

SUNSET PARK AND THE (DE)CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE GREAT RECESSION

SUNSET PARK Y LA (DE)CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA MASCULINIDAD EN EL CONTEXTO DE LA GRAN RECESIÓN

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Reception march 06 2025 Revised version accepted april 15 2026

How to cite Čizmar, Stefan. "Sunset Park and the (de)construction of masculinity in the context of the Great Recession" *The Grove. Working Papers on English Studies*, vol. 33, 2026, e9541. <https://doi.org/10.17561/grove.v33.9541>

ABSTRACT

Economic crises have the potential to dramatically reconfigure hitherto firmly-held beliefs, norms, and dogmas. This includes gender norms as well, since they always depend on the current economic configuration and typically change with it. Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* explores the lives of four young people during the Great Recession and their ways of coping with it. The novel provides an excellent opportunity for an exploration of how gender norms fluctuate with the economy. In particular, this paper analyses the impact of the crisis on masculinity, as showcased by Miles Heller and Bing Nathan, the two main male characters. The central issue in the paper is the extent to which they manage to subvert and reshape masculinity and provide positive models for identification, as well as to what extent this is deliberate. The paper also analyses the intertext with *The Great Gatsby* and *The Best Years of Our Lives* to explore how these references help examine the masculinity portrayed in *Sunset Park*.

Keywords: Paul Auster, *Sunset Park*, masculinity, crisis, the Great Recession, intertextuality.

RESUMEN

Las crisis económicas tienen el potencial de reconfigurar drásticamente creencias, normas y dogmas previamente arraigados. Esto incluye también las normas de género, ya que siempre dependen de la configuración económica vigente y suelen cambiar con ella. *Sunset Park*, de Paul Auster, explora las vidas de cuatro jóvenes durante la Gran Recesión y sus formas de afrontarla. La novela ofrece una excelente oportunidad para examinar cómo las normas de género fluctúan con la economía. En particular, este artículo analiza el impacto de la crisis

en la masculinidad, tal como se refleja en Miles Heller y Bing Nathan, los dos personajes masculinos principales. La cuestión central del artículo es hasta qué punto logran subvertir y remodelar la masculinidad y ofrecer modelos positivos de identificación, así como en qué medida esto es deliberado. Además, el artículo analiza la intertextualidad con *El gran Gatsby* y *Los mejores años de nuestra vida* para explorar cómo estas referencias contribuyen al examen de la masculinidad representada en *Sunset Park*.

Palabras clave: Paul Auster, *Sunset Park*, masculinidad, crisis, Gran Recesión, intertextualidad.

1. Introduction

Even though men and male experiences dominate the narratives of much Anglophone fiction, the representation of masculinity therein represents a paradox, in the sense that men are not often thematised *as men*, and masculinity is rarely explicitly foregrounded in the narrative. As Kenneth MacKinnon notes, “for a time, at least, masculinity and one of its traditional components, male heterosexuality, escaped notice, and could continue to pose as the natural norm” (ix). Some male authors, such as Chuck Palahniuk, Irvine Welsh, or Brett Easton Ellis break away from this norm, writing narratives that tackle masculinity as their main subjects: for example: *Fight Club* (1996), *Filth* (1998), or *American Psycho* (1991). However, male-authored texts typically deal with the topic of masculinity and gender, in general, obliquely, rather than directly. In other words, the topic of masculinity typically hides just underneath the surface and is often tied to the overarching theme of a given work, implicit in characterisation, as well as the overall depiction of society and culture. Paul Auster arguably falls into this category of writers. While his novels typically focus on male characters, they’re often not about masculinity *per se*. However, much can be said about masculinity in his novels after a slightly deeper look into them, and they can illuminate certain problems in contemporary masculinity. *Sunset Park* is one such novel. While it primarily focalises the consequences of the Great Recession in 2007–2008, its focus on male characters and their attempts to navigate the dilapidation caused by the recession allows a critical insight into how masculinity was reconfigured, not only during that period, but also in crises in general.

