

MOVING THE LINE THE SCRIMMAGE:  
MASCULINITY IN RICHARD FORD

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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MOVING THE LINE OF SCRIMMAGE: MASCULINITY IN RICHARD FORD

by

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Abstract for "Moving the Line of Scrimmage: Masculinity in  
Richard Ford" by Marc Gushue

Novelist Richard Ford has created the first important character of the masculinist age of American fiction: Frank Bascombe. In The Sportswriter and Independence Day Frank is an Everyman who faces the issues commonly confronted by men in contemporary American society: issues such as raising children, divorce, mid-life crisis, relationships with women, relationships with men, and professional life.

In my thesis I argue that what has been called the "masculine mystique" is the central antagonist in both novels by Ford. The term is borrowed from the newly-emerged field of men's studies, and refers to codes of conduct that are imprinted on boys by society. Using theorists from this controversial field such as Brod, Pleck, and Messner, I explore the men's studies stance on gender socialization, and demonstrate the ways in which Ford's novels contribute to that debate.

Men's studies seeks to bring a subjective perspective to men's lives—a perspective that heretofore has not been central in the criticism of fiction. I investigate the value of this perspective and demonstrate the ways in which Ford's novels are illustrative of the male condition in postmodern USA.

## Introduction

The gender battle which has been raging for the last thirty years has yielded victory for feminism and for society in general. The idea of gender equality has widely been accepted in North America as we begin the twenty-first century; it is an important achievement and will be recorded as one of our historical legacies. One must be clear, however, about feminism's adversary during this conflict. Feminism did not oppose men, but rather, an erroneous feminine mystique and sexism--the notion that the male gender is superior to the female. Feminism demonstrated the irrationality of the feminine mystique and sexism, and proposed an objective view of the female gender. Naturally, society continues to assimilate this relatively new idea and, as with any revolution, there remain a few areas of concern that must be resolved before true and unequivocal equality is reached. But, the goal of female equality is achievable and within sight.

Some might say that, the gender issue having been resolved, society should move on to address some other social injustice. I would argue that the gender issue is only half resolved. "Moving the Line of Scrimmage: Masculinity in Richard Ford" explores the second half of the

gender equation: the silent plight of men in contemporary society as depicted by American author Richard Ford in his novels The Sportswriter (1986) and Independence Day (1995).

Through his protagonist, Frank Bascombe, Ford explores the drama of manhood; he demonstrates the humour, the ecstasy, the tragedy, and the complexity of being male in American society. Ford's novels resist traditional definitions of gender and are representative of a growing movement towards a redefinition of masculinity. From the beginning of human history to the present day, societies have constructed masculinity in narrow terms. Collectively, these constructions are known as the masculine mystique and, while the masculine mystique has evolved over the centuries, it remains an obstacle to the development of humanity because it limits our understanding of both sexes and is harmful to both men and women.

I have entitled this thesis "Moving the Line of Scrimmage" because the time has come for society to shift its attention from feminism's battle with the feminine mystique toward masculinism's battle with the masculine mystique--a shift that Richard Ford has made with these two novels. The title's reference to football alludes to Ford's use of American sports as the setting for much of his discussion of masculinity and the specifically male crises

which are created by the masculine mystique.

The academic discipline that specializes in male gender issues is the newly emerging field of men's studies. Chapter One explains the function and discourse of this discipline with contextual examples from Ford and others. Men's studies strives to demonstrate that men's experiences must be seen as specifically male phenomena. Men's studies also explores the harmful sex roles which are taught to boys and men by family, friends, and the media. Finally, men's studies addresses sports and its effect on males. While beneficial in many ways, sports often promote the worst aspects of the masculine mystique.

Chapter Two examines The Sportswriter. Frank Bascombe, the protagonist, and the men with whom he interacts suffer from problems common to many North American men. The sex roles which society imposes upon these characters create a community of male suffering that is disturbing in its realism. Frank is able to escape the cycle of suffering by refusing to validate himself by society's gender expectations and succeeds in redeeming himself from his life-long abeyance to the masculine mystique.

Chapter Three examines Independence Day, the only novel ever to win both the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award. The novel once again tracks Frank Bascombe and his

interactions with friends, family, and clients. The harmful effects of sex roles and the masculine mystique are explored again and the male mid-life crisis is specifically addressed--a serious and dangerous ailment from which many North American men suffer. The novel proposes that Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" be used as the self-help manual because it instructs one to do what is right rather than what is expected. By heeding Emerson's advice, men can gain happiness and independence.

Thank you to Jerry Varsava--who supervised the writing of this MA thesis--for his advice, support, and encouragement. Thanks also to the friends and family members who helped me along the way.

Chapter One: Men's Studies and the Quest for  
Subjectivity

1

Richard Ford was once asked if he saw himself as a particularly male writer, to which he responded, "I think that's a lot of crap."<sup>1</sup> The Sportswriter and Independence Day employ the same male protagonist/narrator, Frank Bascombe, who is described in the latter novel as the "arch-ordinary American" (141-2). Both novels are built upon Frank's perceptions, actions, and desires as he experiences life, which he refers to as "the high-wire act of normalcy" (ID 94). These are novels about the life of a man who sees the world through the eyes of a man. But Ford's objection to being labelled a "particularly male writer" is a valid one because the label seems to pigeon-hole this perceptive and sympathetic writer as a jock-novelist. Yes, these novels are illustrative of men, but no, they do not speak to men any more than they speak to women. There are more male characters than female, and the male characters are more interesting and developed more fully, but the novels are not single-minded treatises on the male condition nor do they

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Bonnie Lyons, 53.

depict a "for guys only" social landscape. Indeed, Ford's novels seek to downplay the traditional definitions of gender rather than promote them. To deflect accusations of male bias in his work, Ford explains that

women and men are more alike than unlike, and the ways they're different are both obvious and comprehensible and not as interesting as they're made out to be. The thing that makes a male character interesting is the same thing that makes a female character interesting: access to a variety of humors; a capacity to face moral uncertainty; the ability to surprise, to show compassion. (Lyons 53)

In The Sportswriter and Independence Day, the characters are primarily interested in finding stability and love, and holding onto those prizes in a tumultuous and complex world.

We feel for the failures (romantic or otherwise) of both the male and female characters because they are all portrayed as human victims, not casualties of the battle of the sexes--a struggle wherein the gender lines are firmly drawn and each side blames the other for love's/life's dysfunctionality. But while there is an obvious effort to challenge gender stereotypes, these novels do speak to us in a specifically male voice: Frank is a man, he is not a

woman. Furthermore, the problems of men are different from the problems of women and, as this thesis will demonstrate, the ways in which they are different are extremely interesting (despite what Ford may think) and worthy of investigation.

## 2

The Frank Bascombe novels lend themselves to a revisionist men's studies reading because they display an understanding of, and a disdain for, society's gender conventions and stereotypes. Both novels invite a "re-vision" (to borrow the feminist term) of cultural beliefs regarding masculinity; the novels elucidate the harmful effects caused by those beliefs which, by extension, elucidate the absurdity of patriarchy. Also, both novels reveal ways in which men experience life uniquely as men. These are precisely the goals of men's studies. Before looking into the ways in which The Sportswriter and Independence Day handle the issues of men's studies, it would be helpful to look at those issues and the discipline itself in a more general manner.

When women's studies emerged, its need was obvious because women had been marginalized and written out of history. Men, conversely, had occupied a privileged

position, so the logical question one might ask is: why would men need the assistance of a discipline like men's studies? The short answer is that living in the centre is not as healthy, nor as simple, as it seems. The long answer begins with the realization that, while most scholarly work has been written about men, it has not been about men specifically. Harry Brod provides an excellent explanation in his essay "The Case for Men's Studies."

Men's studies argues that while women's studies corrects the exclusion of women from the traditional canon caused by androcentric scholarship's elevation of *man* as male to *man* as generic human, the implications of this fallacy for our understanding of men have gone largely unrecognized. While *seemingly* about men, traditional scholarship's treatment of generic man as the human norm in fact systematically excludes from consideration what is unique to men *qua* men. The overgeneralization from male to generic human experience not only distorts our understanding of what, if anything, is truly generic to humanity but also precludes the study of masculinity as a *specific male* experience, rather than a universal paradigm for *human* experience. The most general

definition of men's studies is that it is the study of masculinities and male experiences as specific and varying social-historical-cultural formations. Such studies situate masculinities as objects of study on par with femininities, instead of elevating them to universal norms. (39-40)

Men's studies seeks to revise our perceptions of men but not in the same ways in which women's studies accomplished this goal for women. Because women had been too distanced from the centre and because men have been too close to it, our understanding of both sexes has been obscured.

Traditionally, women's experiences have not been handled in an objective manner, so women's studies established the objectivity of women's experiences. Conversely, men's experiences have been handled far too objectively, so men's studies strives to establish the subjectivity of men's experiences: to explore the ways in which those men's experiences are specifically men's experiences as men. The Frank Bascombe novels allow such an exploration because they offer an introspective study of a man and the processes by which he assimilates the world around him.

Men's studies uses two general operating premises. First, men are different from women and are deserving of study because they are unique. Second, this uniqueness is

complex, multi-faceted, and continually evolving.

Consequently one should not speak of "masculinity" as if it is a set of knowable attributes, but instead speak of "masculinities"--a vast collection of data that as a whole encompasses the male experience. Later in his same essay, Brod anticipates the refutation of these premises as grounds for an academic field:

An attempt to refute my position via a *reductio ad absurdum* would present analogous arguments for the establishment of white studies, straight studies, ruling-class studies, Gentile studies, and so on.

Does a commitment to men's studies indeed imply a commitment to all of the above? I think not.

What, then, differentiates men's studies? The answer lies in the fundamental feminist contention that gender is a fundamental component of one's identity and not simply an external mark of oppression. Men's studies adapts from women's studies the contention that consideration of one's identity as male per se is indispensable. This is not to claim that masculinity is invariant but that there is a sufficiently unitary object of study denoted by the concept of masculinity to justify investigation under one rubric. Such is

men is briefly touched upon by Ford and will be specifically addressed later in this thesis. While highlighting biological differences between men and women is a useful starting point, it cannot be carried much further; the work in that field has yielded no conclusive data that links testosterone to any human (non-physical) traits, including aggression. Certainly, Richard Ford's novels show no interest in biological determinism. It is the sociological perspective that yields the most interesting and the most valuable information and it is from this perspective which I undertake my reading of Ford's two novels. The central argument of the sociological model is that the meaning of masculinity varies from culture to culture, and varies over time in any one culture. In this case, I am studying the state of masculinity in the USA in the 1980s.

## 3

The men's studies mission statement can be profitably used in literary criticism. Men's studies seeks a revision of our reading of literature and a revision of our perception of men in general. Basically, there are two ways to approach a text from the perspective of men's studies. First, one might discern whether the text makes sweeping statements or assumptions about men that are reductive or

inaccurate. Does the text portray a certain type of man as normative? Does the text speak of humanity in general in masculine terms? This approach is of particular interest to the study of older texts which were written before the advent of feminism when patriarchy went largely unquestioned. Obviously, a text exhibiting these tendencies would receive negative criticism when examined by this approach; a deconstruction of previously unquestioned themes or ideals would be a typical starting point for such an analysis. Hemingway is a ripe target for this line of investigation. Second, and particularly for texts which do not suffer from patriarchal reductionism, one would investigate the manner in which the text broadens our understanding of men. How does the text depict men, especially in their interactions with other people? How does the text depict women? Does the work offer insight into the male experience? How are the male experiences portrayed as specifically "male"? Shakespeare, as an example, is commended by men's studies revisionist critics for depicting his male characters' experiences as specifically male. Men's studies has heretofore not been applied to the work of Richard Ford, but it has been applied to the work of other major American writers. Examples include Donna Campbell's Resisting Regionalism: Gender and

Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915 which examines sex roles and their impact on the USA's early writers, but it is long on history and short on literary analysis. In his essay "Rereading American Literature from a Men's Studies Perspective: Some Implications," James Riemer notes that John Steinbeck's Cannery Row and Tortilla Flat are refreshing novels because they present male characters who reject traditional sex codes and who develop strong male friendships (quoted in Brod 299).

Riemer also discusses Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises and indicates that the majority of the critical work that has been done on this novel is flawed because it fails to question the masculine code embodied by Pedro Romero (quoted in Brod 297). Most critics feel that Jake Barnes fails to live up to the masculine code, while Riemer suggests that it is the unrealistic and unfair code that fails Jake and other men. Similarly, Jerry Varsava's "En-gendered Problems: Characteral Conflict in Hemingway's Garden" sees the latter posthumous work as an illustration of the strains and stresses that gender stereotyping places on men and women alike. The most concentrated application of men's studies to Hemingway is found in Hemingway's Genders, by Nancy Comley and Robert Scholes. The book explores sex roles, Hemingway's masculine code, the positioning of females in

his work, society's views on sexuality, sexual symbolism in Hemingway, and homoeroticism.

In Henry James and Masculinity, Kelly Cannon examines James' male characters and demonstrates how the author was able to place men who defied sex roles at the centre of his work, without upsetting his conservative readership. Cannon also discusses James' treatment of patriarchy and the manner in which it hurts men:

the marginal male's most frequent posture is the glance over the shoulder to see if the punishing patriarch is watching, a look backward in time because what he fears is what he has been taught to fear, and backward in space because his thoughts are ultimately dominated by the society he is running from, rather than any personal goal he is running toward. (Cannon 158)

A final work of note is Phallic Critiques: Masculinity and Twentieth-Century Literature by Peter Schwenger, which looks at the language of several American authors. The book examines the effect of masculine biases on male writing styles, concentrating on the authors of his "School of Virility": Hemingway and Norman Mailer.

Some have questioned whether men can objectively critique their own writing and, if not, whether it is

possible for men's studies to be applied to literary criticism or whether it is possible even for men's studies to continue to exist. These questions are answered, and their implicit viewpoint refuted, in David Morgan's sociological treatise Discovering Men. He admits that men's studies criticism is full of pitfalls which must be avoided, such as bringing a contemporary view of masculinities to an older text, or overgeneralizing a male condition which is not universal to men. Morgan demonstrates, however, that it is possible for men to critically assess themselves by developing an understanding of patriarchy and an understanding of its role in literature.

## 4

As noted above, patriarchal standards that go unchallenged interfere with our reading of a text. The tool that has been used most prolifically to support those standards is the sex role. A sex role is any attribute which society deems to be characteristically masculine or feminine. Joseph H. Pleck was the first person to isolate and criticize this phenomenon; his ground-breaking book, The Myth of Masculinity, identifies the theory of male sex-role identity (MSRI) which was the model used by psychologists who sought to understand the male experience. The MSRI

theory was hatched in response to growing concern (which began at the turn of the century) that American men were becoming effeminate and incapable of providing for their families. The theory holds that for men to become psychologically mature they must acquire masculine traits, attitudes, and interests which affirm their biological sex.

