

REREADING AMERICAN MASCULINITIES: RE-VISIONS OF THE AMERICAN MYTH OF SELF-MADE MANHOOD IN RICHARD FORD'S FICTION¹

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In his seminal book *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996), American sociologist Michael Kimmel identifies three main patterns of masculinity over the course of American history. At the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, American manhood was rooted in landownership (the Genteel Patriarch) or in the possession of the independent artisan, shopkeeper, or farmer (the Heroic Artisan). The former Kimmel describes as a powerful ideal through the early part of the nineteenth century. The Genteel Patriarch was, indeed, an ideal inherited from Europe and represented an aristocratic type of manhood, committed to the British upper-class code of honor and to a fine character, with exquisite tastes and manners and refined sensibilities. The Genteel Patriarch understood manhood as property ownership and a benevolent patriarchal authority at home, including the moral instruction of his sons. «A Christian gentleman, the Genteel Patriarch,» as Kimmel himself concludes, «embodied love, kindness, duty, and compassion, exhibited through philanthropic work, church activities, and deep involvement with his family» (16). Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, John Adams, or James Madison illustrate this male type. For his part, the Heroic Artisan, an archetype also inherited from Europe, was an independent, virtuous, and honest male, who was very formal in his manners with women, stalwart, and loyal to his male comrades. On the family farm or in his urban crafts shop, he

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was unafraid of work, proud of his craftsmanship and self-reliance. «With a leather apron covering his open shirt and his sleeves rolled up, Boston silversmith Paul Revere, standing proudly at his forge, well illustrates this type» (Kimmel 16).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, American men began to associate their masculinity with their position in the marketplace and with their economic success. Hence the emergence of the Self-Made Man,² who came to dominate over the Genteel Patriarch and the Heroic Artisan, although these two earlier versions of masculinity, as Kimmel (8) himself acknowledges, have never completely disappeared. The Self-Made Man is a model of masculinity that derives identity entirely from a man's activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and social status, by geographic and social mobility. Mobile, competitive, aggressive in business, Self-Made Men were not unique to American culture. As the product of capitalist economic life, they were known as *nouveaux riches* in revolutionary France (and also described as *noblesse de robe*, and other, less pleasant terms in the preceding century), and had their counterpart in every European country. Nevertheless, in America, the land of immigrants and democratic ideals, the land without hereditary titles, Self-Made men, as Kimmel (17) elaborates, «were present from the start, and they came to dominate much sooner than in Europe.»

Not surprisingly, the birth of the Self-Made Man coincided with the birth of America as a nation. In many respects, the Self-Made Man was the product of the American Revolution (Kimmel 17-21). By definition, the Self-Made Man is independent and individualistic, and he values autonomy and self-control over anything else. Thus, the Self-Made Man's ideals seem to derive from the very ideals of the Revolution. Metaphorically speaking, the American Revolution brought a revolt of the sons against the father, the Sons of Liberty against Father England. As long as the colonies were ruled by England, it appeared to all that manly autonomy and self-control were impossible. Being manly entailed ruling one's life, liberty, and property. Being a man also meant not being a boy, since an adult male was responsible, independent, and self-controlled. Language itself reflected these ideas, since the term *manhood* was synonymous with adulthood. So, the white colonists felt enslaved by the English father, infantilized, and thus emasculated. However, the American Revolution resolved this conflict because, in the terms of the dominant metaphor of the day, it freed the sons from the tyranny of a despotic father: «The Declaration of Independence was a declaration of manly adulthood» (Kimmel 18). Thus, the Self-Man man, being born at the same time as the American Revolution, came to be associated with its ideals of liberty and independence.

² The term *Self-Made Man*, as Kimmel (26) explains, is a neologism coined by Henry Clay in a speech in the American Senate in 1832. Defending a protective tariff that he believed would help humble men to rise in business, he declared that in Kentucky «almost every manufactory known to me is in the hands of enterprising, self-made men, who have whatever wealth they possess by patient and diligent labor» (qtd. in Kimmel 26).

Nevertheless, one should bear in mind, as Kimmel (10) himself elaborates, that the history of the Self-Man Man does not only refer to independence and economic success, but is also a history of chronic anxiety, restlessness, fears, loneliness, frustration, and failure. Since his masculine identity is linked to the volatile marketplace, the Self-Made Man of American mythology was born anxious and insecure, unaided by the more stable anchors of landownership (as in the case of the Genteel Patriarch) or workplace autonomy (as in the case of the Heroic Artisan). As the marketplace became more and more crowded throughout the nineteenth century, competition increased and, therefore, only a few men could achieve the ideal of Self-Made manhood. As an ideal, Self-Made manhood has always been, by definition, unattainable. As Kimmel himself (10) explains, the history of the Self-Made Man is «less about what boys and men actually *did* than about what they were told they were *supposed* to do, feel, and think and what happened in response to those prescriptions.» Since success is closely related to failure, the history of the Self-Made Man includes both. In other words, «the history of American manhood is many histories at once» (Kimmel 8).

Winner of the 1996 Pulitzer Prize and PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, among many other literary distinctions and awards, Richard Ford (1944-) is one of the contemporary American writers who has best depicted the «Other» history of American masculinity. Several of his novels and short stories do indeed concern themselves with the American myth of Self-Made manhood and success, which he questions by portraying the alienating effects of late capitalism on the contemporary American working-class man. The writer focuses on the lives of working-class men who, rather than achieve the American ideal of Self-Made manhood and economic success, are daily exploited by an unforgiving capitalist system. In so doing, Ford provides one of the harshest contemporary critiques of the American Dream of endless economic prosperity and success, which he redefines as an unattainable ideal. Rather than the American Dream of unrestrained wealth and success, then, Ford's male characters tend to experience the most alienating effects of wild capitalism, which today, as in the past, keeps oppressing many to favor only a few. Furthermore, Ford's fiction seems to suggest, as we shall see, that only love and affection can help combat and relieve the feelings of alienation, frustration, and/or economic deprivation recurrently undergone by the working-class man in the late American capitalist system.

