

An Interpretation of Masculinity in Manhattan: Reading Jed Rubenfeld's *The Interpretation of Murder*

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This article presents Jed Rubenfeld's *The Interpretation of Murder* as an ideal case study for the critical analysis of representations of masculinity in contemporary American fiction. Set in Manhattan in 1909, at the time of Freud's one and only visit to the United States, Rubenfeld uses the arrival of Freud and his theories of psychoanalysis as his point of departure for a historiographic metafictional investigation of this key moment in the history of American masculinity. Focalising his critique through the protagonist of the novel, Dr Stratham Younger, more specifically through Younger's reinterpretation of Freud's Oedipus complex, Rubenfeld endeavours to critique the *processes* that shaped the pattern of hegemony in the opening decade of modernity. Ultimately, approaching a reading of *The Interpretation of Murder* from a gender(ed) perspective points at the power of the novel in the sociological study of the social construction of masculinity in contemporary society.

Keywords: American fiction; masculinity; New York; psychoanalysis; the Oedipus complex; Sigmund Freud; Jed Rubenfeld

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Una interpretación de la masculinidad en Manhattan: lectura de *The Interpretation of Murder*, de Jed Rubenfeld

Este artículo presenta *The Interpretation of Murder*, de Jed Rubenfeld, como un estudio de caso ideal para el análisis crítico de las representaciones de la masculinidad en la literatura estadounidense contemporánea. Ambientada en Manhattan en 1909, en el momento en el que tuvo lugar la única visita de Freud a los Estados Unidos, Rubenfeld usa la llegada de Freud y sus teorías del psicoanálisis como punto de partida para una investigación de la metaficción historiográfica en este punto clave de la historia de la masculinidad estadounidense. Al focalizar su crítica a través del protagonista de la novela, el Dr. Stratham Younger, en concreto a través de la interpretación que hace Younger del complejo de Edipo de Freud, Rubenfeld adopta una posición crítica hacia los procesos que dieron forma al patrón hegemónico en la década inicial de la modernidad. En última instancia, acercarse a una lectura de *The Interpretation of Murder* desde una perspectiva de género señala el poder de la novela en el estudio sociológico de la construcción social de la masculinidad en la sociedad contemporánea.

Palabras clave: ficción norteamericana; masculinidad; Nueva York; psicoanálisis; complejo de Edipo; Sigmund Freud; Jed Rubenfeld

1. INTRODUCING *THE INTERPRETATION OF MURDER*

Jed Rubinfeld's debut novel, *The Interpretation of Murder* (2006), begins with a reflection on the male individual's search for meaning. As the narrator states, to find meaning, "a man must reinhabit his past, however dark, and live for the future, however uncertain" (2006: 5). The idea of finding meaning by revisiting and reinterpreting the past resonates on various levels in *The Interpretation of Murder*. Harry Brod, a leading figure within the field of Masculinity Studies, makes the persuasive argument that the return to a specific moment in history can enable a better grasp of our contemporary understanding of the social construction of masculinity. While "men are generally nostalgic for a past perceived as embodying a more stable and secure masculine identity", Brod argues, "identifying the historical inaccuracies of this mythologizing of the past can free men's attentions to encounter present realities more directly" (1987: 268). Building upon this recognition, this article aims to illustrate how reading *The Interpretation of Murder* from a gender(ed) perspective affirms the power of fiction in the sociological investigation of the discourses that shape the social construction of masculinity.

2. *THE INTERPRETATION OF MURDER*, THE HISTORICAL NOVEL, METAFICTION AND MASCULINITY

Written in the first decade of the twenty-first century, but set in the Manhattan of 1909, *The Interpretation of Murder* can certainly be classified as a work of historical fiction. The recent resurgence in popularity of the historical novel has provoked reaction from certain literary circles on how we should judge the literary value of the genre. *The Interpretation of Murder* itself experienced the effect of this rise in populist recognition of the genre when it received a British national TV programme's 'Best Read of the Year' award in 2007.¹ Despite, or perhaps due to, the ever-increasing commercial popularity of the historical novel, there still remains a certain critical snobbishness toward this genre of literature. This is perhaps best illustrated with the comments made by James Wood, a professor of the practice of literary criticism at Harvard University and a literary critic at *The New Yorker*. Wood makes his position clear: "I am allergic to historical fiction" (2010b: 1). Wood's *New Yorker* review of David Mitchell's *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010) is littered with disapproving utterances that illustrate this attitude. Despite judging Mitchell's text as a "formidable marvel" (2010a: 3), Wood laments, "the book is still a conventional historical novel, and drags with it some of the fake heirlooms of the genre" (3). Citing Henry James, Wood makes the point that "the novel should press down on 'the present palpable intimate'", a triad which James used "to distinguish the role of the living novel from that of the historical novel" (4). Wood's insinuation is clear: in his estimation, a piece of historical fiction is "lifeless" or even "dead" to the

¹ The award was from the Richard and Judy Book Club, a regular segment of the Richard and Judy daytime chatshow.

reader, with no resounding message, literary substance, or connection to contemporary life. He concludes the article thus:

Meanwhile, the historical novel, typically the province of genre gardeners and conservative populists, has become an unlikely laboratory for serious writers, some of them distinctly untraditional in emphasis and concern. (I am thinking not just of Mitchell but of Thomas Pynchon, Susan Sontag, Steven Millhauser, A. S. Byatt, Peter Carey). What such novelists are looking for in those oldfangled laboratories is sometimes mysterious to me; and how these daring writers differ from a very gifted but frankly traditional and more commercial historical novelist like Hilary Mantel is an anxiously unanswered question. (4)

A possible explanation to the ‘mystery’ that dumbfounds Wood can be found if we consider what these writers, both ‘serious’ and one must therefore assume ‘unserious’, are actually doing with the historical novel. Taking a moment to consider the evolution of this genre, and its evolving contemporary identity, may prove a useful exercise in determining the sociological value of the historical novel and, specifically, the representations of masculinity in *The Interpretation of Murder*.

The classic study of the genre of historical fiction is Georg Lukács’ *The Historical Novel* (1955). With this critical investigation Lukács aimed to reveal the “social and ideological basis from which the historical novel was able to emerge” (1955: 20). The influential contribution that Lukács’ study made to critical theory of the historical novel was to recognise that evolving economic and social factors played a central role in the evolution of the genre. The development of the Enlightenment period, and the establishment of capitalism as the economic structure after the Enlightenment, proposed the idea of history as a ‘process’ that is in constant flux while simultaneously gesturing toward the potential for historical progress. Speaking about the novel that many consider to be the pioneer of the genre, Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814), Lukács states: “These events, this transformation of men’s existence and consciousness throughout Europe form the economic and ideological basis of Scott’s historical novel” (31).² In Lukács’ estimation the male figures in such novels were not “mere costumery” (226) but were the central focus of these texts. As such, the historical novel emerged as the methodological means for exploring the effect of changing social conditions on the male individual and crucially, the connection between the past and the present: “What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which lead men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality” (42). Applying this reading of the historical novel to contemporary works of historical fiction indicates that the retelling of historical events is not the primary concern, but the historiography of the novel itself. Essential to the survival of the historical novel is

² For an overview of the influence of Scott’s *Waverley* see de Groot (2010: 17-33).

its existence as a methodological tool in the interpretation of the discourses that shape society. This, of course, includes the social construction of masculinity.

Masculinity has been a major focus of the historical novel since the nineteenth century.³ Jerome de Groot identifies a particular category of the historical novel that discusses the construction of masculinity: “male orientated crime fiction”. In de Groot’s words these are novels, with their narratives of adventure and warfare, “marketed for men” (2010: 51). De Groot identifies their key characteristics as: a sense of serial and authorial brand coherence; one central male protagonist; the narration of stories within the margins of ‘greater’ historical events as a means to reflect and explain those occurrences; and an interest in the common man (81-82).

Rubinfeld’s *The Interpretation of Murder* certainly shares these features that emerge from the gendering of the historical novel. Following its 2006 publication, Rubinfeld developed further the narrative of his debut novel in *The Death Instinct* (2010). Set in the shadow of the Wall Street bombing of 16 September, 1920, Dr Stratham Younger returns as protagonist. As in *The Interpretation of Murder*, one of the key themes of *The Death Instinct* is Younger’s struggle with his male subjectivity. After serving at the front line in the First World War, and experiencing first hand the destructive character of ‘man’, Younger returns to New York City and finds himself working once more alongside Detective James Littlemore to uncover the perpetrators of the horrific terrorist attack on Wall Street. If *The Interpretation of Murder* is Younger’s interpretation of the social construction of his masculinity, *The Death Instinct* sees Younger, this Manhattan male, engaging with the discourses that appear to be pushing him toward the deconstruction of his masculine self.

Returning to *The Interpretation of Murder*, the novel is fundamentally a work of detective fiction, a genre sharing certain characteristics of the male orientated historical novel, a point recognised by de Groot: “Historical novels and male-orientated crime fiction have many points of overlap, and the combination of historical novel and detective genre fiction more specifically has been particularly fruitful” (2010: 85). These narratives are typically led by a “scholar-historian-detective” (86), who “investigates the intrusion of chaos into a site of order” (86), as exemplified by Dr Stratham Younger probing, questioning, and forming his own interpretation of the underlying dynamics of the arrival of Freud’s new philosophies of masculinity into Manhattan. This “revelation of conspiracy and secret history” (86) is fundamental to works of historical fiction.

While clearly displaying these characteristics of male orientated crime fiction, there is a significant dissonance between the traditional mode of the male historical novel and *The Interpretation of Murder* that further emphasises the value of the text in readings of literary masculinities. De Groot argues that male historical fiction explores a certain category of masculinity: “These novels present a set of possible masculinities within a relatively conservative nationalistic narrative. Their models of heroism are largely straightforward, dutiful, resourceful, violent and homosocial” (79). In contrast, historical novels identified

³ See de Groot (2010: 78-88).

