
Jewish Masculinity in American Fiction: A Critical Analysis of Norman Mailer's *Representation*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the theme of Jewish masculinity in American fiction, focusing on Norman Mailer's literary portrayal of Jewish-American male identity. Through a critical analysis of Mailer's works, particularly *The Naked and the Dead*, *An American Dream*, and *Advertisements for Myself*, the study examines how Mailer grapples with Jewish cultural heritage while simultaneously exploring broader themes of masculinity, power, and vulnerability. Mailer's portrayal of Jewish masculinity is complex, often characterized by tension between the protagonist's intellectual aspirations and their need to assert physical and emotional dominance. This paper argues that Mailer's Jewish male characters reflect the contradictions inherent in Jewish-American identity, confronting the expectations of traditional masculinity while navigating their cultural legacy and historical trauma. By positioning Mailer's representation of Jewish masculinity within the broader context of American literature, this study also traces its influence on subsequent authors, such as Michael Chabon and Jonathan Safran Foer, who incorporate similar themes in their own works. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion of gender, ethnicity, and identity in contemporary literature, showing how Jewish masculinity remains a significant point of exploration within American fiction. By critically engaging with Mailer's representation, this study highlights the continued relevance of Jewish-American experiences in the portrayal of masculinity and challenges the conventional frameworks of gender in literary discourse.

Keywords: Jewish masculinity, Norman Mailer, American fiction, identity, power dynamics.

Introduction

The representation of Jewish masculinity in American literature has evolved over time, reflecting shifts in both the societal understanding of Jewish identity and the broader cultural conception of masculinity itself. Jewish-American men, often stereotyped as intellectual, emotionally repressed, or even emasculated, have been subject to a range of portrayals that either undermine or challenge dominant American ideals of manhood. Among the writers who have explored the complexities of Jewish masculinity, Norman Mailer stands out as one of the most significant figures. Mailer's exploration of Jewish identity is uniquely intertwined with his portrayal of masculinity, and his work offers a fascinating commentary on how Jewish-American men navigate the pressures of both their ethnic heritage and the larger societal constructs of American masculinity.

In Mailer's novels and essays, Jewish masculinity is often seen as an internal battleground where power, weakness, and cultural expectations collide. The conflict Mailer's characters experience the desire to assert their masculinity while simultaneously confronting their Jewish identity resonates deeply with the broader experience of Jewish-American men in the mid-20th century. In a period marked by the dominance of hyper-masculine ideals, Mailer's work reflects a more nuanced approach to masculinity, one that is fraught with contradictions and tensions. This paper will provide an analysis of various aspects of Jewish masculinity, particularly focusing on the works of Norman Mailer, to explore how he grapples with themes of identity, power, vulnerability, and cultural conflict in the context of American fiction.

The Evolution of Jewish Masculinity in American Fiction

The depiction of Jewish masculinity in American literature can be traced through a number of historical phases, from the early stereotypes that dominated the 19th and early 20th centuries to the more complex and nuanced portrayals found in post-World War II literature. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Jewish-American men were often depicted as physically weak, overly intellectual, or socially awkward. These stereotypes were part of a broader cultural narrative that sought to differentiate Jewish people from mainstream American society, casting them as outsiders who were unable to fully integrate into the ideals of strength, stoicism, and independence that defined American masculinity. Early works by Jewish-American writers like Sholem Aleichem reflected the challenges faced by Eastern European Jewish immigrants in adapting to American society. The characters in Aleichem's works, such as Tevye the Dairyman, are portrayed as wise but often physically and emotionally weak men who are at odds with the dominant cultural expectations of American masculinity. These early portrayals, while sympathetic to the struggles of

Jewish immigrants, were often bound by stereotypes that positioned Jewish men as outsiders in the broader American cultural landscape.

