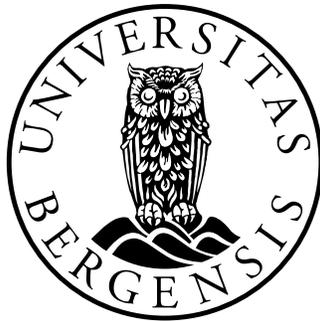


Violent Ends:

Masculinity and School Shooting in Young Adult Fiction

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Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven utforsker fremstillingen av maskuliniteter i ungdomsromanen *Violent Ends* (2015), redigert og del-forfattet av Shaun David Hutchinson. *Violent Ends* er resultatet av et samarbeidsprosjekt mellom atten anerkjente amerikanske forfattere av ungdomslitteratur og er en av mange ungdomsromaner som i løpet av de siste femten årene har tatt opp et tema som er svært relevant for samtiden, særlig i (men også utenfor) USA; skoleskytinger. Oppgaven analyserer fremstillinger og forståelser av maskuliniteter og disses relasjon til aggressiv og voldelig atferd. Til tross for at skoleskytinger er et eksplisitt kjønnnet fenomen forblir dette perspektivet i stor grad utelatt fra mediebildet og allmennhetens forståelse. En analyse av dette relativt nye fenomenet fra et kjønnsperspektiv har dermed mye å tilføre debatten. Forskningsfeltet på menn og maskuliniteter har vist en økende interesse for temaet skoleskytinger samt litterære fremstillinger av maskuliniteter. Likevel eksisterer det få omfattende studier av litterære representasjoner av skoleskytinger fra et kjønnsperspektiv, i den grad jeg kjenner til det. Fremstillinger av karakterers kjønnsuttrykk i *Violent Ends* kritiserer og – til en viss grad – dekonstruerer normative oppfatninger av hva maskulinitet er eller burde være, og leses dermed som kritisk til aggressiv og voldelig oppførsel som en underforstått, ‘naturlig’ del av mannlige tenåringers kjønnsidentitet og -uttrykk. Jeg argumenterer for at innad i romanens kontekst, som er skolemiljøet i en hvit middelklasse-forstad, hylles uttrykk for maskulinitet som er kontrollerende og dominerende (dominating). Disse kjønnsuttrykkene ivaretar sin overlegne plass i kjønnshierarkiet gjennom trusler om og/eller faktisk vold og aggressiv oppførsel, og vedlikeholder dermed patriarkatet gjennom undertrykkelse av kvinner og underordnede (subordinate) maskuliniteter. Dette miljøet både tolerer og oppfordrer til bruk av vold som del av mannlige kjønnsuttrykk.

Denne oppgaven har som mål å bidra til vår forståelse av utviklingen av og uttrykkene for tenåringmaskulinitet i relasjon til vold og skoleskytinger i USA. Den er imidlertid ikke et forsøk på å identifisere en typologi hvis mål er å gjenkjenne varselsignaler eller lignende ved skoleskytinger eller disses gjerningsmenn. Til tross for at forebyggende og gjenreisende arbeid er en særlig viktig del av arbeidet med skoleskytinger er det forfatterens forståelse at utarbeidelsen av en slik typologi har vist seg svært vanskelig og kan få alvorlige konsekvenser for personer som blir feilaktig utpekt.

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Introduction

“The story you are about to read is a work of fiction. Nothing – and everything – about it is real”

(Strasser 2002, 5).

The past fifteen years have seen an increase in the popularity of literature on school shootings in the United States. Judging by the number of titles, this relates particularly to the genre of young adult fiction (YA). Mirroring the upsurge of the topic in politics and the media, YA authors are drawing attention to issues related to school violence in complex and nuanced ways. Incidents of school shootings inevitably lead to debates seeking understanding and preventive measures in both public, private, and political realms. Yet, the media’s portrayal of causal explanations fails to take the complexities of factors found by social scientists into account. Despite psychologists’ and sociologists’ increasing concerns with school shootings as a distinctly gendered and racialized phenomenon, these factors remain largely absent in the public and mediated discourse.

Considering acts of school shootings as markedly gendered, this thesis will attempt to shed light on such acts through a masculinities studies perspective. By examining literary portrayals of masculinities – especially the relationship between the perpetrator’s enactment of masculinity and the normative understanding of hegemonic masculinity – the thesis aims to investigate how gender performances connect to violence in general and school shootings specifically. The main body of the thesis consists of two chapters. Chapter one outlines the social and gendered structures and hierarchies of the novel and examines performances of masculinities within this context through a gendered lens. Once the contexts within which violence occurs have been established and examined, chapter two will address acts of violence in the novel, leading up

to the particular act of the shooting. The analysis demonstrates that the cultural constraints placed on performances of masculinities function both as an *incentive*, in that the perpetrator's experience of failing to live up the cultural scripts of masculine behavior contributes to their sense of despair¹; and as an *enabler*, as hegemonic masculinity – or the ideal thereof – justifies and encourages the use of violence as an expression of gendered power.