as being written primarily for females are seen as “narratives of social, personal and cultural development and crisis rather than journeys, quests or achievements” (79). Rather than contesting ‘masculinity’, the mass-market male orientated historical novel would appear to establish and reinforce traditional masculine traits. As Raewyn Connell writes, “hegemonic masculinity is naturalised in the form of the hero and presented through forms that revolve around heroes: sagas, ballads, westerns, thrillers” (1977: 185-86). *The Interpretation of Murder*, however, subverts these traditional categorisations of male and female orientated historical novels in its rigorous, engaging and ultimately clever examination of the pattern of masculine hegemony in the Manhattan of 1909. A particularly effective theoretical framework for reading the performance of the Manhattan males in Rubinfeld’s text, therefore, is Raewyn Connell’s concept of “hegemonic masculinity”.⁴

Connell’s conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity was the first to recognise the existence of various, often competing, male groups representing diverse ideas of what it means to be masculine. Connell asserts that hegemonic masculinity, in contrast to sex role theory, acknowledges that the key concepts of *power* and *change* are central in understanding relationships both *between* and *within* genders. It is this fundamental idea —that to identify fully the power relations that shape the legitimacy of patriarchy in modern Western society it is crucial to study not only the dominance of men over women but also the dominance of hegemonic masculinities over other masculinities— that underpins one of the most significant contributions to the study of the social construction of masculinity: that of Demetriou (1991), who identified a substantial simplification in Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity. Returning to the origin of the term hegemony in Gramsci’s study of class hegemony, Demetriou suggests the existence of two separate forms: “internal hegemony”, that is to say, “hegemony over subordinated masculinities”; and “external hegemony”, in other words, “hegemony over women” (2001: 341). Only by approaching the study of the discourses of power within the gender system in this dualistic manner is it possible to engage in a rigorous study of the social construction of masculinity. Carefully considering the negotiation, configuration, and reconfiguration of masculinity in *The Interpretation of Murder* through these models of internal and external hegemony allows certain patterns to emerge in terms of the performance of male behaviour.

In his writing on the historical construction of masculinity, Michael Kimmel suggests that rapid industrialization, technological development, and urbanization transformed traditional gender performances in both public and private spheres at the turn of the twentieth century. As such, Kimmel proclaims that the first significant challenge to masculine hegemony in North America took place between 1880 and 1914.⁵ The performance of Rubinfeld’s characters in *The Interpretation of Murder* is evidently driven by ambitious, ruthless, and even merciless masculine drives. Notably, Rubinfeld sets up his

⁴ Nikki Wedgwood has recently called Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity “the most influential theory in the field of men and masculinities” (2009: 329).

⁵ See Kimmel 1987.

depiction of the masculine energies that would come to define Manhattan of the modern era by making a very deliberate contrast with the discourses that defined the preceding polite society of the Gilded Age. As the narrator states, “New York society in the Gilded Age was essentially the creation of two very rich women, Mrs William B. Astor and Mrs William K. Vanderbilt, and of the titanic clash between them in the 1880s” (63). At the turn of the twentieth century, however, New York was being transformed into a city shaped by power, money, and celebrity. It was at this moment that Manhattan became the playground in which these “particular American drives” (7), or to be more specific, these masculine drives, became the controlling energies of this urban labyrinth. The narrator underlines the impact of this change: “The only comparison was with Haussmann’s transformation of Paris a half a century earlier, but in New York there was no single vision behind the scenes, no unifying plan, no disciplining authority. Capital and speculation drove everything, releasing fantastic energies, distinctly American and individualistic” (7).

This lack of control and order not only denotes the urban development of Manhattan, but is also symbolic and representative of the development of American masculinity in comparison with its European ancestry. This development can be attributed to unprecedented levels of economic wealth that western society, and in particular The United States, enjoyed in the move from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The accumulation of capital in turn stimulated the desire to control and manipulate space and shape it in the image of man. As Rubinfeld’s narrator proclaims, “the goal in New York is to out-do everything that has ever been done before” (75). Marshall Berman argues that this is the instinctive drive of modernity: “A great deal of New York’s construction and development over the past century needs to be seen as symbolic action and communication: it has been conceived and executed not merely to serve immediate economic and political needs but, at least equally important, to demonstrate to the whole world what modern men can build and how modern life can be imagined and lived” (1982: 288-289).

Throughout the novel Rubinfeld emphasises the infusion of masculine power discourses that propelled the metropolis into the twentieth century, playing upon the technological and architectural advances that underpinned the urban regeneration of Manhattan: the bridges, the motor car, the pneumatic drill, the telephone, and the underwater train, and of course the emblem of Manhattan that symbolises the masculine drive of modernity, the skyscraper: “On the ground, the implacable Manhattan grid, with its two hundred numbered east-west streets and twelve north-south avenues, gave the city a stamp of abstract rectilinear order. Above this, in the immensity of the towering structures, with their peacock-like embellishments, it was all ambition, speculation, competition, domination, even lust – for height, size, and always money” (2006: 7-8). As Rubinfeld intimates throughout *The Interpretation of Murder*, Manhattan developed through the conflicts between stability and expansion, control and desire, order and ambition. However a reader may choose to categorise *The Interpretation of Murder*, it is principally a novel about masculinity in Manhattan. A single line from the opening chapter of the novel resonates throughout: “The masculinity of it all was undeniable” (7).