By the mid-20th century, however, the portrayal of Jewish masculinity began to shift. Writers like Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, both of whom came from Jewish backgrounds, began to explore Jewish male identity in more complex ways. Bellow's *Herzog* (1964), for example, portrays a protagonist who is introspective and emotionally troubled, yet also deeply resilient in the face of personal and cultural crises. Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) offers a provocative and often humorous examination of Jewish male sexuality, guilt, and identity, challenging the traditional stereotypes of Jewish men as repressed or effeminate. This shift toward more dynamic portrayals of Jewish masculinity continued into the work of Norman Mailer, who used his platform to confront and deconstruct the ideals of American masculinity while also grappling with his own Jewish heritage. While Mailer was not always overtly concerned with Jewish identity in his novels, his work reflects the broader tension between Jewish intellectualism and the more aggressive, physically dominant ideals of masculinity that dominated post-war American culture. In many of Mailer's works, Jewish masculinity is explored through characters who must navigate the complexities of their ethnic backgrounds while striving to meet the societal expectations of manhood. These characters are often caught in a struggle between the values of their Jewish upbringing and the pressures of American society to conform to ideals of physical strength, aggression, and dominance.

The Significance of Mailer's Jewish Masculinity

Mailer's portrayal of Jewish masculinity is particularly important because it marks a deliberate confrontation with the dominant American ideal of masculinity. Born into a Jewish family but distanced from Jewish religious practices and traditions, Mailer's relationship to his Jewishness was ambivalent, and this ambivalence is reflected in his characters. His works explore the internal conflict that many Jewish-American men experience as they reconcile their cultural heritage with the desire to conform to or reject the masculine ideals of American society. In *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Mailer introduces a range of characters who grapple with the pressures of war, leadership, and masculinity. The novel's protagonist, Sergeant Sam Croft, embodies many of the qualities associated with the American masculine ideal strength, aggression, and a certain emotional coldness. However, Croft's characterization is also marked by deep vulnerabilities and insecurities, which complicate the traditional view of masculinity.

In Mailer's portrayal, even the most physically dominant characters are ultimately revealed to be flawed and vulnerable, struggling to reconcile their emotions with the demands of their roles as leaders and warriors. In *The Deer Park*

(1955), Mailer explores Jewish masculinity through the character of Sergius O'Shaugnessy, a writer who seeks to understand his place in the world. Although O'Shaugnessy is not overtly identified as Jewish, his intellectualism, self-doubt, and complicated relationships with women suggest a Jewish sensibility. O'Shaugnessy is constantly at odds with the broader cultural ideals of masculinity that demand emotional restraint, physical dominance, and sexual power. His relationships with women, particularly his attraction to a Hollywood starlet, expose the contradictions in his identity and suggest that masculinity whether Jewish or not can never be fully realized without confronting the inner complexities of the self.

Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) offers a further exploration of Jewish masculinity by delving into Mailer's own internal conflicts about his identity. This collection of essays, which mixes autobiography, philosophy, and literary criticism, reveals Mailer's struggles with his cultural heritage and his desire to project a persona of power and strength. Mailer critiques his own weaknesses, including his emotional instability and his relationships with women, and, in doing so, exposes the complex intersection of masculinity and Jewishness. His essays reveal the tension between the intellectual, introspective Jewish identity and the brash, outward-facing masculinity that he sought to embody. Mailer's ambivalence about his Jewish identity is reflected in the way his characters often reject or embrace their heritage depending on the circumstances.

In *An American Dream* (1965), Stephen Rojack, a disillusioned war hero and television personality, reflects the broader theme of Jewish-American men's struggle to define themselves in a society that prizes physicality and dominance. Rojack's violent tendencies and sexual obsessions are in direct conflict with his introspective nature, and his journey reveals the inner turmoil of a man attempting to reconcile these conflicting aspects of his identity.

Mailer's Masculinity in the Context of American Society

The post-World War II era marked a time when American society became increasingly obsessed with notions of male power, physicality, and dominance. The ideal of the strong, silent man embodied by figures like the cowboy or the war hero was at the center of American masculinity during this time. This model of masculinity, which prioritized physical strength, stoicism, and independence, stood in stark contrast to the more intellectual and emotionally complex vision of Jewish masculinity that Mailer sought to portray. Mailer's works critique the cultural pressure on men to conform to this ideal. His characters, whether Jewish or not, are often deeply conflicted about their roles in society. In *The Naked and the Dead*, the soldiers are expected to embody the masculine ideal of physical dominance and toughness, but many of them struggle with their own vulnerabilities. For example,

the character of Lieutenant Hearn, a leader in the military, is both physically imposing and emotionally distant, yet his internal struggles and insecurities make him a complex figure who challenges the traditional image of the “alpha male.”

