

MASCULINITY AND JUSTICE: GENERATIONAL CHANGES IN JOHN GRISHAM'S *THE CHAMBER**

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of masculinity in the Southern states of America across three generations. These three generations are represented in John Grisham's popular novel *The Chamber* (1994) by Sam Cayhall, his son Eddie Hall, and his grandson Adam. *The Chamber* denounces, as is habitual in Grisham's work, the corruption of the legal and political system in the United States, exposing in this case the cruelty of the death penalty and the wrong political uses white politicians make of it. However, the other main focus of the book is the relationship between Sam, an ex-Klan terrorist sentenced to die for killing two Jewish children in 1967, and his grandson, a lawyer trying to save him from the gas chamber in 1990. This relationship hinges on the suicide of Eddie, who concealed from Adam the existence of Sam and his crimes.

An analysis of the representation of the three generations in *The Chamber* leads to the conclusion that the main difference between Sam's patriarchal generation and Adam's autonomous one is their capability to pass judgement on the previous generation and to opt for change. Sam cannot question the ways of his father, but his son does, which leads him to die. Since neither hatred nor death are a valid solution, Adam is forced, first, to reconstruct his past and, next, choose a moral option that is meant to be representative of the men of his generation. This is marked, above all, by a multiplication of the possibilities in which men can choose to live. Adam chooses working for the reform of the law – for implementing justice – rather than for fatherhood or commitment to a woman. This also shows that changes in masculinity need not be regulated exclusively by inter-gender relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in masculinity are, as is well known, brought about by the intersection of the personal and the political. I consider here this issue through a reading of *The Chamber* (1994), a popular novel by Southern American writer John Grisham. Popular fiction often fulfills the function of dramatizing in an intuitive, succinct way complex processes that only sociologists fully understand, if at all. This, incidentally, explains its popularity.

Grisham plays today a role quite similar to that of Charles Dickens in the 19th century. Both are hugely popular writers sending out a moral message based on a certainly sentimental treatment of their main characters, adapted to suit the tastes of their respective audiences. They call the readers' attention towards their disclosure of the legal and economic corruption of their

society, which they read as, basically, moral corruption. More limited in scope than Dickens, Grisham – a former lawyer – obsessively describes, above all, the corruption in the legal system upheld by white American men and the limited chances of resistance against it.

In *The Chamber* this resistance is instrumental in the personal and political changes undergone by two white men, a grandfather sentenced to die and his grandson, a lawyer torn between anger and pity for him. Their relationship also offers an interesting case to argue that generational changes in masculinity can be shaped by choice based on experience and judgment rather than by simple imitation or inevitable conditioning.

The Chamber is, above all, an exposure of the cruelty and the moral ambiguity of the death penalty. Grisham's choice of protagonist is, however, problematic enough. Disregarding more obvious options backed by the reality of death row statistics, Grisham focuses on the ordeal of a Mississippi seventy-year-old white man – former Klansman Sam Cayhall – sentenced to die for causing the death of two little Jewish boys in a Klan bombing in 1967. Grisham denounces the opportunism that leads the ambitious Governor of Mississippi to let Sam be executed for purely political gains that have nothing to do with justice. Sam fights a losing judicial battle in which he is unexpectedly helped by a lost grandson he had never met, the rookie lawyer Adam Hall.

Hegemonic masculinity changes most visibly when new legislation establishes different thresholds of tolerance for male personal and political behavior in relationship both to women and to other men. “The state,” in R. W. Connell's words “both institutionalizes hegemonic masculinity and expends great energy in controlling it” (1987: 128). It could be argued that this is precisely Sam's case. Formerly an example of the hegemonic masculinity sanctioned by his rural Southern community, including its law representatives, Sam is sentenced to die for his crimes as much as for the obsolescence of his bigoted political and personal views. His grandson represents, in contrast, an adequate, desirable moral masculinity replacing in the early 1990s the patriarchal hegemony of the grandfather.

It is unclear, though, whether Adam is to be accepted as the representative of a new interracial, inter-gender humanism or as the new hegemonic white man. Susan Jeffords has argued in relation to Alan Parker's film *Mississippi Burning* (1988), which uses the same historical background as *The Chamber*,¹ that narratives in which the racism of intolerant white men is denounced by liberal white men allow nonetheless white men to align “themselves with a system of law and justice that would ensure both the institution of justice and white men's continued control of it” (1994: 140). *The Chamber* can indeed be read from this perspective, though Adam's final choice of employment with a black lawyer working in death penalty litigation suggests his aim is collaboration with other men rather than their subordination.