The Interpretation of Murder, by consciously engaging with the complex relationship between history and literature, may be read as a work of “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon 1988: 5). Linda Hutcheon argued that this genre was not simply another variety of the historical novel, but was a paradigmatic form of writing that fulfilled the “poetics of postmodernism” (3). The question arises, therefore, of whether it is more accurate to read *The Interpretation of Murder* as a historical novel, or, in fact, a work of historiographic metafiction. Echoing the statement from Harry Brod quoted above, that the return to a specific moment in history can enable a better grasp of our contemporary understanding of the social construction of masculinity, Jerome de Groot suggests, “this conceptualising of the fictionality of the factual past has led some scholars to argue for the educational and historiographic value of writing historical stories or imagining timelines” (112).⁶ A useful way of working through this issue and, by doing so, affirming the sociological value of *The Interpretation of Murder* in our understanding of the social construction of masculinity, may be to frame its reading and its representation of masculinity in Manhattan in 1909 within the three main components of Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction.

Hutcheon sets out these three components of historiographic metafiction by comparing it to Georg Lukács’ classic definition of the historical novel. The first point that Hutcheon broaches is the protagonist of the historical novel. Hutcheon states: “Lukács felt that the historical novel could enact historical process by presenting a microcosm which generalizes and concentrates. The protagonist, therefore, should be a type, a synthesis of the general and particular, of ‘all the humanity and socially essential determinants’” (1988: 105). Hutcheon rejects this reading as overly reductive, arguing that the protagonists of historiographic metafiction are “overtly specific, individual, culturally and familiarly conditioned in [their] response to history, both public and private” (106). The male subjectivity of the protagonists of these works is complex and multifaceted, a role suitably inhabited by the protagonist of *The Interpretation of Murder*, Dr Stratham Younger.

Younger, as Rubinfeld’s flâneurial detective, is a self-reflexive, analytical agent of male subjectivity. His journey in the text is a journey of (masculine) self-discovery. Younger is also set as a pioneer. Introduced in the novel as “America’s first psychoanalyst” (2006: 11), Rubinfeld places Younger at the frontier of a new historical era in which the European philosophy of psychoanalysis would be brought into the American arena. The significance of the naming of this character as “Younger” should not be overlooked. He is being clearly set as a figurehead of a new generation of American men that would define and would be defined by new theories of masculinity that would come to transform American society. Younger sees the turn of the twentieth century as a time of great intellectual development and change and although he is speaking about the arrival of psychoanalysis, this reading takes on greater significance in terms of his reinterpretation of masculinities in Manhattan: “I felt, [we] were tracing the very edge of man’s self-knowledge, breaking

⁶ De Groot cites Ferguson (2000) and Slotkin (2005) as exemplars of scholarly work that has pointed to the educational value of historiographical writing.

ground in undiscovered country, forging uncharted paths the world would some day follow. Everything man thought he knew about himself —his dreams, his consciousness, his most secret desires— would be changed forever” (2006: 62). Rubinfeld is clearly intimating that this is a moment of great change, a moment that can be read as the starting point in the development of the modern Manhattan male. Younger’s role in the novel is pivotal; it is Younger’s reinterpretation of Freud’s most famous theory, the Oedipus complex, which illustrates the power struggles that underpin male social behaviour in Rubinfeld’s Manhattan. The metafictional pulses of *The Interpretation of Murder* emerge once more in the fact that Younger achieves his reconsideration of the Oedipus complex through re-reading a work of fiction, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Younger’s questioning of the Oedipus complex, and consequently, the performance of masculinity in society, emerges from his struggle with Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, “To be or not to be”. Traditionally this soliloquy has been interpreted as Hamlet’s lament of “to be or to die”. Younger, revisiting the play, soon argues that “not to be” can have a second meaning. “Not to be” can also mean “to seem or to act”. Younger’s re-interpretation comes from his analysing the developing performance of Hamlet. At the beginning of *Hamlet*, the young Prince of Denmark says to his mother, “Seems, madam, I know not seems” (2008: 1.2.77). And yet, after swearing revenge for his father’s murder, Hamlet enters the world of seeming: he puts on his “antic disposition” (1.5.172), that is to say, he pretends to be mad; he instructs actors in a play how to pretend in a more believable manner; he even writes a script for these actors to re-enact his father’s murder. From these examples Younger argues that Hamlet is falling into the domain of seeming, of performing. Younger sees this as a universal act. All identity is performance, all being is acting. It is how a man appears in society, how he acts in society that determines his masculine status and Younger uses the example of the psychoanalyst. Younger’s self-analysing reflections support this reading of psychoanalysis as a social performance in which the male and female participants enact roles established by patriarchal social discourse. During the act of psychoanalysing a young girl named Priscilla, Younger reveals, “‘Yes,’ I said. ‘The ring.’ This *yes* was a lie. I hoped it would make Priscilla think I already understood everything, when in reality I understood nothing” (2006: 48). Younger is fully aware that psychoanalysis can rely or even turn upon an “act of deception” (48) and admits, “I have found myself repeating the same deception, in one form or another, in every psychoanalysis I have ever attempted” (48). As he reflects, when the male psychoanalyst is treating a patient, he assumes the role of psychoanalyst. He is acting. However after leaving the office he takes on another role in society, be it father, husband, or friend. What Younger has realised at this point is that the individual is a social being shaped by discursive societal forces. As Younger ultimately concludes, “We can choose what part we play, but that’s all” (434). Younger comes to realise that the performance of the Manhattan male, especially his own everyday performance, is shaped by the complex relationship between the individual and the system. It is through the development of this complex protagonist, a student of Freud who ultimately comes to question the grand theories of “the Master,” that the main narrative thread of the novel

—the male individual’s struggle with the social discourses that maintain the pattern of hegemony in Manhattan— is played out.

