the Lambert universe and in maintaining its social order. Hidalga suggests that "the container stands for the contained" (137). Thus, the disintegrating state of the house mirrors the disintegrating state of its inhabitants and, more broadly, the disintegration of the nation at the turn of the century. While the novel features several other important locations both within and outside of the U.S. that contribute to each character's self-realization and development, the family home, along with its value and discussions about renovations and disposal, consistently recurs in each character's storyline. Returning to typical features of decline narratives, Hidalga observes how this bleak depiction of physical space mirrors "the fragmentation of the Lambert family" (137). The house, therefore, can be interpreted as a synecdoche, symbolizing the social order and the gender power dynamics that are crucial for maintaining the symbolism of the nuclear family. The nuclear family and the American home embody class, status, and orientation, which are inherent in the image of Alfred's (and Enid's) fading heteronormative ideals.

Keith Wilhite explores the significance of suburban homes within the context of globalization, focusing on developments from the late twentieth century. He illustrates his point through the character of Alfred, the homeowner: "To own a suburban home is to be a shareholder in the patriotic project of nation building. In the novel, Alfred cannot disentangle his quest for privacy from his sense of identity, and the house he refuses to sell functions as a last redoubt against the advanced stages of the Parkinson's disease that threatens to divest him of mind and body" (630). Wilhite further explains that this home/house-centered ideal is fading in light of millennial trends: "The childless yards and 'empty bedrooms' of St. Jude are a reminder that the 1950s era of 'sitcom suburbia' has passed" (628). This shift reflects broader societal changes, revealing how revolving lifestyles and values are reshaping the concept of home in contemporary America.

The Corrections presents a complex network of voices and stories that enhance the multiplicity of interpretation. This ambiguity is constructed through the technique of "narrative correction" (Burn 102ff), which complicates the reading of individual scenes and passages by suggesting that each moment might be revised or "fixed" later on. The house itself is filled with ambiguity, alternating between being a site of repression and a place of safety, as indicated on the first page. The opening scene offers at least two potential readings of Alfred Lambert, the stereotypical white patriarch. On the one hand, he benefits from the structures he helps maintain in his youth; on the other hand, in old age, he is rendered *other* and pitied. The language that describes the elderly Alfred highlights his physical impairments and age-related disabilities, which later manifest as Parkinson's disease, framing him as a victim. In contrast, scenes depicting a younger version of him portray him as a potential aggressor, suppressing his family members, who are the individual components of his

constructed network.

The loss of Alfred's power to dominate in old age is evident from the first page in the desolation surrounding him. The house is in disrepair, and the children are nowhere to be found, as noted by Wilhite. It becomes apparent that the three Lambert children are always out of reach, constantly on the move, and unavailable. This evokes notions of an overwhelming greying population and the implied decline of suburban culture, as well as assumptions about heteronormativity and procreation as discussed by Lee Edelman in *No Future*. Though Alfred Lambert has three children, the narrative questions whether these children will follow in their father's footsteps.

The book begins with an aged Alfred, a character who seems to be victimized by the bio-medical processes of aging. However, there is also an implication that Alfred could be a potential threat, resembling "a descendant of King Lear" (Shostak 38). He may rise once more from his "great blue chair in which he'd been sleeping since lunch" (*Corrections* 3) to instill terror and anxiety among his subjects. This narrative suggests that his deteriorated state is not solely a result of bio-medical aging; it is also profoundly influenced by his internalized self-perceptions within patriarchal social structures. Shostak observes: "Early on, from Enid's perspective, he [Alfred] is described as a 'governing force' whose arguments consistently press 'the constitutional basis of the tyranny's legitimacy'; with telling irony, however, the description appears within a passage describing Alfred's growing lack of 'the neurological wherewithal' to manage their household" (Shostak, *Fictive Fathers* 38). Teresa Requena Pelegrí identifies Alfred as a character in transition, shifting "from the performance of a normative hegemonic role to a subordinate one" (102). *The Corrections*, like *Exit Ghost* and *Toward the End of Time*, display the relational aspect of masculinities and how masculine categories are negotiated discursively. Different versions of masculinities emerge at various stages of life and within different social contexts and interactions. Once the holder of hegemonic power, Alfred is now reduced to a subordinated or marginalized masculinity, with aging serving as a key factor in this transformation.

Alfred's "great blue chair," an aged version of a royal throne, is represented in the famous dinner scene (analyzed in section 3.3) within Gary's "jail of Popsicle sticks" (*Corrections* 294) that "feature[es] a crudely made popsicle-stick electric chair" (Shostak, *Fictive Fathers* 44). In a nightmare that troubled Gary as an adult, he envisions his father "strapped into an electric chair" and then "on the execution-room floor […] twitching and boiling—" (*Corrections* 269). Shostak interprets Gary's nightmare as "dream of anxiety and revenge" (45), noting that the nightmare occurs before the "jail of Popsicle stick" where Gary seeks recognition from his parents, competing with his younger brother, Chip. The revenge dream suggests a form of punishment for Alfred and references both Schopenhauer and Foucault

through the "metaphor of jail" (*Fictive Fathers* 40). From Gary's perspective, Alfred is deserving of "corrections" for his wrongdoings. The chair, therefore, holds multiple meanings. On the one hand, it symbolizes the power that the hegemon possesses during their reign—powers that can ultimately be lost. On the other hand, it implies that these dictatorial powers may not be legitimate and could be subjected to punishment if brought to court.

Alfred, the perpetrator or wrongdoer, emerges early in the narrative alongside Alfred, the aging and emasculated victim—the fallen hegemon. A pivotal moment occurs in the closing sections of chapter one, when Enid calls out from downstairs, "Al? What are you doing?" (*Corrections* 12). Meanwhile, Alfred stands in their bedroom, confused about the many open drawers he sees: "Alfred was standing in the master bedroom wondering why the drawers of his dresser were open, who had opened them, whether he had opened them himself" (12). This moment foreshadows Alfred's developing dementia, linking aging with illness. Wearing observes that this connection continues in a subsequent passage, where Alfred fails to answer Enid's question and merely utters: "I am—" (12).[154] He seems lost in the metaphorical woods of his fading memory: "[W]hen he was taken by surprise, every sentence became an adventure in the woods" (12). At the same time, Alfred is constructed as a scheming character, feeling antagonistic toward his wife and anxious about his waning powers: "He couldn't help blaming Enid for his confusion. For witnessing it into existence. For existing, herself, as a person who could have opened these drawers" (12). While the focus is primarily on his bio-medical decline, the underlying aggression stemming from Alfred's hegemonic masculinity recedes into the background, overshadowed by the pathology of aging.

In the following section, I will explore how masculinities, rather than aging, are equally associated with pathology in the novel. I want to show how these two concepts intersect in *The Corrections* to reveal the power structures affecting both the hegemon, who can no longer conform to the ideal, and the bodies that comprise his constructed network. Hegemonic masculinities, exemplified by the character Alfred, are presented as pathologies that contribute to the hegemon's downfall. This occurs because he fails to adapt his understanding of masculinity in response to his physical changes, resulting in a complete erasure of self. The narrative reflects a broader belief within critical masculinities that hegemonic masculinities are destructive for society as a whole and cannot be sustained in old age.

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[154] More on this passage in the next part of this study: "Hegemonic Masculinity as Pathological Condition."

Hegemonic Masculinity as Pathological Condition

The Corrections presents Alfred Lambert as a divided character, with a stark contrast between his younger and older selves. These two versions of Alfred are in conflict; his younger self embodies hegemonic ideals of masculinity, while in old age, his masculinity diminishes due to physical decay and the aging processes, rendering his masculine identity somewhat obsolete. However, this multi-layered narrative and its dynamic ambiguities suggest that the common view of aging as an experience that erases gender also requires "correction." The ongoing interplay between aging and gender, where one may temporarily fade into the background, implies that these two experiences are fundamentally intertwined. Simply examining masculinities in relation to the younger man overlooks the fact that the experience of normative masculinities persists. Older men continue to shape their self-understanding within the framework of constructed norms, often in opposition to societal ideals.