A Piece of My Heart (1976), Richard Ford's first novel, already reveals the writer's central concern with re-visiting the American myth of Self-Made manhood and success. Set in the American South, this novel centers on the lives of two male protagonists, Sam Newel and Robard Hewes, who become friends while working together on a little, isolated island between Arkansas and Mississippi that does not appear on any map. Newel and Hewes, whose alternating narrative voices shape the novel's structure, are the island's outsiders, temporarily located there to find out «something important about their lives» (Walker 25).³ For Robard, this search means exploring fully his long-repressed

³ Their hosts, Mark and Fidelia Lamb, provide, as Walker (25) has argued, comic relief and counterpoint the emptiness and meaninglessness embodied by Robard and Sam.

attraction for his cousin Beuna, who lives across the river in Arkansas. For Newel, the quest implies remembering parts of his childhood and attempting to piece together fragments of his life. One of Sam Newel's most recurrent childhood memories, which appear italicized in the text, concerns his dead father, whose experiences as salesman challenge the American myth of Self-Made manhood in a number of ways.

As Sam Newel tells his girlfriend Beebe, his father sold starch to wholesalers and he traveled five days a week for twenty-six years. Some days, Newel explains, his father would even travel one hundred fifty miles, and seven states. As a result, Newel's father could hardly see his wife. «Maybe he saw my mother two-sevenths of that time» (Ford *Piece* 81, 80). Although Newel's parents seemed to love each other («they were married fifteen years before I was born, and they were friends» [Ford 81]), Newel's father had to leave his wife and son every Monday morning. Newel cannot help wondering about the feelings of loneliness and distress that must have haunted his father as he was sitting, all alone, in hotel rooms for years. In Newel's own words:

The worst was sitting in all those goddamned rooms, in Hammond, Louisiana, and Tuscaloosa, with nothing at all in them, for *years*. Just come in late in the afternoon, have a drink of whiskey, go down to eat your dinner in some greasy fly-speck café, smoke a King Edward in the lobby, and go back to the room, and lie in bed listening to the plumbing fart, until it was late enough to go to sleep. And that was *all*. (Ford *Piece* 81)

It would appear, then, that some American men fail to live up to the ideal image of the Self-Made Man. Rather than wealth and success, men's jobs often entail loneliness and alienation. Sometimes, they also maim men's health. As Michael Kimmel has argued, in the 1960s, the *masculine mystique* —«that impossible synthesis of sober responsible breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero»— was finally considered fraudulent (262-267). The hippies advocated freedom and love, and rather than work and money, many of them were committed to ending the war in Vietnam. Moreover, successful entrepreneurs, businessmen, and office workers were all haunted by feelings of alienation, loneliness, and distress. The myth of Self-Made masculinity came to be seen as a source of pressure and strain, not pride and motivation. Competitive men were prone to many psychological and physical problems. Because of their stress and anxiety, many men even suffered fatal heart attacks. Thus, self-making was now seen as the disease and the problem, not the cure. As Kimmel has concluded, «literally sick at heart, Self-Made American men were driving themselves to early death» (265).

Many of the ideas put forward in the 1960s were taken up by «men's liberation,» a curious combination of a social movement and psychological self-help manual that emerged in the mid-1970s (Kimmel 280). Male liberation was inaugurated by Jack Sawyer's well-known article «On Male Liberation» (1970), which called for men to free themselves of the sex-role stereotypes that restricted their ability to be human.

Following Sawyer's call, many other works were influenced by male liberation, including Warren Farrell's *The Liberated Man* (1974), Marc Feigen Fasteau's *The Male Machine* (1975), Herb Goldberg's *The Hazards of Being Male* (1975) and Jack Nichols's *Men's Liberation* (1975), among others. Two classical anthologies, Deborah David and Robert Brannon's *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority* (1976) and Joseph Pleck and Jack Sawyer's *Men and Masculinity* (1974), are also considered precursors of men's liberation. Male liberationists regarded traditional masculinity as both burdensome and oppressive. In their view, men were asked to compete aggressively for boring and unfulfilling jobs. Since most men could not live up to the ideal (and hence unattainable) image of the Self-Made Man, male liberationists argued, they felt like failed men. Moreover, men's desperate efforts to live up to the image led them into self-destructive lives of loneliness, emotional repression, and deferred dreams. As Kimmel himself explains, «at its core men's liberation provided a coherent critique of the Self-Made Man; in its eyes *he* was the failure. As a collection of dos and don'ts the male sex role was a recipe for despair» (281). Against the then dominant sex role theory, Joseph Pleck (1981), for example, gave up talking about the «male sex role» (MSR) and began to refer instead to the male «sex role strain» (SRS) model, which described the contemporary sex role as intrinsically contradictory, historically specific, and an unattainable ideal. Male liberationists argued that by rejecting traditional masculinity, men would live happier, longer, and healthier lives, lives characterized by affectionate and caring relationships with women, children, and each other. As the signers of the Berkeley Men's Center Manifesto claimed, «[w]e no longer want to strain and compete to live up to an impossible oppressive masculine image—strong, silent, cool, handsome, unemotional, successful, master of women, leader of men, wealthy, brilliant, athletic, and “heavy”» (qtd. in Kimmel 281). Thus, men themselves were refusing to be «masculine.»⁴