The paradigm was initially formulated from 1936-45 as psychologists constructed tests which enabled them to score individuals on their masculinity or femininity. The tests also measured the degree to which a person deviated from the norm, homosexuality being the maximum deviation. But starting in the 1970s, psychologists began to find fault with the MSRI paradigm and abandoned it. Its rejection was due to a number of tests involving illogical and erroneous results, and also to new research developments and changing attitudes toward sex roles. More and more psychologists were demonstrating that individuals who possessed opposite-sex traits did not suffer from psychological problems; it also became increasingly difficult to see masculinity as a quantifiable trait. As well, feminism played an integral role in the rejection of MSRI by altering pre-conceived notions of gender roles. Of course, psychological discourse advances at a faster pace than does the discourse of the general population, so while sex-roles have been invalidated

by university psychology departments for over thirty years, they remain obstacles in our day-to-day lives and in our criticism of literature. Ford's novels suggest that sex rôles not only exist in the contemporary USA, but that they also have a profound effect on the lives of Americans.

Why do we latch onto these sex roles? When did we establish our current constructions of masculinity and why are we having such a difficult time discarding them? Andrew Kimbrell addresses these questions from a socio-historical perspective in his important work The Masculine Mystique. Kimbrell explains that men in the USA are in a crisis that, if allowed to continue on its present course, will have disastrous consequences for them. He points to dozens of statistics (3-13) which certify a consistent decrease in the emotional and physical health of American men--a group which is well-represented in The Sportswriter. He assigns the blame for this crisis to the industrial revolution--a consensus opinion in men's studies--which removed men from their land and their families, denying them their need to nurture and altering their life priorities. Evolving to its present state, industrialization has yielded a collection of sex roles which he collectively labels "the masculine mystique." The roles of the masculine mystique are divided into four main groups: the machine man, the competition man,

the profit man, and the power man (45-132). American culture urges boys and men to fulfill all four personae and the four personae are the cause of the present crisis. While this taxonomy is not universally endorsed in the field, the four types represent specific problematic sex roles which are regularly addressed in men's studies discourse.

With the rise of the industrial revolution was born the belief that machines are superior, i.e., faster, more efficient, to men. The assembly line sought to limit human thought and action as much as possible, sending a clear message to men: the ultimate man is the one who is most machine-like. This leads to the subordination of emotion and a reverence for all that is cold and mechanical. Kimbrell points to changing attitudes toward sex to illustrate this shift. Most ancient cultures celebrated the phallus as an organic life-giver, most often compared to a tree, as in the may-pole ceremony. Today the phallus is referred to as a "tool," which men use for "screwing" or "nailing." Of course, before engaging in this the man must "get it up," and if he possesses great sexual endurance he is "a sex machine." Popular culture supports the notion of the machine man as well, offering Robocop, the Terminator, and the Six Million Dollar Man as templates for the ideal

male hero (47).<sup>2</sup>

There is a perception that men are innately competitive, that their need to be the best is part of what makes them men. History reveals, however, that this is false. Kimbrell's research demonstrates that early civilizations survived because men were specifically uncompetitive, instead relying on cooperation to grow and prosper. Even in cases of extreme exploitation, men never competed to sell their labour and never competed against one another for survival until the industrial revolution. The need to be competitive for financial survival has alienated men from their families and alienated men from friendships with other men. The competition man is also unable to play--a central component to every healthy culture. His focus on winning at any cost robs play of its therapeutic qualities and replaces them with pressure, frustration, stress, and failure (71). Ford frequently uses American sports to illustrate the negative effects of male competitiveness.

The profit man is consumed by self-interest and, like

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<sup>2</sup> In The Sportswriter, a retired NFL player suffering from the damaging effects of the masculine mystique ironically wears a T-shirt that reads "BIONIC," another name for the Six Million Dollar Man.

the competition man, is of recent origin. Kimbrell notes that while the trading of goods has been practised for thousands of years, "the characteristic feature of primitive economics is the absence of any desire to make profits from production or exchange" (90). Most early cultures survived on various systems of reciprocal gift-giving; not until the industrial revolution was the individualistic struggle for gain a dominating ethic for the working man, and even today there are many cultures around the globe to which this is a completely foreign concept.

The attainment of power is the result of the man who successfully develops the three previous ethics of the masculine mystique: machine, competition, and profit. The power man is typically thought of as the corporate CEO who dominates, exploits, and controls vast amounts of capital, resources, and labour. Society teaches men to strive for this persona and teaches women to admire it. Obviously, being powerful is not in itself a bad thing. We routinely use the word to describe people capable of great action or thought, as in "he is a powerful teacher." But this brand of power Kimbrell refers to as "nutrient power" (116), or power that is exercised for the benefit of the individual and for the benefit of others, and which does not attempt to exploit or control. Unfortunately, the machine,

competition, and profit codes of the masculine mystique cause men to seek, and to be associated with, exploitive power.

All of the men in Ford's novels demonstrate some or all of the characteristics which are sponsored by the masculine mystique. A men's studies reading of both Frank Bascombe novels reveals that the characters who introduce conflict are being controlled by sex codes and social forces to which they are oblivious. The central antagonist of both Frank Bascombe novels is the masculine mystique.

# 5

These sex codes, among others, are adopted by boys through socialization. Socialization is the process by which people are melded by their environment; the primary socializing agents which implant sex codes in boys are his parents and the mass media. In order to understand society's expectations of manhood, we must understand the vehicles that drive those expectations. James A. Doyle's The Male Experience offers an excellent description of these (and other) socializing agents, as well as a helpful summary of the work that has been done in this field.

A boy's parents begin the socialization process at birth. A study conducted with new parents asked them to describe their infant on the day of its birth; the fathers

were interviewed after each had observed his infant in the nursery and the mothers were interviewed after each had fed her infant. Parents of male infants described their sons as firmer, larger, better coordinated, more alert, stronger, and hardier. Parents of female infants described their daughters as softer, smaller, prettier, and more delicate. Despite these different descriptions, both sexes were not appreciably different in height, weight, colour, muscle tonicity, reflex irritability, or heart and respiratory rates on the date of birth (Doyle 106). Influenced by their child's genitalia, parents are incapable of delivering an objective assessment of their son, even when it is obvious that their infant is weak and indistinguishable from a female (with a diaper on).

Parents encourage not only sex-typed characteristics, but also sex-typed activities. It has been demonstrated that mothers encourage girls to play with dolls and encourage boys to play with trains, trucks, and other more "masculine" toys. Furthermore, parents construct different environments for their children, depending on the child's sex. In a study of children's bedrooms, researchers found that boys' rooms were more likely to be furnished with sports and military paraphernalia while girls' rooms were decorated with dolls and domestic materials (92). Another

study took thirty-two boys and thirty-two girls (all thirteen months of age) and their mothers, and examined them in free-play activities and a frustration-producing situation. The girls were dependent upon their mothers, clung to them more, were not exploratory, and were quiet. The boys were independent of their mothers, exploratory, and engaged in vigorous activities such as jumping, banging on objects, and running. The researchers then placed a barrier between child and mother and recorded each child's reaction.

The girls generally stood at the barrier and cried for their mothers, while most of the boys tried to get around the barrier. Upon further investigation, the researchers discovered that when the children were six months of age the mothers of the females touched, talked with, and handled their daughters much more than the mothers of the males did.

They concluded that the differences in interaction at an early age contributed to the children's later behaviour (92).

Another study asked a group of mothers when they would allow their child to use a pair of scissors alone and when their child could play away from home without them. In both cases the mothers of boys gave much lower ages than the mothers of girls (93). In a Canadian study, parents said that they would be less likely to comfort a son who

complained of a minor injury than a daughter who complained of the same injury (93).

The conclusion drawn from all of these studies is that parents have different expectations for each sex; to realize those expectations they offer different activities, interact differently, and create different environments for each sex.

The recurring attribute that parents expect from their male children is independence; boys have to become independent and self-reliant to become successful men. To accomplish this, parents give their male children greater control, greater freedom, and a less supportive upbringing. Ford highlights this tendency in his writing; throughout his work, the male children assert a level of independence and control that is at times frightening. The boy in A Piece of My Heart carries a rifle and kills the protagonist. Claude Philips, the boy in "Children," fights, steals, smokes, drinks, and sees women as sexual toys. In Wildlife, young Joe exhibits defiant composure as his mother slaps him repeatedly. This particular scene elucidates another facet of sex-typed parenting: parents punish their boys differently than they punish their girls. Sociologist Lenore Weitzman notes that boys are more often punished physically (such as with spankings) while girls are more often punished psychologically (such as with the threat of

withdrawal of love). Physical punishment tends to produce children who are more self-reliant and independent, while the other method of child training--psychological or love-oriented punishment--produces children who are more obedient and dependent (Doyle 93). This sounds like an endorsement of physical punishment--boys certainly benefit from it--but there is a disadvantage to this method of discipline as Weitzman and fellow sociologist Ruth Hartley report:

More stringent demands are made on boys than on girls and at an early age, when they are least able to understand either the reasons for or the nature of the demands. Moreover, these demands are frequently enforced harshly, impressing the small boy with the danger of deviation from them, while he does not quite understand what they are.

(Doyle 93)

Furthermore, the training typically involves negative rather than positive reinforcement. Thus, the disadvantage is the young boy who is trained in this manner suffers from anxiety; he must stumble onto the right paths or bear repeated punishment without warning when he accidentally enters into the wrong ones.

Clearly, parents condition their male children differently than they do their female children and,

consequently, the two sexes begin their lives with different sets of parameters which govern their respective behaviours and delineate what is expected of each by society. In The Sportswriter, we learn that Frank's father died when Frank was fourteen and that his mother sent him to a military school to ensure that Frank would continue to be properly raised. Reflecting on what he had learned from his parents as a youth, he concludes that he acquired "a sense of independence" (29). The issue of paternal deprivation is a contentious one amongst social scientists; some feel that the father's absence can lead to deficits in emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal functioning, while others, like Pleck, find no validity in that conclusion, based on the available data (Doyle 99). Consequently, as I discuss Frank and his son in Chapters Two and Three, I will avoid lending too much weight to this issue.

After his parents, the media have the second most profound influence on the shaping of a boy's view of gender.

The media referred to here are those which are most accessible to children: television programs, television commercials, and children's books. All three present sex roles in a traditional manner. Even "Sesame Street," long praised as an excellent educational program, promotes sex codes:

On one program, Big Bird (having said that he would like to be a member of a family and having been told that Gordon and Susan would be his family) is told that he will have to help with the work and that since he is a boy bird, he will have to do the men's work--the heavy work, the "important" work and also that he should get a girl (bird) to help Susan with her work of arranging flowers, redecorating, etc. (Doyle 97)

It should be noted that children also watch television in prime time (and later) and so the manner in which the sexes are depicted in adult television programs is just as important to the consideration of how children are influenced by television. In a study of twenty-two of these programs, women were found to be portrayed as dependent on men, and men were found to be independent of women and in control. Men were shown to be ambitious, adventuresome, strong, and dominant, while women were submissive and weak.

Overall, men were found to be heroes or villains while women were found to be adulators or victims (Doyle 97).

Ford's novels do not promote these traditional roles. Frank Bascombe's ex-wife, Anne, is the ambitious, strong character while Frank is rarely in control.

Traditional roles are promoted in television

commercials as well. Mundane articles such as household cleaners largely employ female spokespersons and are targeted at women, while more exciting products such as tools, cars, and beer feature men predominantly. Children learn sex codes from these commercials as they repeatedly watch women on their hands and knees scrubbing floors, while men are engaged in exciting activities and drinking beer.

Studies conducted on children's books reveal a similar promotion of sex codes. In a study of books that were awarded the prestigious Caldecott Medal for excellence in children's literature, it was found that the majority of the winners were about males and their adventures and that females were mostly absent. The males were involved in challenging roles that required skill and independence, while the few females presented were involved in passive or auxiliary roles (Doyle 98).

Doyle's findings indicate that children learn their sex codes at an early age through the socializing agents of their parents and the mass media. They further indicate that boys are socialized in a different manner than girls because of a social imperative that demands that men be active and independent. Corrections are made, directly and indirectly, at an early stage to ensure that each boy is able to live up to the sex codes that are being prescribed

by American culture. An important one, perhaps the most important, of these sex codes is men's need for power. In Ford's short story "The Womanizer" from Women with Men, Martin Austin is overcome with confusion and self-doubt when he loses power and control over the women in his life; the loss of power eventually leads him to conclude that he is a failure as a man/husband (90). Why is power prescribed as such a vital element to the attainment of manhood? To answer this question let us turn to Joseph Pleck's essay, "Men's Power with Women, Other Men, and Society."<sup>3</sup>

Pleck begins by citing the two most common explanations of why men exert power over women. First, it is simply in men's self-interest to control women and gain the privileges that this power provides them. If one has power, it is rational to want to keep it. The second explanation is that men are prompted to exert power because of a deeply-rooted psychological need to do so. This need is born when the male child is dominated and controlled by his mother and his predominantly female elementary teachers. The boy then harbours a lifelong psychological need to avoid female

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<sup>3</sup> In Elizabeth and Joseph Pleck, The American Man (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980); this is a collection of papers which he published with his wife.

domination. Obviously, this creates a vicious circle, wherein each new generation of men rebels by assuming power in all vocations but child-rearing and early school teaching, which sets the cycle spinning anew. This latter explanation is not favoured by Pleck; the theory holds that women themselves are to blame for the oppression of women. Rather than the fear of maternal domination, he suggests alternate forms of power which men feel that women have over them. The first is "expressive" power--men have such a difficult time expressing their emotions that they often rely entirely on women to experience and express those emotions for them. The second he labels "masculinity-validating" power--to feel masculine men depend on women to play a socially prescribed role of doing the things that make men feel masculine. Women have not asked for these powers; they have been handed over to women by men because American men have defined masculinity as being emotionally "cool" and sexually potent. Men depend entirely on women to achieve these two characteristics and resent women for wielding such enormous power over them. The key to escaping this struggle, suggests Pleck, is for men to learn to express their emotions and to validate themselves by criteria more noble than sexual success. Frank Bascombe is expressive and emotional (far more so than his ex-wife) so

the first example does not apply to him, but the second example, masculinity validation, is applicable because we learn that Frank depended on frequent sexual encounters with multiple women to confirm his self-worth--a shallow and harmful dependence which he eventually abandons.

