

“OVIDIUS” UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANȚA  
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**DOCTORAL THESIS  
SUMMARY**

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“OVIDIUS” UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANȚA  
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CONSTRUCTIONS OF MASCULINITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN  
NOVELS BY JOHN UPDIKE AND PHILIP ROTH

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# CONTENTS

CONTENTS.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
INTRODUCTION.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
PART I. CONTEXTS.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
CHAPTER 1.A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF EARLY MASCULINITY CONSTRUCTIONS .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.1. From the Social Contract to the Gender Contract: the Rise of the Modern Patriarchal Society .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.1.1. Thomas Hobbes's Challenging of "Natural" Rules	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.1.2. John Locke's Gendered Legacy .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.1.3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Views on the Social Contract Theory	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.2. Psychological Perspectives: the Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.3. Male Sex-Role Identity Paradigm .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.4. Lacanian Theory .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.5. Masculinity as Challenged by Feminist Theory .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.6. Critical Men's Studies .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.6.1. Masculinity as Homophobia in the Construction of Gender Identity .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.6.2. Hegemonic Masculinity and Sport .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.7. Postmodernism, Mechanisms of Power, Regulatory Discourses and Masculinity	
<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	
1.8. The Difference Theory .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.9. The Gendered Performativity .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
1.10. Taking Stock.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
CHAPTER 2.MASCULINITY STUDIES: TOWARDS A MORE COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.1. Masculinity at the Beginning of the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century – a Troublesome and Complex Concept .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.1.1. Connell's "Hegemonic Masculinity" and the Dominant Discourse .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

2.1.2. Constructing New Masculinities: Intersections and New Directions .....	<b>Error!</b>
<b>Bookmark not defined.</b>	
2.1.3. Jewish Masculinities.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.2. New Approaches to Theorizing Contemporary Masculinities	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Bookmark not defined.</b>	
2.2.1. Transnational Business Masculinity.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.2.2. Inclusive Masculinity .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.2.3. Caring Masculinity .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
2.4. Taking Stock.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>PART II. LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY MASCULINITIES</b>	
..... <b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	
<b>CHAPTER 3. THE EARLY SIXTIES: ALEXANDER PORTNOY'S FAILED RELATIONSHIP TO HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY .....</b>	
<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	
3.1. Freudian Discourses in <i>Portnoy's Complaint</i> .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
3.1.1. Re-Reading Freud in Portnoy's Family Drama .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
3.1.2. Freud, Psychoanalysis, Jewish Traditions and ... whose Complaints? .....	<b>Error!</b>
<b>Bookmark not defined.</b>	
3.2. Portnoy's Complaint's Relationship to Foucauldian Discourses on Power Dynamics and to Judith Butler's queer theory .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
3.3. Violence, the Path to Masculine Power?.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
3.4. Baseball and American-Jewish Masculinity .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4. THE GENDERED BODY IN <i>AMERICAN PASTORAL</i> AND IN UPDIKE'S TETRALOGY .....</b>	
<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	
4.1. Gender and identity formation in Butler's theories .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.2. Jewish Masculinity and the Swede .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.4. Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom – the Archetypal American Hero?	<b>Error!</b>
<b>Bookmark not defined.</b>	
4.4. Relations among Masculinities in <i>American Pastoral</i> : Homosocial Rhetoric.....	<b>Error!</b>
<b>Bookmark not defined.</b>	
4.5. American Exceptionalism and Masculinity .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.5.1. The Swede and Rabbit: Nationalism and the Myth of American Exceptionalism	..... <b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
4.5.2. The Swede – the avatar of Kennedy, a symbol of national masculinity stereotypes	..... <b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

#### 4.5.3. Lindbergh and Hegemonic Masculinity in Roth's Alternative History Novel**Error!**

##### **Bookmark not defined.**

#### CHAPTER 5. FAMILY, FATHERHOOD AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN ROTH'S SELECTED NOVELS AND UPDIKE'S TETRALOGY**Error!** **Bookmark not defined.**

5.1. The presence of the father: freedom in the Shvitz .....	<b>Error!</b> <b>Bookmark not defined.</b>
5.2. Earl Angstrom – the father captured at the crossing of the Freudian and Oedipal theories.....	<b>Error!</b> <b>Bookmark not defined.</b>
5.3. Harry Angstrom and His Failed Performance of the Father Role	<b>Error!</b> <b>Bookmark not defined.</b>
5.4. Herman Roth .....	<b>Error!</b> <b>Bookmark not defined.</b>
5.5. The Swede's Disobedience: Fatherhood and Hegemonic Masculinity in Crisis ...	<b>Error!</b> <b>Bookmark not defined.</b>
TAKING STOCK.....	<b>Error!</b> <b>Bookmark not defined.</b>
WORKS CITED.....	<b>Error!</b> <b>Bookmark not defined.</b>