The Chamber narrates simultaneously Sam and Adam's fight against the gas chamber and their troubled reconstruction of a past they never shared. Beyond state or Klan political terrorism, the factor that most interests Grisham (and Adam) are the unfortunate consequences of Sam's crimes on the lives of his family, that is, the personal cost implied in political choices. Shattered by the shame he feels when Sam is sentenced to die, Adam's father chooses suicide.

This desertion, for which Adam blames both Eddie and Sam, leaves him literally stranded in a no man's land. *The Chamber* can be read, thus, as a contemporary morality play in which tragedy arises from the many mis-encounters between fathers and sons across three generations of American men.

Grisham traces an extreme model of transition from the intolerant, patriarchal man of the first half of the 20th century to the moral, tolerant man of the 1990s. His rise and success claims the sacrifice of former models represented by the grandfather who is forced to die by the state and the father who chooses to die rather than risk the danger of repeating the values of the previous generation. On Adam's shoulders falls the responsibility not only to redress the wrongs of grandfather and father but also those of the state as he also tries to strike a personal balance. A heavy burden, which conditions the choices, he and many men in his generation make and the changes they face.

THE INEVITABILITY OF WHITE PATRIARCHY: SAM'S GENERATION

"A wide range of American cultural productions since the mid-1970s," David Savran writes, "have insistently reenacted the contradictory spectacle of white men proclaiming themselves victims while simultaneously menacing – or blowing away – somebody else" (1998: 207). Sam is one of those white men. Within the atrocious legal discourse that Grisham exposes – ineffective as a deterrent of crime, unnecessarily cruel – Sam's punishment is indeed undeserved. Sam is also the victim of the Klan's harsh codes of masculine loyalty by which he is prevented from naming his accomplice Rollie Wedge, a young sadistic Klucker who actually causes the children's deaths.

Grisham plays, however, very cleverly with his own ambiguous moral position before the death penalty and the issue of Sam's victimization. He partly exonerates Sam by blaming the sinister Wedge for the crime and although he allows Sam's daughter, Lee, to claim retribution for the victims through her father's death, he also allows Sam to express a politically incorrect view of his position. Sam actually considers his conviction an intolerable triumph of the minorities in his country. Formerly a respectable white man, at least to his own eyes and those of his native community, Sam derides the law for having placed him in the position reserved in America to marginalized black criminals who are, according to him, privileged by the system. Sam's racism is actually increased rather than decreased by his punishment.

The Chamber explores simultaneously the corruption of the white man's judicial system and the corruption of white – specifically Southern – masculinity from which Sam's violence arises. Cayhall has killed because in his worldview the respectability of masculinity is measured by the amount of violence a man causes – violence which is read as justice even when children are involved. Likewise, he must die because the state also interprets the violence it inflicts on Sam's body as justice. Grisham's novel hints that for the moral man to emerge from the patriarchal man, the sins of the latter must be forgiven but not forgotten. It also suggests that he must be sacrificed no matter how unfairly, for even more unfair is the sacrifice of his victims. Grisham preaches a very different message, though, as regards state laws: The men who enforce them for personal gain are neither forgotten nor forgiven for their selfishness. The relationship

between Adam and Sam is thus marked both by their common frustrated efforts at resisting the (immoral) law and by Adam's educating his initially adamant, unrepentant grandfather into the ethical values that must lead Sam first to feel regret and remorse and, next, to ask for his victims' forgiveness.

Their trans-generational alliance is only sealed when Sam asks Adam forgiveness for Eddie's suicide and repudiates the Klan demonstrators marching outside the jail. His final moral pardon by Adam is granted when Sam writes a series of letters of apology to his victims' relatives because "I have a conscience, not much of one, but it's there, and the closer I get to death the guiltier I feel about the things I've done" (p. 391).² Sam has actually felt remorse for years but only Adam – both family and counsel – provides the sympathetic audience he needs. This redemption through accepting guilt is, it must be noted, not the effect of Sam's punishment by the law or a sudden Christian feeling of regret but the effect of Sam's assumption of the secular, moral beliefs of his grandson. Moral regeneration rather than the death penalty is what turns the problematic memory of the intolerant patriarchal white man into a suitable example for the younger generations. In exchange, Adam provides Sam with an equivalent feeling of masculine regeneration: "I'll die a proud man, son," he tells Adam "because of you" (p. 477).