## 6

The need for men to wield power is a vital sex code in American society because men must not only have power over women, but power over men as well. In the power hierarchy women are at the bottom, but there are additional internal rankings within the male stratum. The male who is most "masculine" will enjoy greater control in the patriarchy. Early in life physical strength and athletic ability are the prime determinants of a boy's position; these are replaced later in life by a man's success with women and his ability to make money. The patriarchy not only oppresses women, but also makes men oppress themselves and each other. Because males use these criteria to validate themselves, they are doomed to be failures because there is always someone who will exceed them in some or all aspects.

The failure of American men to live up to the expectations which have been set for masculinity are best illustrated in the world of sports. This microcosm of the

plight of men is a central component of both Ford novels and deserves some attention here as there has been quite a bit of research conducted in this area.

In A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition, Joe Dubbert discusses the rise of sports in the USA from 1880-1920. Male involvement in sports, especially football, was highly encouraged by political leaders and university administrators during this period. The feeling was that football's violence built character in the nation's youth by forcing out any sign effeminacy.

Lazy men and slackers were the ones most likely to change their ways if they went to a college with a good football program. Membership on a football team forced boys to organize their time carefully and cut out worthless dissipations of male energy. . . . It is not surprising that Theodore Roosevelt became one of the greatest advocates of football in its early years, but not necessarily because football promoted good physical conditioning in American youth. Roosevelt saw football as a means of transforming youth from wealthy homes, who were usually considered effeminate, into tough, aggressive men. "A coward who will take a blow without returning it is a

contemptible creature. . . . In short, in life as in a football game the principle to follow is: Hit the line hard; don't foul and don't shirk, but hit the line hard." (180)

Roosevelt's attitude was universal in the country at the time, save for a small minority who saw the vast numbers of horrible physical injuries as more detrimental than beneficial.<sup>4</sup> The majority of people supported football precisely because it was so violent and dangerous; it encouraged males to overcome hesitancy and fear and to strive to win at any cost. Football, as with other sports, served to preserve the masculine mystique in the USA and continues to do so today. The best treatment of this subject is in Michael Messner's "The Meaning of Success: The Athletic Experience and the Development of Male Identity," in Brod's The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies.

Messner's essay examines the role which sports play in

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<sup>4</sup> In The Sportswriter, Ford hints at the continued pervasiveness of Roosevelt's teachings by having a train passenger carry "a fat copy of what I can make out as *The Life and Times of Teddy Roosevelt*, with plenty of paper bookmarks sprouting from the pages" (344).

determining men's views of themselves and, in turn, how those views impact their relationships with others. Messner sees (as Dubbert did) that American society accepts sports because of their purported ability to "build character" by providing young men with the components required to make it in the real world. Messner proves, however, that the opposite is true. In theory, Messner believes that sports are integral to humanity because they promote good health and teamwork, and because they are fun. The problem is that sports in the USA have been perverted by an American ideology of success which he refers to as the Lombardian Ethic. This term is derived from legendary Green Bay Packers head coach Vince Lombardi who is associated with the most famous phrase in American coaching history: "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing."<sup>5</sup> This ethic is both a product and an engine of patriarchy. It suggests that men who lose are inadequate not merely in their running, jumping, and tackling abilities, but also in some larger context. If winning is "the only thing," then what is left

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<sup>5</sup> Lombardi never actually said this. He said "Winning isn't everything, it's the most important thing." He was misquoted by a reporter at a post-game press conference and the misquotation was quickly wired throughout the USA.

for the losers? They are presumably substandard men cast down into some insignificant world--the world of 99.9% of men, as it turns out. Sports, at their purest, make winners of all participants because of the benefits listed above. But sports participation that is driven by the Lombardian Ethic makes winners of only a microscopic percentage of athletes; the rest are failures, to varying degrees. The only true winning athletes in the USA are those who win at the ultimate level, such as an Olympic gold medal, the Stanley Cup, World Series, NBA Championship, or Superbowl. Interestingly, the Superbowl trophy is named after Vince Lombardi. But their success is brief; the moment they are replaced as champions, they immediately become failures under this ethic. Therefore, 99.9% of American men who play sports see themselves, and are looked upon by American society, as failures. This ethic illustrates well the mission of men's studies: to demonstrate that living in the centre is not as easy as it seems. As Messner explains, athletes operate in a system which leads them inevitably to failure and disappointment because of the disjuncture between the narrow Lombardian definition of success and the reality that very few men ever actually reach the top. The desire to reach the top also makes many men socially dysfunctional:

Within the hierarchical world of sports, which in many ways mirrors the capitalist economy, one learns that if he is to survive and avoid being pushed off the ever-narrowing pyramid of success, he must develop certain kinds of relationships--to himself, to his body, to other people, and to the sport itself. In short, the successful athlete must develop a highly goal-oriented personality that encourages him to view his body as a tool, a machine, or even a weapon utilized to defeat an objectified opponent. He is likely to have difficulty establishing intimate and lasting friendships with other males because of low self-disclosure, homophobia, and cut-throat competition. (Brod 201).

Messner elaborates on the social dysfunctionality of male athletes by citing many psychological profiles of former athletes, conducted by himself and others (Brod 194).<sup>6</sup>

Research in the field of men's studies has concluded that contemporary American men suffer from a sense of failure or inadequacy, and that these feelings are caused by

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<sup>6</sup>See also Andrew Thornton's studies in "The Accomplishment of Masculinities: Men and Sports" (Haddad 121).

unachievable social definitions of masculinity. Messner takes this conclusion one step further. He concludes that contemporary males perceive themselves as failures because the socially prescribed means through which they seek validation (winning at sports or business) do not offer men what they actually want: connection and unity with other human beings. Ford explores this problem in The Sportswriter by having Frank interview a retired NFL player.

As Frank discovers, the severing of intimacy with other people has a profound impact on the man's life. The removal of intimacy obstructs friendships, marriages, and even parenting. As Andrew Kimbrell points out in The Masculine Mystique: "the greatest irony of our industrial and postindustrial system is that it has been universally referred to as 'patriarchal.' Yet, from the start it accomplished the ruthless and efficient destruction of real fatherhood, both personal and social" (313).

## 7

Contemporary masculinity's "structure of failure" leads many men in the USA into a mid-life crisis: a sudden and terrifying realization that the terms by which they defined success are invalid. The authoritative text on this subject is Nancy Mayer's The Male Mid-Life Crisis. Mayer explains

that men's crises are more damaging than women's because the masculine mystique dictates that men are not to complain or express their emotions.<sup>7</sup> Men consequently suppress their anger and depression, as does Harry Quinn, Ford's macho protagonist in The Ultimate Good Luck, who believes that the only way to survive life's journey is to "stay efficient and keep your private shit together" (37). When men attempt to suppress these emotions, one of two things happens: they hurt others with violent outbursts which alienate those around them (like loner Quinn), or they hurt themselves by suffering from ulcers, colitis, hypertension, migraines, or psychosomatic illnesses. Frank Bascombe suffers from heart pounding, but his internist, Fincher Barksdale, informs him that "many men approaching forty suffer from symptoms inexplicable to medical science, and that in a while they just go away by themselves" (67). Like Barksdale, most people prefer to sweep these problems under the rug rather than uncover their origin. The mid-life crisis is also a period of intense introspection and alienation from others and it is during the mid-life crisis that divorces usually occur, as is the case with Ford's protagonist, Frank

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<sup>7</sup>The best text on this subject is Jack Balswick's The Inexpressive Male.

Bascombe. Frank is a caricature of the man who experiences a mid-life crisis. Mayer states that the common characteristics of this phase are that

men become more interested in meaningful relationships at mid-life, less preoccupied with success and achievement. Their values become more humanistic, more expressive. They develop a deeper rapport with their children, warmer friendships with both men and women. Some switch careers, change the focus of their work, or get involved with philanthropic or political causes that bring them into closer contact with people. Others begin to paint or sculpt or write. All of these changes relate to the natural evolution of a man's inner self, an evolution that frequently generates a new tenderness. (129-30)

Frank's divorce is also typical. Mid-life divorce most commonly results from tension that arises from shifting needs in both the man and woman. Referring to Carl Jung, Mayer explains that men, particularly those who grew up in the 1950s, spend the first half of their lives fulfilling the socially prescribed role of worker/money earner. But, as they approach their forties, these men complain of a lack of intimacy in their relationships and seek a new,

traditionally feminine, dimension in their lives.

Women of this generation typically spend their early lives fulfilling the socially prescribed role of nurturer. But, as these women approach their forties they complain of a lack of freedom and also seek to explore a new, traditionally masculine, dimension in their lives (meeting new people, upgrading their education, becoming more autonomous). Because men and women tend to be heading in opposite directions at this period of life, conflicts and disenchantment with marriage often result. Extramarital sex commonly ensues and is frequently used as an excuse for divorce, although the true source of unhappiness is much more complex, as is the case with Frank and his ex-wife. While Jung believes marital catastrophes to be inevitable when this double shift occurs, Mayer suggests that men and women who are able to redefine the terms by which they validate themselves and assert independence from the codes of the masculine/feminine mystiques are able to continue to enjoy strong marriages.

The mid-life crisis also showcases disenchantment with the American dream, which can produce an illness psychiatrists refer to as "success depression" (Mayer 159)-- a feeling of emptiness when goals are achieved and there is nothing left to accomplish. Mayer's own research

demonstrates that the evolution of the American dream mirrors Kimbrell's view of the historical transformation of the terms by which masculine success is measured.

In America success has always meant making money and translating it into status or fame, but we have at the same time always felt a deep moral need to justify money-making. Thus the stewardship of wealth doctrine, which prevailed until the nineteenth century, scrupulously distinguished material success from "true" success by tying the latter to the character ethic, to giving, and to service. (Mayer 162)

Since the industrial revolution, American society has placed increasing emphasis on making money for the sake of parlaying it into power. The problem (or blessing) is that, despite this shift, Americans still realize, usually at mid-life, that success should be defined by something more ennobling than the accumulation of wealth.

These shifting priorities typically cause the middle-aged man to feel as though he has been trapped in a servile role which is no longer tolerable to him. These feelings then engender a search for independence, which Yale University researchers refer to as the BOOM period, a time of Becoming One's Own Man (Mayer 170). Men who do not take

steps toward independence at this stage of life remain trapped and unhappy. Men who are able to BOOM become true adults. They begin the maturation process by discarding mentors they may have been obeying; while sometimes helpful to young adults, mentors can restrict independence and individuality. A typical example would be breaking with a controlling boss by changing careers. Having achieved this separation, the men are now able to speak in their own voices and assume themselves the roles of mentors, fathers, and friends to other adults. The BOOM period signals the end of the mid-life external conflict and leads to the second stage, which is the resolution of mid-life internal conflict. This means breaking with the masculine mystique; it means asserting the right to express a wide range of experiences and emotions and to not be influenced by sex roles. As Mayer explains, "at mid-life when a man is forced to confront his mortality and recognize that his years are limited, it is vital to take care of himself in wiser ways than the masculine mystique allows. It is time for him to recognize that he is neither a machine nor superhuman. It is time for him to let go of heroic imperatives in favor of more humane values" (Mayer 238). Unfortunately, the man who undergoes this growth receives no help from American society. For starters, society treats the male mid-life

crisis as a punch line; it exposes a man who cannot handle the rigours of American professional life. Secondly, men who initiate changes at mid-life are rarely encouraged by others; more often they are thought of as reckless or even crazy. These are the obstacles that must be overcome if the man is to attain independence and personal wholeness during this stormy transitional period.

## 8

Men's studies has arisen from the need for men's experiences to be studied from the perspective of the male, in order to determine how those experiences are specifically significant to men. Men are not women, and men experience life in different ways than do women. This is partly due to socially propagated sex roles which are ingrained in American culture and difficult to remove. Taken as a whole, these sex roles are referred to in the discipline of men's studies as the masculine mystique. The masculine mystique is transmitted by socialization, which begins during boyhood and endeavours to meld the individual by instilling the doctrines of the mystique. The world of sports, while beneficial to American society in many ways, offers a fertile setting for the study of the masculine mystique; it

is a male-dominated microcosm of American life that accentuates the problems caused by society's unachievable expectations for men. These problems typically climax at mid-life when many men suffer a mid-life crisis. A form of clinical depression, the crisis is a volatile crossroads of the male life cycle and one which he is specifically ill-equipped to face. While much academic work has been done in this field, real progress has not kept pace. The Sportswriter and Independence Day may help expedite matters; the following two chapters discuss the ways in which Ford's novels are illustrative of these important issues.

## Chapter Two: Redemption of the American Man

## 1

In his essay on The Sportswriter, Christopher Hitchens notes: "This is a novel about how tough it is to be a man" (1255). Disordered, from beginning to end, the chaos of The Sportswriter indeed serves as a metaphor for the state of masculinity in postmodern USA. Frank Bascombe is a writer for an American sports magazine who is struggling to understand himself and the world around him. The opening paragraph, "My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter"

(3), provides us with a complete list of all the things which are clear to Frank as the novel begins. The paragraphs which follow reveal his confusion over the disappointments and failures of his life; he has made money but is neither happy nor stable, as he thought he would be.

Mid-life crisis has cast the protagonist into a state of dreaminess and depression. He remains, however, a reliable narrator as he assures us early on: "I have a voice that is really mine, a frank, vaguely rural voice more or less like a used car salesman: a no-frills voice that hopes to uncover simple truth by a straight-on application of the facts" (11).

The Sportswriter chronicles a weekend of Frank's life

and the lives of three men he encounters, and reveals the problems the masculine mystique causes them.

I have entitled this chapter "Redemption of the American Male" because the novel reveals the tragedy of American masculinity but also tracks the ways in which suffering men are able to restore truth and clarity to their lives. I have also chosen this title because, amidst the chaos of the novel, there lies a pattern of activity that mirrors the redemption of humanity as told in the Christian myth of Easter. The novel is set during Easter weekend and is divided into fourteen chapters like the fourteen stations of the cross (thirteen numbered chapters and one final chapter entitled "The End"). Because Frank plays the role of "the saved" in The Sportswriter, it is not he who is most illustrative of the negative effects of the masculine mystique because he manages to survive his mid-life crisis and re-focus his life. While Frank's fate preserves optimism and saves the novel from a morbid conclusion, it is the men who interact with Frank, "the damned," who are more interesting subjects of study. Unlike Frank Bascombe, Walter Lockett, Herb Wallagher, and Wade Arcenault do not contend well with the masculine mystique and the male mid-life crisis.

