

MASCULINITY AND GENDER MINIMALISM IN GEORGES PEREC'S *A MAN ASLEEP*

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Abstract



This article examines Georges Perec's *A Man Asleep* (1967/1990) through the concept of gender minimalism, rethinking how masculinity operates in narratives shaped by withdrawal, stillness, and reduction. The novel follows an unnamed student in Paris who abandons his studies, cuts himself off from social life, and drifts through a routine of sleeping, walking, watching, waiting, and doing almost nothing. His withdrawal does not develop into a clear rebellion, psychological confession, or search for renewal. It is presented through a stripped narrative form in which action and social attachment are steadily reduced. Building on this narrative premise, the article approaches the protagonist's disengagement as a sustained practice of narrative subtraction in which gender gradually loses its capacity to organise action and value. Engaging masculinity studies while remaining alert to the limits of its dominant frameworks, the analysis places Perec's novel against models that privilege performance, recognition, hierarchy, and reform. It argues that such approaches struggle to account for texts in which masculinity is neither affirmed nor openly challenged but becomes functionally irrelevant. Through close textual analysis, the article focuses on sleep, temporal suspension, indifference, spatial contraction, and bodily persistence as formal conditions that weaken masculine legibility without offering an alternative identity. The article concludes that *A Man Asleep* proposes no new masculine ideal and does not turn vulnerability into ethical insight. Instead, it stages a condition of neutrality in which masculinity survives only as residue, showing how literary minimalism can register moments when gender ceases to function as a meaningful organising principle.

Keywords: Masculinity, Gender Minimalism, Narrative Withdrawal, Stillness, Georges Perec

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Georges Perec's *A Man Asleep* portrays a young sociology student who does not get out of bed on the morning of his final examination. There is no precipitating trauma, no stated grievance, no oppositional stance. The protagonist moves through Paris, inhabits a narrow room, and settles into a state of indifference that is neither melancholic nor defiant. This refusal levels the narrative into a temporal and affective monotony that resists crisis and cure. This study begins from a point where masculinity no longer appears as a problem demanding resolution. Instead of asking how masculinity is challenged, repaired, or reimagined, it turns to what happens when masculinity ceases to organise narrative meaning altogether. In this study, the term gender minimalism is introduced as a way of describing this condition. The concept does not name an alternative masculinity, nor does it describe a form of resistance. It describes a gradual process of subtraction in which gendered identity no longer structures action, affect, or value, persisting only as a residual trace.

Perec is widely associated with the experimental practices of the Oulipo group and with literary forms shaped by repetition, formal constraint, and reduction. First published in French as *Un homme qui dort* in 1967, *A Man Asleep* appeared in English translation by Andrew Leak in 1990 alongside *Things: A Story of the Sixties*. Although more marginal within Anglophone criticism than Perec's later works, the novel nevertheless attracted attention in both the United Kingdom and the United States for its unusual representation of withdrawal and suspended existence. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Eder (1990) described the novel as revealing "a humanity on the far side of refusal," while Parrinder (1991), reviewing the text in the *London Review of Books*, drew attention to its formal and psychological intensity. Although the novel has commonly been approached through existentialism, formalism, and urban alienation, it has not received a clear attention within masculinity studies. From this perspective, the text has strong potential to contribute to ongoing debates in gender studies by examining a form of male subjectivity detached from familiar narratives of ambition, crisis, and self-realisation.

Critical work on *A Man Asleep* has largely approached the novel through postmodern malaise, withdrawal, and the critique of everyday life, while leaving masculinity analytically implicit. As Esin Kumlu observes, sleep in the novel functions as "a form of defense mechanism" through which "the physical pain of headache is tried to

be cured,” while the narrator’s insomnia is set alongside an “illusion of safety” (2016, p. 145). From this perspective, the body does not function as a site of resistance or meaning, but as a surface on which discomfort is contained. Kumlu further notes that “the body finds a solution for the physical pain through spending so much time in bed” (2016, p. 145), framing withdrawal as endurance instead of disruption. While this reading illuminates the novel’s attention to pain and vulnerability, they tend to treat masculinity as a condition of physical and psychological management, leaving unexamined how Perec’s formal strategies reshape the narrative role of gender itself.

