

THE BUDDY AS ANIMA? REVISITING FRIENDSHIPS BETWEEN MEN
IN RICHARD FORD'S *THE SPORTSWRITER*

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This article explores the construction and deconstruction of male friendship in Richard Ford's novel *The Sportswriter*. The first part offers an overview of classic fictions of male bonding in U.S. literature, while the second contrasts such idyllic representations with the available empirical evidence on men's friendships, which emphasizes their scarcity and precariousness. So as to reconcile the 'reality' and the 'fiction' of male friendship, part three analyzes Richard Ford's 1986 novel *The Sportswriter* as a contemporary literary re-vision of the classic myth of male friendship in U.S. literature. More specifically, the novel will be used to illustrate the effects on male friendship of traditional masculinity, which tends to undermine intimacy between men by dissociating them from emotions and, especially, by promoting male homophobia.

Keywords: male friendship; homophobia; homosociality; masculinity; American literature; *The Sportswriter*; Richard Ford

EL AMIGO COMO COMPAÑERO DEL ALMA.
REVISITANDO LAS AMISTADES ENTRE VARONES EN EL PERIODISTA
DEPORTIVO DE RICHARD FORD

Este artículo explora la construcción y la deconstrucción de la amistad masculina en la novela El periodista deportivo de Richard Ford. La primera parte ofrece una introducción a las novelas clásicas sobre amistades masculinas en la literatura estadounidense, mientras que la segunda contrasta estas ficciones con la evidencia empírica existente sobre amistades entre varones, la cual ha demostrado su escasez y precariedad. Con el fin de reconciliar la 'realidad' y la 'ficción' de las amistades entre hombres, la tercera parte analiza la novela El periodista deportivo (1986) de Richard Ford como una re-visión literaria contemporánea del mito clásico de la amistad masculina en la literatura de los Estados Unidos. En concreto, la novela es usada para ilustrar los efectos sobre la amistad masculina de la masculinidad tradicional, que tiende a socavar la intimidad entre hombres separándolos de las emociones y, sobre todo, fomentando la homofobia masculina.

Palabras clave: amistad masculina; homofobia; literatura de los Estados Unidos; El periodista deportivo; Richard Ford

I would like to hug him now...But I
can't. He would get the wrong idea
and everything between us would be
ruined just when it's started so well.

—Richard Ford *The Sportswriter* (1986)

o. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of critical studies on friendship in literature.¹ Many of them have set out to explore *male romantic friendships*, that is, “strong attachments between men in works ranging from ancient epics and medieval romances to Renaissance plays, Gothic novels, westerns, and war movies” (Watkins 2008: n. p.).² In line with this recent critical trend, then, this article begins with an overview of literary celebrations of friendship, focusing on idyllic friendships between men in U.S. literature and culture. Such mythic images will then be compared to the existing empirical work on men’s friendships, which has revealed their scarce and precarious nature, tracing it back to the increased homophobia at the end of the nineteenth century.

While the traditional literary depiction of male friendship and the empirical evidence on the subject seem totally opposed, the article attempts to move beyond the traditional binary between the ‘reality’ and the ‘fiction’ of male friendship, analyzing Richard Ford’s 1986 novel *The Sportswriter* as a literary deconstruction of the myth of indissoluble friendships between men in U.S. literature. In particular, the novel has been selected to prove and exemplify the influence on male friendship of conventional masculinity, which contributes to separating men from one another, as we shall see, by pitting masculinity against emotions and, especially, by promoting homophobia and the fear of homosexuality among men. Even though much of this article will thus aim to deconstruct the myth of indissoluble friendships between men in American fiction, it will conclude by underlining both the feasibility and the desirability of recuperating the emotional attachments between (heterosexual) men, which will entail, as will be argued, diminishing homophobia as well as other forms of social discrimination.

1. The myth of male friendship in American literature: an overview

Classic American literature spills with depictions of idyllic friendships between men. As Leslie Fiedler argued in his influential work *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), American literature, particularly novels and fiction, has consistently represented men’s struggle to avoid women and (hetero)sexuality. From Cooper, Melville and Twain to Hemingway, Saul Bellow and James Dickey, the theme of men’s escape from women and sexuality, which usually takes the form of bachelorhood and male

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² See, for example, Sedgwick (1985); Hammond and Jablow (1987); Dellamora (1990); Watkins (2008).

