

Jopi Nyman, *Men Alone Masculinity, Individualism, and Hard-Boiled Fiction*. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997. Costerus New Sciics 111 Series editois C C Barfoot, Hans Bertens, Theo D'haen and Erik Kooper. 384 pp ; ISBN 90-420-0118-6; paper.

The American Dream seems to pop up whenever discussions of American culture or literature turn to topics of desire and identity. It is no surprise, then, that this mythic construct also permeates the genre and motivates the characters in texts classified as hard-boiled fiction. Although staged in the rather nightmarish decorations of the underworld of gangs, violence, political corruption, homophobia, and hard-core misogyny and heterosexism, the hard-boiled novels in fact communicate a romantic yearning for the American Dream. Jopi Nyman argues in his recent study of the genre. *Men Alone* links the American Dream with ideologies of white male liegemony and analyzes the cultural production of masculinity as an expression of and challenge to the American ideals of gendered individualism, power relations, and social order in the 1920s and 1930s. A thorough and very well researched, although rather unnecessarily overdrawn study, Nyman's book examines the genre as a historical and cultural phenomenon. It interweaves close readings of primary texts with a plethora of literary critical, historical, sociological, and philosophical approaches. It should be of interest to scholars of American literature, gender and culture, as well as American and Cultural Studies.

The book opens with the description of the history and genesis of hard-boiled fiction in the historical and cultural context that produced both popular and more literary works at the time when America was being transformed from an agricultural into an urban society. Relying on the theories of textuality and narrative put forth by, among others, Michel Foucault, Georg Lukács, and Edward Said, Nyman shows that, like other novels, the hard-boiled one is an ideological document that expresses and mirrors social anxieties, class conflicts, and the modernist alienation of the individual. As a direct descendant of the western and the wilderness stories, it maps a process of a male individual's search for a self, while also portraying the life of the underclass very much in the vein of earlier realist and naturalist fiction. Placing his discussion in the larger context of American literary history, Nyman argues that the hard-boiled fiction's alienated masculine perspective on the world arises from this genre's celebration of the tough guy character, some of whose prototypes can be found in the novels of Cooper, Melville, Twain, and Norris. As he shows, the tough hero's yearning for power and control over hostile and corrupt society

around him results from and represents the cultural anxieties of the period, in which traditional gender roles and social structures were being challenged and realigned.

Nyman ably demonstrates this interesting point by reading closely four major novels – Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929), James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They* (1935), and Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1937). In these novels, the hero's seemingly subversive desire to change the world aims actually at the restoration of a patriarchal order in which gender roles and power relations are clearly polarized, and where all the groups subsumed under the category of the other – e.g., women, ethnic minorities, homosexuals – are back in their marginalized position. This is an interesting reading because the hard-boiled hero has been rather tiresomely romanticized as a lonely warrior who is destroyed by the corrupt system, and who thus commands the reader's sympathy. Nyman shows that this hero's ideological agenda is very close to what today sinacks of a fundamentalist and white supremacist push for a return to 'family values' and the idealized 'good old days' of mythic male hegemony. In such a context, even the lawyers and policemen who are the hero's adversaries are merely emasculated excuses for true manhood that belongs only to the likes of Hemingway's Harry Morgan or Hammett's Op. In the corrupt and feminized society, the tough guy can also be a criminal and outcast who reveals American culture's loss of masculine values. In Nyman's analysis the latter type is best exemplified by Frank Chambers from *The Postman*, who resorts to any means in his fight against all those who reject or undermine his superior white manhood. But such a portrayal is deeply problematic, as the true American masculinity has to be proven and thus is predicated upon dominance, racism, sexism, violence, chaos, death, and the hero's own inevitable demise.

Having demonstrated the reliance of the hard-boiled type on the basic conflict between masculinity and femininity, Nyman illustrates the ways in which historically and socially contingent ideologies of American and western individualism can be used to define and interpret this type. By linking the texts he studies with the rhetoric of 'Americanism,' which he sees as specifically inasculine and dating back to the writings of Emerson, Nyman reiterates that the crisis of American manhood is indicative of the larger historical and cultural crisis of gender and individualism in twentieth-century America. This point is persuasively supported by references to Darwin's, Marx's, and Hobbes's theories of determinism, alienation, and social-warfare. Hence the American Dream that emerges from Nyman's discussion is a male fantasy of erasing history and a romance of absolute and unattainable power – a nostalgic yearning for the idolized American past when men were men and women were women. But the idealistic world in which the tough guy could win and rule has been lost for ever. 'Hard-boiled fiction is a fiction of the fall, not of Eden,' Nyman concludes his study.

*Men Alone* is an impressive book but could have been easier to read had the author organized his discussion a little more carefully and devised a tighter theoretical narrative for his argument. There are many unnecessary repetitions and restatements that obscure the author's more interesting points and close readings. Although very ambitious and truly eclectic theoretically, the analysis could have also benefited from a sharper focus on more recent, post-binary critiques of gender. Although Nyman explains that the genre obviously relies on and reproduces the traditional models, he also claims that it actually reveals that

something is wrong with them. This reader regrets that many such interesting points are left undeveloped – e.g., the masculine romance and fear of homosocial bonds – but still recommends *Men Alone* as a study that should make it to the reading list of all interested in men, power, and American individualism.

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