Eric Beck Rubin situates *A Man Asleep* within an aesthetics of absence and dismantling, observing that Perec “built an identity out of this void by assiduously dismantling the means of storytelling and communication, from the level of plot down to the sentence, word and letter” (2015, p. 111). This reading clarifies how subtraction operates as a central formal principle, yet gender does not emerge as a category explicitly affected by this process. Andrew Leak similarly emphasises indifference as a structural and semiological stance not as a psychological symptom. He argues that the protagonist seeks “by a long and patient ascesis, to transform his very perception of the world into the physical analogue of a purely denotational language” (2009, p. 136). As Leak further notes, indifference “does not involve blanking [the world] out; it simply implies an absence of reaction, either positive or negative” (2009, p. 136). Across this body of criticism, withdrawal is most often read as depression, resistance, or critique. These accounts clarify the novel’s refusal of symbolic investment; however, they stop short of examining how such indifference alters the narrative functioning of masculinity.

Masculinity is best understood here not as an essence but as a social practice organised through action, recognition, and projection. Connell argues that “[m]asculinities do not exist prior to social behavior” but “come into existence as people act” and are “accomplished in everyday conduct” (2001, p. 18). Kimmel also claims that dominant manhood is associated with being “strong, successful, capable, reliable, in control” (1994, p. 125). These formulations help explain why masculine subjectivity is so often tied to movement, decision, and futurity. However, Perec in *A Man Asleep* unsettles this expectation by presenting a male protagonist who does not act, compete, or orient himself toward a horizon of becoming. The unnamed protagonist remains

resistant to prescribed gender roles, while the novel articulates this resistance through a consistently critical tone:

Just a little more effort, not even a little more effort, just a few more years, and you will be the middle manager, the esteemed colleague. Good husband, good father, good citizen. War veteran. One by one, you will climb, like a frog, the rungs on the ladder of success." (Perec, 1990, p. 153)

The protagonist's condition is not articulated as loss, protest, or transformation. It simply persists, gradually dissolving the usual coordinates of masculine subjectivity irrelevant. Perec's minimalist narrative form exposes a limit in masculinity studies once action, ambition, and visibility lose interpretive force. It is within this gap that the present study proposes gender minimalism as a way of accounting for moments in which masculinity ceases to organise narrative meaning altogether.

Theoretical Framework: Masculinity Studies

Masculinity studies emerged as a corrective to a critical tradition in which men were treated as the unmarked norm of humanity. While feminist scholarship has rigorously exposed gender as a structure of power, male subjectivity has often remained analytically implicit, treated as neutral rather than gendered within the logic of androcentrism.¹ The intervention of masculinity studies lay precisely in disturbing this neutrality. As Brod and Kaufman famously observed, the field was founded on the need to examine "men as men, rather than as generic human beings whose gender went unnoticed or undertheorized" (1994, p. 4). The turn toward masculinity studies reframed masculinity as a historically contingent and socially organised formation not a biological given. R. W. Connell's relational model was central to this shift. Rejecting essentialist definitions, Connell situates masculinity within configurations of power and hierarchy. Hegemonic masculinity, she argues, is "the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (1995, p. 76). Masculinity, in this account, is neither singular nor stable, but

¹ Androcentrism refers to the tendency to treat male experience as the neutral human standard while positioning women as gendered or secondary subjects. This idea is central to Gilman's early critique of androcentric culture and Beauvoir's account of woman as "Other" (Beauvoir, 1949/2011; Gilman, 1911). Bem (1993) later theorises androcentrism as one of the major cultural lenses through which gender inequality is reproduced. Bailey et al. (2020) provide empirical support for this framework by showing that people tend to associate the category "human" more readily with men than with women.