The patriarch, who has cultivated an environment of fear and restrictions throughout his life, does not suddenly abandon his rigid ideology in old age, even when confronted with the bio-medical consequences of aging. While ageist social structures may victimize him, the novel implies he remains a wrongdoer in the memory of his family members. This idea is demonstrated through various flashbacks that the narrative provides. Initially, the novel portrays Alfred predominantly as a sufferer of old age, particularly in the opening chapter where the character is introduced. However, from the very beginning, it also reveals that Alfred is not only engaged in a struggle with his aging body but is also, perhaps more intensely, waging a war against his wife, Enid. Consequently, I read Enid as an essential counterpart that defines the patriarch's hegemonic struggles as a pathological condition.

According to Zilles, "[a]ging—especially aging in the body—challenges masculine privilege" (213). In the first chapter of *The Corrections*, this loss of privilege is most evident in one of Alfred's most significant defeats, which calls to mind Kimmel's concept of aggrieved entitlement. The interplay between privilege and power, as well as the role of masculine entitlement in maintaining that power, is repeatedly illustrated through the dynamic between Enid and Alfred. While a younger Alfred can successfully fend off his wife's attempts to gain power, the aged Alfred can only marginally resist and clings desperately to a portion of hegemonic rule. The chapter concludes with a dramatic scene in which Alfred is overcome by his losses. He not only loses his train of thought but also experiences a complete disconnection from time, wandering into a "darkness" (12f) that ultimately "consumes" him. This moment is striking in the overall conflict between the married couple, as it foreshadows the story's outcome and Alfred's eventual defeat. In this imagined darkness—referring to the earlier-mentioned scene in the woods—he encounters his younger self as a boy and teenager. Wearing, in her interpretation of Alfred's struggle to

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find or recognize "himself" in the forest scene, contends: "This is a powerful invocation of confusion and the attempt to stave it off, to try to keep the 'darkness' of the loss of language from overtaking 'himself'" (48). Alfred is overwhelmed by his losses and longs to recover his youth.

The text illustrates a stark contrast between self and other, young and old, animated and idle, as well as wandering and stagnant. The younger version of the protagonist is depicted as running through the woods, the darkness, knowingly or unknowingly looking for "the clearing where Enid was waiting for him" (13). In contrast, the old man stands in the master bedroom, struggling to finish a sentence. He begins the sentence with "I am—" (12) to explain what he is doing in the bedroom upstairs, but after a lengthy stream-of-consciousness passage that elaborates on the "darkness," he concludes with "packing my suitcase" (13). This phrase, "I am packing my suitcase," figures as the full sentence in this scene. In a frantic moment of collecting and organizing, "Enid could hear Alfred upstairs now, opening and closing drawers" (12). By the end of the scene, and this chapter, he is fully packed, only to be "berated" by Enid, who loudly repeats: "It's *Thursday*. […] We're not leaving until *Saturday*" (13). This instance further illustrates the power struggle between the aging couple, with Alfred ultimately being corrected. The act of gathering and organizing symbolizes his attempt to restore order, which is overcome by the murkiness and discord he faces in the dark, allegorical forest.

This excursion into the woods symbolizes a loss of memory, purpose, and order, which ultimately leads to a loss of self. This loss is particularly significant as it coincides with the marital conflict between Enid and Alfred. Enid's actions serve as a correction, while Alfred experiences internal chaos. The passing of time and the life cycle are foregrounded when Alfred is depicted as a boy, a teenager, and an adult wandering into the woods. He discovers that the *man* Alfred was "betrayed" by a "darkness that didn't just exist but actively *consumed* the bearings that he's sensibly established for himself, lest he be lost" (13). This scene suggests that aging is to blame for the disruption of both body and mind. Stephen J. Burn interprets this scene more broadly as a manifestation of the search for identity and maintains:

> *The Corrections* is, at its core, an encyclopedia of the twenty-first century self, a theater Franzen has designed to bring the different conceptions of selfhood his characters draft to explain themselves to themselves into conflict. The drama is initiated by the first words that Alfred speaks on Thursday, September 30: 'I am—'. His unfinished sentence intimates that the attempt to articulate one's sense of self is a tentative, provisional quest that may ultimately prove elusive. (115)

Similarly, masculinities can be elusive because they are contextual and constructed relationally in a "state of play" (Connell, "Gender and Power" 184). Gender identities and hierarchies

are negotiated through interactions. Therefore, "the achievement of hegemonic masculinity occurs largely through discursive legitimation" (Messerschmidt and Messner 37-38). In the struggle for power, Alfred and Enid establish a gender order at a "local" level. This local level refers to constructed "gender regimes [that involve] […] the face-to-face interaction of families, organizations, and immediate communities" (40).[155]

Eventually, Alfred completes his sentence but is interrupted by Enid. The "bearings" or principles that he had carefully drafted for himself—a patchwork of philosophical, religious, and hegemonic beliefs about "mankind" or manhood—are consumed by a darkness. This darkness consists of "birds, silent deft darting things which he couldn't quite see in the darkness but which were so numerous and swarming in their hunger that it seemed as if *they* were the darkness" (*Corrections* 12). Out of this darkness emerges Enid, who serves as a distorted version of a safe haven. She puts him in his place and diverts his attention from this imagined loss of self. Her interruption is portrayed as a correction rather than an act of care. The loss of a masculine identity is tangled up with the notion of aging, which is depicted as an active force that causes harm and that makes loss both possible and visible.

Much later in the novel, just before the story transitions into the final chapter titled "THE CORRECTIONS," which portrays the hegemon's downfall and death, Alfred struggles to complete yet another sentence and fails. His son, Gary, takes him to a medical facility where his experiences with dementia and Parkinson's disease are studied and monitored. In a climactic scene, Alfred expresses distress and ultimately begs his son Chip to either take him away or end his life and relieve him from the misery of perceived confinement. The narrative then presents a list of potential sentence endings:

He opened his mouth, but the only word he could produce was 'I—'

> I—
> I have made mistakes—
> I am alone—
> I am wet—
> I want to die—
> I am sorry—

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[155] Messerschmidt and Connell reformulate the concept of hegemonic masculinity and distinguish local, regional, and global levels at which hegemonic masculinities are formed and operate. They propose that "instead of simply recognizing hegemonic masculinity at only the society-wide level, scholars should analyze empirically existing hegemonic masculin*ties* at three levels" (Messerschmidt and Messner 40). The scholars clarify that "within any level multiple and often conflicting hegemonic masculinities will be at play" (40).

I did my best—
I love my children—
I need your help—
I want to die—
'I can't be here,' he said. (643)

The initial phrase shifts from "I am—," which includes a specific verb form that clarifies the overall meaning, to a more vague "I—," signifying merely the experience of a first-person. The narrator then offers several possible sentence endings that reflect what Alfred potentially wants to express but is unable to. These endings, which allude to the inevitability of death, contain uncomfortable truths that would necessitate deep self-reflection, the acknowledgement of guilt and defeat, and the admission of vulnerability. Alfred cannot voice any of these thoughts to his son, or to someone else, that he is defenseless, at fault, and weak in both his son's eyes and those of another 'specimen.' Such an admission would challenge his perception of manhood.

The passage reflects on observations from critical masculinities about male emotionality, particularly focusing on "men's emotional inarticularity" (Robinson and Hockey 143). In *Masculinities in Transition* (2011), Victoria Robinson and Jenny Hockey explore male emotional vulnerability and highlight that "[t]raditionally, men have been seen in masculine ways: to 'master' and control fear in an instrumental fashion, or, to manage socially unacceptable and unruly emotions" (143). Vulnerability, often categorized as a weakness, threatens the dominant understanding of ideal masculinity among white males. As a result, hegemonic masculinities depend on maintaining a masculinely defined body, free of weaknesses, both mentally and physically, against which all other forms of masculinities are measured and defined as complicit, subordinate, or marginalized (Messerschmidt and Messner 38). Robinson and Hockey also observe that "[m]en learn to control their emotions so as not to show vulnerability, and many men 'perform' masculinity to hide any inner turmoil they may be facing, from other people. Their masculinity may be, then, all they have as a way of claiming self-esteem" (144).