comradeship, recurs in much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature. In Fiedler's own words, "where woman is felt to be a feared and forbidden other, the only legitimate beloved is the self. Pure narcissism cannot, however, provide the dream and tension proper to a novel; the mirror-image of the self is translated in the American novel...into the comrade of one's own sex, the buddy as anima" (1998: 348). Through the figure of Natty Bumppo, James Fenimore Cooper did indeed seem to introduce a recurrent male prototype, the white male who rejects women and domesticity and embraces friendship with another man, who embodies the freedom of uncivilized nature. While James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo forges an indissoluble friendship with the Indian Chingachgook, Herman Melville's Ishmael bonds with Queequeg, a Polynesian harpooner, just as Mark Twain's Huck Finn becomes inseparable from Jim, the black runaway slave. In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), for example, Ishmael and Queequeg are so fond of each other that in the tenth chapter of the novel they even decide to get 'married'. As Ishmael himself explains, "he [Queequeg] pressed his forehead against mine, clasped me around the waist, and said that henceforth we were married; meaning, in his country's phrase, that we were bosom friends" (Melville 1996: 50). After marrying, Ishmael and his friend, like any other loving couple, embark on a honeymoon, over which they share confidences and even the same bed. As Ishmael himself elaborates:

How it is I know not; but there is no place like a bed for confidential disclosures between friends. Man and wife, they say, there open the very bottom of their souls to each other; and some old couples often lie and chat over old times till nearly morning. Thus, then, in our hearts's honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg—a cosy, loving pair. (Melville 1996: 51)

Twentieth-century American fiction is centrally concerned with representations of friendships between men, too. For instance, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), set in the context of the Depression, remains one of the most poignant descriptions of male friendship in American letters. Indeed, the deep love between George and Lennie offers them the only respite from the pain of economic marginality. Rather than women, George and Lennie have each other. As Lennie tells his friend, "guys like us got no family", although "we got each other, that's what, that gives a hoot in hell about us" (Steinbeck 1974: 104). Like Steinbeck's novel, much of Ernest Hemingway's fiction makes another classic example for representations of strong attachments between (heterosexual) men in twentieth-century American literature. Hemingway's novels do indeed appear to celebrate male same-sex friendships as more transcendental than any other affective relationships. Only men's emotional attachments to other men, as Leslie Fiedler noted, seem to "move him to simplicity and truth" (1998: 316-17). From *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) to *Green Hills of Africa* (1936) and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1939), most of Hemingway's literary texts focus on battle companions, friends on a fishing trip, fellow patients in a hospital, a bullfighter and his manager and so forth. In Hemingway's works, then, male homosociality becomes much more central and stronger than (hetero)sexuality and women, who are either absent or secondary characters. It is true that women in Hemingway's works, when present, appear to pose a threat to the 'purer' relationships between men. For example, in *The Sun Also Rises*, Brett Ashley's assertive sexuality seems to stand in between Jake Barnes

and Bill Gorton's homoerotic relationship. Nevertheless, Brett's sexuality is far less threatening than it seems. For one thing, Jake is sexually impotent. For another, Brett is much fonder of Romero, the bullfighter, than of either Jake or Bill, although her affair with Romero is short-lived as well. As Fiedler argued, Brett seems "incapable of love except as a moment in bed" (1998: 320).³ Since women in Hemingway's fiction seem to be portrayed as sexual objects, they pose no real threat to the deeper, more idyllic love between men. Indeed, the affective relationship between Jake and Bill, rather than thwarted by Brett's sexuality, appears to become increasingly strong as the novel advances. As Sibbie O'Sullivan (1988: 71) has noted, once Bill and Jake leave Paris for Spain, they become more intimate. The pastoral Spanish setting, with its idyllic mountains and trout streams, seems to facilitate a more private speech which allows them to discuss religion, literature and even personal problems such as Jake's impotency.⁴ Jake's relationship with Bill Gorton thus seems to exemplify an ideal friendship between two men, and perhaps even a source of sublimated homosexuality. During their fishing trip to the Irati River, Bill Gorton does indeed appear to disclose his homoerotic attraction to Jake. As Bill confesses to his friend, "You're a hell of a good guy, and I'm fonder of you than anybody on earth" (Hemingway 1954: 116).

Given the tradition of male friendship in American literature and culture, it is little wonder, then, that contemporary U.S. fiction remains centrally concerned with depicting male same-sex intimacy. If James Dickey's novel *Deliverance* (1970), for example, focuses on four Southern, white, male friends who embark on a risky canoe trip as an escape from their emasculating suburban lives, more recent works such as Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990) or Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), to name but a few, continue to promote fictions of male bonding. Whereas Bly's fable encourages American men to overcome their society's feminizing influences by organizing all-male excursions to the forest, where they can recover their 'true' masculine essence by engaging together in hunting and other warlike games, Palahniuk's novel, which was made into a very popular film of the same name by David Fincher in 1999, invites men to overcome the increasing feminization of the workplace by organizing all-male fight clubs, where they can bond by sharing their 'real' (i.e. aggressive) masculinity with each other, away from the feminizing influence of women. Clearly, these narratives of male bonding are simply modern versions of the canonical fiction in the United States, where males tend to cement their friendships by escaping together to the wilderness in search of violent tests and adventures, and by leaving women behind.