kept through socially authorised practices that define what is culturally legitimate. Connell's emphasis on hierarchy established masculinity as relationally produced: "Different masculinities do not sit side-by-side like dishes on a smorgasbord. There are definite social relations between them" (2000, p. 10). Yet this framework assumes that masculinity becomes visible through action. As Connell notes, masculinities "come into existence as people act" and are "accomplished in everyday conduct" (2001, p. 18). When literary texts present male subjects who refuse action altogether, this assumption begins to weaken.

Michael Kimmel similarly features recognition, arguing that "masculinity is a homosocial enactment" driven by the desire for validation from other men (1994, p. 129). Even when masculinity falters, it remains invested in visibility. What this model struggles to address has been a subject who abandons recognition itself. Todd Reeser's emphasis on masculinity's "cracks and fissures" (2010, p. 14) acknowledges instability, yet still presumes an attachment to gendered meaning. More recent models, such as Eric Anderson's theory of inclusive masculinity, continue to rely on visibility and plurality (2009, pp. 8-9). Across these approaches, masculinity remains something to be expressed or negotiated or even performed. This emphasis on performance, visibility, and reform points to a conceptual limit within masculinity studies. As Alex Hobbs observes, critical accounts have tended to privilege "what men have achieved rather than how they have lived," leaving everyday withdrawal, stillness, and disengagement underexamined (2013, p. 390). Literary texts, as it will be exemplified through *A Man Asleep*, often work through precisely these conditions. This study does not aim extending masculinity studies by adding another typology or alternative ideal. It simply asks what happens when masculinity no longer functions as an organising principle at all.

Masculinity in Sleep

Education, ambition, and productivity function as key social mechanisms through which masculinity becomes visible and validated. Hobbs observes that literary criticism and historical scholarship have often privileged men's public achievements over the lived textures of male experience (2013, p. 390). This leaves personal relations, health, and domestic experience comparatively neglected. This achievement centred model is also consistent with Kimmel's account of "Marketplace Masculinity," which he

associates with "aggression, competition, anxiety" (1994, p. 124). Perec's protagonist withdraws precisely from this economy of achievement. By refusing the examination, the degree, and the future professional path attached to them, he interrupts the narrative machinery through which masculinity is normally made legible.

This interruption initially takes shape through the refusal of the examination: "Later, the day of your exam comes and you do not get up. It's not a premeditated action, or rather it's not an action at all, but an absence of action, an action you do not perform" (Perec, 1990, p. 138). Here the narration refuses to frame the missed examination as a gesture to be read, judged, or witnessed. The protagonist avoids not only intention or protest, but also performance itself. The examination would normally feature masculinity as competence, readiness, and institutional visibility. Its quiet non-occurrence dismantles that staging altogether. In this sense, gender minimalism signals the absence of performance that deprives masculinity of the conditions through which it would ordinarily acquire narrative weight.

In dominant narrative traditions, sleep rarely functions as an experience in its own right. In these narratives, sleep delays action until masculine intervention restores movement and plot. Fairy tale criticism has shown how canonical narratives often organise female characters through passivity, waiting, and suspended agency, especially in tales such as "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White" (Bacchilega, 1997; Warner, 1995). Perec's *A Man Asleep* unsettles this logic by assigning sustained dormancy, repetition, and temporal stagnation to a male subject. From the opening pages, sleep is described not as a fall from productivity or a pause before recovery, but as a practical state that simply continues: "You went to bed early, you slept peacefully... You do not move; you will not move" (Perec, 1990, p. 138). The insistence on immobility is crucial. Sleep here does not anticipate awakening, nor does it mark a deviation from an otherwise normative rhythm of action. It becomes part of an ongoing temporal texture in which nothing is resolved, and nothing accumulates. As such, Perec's treatment of sleep refuses the binary logic through which sleep and wakefulness are ordinarily opposed: "You are not asleep but sleep will never come again. You are not awake and you will never wake up" (Perec, 1990, p. 194). The sentence denies both terms of the binary without offering a third category to replace them. What remains is a suspended temporality in which neither alertness nor rest restores narrative momentum. This