The story of the family can be described as the history of the troubled transition from the Civil War to the civil rights fight and the rise of the contemporary civil society to which Adam firmly belongs. Adam's personal quest involves solving twin queries: Why Sam became a Klan terrorist and why his father Eddie didn't. Lee reveals that the Cayhall men were loyal members of the Klan for four generations. The patrilineal Klan filiations extends back to a rich ancestor, a slave-owner and Civil War veteran in Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest's ranks.³ Sam's father initiated his four sons into Klan activities, including the lynching of a black man in 1936 in which Sam participated, aged only 15. Sam seems to be a clear case of unquestioned imitation of the father's violent behavior. His father's racial hatred resounds in the son's early crimes – the lynching of another black man, his killing of a black employee in 1950 – and in the brutal revenge against the white men that killed the father. Sam's violence is sanctioned by the laxity of the law and the other men in his community and this gives him a feeling of invulnerability. After a decade of ordinary family life, the Klan recruits Sam again to take part in the bombing spree triggered by the unrest following the murder in 1964 of three civil rights workers in Mississippi. Real state offices, churches, synagogues, and the office of civil rights defender Marvin Kramer in which the children died are Sam's targets. Mistried twice by hung all-white juries in trials manipulated by Klan lawyers, Sam walks back home as a free man in 1968.

The pace of historical change forces Sam out of his entrenched white, male haven into jail in 1981. As Grisham writes:

Much had changed in Mississippi since the first two trials. Blacks had registered to vote in record numbers, and these new voters had elected black officials. All-white juries were rare. The state had two black trial judges, two black sheriffs, and black lawyers could be spotted with their white brethren roaming the courthouse hallways. Officially, segregation was over. And many white Mississippians were beginning to look back and wonder what all the fuss was about (p. 20).

In a sense, Sam's downfall is caused by the younger generation's integration of the personal and the political. Sam's prosecutor, David McAllister (born 1952), saw *in situ* the effects of Sam's bomb at age 15. Elected District Attorney in 1979, he soon embarks on a personal crusade against Sam, whose conviction he secures when Sam's former Klan boss betrays him. McAllister is elected Mississippi Governor in 1989, thanks to a Reaganite campaign offering "more jails, longer sentences and an unwavering affinity for death penalty" (p. 50) to his racially mixed electorate, 84% of whom support the death penalty. Sam correctly sees himself as "a political prisoner, sent here by an egomaniac who used me for his own political purposes" (p. 82). McAllister's hounding of Sam is an example of the replacement of private or family patriarchy by public or social patriarchy described by Jeff Hearn. "Though patriarchies certainly still exist," Hearn observes, "they cannot be said to do so in any simple or direct way – the power of the individual father is no longer necessary for the continuation of 'patriarchy'" (Hearn 1992: 6). The state's violence, allegedly a form of equalitarian justice, is exposed as yet another form of intolerant and intolerable behavior – more legal but certainly not more moral than Sam's; not less patriarchal, either.

To Adam's taunting as to whether his hatred of all non-whites is part of his genetic make-up, Sam responds that the way he behaved "was a way of life. It was all I knew" (p. 206). The conclusion that Adam reaches is similar. Looking at the photograph of Sam's first lynching, Adam is comforted by the thought that 15-year-old Sam cannot be made responsible for that death:

He was just a boy, born and reared in a household where hatred of blacks and others was simply a way of life. How much of it could be blamed on him? Look at those around him, his father, family, friends and neighbors, all probably honest, poor, hardworking people caught for the moment at the end of a cruel ceremony that was commonplace in their society. Sam didn't have a chance. This was the only world he knew (p. 400).

Adam's sympathy is the most questionable aspect of *The Chamber*. This sympathy is necessary for him to make sense of his shattered family life. But, in view of his father's rejection of Sam and his own tolerance, the inevitability of white patriarchy – for this is what the Klan defended – is a lie; maybe, hopefully, just consolatory nonsense and not a firm belief.