Caused by the “boom and bust” (Taylor 5) of the housing market, the Great Recession led to a significant fall in the GDP, and a sharp rise in unemployment, while foreclosures left many destitute, from which the USA did not fully recover until 2016. The Great Recession is the backdrop to Paul Auster’s 2010 novel *Sunset Park*. The novel centres on Miles Heller, a college dropout and an “itinerant trash-out worker” (Cuenca 199), who moves into a squat in the Sunset Park neighbourhood after spending years away from his family, fuelled by the grief of inadvertently

contributing to his step-brother's death. The squat is run by Bing Nathan, a "modern-day Thoreau" (Bolaño Quintero 178), who sees squatting as a genuine act of resistance and as an attempt to avoid the effects of the crisis. The other two squatters are Alice Bergstrom, a struggling PhD student, employed at PEN, and Ellen Brice, a struggling artist and real estate agent, both of whom squat out of necessity, and not as an act of rebellion. *Sunset Park* "depicts ideas of decline, eclipse, downfall, ending, and stagnation with such intensity that it clearly propagates the myth of decadence" (Šesnić 51), as well as the characters' ways of coping with the decline, eclipse, downfall, ending, and stagnation. What is of special interest in the novel is the particularly male strategies of coping with the crisis and the (re)thinking and (de)constructing of masculinity during a crisis period that did not leave much room for performing traditional hegemonic masculinity, which was also stricter than earlier, and which hardly allowed any other modes of identification for men, as discussed in the following section. This paper will look into how *Sunset Park* examines and deconstructs masculinity in the context of the Great Recession, how the male characters, specifically, Miles and Bing, relate to their masculinity in this context, whether or not the crisis provides a pretext for creating a more positive masculinity, and, finally, how the novel uses intertextuality to discuss these topics. The central thesis in the paper is that, while the crisis has rendered some aspects of hegemonic masculinity obsolete, it has not led to a thorough reconfiguration thereof, while at the same time allowing other masculine norms to thrive, albeit in a somewhat changed setting.

2. Masculinity and Capitalist Crisis

Goffman writes that "there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and recent record in sports" (Goffman 128). It is perhaps redundant to say that very few individuals would live up to this ideal of masculinity. After all, real, living men are not merely male bodies onto which an ideology of gender could be effortlessly projected and which could operate exclusively according to the tenets of the ideology. There is a myriad of environmental, social, and psychological factors which could cause one to stray from the ideal outlined by Goffman. However, this ideal has, arguably, persisted for a long time, with certain variations and adjustments, and has largely managed to survive into the twenty-first century. This does not mean that there are no competing ideals of masculinity and that this ideal is not evolving to fit contemporary social, economic, and ideological changes, but the association of masculinity with physical strength, fatherhood, relative youth, economic success, as well as belonging to the dominant

ethnic group and the bourgeois class, is still prevalent. Despite the progressive changes in gender relations in the last several decades, this view of masculinity has remained the “hegemonic masculinity”, in the sense of the “successful way of ‘being a man’ in particular places at a specific time” (Beynon 16). This should not be particularly surprising. Hegemonic masculinity is contingent on the capitalist economic structure and the bourgeois family; so long as they both exist, so will a masculinity based on dominance and economic success, in one shape or another. In addition, many men will deliberately strive to acquire or hold on to the positions of power afforded by such social relations and the ideology of masculinity.

Moreover, it can be argued that late capitalism has strengthened and cemented this view of masculinity, especially in the West. This is particularly obvious across class lines. Industrial capitalism gave rise to a specific type of working-class masculinity, which celebrated “physical strength, male camaraderie, and trade union solidarity” (Beynon 16), as well as taking pride in one’s work and taking up the position of the breadwinner whose labour could support an entire family. While this ideology of masculinity can be seen as problematic in multiple ways, especially due to its *machismo*, acceptance of violence, and its turning workplaces into “homosocial” (Sedgwick 1) places that excluded women, it nevertheless provided a model of identification for working-class men which they could live up to and make sense of their place in the world. Additionally, the emphasis on trade unionism and solidarity could potentially provide a space for the dissemination of radical ideas, thus allowing a potential for social transformation, which could also include gender relations. However, the neoliberal policies implemented in the past several decades almost completely dismantled working-class masculinity, as most production moved overseas, to third-world countries, leaving many working-class men unemployed, unable to feed their families, and having to take up jobs that did not provide a source of working-class masculine pride. This process is further emphasised today, in the twenty-first century, where the few industrial jobs left in the West are mostly automated and do not rely on bodily strength, and the majority of the other jobs are in the service sector. In addition to that, neoliberal ideology has placed a great emphasis on individualism, so this shift has also greatly impacted individual consciousness, eroding the potential for collective action and transformation. These shifts in the structure of capitalism have made the hegemonic, bourgeois masculinity outlined above the only acceptable way of “doing masculinit[y]” (Morgan 47), particularly in urban areas, and especially for young men.