Novel Selection

Given the emerging research on school shootings in recent years, the novel selection process focused on publications within the past ten years; however, other novels published earlier were also considered based on their reviews. Abstracts of novels as well as reviews by different sources were compiled and examined, in addition to background information on the authors, and the list was then narrowed down to the following novels, all of which were acquired and read before the final selection was made: *Hate List* (2009) by Jennifer Brown; *Shooter* (2004) by Walter Dean Myers; *Endgame* (2006) by Nancy Garden; *Silent Alarm* (2015) by Jennifer Banash; *This Is Where It Ends* (2016) by Marieke Nijkamp; *Give a Boy a Gun* (2002) by Todd Strasser; *Violent Ends* (2015), edited by Shaun David Hutchinson; *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) by Lionel Shriver; and *Nineteen Minutes* (2007) by Jodi Picoult. The novel selection was originally not limited to the genre of young adult literature but was compiled based on the following criteria; American authorship, year of publication, abstract, and reviews. This process of research and novel selection demonstrated the predominance of the topic within young adult fiction, which

¹ When referring to perpetrators in general, as opposed to the specific character portrayed in *Violent Ends*, the plural pronoun will be used for its gender-neutral qualities; while perpetrators of school shootings are, by and large, male, there are female school shooters as well, and the use of a gender-neutral pronoun is meant to avoid generalizing *all* school shooters.

steered the project in that direction. However, novels outside of this genre were also included on the preliminary list, for comparison purposes across genres. These include *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Nineteen Minutes*; the remaining novels on the list are all within the YA fiction genre.

Having read the novels on the preliminary list, *Violent Ends* stood out in both form and content. A collaborative work of this character featuring school shootings is, to my knowledge, unprecedented. Furthermore, the authors of *Violent Ends* have, in my opinion, created a discourse on school shootings and its perpetrators that largely mirrors the nuances of sociological research, which are frequently simplified in media portrayals and public consciousness. Originally, this project aimed at analyzing and comparing several novels in order to examine how the discourse on school shootings is perceived, reflected, and (potentially) challenged in different novels. The decision to focus on *Violent Ends* only was made because of its complexity and structure, as it reads as several different, but interconnected, texts. Additionally, an emphasis was placed on the novels' potential to engage young readers in the debate and provide them with complex subject matter that goes far beyond one-dimensional and sometimes stereotypical portrayals of perpetrators, environments, and actions. *Violent Ends* proved to address important topics beyond school shootings, such as bullying, domestic abuse, gender non-conformity, sexual orientation, identity, stalking and predatory behavior, and the dynamics of (romantic) teenage relationships, to mention some. Thus, the authors of *Violent Ends* manage to communicate that events such as school shootings do not happen in a vacuum while simultaneously providing the readers with a multitude of young characters and their struggles, enhancing the probability of readers becoming involved, identifying with protagonists, and reflecting on important topics. As a teacher-in-training, I highly valued these nuances and diversities for their potential in the EFL classroom as well as the overall adolescent reading experience.

Violent Ends as a Collaborative Work

I don't expect readers to walk away feeling sympathy for Kirby Matheson, the fictional school shooter in *Violent Ends*. That's not what the book is about. What I hope is that they'll read it and realize that he wasn't just a school shooter. He was a brother and a gamer and a friend and a band geek and a book worm. He wasn't just one thing. Yes, he was a school shooter, but he was a person too. (Hutchinson 2015c)

The idea to write a novel about a school *shooter* rather than a school *shooting* originated with Shaun David Hutchinson. In the process of deciding how to go about such a project, he compiled a list of YA authors "he could only dream of working with" (Hutchinson, n.d.). Overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the responses, the collaborative work of *Violent Ends* began: "We worked together online, trading inspiration, feeding off each other's ideas, and hammering out the details of the school layout and what kind of car Kirby Matheson drove" (Hutchinson, n.d.). While the shooting is present throughout the novel, it is rarely the main focus. Rather, the different perspectives of the protagonists are characterized by their struggle to cope with and make sense of the tragedy. Some were present during the shooting and are left to endure the trauma that follows; some lost friends; some were left unscathed but now find themselves in an environment marked by shock; and, finally, some were killed. While the shooting is outlined early on through media reports and characters' emotional reactions, the act itself serves more as a backdrop to the different stories that are told – stories that range from childhood memories to abusive parents to romantic crushes and relationships. The protagonists all tell their own story; yet, these stories are interconnected – by the shooting, yes, but also by a multitude of other elements present in everyday lives. Hutchinson explains that *Violent Ends* is technically an anthology but urges people to read it as a novel (2015b). Anthologies tend to be "collections of