Research in sociology and psychology indicates that admitting defeat and seeking help can be particularly challenging for cisgender men, tied to their notions of masculinities and gender.[156] Ramaeker and Petrie present a crucial finding, stating that "men who espouse traditional masculine norms have endorsed higher levels of psychological, interpersonal, and

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[156] In the 2016 study titled "The role of masculinity in men's help-seeking for depression: A systematic review," Seidler et al. examine the correlations between normative or hegemonic forms of masculinities and the reluctance to seek help, especially when afflicted by mental health problems. They explain that "[a]mong men, high conformity to traditional masculine norms has been correlated with less help-seeking behaviour and more negative attitudes toward seeking psychological treatments, with men repeatedly found to be half as likely to seek help for mental health concerns from a GP or mental health professional compared with women."

behavioral concerns, such as depression and anxiety" (515). They further note that "[m]en seek medical and psychological help less frequently than women," which is linked to their subscription to heteronormative masculine values (516). Alfred Lambert embodies a form of male angst regarding the display of weakness and vulnerability. His determination to preserve a flawless masculine image, mirroring his work ethic and will to resist sexual temptation, ultimately overshadows his need for human interaction, social connection, and care.

A scene from "AT SEA" discloses the restrictive masculine identities displayed in the novel and how these identities serve as a forceful preservative, preventing Alfred from adjusting to the bio-medical changes in his body and shedding the constructed responsibilities of a masculine, able-bodied individual. These convictions hinder him from finding a constructive way to cope with illness in old age. Aboard the Gunnar Myrdal, Alfred encounters a disturbing experience that offers an alternative interpretation of his masculine ideology as a neurotic compulsion that lurks just beneath the surface, exerting a violent hold on the character. The chapter opens by circling back to the theme of "darkness." The narrative transitions from the darkness of the woods to the darkness of the vast sea surrounding Alfred on the Gunnar Myrdal. From this uncanny maritime setting, the story delves deeper into the nautical world, outlining how Alfred feels endangered in light of a new "world order" (Hawkins 80). This new cosmic order does not merely involve a reformulation of gender roles and sexualities; it also demands a legal and cultural renegotiation of race relations, challenging whiteness in U.S. history and culture.[157] This aligns with Kimmel's observations that "[w]hite men of all classes benefit from a system based on racial and gender inequality" (xii). Alfred Lambert presents the typical beneficiary of this structural inequality.

The opening paragraphs of "AT SEA" describe the uncanny and chaotic circumstances that Alfred faces while confined to a small, "windowless" ship cabin. This suggests that Alfred's state of mind is in disarray, threatened by an indefinite "other."

> There was another world below—this was the problem. Another world below that had volume but no form. By day the sea was blue surface and whitecaps, a realistic navigational challenge, and the problem could be overlooked. By night, though, the

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[157] Burn conducts a thorough investigation into race and its perception within white (upper) middle-class American culture. He examines, on the one side, the direct allusion to Swedish economist Karl Gunnar Myrdal's theories on race and racism and notes that "Gunnar Myrdal is most famous for his enormous work, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), a study of race relations that argued that American democracy had failed to extend its ideals to its African American population" (111). On top of that, Burn also analyzes the ignorance of cruise guests to the changing cultural environment of the late twentieth century, noting that they "circulate, incestuously, within a closed system" (111). This analysis suggests the possibility of exploring how white hegemonic masculinities and, by extension, white supremacy are integrated into Alfred's "traditional" worldview and order.

mind went forth and drove down through the yielding—the violently lonely—nothingness on which the heavy steel ship traveled, and in every moving swell you saw a travesty of grids, you saw how truly and forever lost a man would be six fathoms under. (*Corrections* 277)

In her analysis of this scene, Anna Thiemann connects the images to Freud's psychoanalysis and explains in *Rewriting the American Soul* (2018) that "[t]he water, or unconscious, not only threatens to engulf those who go overboard—like Alfred does at the end of this chapter—but it also invades the ship, the embodiment of daytime sanity" (50). This passage, much like the woods, ties Nature to Alfred's uncertainties. The idea of nature as an opaque mystery relates to his understanding of gender, race, and sexualities, highlighting the philosophical position that nature poses a threat to Reason. This is akin to the female being seen as a threat to a man's domain of science and logic, as discussed in previous chapters of this study. Alfred, portrayed as a scientist, economist, rational thinker, the principled, faces the risk of loss of identity, being swallowed by the darkness of the sea. His established order is once again thrown into disarray. The world depicted in this passage reflects the changing future of post-war U.S. society, which is difficult for the falling patriarch to comprehend. Instead of merely representing old age, I interpret the confining principles of hegemonic masculinities and patriarchy as the heavy weights pulling Alfred down.

This passage is a mirror image of the motel scene from the same chapter, in which Alfred fears nighttime horrors and fends off temptations. In both scenes, depictions of masculinities are interlinked with the vision of a post-patriarchal state that fails to uphold the established moral order. The "men of ill-breeding and poor discipline" (283) that Alfred despises in the motel scene symbolize the utmost disorder. He views these men, along with the "women who chuckled and screamed" (283), as part of the problem—the "faults of humanity" (283). The aged Alfred, however, struggles to conceptualize and articulate the problem, as it becomes complicated by his perception of an aging self. He finds it difficult to express his sense of loss, which becomes less visible during the day. In both instances, Alfred constructs a relatively stable identity and presents a robust, seemingly stable body (in the aging example, the physical body is replaced by the stable frame of the ship). The novel reveals: "By day he felt like a man" (282-283). Yet, by night, the brooding begins, along with feelings and processes over which Alfred has no control. Ultimately, he envisions the loss of "a man" buried "six fathoms under."

The use of the indefinite article in "a man" suggests that the narrative does not refer to a universal understanding of mankind, interchangeable with humankind. Instead, it refers to *one* specific man who symbolizes a larger group of men, embodying a patriarchal system and outdated forms of hegemonic masculinities. The man faces a world that consists of mass but has "no form." Much like his children, who symbolize change, this world is still

in the process of becoming. The growing fears of masculinists during the women's liberation movement find expression in the fragility of the aging patriarch. The novel explores themes of erasure, culminating in man's permanent disappearance "six fathoms under." This phrase serves two purposes: 1) it is a wordplay on the expression "six feet under," directly alluding to death and burial with a maritime twist; 2) it refers to "the deep six" in nautical terms.[158] The deep six signifies, on the one hand, an underwater boundary that is impossible to return from, and, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* as a verb, it means "to submerge in water; […] to reject, abandon, conceal." These interpretations resonate with the bio-medical condition of the male character. Furthermore, the act of rejection suggests the potential for acceptance of something new. In that sense, the new order that Alfred, the chief representative of "man," fears—where he feels powerless and worthless—also presents opportunities for others.

Despite the transformative potential within the sea passage, apocalyptic images continue to emerge throughout this chapter, leaving Alfred in a state of dread. He observes that the world is in disarray, even though he cannot pinpoint the cause and consequences. Later in the novel, this idea is further developed, heightening the themes of danger and loss:

> As things pitched, so they trembled. There was a shivering in the *Gunnar Myrdal*'s framework, an endless shudder in the floor and bed and birch-panelled walls. A syncopated tremor so fundamental to the ship, and so similar to Parkinson's in the way it constantly waxed without seeming ever to wane, that Alfred had located the problem within himself until he overheard younger, healthier passengers remarking on it. (*Corrections* 277-8)

Alfred suspects that the problem he is facing is internal. Although Parkinson's disease is presented as a plausible explanation for his tremors, he contrasts his current uncertainty with the easy conclusions drawn by his younger self, who believes that there is a scientific explanation for the tremors. This understanding provides his younger self with peace of mind, allowing him to dismiss the notion that something was wrong with him. While the young Alfred is stable and grounded in his gender identity, he becomes unsettled by bodily changes that make the limits of that identity more apparent. This interpretation combines and builds on various scholarly attempts to understand this highly complex text. I argue that the patriarch carries significant meaning, illustrating how patriarchy and hegemonic masculinities are destructive not only for non-heteronormative male minorities but also for

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[158] In the *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang* (2014), Tony Thorne explains that "deep-six" has been used as a verb in American English to mean "to bury, dispose of. The verb form, which has been common in American speech since the 1950s, derives from the earlier noun form 'the deep six,' an underworld euphemism for the grave. The ultimate origin is nautical; burials at sea have to be made in water that is more than six fathoms deep" (122). Fathom is "a measure of length" and connotes "[t]he length covered by the outstretched arms, including the hands to the tip of the longest finger; hence, a definite measure of 6 feet" (*OED*).

those who uphold these norms, especially when confronted with aging-related disabilities.