In Mailer’s portrayal of masculinity, emotional vulnerability and introspection are not seen as weaknesses but rather as essential components of the male experience. In *The Deer Park*, the protagonist Sergius O’Shaughnessy reflects Mailer’s own internal contradictions, as he seeks to assert his masculinity in a world that values aggression and power. O’Shaughnessy’s intellectualism and emotional sensitivity are both a source of strength and a form of emasculation, as he is constantly torn between his own desires and the demands placed on him by society. Mailer’s critique of American masculinity also engages with the idea of violence and power. In works like *An American Dream*, Mailer portrays men who assert their masculinity through violent acts, particularly in their interactions with women. These acts of violence, however, are often depicted as futile attempts to gain control over their own emotional and sexual desires. For Mailer, the pursuit of power and dominance is not a straightforward path to fulfilment but is instead marked by internal conflict and self-doubt.

The Portrayal of Jewish Men in Mailer’s Major Characters

Mailer’s major characters, whether explicitly Jewish or not, are often marked by the complexities of their masculinity. In *An American Dream*, Stephen Rojack embodies the contradictions at the heart of Mailer’s work. Rojack is both a physically dominant man and a deeply insecure, introspective figure. His relationships with women are driven by a desire for power and control, yet he is unable to find true satisfaction or emotional connection. Rojack’s character reveals the darker side of Mailer’s vision of masculinity, one that is shaped by emotional repression, violence, and the inability to fully understand or express vulnerability. Similarly, in *The Deer Park*, Mailer explores the inner lives of his male characters, revealing the tensions between physicality and intellectualism. Although the protagonist, O’Shaughnessy, is not explicitly portrayed as Jewish, his character shares many of the traits that Mailer associates with Jewish masculinity: intellectual, self-reflective, and emotionally complex. O’Shaughnessy’s relationships with women serve as a metaphor for his struggle to reconcile his intellectual, emotionally sensitive side with the physical and sexual dominance that society expects of him.

Mailer’s Influence on Jewish Masculinity in Literature

Mailer’s impact on the representation of Jewish masculinity extends far beyond his own works. His exploration of male identity, particularly in the context of Jewish-American experience, has influenced countless writers who have grappled with similar issues of power, vulnerability, and cultural conflict. Writers like Michael

Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Tony Kushner have drawn on Mailer's themes of masculinity, sexuality, and identity to create their own visions of Jewish masculinity. In *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), Michael Chabon explores the lives of two Jewish cousins, Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay, who come of age in mid-20th-century America. Chabon's portrayal of Jewish masculinity reflects Mailer's influence in its examination of the tension between intellectualism and physicality. Both Kavalier and Clay navigate the pressures of their Jewish heritage while also seeking to conform to mainstream American ideals of manhood. Their struggles with identity and masculinity echo Mailer's own exploration of these themes, highlighting the ways in which Jewish men must constantly negotiate their place in a society that prizes strength and dominance.

Mailer's Political Views and Jewish Masculinity

Norman Mailer's political views were complex, and his stance on various issues was often contradictory. His writings on war, politics, and gender relations reveal a significant tension between his intellectual critique of American society and his often contradictory personal behaviour. Mailer was a prominent public figure in mid-20th-century America, and his political engagement shaped much of his literary output. His political beliefs were never static, often shifting in response to contemporary events, but his advocacy for individual freedom and personal responsibility remained central throughout his life. Mailer's political views, particularly in relation to the Vietnam War, shed light on his understanding of masculinity. In his non-fiction works, including *Armies of the Night* (1968), a Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the 1967 anti-Vietnam War march on the Pentagon, Mailer explores the relationship between American masculinity and the brutal realities of war. Although he critiqued the war and the ways in which American society glorified violence and militarism, Mailer's engagement with war also revealed a fascination with power, aggression, and dominance, themes he often explored in his fiction.