stories connected by a theme or idea,” Hutchinson argues, but each story featured in *Violent Ends* is “set in the same world, and is connected by the same tragedy” (2015b). Therefore, the decision was made not to include the authors’ names under each story; “that way the stories feel more like chapters of a traditional novel²” (2015b).

One of the questions that arises for the reader is the exclusion of Kirby’s point of view. In a blog post titled “Violent Ends – Kirby’s Voice,” Hutchinson explains that while it “only seemed natural” to include the point of view of the shooter in a story about a school shooting, the decision was made to omit his perspective because of the authors’ desire not to “glorify violence or exploit tragedy” (2015a). “We live in a society that often turns monsters into celebrities,” Hutchinson states, and explains that he “felt that by directly giving Kirby a voice in the book, [Hutchinson] might end up glorifying what he’d done” (2015a). Furthermore, it was important to avoid a definitive explanation of *why* Kirby became a school shooter; “Not only did I think doing so would add to the attempt to profile potentially violent young men, but I wanted readers to form their own conclusions” (Hutchinson, 2015a). Hutchinson also mentions the issue of the narrators’ reliability, questioning “Who’s to say [Kirby’s] account would have even been true?” (2015a). While it does, in a way, make sense to include the perpetrators’ perspective in a novel that is meant to focus on the shooter rather than the shooting, Kirby’s rationale of his actions might have been not only unreliable and potentially served to glorify or defend his actions, but would also provide the readers with the one ‘true’ explanation. Thus, omitting Kirby’s perspective forces readers to better engage with the story, which likely encourages them to reflect upon – and possibly participate in the larger debate around – school shootings as a societal issue. Hutchinson believes that “while other peoples’ perceptions of Kirby are most certainly filtered through the

² References to *Violent Ends* will, therefore, be marked with page numbers only, as opposed to referring to the author of each chapter. This is to avoid confusing quotations from the novel with secondary references.

lens of their own experiences, when take[n] as a whole, they offer a far more honest narrative about Kirby's actual life than Kirby himself would have been capable of providing." (2015a).

Conceptualizing Masculinities

The study of men and masculinities comprises a relatively new field which arose as a result of feminist movements whose critique of the dynamics of gender recognized men as distinctly gendered. Prior to the 1960s, white men enjoyed a measure of power because they were considered 'unmarked' in terms of gender (Robinson 2000); that is, the male experience was the human experience. Because "gender" appeared to refer to "women," being male and white constituted not only a norm but also a "natural" kind of identity (Buchbinder 2013, 20). Since feminism marked men as explicitly gendered, increasing attention was brought to examining men's lives through a gendered lens.

In line with feminist thinking, masculinities studies recognize gender as performative and distinct from biological sex. Masculinity is a social construct, which is time- and context-specific and, thus, non-stable; constructions of masculinities change over time and differ from culture to culture, as well as within cultures, and will continue to change under the influence of cultural and societal changes. Masculinity is a relational construct; it would be impossible to imagine the concept without its counterpart – femininity. Further, masculinities are performed in relation to other masculinities. David Buchbinder argues that masculinity asserts itself in relation or opposition to women and homosexual men (2013, 98). Thus, any changes in the cultural perception of homosexuality and femininity will influence our understanding of masculinity – as evidenced with the 'marking' of men as unmistakably gendered – and vice versa; "Particular

masculinities are composed historically, and may also be decomposed, contested and replaced” (Connell 2002, 48).

Hierarchies of Masculinities

Among the important developments in the field of masculinities studies is the recognition of the multiplicity of masculinities and the hierarchies within which these are organized. Raewyn Connell’s concept of “hegemonic masculinity” refers, in its simplest terms, to “the form of masculinity which is culturally dominant in a given setting” (2015, 43). Connell specifies that hegemonic masculinity “is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (2005, 76). This concept has been subject to extensive and varying critique from different standpoints, resulting in its revision (see Connell and Messerschmidt 2015). Despite its shortcomings, the concept remains useful – particularly in the absence of a replacement – for examining the complexity of masculine performances and its connections to societal structures.