Narrating the Female Predator

Enid and Alfred are portrayed as adversaries in a metaphorical game of Ping-Pong, maintaining their antagonism until the end. Their relationship is marked by microaggressions and veiled provocations. Their character developments contrast sharply: while Alfred experiences a steady decline, Enid is on an upward trajectory, and the narrative ending hints at the possibility of her liberation. Enid employs "guerrilla" (*Corrections* 6) tactics [159] throughout the story, which play a crucial role in her journey. The interactions of the young married couple (3.2), as well as their dynamics in old age, pave the ground for her emancipation. This form of liberation can only occur in the context of diminishing male power. Shostak sums up Alfred's decline as follows:

> As Alfred falls from his paternal power, from command of his reason and body, he is increasingly excluded from a sense of self. The model of society governing Alfred's endeavors and self-concept is mid-century American capitalism, with its devotion to the ownership of property gained by hard work and self-discipline—the clichéd furnishings of the American Dream. (*Fictive Fathers* 42)

The decline of the hegemon is influenced by various socio-political forces, with women depicted as capitalizing on societal shifts that make it increasingly difficult for Alfred to maintain his power. Alfred is portrayed as the aggrieved U.S. American man, belonging to a "predominantly white, male, and middle- and working-class sector [that] has been buffeted by global economic restructuring with its attendant job losses, declining real wages, and social dislocations" (Kimmel, *Angry White Men* 248). Additionally, Kimmel maintains that "[w]hile under economic stress, this sector has also seen its traditional privileges and status challenged by 1960s-style social movements, such as feminism, minority rights, and environmentalism" (248).

In this environment, Enid is designed as the key threat to Alfred's superiority, much like external forces that invade the family home, a role she naturally embodies as a woman. Although her attempts to challenge the patriarchal structure are not explicitly framed as feminist actions, they are reminiscent of a "civil war" between the sexes, illustrated by the well-known image of "the alarm bell of anxiety" (*Corrections* 3). This alarm bell signals a new era and reflects the crisis that has fueled men's liberation movements and highlighted masculine fragility. Additionally, it symbolizes the bodily decline of the aging male and represents another instance where aging and notions of masculinities intersect. Shostak

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[159] I detail Enid's guerilla tactics in my 2019 essay "Masculinity Beyond Repair: Aging, Pathology, and the Male Body in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*."

explains that "[t]he alarm bell peals the growing disorder of the parents' house as they age and as Alfred drifts increasingly into the Parkinsonism and dementia that presage his death" (*Fictive Fathers* 35-36). Ty Hawkins interprets the alarm bell as ringing in a "new world order…which stems from his [Alfred's] inability to narrate the nature of an America that no longer grounds itself in a material reality he can recognize" (80). This connects with Gabriela Spector-Mersel's theory on masculine scripts, which posits that the absence of a script impacts self-perception and identity formation in old age.

Spector-Mersel argues that the lack of a guiding narrative significantly impacts the old man, who can no longer navigate within the restrictive confines of hegemonic masculinities. In this context, bodily impairments hinder the performance of normative masculinities. The decline of physical stamina and virility, along with mental capacities related to memory and self-recognition, are aspects I have previously discussed with reference to Updike and Roth. These abilities are associated with the performance of an idealized masculinity, and their deterioration in old age due to bio-medical processes represents a form of failure and decline. Alfred's wisdom and his longing for a world of the past diminish, while the feminine, in the form of his wife, becomes dominant. Thus, Frederik Tygstrup observes the power shift: "It is under this new regime that he [Alfred] retires to the basement, the lonely workroom and the blue chair" (110). The blue chair, mentioned earlier, is an aged throne relegated to the cellar of the Lambert home. Tischleder notes that "[a]s a 'vision of the future,'…the chair also foreshadows what Alfred is unable to see—his bodily decline and dementia" (222).

The blue chair is a retirement gift for Alfred, given by himself. Tischleder emphasizes its sentimental value, noting that "[a]fter his retirement and before Parkinson's begins tightening its grip on him, he awarded himself this reassuring object" (209). However, the narrative portrays Alfred's chair in a negative light, describing it as "overstuffed, vaguely gubernatorial. It was made of leather, but it smelled like the inside of a Lexus. Like something modern and medical and impermeable that you could wipe the smell of death off easily, with a damp cloth, before the next person sat down to die in it" (*Corrections* 9). The allusions to a coffin are apparent, and death is depicted as an imminent reality. This imagery of an elderly person in a secluded space, associated with an object in which *they* are placed to die, reinforces negative stereotypes about retirement and care facilities.

But the chair, too, carries multiple meanings. While references to death and smell evoke thoughts of "Fourth Agers,"—the elderly that "are placed in the socially deeply devalued role of being frail and vulnerable dependent 'burdens', who only consume expensive care" (Laceulle 51)—the chair also taps into stereotypical ideas of U.S. American masculinities. The novel reveals these concerns regarding the blue chair:

> [Alfred] [...] wanted something really comfortable, of course, but after a lifetime of providing for others he needed more than just comfort: he needed a monument to this need. So he went, alone, to a non-discount furniture store and picked out a chair of permanence. An engineer's chair. A chair so big that even a big man got lost in it; a chair designed to bear up under heavy stress. (*Corrections* 223-4)

The terms "leather" and "Lexus" evoke ideas related to masculinities, highlighting a desire for something oversized, monumental, and enduring. This longing emphasizes a perceived loss tied to the concept of "masculinity in crisis" and the decline of social order. Ultimately, after a disagreement with Enid over the chair, Alfred resigns himself to his fate: "The chair was a monument and a symbol and could not be parted from Alfred. It could only be relocated, and so it went into the basement and Alfred followed" (12).

In "AT SEA," much like in "ST JUDE," Enid takes on the role of a fierce guerrilla fighter. She manifests as an eerie presence, executing hidden strikes that gradually undermine patriarchal authority. The chapter builds on initial assumptions established in "ST JUDE," portraying a slowly correcting power imbalance between Enid and Alfred that culminates in Enid's triumph by the story's end. Chapter four centers on Enid and Alfred's cruise ship voyage. The narrative features a chaotic back-and-forth style, employing frequent flashbacks and shifting focal points that intertwine the different stories of various characters across different times. Despite these shifts, the *Gunnar Myrdal* remains the geographical backbone of this section and "occupies a central position in *The Corrections*" (Thiemann 50). As the chapter progresses, all storylines and characters converge, only to diverge again toward the end, albeit with less intensity.

Similar to "ST JUDE," "AT SEA" begins with "the old man" (*Corrections* 277) amidst an impending disaster: a ship on the verge of collapse. The instability of the Lambert home, introduced in the novel's opening, is duplicated in the precariousness of the ship. This establishes the cruise ship as an uncanny environment, a great giant "slice[ing] open the black sea east of Nova Scotia" (277), with its stability called into question by suggesting that "[t]here was another world below" (277). This mysterious other world may pose a threat to the ship, its passengers, and beyond. Next, a disoriented Alfred is introduced, revealing the connection between the dilapidating material setting and physical limitations, hence alluding to the uncanny. Lastly, Enid is woven into the scene as a powerful force that mitigates the previous horrors of decay, both material and bodily.