ambiguity is not a psychological symptom awaiting explanation. The novel consistently and explicitly resists framing the protagonist's condition as exhaustion, illness, or despair. Instead, sleep is reduced to biological continuity: "All you really need is your sleep, silence around you, your own silence, stillness... the rising and falling of your rib-cage, the beating of your heart [are] the only evidence of your continuing and patient existence" (Perec, 1990, p. 161). The emphasis on breath and pulse require a particular focus. These rhythms sustain life without generating intention, memory, or projection. Wakefulness, which ordinarily signals readiness and responsiveness, no longer performs its narrative function. As such, the protagonist does not miss opportunities, he rather moves beyond the conditions that give opportunity meaning. With time flattened, masculinity loses any temporal ground from which it might reassert itself. Sleep and wakefulness no longer carry narrative force, leaving gender without a rhythm to organise meaning.

The idea of gender minimalism becomes especially apparent when suspension carries into the future that masculinity is usually expected to secure. Perec lists what will not take place: "You won't finish your degree, you won't begin a postgraduate thesis. You will study no more" (Perec, 1990, p. 139). The blunt repetition matters. These negations do not gather into tragedy, critique, or refusal in any expressive sense. They quietly empty futurity itself, withdrawing the expectation that life must proceed through staged achievement and deferred reward. Because masculinity is so often narratively constructed by promised advancement, this evacuation of the future deprives it of one of its most reliable supports. Here the issue is not simply suspended career path, but the temporal structure through which masculine identity ordinarily takes shape. The refusal does not break a line of development so much as withdraw the expectation that life must move forward in ordered stages.

At its most explicit, *A Man Asleep* presents indifference as a force that dismantles the conditions of meaning itself. When Perec writes that "indifference dissolves language and scrambles the signs" (1990, p. 185), he identifies not silence but the collapse of the relations that allow signs to function. Language remains, yet it no longer carries intention, direction, or desire. The passage advances this suspension through a series of paired contradictions: "you are patient and you are not waiting," "you are free and you do not choose" (Perec, 1990, pp. 185-186). These formulations strip familiar

terms of their operative assumptions, suspending agency without redirecting it toward any alternative form of action or intention. Accordingly, negation becomes structural. The withdrawal of agency is made explicit through the suspension of claim making itself: "You ask for nothing. You demand nothing" (Perec, 1990, p. 186). This refusal of demand removes the subject from any economy of exchange or assertion. Perception continues without direction such as "hearing without listening, seeing without looking" as attention disperses across minor details such as cracks, stones, passing cars, and clouds, without hierarchy or emphasis (Perec, 1990, pp. 185-186). From a gender minimalist perspective, the passage marks the moment at which masculinity loses its symbolic footing. Once choice, ambition, and hierarchy cease to operate, gender persists only as residue, present but no longer effective. Indifference functions instead as a neutralising force that suspends the very logic of valuation not as refusal or rejection as clearly indicated in the fiction: "You reject nothing, you refuse nothing. You have ceased going forward, but that is because you weren't going forward anyway, you're not setting off again, you have arrived, you can see no reason to go any further..." (Perec, 1990, p. 143). Then, masculinity, which relies on ranking and differentiation to stabilise itself, finds no room in a narrative economy where nothing is preferable or prioritized.