3. REINTERPRETING FREUD, REINTERPRETING MASCULINITY

The second point of Hutcheon’s revision of the intentions of the contemporary historical novel addresses the issue of historiography. In Hutcheon’s estimation, Lukács contended that “the historical novel is defined by the relative unimportance of its use of detail” (1988: 106). Historiographic metafiction contests this claim in two ways: by “play[ing] upon the truth and lies of the historical novel” and highlighting “the way in which postmodern fiction actually uses detail or historical data” (106). Hutcheon argues that instead of merely incorporating historical fact to add a sense of historical verifiability, novels of historiographic metafiction put the *process* of assimilating these historical facts at the fore. This is very much the case in *The Interpretation of Murder*. Rubinfeld’s novel is built upon the fictionalization of Freud’s classic case study, ‘Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria’ (1905), or as it is more commonly known, ‘Dora.’ Rubinfeld’s historiographic metafictional treatment of Freud’s most famous case history not only critiques the scientific credentials of Freudian psychoanalysis but, even more significantly, underlines the potential of this case study to illustrate the discourses that legitimise the pattern of hegemony in society. With the narrative shaped around Freud’s arrival in Manhattan, Rubinfeld is not simply retelling what is on historical record, but is consciously probing the masculine discourses that shaped the event through Younger’s struggle with his (re) interpretation of Freud’s Oedipus complex. As Raewyn Connell proclaims, it is possible to identify psychoanalysis as “the starting point of modern thought about masculinity” (1995: 8).

Connell identifies the paradoxical position of psychoanalysis in discussions of the social construction of masculinity.⁷ While she considers Freud’s work as an important moment in the study of masculinity, she also laments how “later masculinity researchers have known little and cared less about the detail of [Freud’s] ideas” (8). There has always existed a particular tense relationship between psychoanalysis and sociology, but, despite the recent rise in the number of Freud’s critics, to dismiss Freud completely would be extremely foolish.⁸ As Simon Clarke argues, to take such a critical position “detracts from what Freud does give us in terms of interpretation, and what it might offer sociology in terms of its hermeneutic and philosophical quality” (2006: 1155). As Connell notes, the Oedipus complex “is thought by Freud to be the node of all psychosexual development, and difficulties in its resolution the roots of later neuroses” (1995: 6). And yet, as Connell argues strongly, treating Freud’s theories as socially constructed concepts shows that “the

⁷ Also see Connell 1994.

⁸ See Fish 1986; Sulloway 1991; Crews 1995; Cioffi 1998; Dufresne 2003 and 2007. For an excellent edited collection of Freud criticisms see Crews 1998.

Oedipus complex can be seen as a product of a definite historical type of the family; repression itself as no abstract consequence of human relation in general, but taking definite form and intensity in specifiable historical contexts” (10).⁹ It is this reading which brings us to the main thread of *The Interpretation of Murder*. The illustration of the Oedipus complex as a historical construct shaped by power discourses, or to be more accurate, masculine power discourses, emerges as the main narrative of the novel through Rubinfeld’s historiographic metafictional treatment of Freud’s ‘Dora’.

The murder mystery that underpins *The Interpretation of Murder* begins as Freud arrives in Manhattan in September 1909. Upon Freud’s arrival, a young girl, Elizabeth Riverford, is found bound and strangled. The next night another young girl, Nora Acton, is also found, tied to a chandelier. Luckily she has not met the same fate as Miss Riverford. Nora, suffering from aphonia and amnesia, is treated by Dr Stratham Younger. As Younger engages in the act of psychoanalysing Nora she appears to have symptoms consistent with Freud’s most famous theory: the Oedipus complex. What Rubinfeld is doing, therefore, in his historiographic metafictional treatment of this moment in Manhattan is playing upon Freud’s ‘Dora’.

‘Dora’ was composed by Freud to substantiate his earlier work on ‘hysteria’, itself a loaded term with regards to gender politics.¹⁰ Freud saw the case study as a practical application of the theories that he had developed in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). His patient was Ida Bauer, an eighteen-year-old girl to whom Freud gave the pseudonym Dora in order to protect her identity. Dora came from a typical upper-middle class Viennese family composed of the classic bourgeois configuration of father, mother, son, and daughter. At the time Dora was suffering from symptoms of dyspnoea (difficulty breathing, hysterical choking), aphonia (loss of voice), fainting, depression, and had even threatened suicide. The focus of Freud’s analysis was the construction of the sexual aetiology of Dora’s hysterical symptoms. Freud believed that the trigger for these symptoms was the unwanted sexual advances made by Herr K., a friend of Dora’s family; the repressed sexual feelings that Dora harboured for her father; and the (unacknowledged) homosexual feelings Dora felt toward Herr K.’s wife, Frau K., who was having an affair with Dora’s father, a relationship Freud believed Dora to be jealous of.