Choice is actually available even to men like Sam. Both Grisham and Adam neglect the insights that a secondary character – Sam's brother Donnie, born in 1929 – offers into Sam's behavior. If it was *necessary* for Sam to behave as he did, his brothers must have been subjected to the same conditioning. Yet gentle Donnie, the only Cayhall that has stood by Sam, is living proof that no man is fully conditioned by his childhood environment. "Eventually," as Robert Bly writes "a man needs throw off all indoctrination and begin to discover for himself what the father is and what masculinity is" (1992: 25). Initially a Klan member like Sam, Donnie chooses to leave it after his tour of duty in the Korea war, an experience that opens his eyes to other realities beyond Mississippi and his family. For reasons that are not specified, he even leaves Mississippi for North Carolina, as if geographical distance could help free him from his

brothers' influence. Sam's lack of roots in his native, poisoned soil appears to be, thus, one of the reasons for his inability to choose change.

In the end, Sam discovers a well of self-pity he had never tapped before, secure as he was in his male emotional shell. In the clearest example of sentimentalism in the novel, grandfather and grandson address the most essential issue:

"I'm sorry you found me like this," he said, wiping his eyes.

"Don't apologize."

"But I have to. I'm sorry I'm not a better grandfather. Look at me," he said, glancing down his legs. "A wretched old man in a red monkey suit. A convicted murderer about to be gassed like an animal. And look at you. A fine young man with a beautiful education and a bright future. Where in the world did I go wrong? What happened to me? I've spent my life hating people, and look at what I have to show for it. You, you don't hate anybody. And look where you're headed. We have the same blood. Why am I here?" (p. 409)

The implicit answer is that Sam was wrongly taught that hatred is an integral part of hegemonic white masculinity. Rather than change his views or his behavior, the opportunistic manipulation of the law and his personal inability to consider making moral choices for change helped entrench him in his position, especially throughout the 1980s. He's there because he was taught by his father to put his loyalty to the men of the Klan above the loyalty to his own family: The political over the personal, the masculine patriarch over the family man. As Lee argues, Sam would be safe if he had "been home with his family rather than riding around at night with his idiot buddies" (p. 61). Pride in his condition as a white man prevents him from considering the real sources of his hatred of others, hence, of his downfall. Adam helps him redirect his emotions by offering his own achievements as a legitimate motivation for feeling pride as a (white) man, but by then it is too late.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND UNCIVIL MEN: EDDIE'S GENERATION

In *The Chamber*, the generation of men born in the World War II period is dramatically split as regards the defense of civil rights and the effectiveness of justice. Two sacrificial sons and a terrorist, all of them Southerners, represent this generation. Eddie (1943-1981) chooses death by his own hand out of shame at Sam's crimes; Marvin Kramer (1939-1971) follows the same path out of frustration at Southern justice's unwillingness to condemn Sam. Rollie Wedge (born 1945) chooses terrorism. Eddie questions segregation on a personal basis without becoming involved in the civil rights fight. Inaction signifies in Eddie's case his impotence to resist the hegemonic white masculinity around him rather than conformity. Kramer and Wedge are placed at opposite ends of personal and political commitment: The former is a family man who pays for his political activity with the death of his sons; the latter is a loner for whom violence is legitimate political activity. Not all the white men in Sam's generation follow the same rules: Donnie doesn't, nor does Kramer's father, a Jewish businessman who refuses to involve himself in politics at all. For Eddie's generation inaction is not really a valid option, which is why he ultimately dies. The definition of proper masculinity is beginning to involve by

the time of his suicide allegiance to the values of justice and equality implied by the civil rights movement, and that causes masculinity to split in multiple, incompatible directions.

Eddie and Marvin Kramer are the sons sacrificed to Sam's fierce white supremacist beliefs. Both are said to be "different," though Wedge is clearly also different. Both choose death when their expectations of a fair life for all are shattered. Both are, also, the victims of Sam's (and Rollie's) violence. Like many patriarchal men confronted by sons who reject them, Sam is confused about his son's sensitivity and tells Adam that Eddie "was a tender child [...] He got it from his mother. He wasn't a sissy. In fact, he was just as tough as other little boys" (p. 208). Eddie's mother had little to do with Eddie's heightened sensitivity. He is actually shocked into a radical rejection of his father's model of masculinity by Sam's cold-blooded killing of a black employee in 1950. Joe Lincoln, the father of Eddie's best friend, was murdered following a quarrel between Eddie and Quince – both 7 – about a misplaced toy. Lee witnessed the scene in horrified silence, something Sam ignores and on which she blames her alcoholism. Despite apologizing to Quince for his father's barbaric act, Eddie could never get over it.