The aforementioned changes point towards Marx and Engels’ notion that the “ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (67), in the sense that the dominant ideology always emanates from the ruling class, their ways of seeing the world, and their economic needs, even though this process is typically spontaneous

and unconscious. This also includes gender, since it is “an ideology people use in modern societies to imagine the existence of differences between men and women on the basis of their sex where in fact there are none, and whose existence they at other times deny” (MacInnes 1). Therefore, gender norms will always stem from, or at least be influenced by, the gender norms of the ruling class. This was true even for industrial capitalism, for example, where the ideal of the man as the breadwinner and head of the family that was central to working-class masculinity was a thoroughly bourgeois idea; only, it had a different manifestation in working-class families. This process has led to the creation of a generation of young men who can only strive to become wealthy, physically strong, and sexually successful if they wish to do masculinity right, but are unable to do so because the economic base of late capitalism simply keeps the means of doing so out of their hands, which leaves many disaffected and pushes them towards reactionary politics and the toxic modes of masculinity that come along with it. As Beynon (80) states, “the male gender script has been widened for girls, it has remained too constricted for boys”, or even more accurately, the gender script for men has become even more constricted. Even though more men take part in housework and childcare, the overall ideology of masculinity has not changed fundamentally.

However, the persistence of hegemonic masculinity is always contingent on economic stability and upturns, as most of its tenets depend on wielding a degree of economic power. The role of the breadwinner is impossible to play if one’s salary is not large enough to support a family. If the economy is suffering a downturn, it is increasingly difficult to achieve success and present oneself as a man who is successful in business, wields economic power, and can afford status symbols that emphasise his masculinity. Moreover, as the economic base changes, so does masculinity in general, even if some of its core tenets remain the same. That is why there is often talk of a crisis of masculinity, which can be said to be “constitutive of masculinity itself” (Beynon 76). On the other hand, Connell states that “we cannot logically speak of the crisis of a configuration; rather, we might speak of its disruption or its transformation” (84), while MacInnes claims that “masculinity has always been in one crisis or another” (11). The disruption and transformation that Connell speaks of can and do cause crises of the configuration, and both processes can happen concurrently and dialectically. Economic and social changes can disrupt the configuration of hegemonic masculinity. This can further cause transformations that can trigger different reactions, plunging the whole configuration into a crisis. On the other hand, there can be purely ideological transformations brought about by people rethinking the dominant ideology, which cause disruptions and thus push masculinity into crises. Since social structures tend not to be particularly static, neither is masculinity. This leaves it in a state of perpetual crisis, which means that it is an inherent part of masculinity, especially the hegemonic kind. However, this crisis does

not exclusively play out in the field of ideology. There is also what Beynon calls “men-in-crisis” (76), real men whose lives and livelihoods are shaken by capitalist crises and the changes brought by its development. There is another dialectical relationship at play here. Men’s lives are directly impacted by crises and shifts in capitalism, which changes both how they live and how they relate to themselves and their masculinities, while, at the same time, these crises and shifts directly influence the ideology of masculinity, which can further have an impact on how men relate to themselves, each other, and masculinity.

Sunset Park offers an image of both masculinity in crisis and men-in-crisis, as the Great Recession impacted masculinity as an ideology, and also the men suffering through the crisis. It can be argued that the text shows how the economic crisis exposed the instability of hegemonic masculinity, leading the male characters to break with some of its norms. However, they ultimately fail to fully distance themselves from these norms, and the text arguably fails to offer viable alternatives to hegemonic masculinity, in the sense of transforming masculinity into a less rigid and more egalitarian ideology. The following section examines this issue in detail.