Written at the peak of the male liberationist movement, Richard Ford's *A Piece of My Heart* seems to reflect the men's movement's ideas in a number of ways. In particular, Newel's father's life seems to confirm the liberationist claim that men's obsession with money and success ends up having a detrimental effect on their lives and bodies. After years doing the same thing, Newel's father did indeed have «scars» (Ford *Piece* 80). As Sam Newel himself explains, his father had «piles as big as my thumb that bled in his underwear. He had those for years. He'd have them cut out, and they'd come back... He had bad circulation in his legs from having the blood cut off at his waist. And for a long time» (Ford 80). Moreover, Mercury, a car company, made a car with a door that was very easy to catch your hand in, and the company bought Mercuries for the salesmen, and they were all slamming their hands in the

⁴ It is true, as Kimmel (290) argues, that men's liberation focused on men's pain, thus ignoring the issue of men's power and promoting the image of men as victims. Although male liberation did not pay enough attention to the fact that (heterosexual) men, unlike women and homosexuals, are generally advantaged by current social structure, the movement proved helpful to identify the costs to men of relying on traditional (mis)conceptions of masculinity. And, for many men, the oppressive nature of masculinity has become a powerful reason for trying to change the patriarchal gender order.

doors. «My father,» as Newel elaborates, «closed his up three times in one year, and finally had to have the finger nubbed –lost all the feeling in it» (Ford 80). To top it all, Newel's father got a corn on his foot from the clutch, which, eventually, made him limp. He would sit on the commode in the hotel slicing at his corn with a razor blade, and putting alcohol on it. However, the corn got infected and got worse «until he limped, and after a while he had to use a cane because the pain... was hideous. I think he cried sometimes.» Finally, his wife made him go have it removed surgically, although he could never stop limping (Ford *Piece* 80-81).

Nevertheless, Newel's father pretends to live a happy life. As Newel says, «he went off every Monday morning, smiling and whistling like Christmas, like it was fun, or he was just too ignorant to know what it *was* like» (Ford *Piece* 81). Most male liberationist texts explain that vulnerability is associated by most men with negative feelings of dependency and effeminacy. Thus, men must always pretend to be in control of everything, especially before other men. Traditional masculinity, as Kimmel (281) contends, is indissolubly linked to emotional self-control. Men must always conceal their emotional vulnerability before other men (even, as in the case of Newel's father, before their sons). However, Newel's mother is fully aware of her husband's alienation. As Sam Newel reveals, «she already knew about those [hotel] rooms» (Ford *Piece* 82). Heterosexual men often rely on women, especially their wives, for emotional self-disclosure. Since women, unlike men, have been traditionally considered emotional beings, men tend to resort to women, rather than other men, for emotional support (Schmitt). Because Newel's mother «knew the limits to things,» he hypothesizes that she was afraid that her husband's alienation and despair would lead him to kill himself and all his family. As Sam Newel explains, «when I was little we had a flat tire right on the bridge at Vicksburg, and my mother grabbed me and held me so tight I couldn't breathe, until he had fixed the tire. She said she was afraid of something happening» (Ford *Piece* 82).

Nevertheless, Newel's father finally dies from a work accident. Driving to New Orleans, his father got behind a truck from which a load of corrugated steel pipe fell directly into the front seat with such force that it cut his head off. As Newel himself explains, his father's death as a victim of an alienating capitalist system «frightens the shit out of me» and so does not «*want* everything the same» (Ford *Piece* 77, 83). Newel seems to find his own parents' lives so meaningless that he fears his future will make him like them. Newel does not want to live the same asphyxiating life as his father did. And he does not. Unlike the other protagonist of the novel, Robard Hewes –who is represented as a down-to-earth, task-oriented, tough guy–, Sam Newel is portrayed as a world-weary, physically inept intellectual. Although Newel's «alternative» life is itself open to questioning (he often feels lost, confused, and ill-defined), he does clearly represent a rejection of his father's job-oriented life (Walker 38).⁵

⁵ There is a number of striking similarities between Richard Ford's *A Piece of My Heart* (1976) and Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949). While it is far beyond the scope of this article to carry out an in-depth comparative analysis between the two texts, it may be relevant to note here

Newel's father is not the only character in *A Piece of My Heart* who challenges the American myth of Self-Made masculinity. Mark Lamb, the «ruler» of the island, also questions the traditional image of the Self-Made Man as autonomous and self-sufficient, showing how his (always unstable) power derives, ultimately, from his structural relations (with other men). As has been suggested, the Self-Made Man is, by definition, independent, autonomous, individualistic, and self-sufficient. His power and success *seem* to derive exclusively from his own personal efforts and his inner strength, just as failure is always attributed to some personal or internal flaw. In this way, the system can go unchallenged. Mr. Lamb appears to embody an independent and all-powerful Self-Made Man. As Elinor Ann Walker (27) has noted in this respect, the island resembles a barony in its way of governance. Mr. Lamb oversees the place, hires the employees, guides hunting parties, and partakes of the island's bounty himself. Mr. Lamb and his wife have lived on the premises for fifty years, ever since he gave it to Fidelia for a combined birthday and wedding present. One would assume, therefore, that Mr. Lamb rules the island and is in control of everything. Nevertheless, we soon learn that his power and autonomy are illusory. Chicago Pulp and Paper Company still owns the deed and periodically must renew the lease. Indeed, the lease is up for renewal as Hewes and Newel reach the island. Mr. Lamb «supposes» that the lease will be renewed, although he complains that he does not «like them greasy dagos coming down here in their sorry-ass airplane, making me haul them around like I was a bus driver. It's demeaning» (Ford *Piece* 169).