Sam, however, is not aware of how important the incident was in the lives of Eddie and Lee. He attributes Eddie's "difference" to other factors. His friendship with Quince – a strange gap in Sam's racism – led Eddie to question segregation at an early age. "He really suffered for it," Sam tells Adam "and that made him different. As he got older, he grew even more sympathetic toward the Africans" (p. 208). Sam never questioned his own father's decision to initiate him in the Klan, but he behaved in quite a different way towards his son. Eddie was told about his father's Klan filiation as a teenager and his grim revelation only reaffirmed him in his rejection of Sam: "He expected me to change, and I expected him to see the light like all the other white kids his age. It never happened. We drifted apart when he was in high school, then it seems like the civil rights crap started, and there was no hope after that" (p. 209).

Instead of participating in the civil rights movement – Sam explains local whites knew better than that – Eddie leaves home at 18, in 1961, to join the Army. Three years later he brings his wife, Evelyn, and their newly born son, Adam (then still Alan), back home. The young family leaves Mississippi for good in 1967, following Sam's bombing. "Eddie," Lee explains "was terrified that if he stayed [...] something would happen to him, some mysterious genetic flaw would surface and he'd become another Sam" (p. 247). Eddie chooses to symbolically cut his ties with Sam by rejecting his surname, clipping it to Hall; Alan is renamed Adam. Sam, a free man until 1981, never bothers to track his estranged son and his family. His son's rejection hurts his patriarchal pride and this prevents him from seeking any kind of reconciliation.

For Adam, the reconciliation with the dead father passes through forcing Sam to acknowledge his guilt in the death of his son. In view of Sam's predicament, hatred is not an option for Adam; only compassion can heal the emotional wound left by Eddie's violent death. Understanding Sam helps Adam understand Eddie and his profound shame before the deviant hyper-masculinity of the father, which needs expression in "macho" acts of racial attack. The father's hatred of African-Americans and Jews is not tolerated by the son and prevents any

possible intimacy between them. But self-pitying, self-centered Eddie also lacks the resources to build any intimacy with his own son.

David Savran writes that "unlike their fathers, many young rebels of the 1960s endeavored not only to change the world but if necessary to sacrifice themselves (in certain ways, at least) to effect this change" (1998: 125). Eddie cannot be said to be a rebel in the way other 1960s public men were rebels, but his sacrifice clearly stems from a rebellion against the father. In a very sad sense, his sacrifice does effect a change in Adam's life, which is partly positive and partly negative. Adam finally grants that Eddie was "a good man, a good father who just had this dark, strange side that flared up occasionally" (p. 212). Adam recalls family life as a state of perpetual divorce between his parents. The mother, Evelyn, gave a certain economic and emotional stability to a fragile family built as a shelter for the depressive father. Eddie was, unlike his own father, an unsteady breadwinner; like him, an uninvolved father. His view of his own son does not take into account how his death can harm him. He even plans his suicide so that Adam will find the body. Eddie's suicide note expects Adam to keep his head, clean the mess, and protect the women – his mother and sister – from the ghastly sight of Eddie's dead body. Only 16 years-old at the time, Adam collapses, indeed, and is only partly rescued from what could be a thorough, emotional death by Aunt Lee's disclosure right after the father's funeral of the existence of a grandfather.

Marvin Kramer loses in the bombing both his children – only two years older than Adam – and his legs. This is a brutal form of castration, for the killing erases the younger Kramer men, still little children, as Rollie wishes. Kramer's biography is not much happier than Eddie's and is also beset by a fundamental disagreement with the father. Kramer is a fourth generation Mississippi Jew belonging to a family of businessmen. His father pays for his son's Northern education – college at Brandeis, law school at Columbia – but is negatively surprised to realize Marvin has found in the North his real call: The civil rights fight. "Marvin," Grisham writes at the very beginning of *The Chamber* "was different" (p. 1). Despite the opposition of his whole family, Kramer devotes most of his office's resources to registering black voters, filing lawsuits defending civil rights, and funding Freedom Riders. An early arrest is followed by early death threats, culminating in the bombing. It is the sight of a helpless Marvin Kramer rolling on the ground outside the court where Sam has been pronounced a free man that moves Adam to feel the shame of his grandfather's action. He offers the elder Kramer an apology, asking him to forgive Sam, but the old man can only find relief for the loss of the other men in his family in Sam's death.