3. *Sunset Park*

The very opening of the novel provides a rather bleak account of the situation in the midst of the Great Recession, as Auster describes desolate houses, whose owners were forced to abandon them after foreclosures. Miles is part of a trashing-out team whose job is to clear out the houses before they can be repaired and shown to potential buyers. While his coworkers practically loot these houses, stripping them of whatever valuables are left, Miles has taken to photographing the houses and the rubble of the economic crisis in them, the “innumerable cast-off things left behind the departed families” (Auster 3). The descriptions of the houses point not just to an economic crisis, but also to a great personal tragedy; the number of valuables and personal things left behind implies that people were practically forcefully driven from their homes, as if they were victims of a war or a similar catastrophic event. Auster’s further descriptions cement the dreary junkyard-like picture of the foreclosed homes, which can be said to represent America as a whole, establishing the theme of “America’s loss of innocence and the end of the nation’s myth of invulnerability” (Simonetti 17). “The absent people have all fled in haste, in shame, in confusion . . . Each house is a story of failure—of bankruptcy and default, of debt and foreclosure—and he [Miles] has taken it upon himself to document the last, lingering traces of those scattered lives” (Auster 3). The crisis has obviously had a significant impact on Miles, as it has pushed him away from the typical goal of the acquisition of wealth and power, and towards an ascetic existence, in which he is dedicated to emotion-based pursuits, exemplified by his

photographs. They represent “a need to connect with other people in an increasingly solipsistic society” (Bolaño Quintero 176), which seems to be a pressing matter for all the characters in the novel, who suffer not just from the material consequences of the economic crisis, but also from emotional and psychological ones, as they all have broken relationships and stifled communication with everyone around them. There are various strategies for coping with this; Miles has his photographs, Bing attempts to form a commune, Alice helps writers at PEN, and Ellen attempts to communicate by taking nude drawings of Bing.

The material and psychological consequences of the crisis have also greatly impacted how Miles and Bing relate to hegemonic masculinity. In other words, the novel does not really abound with images of hegemonic masculinity; rather, these two male characters in many ways represent a break with hegemonic masculinity. Neither seeks power, business success, or domination, nor is either of them endowed with sexual prowess and physical strength. Instead, both choose “voluntary simplicity” (Buell 654), downward mobility, and actively seek to escape the structures of power and dominance of mainstream society, which implies an attempt to deconstruct masculinity and create more positive models of identification for men. As Cuenca writes, “Auster’s text testifies to the hope that the economic crisis will result in a resurgence of ethical values that will, among other things, be liberating in terms of constricting gender roles” (203). There is a great deal of truth to this. Crises tend to reconfigure social relations, including gender norms, since existing norms become untenable, which also causes a general rethinking of the social order and acceptance of changes. An example of this is how both world wars led to a greater inclusion of women in the workforce, which led to a loosening of the strict gender roles. A broader example is that economic crises tend to render the traditional male breadwinner role impossible to perform, leading to greater equality within the household. The Great Recession, exemplified in the novel, could have led to a similar transformation. Moreover, the squat where Bing, Miles, Alice, and Ellen live can be seen as an egalitarian space that figures as an alternative to the traditional nuclear family and the strict gender norms that come with it, as everybody takes turns to cook, clean, and get groceries, regardless of their sex. Thus, Cuenca expresses the hope that “Miles does not only reverse the historically preeminent model of male success, but also represents an alternative to the contemporary shaping of successful masculinities” (200).

However, implying that Miles is strictly a positive male role model, in that he embodies a shift towards a more egalitarian and less rigid masculinity, requires a great deal of glancing over many aspects of his character, especially pertaining to his reason for (seemingly) living outside the norms of traditional masculinity, as well as his relationship with Pilar. The same can be said of Bing, who, despite his Thoreauvian activist performance, embodies many negative traits often associated

with masculinity, especially when it comes to the masculinity of the poor and disenfranchised. Furthermore, it is questionable to what extent downward mobility and the associated rejection of male gender roles are a deliberate act of protest for them, particularly for Miles. While Miles does seemingly choose to live such an ascetic life, “par[ing] down his desires to what is now approaching a bare minimum” (Auster 6), and he definitely does possess a softer sensibility exemplified in his photographing, unlike his male colleagues who prefer to take advantage of the situation, there is nothing to suggest that these choices were inspired by a desire for deconstructing gender norms. Rather, it can be said that his voluntary simplicity is a result of his grief over the death of his stepbrother, and a way of coping with it by self-denial as a means of punishment or purification. As Mark Ford states, “Auster’s characters are also prone to pursuing illumination through the rituals of self-denial. Like Thoreau, ‘by accident’ they find themselves declaring independence and embracing the austere *via negativa* of the American hermit” (Ford 210). Miles’ lifestyle is more likely to be another instance of a ritual of self-denial, even if he is not a complete hermit. On the other hand, Bing’s lifestyle choice might be more honest, in the sense that he seeks to create an alternative to the mainstream and sees the squat as an attempt to reclaim freedom and protest mainstream, capitalist society. He is, after all “described as a modern day [*sic!*] Thoreau with ideas directly extracted from ‘Resistance to Civil Government’” (Bolaño Quintero 178), or in Auster’s words:

He is the warrior of outrage, the champion of discontent, the militant debunker of contemporary life who dreams of forging a new reality from the ruins of a failed world. Unlike most contrarians of his ilk, he does not believe in political action. He belongs to no movement or party, has never once spoken out in public, and has no desire to lead angry hordes into the streets to burn down buildings and topple governments. It is a purely personal position, but if he lives his life according to the principles he has established for himself, he feels certain that others will follow his example. (Auster 71)

Even though in Bolaño Quintero’s view, Bing’s squatting is “a need, resulting from the economic situation” (Bolaño Quintero 181), it can be seen that it is primarily a political act, and Bing might just be the only squatter who actually believes in what they are doing and sees it as an act of resistance. However, this view of Bing as a revolutionary is swiftly undercut by Auster’s clear description of him as a rather unsavoury character.

He was the fat boy who never had a girlfriend in school, the bumbling naïf who didn’t lose his virginity until he was twenty, the jazz drummer who had never picked up a stranger in a club, the dumbbell who bought blow jobs from hookers when he was feeling desperate, the sex-starved moron who jerked off to pornography in the darkness of his bedroom. He knew nothing about women. He had less experience with women than most adolescent boys. He had dreamed of

women, he had chased after women, he had declared his love to women, but again and again he had been rebuffed. (Auster 85)

While this description firmly positions Bing as somebody who does not live up to the standards of hegemonic masculinity, as in “a belief in an innate difference between instrumental, violent men and expressive nurturant women” (MacInnes 14) and somebody who does live outside its norms, he can hardly be seen as a model for other men. Rather, it can be said that he is simply unsuccessful at performing hegemonic masculinity, which causes him to seek out alternatives, but the alternative he finds does not fully separate him from the prescriptions of hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, the Thoreauvian enterprise of abandoning society and living a life based on ruggedness, self-reliance, and physical and mental fortitude can be seen as a thoroughly masculine project, since the values it is based on are traditionally masculine ones (Craib 724), even if this lifestyle differs from hegemonic masculinity in that it does not emphasise economic success and being a breadwinner. It is also important to note the difference between male and female narratives of downward mobility. While male characters in these narratives often freely choose downward mobility, for female characters, it “is altogether involuntary” (Buell 658), and they tend to have the goal of escaping downward mobility and returning to a more well-off life. The same is true for Alice and Ellen. While they technically moved into the squat voluntarily, their choice to do so was forced due to both of them being unable to pay rent, as a result of the Great Recession, and they plan to move out of the squat and into conventional housing. Therefore, while Bing lives largely outside the confines of hegemonic masculinity, this is not a deliberate action of protest against it, rather, it is largely a product of being unable to live up to it, even if the squat can be seen as a genuine attempt to rebel against capitalism.

To go back to the character of Miles, it is important to note that he is a more nuanced character than could be gleaned from Cuenca’s statement that he “represents an alternative to the contemporary shaping of successful masculinities” (Cuenca 200). There is some truth to this statement, particularly because of his “attempt to escape the negotiation with consumerism that middle-class masculinity entails” (Cuenca 202). Miles’ rejection of masculinity based on consumerism and economic success is particularly striking in the context of his class origins. He comes from a bourgeois family headed by his father, Morris. Despite not being overtly hypermasculine, as he treats his wife and family with care and respect, Morris can still be seen as an example of relatively successful hegemonic masculinity, as he is a prosperous business owner, running a publishing company and thus wielding authority over a group of subordinates. While his company is facing problems due to the Great Recession, he does not fall into despondency like the younger male characters. Instead, he strives to find ways of keeping his business afloat and preventing layoffs, in an exemplary

performance of stereotypically masculine level-headedness and business acumen. Morris is in this regard similar to Miles' stepfather, Simon Korngold, who is also trying to weather the storm in a display of steadfastness, "scrambling to make small, worthwhile films in a world of mega-junk, just as his [Miles'] father was scrambling to publish worthwhile books in a world of fads and weightless ephemera" (Auster 67). There is an obvious difference in coping mechanisms between the two generations of men in the novel, while the older generation seems to be more in line with hegemonic masculinity.