Mr. Lamb's words suggest men's contradictory experiences of power. In his classical text *The Myth of Male Power* (1993), pop psychologist Warren Farrell, one of the leading male liberationists, describes male power as a «myth» since women and men have equally negative stereotypes of «sex object» and «success object.» Farrell often uses the analogy of the chauffeur to make his point. The chauffeur is in the driver's seat. He knows where he is going. He is wearing the tie and the uniform. One would think, then, that he is in power. However, from his perspective, somebody else is giving the orders; he is not powerful at all. Farrell's argument has become extremely influential, opening a round for male victimhood in contemporary American culture.

Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that Farrell's conception of male power is of limited value, since it focuses on individuals and neglects structural

that both works focus on down-on-his-luck salesmen who fail to achieve the American ideal of Self-Made masculinity. Like Ford's novel, Miller's famous play represents Willy Loman as a victim of the capitalist system, which exacts a price on his physical and mental health. Moreover, Willy, like Newel's father, spends most of his time travelling and sleeping in hotel rooms. Although Willy Loman pretends to be happy before his sons, his wife Linda also knows how he really feels and offers him emotional consolation and support. Like Newel's father's wife, Linda is afraid of a tyre, which her husband finally uses to kill himself. Moreover, Willy Loman's son Biff, like Sam Newel, reject their fathers' obsession with money and success, thus questioning the American myth of Self-Made masculinity. For a deeper discussion of (the deconstruction of) the American myth of Self-Made masculinity in Arthur Miller's play, see Armengol.

gender relations. As Michael Kimmel has argued, «what if we ask one question of our chauffeur, and try to shift the frame just a little. What if we ask him: What is the gender of the person who is giving the orders? (The lion's share of riders in chauffeur-driven limousines are, after all, upper-class white men)» (93). Instead of Farrell's (mis)conception of male power, Kimmel (92-100) advocates a more complex vision. Much feminist theory has established a symmetry between the structure of gender relations and women's individual experiences. Women, as a group, are not *in* power. It is evident that most universities, governments, and companies are run by men. Nor, individually, do women *feel* powerful. Indeed, they often feel constrained by gender inequality into stereotypic activities that prevent them from feeling comfortable, safe, and competent. Nevertheless, this symmetry breaks down when we try to apply it to men. Although men are *in* power everywhere one cares to look, individual men are not «in power,» and they do not *feel* powerful. Here, in a way, is where feminism has failed to resonate for many men. When confronted by the idea that the gender hierarchy means that men have power over women, men often respond with astonishment, claiming that they do not feel powerful. As Kimmel himself explains, «men often feel themselves to be equally constrained by a system of stereotypic conventions that leave them unable to live the lives to which they believe they are entitled» (93). Men as a group are in power (when compared with women), but do not feel powerful.⁶ Thus, power is not to be seen as a property of individuals, but as a property of group life, of social life. Power is an institution. It is not a possession that one has or does not have, but a property of group life, of social life. As philosopher Hannah Arendt put it, «power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only as long as the group keeps together» (qtd. in Kimmel 93-94).

Mark Lamb's situation seems to illustrate all these ideas perfectly well. Mark Lamb *seems* to be an autonomous and powerful man. Mr. Lamb appears to live and work on the island like a feudal tenant. As an individual man, however, Mr. Lamb is not, and does not feel, powerful. As he complains, the Chicago Pulp and Paper representatives «come flying down here every five years, pissin around, messing in my business, marking my trees like I hadn't been here fifty years» (Ford *Piece* 169). In Mr. Lamb's view, their behavior is offensive. «It's an in-dignity to suffer their presence on this island» (Ford *Piece* 170). Mr. Lamb must swallow his pride and treat his visitors like guests, hoping that his lease will be renewed. It seems clear, then, that Mr. Lamb's power is not an individual property, but derives from a group. Although individual men are powerless, men, as a group, are in power. After all, it is Mr. Lamb, not his wife Fidelia, who is in charge of the island; it is Mr. Lamb who hires his employees; and it is Mr. Lamb who receives his «guests» when they

⁶ The feeling of powerlessness is, as Kimmel (93) indicates, one reason why so many men believe that they are the victims of reverse discrimination and react to feminist policies, or why the mythopoeists look for rituals to enable them to claim the power they want but do not feel they have.

come to his barony. Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume that the Chicago Pulp and Paper representatives are all men. After all, most American companies are run by men, who still occupy the top-end positions on the labor scale. As masculinity scholar Michael Kimmel has noted, «women only hold 7 percent of all corporate board seats. Between 95 percent and 97 percent of all senior managers are men. Of the 4,012 highest paid directors, officers or corporate CEOs in America, only nineteen –less than one-half of 1 percent– were women» (186).