In his study of heterotopic space in *The Corrections*, Marcel Thoene examines how a claustrophobic atmosphere is created in this chapter by uniting narrative perspective and geographical setting. He suggests that "the narrator, employing a zero focalizer, is the one who peeks into the Lamberts' stateroom and lays out to the reader the scene: an old man in a spooky, tight place, caught in disorientation in a heterotopian space that he cannot fully

grasp" (167). Thoene further explains that this obscure perspective provides the only insight into a windowless room. He defines the *Gunnar Myrdal* as "a space that reciprocally influences and is influenced by the characters that it contains and constructs" (167). I agree with Thoene and want to focus on Enid in my reading of "AT SEA." Enid is an essential part of this scene; therefore, I will outline how the novel portrays her as an active agent who shapes the space that she and Alfred occupy to her advantage. She strategically designs their shared space as part of the coup d'état that is implied and even promised very early in chapter one when the two characters collide for the first time. The passage in "AT SEA" reads:

> There was no porthole. A room with a view would have cost hundreds of dollars more, and Enid had reasoned that since a stateroom was mainly used for sleeping who needed a porthole, at that price? She might look through it six times on the voyage. That was fifty dollars a look.
> She was sleeping now, silently, like a person feigning sleep. Alfred asleep was a symphony of snoring and whistling and choking, an epic of Z's. Enid was a haiku. She lay still for hours and then blinked awake like a light switched on. Sometimes at dawn in St. Jude, in the long minute it took the clock-radio to flip a digit, the only moving thing in the house was the eye of Enid. (*Corrections* 278)

Similar to the first chapter, where aging Alfred "struggled to his feet and stood by the Ping-Pong table, listening in vain for Enid" (3), Enid is again portrayed as an unpredictable character who is best left unchallenged. She is responsible for trapping Alfred in a "dark metal box" (278) without windows, as she rejects the apartment with a porthole to save money during the planning of their trip. This portrayal recalls the depiction of the "deviant female," including witches, "whores," and "disobedient wives" who have historically constituted a "threat of disorder to the patriarchy" (Simkin 59).

  While young Enid is initially denied participation in financial matters (3.2), here, she is represented as headstrong and determined. She takes charge of financial calculations and ultimately makes decisions independently, without being patronized. She breaks away from the stereotype of the obedient wife. Moreover, as Alfred's mental capacities decline, Enid uses Reason to assess the situation, for she "reasoned" that the cost-benefit ratio was unacceptable. In many Western cultures, the ability to reason is traditionally attributed to dominant males. Enid's assertive takeover of financial decisions, coupled with Alfred's absence from the text in the moment of economic decision-making, highlights one of the significant losses for the patriarch: the ability to provide. The exclusive use of the female pronoun implies that Alfred is not included in the decision. His failure to reason and make choices represents a form of emasculation, especially for a man socialized in a post-war culture where "economic prosperity and the growth of suburbia continued to bolster the ability of middle- and working-class men to conform to the breadwinner ideal" (Currarino). The question Enid poses is rhetorical; it neither seeks nor requires an answer from Alfred.

In this instance, Alfred is depicted as obsolete and at fault, as Enid holds him responsible for her financial disadvantages in old age.

Franzen further develops the depiction of Enid as a guerrilla figure, alert and embodying a sense of combativeness, which was already established in "ST JUDE." While Alfred's sleep suggests a profound slumber that remains undisturbed by the noises that surround him and that he himself produces, Enid's characterization evokes the vigilance of a ninja—a wakeful warrior "feigning sleep." This connection to Japanese culture is underscored by portraying Enid as the personification of a "haiku," a three-lined, unrhymed poem defined by its precision and clarity. Most striking, however, is the closing line of this paragraph. Aboard the ship, far from St. Jude, Franzen abruptly returns the reader to the suburbs, flooding this remote location with the specific details of the couple's suburban life. Thoene, who interprets the ship as a heterotopic space, recognizes the conflation of cruise and St. Jude as a pivotal moment for Alfred to come to terms with his changing self (164).

While the ship offers Alfred a chance "to reflect on himself and his life" (164) and to explore what lies in the seemingly murky and terrifying "world below" (*Corrections* 277), it is Enid who continues to gain more control and thus undergoes a more significant transformation. The intertextual reference to Wallace Stevens' poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1917) adds depth to Enid's transformation. The line from the original poem, "The only moving thing was the eye of the blackbird" (Stevens 92), is altered to read, "the only moving thing in the house was the eye of Enid" (278). The blackbird in the first stanza of Stevens' poem, set against a white background "among twenty snowy mountains" (Stevens 92), reinforces Enid's watchful yet newly assumed superior position. The three-lined stanza itself, which might as well stand on its own, reiterates the precision of the haiku and completes this strategic combination of structural and figurative tropes, clearly illustrating the dynamic of supremacy within the confined space of the house.

Later in this chapter, *The Corrections* elaborates on the notion of "shamming sleep" (278), which Enid tries to perfect over time. The text employs language related to the animal kingdom, contrasting predators and prey to construct the characters as opposites. In this portrayal, Alfred is depicted as the predator, likened to a lion, while Enid assumes the role of the prey. This unexpected twist suggests that by consciously and willingly assuming the role of the prey, Enid holds sexual power over her husband. This depiction aligns with the *femme fatale* trope, portraying Enid as the scheming and manipulative woman who uses her sexuality to entice the male (Simkin 5ff). The narrative reveals that "in truth her [Enid's] passivity was calculated, because she knew passivity inflamed him" (*Corrections* 279). This strategy fits Enid's soldier mentality, which she exhibits throughout their marriage to achieve her desires without directly demanding them.

The discussion of the stock market is tied to Enid's marital fulfillment and follows the predator-prey metaphor. It is only after she finally becomes pregnant with the long-desired third child that "she got sloppy and talked about the wrong thing to Alfred" (280). Her misstep is rooted in her euphoria over this accomplishment. Ironically, *The Corrections* contrasts Enid's unsuccessful attempts at gaining professional recognition—"she was a bright girl with good business skills" (279)—with her growing ability to gain power through manipulation, as there is little benefit in communicating with the dominant antagonist, or, as suggested, the predator.

Enid's desires are twofold, as the text suggests. She craves some form of sexual activity; however, when her desires are directly revealed, sexual gratification is framed as "self-deception" or as "memories (which also now curiously seemed like self-deceptions) of the early years when he'd been mad for her and had looked into her eyes" (279). Her feelings of physical attractiveness and "the loving kindness of other couples" she observes often leave her "frightened and [a]shamed" (279). These emotions are overshadowed by the animalistic urges that appear to dictate their relationship, which is primarily determined by Alfred. Moreover, Enid feels she cannot fulfill her marital duties without bearing children: "She'd always wanted three children. The longer nature denied her a third, the less fulfilled she felt in comparison to her neighbors" (279). Her role as a "successful" mother and wife—and thus a valuable woman—needs validation from an external source, specifically "the neighbors."

The power struggles explored in *The Corrections* parallel the decline of the patriarchal figure. As Alfred's authority diminishes, Enid's power increases, and the text envisions a scenario where the roles of predator and prey are reversed. Before the animal analogy reveals Enid's agency, the novel presents Alfred in a diminished role: "Alfred in middle age had invited such venial deceptions. A decade-plus of marriage had turned him into one of the overly civilized predators you hear about in zoos, the Bengal tiger that forgets how to kill, the lion lazy with depression" (279). It is against the backdrop of this image of failure and loss of authority that Enid, a formerly subordinated character, assumes power.