That being said, it is important to note that Miles' behaviour is still closely tied to the norms of hegemonic masculinity, despite his rejection of some of them, which calls into question Cuenca's statement cited above. This is perhaps best seen in his relationship with Pilar. The representation of this relationship is problematic from the start, since the age gap between the two essentially makes the relationship a paedophilic one; Miles is twenty-eight, while Pilar is seventeen and still at school. There is an obvious power imbalance in the relationship, which has been overlooked by most analyses, and is largely seen as unproblematic by the other characters. Moreover, their relationship mostly follows typical patterns of patriarchal relationships. Cuenca states that "Miles is a caring, supportive partner, who adopts the role of enabler, doing everything in his power to help his beloved achieve her dream" (200), which can be seen as partially true, and in that sense can be seen to go against the norms of hegemonic masculinity, since the "[d]ominant definitions of masculinity do not include caregiving as a component of men's lives" (Pease 30). However, Cuenca's reading is perhaps too optimistic, as Miles's caregiving is much closer to the traditional male role of the breadwinner; he works to support a female partner, and the female partner is economically dependent on him. While he encourages her to go to university, he also leads her into a position where he is the dominant partner, which is further exacerbated by her age and inexperience. While he is ascetic and thrifty when it comes to himself, he does not seem to be so when it comes to her, as he generously gives a great part of his savings before moving to New York; she is not included in his ritual of self-denial. This non-inclusion further cements him as the dominant partner and traditional male provider.

Cuenca also maintains that Miles is "far from pretending to win Pilar over by purchasing her love, using the trite mechanisms of patriarchal, capitalist romance" (Cuenca 200). This is also only partially true; while he is the breadwinner in their relationship, he does not exactly shower her with expensive gifts in order to seduce her. However, he literally uses her to barter with his sisters after they threaten to report him to the police, exchanging her for kitchen appliances he finds in the abandoned houses he clears. "In other words, Pilar now lives with him because he bribed the family. He bought her" (Auster 13). By doing so, he becomes complicit in

a modern version of “the traffic in women” (Rubin 157), which is a far cry from an attempt to redefine masculinity across more positive and egalitarian lines; rather, it might simply be a way to adapt traditional masculinity to the demands placed on it by the Great Recession. Additionally, their relationship might also have a symbolic meaning: it can be read as an expression of Miles’ immaturity and unwillingness to accept the burden of adulthood. His father notes that it “made sense for him to be in love with someone that age, for the boy’s life has been stunted, cut off from its proper and natural development, and although he looks like a full-grown man, his inner self is stuck somewhere around eighteen or nineteen” (Auster 280). This reading points to a crisis within Miles, a personal one that coincides and intersects with the general, economic one, and does not allow him to properly mature and become an adult, which leads him to engage in an unequal relationship with Pilar. Therefore, Miles can hardly be seen as a positive masculine role model, as Cuenca would seem to argue. Rather, he is an example of a man-in-crisis and an expression of masculinity-in-crisis, which will necessarily deviate from hegemonic masculinity, as it is becoming unsustainable, but this does not generate a conscious response to hegemonic masculinity and a deliberate attempt to oppose it.

Additionally, it can be argued that the novel’s bleakness does not provide many chances for looking into the future and creating alternatives, whether it be alternative masculinities or alternative models of running society. Instead, the novel seems to primarily look back into the past and juxtapose it to the present, which can be seen in Miles’ and Bing’s jobs, both of which “deal with junk, fragments, discarded, broken or abandoned objects and trash, thus indicating tentatively an anti-modernist tendency” (Šesnić 65). This is particularly obvious in Bing’s case, as he “takes it for granted that the future is a lost cause” (Auster 72) and runs the Hospital for Broken Things, where he mends “objects from an era that has all but vanished from the face of the earth” (Auster 73). This signals a strong desire not to create something new, but rather to idealise and recreate the past, in a solipsistic attempt to escape the harshness of the present. This looking back into the past is also evident in Auster’s use of references to Scott F. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and William Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), which are juxtaposed to the events in the novel and serve to emphasise the themes of constructing masculinity and overcoming personal and social crises. The following section examines these references in detail.