Minimal Presence: Space and Body

The novel develops gender minimalism by reducing masculinity to its barest spatial and bodily traces. This reduction becomes most visible in the organisation of interior and exterior spaces and in the diminished status of the body that inhabits them. As the narrative withdraws from hierarchy, ambition, and differentiation, spaces such as rooms, streets, and interiors cease to function as a field of movement, control, or expansion. The perception of the space becomes instead a condition of minimal presence, one that neither demands action nor offers orientation. The focus is not on where the protagonist goes, but on how little space he needs to remain. However, the novel does not simply portray a retreat into smaller spaces. It rather constructs a spatial order in which any potential masculine authority can lose its intelligibility. The protagonist's room is described in terms of sufficiency rather than lack: "You live in a narrow room, a narrow bed, a narrow life" (Perec, 1990, p. 160). Repeated nearly thirty-five times, the word "narrow" draws space, body, and existence onto the same diminished scale. The contraction offers no impulse toward correction or escape. It

settles instead into a way of dwelling that leaves little room for the expansive gestures through which masculine authority is usually asserted.

Framing landscape as a site of affective restoration or ethical meaning is strongly challenged. Instead, spatial environments are represented as neutral, refusing to offer either refuge or challenge. This treatment of space becomes particularly visible in the novel's engagement with nature, where familiar pastoral cues are introduced only to be immediately withdrawn:

Bird-song rings out: chirps, roulades, raucous cries. The great trees tremble. Nature is there and it beckons you lovingly. You chew on blades of grass that you quickly spit out: you are not really inspired by the landscape, or moved by the tranquillity of the fields, you are neither irritated nor soothed by the silence of the countryside. You are only occasionally fascinated by an insect, a stone, a fallen leaf, a tree: sometimes you spend hours contemplating a tree, describing it, dissecting it: the roots, the trunk, the branches, the leaves, every leaf, every rib of every leaf, every branch again, and the unending play of the indifferent shapes that your eager gaze solicits or conjures up: a face, a town, a maze or a path, coats of arms and cavalcades. (Perec, 1990, p. 153)

Here the opening gestures recall the language of romantic invitation, yet the response that follows is marked by a strong sense of absence. The protagonist remains unmoved. He is "not really inspired by the landscape," nor "moved by the tranquillity of the fields," neither irritated nor soothed by rural silence. Affect is suspended on both sides. What replaces emotional response is a prolonged, almost obsessive attention to form. The tree is not encountered as symbol or refuge but broken down into parts: roots, trunk, branches, leaves, ribs. Description multiplies without resolution, producing accumulation further reinforcing meaning. Nature is neither feminised nor romanticised, nor is it mastered. It becomes a surface for neutral observation, where looking persists without interpretation. In this way, space ceases to serve as a stage for masculine projection, reinforcing the novel's movement toward gender minimalism by stripping landscape of its capacity to organise identity or value.

Similarly, public space offers no counterweight to this contraction. When the protagonist moves through the city, he occupies positions that are spatially recessive

rather than marginal in a dramatic sense: "You sit on benches, in cafés, in cinemas, always at the back" (Perec, 1990, p. 168). Being "at the back" is not framed as exclusion or resistance. It carries no narrative grievance. The centre, ordinarily associated with visibility and control, simply ceases to matter. Movement through the city becomes circular and non-accumulative, following routes that return without progression. Space no longer organises power or identity; it merely contains the body as it persists.

The narrator repeatedly describes the body in terms that reduce it to biological continuity beyond its expressive capacity. Sleep, breathing, and circulation replace intention, desire, and will. He observes that "the rising and falling of your rib cage, the beating of your heart [are] the only evidence of your continuing and patient existence" (Perec, 1990, p. 161). The phrasing remains deliberately restrained. There is no interiority offered for interpretation, no affect waiting to be uncovered. The body appears only to the extent that it continues to sustain itself. Reduced to respiration and pulse, embodiment is stripped of the cultural scripts that usually render the male body legible as productive, desiring, or agential. This reduction is sharpened through comparisons that remove human distinction altogether: "You live like a rat. Like a mollusc. Like a fly" (Perec, 1990, p. 177). These similes do not operate metaphorically in any redemptive sense. They do not elevate or debase. Instead, they associate the protagonist with minimal forms of life defined by persistence rather than intention.