## ABSTRACT

The current dissertation considers a number of perspectives that are meant to provide a clearer picture of developments, both in literature and in the extra-literary world, that have emerged over the last few decades. It engages in the complex process of assessing aspects of “gender trouble” having to do with constructions of masculinity in the novels of John Updike and Philip Roth. Although constructions of masculinity feature prominently in John Updike’s and Philip Roth’s fiction, comparatively little criticism considers the meanings, constructions, and performance of masculinity in their writing, which prompted the intention which led to the writing of this dissertation.

This research aims to contribute to the critical work so far written on Updike, Roth and masculinity, offering a 21<sup>st</sup> century reading of the seven novels under investigation. The ways these novels portray masculinity are scrutinized through the lenses of social-constructionist theories of masculinity, among which Raewyn Connell’s work features prominently. Foucault’s ideas in *The History of Sexuality*, *Discipline And Punish: the Birth of the Prison* and *The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom* and feminist theories (Judith Butler), re-reading Freud’s theory about the acquisition of gender identity, are only a few of the secondary resources that have been of use to the current dissertation. All this is meant to provide the framework for a better understanding and interpretation of two very important American authors: John Updike and Philip Roth.

## KEY WORDS:

Hegemonic masculinity, gender, identity, power, American exceptionalism, Jewish constructions of masculinity, caring masculinities, inclusive masculinities, fatherhood.

In an age where gender issues have become central on campuses as well as in the world outside them, the works of John Updike and Philip Roth are interesting for both fans of the two already canonical male writers and for militants determined to critically re-examine their canonical status.

In the field of gender studies, studies that explicitly deal with the issue of masculinity are still a minority, since feminism has long earned a more important place. Feminism has drawn attention to inequality and discrimination. Why would anyone be interested in masculinity, since patriarchy is still ruling contemporary societies? However, the legitimacy of placing gender in context, and the examination of aspects of contemporary culture that have made both femininity and masculinity problematic and critical, within a larger context in which LGBT should also be taken into account, has become more and more conspicuous.

Considering this, a critical analysis is needed of both explicit and implicit assumptions of the traditional academic approaches to the interpretation of literary works within contexts in which new reassessments of gender occur. This examination of a more comprehensive theoretical framework including different approaches, a number of behavioral guidelines regarding masculinity, has been found very useful, providing the current dissertation with the necessary backgrounds and contexts in which to deal with the two American authors' fictional works. Although it examines masculinities, the configurations of gender practices in relation to men's position within the architecture of gender relationships, the dissertation is mainly concerned with perceptions and illustrations in fiction rather than the description of real people and real places. These real people and real places, however, are part of the complex process of communication in which literary texts, their readers and writers play a significant part.

A thorough investigation of Updike's and Roth's fictions considers the configurations in which the male characters are shaped by a complex interplay of gender, class, ethnicity, rather than race structures and discourses specific to their cultural context. Of particular importance for the current thesis is the extent to which these forces contribute to the construction of masculinities and to what extent masculinities resist these structural constraints. Updike's and Roth's novels, as this investigation notes, provide representations which feature the significant role that social structures hold in the construction of masculinity. In order to be identified as 'men', Updike's and Roth's male protagonists are forced to

perform within their contemporary social structures and discourses, these having already drawn specific manners in which their masculinities are constructed and performed, in accordance with the prevailing gender stereotypes of a world still driven by patriarchy. The focus of the current dissertation will be on John Updike's so called "Rabbit's Trilogy" (*Rabbit, Run*, *Rabbit Redux*; *Rabbit Is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest*), as well as on Philip Roth's: *Portnoy's Complaint*, *American Pastoral* and *The Plot against America*.

A current growth of interest in the subject of masculinities supports this updated analysis of Updike's and Roth's novels, establishing the necessary conditions and motivation for a renewed analysis of constructions of masculinity in Updike's and Roth's novels. Therefore, the current work offers a re-examination of a significant part of Updike's and Roth's novels, exploring the intersections of key issues of masculinity, ethnicity, power, sports and social tensions in America, as presented in their novels, between the 1960s and 2004. The theme of American masculinity in the writing of Updike and Roth is all too obvious. But there has been less interest, to my knowledge, in the identification of the extent to which this theme has implications transcending the fictional worlds which the authors created, in a comparative and contrastive study.