Rubinfeld’s fictionalised version of the Dora case study maintains a number of these vital details: the patient is a young girl named Nora, also 18 years old. Nora is from an

⁹ Although Freud did not set out to do research on gender, Connell identifies an undercurrent of thought on ideas of masculinity. She notes three key moments in the evolution of Freud’s ideas on masculinity: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and its introduction of the Oedipus complex; *The Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) with its general theme of adult sexuality as a constructed, complex, and conflict-ridden process; and third, Freud’s ‘Wolf Man’ study and its focus on pre-Oedipal masculinity, which Connell argues “produced the first really detailed map of the contradictions and fissures within an adult man’s personality” (1994: 14).

¹⁰ ‘Hysteria’ itself is a loaded term in relation to gender politics. At that time, hysteria was attributed to various psychological maladies to which no somatic cause could be determined. Notably ‘hysteria’ comes from the Greek word for uterus and the condition was associated mainly with women.

upper-middle class family who live in Manhattan. And after her vicious attack, she is also suffering from aphonia and amnesia. As Younger psychoanalyses Nora, her narrative mirrors that of the classic Dora case: Nora was propositioned twice at the ages of fourteen and sixteen by a family friend, Mr George Banwell. Younger, in consultation with Freud, initially believes that Nora harbours sexual feelings for George Banwell as well as Oedipal desires toward her father. Her aphonia, in the psychoanalysts' estimation, is a physiological reaction to the jealousy she feels after witnessing Clara Banwell fellating her father in their home library. What Rubinfeld's narrative does, however, is to underline the masculine power discourses that underpin the performance of these male figures in the novel.

Rubinfeld dramatizes these power discourses in the main narrative of *The Interpretation of Murder*. As Nora tells Younger, after her traumatic encounter with Mr Banwell, she turned to her father for help. However to Nora's despair, "he acted as if I were the wrongdoer" (151). Nora reports that her father confronted Banwell but Banwell, mirroring her father, "maintained that I had drawn the wicked inference myself, because of – because of the kind of books I read. My father chose to believe Mr Banwell. I hate him" (151). Rubinfeld's Freud reaches a typical conclusion to account for Nora's hatred toward her father. Despite Nora being only fourteen at the time, Freud concludes: "you imagine Mr Banwell thrusting himself on an unwilling and innocent victim. But perhaps it was she who seduced him: a handsome man, her father's best friend. The conquest would have appealed to a girl her age; it would likely have inspired jealousy in her father" (163). The sexualisation of the young female patient is maintained by Younger, who states repeatedly, "you are not to blame, Miss Acton" (150). When Nora reveals that Mr Banwell proposed that she have sex with him, instead of expressing concern for Nora, Younger suggests that Nora should not feel "shame" (151). In a later session in which they discuss Nora seeing her father and Mrs Banwell in the library, Younger assures Nora once more, "you have nothing to be ashamed of, Miss Acton" (202). There is a clear message here: the girl should admit her sexual desires, accept the fact that she has led the male to believe that she wants to have sex with him, and finally submit herself to the male's sexual advances. What Rubinfeld is doing here is transposing one of the main issues in Freud's case study into the social arena of Manhattan, clearly displaying the power politics that define the pattern of external hegemony in Manhattan. As Crews argues, Dora was at the mercy of the "two predatory males . . . who basked in the glory of Freud's unwavering respect" (1995: 52). This gender bias, Crews argues, goes beyond the microcosmic setting of the psychoanalyst's office and resonates in its reflection of the macrocosmic condition of the legitimisation of patriarchy in wider society. Whereas Freud's Oedipus complex appears to explain the impact of repressed sexual desires in the performance of these Manhattan males, fictionalising the Dora case study allows Rubinfeld to highlight the institutionalisation of these distorted sexual discourses in the legitimacy of patriarchy in the hegemonic framework in Manhattan. As these powerful men jockey for position within the Manhattan hierarchy, and deal with the challenge to their established hegemonic status, one Manhattan male emerges as the dominant figure above the others:

George Banwell. Central to Banwell's aggressive, ambitious and tyrannical masculinity is the performance of his sexuality in relation to two central female characters in the novel, Nora Acton and his wife, Clara. One of the fundamental elements of traditional hegemonic masculinity is the objectification and exploitation of women in sexual acts underpinned by power. A hegemonic male figure in the public sphere, Banwell's sexual acts with his wife Clara and his obsession with Nora perfectly illustrate that the paradigms of power and sexuality that underpin Freud's conceptualisation of the Oedipus complex also permeate the discourses in wider society.