In the novel's opening chapter, Frank and his ex-wife (Anne Dykstra, but referred to in this novel only as X) are standing in a cemetery sharing a moment of reflection on the anniversary of their first son's death. While in the cemetery, Frank makes reference to three poems: "The Hollow Men" by T.S. Eliot, "To An Athlete Dying Young" by A.E. Housman, and "First Meditation" by Theodore Roethke--each of which is thematically pertinent to The Sportswriter. The house thieves, who indirectly caused Frank's divorce, spray-painted "We are the stuffed men" (line two of Eliot's poem) onto a wall of his house. The men described in the poem lead hollow, meaningless, life-in-death existences in a dying and meaningless world. At the end of the poem the world ends "Not with a bang but a whimper" (98). Ford's depiction of American men is similar--having embraced the masculine mystique as their operating guide, American men lead empty lives, dedicated to accumulating wealth and power instead of friendships and happiness. When their worlds finally collapse during their mid-life crises, no one cares.

The Housman poem describes a funeral procession for a young athlete and, on a symbolic level, also describes the Lombardian Ethic and the ephemerality of public glory in sports and in life: "It withers quicker than a rose" (12).

When athletes depend on winning to value themselves, they become worthless when they lose or when they can no longer compete; the poem mockingly suggests that the young athlete is fortunate to be dead because he will be remembered as a champion, unlike those "Runners whom renown outran" (19).

The line of Roethke's poem, which Frank reads, alludes to the often sad and blurred landscape that is human memory.

The poem's opening lines, "I have gone into the waste lonely places / Behind the eye; the lost acres at the edge of smoky cities" (1-2) are symbolic of the intense introspection, dreaminess, and depression that preoccupy Frank. These poems indicate that there is something wrong with the social codes that govern men's lives; the codes create an absurd world and ruin the lives of its inhabitants.

Frank and X exemplify Ford's disregard for gender conventions; while each retains feelings for the other, they each transmit those feelings in unconventional ways. Frank still cares deeply for his wife and openly displays his emotions when they are together. X still cares about Frank but she erects a transparent facade of stoicism. Frank is often depicted as fragile, dreamy, and sympathetic. He notes that "I have always liked hearing women talk more than men" (11), and believes that "men feel things women don't"

(329). X is often depicted as mentally and physically strong (she is a top-tier golfer), focused, and rational. Embarrassed at the prospect of being caught crying, she remarks "Isn't that womanish" (17). When she tosses a stone into the forest, she "throws as a catcher would, snapping it by her ear in a gainly way" (18). Explaining her refusals of recent marriage offers, she notes, "I might've reached an age, though, when I don't need men" (19). She envies the talks Frank shared with his son, saying "I felt like it was all men's secrets and I wasn't in on it" (20). She also refers to her new haircut as "dikey" (20).

By highlighting X's traditionally masculine traits and Frank's traditionally feminine traits, Ford never allows the reader to form expectations based on gender conventions for these or any other characters. Ford's depictions are subtle, so as not to create androgenous caricatures, but they do challenge gender stereotypes and provide a refreshing perspective. Frank and X also display some of the common characteristics of adults who are entering a mid-life shift, as explained by Mayer in the preceding chapter.

Frank, like many men at this stage, becomes disenchanted with work and seeks emotional development. X, like many women at mid-life, finds herself confined by traditional maternal roles and seeks to establish her independence and

pursue abandoned ambitions (joining the LPGA tour). The cruel irony is that they still complement each other. Frank is looking to become an emotionally supportive partner, looking for someone with direction: "a big strapping things-in-order girl should be in every man's life" (19). X has become assertive and seeks a submissive partner: "Somebody I can beat at golf and bully" (15).

This reversal of roles is one of the many strange and intriguing sociological issues examined in The Sportswriter.

One of Ford's strengths is his ability to highlight elements of social interaction which are often ignored and then to make those elements fascinating. Some critics find the novel too pedestrian. Tom Hiney, for example, writes that "Richard Ford is a great novelist in the way Michael Schumacher would make a great pizza courier. He doesn't make many mistakes, but you wonder whether he shouldn't be doing something more imaginative" (15). I disagree; it is his investigation of the commonplace and the everyday that is most imaginative and original in his work. As R.Z. Sheppard writes, "The Sportswriter is an appreciation of the mystery of things as they are" (86).

In Frank Bascombe's world the centre does not hold.

The death of his first son has dispelled the notion of continuity for Frank, as has his divorce. Trapped in what he refers to as the Existence Period, Frank inhabits a world that is seemingly unknowable and retreats within himself to escape. Frank, like many men, lacks the vocabulary to describe the psychological turmoil from which he suffers, so Existence Period is his label for this turmoil. The turmoil includes his divorce, the death of one son, his inability to fall in love again, and regrets from his past. As Guy Lawson notes in his article on The Sportswriter, the Existence Period is "a time . . . when treading water is the most that can be hoped for" (42). The novel's title is significant here because Frank believes that it is sportswriting that allows him to tread water rather than drown. Sportswriting is unambiguous and Frank depends on the simplicity of his profession to keep himself sane, but the therapeutic qualities of his vocation are a lie. Frank claims to love sportswriting's superficiality, but the truth is that the job is perpetuating Frank's dreaminess. Rather than confronting his mid-life problems, Frank is allowing himself to slip in and out of a dream-like state (10). These reality lapses prevent him from identifying and conquering the masculine mystique, and are the product of his Existence Period and his inability to cope with his mid-

life crisis. His dreaminess provides temporary escape, but it provides no true solace because, in his dreamy state, he sees that he is, himself, as complex, chaotic, and mysterious as the world around him. Frank does not fit into the world because the world insists on obedience to the doctrines of the masculine mystique--doctrines against which Frank is unconsciously rebelling as he suffers his mid-life crisis. Frank's divorce, for example, tags him as socially dysfunctional. As he notes,

it is not, I have come to understand, easy to have a divorced man as your neighbor. Chaos lurks in him--the viable social contract called into question by the smoky aspect of sex. Most people feel they have to make a choice and it is always easier to choose the wife, which is what my neighbors and friends have mostly done. (5)

He notes again, near the end of the novel: "A big problem of being divorced in a town this size is that all the women immediately become your wife's friends whether they know her or not. And that's not just paranoia. Being a man gets harder all the time" (343). Frank is not alone; in 1981 the divorce rate was thirty to fifty percent, depending upon the location in the country, and rising (Lewis 31). This is a significant population of men who are treated as, and who

believe themselves to be, failures.

The collapse of the nuclear family also has some repercussions on the young males involved, mostly related to gender identification--the absence of the father forces the son to study other men to learn male behaviour. As we see in the interactions between Frank and Paul, the boy is troubled. The connection between Paul's troubles/sadness and Frank's absence from the home is not emphasized, however, and there are other important contributing factors including the death of Paul's brother and Paul's dog which induce melancholy in the boy. Ford's decision to downplay any direct correlation between the single-parent home and child dysfunctionality is perhaps wise; the studies on the subject reveal inconclusive findings (Doyle 109). What is clear, however, is that separation from his wife and family has hurt Frank and alienated him from both family and society. Frank dreams of leading a simple life wherein he loves and is loved--a dream shared by a large and growing number of American middle-aged men. In this sense, Frank is an Everyman--he is the most ordinary of men, suffering from ordinary problems. As Walter Clemons writes,

most readers, males particularly, will sheepishly admit to sharing his inertia, his reticence, his desire for a life without complications. Only a

scrupulously honest novelist could make us sympathetic to such an unheroic nature. Ford makes us feel we're more like Bascombe than we often care to admit. (82)

One might refute Frank as a universal male standard because he belongs to the white upper-middle class, but it is impossible to ignore the increasing number of American men who identify with his plight.

Frank responds to his feelings of alienation by joining The Divorced Men's Club, a group of five single men who meet occasionally to relax and engage in traditionally masculine activities such as watching baseball games and fishing. These activities are alluring to Frank and other men because they appear to promote social interaction; unfortunately, the activities also distance the men from interaction with women and true progress in their lives. The men are unable or unwilling to express their feelings about their individual lives, and the club exists simply as an excuse for the men to drink and display bravado, rather than engage in any manner of therapeutic conversation. This unfortunate arrangement is attributable to the masculine mystique and the manner in which it encourages men to conceal their emotional problems so that they do not appear weak or feminine. While Frank does not address his problems,

another club member, Walter Lockett, does and is, in fact, the only man to do so in the novel.

After a fishing trip Walter persuades a reluctant Frank to join him for a drink and a chat. As Frank listens with discomfort and annoyance, Walter explains that his life is in shambles. He is undergoing a crisis, a mid-life crisis, which he does not fully understand and which recently has led him to have sexual intercourse with a man he met in a bar. Walter's confession further depicts men's inability/refusal to communicate emotional problems with one another; even Walter, who manages to vent a portion of his frustration, is awkward and untrusting of both himself and Frank as he delivers his tale. His discomfort is, of course, fuelled by Frank's visible annoyance and resentment that he is the one chosen to hear Walter's confession.

As noted in the preceding chapter, the American male is socialized from childhood to be a non-communicator of emotions, which typically makes the American male both a horrible confider and horrible confidant. The divorced single man is rarely able to express pain properly and, even if he can, has no easy outlet for that expression. Furthermore, divorce often coincides with, or results from, a mid-life crisis. Consequently, there is a large population of American men who are struggling to

simultaneously suppress the pain of divorce and the pain of mid-life crisis. After his shocking revelation, Walter reflects on his inability to bond with Frank during his confession.

"Women are better at this kind of thing, I think," Walter said.

"I never thought about it."

"I think women, Frank, sleep together all the time and don't really bother with it. . . . They understand friendship better in the long run."

(94)

While female emotional and physical intimacy tends to be, as Walter points out, socially more acceptable, male homosexual acts are repugnant to a significant majority of American society in the 1980s (Brod 220). Even Frank, the only non-homophobic male character in the novel, finds this subject unsavoury. Walter's sexual orientation remains ambiguous in the text and is, in any event, irrelevant. If he is heterosexual, his act represents a desperate need for human interaction at any cost. If he is homosexual or bi-sexual, his act becomes a signal of defiance of the masculine mystique, by which he had been doubly wronged, because of his minority sexual orientation. If the average man is subdued by the masculine mystique, then the homosexual man

is silenced and enslaved. The mystique's fostering of male communication problems helps to ensure the survival and perpetuity of the mystique itself.

Walter's confession also depicts the male mid-life crisis. This is how Walter describes it: "Like I'm impoverished, just suddenly. Not that I want anything. Not that I even can lose anything. I just feel bad, though I'm probably not going to kill myself" (95). The masculine mystique which encourages men to strive for power and material wealth (among other things) deprives men of their most valuable commodity--inner peace. When the dollar figure is used to establish value and men suddenly find themselves disenchanted with that system of valuation after half a lifetime of abeyance to it, they are struck with an enormous amount of emptiness and a sense that nothing they have, or have accomplished, holds any appreciable meaning. This is the state at which we find the men of The Sportswriter; from this point in the novel, Frank's and Walter's lives diverge and we are able to track the two men as they suffer through their individual mid-life crises. Frank will suffer and rebound while Walter will suffer and commit suicide.

Frank's ability to understand the dilemma of the male mid-life crisis is partly attributable to the education he receives when he fulfills his professional assignments. As we have seen, sports in the USA propagate and contribute to the masculine mystique. As a sportswriter, Frank mainly reports on results, opinions, and other sports superficialities. But on his assignment to interview Herb Wallagher, he inadvertently becomes more than a sportswriter and finds himself recording information on the plight of the American male. It is a painful and disturbing experience for Frank, but one which, consciously or otherwise, leads him onto the path of rehabilitation.

Herb Wallagher is a retired NFL player. As the interview is the only job-related function which Frank performs throughout the novel, it sticks out as a key event, and is one upon which he continues to reflect long after he finishes it. Frank is asked by the magazine for which he writes to do a simple "where-are-they-now" piece on Herb but discovers that there is nothing simplistic about either the man or his situation.

For men of Frank and Herb's generation, the consensus has been that sports are healthy for males; as Michael Messner notes, "through the late 1960s, it was almost universally accepted that 'sports builds character' and that

'a winner in sports is a winner in life'" (quoted in Brod 193). The male who acquires these attributes while playing sports will, in turn, use those attributes to assert a dominant position in the world outside sports. This supposedly winning formula is an inaccurate one, as it assumes that all men enjoy sports and that all men share an unyielding desire to dominate. It also suggests that those who do not play sports, those who do not excel at sports, and those who do not dominate in general, are losers or dysfunctional in the real world. In reality this stigma makes losers of all the men it addresses, as Frank reveals in his interactions with this supposed "winner."

In the course of Frank's preparatory work for the interview, he makes some interesting phone calls. The first is to investigate athletic injuries and he learns that women "are 38 percent more susceptible than men, although men have a higher percentage of painful injuries due to body weight, stress and other athletic-related activities. Men complain less, however, and consequently amount to a hidden statistic" (33). This information demonstrates the predicament that sex roles create for men. Men are discouraged from showing emotion or revealing pain, be it physical or emotional. While this supposedly helps them maintain a dominant position, it buries the truth, and turns

important concerns and problems into a "hidden statistic." The impact of this social pressure is further demonstrated by Frank's subsequent call to the Detroit Lions public relations people. He asks for someone who would like to speak on behalf of the organization about Herb, but finds no one willing to do so. It is fitting that even those men (it is a safe assumption that there are men working in this department) whom society deems adept at public relations are incapable or unwilling to express themselves in an emotional context.

On his way to visit Herb, Frank muses about The Vince Lombardi Rest Area and is disappointed that this nearby "haven" (62) does not lie on his route. It is ironic that Frank's route takes him instead to the site which exposes the Lombardian Ethic as fraudulent. Naturally, Frank expects the interview with Herb to be the typically distanced, unemotional palaver that society demands of men.

Herb, in particular, is a former lineman and these men (according to Frank) "tend to be more within themselves than most athletes, particularly once they've left the game" (34). But even before meeting Herb there are indications that this former Pro Bowler has not lived up to society's "winner at sports, winner at life" paradigm. Frank has learned that Herb's career-ending injury has changed his

life forever, dispelling the notion of an effortless transition to the non-sports world. While Frank does not know the particulars of the change, he has

before-and-after pictures of him in his playing days and today, and in them he does not look like the same person. Then he looks like a grinning tractor-trailer in a plastic helmet. Now he wears black horn-rims, and having lost a lot of weight and hair, looks like an overworked insurance agent. (34)

As the largest, most powerful vehicle on a highway, the tractor-trailer is a valid simile for the gargantuan NFL lineman who is powerful, confident, and unstoppable; it reminds us, however, of the masculine mystique's endorsement of machine as ideal man. Conversely, the small, spectacled insurance agent is society's stereotype for a man who controls no one and falls short of the USA's standard for men. When Frank speaks to Herb on the phone before his visit he detects in Herb's voice a "nervy formality . . . as if something was bothering him but he didn't want to make a fuss about it now" (34). The conversation is awkward and tentative, and we are struck with the picture of a man struggling with emotions that are being held in check by the "formalities" of social convention. It is fitting that Herb

is now living in a town called Walled Lake. The name evokes an image of life in recluse or life imprisoned and symbolizes the struggles which the former athlete now endures.