The general objective is to examine the models of masculinity in these novels. The hypothesis is that literary works constitute themselves as among the most significant symbolic fields in the construction of gender role models and, as a consequence, among the most suitable fields of inquiry for this analysis. The research on the fictional constructions of masculinities was carried out by means of applying a multidisciplinary theoretical framework to the selected corpus. The basis for this research is, on the one hand, the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity and, on the other, the scrutinizing of alternative models of masculinity. Consequently, the specific objectives of the current research are manifold. Some of them are: the increase in the visibility of masculinity as a cultural structure, with the help of hierarchical constructs of power relationships such as gender, ethnicity and sexuality, the assimilation of the most innovative academic contributions on men's studies from psychology, sociology, gender, race, ethnicity and sexual research, the use of a corpus of theories about the study of constructions of masculinity in American literary texts, particularly those written by John Updike and Philip Roth, in the last six decades. In addition, it is worth considering the articulation of the essential critical apparatus in pursuance of the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity and, meantime, bring to light new, alternative constructs of masculinity developed in American literature of John Updike and Philip Roth. One of the most important aims would be the investigation of the ways in which a widening

of this theoretical framework might lead to the incorporation of a discourse between feminist theories and masculinity studies in the works of Updike and Roth.

The organizational schema of this thesis has at its basis two directions of major importance for the development of the entire discussion: (1) the first part of the thesis consists of the approach of theories and contexts in which men's studies and masculinity studies emerged and developed; (2) in the second part, contemporary literary constructions of masculinities are analyzed.

The research work consists of a first stage for providing our analyses with the necessary multidisciplinary theoretical foundations, under the title *Part I. Contexts*, which is carried out in the first part of the research, more precisely in the first two chapters. On the other hand, these theories are further applied to the study of the selected literary corpus in the last three chapters, gathered under the title *Part II. Literary Representations of Contemporary Masculinities*.

The first chapter, *A Survey of Masculinity Studies*, starts from the assessment of a number of perspectives on gender and masculinity constructions. The beginning of the chapter concentrates on three major social contract theorists separately. Each subsection will contain a brief presentation of the respective thinker's essential arguments, with special focus on their ideas about human nature and social constructs. Each such presentation will be the framework for the feminist analysis contained in each section, the final goal being that of revealing "manly" presences as perceived in those times.

Although gender became an important identity marker only in the twentieth century, significant developments showing concerns with gender constructions can be traced back as early as the beginning of modernity. In this respect, gender politics of late eighteenth-century rights discourse focused on binary oppositions such as reason/passion and masculine/feminine, leading to the division of the political world into the public/private spheres. Even if, at first sight, the social contract theorists' ideas are less relevant in the analysis of masculinity, there are at least two reasons for which they are important. The first one is that social contract theories laid the basis for referring to society through the lenses of social constructionism. The second reason shows that, in spite of the fact that the contract theorists did not use the masculinity concept, they anticipated it, along with the concept of gender, from the point of view of the social construction of sexual difference starting from the sexual division of labor, and not only. They adopted a constructivist approach, without naming it as such, in order to challenge abusive power. But they must have also done it with

the aim of explaining men's superiority to women, trying to avoid explanations having to do with nature.

Among those whom one may consider the founders of this patriarchal perspective within the framework of the European Modernity were Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, architects of the *Social Contract Theory*, which, in spite of these progressive aspects, is tinged with sexism and masculinity. These thinkers drew attention to societal features of human beings by stating that every man got involved in several contracts with fellow beings, and this made clear their relationship to others but also the status they held in society, at that time. The Contract was a step forward in the emancipation of the individual in relation to authority structures. This emancipation was beneficial for men, with women still relegated to a secondary role in the family and in the society as a whole.

Masculinity studies can be noted to have developed in three phases or 'waves', according to Tim Edwards (2006: 2) in his book, *Cultures of masculinity*. The first one saw masculinity as a socially constructed identity. This identity was at first defined in terms of psychoanalytic and sex role theory, but the thinkers and the context in which they expressed their 'patriarchal' ideas predate by centuries the current theoretical discussions, obviously predating Freudian thought and more recent, sex role theory.

Ideas, beliefs, perceptions of gender go back in time, to the beginning of history. A relatively long outline may provide a basis, but the focus here will be on times which are relevant to our own culture and age, whether we call it modern, or postmodern, or any other way.

An analysis of the concept of masculinity obviously entails the analysis of the relation between genders and an interesting perspective on the field benefits from the progress made by feminist (Simone de Beauvoir, Helene Cixous) and post-feminist research (Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler), in the second phase.