³ Though Brett has been subject to numerous misogynist attacks, including Fiedler's characterization of her as an unemotional female character, she seems to be much more complex than has been generally acknowledged. In fact, Brett appears to represent the flapper, the 'New Woman' of the 1920s. One way in which she asserts her new identity is by exploring her sexuality and by moving away from the traditional female roles of mother and wife. However, Hemingway seems unable to avoid patriarchal representations of women as bitches and sexual objects. I am grateful to Àngels Carabí (personal communication) for these reflections.

⁴ "Though Jake's problems are not discussed at length, and though his answers are frequently evasive or non-committal", the subject, as O'Sullivan has concluded, is mentioned often enough in a number of conversations to deserve to be considered "a topic of conversation" (1988: 71).

2. Male friendship: myth vs. reality

Even as (classic) American literature has long provided numerous representations of idyllic friendships between men, the myth of male friendship is not to be confused with its reality. Actually, contemporary men's friendships, as masculinity scholar Peter M. Nardi reminds us, are usually characterized by emotionally neutral, instrumental, "side-by-side" (2004: 322) interactions. While women's friendships often show emotionally close, expressive, 'face-to-face' styles of intimacy, (heterosexual) men's friendships tend to be less intimate, self-disclosing and physically affectionate, focusing on topical rather than personal issues. Moreover, it has been proven that men tend to have fewer supportive relationships than women do, generally receiving (and giving) less support from (and to) their peers. No wonder, then, that men regard the meaningfulness of, and satisfaction with, their same-sex friendships lower than women do, while they see their cross-gender friendships as closer and more intimate than their same-gender ones, compared to women, who see their same-gender ones as closer (Nardi 2004: 322).

Historically, the birth of the modern homosexual seems to have had enormous implications for the current gendered construction of male friendship. Within current social structure, there seems to be a clear-cut distinction between *homosexuality* and *homosociality*, that is, the social bonds between persons of the same sex. Indeed, the term *homosocial* is often used to describe such activities as 'male bonding', which may, in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia. However, friendships between men were once more intense and intimate. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British culture and literature, for example, there seems to have existed a continuum, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick elaborates, between male homosocial and homosexual relations,⁵ "a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted" (1992: 2). Sedgwick contends that the separation between friendship and homosexuality is gender-specific and context-bound. On the one hand, the opposition between the homosocial and the homosexual seems to be less dichotomous for women than it is for men. As Sedgwick herself explains, "women in our society who love women, women who teach, study, nurture, suckle, write about, march for, vote for, give jobs to, or otherwise promote the interests of other women, are pursuing congruent and closely

⁵ Of course, Sedgwick's argument (1992) of a continuum between homosexuality and homosociality, as Crowley (1987: 307) reminds us, derives, at least partly, from the work of Sigmund Freud. As is known, Freud insisted that homosexual tendencies are never fully repressed but are simply sublimated through culturally legitimated (homo)social practices such as male friendship and comradeship. In Freud's own words:

After the stage of heterosexual object-choice has been reached, the homosexual tendencies are not, as might be supposed, done away with or brought to a stop; they are merely deflected from their sexual aim and applied to fresh uses. They...help to constitute the social instincts, thus contributing an erotic factor to friendship and comradeship, to esprit de corps and to the love of mankind in general. (1959: 3446-47)

It seems clear, then, that in Freud, as in Sedgwick (1992), the whole range of what may be called *male 'homosocial' relations* is seen to be more or less eroticized, even if the term *homosexual* has traditionally been applied to genital practices only.

related activities” (1992: 2-3). Moreover, the current disjunction between male friendship and homosociality seems to be historically specific. For the classical Greeks, for example, the continuum between men loving men and men promoting the interests of men seems to have been completely natural (Sedgwick 1992: 4).

Nevertheless, the increasing homophobia at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries seemed to put an end to much of the closeness and intensity of male same-sex friendships (Foucault 1984: 173-92; Bem 1993: 81; Segal 1997: 139; Kimmel 2000: 214-15; Nardi 2004: 321-22). Before the turn of the century, the word *homosexual* described a type of sexual behavior, not identity. But, as soon as the word changed from an adjective to a noun, homophobia came to play an increasingly central role in men’s lives. The disappearance of friendship as a social institution thus seemed to result from the declaration of homosexuality as a social/religious/medical problem, which was itself the result of a number of specific historical factors. As feminist historian Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1993: 81) has argued, the increased stigmatization of homosexuality at the end of the nineteenth century was mainly a reaction to an epoch of social disruption in England and other parts of Europe, as well as in the United States. At the heart of this social disruption was a radical change in the models of sexual behavior, which was seen as a threat to the hegemonic sexual and political order. Bem explains that while sexuality had often been limited to marriage according to the rules of closely knit rural societies, nineteenth-century American and European urban areas were characterized by a dramatic increase in the prostitution business as well as by a growing, predominantly male homosexual culture (1993: 81). In conclusion, then, the increased homophobia at the turn of the century was fundamentally a reaction to these sexual changes, which were perceived as a threat to the dominant social and sexual order. The end of the nineteenth century was thus characterized by a ferocious religious, medical and legal persecution and repression of homosexuality. While religious sermons often celebrated the sanctity of the heterosexual family and warned against the abominable sin of homosexuality (Foucault 1984: 173-92), Freudian psychoanalysis described homosexuality as a deviation and a mental illness.⁶ Moreover, the three infamous trials and subsequent imprisonment of Oscar Wilde served to remind men that homosexual behavior was socially and legally punishable. As Lynne Segal has argued in this respect, “the possible imputation of homosexual interest to any bonds between men ensured that men had constantly to be aware of and assert their difference from both women and homosexuals” (1997: 139). While the concept of friendship between men had once included a wide range of erotic and sexual possibilities, men’s friendships thus became more limited in scope as issues related to (homo)sexuality became part of the public discourse in the post-Freudian era. As friendship scholar Peter M. Nardi elaborates:

Romantic friendships, especially for men, were less visible and less of a topic to be discussed in poems and literature. True friendship, in the early twentieth century and continuing to this day, would be seen as something only women were more capable of

⁶ See, for example, Freud’s pathologization of homosexuality in books such as *Totem and Taboo* (1912-13) and in essays such as ‘On Narcissism: An Introduction’ (1914) and ‘Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes’ (1925).

experiencing. The ideal form of friendship is now typically described with more “female” language: intimacy, trust, caring, disclosing, and nurturing. (2004: 321-22)

3. Re/presentations of (failed) friendships between men in contemporary American literature: the example of Richard Ford

From what has been argued here, it would appear, then, that the literary and empirical approaches to male friendship are totally opposed. While idyllic friendships between men have pervaded U.S. literature and culture from the nineteenth century to our day, masculinity and friendship scholars have revealed the scarcity as well as the precariousness of (heterosexual) men’s emotional attachments to other men, which they have linked, historically, to the birth of homosexuality as an identity at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. Thus, work on male friendship seems divided between the sciences and the humanities, truth and myth, the world and the text. Moving beyond this traditional binary between ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’, however, the remainder of this article concentrates on revisiting the myth of male friendship from a specifically literary perspective. Focus will be given, as has been pointed out, to Richard Ford’s *The Sportswriter* (1986), the first novel of the Frank Bascombe trilogy, completed by *Independence Day* (1995) and *The Lay of the Land* (2006). Ford’s 1986 novel has been specifically selected for two different, albeit complementary, reasons. On the one hand, it rewrites traditional U.S. narratives of male bonding by underlining the male protagonist’s fear of (same-sex) friendship and intimacy. On the other, it illustrates the specific influence of masculinity ideals, particularly male homophobia, on the gendered construction of male friendship. Besides considering his former personal experiences of trauma, the novel connects its male protagonist’s fear of (same-sex) intimacy, as we shall see, to his traditional ideas about masculinity as the denial of emotions and, above all, to his blatant homophobia. In so doing, *The Sportswriter* will not only help us question the traditional depiction of idyllic friendships between men in classical U.S. fiction, but will also contribute to illustrating and exemplifying, as we shall see, the existing empirical work on masculinity, male friendship and homophobia from a specifically literary perspective.

The author of six novels and three collections of short stories,⁷ and the recipient of the PEN/Faulkner Award for *The Sportswriter* (1986) and the Pulitzer Prize for *Independence Day* (1995), Richard Ford has been heralded both as a novelist and as a short story writer. Resisting the influence of postmodernism on contemporary American literature, most of Richard Ford’s works seem to share his stark realism and often minimalist style and, indeed, the author himself has often expressed his

⁷ After his first novel, *A Piece of My Heart* (1976), Ford published the well-known Frank Bascombe trilogy – formed by *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995), and *The Lay of the Land* (2006), his latest work –, besides two minor novels, *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981) and *Wildlife* (1990). On the other hand, his short story collections include the highly acclaimed *Rock Springs* (1987), *Women with Men* (1997) – resulting from the compilation of three novellas titled ‘The Womanizer’, ‘Occidentals’ and ‘Jealousy’, respectively – and *A Multitude of Sins* (2001), which talks, mainly, about adultery and human frailty.