The introductory chapter sets the stage for understanding the relationship between the married couple, while "AT SEA" delves deeper into their intimate bond during their journey through life. The geographical travels of the characters mirror the intra-textual development of their relationship and the quest-like voyage of the reader through the text. The middle chapter functions as the *z-axis* of the narrative, a term introduced earlier in reference to Alfred's unique self-explorations. According to Thoene, "the z-axis, which opens up an additional spatial dimension, functions as a tool that helps carve out the self in relation to one's personal biography and spatio-cultural background" (164). This observation

holds true for both Alfred and Enid when considering the characters on a plot level. When we view the book as a physical object, however, this chapter emerges as its focal point, thereby increasing its significance. The middle section, which carries the most weight, depicts the crumbling power of hegemonic masculinities by giving insights into the deeper dimensions of the couple's relationship. The text structurally emphasizes the systemic shift occurring as we enter the twenty-first century. Gender power dynamics are renegotiated at a local level, which has the potential to influence *regional* and *global* contexts.

The final sentence of the novel concludes the power struggle by portraying Enid's desire for "transformation" after Alfred's burial: "She was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life" (*Corrections* 653). Critics have noted the potential irony in this statement. On a character level, it is difficult to imagine significant changes in the life of an aging widow who has also been shaped by heteronormative ideology. Some critics argue that the novel even undermines the hopeful changes implied at the end. This sense of hopelessness is rooted in the rigidity of the system from which the Lambert microcosm arises, a system that it simultaneously reinforces through varying degrees of participation. Nonetheless, Enid is presented as a resilient and resourceful character, described as a supposedly evil, scheming female agent who continually tests the powers of the hegemonic structures. In this sense, the narrative resorts to stereotypical sexist depictions of the female, such as the image of the "succubus" in "AT SEA," who attempts to "force" oral sex on her unsuspecting husband (321-322). However, what begins as an intimate scene escalates into the depiction of domestic rape, reinforcing the idea that female behavior once again must be corrected—albeit in a cruel manner, through physical punishment and violence. The narrative plays with sexist stereotypes of the female and, at times, suggests that these stereotypes are reappropriated as weapons against patriarchy. Thus, the final sentence loses its ironical value and instead signals a more serious attempt at a new beginning.

The network depicted in the narrative engages in small acts of rebellion that serve as a critique of Alfred Lambert, who embodies the archetype of the "old white man"—a representation of the Baby Boomer generation. In *The Corrections*, Alfred is conceptualized as a complex character who embodies a conservative masculine ideal. He strives to uphold his strict principles of order and to pass them on to his children, particularly his sons Chip and Gary. Alfred's determination to uphold this form of hegemonic masculinity—one that he himself can no longer embody—prizes work ethic and honest labor, fitting neatly within the suburban post-war ideal of the United States. At times, this rigid masculinity is depicted as outdated, while at other moments, it appears unyielding. As he ages, the patriarch grapples with the limitations of his masculine powers. He struggles to adapt his self-perception and his role as a man in relation to his wife and children, ultimately preventing him from creating

a healthier and more productive environment for his family at the dawn of old age. For the aging patriarch, conventional masculinity does, in fact, reach its conclusion with old age. He clings to an idealized version of youth that is increasingly out of touch. While the novel suggests that a post-patriarchal future may be possible with the decline of the patriarch, it does not consistently critique the principles and behaviors of the "old white man," and in doing so may deny other characters a fully transformative experience by the end, with the notable exception of Enid.

The Corrections remains a complex narrative that challenges interpretation through its intricate structure and themes. It explores the intersections of aging masculinities, placing *The Corrections* within the category of male aging literatures. At its core, the story revolves around the figure of the white aging hegemon, representing a network of interconnected characters that circulate around the aging protagonist. While the narrative amplifies the voices of other characters within this hegemonic structure—a notable distinction from the works of authors like Updike and Roth—Alfred Lambert remains the main component of the Lambert universe, a figure that others seek to either escape or reconcile with. Ultimately, *The Corrections* unravels the structural oppressions of patriarchal and hegemonic family constructs, suggesting that these dynamics extend to the broader societal level, akin to the nation-state. Alfred's patrimony is called into question and openly rejected, even though his dominant influence appears difficult to shake off. Enid Lambert, Alfred's "old" wife and later widow, discovers her liberation from his oppression only through his disability and death. The narrative implies, from a cynical perspective, that meaningful change can only occur when the representative of this hegemonic order is completely erased. On a more positive note, *The Corrections* challenges the romanticized image of the solitary "old white man," a figure that largely dominated literature during that period. Finally, it underscores the (self)destructive aspects inherent in the ideology of the heteronormative post-war father. This father figure is rendered as unsustainable.

5. Conclusion: Reforming the "Old *White* Man"

> "It takes courage to say no to martial rhetoric and the authority of ignorance.
> It takes courage to be gentle and kind" (Burke 45).

Literary criticism operates at the crossroads of fact and fiction. And these two sides constantly spill into each other. The literary depictions of men and masculinities, whether they imagine new dimensions or mirror existing realities, respond to cultural processes and the ways we view ourselves and others in the world. Some of these representations are subversive; they foreground and promote diversity and inclusivity. Some remain static and reject developments away from constructed heteronormative ideals. These are texts that need to be challenged and examined from critical social positions. Nonetheless, all of them provide interpretations of masculinities that acknowledge established gender power structures and the hierarchies that arise from these negotiations. Hence, it is crucial to understand both the historical contexts influencing cultural representation and the structural elements that shape these images. Examining normative masculinities alongside aging, for instance, involves merging hegemonic and marginalized identities into a single framework, rather than strictly separating these categories that theoretically distinguish the powerful from the powerless.

Limited Masculinities demonstrates how aging masculinities are configured in key turn-of-the-century novels, specifically John Updike's *Toward the End of Time*, Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost*, and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. In my study, I identify narrative characteristics that distinguish these literary works from other genres and subgenres in the American tradition. On a textual level, these narratives provide valuable insights into the struggles faced by aging men, placing the "old man" at the heart of the narratives and focalizing the aging male voice. They examine old age hardships, highlighting bodily issues and the ways in which old age limits individuals in social environments that structurally devalue aged bodies. Common themes include physical impairments and illness, the loss of sexuality and sexual prowess, the challenges posed by spaces that are not accommodating to increasingly immobile bodies, and the lack of care and social support.

On the extra-textual level, viewed from a critical social position as provided by the MeToo movement, these texts reveal cultural practices that uphold the white, male, and fit body as the unspoken norm against which all other bodies are measured and judged. Consequently, these bodies are defined and define themselves in opposition to this constructed ideal. When analyzed through the intersecting framework of aging studies and critical masculinities, the selected texts highlight society's shortcomings in providing cultural scripts for aging individuals to redefine their masculinities in old age outside of the limiting

perspective of decline and death. Thus, narratives about "old men" illustrate the destructive and untenable nature of hegemonic masculinities, emphasizing the difficulty of maintaining a constructed ideal that many men strive for but few achieve in their lifetime.

In his 1963 discussion of the "normal," Ervin Goffman describes a type of normative U.S. masculinity—an "ideal" or "standard"—"against which almost everyone falls short at some stage in his life" (128). This early definition, as scholarship suggests, continues to influence both academic and public discourse, as the notion of a "traditional masculinity" remains prevalent. In the media, regardless of the ideologies tied to various organizations, whether left, right, or center, the term "masculinity" is still predominantly equated with a singular and static version referred to as "traditional masculinity." This archetype of the traditional male—often left undefined—largely corresponds with Goffman's portrayal of the ideal American "man," who is a "young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports" (128). Contemporary scholars of critical masculinities would challenge such a narrow definition, as it excludes important discussions of hegemonic masculinities on local, regional, and global stages. The controversial debates surrounding R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and the resulting reformulations offer alternative perspectives that move away from the misleading idea of a traditional and singular hegemonic type. Despite the advancements made in scholarship, this normative masculinity summed up by Goffman during a time when academic inquiries into masculinities were emerging continues to be upheld in society as a desired ideal.

This ideal, then, manifests as a barrier, hindering the aging male from creating a version of masculinity in their later years that does not equate to failure. Leading aging studies scholars Kriebernegg and Maierhofer caution that "[i]conographies and representations mark changes in social and cultural perceptions and have very real consequences in terms of social, political and cultural practice" (9). Their early twenty-first-century observations echo the concerns raised by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Coming of Age* (1970) regarding male aging and the practice of *othering* through cultural representation. Along those lines, Hanne Laceulle's study on life narratives that depict aging and old age outlines the significant impact of cultural narratives, which often become established as master narratives. These narratives are ingrained in the collective consciousness of society and shape how the elderly perceive themselves within cultural discourse. They influence many aspects of public and private life, from "internalised prejudices" (Reeve 81) and self-devaluation to matters like pensions and urban planning that accommodate the needs of the elderly and disabled.