With regards to men's studies, authors such as Arthur Brittan, R. W. Connell, Michael Kaufman, Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner are prominent figures of research that studied how masculinities are culturally, socially constructed (instead of given *a priori*) and how power relationships between men and women, but also among men, are sustained. In the same context, sport obviously affects the way people, men included, construct meanings about their gender identity. In both Roth's and Updike's novels, performing well as an athlete is a variable attribute of success and of masculinity. Three major themes dominate the literature on masculinity – whether hegemonic or not – and sport: human interaction in the world of sport, appearance and the physicality of sport.

*The third wave* has often sought to entirely reconsider the whole notion of masculinity and has tried to move attention away from the practices of masculinity to their theorization. This theorization is due to the rise of poststructuralist theory, queer theory and the refocused attention on issues of performativity.

Summing up, this examination acknowledges the complexity of the relation between socially constructed concepts of gender and sexuality within a contemporary cultural context and how this interaction strengthens, challenges and articulates relations of power. Contemporary cultural constructions of gender and sexuality are seen as interconnected identities, imbedded in historical, social, cultural and political practices (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, Connell 2005a) of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, open to interdisciplinary discussions.

The second chapter, *Masculinity Studies: Towards a More Comprehensive Framework*, combines perspectives and texts from cultural and literary studies with recent approaches to masculinity, more precisely, those developed at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the same time, this chapter highlights the connection between literature and identity, language and sexuality for the construction of the fictional world, understood as the literary representation of individual and collective identities. In the first part, it proceeds to the analysis of the evolution of studies in the field of masculinity at the beginning of the 21st century, linking Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity", reconsidered in her 2005 edition, *Masculinities*, and the dominant discourse. Further on, it highlights new masculinities, studying intersections and new directions, paying particular attention to representations of Jewish masculinities. In the end, contemporary theories in the field of masculinity are considered: transnational business masculinity, inclusive masculinity theory and caring masculinity theory.

The development in masculinity studies, the evolution from the theory of a singular masculinity to a plurality of masculinities, emphasizes the increased differentiation of the topic's area of interest. The approach combines textual analyses with the highly specialized, theoretical discourses of masculinity and gender studies in order to identify the mechanisms of construction and development of masculinities within Updike's and Roth's literary texts and to highlight the influence of the literary system itself and the wider social and cultural context on the perception of the mechanisms of masculinities. Therefore, this chapter's goal is to provide a basis for the next chapters, so that the theories from the field of masculinity and gender studies, from an interdisciplinary perspective, are applied to a literary corpus written by Updike and Roth.

The second part of the thesis is structured in three chapters, dealing with hegemonic masculinity (Chapter III), the gendered body (Chapter IV), and family, fatherhood and hegemonic masculinity (Chapter V) in Roth's novels and Updike's Tetralogy.

Chapter three, *The Early Sixties: Alexander Portnoy and His Failures To Attain Hegemonic Masculinity*, looks at the interconnections between the Jewish cultural identities, the male body, the institution of the family, but also other themes related to masculinity, in *Portnoy's Complaint*. The novel's protagonist is scrutinized in relation to the overlapping of Freud's psychoanalytical discourse, Foucault's theories on power dynamics, as well as Judith Butler's queer theory. *Portnoy's Complaint*, more than any other novel by Roth, focuses on issues of problematic masculinity, analyzing the methods in which vulnerable masculinity is constructed through social structures and discourses, the manner in which a character subjects himself to the disciplinary power of discourse in an attempt to acquire what one might call 'a less unworthy', a less undignified subject position as a man. The chapter also deals with the mother in connection to Freud's theories, Sophie being considered the root cause of Alex's difficulties. In fact, as Sarah Eden Schiff comments relying on the family systems theory, it is the parents - Jack with his incapacity to manage life, and Sophie, with her tendency to assume too much responsibility (masculinity) - that generate Alex's misbehavior (Schiff, 2006: 37). Alex is openly contemptuous of his mother's intrusion and, at the same time, he is discouraged by his father's apathy and unconcern, the image of the failed patriarch. The last two subchapters consider two main themes in relation to the construction of masculinity: violence in general and baseball in particular as sites of dominant masculinity creation in the fiction of Philip Roth, being at the same time means to attain hegemonic masculinity.