admiration for other contemporary American realist writers such as Tobias Wolff and Raymond Carver, among others. Recurrently, Richard Ford has been discussed as a Southern writer, although the author himself has always rejected this label and, indeed, only his first novel, *A Piece of My Heart* (1976), is set in the American South. Whether an example of Southern literature or not, his fiction has recurrently focused on the construction of masculinities. After all, most of Ford's narrators and protagonists to date have been men. From Robard Hewes and Sam Newel, the two main voices in *A Piece of My Heart* (1976), Ford's first novel, to Harry Quinn, the Vietnam veteran of *The Ultimate Good Luck* (1981), to sixteen-year-old Joe Brinson in *Wildlife* (1990), to Frank Bascombe, the narrator and protagonist of both *The Sportswriter* (1986) and *Independence Day* (1995) as well as *The Lay of the Land* (2006), Ford's novels typically concern themselves with first-person male narrators and protagonists. And this also applies to most of his stories. For instance, the defining viewpoints in 'The Womanizer', 'Occidentals' and 'Jealousy', the three stories included in *Women with Men* (1997), are men: Martin Austin, Charley Matthews and Larry, respectively. On the other hand, first-person male narrators also tell eight of the ten stories in *Rock Springs* (1987). And, in fact, 'Empire' and 'Fireworks', the only two stories told in the third person, also seem to "attain intimacy and intensity", as John Wideman has argued, "by being reflected tightly, exclusively through a single [male] consciousness in each story" (1987: 1), Sims in the former, and Eddie Starling in the latter. As Wideman has concluded, all the voices in Ford's stories "are male. All white. All approximately 25 to 40 years old. Predictably, they speak about gaining, losing or holding on to manhood" (1987: 1).

This applies as well to Ford's *The Sportswriter* (1986). As its title indicates, the novel, which is set in the early 1980s, focuses on the life of an American sportswriter, Frank Bascombe, who lives in New Jersey and works in New York City. While Bascombe has an interesting professional life and a job that he likes, his personal life is marked by a number of painful events. The unexpected death of his son Ralph from Reye's syndrome has been followed by his divorce. Moreover, Frank feels frustrated as a result of his failed attempts to win back his ex-wife X's love, who has decided to move up to Connecticut with their two remaining sons, Paul and Clarissa. All these difficult experiences seem to have rendered Frank totally incapable of emotional commitment. In fact, Ford's character, since he has lived alone, is undergoing what he describes as the "Existence Period", a time of emotional isolation which entails the denial of affection for others. "Intimacy", as Frank himself explains, "had begun to matter less to me" (1995: 96). Frank has come to realize that emotional commitment and love are indissolubly linked to pain and suffering. Love often entails suffering, for the beloved can suddenly disappear. Embittered by personal losses, Frank thus rejects as emotionally dangerous the possibility of living a life in relation to others and instead chooses a solitary life without such problems and complexities. In his own words, "a successful practice of my middle life, a time I think of as the Existence Period, has been to ignore much of what I don't like or that seems worrisome and embroiling" (1995: 10). Following the main tenets of the 'Existence Period', Frank thus moves away from the world of emotion and affect. Even though he has girlfriends, such as Vicki and Catherine Flaherty, he avoids commitment to them. Believing that emotion might make him vulnerable to other people, Frank concentrates on his job as sports journalist and

avoids emotional engagements, both with women and other men. As Richard Ford scholar Elinor A. Walker has argued, “most disclosure between friends, full or not, scares the ‘bejesus’ out of him” (2000: 83).

Despite his attempts to avoid *human* contacts, Frank establishes a few contacts with other men throughout the novel, perhaps most notably Walter Lockett, a friend from the Divorced Men’s Club to which both he and Frank belong. In his encounter with Walter, however, Frank becomes ‘the listener’ rather than the counselor. Since he tries to avoid all kinds of emotional attachments, Bascombe, as Walker (2000: 83) has noted, proves to be a reluctant confidant who hears confessions that are not particularly welcome. Above all, his encounter with Walter illustrates how Frank’s emotional disengagement is not only the result of his former traumatic personal experiences but also derives, as we shall see, from his traditional gender(ed) conceptions of masculinity and male homosexuality as a heterosexual man.

Clearly, Frank’s relationship with Walter throughout *The Sportswriter* is marked by an evident lack of intimacy. As the novel begins, Frank is told by Carter Knott, another member of the Divorced Men’s Club, that Walter’s wife, Yolanda, left him for a water ski instructor, and that “it’d been a big shock”. However, Bascombe himself acknowledges that he knows little more about his friend (Ford 1995: 84). They have coincided in the same bars and cafes on several occasions, but they have always felt somehow uncomfortable in each other’s presence. For example, Frank remembers one occasion when they sat and stared at each other for several “horrible minutes” until Walter just got up and walked out without ordering anything or saying another word (1995: 85). Since then, they have just tried to ignore each other. Moreover, their (always sporadic) encounters have proved dispensable and impersonal. For, although the members of the Divorced Men’s Club go fishing together, one of the Club’s basic rules, as Frank himself explains, is that “we’re none of us much interested in...self-expression” (1995: 86).