Although concepts of masculinity and notions of what constitutes hegemonic masculinity differ according to time and space, there will inevitably be a recognizable and highly visible form of masculinity against which other masculinities are assessed. Hegemonic masculinity is often represented in terms of character traits such as “physical size, muscularity, strength, bravery and resourcefulness, fairness, competitiveness, stoicism...” (Buchbinder 2013, 89), or through idealized standards such as “being brave, dependable, and strong, emotionally stable, as well as critical, logical and rational” (Coston and Kimmel 2012, 98). Such identifying characteristics are relevant in that they represent what is normatively considered ‘ideal’ expressions and

embodiments of manhood, but they nevertheless describe a certain variant of hegemonic masculinity limited to a particular historical and cultural context, and these are constantly subjected to challenge and renegotiation. When applying the term in critical analysis one must, therefore, be aware of its limitations. Furthermore, Connell points out that the power of hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily stem from numbers; rather, very few men exhibit this distinct, idealized masculinity (2005, 79). Hegemonic masculinity, then, as much as it is related to men's power over women, also denotes men's power over other men in what Connell describes as hierarchies of masculinity (2015, 5).

At the very top of this hierarchy is hegemonic masculinity. *Subordinated* masculinities are defined in opposition to hegemonic masculinity, the most conspicuous being gay masculinity, but other masculinities are included as well. Common to them is an association with femininity; the subordination of both gay masculinities and other heterosexual masculinities is cemented with terms like 'wimp,' 'sissy,' 'nerd,' etc. (Connell 2005, 79). In between these polar opposites of hegemony and subordination is what Connell terms *complicit* masculinity; "constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy" (2005, 79). Although few men actually meet the normative standards of hegemonic masculinity, the majority of men benefit from its hegemony and are thus complicit in the hegemonic project. It is important to emphasize that these different masculinities are useful in order to analyze relations *between* them, not as distinct personality types, which they are not.

In their article "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," Connell and Messerschmidt stress that masculinities can be analyzed at different levels:

1. Local: constructed in the arenas of face-to-face interaction of families, organizations, and immediate communities, as typically found in ethnographic and life-history research;

2. Regional: constructed at the level of the culture or the nation-state, as typically found in discursive, political, and demographic research; and
3. Global: constructed in transnational arenas such as world politics and transnational business and media, as studies in the emerging research on masculinities and globalization. (2005, 849)

These different levels are inevitably linked to each other. The analysis of masculinities in *Violent Ends* must, therefore, be understood in the context of this interplay, particularly between the regional and local level. Although many have outlined typical traits associated with hegemonic masculinity in the United States, for example, Connell points out that “the masculinity that is hegemonic at a local level may be significantly different from (though usually overlapping with) the hegemonic masculinity at a regional or global level” (2014, 9). Despite Connell and Messerschmidt’s definition of the regional level as the culture or nation-state, when referring to the United States it may be beneficial – if not necessary – to separate between the national level of the nation-state and the regional level of individual states or regions within the nation. Given the diversity of the country, regional variations can be very divergent, and the question is whether we can talk about “American” masculinity at all. Further, Michael S. Kimmel and Matthew Mahler (2003) argue that school shootings are not a national problem but a series of local ones that occur in specific areas or regions. Therefore, the “regional level” here refers to particular areas within the United States. Furthermore, a distinction will be made between the local level or the local community and the explicit environment of high school, as the normative perception of gender performance likely differs – although remains closely connected – from the community at large to the high school environment, especially with regard to the latter’s formative aspect and social organization.

Masculinities Studies Beyond Sociology

For the past forty years, extensive contributions on topics related to men and masculinities have been made within different fields of study that have advanced our understanding of its relationship to power and patriarchy, sexual orientation, education, violence and crime, health, family life, and, quite recently, masculinities in a global world and the relationship between global and local masculinities, particularly beyond the Western world (see, for example, Kimmel, Hearn and Connell 2005; Davis, Evans and Lorber 2006). Despite the large body of research, past and present, on topics related to men and masculinities, there are some notable shortages. While the interest in masculinities and the intersectionality between sociological approaches and other fields such as psychology, anthropology, literary and cultural studies, and violence prevention have grown, most contributions stem from the field of sociology. Such additions have focused extensively on structures of power and patriarchy and only recently have we seen a shift in perspective toward the personal experiences of men's lives (Riemer 1987, 293). Although personal experiences will be an important source of examination in this thesis, these do not happen in a vacuum; thus, the societal and institutional structures and arenas within which masculinities are performed will be an inextricable part of the analysis.