4. MASCULINITIES IN MANHATTAN

Linda Hutcheon, in her third and final point on the qualities of the historiographic metafictional novel, focuses on the employment of historical figures. She argues, "Lukács' third major defining characteristic of the historical novel is its relegation of historical personages to secondary roles" (1988: 106), with these figures becoming ontological sleights of hand that exist merely to authenticate the fictional world by their presence. Conversely, Hutcheon argues that in works of historiographic metafiction these historical figures are not only questioned, but aid in the questioning of the knowability of the past. To build upon this, if we consider how Rubinfeld uses the historical figures in the novel, it is clear that they are not only employed to give the novel a sense of historical authenticity, but also serve a (self-reflexive) critical function.¹¹ Rubinfeld does more than simply retell a key moment in the history of the development of the Manhattan male —as a writer of fiction he is looking past the restrictive nature of historical fact to probe the underlying processes that influenced the performance of these men in Manhattan. What Rubinfeld does remarkably well is to intertwine the narratives of historical and fictional Manhattan males to present a critically engaging examination of the discourses of hegemony in that setting.

The attitudes and actions of the fictional Manhattan hegemonic males are corroborated through Rubinfeld's employment of historical hegemonic male figures in Manhattan. As well as the group of psychoanalysts, Freud, Jung and Brill, playing a key role in the novel, there are a small group of other historical Manhattan males lending support to Rubinfeld's critical analysis of the social construction of masculinity in this historical era: the New York Triumvirate. The Triumvirate are Charles Loomis Dana, Bernard Sachs, and M. Allen Starr, and these men are presented in the text as "the three most powerful neurologists in the country who owed their extraordinary prestige and power to an impressive combination of accomplishment, pedigree, and money" (496). Similar to Banwell, these men obsess over the various manifestations of power that underpin their

¹¹ As Rubinfeld has stated, "about 90% of the dialogue that Freud and Jung speak is taken from actual books, essays, letters that they wrote. I dug through thousands of newspaper articles from the time period, and lots of books, so that I would make New York City of 1909 as real as I could possibly make it" (<<http://www.Youtube.com>>).

hegemonic status. They are members of what Brill calls “a secret society” (498), a club that is “one of the most exclusive in the city” (498). Their position within the masculine hegemonic framework is played out in their manipulation of financial, political, social, and sexual power. The weaving of this group into the narrative has an important symbolic significance in terms of the challenges and reactions of psychoanalysis, both as a clinical practice, and as a philosophical theory, to established American masculinity.

The Triumvirate were greatly opposed to the arrival of Freud and psychoanalysis in 1909. As Younger explains in one of his reflective set-pieces in the novel: “They belong to the somatic school,” said Younger. “They believe that all nervous diseases result from neurological malfunction, not psychological causes. They don’t believe in childhood trauma; they don’t believe sexual repression causes mental illness. Psychoanalysis is anathema for them. They call it a cult” (497). Historically, there was no plot to derail Freud’s appearance at Clark University during his visit to the United States. Rubinfeld, however, plays upon the tensions that would have certainly underpinned his visit and its challenge to the Triumvirate’s power and influence in Manhattan. Their attempts to stifle the arrival and reception of psychoanalysis illustrate the pivotal role of “secondary” historical figures in the novel as they negotiate their position within the hierarchical framework in Rubinfeld’s Manhattan.

Other historical figures play key roles in the novel to authenticate the impact of these sexual drives. A celebrity of the time in Manhattan was Harry K. Thaw.¹² Thaw’s infamy was based on his murder of the renowned architect Stanford White on the rooftop of Madison Square Garden in 1906. There was a clear motive for the murder: many years before White had bedded Thaw’s wife when she was a sixteen-year-old showgirl. Thaw, however, was acquitted of the murder by a jury on the grounds of insanity. Thaw, despite being a secondary character in *The Interpretation of Murder*, is employed to validate that fact that the distorted dynamics of male sexuality that are explored through various fictional characters, namely George Banwell, are not mere fictional imaginings but have historical grounding. Throughout the narrative Thaw carries out sadistic attacks on his wife Evelyn Nesbit and many “young ladies” (2006: 266) working as prostitutes; the severity of these attacks revealed in transcripts from Harry K. Thaw’s trial that are discovered in a key moment by Detective Littlemore and Betty Longobardi.¹³

The significance of sexual violence is evident in the manner in which these distorted ideas of the social performance of masculinity permeate all the narrative threads of *The Interpretation of Murder*. As well as the attacks on Nora, George Banwell’s relationship

¹² Harry K. Thaw is a prominent figure in E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1974). Doctorow’s novel, set in the period between 1902 and 1914, is a work of historical fiction that dramatises the move into the modern era. Thaw features in chapter six, before reappearing in the final chapter of the novel. Rather than being a piece of historiographic metafiction, Doctorow’s novel is a more traditional model of the historical novel, engaging with various historical figures of the age, namely Freud and Thaw.

¹³ The transcripts in the novel are taken directly from the original transcripts of the Harry K. Thaw trial in 1906. For further information see Linder (2011).

with Clara, and Harry K. Thaw's attacks on his wife and the young prostitutes, the subplots involving the New York Triumvirate and Smith Ely Jelliffe also demonstrate the Manhattan male's treatment of women. We learn that for Jelliffe "girls were his specialty" and "he knew all the best gentlemen's establishments" (371). The Chinese men Chong Sing and William Leon are also involved in Banwell's cover-up of the attacks on Nora. Ultimately, Rubinfeld demonstrates that this legitimisation of sexual violence that maintains the established framework of external hegemony transcends class, race, or religion. Connell offers a valid reasoning for this element in the social organization of masculinity. She states: "Violence is part of a system of domination, but is at the same time a measure of its imperfection. A thoroughly legitimate hierarchy would have less need to intimidate. The scale of contemporary violence points to crisis tendencies (to borrow a term from Jürgen Habermas) in the modern gender order" (1995: 84).