In *Unreasonable Men: Masculinity and Social Theory* (1993), masculinity scholar Victor Seidler has shown how, due to the works of Enlightenment philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza and Kant, among others, reason has come to be defined in opposition to emotions, just as the mind has been set against the body and culture has been opposed to nature. Thus, emotions and feelings have been dismissed as forms of knowledge since they are considered to be ‘personal’ and ‘subjective’ as compared to the ‘objectivity’ and ‘impartiality’ of reason. Elaborating on that, Seidler (1994: 11-12) contends that the identification of reason with masculinity, which remains a defining feature of contemporary Western culture, has led to men’s emotional distance from one another. Moreover, the Enlightenment equation of rationality with masculinity had important consequences for both women and nonwhites. As men were associated with reason and the mind, women and ethnic groups were stereotyped as being closer to nature, the body and the sphere of emotions. Since they were seen as irrational beings, women and ethnic men were systematically silenced and excluded from the manly spheres of power and rationality, and had to prove themselves rational to be given access to *mankind*. While the Enlightenment equation of rationality with masculinity had a particularly detrimental effect on the lives of women and ethnic groups, such an equation

also had a backwash effect on men, who have since been prevented from exploring and expressing their intrinsic emotional complexity. As Seidler himself puts it:

As rational selves we [men] learn that we can only know ourselves through reason and that reason is the only way that we can guide our lives. We learn to *silence* our natures and so we also become deaf to the cries of others, learning to treat them as 'emotional' or 'subjective'. (1994: 11-12, emphasis in the original)

Disclosing one's inner feelings entails acknowledging one's emotional dependence and vulnerability. Since emotional self-disclosure, as Seidler (1994) notes, has been traditionally associated with women and effeminacy, it is no wonder, then, that in Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter* the unspoken boundaries of conversation in the Divorced Men's Club prohibit personal questions. The members of Frank's Club, formed by heterosexual men, try to stay 'rational' and avoid any contact with each other that might be deemed effete or homosexual. Ultimately, then, it is homophobia that stands in between Frank and his friend Walter, preventing them from achieving a closer intimacy. As Elinor A. Walker has pointed out, "confessions of feelings are of course off limits between men such as Frank and Walter, who should be instead talking about the weather, sports, politics, anything but emotion" (2000: 87).

Despite the strict rules of the Club, which prohibit emotional self-expression, Walter risks breaking the norms by confessing to his friend that he has recently had a homosexual affair. "I went in a bar in New York two nights ago, and I let a man pick me up", Walter explains. "Then I went to a hotel...and slept with him" (Ford 1995: 92). Walter, who had always been heterosexual, insists that he feels pretty confused as a result and that he really needs to talk about this with a friend.

Nevertheless, Frank is not interested in his friend's story. Since he is utterly afraid of self-disclosure, he believes that things are better if you just let them be "lonely facts" (Ford 1995: 94). Between Frank and his friend one can thus see an inseparable gulf. While Walter explains that he needed to tell his secret simply because he does not like secrets and telling them makes him feel better ("Frank, I needed a context. I think that's what friends are for" [1995: 94]), Frank accuses his friend of telling something he should have kept for himself, of disclosing an intimacy he absolutely did not have to disclose (1995: 98). If Walter insists on the value of friendship and describes Frank as his best friend in the world, the latter defines friendship simply as the amount of time you will squander on someone else's calamities (1995: 94, 97). Taking into account Frank's fear of intimacy with his friend, it is no wonder that Walter concludes that women make better friends than men do. As Lockett himself explains, "women are better at this kind of thing...I think women, Frank, sleep together all the time and don't really bother with it. I believe Yolanda did. They understand friendship better in the long run" (Ford 1995: 94).

Frank seems to remain equally distant from his friend over the course of their reunion in the eighth chapter of the novel. When Frank arrives home from work late at night, Walter Lockett is waiting for him. Even though Frank acknowledges that Walter looks really worried, Bascombe keeps relying on his manly code of emotional restraint, noting that Walter's private life is an absolutely private matter, "which no one but him should be required to care a wink about" (Ford 1995: 183).

While Walter is talking about his emotions to his friend, Frank does indeed appear to remain totally unconcerned. Moreover, he tries to justify his lack of interest on the basis of his little experience in listening to another man's emotional experiences (Ford 1995: 183). When Walter asks him about his reactions when something worries him and cannot make it stop, Frank suggests different strategies, such as taking a walk, getting drunk or thinking "dirty thoughts" about women in bed (1995: 184). It seems particularly striking, however, that he does *not* mention the word *friend* at all. Unlike Walter, then, Frank Bascombe seems unable to ask for help and advice from a friend, sadly confessing that he has no real friend to confide in (Ford 1995: 87). Although Walter insistently declares that he feels "on display in this mess" and is "scared to death" (1995: page), Frank keeps avoiding dealing with Walter's feelings, proving both unable and unwilling to understand his friend's need for emotional release. As Frank confesses, "I am in no way interested in him...I'm simply performing a Samaritan's duty I would perform for anyone (preferably a woman)" (Ford 1995: 184, 186, 187). Significantly, then, Frank's words not only highlight his unwillingness to listen to a male friend, but also seem to confirm the idea that (heterosexual) men often associate emotional connection and intimacy with women and femininity, rather than men and masculinity. As Shamir and Travis have argued, gender seems to have been divided into two different traditions along the line of emotional expressivity: a feminine mode marked by effusion of sentiment and its representational conventions, and a masculine code, where affect is described negatively, "in terms of disavowal and repression or – in such instances where men 'betray' emotions – in terms of parody or 'feminization'" (2002: 2).