Like *A Piece of My Heart*, Richard Ford's *Rock Springs* (1987), one of his best-known and most acclaimed collection of short stories, appears to re-visit the myth of Self-Made masculinity in a number of ways. Focusing on the lives of working-class men, most of Ford's stories question the traditional image of masculinity as unrestrained wealth and success. Typically, Ford's protagonists are unemployed, and many of them have to face economic hardship, which often leads them into violence, robbery, and other criminal acts. As Fred Hobson explains, most of the characters in the collection tend to live «from day to day, having few goals save peace of mind, sex, freedom from the law, and enough money to get by» (44). Rather than the American Dream of wealth and success, then, Ford's fiction seems to portray, once again, the detrimental effects of late capitalism upon the contemporary American working-class man. Ford delves into the souls of alienated men haunted by feelings of displacement, isolation, and bewilderment. And these feelings are usually shown to result from the oppression exerted by the late capitalist system upon the working-class man. As Folks argues in this respect, Ford's characters in *Rock Springs* are «victims of a harsh, unforgiving economic system, and their condition is intimately connected with internal colonialism and with their status at the bottom of that system» (151). Moreover, several stories in the collection, such as «Rock Springs» or «Fireworks,» highlight the corruption underlying the American Dream, as well as its illusory nature. Although most of the stories in *Rock Springs* are set in the West, they make it clear that the West, despite its mythic representations, is not paved with gold. As Martin notes in this respect, «at the close of the twentieth-century, the West's frontier legacy of boom and bust still hasn't abated. Immigrants continue to barrel into the region, certain that it harbors those things that their lives have always lacked, and they continue, most of them, to end up disappointed» (xviii).

Rather than a golden West, then, Ford's stories describe the detrimental effects of late capitalism on the working-class man in twentieth-century American culture. For example, in «Optimists,» Roy Brinson's concern about losing his job makes him become nervous and aggressive, which finally leads him to kill another man. As Frank, the narrator of the story explains, 1959, the year when his father Roy Brinson killed Boyd Mitchell, was also an extremely difficult time for Brinson. In 1959 Frank's father was a railroad worker in Great Falls, Montana, and that year was not a good time for railroads –not in Montana especially–, as it was «the featherbed time» then and «everyone knew, including my father, that they would –all of them– eventually lose their jobs» (Ford *Rock* 172). Actually, by the end of summer in that year, Brinson became so worried about his future and that of his family that he even stopped

taking days off to fish or going out along the couleed rims to spot deer, two *Rock* of his favorite hobbies. Instead, he worked more then and «was gone more» (Ford *Rock* 173). Although Frank does not justify his father's criminal behavior, the narrator explains that his father's concern about losing his job turned him into a nervous and aggressive man, which finally led him to kill another man.

Like «Optimists,» «Children» explores the detrimental effects of capitalism on family life. Its narrator, George, explains that he did not see his father very often, as he worked on the Great Northern as a brakeman in Shelby and so was usually gone two nights together. As a result, George «didn't go to school so much» (Ford *Rock* 70). Claude and his father Sherman do not fare much better. Sherman is described as a jobless man who has been in prison on several occasions for stealing and fighting (Ford *Rock* 71). Actually, Claude tries to avoid seeing his father whenever possible, as he is a violent man and a drunkard who often mistreats his son. Like Sherman, Les(ter) Snow, the narrator of «Winterkill,» has lost his job and spends most of his time watching TV at home or drinking in bars with his wheelchair-confined friend Troy Burnham. For his part, Lloyd in «Going to the Dogs» is running out of money. His wife has sold their car before leaving and his business plans have failed. He does not even have enough money to pay the electric bills. In fact, he wants to stiff his landlord, Gainsborough, for the rent and has already bought a train ticket to Florida to try to «change [his] luck» (Ford *Rock* 99). Thus, Lloyd wishes to manipulate his social environment in order to realize the American dream of wealth and success. His (failed) business plans, as well as his attempt to stiff his landlord for the rent, are paradigmatic in this respect. However, Bonnie and Phyllis, the two huntresses, easily manipulate him, teaching him the futility of his dreams of power. Together, both women thwart Lloyd's aspirations of easy success. As Leder elaborates in this respect:

After his business schemes have failed and his wife has abandoned him and sold their car, Lloyd imagines stiffing his landlord for the rent and taking the train to Florida. The deer hunters foil his plans: while Bonnie seduces him, Phyllis steals his ticket and money, leaving him to realize that «it was only the beginning of bad luck.» (115)

It is not casual at all that «Rock Springs» is the first and title story of the collection. After all, it deals with an «adult male who cannot make his life productive» (Walker 125), which is one of the central concerns all through the volume. More specifically, «Rock Springs» is about a man's maddening and unsuccessful pursuit of the American myth of Self-Made masculinity, as well as its detrimental effects on his life and the lives of those he loves. In «Rock Springs» Ford shows, therefore, how the ideal Self-Made Man is an extremely dangerous myth, which is indissolubly linked to moral irresponsibility and the death of love and affection.

Earl Middleton, the first-person narrator and protagonist of the story, is described as a man who was in jail in Tallahassee for stealing tires, who works only

occasionally, and who is ready to leave for Florida because he had to «scrape with the law in Kallispell over several bad checks –which is a prison crime in Montana» (Ford *Rock* 2, 1). Middleton imagines that he can make his particular American Dream come true by stealing a cranberry Mercedes and heading south to Florida, where he expects to be able to begin a new life with Edna, his girlfriend of eight months, and his daughter Cheryl.⁷ Nevertheless, Middleton's pursuit of the American Dream soon turns into a nightmare. For one thing, the stolen Mercedes breaks down, which clearly symbolizes the failure of Middleton's dreams of wealth and success. For another, Middleton seems utterly unable to tell illusions from reality, which only causes him frustration and disappointment. Earl's recurrent confusion between illusion and reality is nowhere better exemplified than in the gold mine episode. When the Mercedes breaks down near Rock Springs, Earl walks into a trailer park. As he realizes, the trailer park is overshadowed by a mysterious plant, which a Negro woman identifies as a gold mine. Middleton, who covets the American myth of Self-Made masculinity, believes that the gold mine will make him rich. As he himself puts it, «it seemed as if anyone could go in and take what they wanted» (Ford *Rock* 19). It is obvious, however, that the access to the gold mine –and, therefore, to wealth– is restricted. As Leder comments in this respect:

In search of his own particular «gold mine,» he confuses surface with reality, the illusion of wealth –stolen cars and rubber checks– with genuine prosperity. He also confuses his acts, «which were oftentimes offender's acts, and [his] ideas, which were as good as the gold they mined there where the bright lights were blazing» (p. 17). His ideas, like the gold he has only heard about, create a glossy surface which he believes reflects his true nature. His acts, which have consequences, actually define him. (116)

Although Earl regards the plant next to the gold mine as «some unbelievable castle,» careful analysis reveals that his vision of the plant is part of his «distorted dream» (Ford *Rock* 18). When Earl, Edna, and Cheryl take the cab to Rock Springs, the driver tells them that many trailers are peopled with prostitutes and pimps from New York City. In other words, many trailers are brothels operated by the mine for engineers and computer people away from home. As the cabdriver bitterly suggests, it is the «pure criminal element,» «prosperity's fruit» (Ford *Rock* 21, 20). Although Earl seems to come across the mythical gold mine, the object of desire of any (would-be) Self-Made Man, he ends up realizing that its wealth is controlled by corporate owners and that its workers subsist in old trailers that only resemble homes.

⁷ Like Earl, Edna also wants to leave Montana because she «had already had her own troubles» there. Unlike Earl's, Edna's problems, however, are not directly associated with theft, or the easy achievement of wealth, but rather with «keeping her ex-husband, Danny, from breaking in her house and stealing her things while she was at work» (Ford *Rock* 1).

At story's end –when Earl, Edna, and Cheryl finally reach the motel in Rock Springs–, Earl remains obsessed with the «gold mine» and the myth of Self-Made masculinity. As he explains, «I could see out the window past her some yellowish foggy glow in the sky. For a moment I thought it was the gold mine out in the distance lighting the night, though it was only the interstate» (Ford *Rock* 22). While Earl seems incapable of leaving behind his «distorted dream» and self-delusions, Edna, on the other hand, gets tired of the life she is living with him and readily accepts his offer to send her back to Montana. Edna is fed up with motels and the fantasy of freedom and security they afford. In her own words:

«I used to like to go to motels, you know,» she said. «There is something secret about them and free...you felt safe from everything and free to do what you wanted... Fucking and everything, you know.» ...«I'm thirty-two and I'm going to have to give up on motels. I can't keep that fantasy going anymore.» (Ford *Rock* 23)

Thus, Edna seems to realize that she must give up on motels before some really bad thing happens to her. That Edna leaves Earl does *not* mean, however, that she does not love him. As she herself insists, «“none of this is a matter of not loving you, you know that”» (Ford *Rock* 25). Nevertheless, Edna, unlike her boyfriend, becomes morally responsible and so knows that she cannot keep living with Earl. As Leder puts it, Edna's comforting declaration of love to Earl may derive from «the same developing sense of responsibility that compels her to leave him» (117). Although Edna loves Earl, she knows that they have completely different ethical values and that their life together is thus doomed to failure. As Edna herself explains to Earl:

«Here I am out here in the desert where I don't know anything, in a stolen car, in a motel under an assumed name, with no money of my own, a kid that's not mine, and the law after me. And I have a choice to get out of all of it by getting on a bus. What would you do? I know exactly what you'd do». (Ford *Rock* 24)

Unlike Edna, however, Earl finally remains a morally irresponsible man who seems determined to keep the fantasy going. At story's end, just after Edna falls asleep, «sometime late in night» (Ford *Rock* 25), Earl gets up and walks outside into the parking lot in the Ramada Inn, where he looks for another car to steal. As Leder has concluded, Earl seems determined to keep stealing «the illusion of power and prosperity in the form of expensive cars» (117). From what has been suggested, it seems appropriate to conclude, then, that a key difference seems to separate Earl from Edna –namely, their different ethical stance or conception of morality. Whereas Edna finally realizes that she must leave Earl because their life together is morally irresponsible, Earl never questions his own lack of moral responsibility. Rather than ponder the role his moral irresponsibility plays in Edna's decision to leave him, Earl believes that all he must do is forget about his failed relationship with Edna. For

Earl, the ability to forget, together with the number of troubles one has to deal with in a lifetime, marks the difference between a «successful» and an «unsuccessful» life. In his own words:

I thought that the difference between a successful life and an unsuccessful life, between me at that moment and all the people who owned the cars that were nosed into their proper places in the lot, maybe between me and that woman out in the trailers by the gold mine, was how well you were able to put things like this out of your mind and not be bothered by them, and maybe, too, by how many troubles like this one you had to face in a lifetime. Through luck or design they had all faced fewer troubles, and by their own characters, they forgot them faster. And that's what I wanted for me. Fewer troubles, fewer memories of trouble. (Ford *Rock* 26)

Of course, Earl's stance, as Walker (127) indicates, does not make sense for several reasons. First of all, he cannot really know the nature or number of troubles that have befallen those whom he has met just for a short period of time, such as the black woman in the trailer park, although to speculate in this way relieves him of some measure of responsibility and accountability. Second, in embracing so passive a conception of life, he also ends up relying on the notion that to some extent life has just happened *to* him. Thus, he appears to give up control over his own life without even realizing it, attributing what happens solely to «luck or design.» Thus, Earl, as Walker herself (127) concludes, «ends up where he began: in trouble.»