Although Connell is speaking about violence as an intrinsic element of external hegemony in a contemporary setting, it is applicable to the particular historical era in *The Interpretation of Murder*. The acts of (sexual) violence in the performance of masculinity in Rubinfeld's Manhattan can be explained as possible reactions to challenges in the established gender order. These "crisis tendencies", as Connell explains, are not necessarily crises of masculinity, but are changes in the configuration of practice within a system of gender relations. Whereas Freud's Oedipus complex appears to explain the impact of repressed sexual desires in the performance of these Manhattan males, fictionalising the Dora case study allows Rubinfeld to highlight the institutionalization of these distorted sexual discourses in the legitimacy of patriarchy in the external hegemonic framework in Manhattan. While the psychoanalysts in the novel initially believe that Nora's problems relate to the jealousy that she feels toward Clara because of the sexual feelings Nora is harbouring for her own father, it is Younger, in his role of flâneurial sociologist, who finally recognises that Nora's performance is not due to repressed sexual desires, but is a result of the manipulation of Nora by George Banwell's wife, Clara. While Freud believes that Nora is in love with Clara, Younger comes to realise that it is actually Clara's jealousy of Nora, a jealousy that is formed by the repressive nature of the societal framework in Manhattan, and the control that Nora appears to have, in Clara's view, over the male figures in her life, that is ultimately the key to solving the murder mystery in Manhattan. As our urban detective, Younger, realises, there was no Elizabeth Riverford; it was Nora playing a role directed by Clara Banwell in her master plan to frame the novel's Manhattan man, her husband, George Banwell.

The final message of the sociological value of this re-reading of this historical moment in the development of masculinity in Manhattan is freighted powerfully in Freud's final warning to Younger as he leaves the New World: "'This country of yours: I am suspicious of it. Be careful. It brings out the worst in people —crudeness, ambition, savagery. There is too much money. I see the prudery for which your country is famous, but it is brittle. It will shatter in the whirlwind of gratification being called forth. America, I fear, is a mistake. A gigantic mistake, to be sure, but still a mistake'" (515).

As Rubinfeld's narrative illustrates, the configuration of practice of these masculine groups appears to work toward strengthening the pattern of hegemony in Manhattan. But it is how Rubinfeld achieves this critical investigation that is of the utmost importance; he does so by employing the protagonist of the novel, Dr Stratham Younger, as the *flâneur* who observes, reflects, and critiques these new theories of psychoanalysis to offer a counter-hegemonic reinterpretation of the social construction of masculinity in Manhattan. As Younger's sociological investigations conclude, Freud had held the mirror up to nature but what he had seen was a mirror image of reality. Rather than the performance of these Manhattan males being driven by the repressed sexual drives as Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex appeared to illustrate, Younger's realisation of masculinity as a social and historical construction emphasises the role of power in the production and reproduction of masculinity. If reaching a hegemonic position in society is the ultimate goal of the male individual, then the control and manipulation of these power discourses is of utmost importance. As such, Rubinfeld's engagement with this moment in the history of the Manhattan male cleverly posits the Oedipus complex as an indicator of the socially shaped aim of the hegemonic group to oppress any possible challenge to the pattern of hegemony. As Younger argues in his reinterpretation of the Oedipus Complex:

It's the father, not the son. Yes, when a little boy enters the scene with his mother and father, one party in this trio tends to suffer a profound jealousy – the father. He may naturally feel that the boy intrudes on his special, exclusive relationship with his wife. He may well half want to be rid of the suckling, puling intruder, whom the mother proclaims to be so perfect. He might even wish him dead. (468)

Taking this analogy to its logical conclusion, what Rubinfeld ultimately achieves with this novel is to make visible the power discourses that have shaped the performance of masculinity.¹⁴ Rubinfeld's critical investigation into the sexual aetiology of the Oedipus complex teases out the sociological value of Freud's theory. *The Interpretation of Murder* clearly displays the self-reflexive, subversive and contrary tendencies of the "poetics of postmodernism" to question the discourses of fiction and history, and, in doing so, problematises the discourses that have come to shape the social construction of masculinity in Manhattan.

In answer, finally, to James Wood's dismissal of contemporary historical fiction as texts produced in "oldfangled laboratories" by "genre gardeners" and "conservative populists", it is evident that the historical novel is far from being what Wood continues to see as "a somewhat gimcrack genre not exactly jammed with greatness" (2012: n.p.). More accurately the contemporary historical novel, through a historiographic metafictional lens, persists as a method of revisiting and reinterpreting key historical events in order to critique the discourses that have shaped, and continue to shape, masculinity in contemporary society.

¹⁴ This is a reference to Kimmel's still relevant argument of the invisibility of masculinity (Kimmel 1993).

There may be a commercial market for historical fiction but this does not make the genre any less literary. The historical novel continues to maintain its mass-market appeal while engaging with sociological discourse, with *The Interpretation of Murder* critically analysing masculinity as an intricate, complex, and multi-faceted social construction.

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