It is worth pointing out that the aforementioned dichotomy between the successful athlete and the average man is itself a component of the athlete's success. While other men may value themselves based on their economic or professional status, the athlete uses his athleticism (though often erroneously measured by his income) as his system of valuation. Consequently, professional athletes are held far above normal men and perceive of themselves in that way. As a sportswriter Frank has spent his life studying athletes, and notes that they are self-absorbed and never concerned with the thoughts or desires of others:

athletic training teaches this; the necessity of relinquishing doubt and ambiguity and self-inquiry in favor of a pleasant, self-championing one-dimensionality which has instant rewards in sports. You can ruin everything with athletes simply by speaking to them in your everyday voice, a voice possibly full of contingency and speculation. It will scare them to death by demonstrating that the world . . . is complexer

than what their training has prepared them for.

(63)

This passage develops our protagonist. We learn that while Frank understands and obeys the division between athlete and normal man, he recognizes it as a social construction and one that does not usually hold up once the athlete is forced into the underworld of normalcy; hence, a winner in sports is rarely a winner in life. After interviewing Herb, Frank notes to himself "*Herb Wallagher has seen life from both sides (and doesn't think much of either one)*" (208).

Psychological studies of retired star athletes support this view (Messner 203-5). The key problem is that athletes are trained to use their sport as an outlet for negative emotions, rather than dealing with those emotions in a more conventional manner, such as discussing the problem with a friend. Consequently, athletes rarely develop strong friendships because they refuse to let themselves be vulnerable, and when their emotional outlet (their sport) is taken away they have no coping skills and no friends to help them cope. Frank reflects on this precise dilemma, noting how an athlete

is trained not to let [an emotional situation] bother him too much or, if it bothers him more than he can stand, to go outside and hit five

hundred balls off the practice tee or run till he drops, or bash himself head-on into a piece of complicated machinery. I admire that quality more than almost any other I can think of. He knows what makes him happy, what makes him mad, and what to do about each. In this way he is a true adult. (Though for that, it's all but impossible for him to be your friend.) (63-4)

The psychological studies are far less flattering. Messner cites these studies at length, demonstrating how male athletes are rendered socially dysfunctional through sports. He describes the disengagement trauma of the ex-athlete as "a crisis of male identity" (Brod 202), and Herb Wallagher is Ford's spokesman for the suffering that this crisis engenders.

When Frank arrives at Walled Lake the division between Frank's non-athletic world and Herb's post-athletic world are firm. The locals are suspicious of Frank; they are a "protective community rising to a misconstrued threat against its fallen hero" (152). When Frank and Herb meet they shake hands and Herb almost pulls Frank to the ground; an indication of Herb's need for interaction and connection with Frank's world. Frank notes shortly thereafter that "Herb looks all around the sky like a caged man" (153), and

after talking to him for a short period remarks to himself: "I am sorry to hear Herb referring to his life in the past tense. It is not an optimistic sign" (154). Herb is himself in the throes of a mid-life crisis, as is clear in Frank's description of him and his wife, Clarice:

Herb couldn't be thirty-four yet, though he looks fifty. And Clarice has entered that long, pale, uncertain middle existence in which years behind you is not a faithful measure of life. Possibly she is thirty, but she is Herb's wife, and that fact has made everything else--race, age, hopes--fade. They are like retirees, and neither has gotten what he or she bargained for. (154)

As they begin the interview Herb ironically asks "Okay now, Frank, what's this bunch of lies supposed be about," (155) to which Frank responds that he would like to write a feel-good article on Herb that updates the Pro Bowl athlete's life in a way that would offer optimism and inspiration to others. Frank's plan is to start with Herb's job as "spirit coach" (presumably with the Lions, although it is not specified in the text) but learns that Herb is planning to retire: "I just wasn't getting the job done down there, Frank. Too much bullshit involved" (155). This revelation is an uncomfortable shock to Frank who does not

want to hear about failure because it makes for bad inspirational reading. As a sportswriter Frank unwittingly upholds and promotes the masculine mystique because his profession survives by disseminating the lie that all is well in the world of sports and that athletic objects of public admiration (such as Herb) are worthy of this idolatry both on and off the field. It is a safe assumption that when Herb refers to "too much bullshit," he is really referring to "too much emotional interchange," or "too much association with others on a personal level." As has already been discussed, the typical American male athlete is specifically ill-equipped to undertake an emotionally demanding role involving personal contact such as being a "spirit coach," so it is not surprising that Herb has failed in his new profession.

Frank's interview with Herb never actually begins because Herb has become moody and eccentric and because he resents Frank's desire to write a sports article with a positive slant. On the lone occasion in which Herb makes reference to his NFL career, he notes "It really seems insignificant now, Frank. It's really a pretty crummy preparation for life, I've come to believe" (161). Herb is depressed, vulgar, insulting, dreamy, tense, philosophical, and unfocused. Frank believes Herb to be crazy at this

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travelling the same path toward emotional ruin. Frank is subconsciously noting the disastrous effects of the masculine mystique and of allowing a male mid-life crisis to go unchecked and will, in time, take measures to save himself.

## 5

Frank begins to see fault in himself shortly after leaving Walled Lake. Having left Herb in tears, he then has a fight with his girlfriend, Vicki, and remarks to himself

I have managed to make two different people cry inside of two hours. I am doing something wrong.

Though what? Cynicism. I have become more cynical than old Iago, since there is no cynicism like lifelong self-love and the tunnel vision in which you yourself are all that's visible at the tunnel's end. (172)

Despite the fact that he notes his self-absorption, he does not yet make corrections, as seen later the same evening when he returns home to find Walter waiting for him. Walter is clearly in need of emotional support but Frank is still thinking about his relationship with Vicki and remains disgusted about the chore of having to listen to another man discuss personal problems. Always perceptive, Frank notes

that "Walter's face sinks solemn still, in the manner of a man considering new frontiers" (183), but Frank lacks both the tools to console Walter and the foresight to anticipate that Walter's new frontier is death. Frank does, however, listen to Walter and allows the latter to express his frustration as best he can. Unfortunately, Walter then kisses Frank and destroys any chance he has of retaining Frank as a friend. Walter is an extreme example of a man who is so deprived of interaction with other men that he is completely ignorant of social conventions. Because he fails to understand that heterosexual men (like Frank) do not bond physically, he violates the implicit trust between them and alienates Frank.

While Frank has not yet consciously taken steps to confront his mid-life crisis and the masculine mystique, changes do occur after his discussions with Herb and Walter.

In the following chapter (Nine) Ford begins to emphasize that his tale is set during Easter weekend and that it is now Easter Sunday. Like spring itself, Easter celebrates rebirth and new beginnings, so it is a fitting celebration of Frank's forthcoming redemption. But because Easter celebrates rebirth, it is also an event that signals death.

For Frank (like Jesus) it will signify the death of his discarded former self but, for the less fortunate, there

will be no redemption: Herb will continue with his life-in-death existence and Walter will simply go his suicidal way.

The respective fates of the three men are shockingly senseless and random. Through instruction provided by Jesus, Christians are supposedly able to experience first hand the benefit of proper behaviour, i.e., going to heaven.

But for American men there is no messianic figure to help them cope with the negative effects of the masculine mystique and no one to lead them from their mid-life crises.

Ford's call for education and prevention is subtle but clear.

6

As was discussed earlier, the profession of sportswriting is an inadvertent accomplice to the perpetuation of the masculine mystique, particularly as it applies to male athletes. One key step in Frank's redemption is his identification of the malevolent aspects of his profession, shortly after his visit with Herb. Sportswriters emphasize the Lombardian Ethic by promoting winners but they also increase the stakes of the Lombardian Ethic by making headlines of the losers.

The cheap-drama artists of my profession would, of course, make quick work of Herb. They're

specialists at nosing out failure. . . .

Sportswriters are sometimes damned bad men, and create a life of lies and false tragedies. In Herb's case, they'd order up a grainy black-and-white fisheye of Herb in his wheelchair, wearing his BIONIC shirt and running shoes, looking like a caged child molester; take in enough of his crummy neighborhood to get the "flavor"; stand Clarice somewhere in the background looking haggard and lost like somebody's abandoned slave out of the dustbowl, then start things off with "Quo Vadis Herb Wallagher?" . . . Though what can I write that's better? I'm not certain. Some life does not give in to a sportswriter's point of view. It ought to be possible to take a rear-guard approach, to look for drama in the concept of retrenchment, to find the grit of the survivor in Herb--something several hundred thousand people would be glad to read . . . something that draws the weave of lived life tighter. It's what's next that I have to work on. (208-9)

This passage demonstrates Frank's increasing awareness of the roots of male problems and his awareness of the importance of eliminating negative forces or "retrenchment."

The tragedy of the novel is that, while he interacts continually with men, Frank is impotent in his ability to help other men; Herb, for instance, has little hope of being a "survivor" unless he is administered psychiatric therapy or simply counselled, because he has no one with whom he can confide. It is clear that the company of men offers something to other men that is nurturing. Frank's elderly neighbour, Delia Deffeyes, says of her husband Caspar: "He'd love for you to come talk men's talk. . . . He misses men, I'm afraid" (214). Frank, of course, does not help Caspar or Herb or Walter or anyone else he encounters because he does not fully understand the sources or the cures for male depression.

## 7

Frank spends Easter Sunday with his Vicki Arcenault and her family. Before supper Vicki's father, Wade, makes a conspicuous statement to Frank as they chat with one another: "I've never wanted a night out with the boys in my life, Frank. What fun that is, I don't know" (266). Wade is meant to be a character who is deprived of the benefits of male bonding and companionship (friendship, stress-relief, support, etc.), and further discussion with him certainly reveals him to be mentally unhealthy (he once

specialists at nosing out failure. . . .

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Wade . . . What if I just don't want to win that bad, or can't?"

"Then you shouldn't be on the team." (279-80)

The player symbolizes the American man, the team symbolizes masculinity, and the discussion elucidates the predicament of masculinity in America. Sports dehumanize male athletes in the same ways in which the the masculine mystique dehumanizes men in all arenas of life. The references to men as machines refer to society's notion of the perfect man as machine, as explained by Kimbrell's "Machine Man" model.

The dialogue in this scene seems inspired by Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead; the conflict between Frank and Wade is strikingly similar to the conflict between Lieutenant Hearn and General Cummings in Mailer's work. In both contexts, society's perceived need to reduce men to a machine-like state results in stripping men of their individuality and dignity. Men are reduced to "cogs" and if they fail at their task or attempt to take a stand against dehumanization they are punished or discarded. This is the predicament of many postmodern male characters. In his discussion of football players in American fiction, François Happe notes in his essay "Fiction vs Power: The Postmodern American Sports Novel":

The quixotic "I quit," has now been fossilized in the sediments of popular football fiction. The [characters] all dramatically take leave, not as an indictment of the game itself, but as a response to the dehumanization that goes with it.

Discovering that a player is also a plaything, the football hero often strives for some kind of freedom, but the odds are long: technology, the team, the coach (both father-figure and wrathful god), as well as the commercial imperatives are his many obstacles. His legendary status being constantly contaminated by his own commodification, the hero has to face a basic truth: big time sport is business and he is just a cog. Either he submits to the collective's domination and discipline, forgets about self-definition and spontaneity, joins the pack and cries for order, or he quits . . . and ceases to exist. For it is, paradoxically, when he disappears in his uniform and helmet, thus becoming a mere number on the field, that the player really comes to life--even though he is aware that football threatens his integrity, physical or otherwise. (161-2)

Frank's argument with Wade is illustrative of Happe's discussion of athletes in American fiction.<sup>8</sup> This discussion can also be transposed to Frank's life (and to the lives of many American men). Frank will soon quit his profession, not because he dislikes it, but because of its dehumanizing effects. Frank the writer contributes to the dehumanization of others, but is himself being written upon by the masculine mystique each time he writes. While he appears to be expressing himself through his writing, he is a mere cog in the machine of male imprisonment. Only by silencing himself (quitting) will he be able to speak in his own voice.

The end of Frank's argument with Wade marks the climax of the novel. After supper Frank is informed by a phone call from his ex-wife that Walter has committed suicide by shooting himself. For the first time in the novel Frank internalizes the problems of another; he feels complicity, remorse, and undergoes an awakening as he speaks to X:

"It must seem like I live a life of chaos and

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<sup>8</sup> Wade's son is named Cade; the similarity of the names symbolizes the perpetuation (through familial socialization) of the destructive philosophies engendered by the masculine mystique.

confusion," I say, thinking about Walter's face for the first time all afternoon. I see it alive, then stone dead, and I can't help thinking he has made a terrible mistake, something I might've warned him about, except I didn't think of it in time. (304)

At the end of the chapter Frank is dumped by Vicki because of his argument at the supper table. It is an interesting separation because it marks a physical separation from those from whom he is ideologically distancing himself--those who, like the Arcenaults, are content to live under the thumb of the masculine mystique. The separation is a violent one--Vicki punches him in the face, making his mouth bleed when he protests--which marks the abrupt termination of his association with mental and ideological apathy and the birth of a new Frank, who is more clearly able to understand his own life and the world around him. There is a distinct sense that Frank is now experiencing a fresh start. Soon thereafter, as he reflects on the chaos and confusion of his own life, he is standing outside a restaurant called "Ground Zero"--an indication that he is leaving the domain of negativity and establishing equilibrium, with the possibility of moving toward the positive. When Frank returns to his office toward the end of the novel, he meets

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assert himself. While society's distorted vision (racism) is partly to blame for his invisibility, he is complicit in his tragedy because he is ultimately responsible for his own actions. In The Sportswriter, the same scenario is at work with one exception: society's vision is distorted by the masculine mystique, instead of racism.<sup>10</sup> These are Frank's reflexions on his own invisibility:

Where, in fact, do you go if you're me? . . . I drive, an invisible man, through the slumberous, hilled post-Easter streets of Haddam. And as I have already sensed, it is not a good place for death. . . . Haddam is, however, a first-class place for invisibility--it is practically made for it. . . . I cruise through the dark cemetery where my son is put to rest, and where the invisible virtually screams at you, cries out for quiet, quiet and more quiet. I could go sit on Craig's