4. Intertextuality, Masculinity, and Crisis

Sunset Park abounds with references to *The Great Gatsby*, and even more importantly, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). They are important because they provide contrast to the oppressive bleakness of the novel, which is particularly true in the case of

The Best Years of Our Lives due to its framing “between moments of personal and national trauma” (Shostak 66) and the happy resolution of the crisis. Furthermore, the film reference provides a model of post-crisis masculinity that resolves crises through reintegration into the social order, which is lacking in *Sunset Park*, much like deeper transformation. The film focuses on Captain Fred Derry (Dana Andrews), Sergeant Al Stephenson (Fredric March), and Petty Officer Homer Parrish (Harold Russell), three World War II veterans who have recently returned home from the front and are struggling to adjust to civilian life. Fred suffers from nightmares and has trouble finding work and maintaining his rushed marriage, Al struggles to readjust to his job at a bank, and Homer has lost both of his hands and has to use hooks instead, which makes him deeply insecure as to whether or not he will be able to marry his sweetheart, Wilma (Cathy O’Donnell). Apart from these personal crises caused by the war, the film captures the social crisis that accompanied the end of the war and the return of the demobilised soldiers; their return meant that there would be millions of unemployed men unadjusted to civilian life, many of which were seriously injured or suffering from psychological damage, and were thus seen as a potential threat to the social order. As Gerber writes:

On the one hand, the veteran's heroism and sacrifices are celebrated and memorialized and debts of gratitude, both symbolic and material, are paid to him. On the other hand, the veteran also inspires anxiety and fear and is seen as a threat to social order and political stability. (Gerber 546)

These personal and social crises also have an effect on the characters’ masculinity. While martial prowess has always been part of hegemonic masculinity and war veterans have usually been celebrated, martial masculinity is not necessarily congruent with the kind of masculinity that is suitable for civilian life. In civilian life, a man was still supposed to be the breadwinner of the family, and this was often impossible because many ex-soldiers had little to no education and work experience. This was exacerbated by the changing gender roles; many women had become part of the workforce and did not want to relinquish the newfound financial freedom. In the film, this is particularly exemplified by Fred. As a soldier, he earned a handsome salary which could support his wife’s lifestyle, especially coupled with her earnings. As a civilian, he wants his wife out of the workforce, to which she complies, but the only job he can find is his old position as a soda jerk at the local drugstore. He fails to properly do working-class masculinity despite being a war veteran, and slowly loses his wife because of that. However, Homer is an even better embodiment of both a man-in-crisis and masculinity-in-crisis. Having lost his hands in the war, he has even fewer chances of becoming a breadwinner, and he is convinced he is going to lose Wilma, which leads him to become irritable and, on occasion, violent. In the beginning, he showcases

amazing dexterity with his hooks, even being able to light a match and hold a beer bottle, in an attempt to present himself as just another man who is capable of taking care of himself. He also “drinks with gusto and takes pride in participating in the male drinking culture” (Gerber 561) and generally fits in with the other two ex-soldiers. However, this view of him is undercut in the scene where he cannot get ready for bed without the help of his father and in a similar scene where Wilma helps him to bed, after he comments that, without his hooks, he is “as dependent as a baby that doesn’t know how to get anything except to cry for it” (*The Best Years of Our Lives* 02:26:02–02:26:05). The loss of his hands essentially meant a great blow to his masculinity, as, without them, he is stripped of independence, one of the most essential tenets of all masculinities. This scene is one of the moments when a direct link is established between the film and the novel. Moved by it, Miles compares himself to Homer:

... [H]e feels he has become that boy now, who can do nothing without his father’s help, a boy without hands, a boy who should be without hands, a boy whose hands have brought him nothing but trouble in his life, his angry punching hands, his angry pushing hands (Auster 306–307)

Miles relates to the scene mostly on a personal level, as his wish to be without hands stems from his guilt for contributing to his stepbrother’s death and his need for self-punishment and self-denial. Additionally, Miles’ comparison to Homer implies a feeling of shared wounded masculinity and the sense of being unable to either reclaim or refashion it; the only options are avoidance and self-pity. Alice makes a similar observation, “Miles has been in a war, and all soldiers are old men by the time they come home, shut-down men who never talk about the battles they have fought” (Auster 235–236), which further emphasises the idea that Miles is wounded and lacking, even though Alice admires his quiet masculine reservedness and steadfastness, as opposed to the rants and whining of Bing and Jake.