In a sense, Rollie Wedge is the son Sam never had. In 1990 Wedge runs a Nazi training camp in the US. But between 1967, when he flees the US, and the 1980s when he returns, Wedge is involved with terrorist groups in Northern Ireland, Libya, Munich, Belfast, and Lebanon. Wedge, the son of a Louisiana Klansman, becomes a terrorist in 1966 – aged 21 – after dodging the Vietnam draft, traveling to Canada, and returning secretly to the US. His fierceness and lack of moral scruples are enough to terrify Sam into silence for years, a silence he only partly breaks to tell Adam he can't name Wedge for fear of risking the lives of Adam himself and Lee. Whereas Eddie and Marvin have the capacity to judge the ways of their fathers, and choose accordingly to change, Wedge can be said to continue the supremacist,

masculine politics of his father without questioning them. He actually increases their destructive potential by contributing to the Klan a criminal, bloodthirsty terrorist know-how that surpasses the habitual cruelty of the Klan. His notion of masculinity is that of the unrepentant patriarchal warrior. When he threatens Sam in prison, his orders are clear enough: "You just take it like a man, Sam. Die with dignity" (p. 322). Wedge is infinitely more dangerous than Sam because his criminal activity feeds on hatred that has few visible, public outlets. Sam's Klan was tolerated by wider sections of the Southern states, but Wedge's Nazi group – for the Klan in the 1990s is nothing but one among many supremacist groups – marks the limits of absolute intolerance in contemporary society. He, and not Sam, is the threat politicians like McAllister should fight.

THE AUTONOMOUS MAN: ADAM'S GENERATION

Adam's activity and self-confidence make up for his father's passivity and self-victimization, yet his obsession with his grandfather signifies his own obsession for his rootlessness. As he tells Lee, "I have no past because my father conveniently erased it. I want to know about it, Lee. I want to know how bad it really is" (p. 57). Fascinated by American history, Adam can no longer tolerate the gaps in his own history. His brave facing of his monstrous gramps is meant to work as an adult rite of passage for young Adam, coming after the first rite involving his father's suicide. "The boys in our culture," Robert Bly writes, "have a continuing need for initiation into male spirit, but old men in general don't offer it" (1992: 13). In Bly's rhetoric, the grandfather is a clear case of the warrior gone to the dark side. It is Adam's merit that he turns his negative example as a positive warning against hatred. Uncomfortably placed for years at a crossroads between his rage at Eddie's shortcomings as a father and as a man, his need to force Sam to acknowledge his guilt, and the quest for his own elusive root, Adam grows to be an apparently balanced, autonomous man.

The road towards Adam's autonomous adult self begins with Eddie's suicide. Apart from the awful shock, the suicide brings suddenly his so-far unknown family in focus. Told repeatedly he had no living family left, Adam regards himself an oddity. Aunt Lee's revelations about Sam are received "not in shock or anger, but with enormous fascination. [...] Perhaps he wasn't so abnormal after all" (p. 53). This fascination is partly rooted in a morbid, teenage inclination to learn more about the sordid story of the grandfather. The father's insurance money allows him to attend college at Pepperdine between 1982 and 1986, where he conceives the mad plan of saving his grandfather. He graduates from the University of Michigan Law School in 1989 and chooses to work for Kravitz and Bane, a Jewish, Chicago firm which has been handling Sam's defense since 1983 as a pro-bono case. Sam dismissed them then, unable to tolerate for any longer the paradox of being defended by Jewish lawyers. As Adam tells the head of the pro-bono section, significantly named Goodman:

Nothing is understandable, Mr. Goodman. I do not understand how or why I'm standing here in this office at this moment. I always wanted to be a pilot, but I went to law school because I felt a vague calling to help society. Someone needed me, and I suppose I felt that someone was my demented grandfather. I had four job offers, and I picked this firm because it had the guts to represent him for free (p. 30).

Adam uses for his own personal ends the workaholic environment and resources of his firm. This is not easy, as he must face the resistance of the old patriarchal guard, represented by Daniel Rosen, who wishes to dismiss him on the grounds of his connection with Sam. His victory, the permission to carry out the case, in which Goodman helps him, signifies the demise of Rosen's fierce work ethics, identified with Jewishness rather than Protestantism.