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<sup>10</sup> Racism was alive and well in the USA in the 1980s but Ford makes only brief mention of it in his work. Men who belong to minority races are doubly wronged by society's distorted views--a subject worthy of study, but one that is not addressed at length by Richard Ford.

stone and be silent and invisible with Ralph<sup>11</sup> in our old musing way. But I would soon be up against my own heavy factuality, and consolation would come to a standstill. (339-40)

Frank acknowledges his invisibility and the painful truth that his life is barren of meaning. He survives this, however, by refusing to relinquish his belief that happiness is still possible for him. Since there is no happiness in his own life he turns to appreciating the happiness in others' lives:

To take pleasure in the consolations of others, even the small ones, is possible. And more than that: it sometimes becomes damned necessary when enough of the chips are down. It takes a depth of character as noble and enduring as willingness to come off the bench to play a great game knowing full well that you'll never be a regular. (341)

## 9

By novel's end Frank has made a commitment to himself to be happy. He escapes the need to validate himself by society's expectations of proper male behaviour. He is

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<sup>11</sup> The ironic name of Frank's deceased son.

content to be a utility player in a world that demands that men be "regulars." Frank has also made a commitment to society:

Walter's death, I suppose you could say, has had the effect on me that death means to have; of reminding me of my responsibility to a somewhat larger world. Though it came at a time when I didn't much want to think about that, and I still don't find it easy to accommodate and am not completely sure what I can do differently. (366-7)

Even though his future is uncertain, he is able to take consolation in the knowledge that his own problems with the masculine mystique and the male mid-life crisis are shared by others: "We've all felt that way, I'm confident, since there's no way that I could feel what hundreds of millions of other citizens haven't" (375). What separates Frank from the crowd is that he redeems himself from his lifelong participation in the masculine mystique, which tens of millions of other American men are unable to do. Frank's redemption is not spectacular--indeed, few drastic changes occur in the novel--but the novel is not about change on a large scale. The Sportswriter describes the plight of a gender in turmoil--a plight from which change is an unlikely

fate. As Robert Towers explains, the novel is slow-paced and, like its protagonist, lacks a clear sense of direction; it arrives nowhere, so to speak. The book is, instead, a reflective work that invites reflection, a novel that charms us with the freshness of its vision and touches us with the perplexities of a 'lost' narrator who for once is neither a drunkard nor a nihilist but a wistful, hopeful man adrift in his own humanity.

(39)

As the novel closes there is unfinished business: Frank has shed a skin but must now rebuild himself and test his new self against the world. That story is told in Richard Ford's second Frank Bascombe novel, Independence Day.

## Chapter Three: Independence of the American Man

## 1

Independence Day begins with Frank listening to the morning sounds of his neighbourhood, which are dominated by a hymn from a church: "Wake the day, ye who would be saved, wake the day, let your souls be laved" (4). This distant sound is an echo of Ford's previous novel; it reminds us of the protagonist's redemption and clean start. Realizing that sportswriting had trapped him in a world that reinforced the masculine mystique he broke with the sports magazine and began selling real estate, a vocation he deemed more humanistic. But despite his awakening and the external corrections he has made, Frank continues to face internal conflict and confusion which is being brought about by his mid-life crisis. Frank's central anxiety is that he has neglected his son, Paul, who is now an adolescent delinquent who suffers from mild mental illnesses which cause him to lie, steal, and make unusual noises. Frank understands that his intervention is critical not only for Paul's welfare, but also for his own because he has determined that his personal fulfilment must come by means of helping others rather than by professional advancement. This personal directive marks Frank's shift from adherence to social sex

codes and the masculine mystique, toward adherence to his own opinions and beliefs and, eventually, toward independence and self-reliance.

2

While The Sportswriter highlights many negative effects of sports, Ford acknowledges that they remain an important part of American culture. In Independence Day, baseball, while unromanticized, is regarded as an institution which celebrates both Americana and masculinity, and its hall of fame is the final destination in Frank's quest. An appreciation of baseball's place in American culture and an appreciation of the texts which Frank brings with him on his quest--Thomas Jefferson's "The Declaration of Independence" and Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance"--are crucial if we are to fully understand the role of sports, independence, and self-reliance in the context of masculinity in the USA.

A brief discussion of baseball and a summary of the relevant passages of both texts precedes my analysis of masculinity in Independence Day.

It is interesting to note that both Jefferson and Emerson commit the men's studies faux pas of referring to humans as men; by generalizing the male condition for the human condition, they do not speak of men as males, but

rather, as people. This is pardonable--while their societies promoted gender prejudice, their essays do not. It is due to the universality of their respective messages (and the special genius of each) that these texts are equally applicable to women and applicable also to the specifically male dilemma of the masculine mystique.

As has been previously discussed, men who suffer the effects of the masculine mystique receive no guidance to help liberate themselves. Frank is fortunate to learn from others' tragedies and fortunate also to have discovered the writings of great American thinkers. These writings, he believes, guide him as he combats the masculine mystique and also allow him to guide his son as they begin their journey.

As Frank notes,

Fatherhood by itself doesn't provide wisdom worth imparting. Though in preparation for our trip, I've sent him copies of *Self-Reliance* and the Declaration, and suggested he take a browse. These are not your ordinary fatherly offerings, I admit; yet I believe his instincts are sound and he will help himself if he can, and that independence is, in fact, what he lacks-- independence from whatever holds him captive: memory, history, bad events he struggles with,

can't control, but feels he should. (16)

This statement is equally applicable to Frank and most other American males because of the well-documented commonality of this malaise. Masculinity in the contemporary USA faces problems similar to the problems which faced the country's early settlers. In his preface to "The Declaration of Independence," Jefferson notes that six of the states "were not yet matured for falling from the parent stem" (638). The messages conveyed by this text can be transposed from their original context--independence from British rule--to the present context of independence from the masculine mystique. Some men, like some colonies, will never be ready to break with the past or break from that which enslaves them. When those who are able to assert independence outnumber those who cannot, human progress occurs; such is the implied hope for men even as they continue to be overwhelmed by sex codes and the masculine mystique. The causes of Frank's own break with the masculine mystique are summarized, symbolically, by Jefferson in his list of self-evident truths and of the dangers of British rule:

that all men are created equal; that they are  
endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable  
rights; that among these are life, liberty, and  
the pursuit of happiness; . . . that whenever any

form of government becomes destructive to those ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. . . . The present king of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. . . . He has refused to pass laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of representation in the legislature, a right inestimable to them, and formidable to tyrants only. (Jefferson 640-1)

The colonists' need for self-government is shared by the contemporary American man. While Americans have spent two hundred years constructing a sophisticated democratic government, the American man still lacks personal self-government. Frank stands as one of the outnumbered, a man who recognizes the danger of the masculine mystique (symbolized in this context as the king of Great Britain) and who acts upon his inalienable right to overthrow it.

Moving from Jeffersonian notions of self-determinism,

Frank next focuses on the pragmatic solutions offered by Emersonian thought. Emerson believes that self-reliance is essential to achieving independence; Emerson's opening epigram, "Ne te quæsiveiris extra" is the rule that must be followed if the American man is to secure happiness (Emerson 956).<sup>12</sup> Emerson goes on to write that "There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide" (Emerson 956). This holds true (literally) for Walter Lockett, who was seen as a failure by society and who could not bear the depression engendered by that label. Emerson believes that men are afraid to change because they believe that society will condemn them for their individuality. He is also quick to point out that men who believe this are correct: "For non-conformity the world whips you with its displeasure" (Emerson 960). It is easy to follow society because doing so reduces conflict. But as Emerson, Nancy Mayer, and others have confirmed, it also retards a man's maturation into full adulthood.

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. . .

. My life is not an apology, but a life. It is

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<sup>12</sup> "Do not search outside yourself," i.e., "Do not imitate."

for itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than that it be glittering and unsteady. . . . Few and mean as my gifts may be, I actually am, and do not need for my own assurance or the assurance of my fellows any secondary testimony. (958-9)

Conformity denies the American man the opportunity to progress on a personal level because it traps him in a mode wherein all decisions are made for him by rule of sex codes.

This point is illustrated, in a separate context, when Emerson questions organized religion.

A man must consider what a blindman's bluff is this game of conformity. If I know your sect, I anticipate your argument. I hear a preacher announce for his text and topic the expediency of one of the institutions of his church. Do I not know beforehand that not possibly can he say a new and spontaneous word? Do I not know that with all this ostentation of examining the grounds of the institution, he will do no such thing? (959)

Along with conformity, Emerson believes that consistency is an obstacle to self-reliance. By consistency, he refers to the desire to avoid changes to our actions or opinions for

fear that others will notice the irregularities and become upset by them. Emerson agrees that changes in action or opinion anger others, but counters that it is far more important to always do and think what one believes to be the proper action/thought at any given moment.

Why drag this monstrous corpse of your memory,  
lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in  
this or that public place?. . . Trust your  
emotion. . . . A foolish consistency is a  
hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little  
statesmen and philosophers and divines. With  
consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do.

He may as well concern himself with his shadow on  
the wall. . . . Else, if you would be a man, speak  
what you think to-day in words as hard as cannon  
balls, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks  
in hard words again, though it contradict every  
thing you said to-day. (960-1)

Emerson ends his treatise by focusing on man's relationship to society. Man remains powerless until he changes himself--it is during the transition that he exudes power, much like a piece of matter which experiences an exchange of energy as it changes state:

Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides

in the moment of transition from a past to a new state; in the shooting of the gulf; in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul *becomes*; for, that forever degrades the past; turns all riches to poverty. (965)

This is certainly true of Frank in The Sportswriter. When he is dreamy and stuck in his emotional rut he lacks the energy and vibrancy he exhibits toward the end of the novel as he breaks free from his old self. The prelude to change is recognizing one's role in society, recognizing the goals one has set, and determining that they are unacceptable. For many men suffering the effects of the masculine mystique and mid-life crisis, the quest for material gain engenders their discomfort with life:

the reliance on Property . . . is the want of self-reliance. . . . But a cultivated man becomes ashamed of his property, ashamed of what he has, out of new respect for his being. . . . It is only as a man puts off from himself all external support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail. . . . Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles. (972)

Emerson's teachings are useful in the postmodern USA. The

solution to national male liberation from the masculine mystique depends on ignoring the masses and focusing on the self. Frank, unlike most American men, stands alone and seeks self-reliance. Independence Day charts his continuing quest for inner peace and the manner in which his principles triumph.

The third "text" used by Frank in his journey is sports, particularly baseball. The Bascombes' trip begins with the National Basketball Association Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachussets and ends with the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, which Frank believes to be "the ur-father-son meeting ground, offering the assurances of a spiritually neutral spectator sport made seemingly meaningful by its context in idealized male history" (18).

Baseball's cultural significance to the USA cannot be overlooked; it is the country's national pastime and is an integral component of its folklore. Its greatest players are heroes of twentieth century American mythology, such as Babe Ruth, whose larger-than-life antics and revolutionary athletic prowess embedded the sport into the national conscience. Another American icon, Joe DiMaggio, is immortalized in the American folk song "Mrs. Robinson," by Simon and Garfunkel, and in Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man

and the Sea, as a metaphor of the hard-working man whose charm and simple elegance inspire remembrance of better times. To this day, the Dodgers' Jackie Robinson remains the preeminent symbol of the USA's racist past, its gradual move toward racial acceptance, and the belief that one person can make a difference if he/she has the fortitude to stand for his/her convictions. Because baseball is an integral component of the American experience, the trip, while intensely personal for Frank and Paul, assumes a larger scope as one reads Independence Day--the father and son become American Everymen. Because Major League Baseball is played exclusively by men, the trip also assumes a specifically male dimension.<sup>13</sup> The physical quest to Cooperstown, the heart of America's pastime, is symbolic of Frank's quest to win his son's heart and liberate himself from his own problems. Because of his divorce and his denial of child custody, he has been distanced from Paul which has made it impossible for Frank to guide and nurture

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<sup>13</sup> The rules of Major League Baseball do not speak of "men," but rather, of "players." Men and women are permitted to play but heretofore no woman has demonstrated the skill necessary to compete at this level.

his son.<sup>14</sup> Frank's quest to connect with his son is similar to baseball's own circular quest which begins at home, leads to potential danger and estrangement on the base paths, and then to the possibility of safety, a return home, and victory.

Obviously not all interpersonal stratagems result in victory, which makes baseball an even more effective metaphor. Baseball is often described as a game of failure; the greatest hitters in the game fail to get hits in 65% of their tries. The greatest baseball teams each season typically lose about 40% of their games. While the object of baseball is simple, executing its plays is a difficult task to perform consistently and the line between success and failure in baseball is thin. Like the game, Frank's life has seen a fairly equal amount of success and failure which has taught him, as it teaches professional baseball players, to not let himself get too emotionally high or too emotionally low.

To the casual observer, baseball moves at a leisurely pace; to the educated fan and player, there is barely enough time between pitches to analyse the permutations of events

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<sup>14</sup> In the USA the majority of fathers are denied child custody in a divorce. See Lewis, 31.

that might unfold with the next pitch. Baseball, like life itself, is a game for thinkers. Both require planning, training, experience, talents, and the ability to make sound decisions in difficult situations. Baseball is the only professional team sport in the USA that, like the universe, is potentially infinite both temporally and spatially. The game is played without a clock and can hypothetically continue forever, if the teams' run totals balance after each inning. Likewise, there is no limit to the distance a ball can be hit, save for the limits of human ability, because the foul poles mark invisible lines that continue to infinity.<sup>15</sup> Baseball also has a unique Emersonian dimension: because the action lasts only a few seconds for each play, success in baseball depends on embracing the Emersonian belief that the past is in the past and that only the moment is important. This is a mindset which Frank will adopt as he attempts to propel his life above .500--looking at the present and future but not dwelling on the past. Ford's novel and protagonist analyse life the way a serious baseball fan analyses a game: it is the minutiae of the

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<sup>15</sup> Early parks exemplified this by having no outfield wall to contain the field of play. Contemporary inner-city stadiums have, unfortunately, made this feature impossible.

affair which are most appealing--a pitcher's propensity to induce ground balls, a catcher with dubious arm strength and a runner at first--rather than a continuous barrage of action. Likewise, Frank is intrigued by the minutiae of ordinary life--an ambiguous smile, a forgotten poem--more so than by continuous action and excitement.

## 3

Frank and Paul's journey across the USA's landscape mirrors the historical journey of the American male. Like the scenery they take in, the internal landscape of the American male has witnessed growth and prosperity but has also seen crimes, abuses, and other degenerative influences.