An increasing focus on men's personal and every-day experiences and expressions of masculinities demonstrates the contribution of literary masculinities to the overall field of masculinities studies and vice versa. Literature is, at least in part, a reflection of society, and will always be influenced by the context within which it is produced. In "Rereading American Literature From a Men's Studies Perspective," James D. Riemer calls for analyses of literary masculinities through viewing American literature as "social documents reflecting our society's ideals of masculinity" (1987, 290). Riemer argues that the relationship between masculinities

studies and literary masculinities is a reciprocal one; examining literary masculinities can impact our understanding of issues related to masculinity and men's lives, and contributions from different fields of masculinities studies, in turn, can better our reading of literature, thus affecting the nature of literary criticism itself (293). Nevertheless, reading fictional accounts, literary or otherwise, as illustrative of society should involve cautious and critical analysis. As David Buchbinder points out, "representations are encoded in and through ideological discourses abroad in the culture, and, therefore, will inevitably articulate the viewpoint and the advantage of *some* group in the culture. The uncritical acceptance of a particular representation thus tacitly and unthinkingly affirms a particular ideological structure" (1998, vi; italics in the original). This is not to say that fictional images cannot better our understanding of societal conditions, but in doing so, we must approach them with caution and be wary of whose representation of society is offered.

Furthermore, literature has more to offer than its illustrative aspect. As art, literature possesses "a kind of knowledge about masculinity that is not only relevant for a better understanding of its construction or specific configuration, functioning, and supposed defects, but also feature[s] a co-constructive potential which enable[s] the reader to critically re-construct their masculinity" (Horlacher 2015, 4). The process of reading involves a mediation between text and reader, a process that has been widely appraised for its potential to foster personal reflection and development (see, for example, Bredella 2006; Iser 1972; Maley 2001). Understanding gender identity as "a potentially unstable, contradictory, and evolving cultural product akin to language and the narrative operations of literature," Stefan Horlacher argues that the literary text "could really be seen as a privileged space and epistemological medium where the manifold mechanisms of configuring ever different and divergent masculinities in the discursive condition becomes readable, knowable, and thereby also rewritable" (2015, 5). A masculinities studies

approach to literature thus allows for critically examining and re-evaluating the concept of masculinity itself. Literary texts, not simply as cultural artifacts representing societal conditions and uncertainties but as a medium through which the readers can re-evaluate their own perspectives, offer opportunities to challenge what is prescribed as normative in a given culture.

Scholars seem to disagree on the relationship between sociological and literary portrayals of (hegemonic) masculinities. Some believe that there are few positive or alternative images of masculinity in popular culture, literature included (Armengol 2007, 80; Riemer 1987, 298). David Buchbinder offers a more optimistic perspective and argues that the rise of other kinds of masculinities in popular culture challenges hegemony; the persistence of figures exhibiting ‘inadequate’ masculinities in movies and on television suggests a reevaluation of gender performance and can be understood as “enacting a resistance to or even a refusal of the coercive pressure of the gender system” (2013, 162). However, he asserts that this shift mainly occurs in comedic texts, which indicates that ‘inadequate’ masculinities remain a target of ridicule. Given the sparsity of research on this topic, it is hard to tell who is right, as well as what is meant by ‘positive’ – and thereby also ‘negative’ – images of masculinity. Nevertheless, the disagreement among literary scholars on the role of masculine portrayals and the vaguely defined characteristics of masculinity they employ serves to demonstrate the need for contributions in the field.

While this is an important debate, it is somewhat simplistic and binary. Peter Swenger explains that a significant challenge for literary masculinity studies is the risk of oversimplifying or reducing representations to a two-dimensional separation, creating “a happy hunting ground for Men We Disapprove Of and Good Guys” (1979, 622). For example, if a depiction of hegemonic masculinity is culturally understood as toughness, literary portrayals of this trait will be deemed negative, while characters displaying emotional sensitivity – an attribute in conflict

with the notion of toughness – will be considered in a positive light. In a way, this reverses the established view of which features and behaviors are considered positive and negative in a given culture and its literary representations. In addition to being an oversimplification of the multifaceted processes involved in the experiencing and expressing of masculinities, such a categorical understanding does little to remedy the constraints placed on gender performance. This is an important challenge to be aware of within literary masculinities studies and perhaps even more so when examining YA fiction. Although the complexity of YA fiction has gained increasing recognition, these are still literary representations created with a younger audience in mind and should, therefore, be treated with particular caution in order not to convey a reversed, although equally constrained, depiction of masculinity. As Schwenger points out, “literary analysis should not fall into the error, common in social revolutions, of overthrowing old patterns only to establish new and equally rigid patterns” (633).