Under contemporary capitalism, "work becomes an end in itself [...] very much in the way that morality is separated from the rest of our lives. There is always more to be done. We can never really settle, never relax. Self-denial is involved in the very definition of our masculinity" (Seidler 1991: 77). In the early stages of his odyssey, Adam hesitates between this paradoxically selfish workaholic self-denial, which should ensure his early retirement at 40, and devoting his energies to a job morally more rewarding. He finally eschews money in favor of employment with Hez Kerry, an African-American, Yale-educated lawyer who runs the Southern Capital Defense Group, an anti-death penalty quasi-governmental agency. Kerry dares Adam to take the job, arguing "it takes strong moral convictions to fight the system like this" (p. 441). And Adam agrees.

Since Grisham is not given to much psychological introspection, Adam remains a cipher. A few details, though, suggest his masculinity is not defined by his relationship with women. Aged 26 in 1990, when he meets Sam, Adam has no steady girlfriend, neither expectations of having one, or a family. His bachelor lifestyle includes a liking for strip shows, which he prefers watching "sitting in the rear, of course, where no one could see him" (p. 315) and hanging out in "trendy bars looking for lonely, beautiful women" (p. 315). But he shares the company of no woman, excepting Aunt Lee, with whom his rapport is very good. His mother Evelyn – remarried to a wealthy man – is distant; as for her he is, in Adam's own words, "a painful link to my father and his pathetic family" (p. 56). His relationship with his pretty sister Carmen – a psychology doctoral student at Berkeley – is correct but not especially close, even though, unlike his mother, she supports his quest.

This emotional detachment causes Adam no apparent problem. A really unsettling aspect of his behavior is his repeated, compulsive watching of a video about his grandfather's crimes that he has himself edited out of news clips assembled throughout his years of research on Sam. Seeing him watch this horror movie – "The Adventures of a Klan Bomber" – again and again sends a chill down the reader's spine. Lee, the only other person who sees the tape, breaks momentarily Adam's shell, but it is hard to say where his autonomy begins and his isolation ends. Understandably, Adam may have not recovered at all from Eddie's suicide. He tells Sam he was angry with Eddie both for having killed himself and for having lied to Adam about their family. Adam asks his dead father's body questions that are left unanswered and motivate his search for the "truth" about the past and his family. He tells Sam he wants to know to "make some sense of it" (p. 95); he thoroughly disagrees when Sam tells him he's lucky not to have a past.

In a sense, Adam is a miracle of stability. Adam and Carmen are living proof that the horrors of the patriarchal legacy can be overcome. Comparatively, Carmen is better adjusted: She has a steady relationship with a live-in boyfriend, is interested but not obsessed by family. Yet nothing actually explains how and why Adam has grown to be such a well-adjusted, moral young man – if he is at all. Becoming an adult without proper guidance either from men or women, Adam appears to be a miraculous product of a changed environment: He cannot help being compassionate, in the same way his grandfather couldn't help being full of hatred. Only his loneliness betrays a certain unbalance in his mental makeup.

Other factors such as education, the geographical distance from the South, the role of the hard-working mother, and, no doubt, changing morality and legislation must be instrumental in Adam's stability. Choice rather than change is a key word in this generational transition articulated by changing notions of masculinity. "The hegemonic masculinity of a historical era," Steve Cohan writes "does not define a proper male sex role for all men to follow so much as it articulates various social relations of power as an issue of gender normality" (1997: 35). Adam's acceptable level of normality – for normality is always relative, not absolute – conforms to early 1990s patterns supporting the search for autonomy from hegemonic masculinity. In 1987 Connell spoke of the present as "not a culmination but a point of choice" (p. 279). In 1993, Kathleen Gerson concluded that psychoanalytical theories of conditioning – from Freud to Chodorow – do not give an accurate picture of change and choice. "[...] Men," she wrote, "actively use and make sense of early experiences rather than simply being molded by them" (Gerson 1993: 42). Unexpected circumstances and unanticipated experiences carry an enormous weight in the making of contemporary men. This is not the only prerogative of Adam's generation, for men like Donnie and Marvin also made choices that separated them from their fathers' views of masculinity. What is new today is the coexistence of diverse models of masculinity based on active choice. Men, in short, are not changing in one single direction but opting for different models, more or less sanctioned by society.