Despite the opposition from Frank, however, who insists that he is interested in the public rather than the private parts of a man, Walter proceeds to describe his affair with Warren, his homosexual date, whom he defines as a close friend. As Walter explains to Frank, "we've talked for three hours!...it was like a friendship, Frank...I was never closer to anyone in my life. Not Yolanda. Not even my mom and dad, which is pretty scary for a farm kid from Ohio" (Ford 1995: 188, 191, 192). Interestingly, Walter's experience with his male lover seems to confirm that male friendship and homosexuality may prove confusingly proximate terms, although the continuum between homosociality and homosexuality in our contemporary society has, as Sedgwick (1992: 2, 3-4) has argued, been generally disrupted. Indeed, the only really close friendship between two men in Ford's novel – namely, that between Walter and Warren – seems to demand a homosexual rather than homosocial relationship.

Even as Frank continues to show little interest in his friend's experiences, Walter eventually claims to feel much better after talking to Frank, giving Frank an extra key to his place in gratitude and kissing him. However, Frank's homophobia re-emerges at once, rejecting Walter's display of affection for him. "I shove him backwards and in one spasm of wretchedness shout, 'Quit it, Walter, I don't want to be kissed!'" (1995: 194). If Walter thus seems to (con)fuse male friendship with tenderness and intimacy, Frank is determined to keep a clear-cut distinction between the two. Actually, upon Walter's departure, Frank finally decides to unplug the phone. "Don't call, my silent message says, I'll be sleeping. Dreaming sweet dreams. Don't call. Friendship is a lie of life. Don't call" (Ford 1995: 195).

Walter will *not* call again. Unbeknownst to Frank, his friend is planning to commit suicide. And, unfortunately, he succeeds. For one thing, Walter proves unable to get over his divorce from Yolanda, which had been a big shock for him. For another, his relationship with Warren, which could have helped relieve Walter's loneliness, is short-lived as well, which only adds to his intense feelings of loneliness and isolation. Facing this difficult situation, Walter decides to put his sadness to an end. Of course, Frank, who avoids any type of intimacy with men, completely fails to detect Walter's feelings of despair. Frank himself confesses to his ex-wife X that he has no (male) friends, insisting that men simply feel things women do not (328, 329). Although here Frank seems to show off male individualism and self-sufficiency, we soon learn that he is just pretending. After all, he is quick to invite his ex-wife to visit Walter's house with him, since it is clear that he is afraid of going there alone. Most (heterosexual) men, as Nardi (2004) has noted, tend to identify their wife as their closest friend and rely on women, rather than other men, for intimacy and emotional support. As Nardi himself puts it, true friendship is usually seen as something women are "more capable" (2004: 321-22) of offering and experiencing.

Visiting Walter's house with his ex-wife X, his best (and probably only true) friend, Frank realizes that, in reality, he did not know his friend at all. While Frank had assumed that Walter was not interested in him, he feels surprised, for example, to find a photo of the Divorced Men's Club. It seems clear, therefore, that Walter valued friendship more than Frank does. This is confirmed when Frank realizes that on the night table there is a copy of his only prose fiction book, *Blue Autumn*, with the author's picture face-up, Frank himself "looking remarkably lean and ironic" (Ford 1995: 333).

On visiting Walter's home, Frank Bascombe starts to reflect on the reason for Walter's death. Unable to look for a better reason, he concludes that Walter killed himself because he liked to "sentimentalize" his life, which made him "regret everything" (Ford 1995: 334). Not surprisingly, of course, Frank attributes Walter's death to his inability to control his emotions, to his tendency to "sentimentalize" his life, which is precisely what Frank has avoided doing all his life. Even after Walter's death, Frank is described as a hard-boiled man, who remains faithful to the traditional definition of masculinity as emotional repression and self-control. In this way, he ends up declining any responsibility for Walter's death. "Do you think you were supposed to help him?" X (Frank's ex-wife) says "...He should've helped himself is my answer, and in fact it is what I believe" (1995: 334-35).