Bart Keunen suggests that "[t]he building blocks of narratives do not consist of logical proofs or empirical observations but of consecutive actions and states of things. At

the heart of this form of reasoning are mental images that are interconnected on the basis of spontaneous expectations" (Keunen 5). The fictions of aging masculinities conform to the general expectations that readers have regarding old age and the supposed decline of normative manhood. These narratives, along with the images they present, are carefully constructed over time and feed into our assumptions about what Simone de Beauvoir described as the "myths and clichés" surrounding the "elderly man as someone who is different, as *another being*" (3). Grounded in the perpetual reiteration of monolithic stock narratives that continue to reproduce stock characters, aging studies critically examine literary representations for portrayals of masculinities in old age that diverge from established master narratives. These fixed imaginings typically depict the aging male as either a "white-haired and venerable Sage" or an "old fool," who is socially and culturally positioned "outside humanity" (4). This raises an important question: Are there no imaginings of old age and masculinities that fall outside this narrow framework and capture the nuances of aging male experiences?

Cultural representations of aging masculinities, both in and outside of literature and beyond, have come a long way. Today, streaming platforms like *Netflix* and social media, amplified by the global *TikTok* phenomenon "Ok, Boomer," showcase a wider and more diverse portrayal of older men than ever before. The film industry, in particular, has produced numerous well-received stories about aging that reinforce and challenge stereotypes. A notable example is Anthony Hopkins, who won the Academy Award in 2021 for his role as an elderly man suffering from dementia in *The Father* (2020). The visibility of aging continues to grow in public discourse, encompassing both fiction and nonfiction.

"Fiction," Keunen maintains, "is able to creatively transform the images that are available to us from perception and from memory; it assimilates those images in a series of narrative processes that enable us to picture for ourselves a *world-in-motion*. As a result the images gain in complexity and evaluative force" (Keunen 5). The medium of fiction uniquely constructs aging masculinities as intricate and often conflicting. Whether they conform to or deviate from stereotypes, these depictions are always situated within the liminal spaces that, often painfully, renegotiate the status of older men in society. They simultaneously reflect the plurality, heterogeneity, and inconsistency of masculinity, which, according to Connell and Messerschmidt, is "not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals" (836). The scholars famously agree that "[m]asculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting" (836). Masculinities are constantly negotiated and redefined.

In his 2019 nonfiction work, *Mask Off: Masculinity Redefined*, J.J. Bola writes: "There is no such thing as a 'real man'" (11). This statement not only highlights a truth that is slowly entering the mainstream consciousness but also calls for a reevaluation of rigid social narratives surrounding "masculinity." This is important because the idea of a "real man" often seems unassailable, much like the enduring narratives about aging and old age. In literature that narrates the experiences of aging masculinities, the concept of the "real man" is prevalent throughout various storylines. This ideal often represents a lost persona, embodied by a past self that is now gone and cannot be reclaimed. The desire to recover this loss typically emerges as men approach retirement, often told through an aggrieved first-person narrator who expresses dissatisfaction with the perceived normative "masculinity" that aging disrupts, framing it as a massive crisis. As a result, "masculinity" is perceived as being "in crisis" because the aging male, faced with the physical declines that come with time, struggles to perform according to the set masculine standard.

These aging men experience their growing bodily impairments and the consequences of biomedical aging that befall the body as a fall from hegemonic power positions and the erasure of their "masculinity." The individuals surrounding aging male characters in their microcosms, and who they depend on to maintain established gender hierarchies, include the young, women, and marginalized groups. These are the bodies that, in the past, have been subdued through various means of "negotiation" or "gender play." However, they are increasingly identified as threats; they evoke fear and suspicion, and if possible, they are actively combated. In narratives focusing on the struggles of aging males, young male rivals, and different versions of predatory women often play significant roles. Finally, these texts intensify the idea of a crisis, as the tragic fate of the aging male character coincides with catastrophes such as wars and terror attacks, or great cultural shifts like women's emancipation and globalization. The aging character is situated in a chaotic world, where his physical decline and perceived loss of power reflect broader social instabilities.

John Updike's *Toward the End of Time* serves as the prime example in my study. Similarly to Updike's famous recurring character "Rabbit," Ben Turnbull embodies an "'average Joe' [who] is represented as speaking for 'traditional' (patriarchal) values (Robinson 335). Turnbull symbolizes an "America" that is "a unified and dissatisfied white America" (336)—an embodiment of what Kimmel describes as the archetypal *angry white man*. His grievances stem from both bodily decline and societal changes that contribute to a perceived loss of power. John Parks characterizes him as "another of Updike's desperate, narcissists, another egotist, whose lusts inspire both disgust and sympathy" (153). However, Ben Turnbull is more than just an egocentric male who uses his "sexual prowess […] to allay the anxiety of death" (155). Instead, he represents a character shaped by the late twentieth-

century masculinist demands for a restored social order—a gender order that nostalgically harks back to the suburban, "square" American culture of the 1950s and 1960s. Today these sentiments are reiterated, for instance, in incel communities. What González-Etxeberria observes about "Rabbit" in old age equally rings true for the aged Turnbull: "His family and his social context make him aware of changes he is not happy about because he has been treated like the center of the world since he was young" (20). The young patriarch stands in for a past social order he tries to renew, but that order essentially does not hold in the fictional post-apocalyptic setting of rural and urban Massachusetts. Turnbull consequently looks for consolation in life-writing, the pastoral, and the supernatural. He frequently escapes into fiction.

Despite his loud lamentations, Turnbull is not merely a wretched and pitiful aging character deserving of societal disdain. Once a beneficiary of a system that values the heteronormative able-bodied male, Updike's "old white man" struggles to carve out a meaningful place in the domestic sphere of his marital home upon entering retirement. While it may be true that Turnbull's sexual desire is accentuated in the narrative—contrasted with the increasing risk of impotence, the accumulation of perceived losses, and the specter of death—the text also portrays him as lewd and scheming. In fact, he is depicted as a transgressor of the worst kind, who sexually assaults a minor in the woods behind his country home. This criminal act punishes and disciplines a female, representing an attempt to restore the gender hierarchy. Moreover, Turnbull's powerlessness is evident in his negotiations with his second wife as well as the sex worker he seeks in his wife's absence. He experiences a similar sense of inferiority when interacting with other male bodies. The narrative alternates between depicting Turnbull as dominant and impotent, both physically and metaphorically.

The characters that Philip Roth constructs in his late texts share many similarities with the aggrieved male archetype found in John Updike's writing. According to Shostak: "Roth's novels express longing for—and repudiation of—a mythic ideal of moral and material fulfillment rooted in midcentury liberal ideologies promising the American Dream to the American Everyman" ("Philip Roth" 282). In his later texts, Roth shifts focus "to the aging self reduced by the terrifying facts of mortality" (281). For these characters, Jewish identity becomes almost secondary to their efforts to embody a form of established normative "American" masculinity, which is based on physicality, sexual prowess, and mental capacity. Shostak further notes that "[b]y the 1990s […] his subject matter is no longer strictly the Jew embroiled in contest and controversy. Instead, Jewishness anchors his imaginative excursions into the disappointments wrought by historical circumstances on American dreams" (286). Although Roth's explorations of ethnic identity and Jewish American culture remain relevant, his later works increasingly address the themes of aging, mortality and death,

often wrapped in universal or "American" narratives. These texts become more melodramatic, filled with vivid imagery of demise and erasure, leading Roth to "return to realism as a narrative mode" (286), in contrast to the postmodern jest he employed in his earlier works.