At one point Frank is reminded of American history as he looks at the trees along the highway: "wedges of old-growth hardwoods still loom, trees that saw Revolutionary armies rumble past, heard the bugles, shouts and defiance cries of earlier Americans in their freedom swivet" (128). The novel anticipates the outbreak of a new American Revolution against the masculine mystique, but this revolution is not yet begun, as demonstrated by Frank's reflections on the local ideology:

Vermont's spiritual mandate, after all, is that  
you don't look at yourself, but spend years gazing

at everything else as penetratingly as possible in the conviction that everything out there more or less stands for you, and everything's pretty damn great because you are (Emerson has some different opinions about this). (89)

The truth is that, in 1988, the American male is in limbo, a situation symbolized by the country's national election; the country must decide whether political conservatism or liberalism is the proper course, and is temporarily rudderless. The American male does not look at himself for answers but instead seeks to imitate the moral majority in his endless quest for normalcy. Frank's business partner, Karl Bemish, notes: "We're all distanced from government. It don't mean anything in our lives. We're in limbo" (137). The lack of self-government is the key problem for Karl and other American men and, now that the country is in a transitional period and searching for its own identity, the American male has an opportunity to assert his independence. Frank is a liberal (Democrat) who wishes to see the current conservative (Republican) regime overthrown because the latter promotes tradition rather than change. Most American men are afraid of change, however, and the Republicans are returned to power, winning the election by a wide margin. In 1988, the leader of the Democratic party

was Michael Dukakis, the son of a European immigrant to the USA. He had a sound political platform, with emphasis on social care, but was uncharismatic. The leader of the Republican party was George Bush, the former Vice President under Ronald Reagan. His platform was macho--an emphasis on the military and traditional American values--and he delivered it with learned Hollywood flair. For the American public, a Republican vote represented a vote for the status quo; it represented a vote for the traditional, all-American, ethnically homogeneous man. Bush, while physically slender, was perceived as a "Machine Man" while Dukakis seemed more peaceful and pensive. In a society terrified of weakness, the gentle Dukakis was a gamble, which left Bush as the only choice.

Shortly after discussing politics with Karl, Frank visits his new girlfriend, Sally Caldwell, and reads a passage from a book he finds in her house:

The first thing that strikes a traveller to the United States is the innumerable multitudes of those who seek to emerge from their original condition; and the second is the rarity of lofty ambition to be observed in the midst of universally ambitious stir of society. No Americans are devoid of a yearning desire to rise

but hardly any appear to entertain hopes of great magnitude or to pursue lofty aims. (154)

The passage relates not only to the American man's inability "to rise" against negative forces, such as the masculine mystique and national government, but also relates to Frank's personal problems. At this point Frank has yet to embark on his quest with Paul ("pursue his lofty aim") or correct his own problems with self-reliance and he is labouring to maintain a relationship with Sally, which sends him back into deep self-reflection.

## 4

In both novels Frank is unable to build intimate relationships with women, in part because of his lack of self-government. Because he spends so much time thinking about women, reflecting on relationships he has had, and dreaming about future possibilities, it is clear that being in love with a woman (who loves him in return) is of paramount importance to Frank, as it is for many men. Although he is largely unsuccessful in matters of love, he does not blame women for his failure; for Frank, this marks an important deviation from the masculine mystique and for Ford, this is an important deviation from other male

writers. As Vivian Gornick points out, fifty years ago the strongest version of this story [lonely men looking for love] was written by Ernest Hemingway. Today, it survives in the work of Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, and Andre Dubus.

One enormous difference obtains between the earlier writer and the later ones. Hemingway held an allegorical view of life in which women were idealized as the means of spiritual salvation, then condemned as agents of subversion. Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, and Andre Dubus are neither sexists nor misanthropes. On the contrary: tenderness of heart is their signature trait. These men share an acute sense of the compatriot nature of human suffering. Their women are fellow victims. (31)

Frank does not blame Ann for the break-up of their marriage, nor does he ever make a negative remark toward any of the women with whom he has had short affairs. Frank's changing outlook on his life includes an appreciation of his own short comings. Throughout the novel, Frank thinks about Sally and talks to her on several occasions. He is usually awkward and uninspiring in these matters, but he always displays genuine concern for her needs, as well as his own.

Frank is an unusual and original protagonist: a non-sexist man who is desperately trying to learn the language and comportment required to communicate love. At times, Frank pretends to believe that he has his life under control, so it is not surprising that the women in his life become disillusioned with him. As Frank states,

Unmarried men in their forties, if we don't subside entirely into the landscape, often lose important credibility and can even attract unwholesome attention in a small, conservative community. And in Haddam, in my new circumstances, I felt I was perhaps becoming the personage I least wanted to be and, in the years since my divorce, had feared being: the suspicious bachelor, the man whose life has no mystery, the graying, slightly jowly, slightly too tanned and trim middle-ager, driving around town in a cheesy '58 Chevy ragtop polished to a squeak, always alone on balmy summer nights, wearing a faded yellow polo shirt and green suntans, elbow over the window top, listening to progressive jazz, while smiling and pretending to have everything under control, when in fact there was nothing to control. (109)

This is not the only perception of himself which Frank fears. As the trip approaches, Frank becomes increasingly irritated by the manner in which he is perceived; Sally calls him "Franky" which he finds intolerable because it makes him seem as though he "were six and of indeterminate gender" (168). After speaking with real estate client Phyllis Markham, he remarks to himself, "In two hours I have been suspected of being a priest, a shithead and now, a homo. I'm apparently not getting my message across" (192).

Frank feels the need to establish his identity, particularly his male identity. He is entering a transitional period that is blurring his persona, which coincides with the transitional periods being experienced by his son (puberty) and his country (election). But Frank is a complex character because he also embraces change--he is thoroughly Emersonian in that respect, unlike the women in his life. Sally is undergoing change and seems ashamed of it: "Women don't usually have mid-life crises, do they?" (309). Later she accuses him of altering his words in an exchange which illustrates Emersonian philosophy:

"I don't think that's exactly what you said last fall."

"But it's pretty close . . . and it's what I meant and what I mean now." (310)

Frank believes that one should say what one feels at each moment rather than sticking with past opinions; Sally (society) disagrees and whips him with her displeasure. She says to Frank: "You're not really very easy to fix on. And I don't think I'd be a good long-term lover or wife for somebody like that. I had a husband who was hard to fix on" (311). People are angered when others refuse to be consistent and predictable, as Frank does. It is ironic that Sally says she may be suffering a mid-life crisis because it is the period in which many people realise that they have spent their lives being consistent and predictable in order to meet the demands of social sex codes. Sally, unlike Frank, clearly remains a victim of those codes; she is bewildered by the fact that Frank is interested in her instead of younger women. She asks him, "Tell me why you're attracted to women your own age" (309), insinuating that his tastes in women are psychologically deviant. Frank sought younger women during his mid-life crisis because he wanted to feel young himself, but came to understand that he was merely overcome by the masculine mystique's impulse to be someone other than himself. Emerson's belief that imitation is suicide rings true in this instance because Frank was collapsing within himself during those years and his escape from adherence to sex codes was a rebirth for

him, as it is for many men.

When Frank looks through the books at the Deerslayer Inn, he finds his collection of short stories entitled Blue Autumn; Frank was a fiction writer before becoming a sportswriter and the book is a symbol of his youth. That moment crystallizes the death of the past for Frank because he realises that the man who wrote the book is not the man who is reading it. It also helps him come to grips with the end of his marriage, an element of the past to which he still clings.

The chasm (and what else is it?) between our long-ago time and this very moment suddenly makes yawningly clear that all is now done and done for; as though she [Ann] was never *that* she, me never *that* me, as though the two of us had never embarked on a life that would lead to this queer librarial moment (though we did). And rather than being against all odds, it's in precise accordance with the odds: that life would lead to here or someplace just as lonely and spiritless . . . Gone in a hiss and fizzle. (Though if it weren't that tears had just sprung to my eyes, I'd accept my loss with dignity. Since after all I'm the man who counsels abandonment of those precious things

you remember but can no longer make hopeful use  
of.) (322)

The book's title is a cute touch: blue as sadness and autumn as the season of dying. By crying, Frank mourns the death of his former life and marriage but that loss is replaced with peace of mind and a clearer vision of present and future. It is a moment of clarity for which all men should hope, but one that is impossible for men who are unable to cry.

## 5

As a real estate agent, Frank has become a professional manager of transition and change, so he is uniquely qualified to serve as the guide for changes to himself, his son, and others. Even as Frank attends to his son and himself, he is relocating Joe and Phyllis Markham, clients who are drawn from the pages of a realtor's nightmare. The Markhams are from Vermont and Ford uses them to exemplify the problems that are caused by "Vermont's spiritual mandate"--the opposite of self-reliance and independence. These problems are shared by the general populace, as Frank notes: "their dilemma is now the dilemma of many Americans" (36). Joe and Phyllis Markham have left Vermont for New Jersey in search of a better life, fearing that if they had

stayed they would have ended up like everyone else in the region: "nonproducers in a society in need of new ideas" (37). Obviously, the state of Vermont is not the problem; the problem is an American society which suffocates itself by promoting social codes of behaviour--codes which exist in all of the nation's states and which cannot be fled but, rather, must be confronted.

In the Markham sections of Independence Day Ford frequently uses the words "realty" and "reality" and the two words, which are spelled so similarly, are often interchangeable in the novel. The Markhams currently have a realty problem--they are homeless and their house hunting is going poorly--but their actual problem is that they do not understand reality. The first aspect of reality which they do not understand is the concept of a market economy: they are looking for a large house in a pastoral setting, located near modern conveniences for \$150,000 while this sort of house actually costs \$450,000. The second aspect of reality which evades them is that the country is ethnically diverse; they insist on leading sheltered lives in a racially and culturally homogeneous (white, upper-middle class) community. Their impossible quest for this home and community makes them prisoners of their idealism and blinds them to the realities of capitalism and multiculturalism;

much like Frank and Paul's personal problems, and the greater dilemma of the American male, the Markhams cannot achieve independence because they are chasing an unattainable standard set by society instead of searching within themselves to find sources of happiness. When the Markhams talk to Frank their realty woes become blurred with their reality woes (their life problems)--discussions of their housing needs invariably lead to a discussion of their daughter's need for a proper school which leads to family problems which leads to health problems and other personal issues. The lack of focus from which they suffer is essentially an Existence Period, from which they will only escape by asserting self-reliance. With the Markhams (and with Paul), Ford packages this theme of the quest for self-reliance and independence in a hilarious manner. While his frequent use of humour may seem misplaced as he probes this serious American predicament, it is an effective device because it enables him to emphasize the absurdity of social codes. These sections are also loaded with verbal obscenities which, not only add realism to the dialogue, but also emphasize the vulgarity of the contemporary USA and the severity of the Markham's displacement woes.

The Markhams are experiencing "the realty dreads" (57) which are more about reality than realty. As Frank

explains, these dreads originate "in the cold, unwelcome, built-in-America realization that we're just like the other schmo, wishing his wishes, lusting his stunted lusts, quaking over his idiot frights and fantasies, all of us popped out of some unchinkable meld" (57). This section further demonstrates Frank's understanding of the ways in which American culture socializes its people. It also demonstrates Frank's understanding of mid-life crisis and the manner in which it shocks people into the realization that they have been socialized and controlled. When Frank talks to Joe Markham in the motel room it is clear that Joe is suffering from a mid-life crisis. He notes to Frank: "I've completely quit becoming, . . . I'm not out on the margins where new discoveries take place anymore" (50), and then adds, "I don't want to get trapped in some shitty life I'll never get out of except by dying" (52).

The first passage recalls Emerson's view of power existing in the moment of transition. If that is the case, Joe has taken an important step by moving, but he (like most men) is ill-equipped to overcome his mid-life crisis by himself and is lucky that Frank, rather than death, will take him past it. At the end of their conversation Joe complains: "You just see everything from the fucking middle, that's all" (56), but this is inaccurate because Frank is a

perceptive protagonist. Frank (having learned from his mistake with Walter Lockett) is able to see things from the middle which makes him an able mediator and counsellor for the Markhams and Paul. Frank also sees things from the inside. As an American man, he fought with the masculine mystique and his own mid-life crisis, and Frank continues to have some problems with women and his children which he struggles to overcome. Lastly, Frank sees things from above--he is always able to step back and look at problems in the grand scheme of life. It is this view that allows him to define Americans as "lab rats" (57) and which helped him diagnose and overcome his adherence to the masculine mystique. Frank's analytical skills and objective view of the world allow him to isolate problems and find solutions; in the Markhams case,

the only thing that'll save them is to figure out a way to think about themselves and most everything else *differently*; formulate fresh understandings based on the faith that for new fires to kindle, old ones have to be dashed; and based less on isolating, boneheaded obstinence and more, for instance, on the wish to make each other happy without neutralizing the private self--which was why they showed up in New Jersey in the first

place instead of staying in the mountains and becoming smug casualties of their own idiotic miscues. (90)

The advice here is similar to Emerson's and suitable for any person who suffers a mid-life crisis: one must always do what is right at the moment and not allow outdated codes of conduct to govern one's life.

## 6

Frank's central concern in Independence Day is his son, Paul Bascombe. Paul is a simultaneously humorous and depressing reminder of the adolescent transitional period, and his rapidly changing body and mind are confusing to both himself and his father. When Frank collects Paul for their trip Frank notices that

he's even pudgier and somehow taller, with thick, adult eyebrows even more like his mom's, but with a bad, pasty complexion--nothing like he looked as recently as a month ago, and not enough anymore (or ever) like the small, gullible boy who kept pigeons at his home in Haddam. (How do these things change so fast?) His hair has been cut in some new, dopey skint-sided, buzzed-up way, so that his busted ear is evident in its bloody

little bandage. Plus, his gait is a new big-shoe, pigeon-toed, heel-scrape, shoulder-slump sidle by which he seems to give human shape to the abstract concept of condescending disapproval for everything in sight.... (255)

While intelligent, Paul is emotionally troubled and has a negative view of existence; like his father, he is in need of a make-over. Frank is partly responsible for Paul's emotional immaturity because his divorce has distanced him from his son which has disrupted his ability to guide his son. Frank's mission is, through fatherly counsel, to offer Paul other options; ironically, Frank will be the beneficiary of the same counsel, blurring the distinction between father and son, mentor and pupil. Both are in a state of flux and seeking self-definition, much like the country they inhabit. Only when nation, father, and son establish their respective identities will each be able to progress and achieve independence and self-reliance. As Frank explains, "independence is, in fact, what he lacks-- independence from whatever holds him captive: memory, history, bad events he struggles with, can't control, but feels he should" (16). Because Frank understands Emerson, he knows that fear of the past is an impediment to self-reliance and wishes to help Paul overcome it; because he

understands Jefferson, he is cognizant of the symbolism of the July fourth celebration--a celebration he entitles "Reconciling Past and Present: From Fragmentation to Unity and Independence" (259).