Despite the recent upswing in interest regarding literary masculinities and the awareness of their potential for contributing to the larger field of masculinities studies, literary masculinities remain largely unexplored in academia, and most research seems to focus on a rereading of canonical literature, with little attention given to contemporary, popular literature (Armengol 2007, 78-79). Furthermore, much of the research on men and masculinities focuses on adult men, while the development of masculinities in the course of growing up and growing old remains underdeveloped (Kimmel 2008a, 45; Poteat, Kimmel and Wilchins 2010, 434; Drummond 2007, 10; Hearn and Kimmel 2006, 64). Issues of age – both relating to adolescence and old age – have been largely ignored in the study of literary masculinities as well (Hobbs 2013, 389). Thus, the development of adolescent masculinity in contemporary literature remains understudied, despite its potential to contribute to our understanding of masculinities – literary and otherwise. Further, Alex Hobbs points out that the need for contributions on literary masculinities relates particularly

to children's literature, a genre rarely examined from a masculinities studies perspective (2013, 389).

The Genre of Young Adult Fiction

The genre of young adult fiction has grown in both popularity and recognition, making it a subject of increasing interest for literary scholars. Although much work has been published on the value of YA fiction in terms of encouraging adolescents to read for pleasure and enhancing literacy, chiefly with regard to education, the genre still faces challenges of legitimacy and appropriateness. The genre – or, rather, people's perception of it – has evolved from adolescent 'entertainment' to more serious, legitimate literature which is concerned with social matters and addresses real-life issues that adolescents face (Cart 2008; see also Bodart 2006). Still, YA fiction is often treated as a "stepping-stone" on the path to more sophisticated adult literature, rather than a "destination literature" in itself (Coats 2011, 315-317; see also Glaus 2014). As such, Karen Coats calls YA fiction "a marginalized literature in the field of literary studies" (2011, 317).

The accelerating popularity of YA fiction and the genre's willingness to address topics that concern adolescents and that are otherwise often considered taboo have been the cause of much controversy, particularly in schools. Teachers, parents, and administrators butt heads over the appropriateness of exposing adolescents to issues such as homosexuality, violence, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and others (Jenkins 2011; see also Alsup 2003; Bodart 2006; Hart 2004). Yet, YA authors insist that the key to writing fiction that adolescents respond to is to make it realistic; if it is not authentic and relatable, the readers will lose interest (Hart 2004). Joni L. Bodart argues that "teens, unlike the adult readers they may become, have little patience with unrealistic characters or situations, conversations, or emotions" (2006, 32), and claims that this is

the reason why YA fiction is considered as well-written as adult literature, if not better. Thus, in order to supply what readers want, YA fiction must reflect societal issues and real-world challenges that preoccupy and influence adolescents. It is precisely because of their willingness to engage with such controversial topics that “young adult novels provide a roadmap of sorts for adolescents coping with these issues in real life” (Bean and Moni 2003, 638). Although such issues are not personal experiences of every reader, most adolescents know someone for whom these are real concerns. As such, “young adult literature is made valuable not only by its artistry but also by its relevance to the lives of its readers” (Cart 2008).

Adolescence constitutes formative years in terms of identity development, gendered and otherwise. Commenting on the relationship between adolescence and literature, Karen Coats argues that “adolescence is a threshold condition, a liminal state that is fraught with angst, drama, and change anxiety. The burden of adolescent literature has always been to achieve synchronicity with the concerns of an audience that is defined by its state of flux and impermanence” (2011, 325). The process of reading and interacting with the text is significant for personal development and identity formation in general, but this relationship is likely even more powerful during the influential years of adolescence. In their examination of youth’s reading practices, Elizabeth Birr Moje and colleagues found that reading and writing texts served as “a means of gaining information needed to enact or develop new identities” (2008, 138), gendered ones included. In light of this potential, YA fiction – with its willingness to address difficult and controversial social issues that engage its readers – is of particular importance and demands attention.

Investigating school shootings featured in YA fiction is vital because of the genre’s target audience and how their age group correlates to those most at risk for experiencing – or perpetrating – such incidents. The intensifying interest in school shootings as a literary topic demonstrates a growing awareness among the target audience, indicating adolescents’ desire to

participate in the conversation. While the popularity of the topic seems to be most widespread in YA fiction, school shootings remain featured in adult novels as well. Importantly, YA fiction has become increasingly popular with adult readership (Cart 2016, 146). Yet, despite an expanding body of work on violence in the mass media and its effects on youth, “little critical attention has been paid to the role of violence in young adult literature” (Franzak and Noll 2006, 662). Much research has been done on the relationship between text and reader, especially with regard to young readers and how their total immersion in literature can foster personal development and expand on their ethical and moral perspectives (see, for example, Cart 2008; Coats 2011; Glasgow 2001; Glaus 2013; and Howard 2011). The rising fascination with school shootings as a topic suggests how the genre of YA fiction can contribute to our understanding of school shootings and the relationship between masculinity and violence; this, in turn, may prove insightful to fields such as masculinities studies, education, and violence prevention. While the fast-growing interest in the quite emergent field of masculinities studies has extended to literature and literary studies, few comprehensive studies of literary portrayals of school shootings from a masculinities studies perspective have, to my knowledge, been done.