In *Armies of the Night*, Mailer presents himself as both participant and observer in the protests against the Vietnam War, presenting his personal experience in vivid detail. The book is a meditation on power and masculinity, as Mailer reflects on the political climate of the 1960s and the implications of American imperialism. His portrayal of himself in the book reflects the tension between his public persona as a masculine, combative intellectual and his more reflective, intellectual side. Mailer's critique of American war culture is situated within his broader commentary on male identity, how war, power, and violence shape the modern understanding of masculinity. In *Armies of the Night*, he wrestles with the realization that his own masculinity is inextricably linked to the nation's militaristic agenda. Mailer was also

deeply interested in the concept of American heroism and the ways in which war, particularly World War II, shaped the American male psyche. The men in *The Naked and the Dead* are all affected by their experiences of violence and trauma in the war, reflecting Mailer's complex views on masculinity. While he critiques the glorification of violence, he also reveals the ways in which men are shaped by their experiences of war how they internalize masculinity through violent conflict and battle.

Jewish masculinity, in this context, becomes both a refuge from and a challenge to the prevailing masculine ideals of aggression and dominance that dominate American war culture. Mailer's political views on war and masculinity often intersected with his critique of American culture, and specifically his reflections on the pressure placed on men to embody certain ideals. The pressure to conform to these ideals of physicality and aggression can be understood as part of the larger societal forces that Mailer critiques in both his fiction and non-fiction. Jewish-American masculinity, as represented by Mailer's characters, is constantly engaged in a struggle with these cultural expectations. The intellectual, introspective Jewish man, grappling with cultural alienation, stands in direct opposition to the idealized image of the American male hero who is defined by his physical strength, stoicism, and ability to dominate.

Mailer's Feminist Arguments and Gender Politics

Mailer's relationship with feminism is contentious and complicated. Over the course of his career, he made statements and took actions that have been criticized for their misogyny, even as he expressed support for women's rights and often explored gender dynamics in his work. His approach to gender politics offers a valuable lens through which to analyze his broader views on masculinity. His work can be seen as reflecting the tensions within second-wave feminism, particularly in his portrayal of women and their relationships with male characters.

In *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), Mailer offers an extended essay on the relationship between men and women in American society, attempting to reconcile his own views on masculinity with the feminist movement that was gaining momentum during the 1960s and 1970s. The book is an exploration of gender and sexuality, in which Mailer seeks to understand the sexual dynamics between men and women. However, *The Prisoner of Sex* is often criticized for Mailer's condescending treatment of feminism and for his romanticized view of traditional male-female relationships. Mailer's conception of feminism in *The Prisoner of Sex* is deeply influenced by his view of masculinity as an essential, natural force. He argues that modern society, in its push for sexual equality, is suppressing a fundamental aspect of male identity, the desire to dominate and assert power. Mailer's assertion that male sexuality is inextricably linked to the need for dominance is controversial, and many

feminists have criticized him for reinforcing gender hierarchies rather than challenging them.

Mailer's insistence that women must understand and accept the sexual desires of men is presented as an argument for maintaining a traditional view of gender roles. His stance reveals the underlying tension between his commitment to male freedom and his reluctance to fully embrace the feminist critique of patriarchy. While Mailer's feminism is often seen as patronizing and reductive, it is also significant for its engagement with the complexity of gender relations. His depiction of male characters' relationships with women often characterized by power struggles, sexual obsession, and emotional detachment reflects a broader cultural tension in the 1960s and 1970s about the roles men and women were expected to play in society.

In *An American Dream*, the protagonist, Rojack, demonstrates this conflict, as he is both sexually dominant and emotionally distant from women, reflecting Mailer's larger critique of male identity. Women in Mailer's novels are often portrayed as symbols of both power and submission, and their relationships with men highlight the imbalanced power dynamics that pervade his works. At the same time, Mailer's fiction contains more nuanced portrayals of women who resist traditional gender roles and challenge the patriarchal structures of society. His female characters, like the enigmatic women in *The Deer Park* or *An American Dream*, possess a certain agency, though often this agency is complicated by the male characters' need to control and dominate. Mailer's exploration of female power and sexuality, though problematic, opens up a conversation about the complexities of gender relations and the ways in which masculinity is shaped by interactions with women.