Gerber notes that in the medium of the film, America had a powerful tool for “representing its anxieties and for instantly and cathartically resolving the anticipated problems that prompted so much expert and lay concern” (Gerber 545). This is especially true in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Despite the deep crises faced by the main characters, they are overcome, and the hope for achieving the American Dream has been restored. Fred separates from his wife and starts a relationship with Peggy (Teresa Wright), Al readjusts to his banking job, and Homer, in spite of his anxiety due to his hooks, is fully accepted by Wilma and marries her. While the film “refuses to glorify the war as combat, and rather chooses to focus on the lingering post-war effects” (Šesnić 64), managing to capture the plight of the ex-soldier and give an insight into his readjustment difficulties and the prejudices he faces, it does not attempt a deeper critique of the social order that produced this personal crisis. Rather, the social

order is reinstated in the end, albeit with slightly changed gender roles, and everybody happily finds their place in it, which signifies the start of a new, more prosperous era with America as “the land of unlimited opportunity for all” (*The Best Years of Our Lives* 1:52:20). This is starkly juxtaposed to the situation in *Sunset Park*, where there is no such hope for the main characters, and seemingly, for the whole country. Instead of a happy resolution of the personal crises, the characters are pushed deeper into them, after being violently chased out of the squat by the police, which signals profound hopelessness and an utter lack of a chance for either progressing into a brighter future or returning to a past golden age. Unlike *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Sunset Park* foregrounds a condition of prolonged instability.

Such a golden age is also alluded to in the references to *The Great Gatsby*, which is perhaps the most recognisable piece of literature set in the prosperous Jazz Age. While the novel is not exactly a celebration of the Jazz Age, it does have a critical edge that points to the superficiality and the artificiality of the era—the glamour and the extravagance represented in the novel seem to emphasise the bleakness of the setting of *Sunset Park*. Additionally, *The Great Gatsby* abounds with images of successful, coherent hegemonic masculinity, while providing a stark contrast to the portrayal of masculinity in *Sunset Park*. Jay Gatsby, at least on the surface, can be seen as a representative of this, as his great wealth and displays of splendour are congruent with the dominant norms of masculinity. The same can be said of Tom Buchanan, who possesses not just economic power, but also great physical strength and ferocity, to the extent that his mere existence can be seen as an exuberant display of masculinity:

Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body – he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing, and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting then his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage – a cruel body. (Fitzgerald 6–7)

No such display exists in *Sunset Park*, but it does not succeed at subverting hegemonic masculinity. While this kind of old-fashioned masculinity based on wealth, consumption, power, and physical strength is largely absent from the novel, due to the economic crisis and Miles’ and Bing’s rituals of self-denial, it has not been replaced with viable, alternative forms of identification. Lacking the “glamour, allure and ultimate artificiality of the jazz age” (Reynolds vii), the world of *Sunset Park* offers neither the illusions that once sustained hegemonic masculinity nor feasible alternatives to it, thereby reinforcing the novel’s broader depiction of masculinity as a condition of unresolved crisis rather than transformation.

5. Conclusion

Victor Seidler states that “Men’s sense of themselves and their masculinity is much more tied to consumption and to the body than it is to the culture of care” (226). *Sunset Park* tackles the issues of consumption, the body, and care in a way that expresses a deal of scepticism towards hegemonic masculinity. The two central male characters in the novel, Miles and Bing, actively reject the culture of consumption that comprises a great part of hegemonic masculinity, and choose downward mobility. This may hint towards a possible manner of refashioning masculinity during and after an economic crisis; as the crisis erodes hegemonic masculinity, it is rethought and refashioned in a way that is less dominant and more egalitarian and caring. However, this is not the only response masculinity has to economic crises. Very often, there is a reactionary approach that seeks to restore some kind of mythic “traditional” masculinity. *Sunset Park*, however, offers neither vision. While the male characters in the novel somewhat distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity, their actions do not finally coalesce into a feasible alternative model of masculinity. Therefore, *Sunset Park* neither restores traditional masculinity, nor does it fully subvert it. Rather, it portrays masculinity-in-crisis, without fully utilising the subversive potential inherent in this portrayal. Instead, the masculinity presented in the novel remains a site of instability, fragmentation, and lacking meaningful direction.

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