The next chapter, *The Gendered Body in American Pastoral and in Updike's Tetralogy*, considers that the novels not only provide a conspicuous type of male heroes but they also create room for interpretation if we consider gender stereotypes and the way they influence the development of masculine identity. The characters portrayed in the works explored in this dissertation clearly display the complexities faced by mainstream WASP American and Jewish-American men who seek to rise to the challenges of the ethnic and/or social paradigms of masculinity. Their masculinity presents a certain amount of flexibility in that they correspond neither to the prevailing ideal, nor to the traditional Jewish pattern. Rather, they display an expanded amalgam of male types. The chapter considers writings of such authors as Judith Butler and Raewyn Connell, in which the body is identified as having many connotations and significations. The purpose is to analyze the manner in which Philip

Roth's and John Updike's texts may accommodate these theories in their works: *American Pastoral*, published in 1997 and "Rabbit's Trilogy".

The last chapter, *Family, Fatherhood and Masculinity in Roth's Selected Novels and Updike's Trilogy*, discusses the ways masculinity is handled in the family milieu, confronting Connell's approach of hegemonic masculinity. This section has as main aim to find answers to the question about the extent that the individual male characters's actions are constricted by their community (in the case of Philip Roth this refers not only to the American community as a whole but also to that of the Jewish community). Thus, as it will be seen, in the analyzed novels, both Updike and Roth focus upon the complicated relationship between individual protagonists and the American/Jewish (collective) community to which they belong.

Focusing on Updike's Trilogy and Philip Roth's novels: *Portnoy's Complaint*, *American Pastoral*, *The Plot against America*, the chapter explores the case of the main characters' families, with their major focus on fathers. Although both Roth and Updike are reputed as being essentially man-focused authors in whose writings, families are not always depicted as having a key influence on the male identity, in these novels we find both the family as negative impact on male identity and as a receptive open-minded father whose masculinity develops in consonance with what his family needs. The first novels provide us with a negative influence on the development of masculinity, meanwhile the last one, *The Plot against America*, presents Herman as the dominant, responsible male and father. By exploring the characters of these novels, this chapter examines the extent to which male characters manage to reconcile their position in relation to the idea of hegemonic masculinity in which they are supposed to play dominant, patriarchal roles.

Both Updike and Roth have often set the internal antagonisms – generally the conflict between traditional and contemporary values – against the background of the family. In the analyzed Trilogy, Updike portrays animosities between fathers and sons, and between husbands and wives. Similarly, in David Brauner's terms, Roth presents oppositions between Jewish men, be they fathers and sons, contending brothers or authors and critics, all Jews who judge, blame, deceive and harm one another (Brauner, 2007: 193), as in *Portnoy's Complaint* and even in *American Pastoral*, to a certain extent. Nevertheless, in his more recent books, Roth provides a more sympathetic image of his own family, this recognition being also apparent in *The Plot against America*, a novel some may find untypical of Philip Roth, but what would be typical Roth if not a brilliant writer who is constantly changing and developing?

While resorting to the theories emerging from masculinity studies, the thesis aims to investigate the role played by expressions and performances of masculine and feminine gendered identities in the work of both authors. This concerns *inter alia* a shared concern that underpins the work of both novelists: the representation of hegemonic masculinity seen as ruling or dominant masculinity, as well as the transformation of alternative masculinity.

The current thesis explores how John Updike and Philip Roth performatively produce masculinity instead of simply represent it as an object possessed by particular characters. Masculinities are multiple, historical, and social, and the thesis *Constructions of Masculinity in American Contemporary Literature* focuses on masculinity. It examines a fictional space for the reinvention of the male self and the attending social relations in contemporary American culture. As represented by both Updike and Roth, American masculinity has undergone dramatic changes for the better and for the worse and their literary texts exploit these changes for a variety of reasons.

As seen in the analysis of the thesis, there is a tendency for masculinity to be characterized by an association with male dominance, patriarchy, hegemony, heterosexism, leadership or heteronormativity. The analyzed novels reveal masculinity as neither individually liberating nor egalitarian.

As they make progress along their long artistic itineraries Updike's and Roth's visions and tones of the novels turns more tragic, and as for their male characters, although they are restricted by social structures, they are not completely trapped by them. The novels even if they are governed by discourses of masculinity and the characters mainly define themselves in terms of power, they also expose the limitations of such a construction.

The relationship between these structures and characters is a dynamic one; the core values and the construction of these characters are actually shaped by the social structures they adhere to through their gender practices. The resistance to the change brought about by these new social structures exists but it is nevertheless limited.

This thesis situates the exploration of masculinity in Updike's and Roth's novels in the context of their largely patriarchal philosophy, and attempts to highlight their vision on how the gender perceptions have been altered by the mechanisms of change. Taking into account the above, the structures of masculinity that have prevailed in literature for a long time are shown to be open to gradual change in an increasingly more equitable 'battle of the sexes', sexes which are no longer two.

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