Although Earl attributes his problems to «luck or design,» Ford shows how the problems of his characters derive not from fate, but from their own pasts or personal failings. Above all else, the writer warns against the dangers of losing sovereignty over one's life. In Ford's view, life always requires self-awareness and responsible choices. The writer insists on the importance of ethical responsibility, warning against the dangers involved in men's obsessive pursuit of the American myth of Self-Made masculinity. Men's obsession with financial success, Ford seems to suggest, can make them lose their families and/or become criminals without even realizing. The concluding paragraph of the story constitutes one of Ford's unusually direct ethical admonitions to the reader against the dangers of easily achieved wealth. As he is about to steal another car from the parking lot of the Ramada Inn, Earl addresses the reader in the following terms:

And I wondered, because it seemed funny, what would you think a man was doing if you saw him in the middle of the night looking in the windows of cars in the parking lot of the Ramada Inn? Would you think he was trying to get his head cleared? Would you think he was trying to get ready for a day when trouble would come down on him? Would you think his girlfriend was leaving him? Would you think he had a daughter? Would you think he was anybody like you? (Ford *Rock* 27)

Like «Rock Springs,» «Fireworks» also seems to challenge the American myth of Self-Made masculinity. Its protagonist, Eddie Starling, has lost his job as an estate agent and been unemployed six months. Thus, he is running out of money and has to move to a poor and noisy neighborhood, where «he had never thought he'd find himself living» (Ford *Rock* 199). Starling is deeply affected and depressed not only because he has lost his job and has long been unemployed, but also because of the way in which he was fired. The boss told him that they had to dispense with his services because the company was closing down. Later on, though, Starling learnt that the boss had not closed the agency down, but had simply hired two new people to take his and another colleague's places. «When he called to ask about it the boss apologized, then claimed to have an important call on another line» (Ford *Rock* 199). To top it all, Lois, Eddie's wife, has a chance meeting with Louie Reiner, her ex-husband, who is just passing through. And Eddie is not «particularly happy» (Ford *Rock* 195) that Lois meets Louie again, not only because he invites Lois to go to Miami with him but also because, apparently, Reiner's life has been much more successful than Eddie's.

Even though Eddie is afraid his wife is still interested in Reiner and his seeming success, Lois makes it clear that she only loves Starling and that «Reiner was just a mistake» (Ford *Rock* 209). Indeed, Lois repeatedly undermines the mythical image of Reiner as a Self-Made Man. For example, while Reiner tells Eddie that he has a very profitable sideline in Italian rugs, Lois tells her husband that, in fact, Louie has «a house full of these cheap Italian carpets, and nobody to sell them to» (Ford *Rock* 209). Lois also undermines Louie's powerful appearance in other interesting ways. For instance, Louie is an «extraditer,» that is, a person who «travels the breadth of the country bringing people back here so they can go to jail» (Ford *Rock* 196). Thus, he seems a virile male who is able to deal with danger and death. However, Lois tells Eddie that the man Louie is extraditing has just written a forty-seven-dollar bad check. Moreover, even if he has «a gun and a little beeper,» Lois insists that it is only a «little» beeper (Ford *Rock* 196). On top of that, Reiner's obsession with success seems to have had a detrimental effect on his health. As Lois tells Eddie, Louie has gotten «a lot fatter» and unattractive, his «stomach's all shot,» and has «got an ulcer» because «he worries too much» (Ford *Rock* 207). Here, then, one is reminded, once again, of the male liberationists' argument that men's pursuit of the myth of Self-Made masculinity prevents them from living longer, happier, and healthier lives. Reiner's obsession with success, as it turns out, has exacted a price on his health. So, although Eddie initially resents Louie, who has asked Lois to travel to Florida with him, he ends up feeling sorry for him:

Louie Reiner had been a large, handsome man at one time, with thick eyebrows and penetrating black eyes. A sharp dresser. He was sorry to hear Reiner was fat and bug-eyed and wore a leisure suit. It was bad luck if that was the way you looked to the world. (Ford *Rock* 207-208)

While Reiner's story seems to question the American myth of Self-Made masculinity, Eddie's story highlights the power of love to relieve men's feelings of

alienation in the late American capitalist system. It is true that, apparently, «Fireworks» can hardly lay a claim to being an optimistic story. As Kakutani argues, most of the men in *Rock Springs* are «lost, broken, or desperate» (28). However, the focus of the story is not on Eddie's bad luck, but on the momentary consolation provided by its main character's decision to trust his wife. In «Fireworks,» Ford shows how love and affection can help men overcome, even if only temporarily, the feelings of alienation and anxiety that so often haunt working-class men in the late capitalist era.