The decline of "masculinity" is deeply intertwined with the disappointments tied to the American Dream in Philip Roth's work. As Kimmel asserts: "To be a self-made man was the American Dream" (Kimmel "Angry White Men" 19). Nathan Zuckerman, one of Roth's recurring characters, who makes his final appearance in *Exit Ghost*, epitomizes the Rothian male, defining himself through his sexual prowess and intellectual superiority. Andy Connolly observes that "Zuckerman's aesthetic urge to redraw limits and escape boundaries has always been linked to notions of Eros and masculine potency in previous novels. Conversely, the failure to achieve full authorial dominance over external 'facts' has been presented as a form of impotence and emasculation" (643). The biographical element plays a crucial role in *Exit Ghost* and other novels by Roth, as it represents the loss of control over a constructed public identity. Fiction manifests as a means to write the self into existence and confront the crises that life presents. Connolly refers to these challenges as traumas (653). Zuckerman faces "an American life-world in which the unruly 'facts' constantly challenge and undermine the writer's efforts to assert authorial control over his material" (653)—which can be interpreted as an attempt to gain control over his own identity. The protagonist's battles—with the young male biographer, the woman he lusts for, and anti-Semitic discrimination—culminate in the overbearing and pervasive representations of impotence and incontinence. The aging male body is constructed as a stage upon which these battles are exaggerated and eventually lost.

In *The Corrections*, loss is primarily embodied in the aging hegemon, Alfred Lambert. Unlike Roth's exploration of complex ethnic identities, Jonathan Franzen's narrative displays an archetypical *white* patriarch, reminiscent of Updike's Ben Turnbull. *The Corrections* exemplifies a case of aggrieved entitlement, closely aligning with Kimmel's observations of post-WWII American masculinities. Kimmel states that "[g]ender and racial equality feels like a loss to white men: if 'they' gain, 'we' lose. In the zero-sum game, these gains have all been at white men's expense. We employ what I call a 'windchill' psychology: it doesn't really matter what the actual temperature is; what matters is what it feels like" ("Angry White Men" 16). The notion of perceived loss is clearly demonstrated by Franzen's protagonist in his old age. Although Alfred Lambert is constructed as the centerpiece of this fictional universe, in old age, he can no longer maintain his patriarchal supremacy. The nuclear family, which should reinforce his authority, is unsettled by the traditional structure that reflects his ideology through their actions and interactions with their husband and father. In the quiet

decline of a crumbling suburban idyll, a remnant of the prosperous 1950s and 1960s, Alfred Lambert clings to a conservative past and seeks solace in the philosophy that underpins his vision for social order. Arthur Schopenhauer constitutes a pivotal anchor for Alfred Lambert.

Despite Alfred's strict reluctance to adapt to the social and cultural shifts of the late twentieth century, he fails to pass on his masculine ideology—viewed as obsolete and "impossible ideals of manliness" (Kimmel, "Angry White Men" 15)—to his sons Chip and Gary. The transfer of hegemonic masculine legacy is disrupted in the narrative; the novel does not provide a resolution to this issue, portraying all members of Alfred's nuclear family as ambiguous figures who both subconsciously embody and actively reject Alfred's legacy. The novel places significant emphasis on the deteriorating body of the aging male, which serves as a metaphor for the declining state of the suburb, the nation, and, by extension, traditional conservative values. More importantly, it suggests that this "failing" body is part of a larger network of bodies that "participate in social action by delineating courses of social conduct" (Connell and Messerschmidt 851). Connell and Messerschmidt argue that "[i]t is important not only that masculinities be understood as embodied but also that the interweaving of embodiment and social context be addressed" (851). While Franzen's novel illustrates the workings of this "social conduct" through the example of the nuclear family, the nuclear family also represents a heteronormative ideal of bodies that diverge from common expectations. The chaos within the Lambert family mirrors a national chaos that the conservative figure of the father is unable to "correct" and rejuvenate.

All three novels portray male aging as a state of loss. The losses are closely tied to cultural and social shifts that impact the self-realization of masculinities in old age. Although not all representations of masculinities in these texts are versions of hegemonic ideals, each narrative illustrates the character's attempts to regain a sense of dominance that they feel has diminished due to biomedical ailments associated with aging. The male characters express their grievances melodramatically and lament their situations, which sets the overall tone and atmosphere of the narratives. These characters cling to an imagined masculine ideal—one that is always young and able-bodied—frozen in a past temporality that defines this ideal version as irretrievable and inaccessible to the "old man." The dramatic downturns are gendered, as aging itself is inherently a gendered experience. These fictions depict male aging, primarily as a loss of power within an established gender hierarchy, a social order in which different genders are pitted against each other to uphold a binary system. "Grounded in Connell's structural analysis," Messerschmidt and Messner contend, "gender is revealed not merely as individual attributes or styles, but as collective agency, constrained and enabled by social structures. Historical crisis tendencies in the gender order, as well as within and across gender regimes, create both constraints on and opportunities for action" (36). While texts

like *Toward the End of Time* and *Exit Ghost* remain trapped in the tortured frame of the aging male individual, *The Corrections* presents ambiguities that open the door to potential social change.

The texts that I outline in my study are undeniably male-centered narratives. They depict the struggles of aging male characters who perceive their aging as a loss of "masculinity," which, in turn, equates to a loss of social power. These narratives are distinctly "American," reflecting the social, political, and economic changes in post-war U.S. culture, along with the increasing visibility of unquestioned male privilege as we moved into the twenty-first century. Kimmel notes, "Men may still be 'in power,' and many men may not feel powerful, but it is the sense of entitlement—that sense that although I may not be in power at the moment, I deserve to be, and if I'm not, something is definitely wrong—that is coming to an end" ("Angry White Men" xii-xiv). The uncertainty surrounding a shifting cultural landscape, in which normative masculinities must be renegotiated and redefined, is evident in the fictions of aging masculinities amidst the biomedical decline of the body. Rather than reflect on the changing dynamics, these aging male characters tend to blame the aging process, illness, and disabilities—*their bodies*—for their perceived losses. They fail to recognize that their sense of loss is grounded in the absence of new frameworks for understanding and potentially reformulating their masculinities in old age. As long as dominant narratives of the "ideal" exist, all bodies will inevitably be measured against this desired model, leading to the devaluation of aging masculinities.

In her book, *A History of American Literature*, Linda Wagner-Martin notes that "[i]n the 1950s, when for the first time women outnumbered men and more and more women students enrolled in universities, novels that narrated unlimited male power were still dominant" (33). Richard Gray traces the beginnings of the "American novel," under the caption, "The Making of American Myths" (92ff), back to Washington Irving. Irving is one of many early novelists referenced by Roth in his collection of literary texts, particularly in *Exit Ghost*, where he retells the story of the famous "lost" character "Rip Van Winkle." Intertextuality serves as a means to connect the past with the present and even envision the future. These canonical texts are elevated by the echoes of earlier works, and the traditions of the past continue to influence contemporary literary production and reproduction.

The long-standing tradition of prioritizing male voices in literature and male characters that drive and determine narrative action may, as Kimmel suggests, be "coming to an end" ("Angry White Men" xii-xiv). Literature of aging masculinities narrates the fall from this once-established position of power. It portrays male characters socialized in environments that favored heteronormative male bodies above all others—a reality reflected, for instance, in the political practice of the post-war era. However, as these same bodies enter

old age, this dynamic begins to shift. "[T]he world that *creates* the text" (Bakhtin "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" 252) is a different world today. It is more attuned to the invisible forces of the normative that find expression in textual representations often misidentified as "American" literature, lacking any other categorizing markers. Keunen maintains that "today texts are increasingly read as cultural objects that acquire meaning through numerous mental operations" (6). When revisiting the works of these so-called "great American novelists," who emerged from post-war aspirations to renew social order, it is essential to apply a critical perspective and recognize the inherent privileges in the voices of normative male viewpoints. These perspectives can vary significantly depending on religious, ethnic, and class backgrounds. However, they appear to be immersed in a self-centered masculinist ideology deeply rooted in religion, philosophy, science, economy, and other sections of human history, most certainly, including literature.

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