It is also notable that Perec refuses to translate this bodily minimalism into suffering. The text insists on affective neutrality: "You exist without joy and without sadness, without a future and without a past" (Perec, 1990, p. 177). Absence here is not framed as loss. It is presented as a condition that neither demands explanation nor invites recovery. The absence of affect forecloses familiar interpretive routes such as trauma or existential injury. Masculinity cannot return as a story of damage because damage no longer signifies: "You are just a murky shadow, a hard kernel of indifference, a neutral gaze avoiding the gaze of others. Speechless lips, dead eyes" (Perec, 1990, p. 145). The body neither seeks repair nor recognition. It continues, withdrawn from the emotional economies through which masculinity is typically made legible.

The culmination of this reduction is articulated through the language of transparency and disappearance. Perec writes: "You learn the art of transparency,

immobility, inexistence. You learn how to be a shadow and how to look at men as if they were stones" (1990, p. 163). The body does not vanish, but it loses opacity. It no longer draws attention or invites interpretation. Here masculinity, which is ordinarily inscribed on the body through labour, competition, and demonstration, finds no surface on which to operate. To be "transparent" here is not to be vulnerable or exposed, but to be unreadable within existing symbolic frameworks. This condition reaches its most distilled expression in one of the novel's most striking passages: "You are invisible, limpid, transparent. You no longer exist... simply, self evidently, like a drop of water forming on a drinking tap" (Perec, 1990, p. 177). The comparison reduces existence to a physical process without intention, memory, or narrative direction. The body persists as a phenomenon, not as a subject. In this state, masculinity cannot be reasserted, revised, or mourned. It has no function left to perform. Gender minimalism thus culminates not in the transformation of masculine identity, but in its quiet exhaustion, leaving behind a body that continues to live without the burden of signification.

Conclusion

This study has approached *A Man Asleep* as a literary exploration of masculine withdrawal organised not through crisis, resistance, or reform, but through ongoing reduction. By attending to Perec's use of dormancy, temporal flattening, indifference and bodily minimalism, the analysis has shown how the novel systematically weakens the narrative mechanisms through which masculinity typically becomes legible. It has resisted a sense of dramatizing masculine failure or transformation, allowing withdrawal to persist long enough for ambition, hierarchy, and projection to lose their organising force. In *A Man Asleep*, masculinity is neither openly contested nor explicitly dismantled. It fades through a sense of neutrality sustained throughout the story. This fading distinguishes Perec's novel from narratives that seek to recuperate male vulnerability as moral insight or political critique, and it complicates theoretical frameworks that continue to privilege visibility, performance, and agency as the primary sites of masculine analysis.

Methodologically, this study suggests that literary texts structured around stillness and repetition can expose limits within masculinity studies itself. When action, recognition, and futurity are suspended, masculinity no longer appears as a problem to

be negotiated, but as a category that gradually loses relevance within the narrative economy. Attending to such moments requires a critical vocabulary capable of reading absence, inertia, and neutrality not as interpretive gaps, but as meaningful formal conditions. To this end, gender minimalism has been proposed as a way of responding to this gap. The term is not employed to name an alternative masculinity, nor does it function as a corrective model within masculinity studies. Instead, it refers to narrative strategies through which gendered identity is progressively reduced until it no longer structures meaning, action, or value.

By reading *A Man Asleep* through gender minimalism, the article has aimed to shift attention from how masculinity is enacted or repaired to when and how it ceases to matter. It has been discussed that the novel does not portray the transformation of the male subject, but the exhaustion of the narrative demands placed upon him. Masculinity survives only as a remainder, attached to a body that continues to exist without symbolic obligation. Recognising this remainder allows literary criticism to approach withdrawal not as a failure of meaning, but as a mode through which gender quietly relinquishes its organising power.

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