Jewish Masculinity, War, and Feminism in Mailer's Legacy

Mailer's exploration of Jewish masculinity, war, and feminism forms a significant part of his literary and cultural legacy. His work has continued to shape the way masculinity is discussed in American literature, particularly in terms of how men of Jewish descent navigate the intersection of intellectualism, vulnerability, and aggression. His treatment of war in his novels, such as *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Deer Park*, reflects a deep concern with the psychological and emotional costs of war, particularly for men whose identities are tied to ideals of physical strength and dominance. Jewish masculinity, in Mailer's works, is often a struggle between the intellectual, cerebral aspects of identity and the aggressive, violent tendencies associated with traditional masculinity.

Mailer's political views on war, particularly in *Armies of the Night*, suggest that masculinity and violence are inseparable in the American cultural imagination. His critiques of war, however, are not only an indictment of political violence but also a reflection on how American men internalize the ideals of militarism and

domination. This internalization of masculine power becomes central to understanding Mailer's larger critique of society. Mailer's feminist arguments, especially in *The Prisoner of Sex*, provide an essential, albeit controversial, window into his thinking about gender dynamics. While he resisted the feminist movement's critiques of patriarchy, his work nevertheless reflects a preoccupation with the power dynamics between men and women. Jewish masculinity in Mailer's works often operates in opposition to these patriarchal structures, as Jewish male characters struggle to define themselves within a broader cultural context that simultaneously marginalizes and empowers them.

In contemporary discussions of masculinity, Norman Mailer's works continue to be referenced, critiqued, and reinterpreted, particularly in the context of how they portray complex notions of male identity. Mailer's exploration of masculinity often marked by a raw, at times controversial, examination of power, aggression, and vulnerability has left a significant imprint on literary discussions of gender. His focus on the internal struggles of men confronting their roles in society has resonated with subsequent generations of writers. Writers like Michael Chabon and Jonathan Safran Foer have drawn upon Mailer's exploration of Jewish masculinity, incorporating elements of his literary style and themes into their own depictions of Jewish-American men navigating issues of power, vulnerability, and cultural identity. Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* reflects Mailer's influence in its portrayal of Jewish men who grapple with their sense of purpose in the world, their emotional complexity, and their evolving relationships with identity in the face of historical trauma. Like Mailer, Chabon's characters wrestle with the tension between masculinity, intellectualism, and emotional expression. Similarly, Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* also echoes Mailer's themes of Jewish masculinity, particularly in the ways that characters confront their heritage and the legacy of past trauma. Foer, like Mailer, delves into the complexities of familial relationships, the pressures of cultural expectation, and the search for personal meaning amid historical upheaval. Both writers challenge traditional notions of strength and vulnerability, blurring the boundaries between what it means to be a man within the context of Jewish-American identity.

Conclusion

Mailer's influence also extends to broader discussions of masculinity in literature, where his works have been critiqued for their portrayal of toxic or exaggerated forms of male behaviour, yet simultaneously acknowledged for their exploration of the vulnerability and contradictions that exist within men. His characters often embody a struggle to reconcile power with tenderness, success with failure, and personal desires with societal expectations, themes that continue to

resonate in the work of contemporary authors exploring male identity. In this way, Mailer's legacy endures as a key touchstone in ongoing conversations about masculinity, cultural identity, and the complexities of being a man in a rapidly changing world. Norman Mailer's exploration of Jewish masculinity in American fiction offers a profound commentary on the ways in which Jewish-American men navigate the complexities of identity, power, and vulnerability. Through characters who embody both the fragility and strength of masculinity, Mailer critiques the societal expectations placed on men while simultaneously exploring the internal conflicts that arise from these pressures. His works offer a multifaceted vision of Jewish masculinity, one that rejects the stereotypical notions of weakness and effeminacy while acknowledging the emotional and intellectual complexities that define Jewish identity. In doing so, Mailer has left an indelible mark on the literary landscape, influencing subsequent generations of writers to grapple with the intersections of Jewishness, masculinity, and American culture.

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