One of these models is that of the autonomous man,⁴ that is to say, the man who does not see his life primarily in terms of commitment to a family, either as breadwinner or involved parent. Gerson refers to the growing numbers of men choosing to remain childless and single as part of a "male revolt;" she fixes the number of these men and the divorced men who have rejected parental duties at around 30% (1993: 11). She is concerned that American culture makes it impossible for men to adjust to a less selfish model, for "American culture idealizes both the good provider and the loner who remains free of obligations to work and family. It is impossible for any one man to live up to these contradictory ideals" (Gerson, 1993: 264). Men like Adam actually hint at another possibility, which may be equally popular among women: The focus on political commitment as personal commitment. Adam's choices follow the trend announced by David Morgan when he writes "the desire for change on the part of men is more likely to take on an ethical dimension rather than an existential or experimental dimension" (1992: 140). Adam wishes to devote his life to a moral cause of high *personal and political* significance for him. To his eyes, this is enough to regard himself as a man in full – hopefully also a full human being.

Women like Kathleen Gerson and Lynn Segal are possibly guilty of narrowing down the possibilities of change for men to their interpersonal relations with women. Segal wrote in 1990 “it is quite simply not in men's interest to change too much, unless women force them to” (p. 41). Gerson is certainly critical, though in a rather subdued way, of men who reject parenthood altogether. Grisham’s novel seemingly argues that change and choice in men’s lives needn’t be conditioned by women’s pressure or men’s selfishness. In Adam’s case, an aunt rather than a love interest plays an important role in his evolution, but this role is limited to her providing him with important information that can help him make his choices, rather than pointing out the road he must take. “Men and gender,” Hearn notes, “are produced in the conflicts and struggles of history and politics” (1992: 13). *The Chamber* dramatizes one of those conflicts, stressing the role of ethics and morality in the construction of contemporary masculinity beyond the confrontations between men and women.

The fact that no woman plays a major role in Adam’s life might suggest that, as Arthur Brittan observes, “what has changed is not male power as such, but its form, its presentation, its packaging” (1989: 2). This leads us back full circle to Jeffords’ denunciation of films like *Mississippi Burning* as endorsements of white men’s power. As happens in the case of feminism, the issue that cannot be solved is whether white men like Adam can embrace a genuinely fair stance and surrender a share of their power. Adam’s final choice of employment suggests he’s ready to contribute his power to a fair cause – the elimination of the death penalty – rather than simply to the continuation of white man’s power. Adam, a moral man if there is one, has been made by his family, his society, its laws, and, what is more important, his personal capacity to pass judgment on all of them and make his own, autonomous moral choices. The white man changes positively when he becomes, like Adam, capable of understanding the mistakes made by other men. This requires the ability to seek reconciliation even with those men who were wrong, while still pointing at their guilt and bearing the burden of shame their actions cause. This ability comes only from facing the evils of patriarchy with compassionate open eyes, for which women's presence is helpful but not strictly necessary.

According to John Grisham, white masculinity is regenerated only through bravely facing the worst aspects of the white man's legacy as Adam does when he meets Sam: By giving the phrase "taking it like a man" a positive meaning. The next step is for Adam is to overcome the need to punish himself for other men's misdeeds, as Eddie does. The path for the future is not necessarily committed fatherhood, though that may come, but devoting one's life to redressing injustice, as Adam literally chooses to do. This might be pure wishful thinking coming from popular fiction with few affinities to reality, but even supposing this were the case, the moral message challenges white men to use their sense of justice to end the injustice sanctioned by the law. Men are not supposed to take justice in their bloodied hands, as Sam did, or to misuse the law, as McAllister does. Men are expected to help change the law for the common good of all. Grisham’s appeal to white men’s sense of justice may be sentimental and populist – but it can also be effective.

ENDNOTES

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¹ This film narrates the FBI investigation that unmasked the Klansmen behind the murder of three civil right workers – one black, two whites – that took place in Mississippi in 1964.

² I am quoting from the Double Day edition (New York, 1994) of *The Chamber*.

³ For a history of the Klan, see Wade (1987). Forrest was not the founder but the organizer of the Klan as a regional structure in the period 1866-1869. The Cayhalls appear to have been steady supporters of the Klan even in its less active periods.

⁴ The autonomous man is not the so-called New Man, a wishful-thinking figure bandied about by journalists and popular essayists in the 1990s. The New Man is a strange combination of autonomy and commitment – he is both the perfect bachelor and the perfect father – that seems not to exist in real life.

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