Todd Strasser’s young adult novel on school shootings, *Give a Boy a Gun*, features a brief author’s note which ends with the statement “the story you are about to read is a work of fiction. Nothing – and everything – about it is real” (2002, 5). Throughout the novel, the fictional account is interspersed with statistics on gun ownership, violence rates, and school shootings. His comment demonstrates the close ties between literary representations and actual events, particularly in relation to the challenging topic of school shootings. As Hutchinson and the other authors of *Violent Ends* have expressed, the difficulty of addressing such a topic is great, and authors have to carefully consider how to go about describing such actions and whose perspective is presented to the reader. Similarly, scholarly examinations of such literature must share these

concerns and avoid, to their best ability, generalizing. We still do not know enough about school shootings and the boys – and, rarely, girls – who perpetrate them.

Chapter One: Hierarchies of Masculinities

The stories presented in *Violent Ends* are set in fictional Middleborough. In doing so, the authors – most likely on purpose – avoid situating the novel geographically, politically, and socioeconomically. This serves a universalizing objective; despite reactions of shock and disbelief, several characters point out how they could have just as easily become victims. Furthermore, the novel abstains from stigmatizing certain geopolitical areas and socioeconomic groups as more likely to experience a school shooting. While there are recognizable patterns to be found in studies of school shootings, these are not without exceptions. (Also, despite the notion often conveyed through media coverage, school shootings are rare occurrences and, consequently, the material available for analysis is scarce). A notable example is the perception that school shootings are a Southern phenomenon and, therefore, tied to a culture of violence found specifically in the South; episodes of school shootings in the North, the West, and the East have challenged this assumption (Newman 2004; 69). Without restricting the novel to a distinctive region of the United States, *Violent Ends* places its focus on the local community and its social make-up. Still, some assumptions can – and probably will be – made by the reader.

The setting of the novel is outlined in the second chapter, as is the initial information about the shooting. Its protagonist, Teddy, attends East Monroe High School, located in Middleborough's neighboring district, less than ten miles from Middleborough High. News of the shooting reaches East Monroe High School and the students in Teddy's class, some of which have relatives attending Middleborough, anxiously await news. Teddy contemplates what would have happened if his dad had bought a house in Middleborough instead of East Monroe, a decision made by chance. The picture painted here is that of a small, tight-knit community. The fictional name of "Middleborough" connotes averageness and mediocrity. At its heart is the

middle-class neighborhood of Birdland; “with gentle slopes and curves and streets almost entirely devoid of traffic. Cars that passed – when they did, which was rare – rolled slowly, the drivers smiling and waving, their faces as familiar as the fronts of their homes” (Hutchinson et. al. 2015, 14). These descriptions indicate that the story is set in a ‘typical’ community of the United States, presumably a suburban, middle-class, predominantly white area. When news reporters start filing into Middleborough, Kirby is described as “a classic American boy” (36). The assumption becomes that he is white and middle-class (although this is not necessarily representative of a ‘typical’ American boy – if such a typology could even be identified – given the diversity of race and class that characterizes the American population, not to mention regional and local differences). This is consistent with sociological studies on school shootings, which argue that they tend to be perpetrated by young, white males in suburban or rural areas (Kalish and Kimmel 2010; Kimmel and Mahler 2003).

Characters’ socioeconomic environment is determined by way of their residential area; the middle class inhabits Birdland, where the streets are named after different birds; Little Mexico, with its rodent-named streets, houses working-class families. Little Mexico is the “poor side of town” (100) and the dichotomization of these neighborhoods is evident in “the ever-present disgust that appeared on Birdland kids’ faces when they came in contact with Little Mexico kids” (101). Kirby lives on Egret Lane, which places him and his family in the middle class. Despite the novel’s universalizing effect – which it obtains by avoiding to directly locate its geopolitical and socioeconomic setting – it still retains a link between the societal issue of school shootings and its characterizations and patterns on the one hand and literary portrayals on the other. While this lack of specificity is certainly essential in order to reflect sociological research on school shootings, it does run the risk of avoiding issues of race and class and their connection