In this story, Lois is described as a «festive» woman who always tries to call him from work «in good spirits,» asks him to «be patient,» and constantly reassures him of her love for him (Ford *Rock* 200, 194). Unlike other female characters in *Rock Springs*, Lois does not leave her husband but proves his main foundation and support. Although Eddie has long been unemployed, Lois never gives up supporting him, both financially and emotionally.⁸ While Eddie does the housework and looks for a job in the newspapers, Lois works «tending bar» (Ford *Rock* 94).⁹ Moreover, when Eddie meets Lois at the bar where she works for a drink after a long day, he forgets altogether about his concern about unemployment. Lois is constantly demonstrating her love for her husband. For example, as they drive home after Lois's shift, she looks at several Fourth of July fireworks and recalls Eddie's mother, a «sweet old lady» (Ford *Rock* 211) who liked fireworks. When they finally get home, Lois, as Leder (120) reminds us, seems to draw upon the mother's nurturing power in order to create a ritual conveying power upon Eddie. Lois begins to dance for Eddie before the car, in the rain and with a lit sparkler,

making swirls and patterns and star-falls for him that were brilliant and illuminated the night and the bright rain and the little dark house behind her and, for a moment, caught the world and stopped it, as though something sudden and perfect had come to earth in a furious glowing for him and for him alone –Eddie Starling– and only he could watch and listen. And only he would be there, waiting, when the light was finally gone. (Ford *Rock* 214)

Eddie thus seems to enjoy for a moment the full power of love and affection. The final scene in «Fireworks» seems to recall the «listening one moment» that Frank Bascombe describes at the end of Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter* (1986). However, there is also a key difference between the two texts. Frank's moment

⁸ It may be relevant to note that Ford's wife, Kristina, has «recognized herself in his work just once, as the nurturing wife of an out-of-work salesman in the story "Fireworks"» (Weber 64).

⁹ As feminist scholar Lynne Segal (37–43) has argued, unemployed men often subvert traditional gender arrangements. It is true, as Segal herself acknowledges, that unemployed men (and Eddie is no exception to that) often suffer depression and show low levels of self-esteem, since masculinity has been traditionally associated with men's role as family providers. More often than not, unemployed men see themselves as failed men. Nevertheless, jobless men often increase their participation in housework and childcare, since they do not want to be a burden to their wives and need to feel useful. Thus, one should not be surprised to see Eddie do the housework while his wife is working outside.

depends absolutely upon his solitude and a degree of comfort with himself that he has struggled to achieve. On the other hand, Eddie, as the critic Elinor Ann Walker (131) has noted, takes his energy completely from Lois' movements and her presence, both of which constitute her gift to him. Unlike Bascombe, then, Starling seems to succeed, even if only temporarily, in finding some «affection,» which helps him deal with the symptoms of alienation and distress that pervade the late American capitalist era.

Though apparently grim, then, Ford's *Rock Springs* may not be irreducibly pessimistic and hopeless. After all, the recurrent images of masculine alienation and despair are sometimes illumined, even if only briefly, by «the flare of meaningful connection between one character and another» (Walker 132). Through his portrait of working-class masculinities in contemporary American culture, then, Ford not only provides a critical reevaluation of the late capitalist system, but also advocates the «law of love» as a possible alternative to the «law of success.»¹⁰ Although the capitalist system keeps suffocating working-class men's hopes and desires, it cannot prevent Eddie from enjoying the view of his wife dancing «for him and for him alone» (Ford *Rock* 214). Like several other twentieth-century American fictional texts, perhaps most notably Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Ford's fiction seems to suggest, therefore, that love remains one of the most powerful arms to combat the feelings of alienation and despair undergone by working-class men in the late American capitalist system.

From what has been pointed out, it would appear, then, that the American myth of Self-Made manhood can be, and has been, questioned in a number of ways. It is true that men still need to prove their masculinity, especially in the public sphere, and that competition in the marketplace is fiercer than ever. Moreover, the image of the Self-Made Man—in the guise of businessmen such as Donald Trump or internet magnates like Bill Gates—keeps haunting the minds of many American men. Nevertheless, global economic trends augur poorly for men's ability to prove masculinity in traditional ways. Downward mobility, as Michael Kimmel has argued (299), is now more common than upward mobility and most Americans will never earn enough to buy the houses they grew up in. It now takes two incomes to keep the same standard of living that one income provided less than two generations ago. As Kimmel himself concludes, «[t]his generation may be the first in U.S. history that will leave its children poorer than itself... American men feel themselves beleaguered and besieged, working harder and harder for fewer and fewer personal and social rewards» (299). For most men, then, the workplace no longer serves as the arena to prove their masculinity.¹¹ In an era in which middle-class incomes seem

¹⁰ The terms have been borrowed from Arthur Miller, who associates them with Willy Loman (law of success) and his son Biff (law of love), respectively. See Armengol in this respect.

¹¹ It also seems that, though still pervasive, the image of the Self-Made Man is increasingly falling into disrepute. In Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), for example, the Self-Made Man, represented by a yuppie of the 1980s, is satirically portrayed as a decadent species. Similarly, in Taylor

to decrease (in purchasing power) for the first time since the Second World War, proving masculinity on the basis of men's success as breadwinners and providers is becoming increasingly difficult. The myth of Self-Made manhood, which promotes the (usually unattainable) ideal of masculinity as success, leads more than ever before to chronic anxiety and insecurity. In this context, then, only love and affection appear to be powerful enough, as Richard Ford's fiction beautifully illustrates, to combat the pervasive feelings of alienation, exploitation, and/or insecurity undergone by the working-class male in the late American capitalist system.

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Hackford's *The Devil's Advocate* (1997), Kevin Lomax (Keanu Reeves), a young Florida lawyer, gets hired by one of the most important New York firms, which seems another of Horatio Alger's stories. He and his wife Mary Ann (Charlize Theron) are soon moved into one of the sumptuous company apartments. However, what seems like a dream come true soon turns into a nightmare. Kevin works very hard and spends little time with his wife, who feels increasingly lonely. Lomax falls prey to money worship and finds himself defending murderous clients. To top it all, Kevin's boss, John Milton (Pacino), is not only involved in illegal arms trafficking, but is Lucifer himself. Thus, in *The Devil's Advocate* becoming a Self-Made Man entails working for the devil himself.

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