Neither Frank nor Paul seems particularly interested in sports during the trip, but the importance of sports is frequently suggested, as when Paul describes his days at the camp for troubled youths: "if we played basketball, even stupid basketball, they all got better for a while. We had 'share your thoughts' after every game, and everybody had better thoughts. For a while at least" (267). Frank often tries to belittle the impact of baseball on his own life, but one of the fondest memories he has of his children is the day he took them to a baseball game:

I speared a liner bare-handed in the right-field stands at Veterans Stadium, hot off the bat of some black avenger from Chicago, with my son and daughter present and awed to silence with admiration and astoundment for their Dad (everyone around me stood up and applauded as my hand began to swell up like a tomato). (117)

Furthermore, Frank has packed two baseball gloves and baseballs for the journey--items he describes as "important paraphernalia for my trip with Paul" (118). The activity

of "having a catch" is symbolic in baseball literature of a connection between the participants. For men, who often have trouble expressing themselves, the activity provides a vehicle wherein both men are able to silently send (throw) and receive (catch) each other's offerings. The game is simple but requires that each participant concentrate on the other, receive what the other offers, and trust that neither will hurt the other. In The Sportswriter, Frank refers to baseball as "a good man-to-man connection" (83), and for that reason, has chosen baseball's shrine as the site of the critical meeting with his son.

At each hall of fame, an incident occurs which moves Paul and Frank closer to an understanding of life, the world, and their place in it. At the Basketball Hall of Fame the main exhibit is "The Shoot-Out," which is a conveyor belt lined on both sides with basketball nets at various heights and distances. Visitors stand on the slowly moving belt to take shots at the baskets with balls that are continuously being replenished in troughs lining the belt. It is an obvious metaphor of the life journey and its continuous stream of opportunities and attempts, including the successes and failures that are produced. The Shoot-Out's layout displays the life journey as if it were a time line. It is symbolic that Frank, in his middle years, is

nervous about the large crowd of people behind him on the belt and has one of his good shots deflected away from a basket by a younger, more athletic participant. As Frank watches Paul on the belt he remarks that the "conveyor moves him seemingly much more slowly than I myself was moved, and certainly leisurely enough to get off six or seven good shots and even dribble before he shoots" (279). This indicates that Paul has a long life ahead of him and can take his time with decisions. It also suggests that it is easier to see things clearly (as Frank does) when one is distanced from the action. Paul makes no attempt at a shot but remarks afterward that he enjoyed it because he stopped thinking he was thinking. The recurring problem of thinking he is thinking is a symptom of Paul's detachment from himself and from life, which was partly caused by his father's detachment from the nuclear family to which they once belonged.

In Cooperstown, Frank and Paul do not enter the Baseball Hall of Fame because of a protest in front of the building, but the batting cages nearby provide the novel's climactic scene and further develop of its masculinist themes. The batting cage and its pitching apparatus are clever metaphors for the industrialized world and the masculine mystique:

I lead us straight across to the fenced cages, which are fitted out with fifty-cent coin boxes and draped inside with green netting to keep careening balls from maiming people and injuring pitching machines, which are themselves big, dark-green, boxy, industrial-looking contraptions that work by feeding balls from a plastic hopper through a chain-drive circuitry that ends with two rubber car tires spinning in opposite tangency at a high rate of speed and from between which each "pitch" is actually expelled. (354)

The baseballs are people--men especially, since men have greater ties to baseball--who are fed through the industrial machine and, with the help of the masculine mystique, sent flying on a predictable path straight to their end. The ball's path is jolted to a stop when someone makes contact with a ball; this perhaps symbolizes the mid-life crisis experienced by many men. Some of them are able to turn their lives around and rediscover themselves (a strong hit) while others experience the crisis and continue along a tangential destructive route (a foul tip). The industrial machine, like the pitching machine, is perpetual, and has safety mechanisms in place to assure its survival from men (or balls) who choose unexpected and unacceptable paths.

The entire mechanism exists for the purpose of making money with no concern for the fates of the objects it processes, "having no brain, or heart, or forbearance, or fear" (361).

Inside the cage, Frank is unimpressive; he watches three pitches, misses the fourth, and fouls off the fifth. Because Frank views baseball as a national institution, as do most Americans, he is embarrassed by his failure at the sport. Sore and humiliated, he is further ridiculed by Paul who calls him "The Sultan of Squat"<sup>16</sup> (358). After exchanging expletives Frank loses his composure and grapples intensely with Paul, causing his damaged ear to bleed. This awkward scene demonstrates Frank's limitations as a parent and his short-sighted views of the father-son relationship.

For Frank, baseball (the Hall, the batting cage) was to provide the ideal setting for his communion with Paul--a setting which might inspire Paul to be a "normal" American boy. Frank erupts in violent anger because Paul assigns no significance to the traditional American setting and refuses to be measured by it (by demonstrating his prowess in the batting cage). Angered and humiliated, Paul charges into the cage and allows himself to be hit in the face with a baseball hurled at seventy-five miles per hour from the

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<sup>16</sup> Babe Ruth was "The Sultan of Swat."

pitching machine. While mentally troubled and emotionally fragile, Paul demonstrates self-reliance and fortitude by refusing to play by socially prescribed rules he deems unacceptable. While Frank seeks to measure his athletic ability against the "Shoot-Out" and the pitching machine, Paul refuses to be measured by those machines and the institutions they represent. According to Frank, Paul is "drawn to the fissures between the literal and the imagined" (343) and it is this fantastic imagination and appreciation of the bizarre that allow him to see options and possibilities that others cannot.

Throughout the novel Paul uses homonyms to work common expressions into new phrases, such as "Take it for granite . . . A new leash on life . . . Put your monkey where your mouse is" (343). These expressions provide clues to the boy's misunderstood wisdom which is finally revealed in the batting cage when he sacrifices his body to fight the previously unquestioned authority of the machine. By refusing to play by the rules of the machine (not wearing a helmet, getting hit), Paul conquers the machine and all for which it stands. In the hospital when Frank apologizes for forcing Paul into the cage, the boy responds "You didn't make me . . . HBP. Runners advance" (401). Paul probably does not understand the symbolism of his actions, but by

scoring the incident "hit by pitch," and by indicating that it resulted in imaginary runners advancing, he demonstrates some awareness of the value of his unorthodox deed. It is ironic that the novel's most perceptive character is rendered temporarily blind, (he has one of his retinae detached), while Frank, who refers to helping the blind twice in the novel (reading Doctor Zhivago to the blind and creating an FM radio station for the blind) and who planned to offer Paul more life options while on the trip, is the one who is shown to be short-sighted and who is shown other possibilities by his delinquent son. Emerson's famous line, "To be great is to be misunderstood," (961) is a fitting summation of Paul's wisdom and his inability to abide by the USA's social codes of conduct.

## 7

Frank reflects on Emerson as he contemplates Paul's accident: "yesterday may have cleared our air and accounts and opened, along with wounds, an unexpected window for hope to go free. A last in some ways, but a first in others. 'The soul becomes,' as the great man said, by which he meant, I think, slowly" (430). Frank's own transformation is represented by his shift from the Existence Period to the Permanent Period. In the Existence Period, Frank ignored

everything he disliked and everything which troubled him. Usually those things went away or else he would lapse into dreaminess or "psychic detachment" (25) to avoid them. It is this period which forced the end of his fiction-writing career, the beginning of his sportswriting, his divorce, the removal of his children, and numerous failed relationships with women. It was a period wherein he tried to live up to the standards set by the masculine mystique, and was spit out as a failure by the system which makes failures of so many men. Because Frank tried to be a "normal" man, Sally's description of the period as a "simulated way to live your life" (434), is an accurate one.

Following Paul's accident, Frank is shocked when he meets Irv, his step-brother who designs simulators, who believes in continuity and consistency and who worships the past. By assessing Irv's illusory existence, Frank is able to see himself as he was and knows that he is shedding the last remnants of his past, discarding social codes, and gaining independence. In his new Permanent Period there is an emphasis on the future and the ability to make decisions independently. For Frank, the ultimate concern has become "how I think of myself before whatever there is that's wild and unassuagable rises and cheerlessly hauls me off to oblivion" (450).

Freedom from the masculine mystique, the most important feature of the Permanent Period, allows men to die content and fulfilled. Few men experience a Permanent Period, however; in the USA, many males are enslaved by the masculine mystique from the moment they begin socialization and die in the midst of an Existence Period. While Frank is not a classic literary hero, he achieves victory by redefining the terms of success amidst a society that resists his new definition.

## 8

Independence Day begins with a church calling out to the community (4) and ends with Frank dreaming of himself in the midst of a crowd enjoying an Independence Day parade: "My heartbeat quickens. I feel the push, pull, the weave and sway of others" (451). For Frank, the Fourth of July crowd is an ambivalent symbol; it represents the American society he cherishes as a humanist American citizen, but also represents society as a mob, thinking and acting uniformly. The important issue, however, is that Frank is able to celebrate his patriotism with the crowd while maintaining an independent set of values and moral codes. It is the truest manner in which to celebrate the national holiday of a democratic country, and Richard Ford's dream

for all American men.

Perhaps the greatest irony of Independence Day is the shift that Frank experiences: the more he embraces self-reliance and opposes society's values, the less he is interested in himself and the more he embraces community. As a realtor, he knows all of the neighbourhoods in Haddam and cares about the city's political, social, and economic trends. As a landlord, he shelters people at reasonable rates. Frank also appreciates the mutability of his community:

The strongest feeling I have now when I pass along these streets and lanes and drives . . . is that holding the line on the life we promised ourselves in the Sixties is getting hard as hell. We want to feel our community as a fixed, continuous entity, the way Irv said, as anchored to the rock of permanence; but we know it's not. (439)

This is a healthy attitude because it welcomes change and openness. It is not, however, an attitude shared by most residents of Haddam; the neighbourhood is racially segregated and the citizens are in a frenzy over the discovered remains of an old human body at a work site. The body represents continuance of a certain way of life for the residents of Haddam; for liberated men like Frank, the past

is of little interest--the future holds the greater mystery.

## 9

Independence Day is a humourous but troubling portrayal of the male mid-life crisis and of its far-reaching implications. The novel demonstrates the pervasiveness of sex codes and condemns them for the manner in which they interfere with the lives of American men. The writings of Thomas Jefferson and Ralph Waldo Emerson teach Americans to trust in themselves and overthrow that which offends them; only by following those teachings will American men be liberated from the social codes which lead to mid-life crises. While it is a depressing commentary on American society, the novel ends on an optimistic note--if one man can learn to discard social conventions and adopt Emersonian philosophy, then perhaps a nation can also.

## Conclusion

Men's studies issues continue to slowly gain popularity as more people discover that the traditional codes by which men are measured are invalid. On the day that I began penning the conclusion to this thesis, my local newspaper, "The Calgary Herald," published a special report entitled "What about the Boys?" The article listed disturbing statistics which suggest that males face some serious disadvantages in the post-feminist age. For example, boys are far more likely than girls to have learning disabilities, to be disciplined at school, to be medicated for hyperactivity or attention deficit, to be suspended from school, or to quit school. Boys are incarcerated more than girls who commit the same crimes. Boys are physically abused more often. The ratio of teenage suicide is five to one in favour of boys; the suicide rate for boys aged ten to fourteen has tripled since 1971. The disturbing statistics follow the boys into manhood: one in three men is divorced, twelve per cent are binge drinkers, and three times as many men as women are heavy drinkers (Adams C9). The executive director of a counselling centre notes that "We looked at what needed to be changed for women and made some changes, but didn't make changes for men. It's like we forgot half

the equation" (Adams C9). The male half of the equation is investigated in Susan Faludi's newly published Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man. In this work, the belligerent feminist has shifted her attention away from women's issues, interrogating instead the specifically male crises which are propagated by American society.

Clearly, society's view of men is changing. The strong silent type may look good in the movies, but in real life, his silence leads to a nervous breakdown; the only strength displayed when he withholds emotion is the strength of his devotion to the masculine mystique. The problem, of course, is the industrial revolution which took fathers away from boys and left the latter to fashion male role models from the mass media. In agrarian culture, men spent most of the day with their sons, teaching them to build and fix, to sow and harvest, all for the purpose of providing for family. In 1999, one in five children spends less than fifteen minutes per day with a father (Adams C9). Boys, having little interaction with positive male role models, do not define themselves as nurturers or providers, but simply as non-girls. If girls are seen to be emotional and co-operative, then boys strive to be the opposite. The void left by positive role models is filled by the masculine mystique.

Richard Ford's novels interrogate this phenomenon. Through the eyes of Frank Bascombe, we are able to witness the manner in which the masculine mystique renders American men dysfunctional. Frank begins as a sportswriter who lives within himself and who perpetuates the masculine mystique by refusing to confront his emotional problems. He is divorced, he has trouble with relationships, and he is cast into a state of dreaminess and depression. His interactions with three men, Walter Lockett, Herb Wallagher, and Wade Arcenault reveal the disastrous effects of the mystique and male social codes. Walter kills himself because of his divorce and confused sexual orientation, neither of which are tolerable to society. Herb lives a life-in-death existence because he is no longer a sports hero and is regarded as a lesser man. Wade, who has had no male role models, has mental problems and perpetuates social sex codes with every utterance.

Frank learns from each man's disastrous life and recognizes that he is himself enslaved by male social codes and the masculine mystique--the cause of his mid-life crisis. He abandons the mystique and slowly learns to assert independence over his life. Frank also discovers that true manhood is attained by helping others, in addition to helping himself. He helps the stubborn Markhams relocate

themselves and abandon their misguided racial prejudices. He also guides his delinquent son, Paul, through a difficult period of his adolescence. Using Emerson's "Self-Reliance" as a mentoring text, Frank learns as many lessons about male independence as he teaches.

As an avid sports fan, I have noticed an intriguing phenomenon this year. In the NHL, NBA, NFL, and Major League Baseball, professional male athletes are crying. These men are crying after losses, they are crying after wins, they are crying during interviews, and they are not embarrassed. It has suddenly become acceptable for these men to show emotion and vulnerability. This indicates that one male social code--that men must not show emotion--may be loosening its grasp on American society. Time will tell which other codes will follow.

Frank Bascombe is the first important character of the masculinist age of American fiction. Richard Ford's renegotiation of masculinity in the Bascombe novels will undoubtedly be mirrored by other writers as awareness of men's studies rises. When the masculinist canon achieves equal footing with the feminist, we will have the gender equality for which we have been striving. It is a hopeful and achievable goal for the new millennium.

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