In his inside, however, Ford's protagonist is fully aware that he could have helped Walter, or at least offered his help. "In a way, if it weren't for me being his friend, he'd be alive" (Ford 1995: 350), Frank declares. Even though it is doubtful that Frank could have prevented Walter from killing himself, it is clear that he could have tried to do more for his friend. As Elinor A. Walker has pointed out, Frank rushes out of emotional situations, "terrified of the truth" (2000: 89). While Frank fails to help his friend in life, he does indeed attempt to help him after his death, probably to redeem his own sense of guilt. Walter leaves a suicide note for Frank where he asks Frank to look up his long-lost daughter. Frank will indeed look her up, only to find out that she does not, in fact, exist. Walter's story about the illegitimate daughter shows how he has known Frank better than Frank has known him. Since Walter knows that Frank dislikes confessions and

self-disclosure, Walter tells his friend one final 'secret', sending him off to look for a truth, which, ironically, does not exist at all. As Frank himself admits:

The whole goose chase was just his one last attempt at withholding full disclosure. A novelistic red herring. And I admire Walter for it, since for me such a gesture has the feel of secrecies, a quality Walter's own life lacked, though he tried for it. (Ford 1995: 367)

While Walter finally reveals his deep knowledge of his friend, Ford's sportswriter thus remains equally contemptuous of full disclosure, emphasizing the value of 'secrecies'. In his avoidance of self-disclosure, though, he remains emotionally alienated from his (same-sex) friends. As he associates male intimacy with homosexuality and emasculation, he avoids establishing any deep emotional relationship with other men. Homophobia thus prevents him not only from helping his friend Walter with his emotional problems, but also from exploring and expressing his own inner feelings. Because of his fear and hatred of male homosexuality, Ford's protagonist thus ends up "missing the connection with men" (Walker 2000: 89).

4. Conclusions

From what has been argued here, then, one could draw some concluding remarks. First of all, even as the myth of male friendship has long pervaded (U.S.) cultural and literary history, it seems both possible and necessary to start to deconstruct it. After all, much recent masculinity scholarship has revealed, as we have seen, the precariousness of intimate friendships between (heterosexual) men, which has been explicitly linked to the birth of the homosexual as a social identity. Moreover, the emotional distance that often separates (heterosexual) men has also been explored in fiction, as exemplified by Richard Ford's 1986 novel *The Sportswriter*, which not only deconstructs the classical myth of male friendship in American fiction but also illustrates, as has been seen, the role played by masculinity in the gendered construction of male friendship. Actually, this novel, in line with existing contemporary research work on masculinity as well as male intimacy and homophobia, illustrates Frank's emotional estrangement from other men as deriving not only from former personal or individual traumas but also, and above all, from his socially learned conception of masculinity as the denial of emotions, his fears of feminization and emasculation and, ultimately, his blatant homophobia.

Since men associate (same-sex) friendship and intimacy with the world of emotions, which have traditionally been considered feminine, they tend to link friendship to femininity and, therefore, to emasculation fears. Clearly, then, promoting male same-sex intimacy will imply questioning conventional ideas about masculinity (and femininity), challenging the traditionally reductive equation of emotions with femininity and, in the case of men, with feminization and emasculation. However, if, as it seems, male homophobia can prevent men from engaging in closer and richer friendships with other men, then changing traditional conceptions of masculinities and men's friendships will necessarily entail undermining male homophobia, too. On the one hand, dispensing with homophobia will allow men to enrich their own emotional lives, which are often maimed and limited by the fear and hatred of homosexuality. Even Frank Bascombe in *The Sportswriter* can sometimes perceive and acknowledge the

limitations of the masculine code of emotional restraint, which keeps estranging him from his male friends. For example, while talking to his friend Wade Arcenault, girlfriend Vicki's father, Frank himself realizes the emotional distance which male homophobia establishes between them: "I would like to hug him now...But I can't. He would get the wrong idea and everything between us would be ruined just when it's started so well" (Ford 1995: 240). Given the homophobic component of traditional forms of male bonding, it stands to reason, therefore, that increasing male intimacy will imply diminishing men's fear and hatred of homosexuality. Just as reducing male homophobia will favor male intimacies, so the promotion of male intimacy will, hopefully, contribute to undermining male homophobia as well.

On the other hand, and even more importantly perhaps, promoting male intimacy might also contribute to diminishing sexism and misogyny. After all, male homophobia, as Sedgwick (1992: 20) has skillfully noted, is also misogynistic, that is, it is not only oppressive of the so-called *feminine* in men, but also of women. It is already common knowledge that homosexual men have often been stereotyped as 'feminine' or 'effete' by heterosexual men. Of course, the main aim of this feminization process has been to annihilate homosexuals although, indirectly, it has been demeaning of women as well. In order to assert their superior masculinity, heterosexual men have recurrently tried to diminish homosexual men by associating them with femininity as a mark of inferiority. Since male homophobia thus reveals men's fear and hatred of the 'feminine', fighting male homophobia by promoting male friendship and intimacy could, eventually, contribute to erasing sexism and misogyny, too. At the beginning of a new century, it becomes more necessary than ever, therefore, to continue the ongoing combat against (male) homophobia so as to try to re(dis)cover the lost intimacy between (heterosexual) men, which, however difficult, is far from impossible. As friendship scholar Drury Sherrod has concluded:

By acknowledging their need for intimacy, and risking the pursuit of friendship, men can begin to achieve the kind of closeness that males have known in other times and other cultures...With commitment and persistence, men can learn to break through the bonds that confine them and rebuild the bonds that unite them. (1987: 238, 239)

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