to masculinity as well as school shootings. As a result, the novel becomes, in a sense, unmarked in terms of race. Kirby can be identified as white only by the absence of racial markers; this is noteworthy, given the consensus among scholars that school shootings are raced white (Bushman et. al. 2016, 10; Böckler, Seeger, and Heitmeyer 2013, 10; Kimmel 2008b, 66). The only indication is his belonging to Birdland, as opposed to Little Mexico. The latter has gotten its nickname “even though not everyone who lives there is Mexican” (139). It has undergone gentrification and “lots of people think [the] neighborhood is dangerous, but it’s not” (55). The perspective of Birdland inhabitants on Little Mexico creates a link between ethnicity, class, and violence and, as such, the novel runs the risk of perpetuating stereotypes. Yet, the shooting is perpetrated by a Birdland resident, one that no-one believed to be capable of such an act. Additionally, while the ‘unmarking’ of geopolitical setting in *Violent Ends* serves to avoid a categorization of school shooters and the communities in which they occur, which makes the issue relevant for everyone, this may also perpetuate a culture of fear by alluding to the idea that this could happen anywhere, to anyone.

Relationships and Hierarchies in *Violent Ends*

Beyond the novel’s regional and local setting is the specific context of the high school environment at Middleborough High. Although many of the events described take place outside of school, the characters clearly build their life around their peers and the high school environment as they make conscious choices regarding how to present themselves in order to fit in, or deliberately avoid doing so. Different characters in the novel can be identified as loners, outcasts, jocks, cheerleaders, and geeks, mirroring the social structure typical of high school. Some characters are content with their placement in this social hierarchy; others struggle to

advance or remain in their location; and some position themselves in opposition to the social hierarchy while, nevertheless, remaining a part of it. Reading the novel as set in a white, middle-class, suburban area consequently identifies the school as a focal point of this community. While larger cities provide proving grounds beyond school where adolescent social hierarchies are established, smaller communities place school at the center of community life (Newman 2013, 60). In this setting, it is necessary to examine the social structure of high school in order to understand characters' performances of masculinities and the hierarchical relationship between these, particularly with regard to displays of violence.

The seventeen chapters that comprise *Violent Ends* are written by different authors, each featuring its own protagonist. They all have a relationship to Kirby: for some, he was a close friend or family member; for others, he had only a marginal impact on their lives; and for yet others, he remained invisible until the shooting made him a part of everyone's lives. The protagonists are related to Kirby either through childhood experience, high school, or family, with one exception: the gun. Chapter eight, placed in the middle of the novel, is told from the perspective of the gun that Kirby brought to school; it also provides the most revelatory insight into the life and thoughts of Kirby whose perspective the novel excludes.

Four of the protagonists know Kirby from childhood experiences; Susanna lives in the same neighborhood but is three years younger than him; Teddy went to summer camp with him; Laura used to live next-door to him; and to Ray, Kirby is the boy who moved into his house after his parents got divorced. The remaining protagonists, besides the gun, know Kirby through high school, except Carah, his sister, although she remains part of the social structure of high school. Middleborough High is ruled by the jocks and cheerleaders, represented by Nate, the football star and notorious bully who gets a pass for his behavior by students and teachers alike, and Lauren,

the anorexic cheerleader who is in a constant struggle to remain at the top of the pyramid. There are also protagonists who do not wield as much power as the reigning few but remain popular; Mark, as well as Morgan, the captain of the girls' soccer team. Some of the protagonists retain a somewhat undistinguished position in the social structure, neither popular nor unpopular; Carah, Kirby's sister, and her fellow yearbook-group, as well as Jenny, who attended marching band with Kirby and was his girlfriend for a while.

The bottom of the social hierarchy is inhabited by outcasts, loners, and nerds. The outcasts place themselves in opposition to the social structure but remain integrated into it; Alice and her group of friends are labeled 'trouble' as they ignore both the formal and the unspoken rules of high school. Like the protagonists and characters that find themselves in an undistinguished position, Alice and her friends enjoy the safety of belonging to a group. So does Zach, whose problems at home far outweigh concerns of popularity at school; and Ruben, whose interest in superhero movies and writing graphic novels makes him an outsider in the social hierarchy. Still, both these protagonists retain a group of friends, making them less vulnerable. In contrast, protagonists like Billie, a newly transferred transgender girl, and Reba, another transfer student who does not fit, lack the support of peers and find themselves largely on the outside of the social fabric of high school. Finally, and placed outside of this hierarchy of peers, is Abby, one of Kirby's teachers whose interest in him turns into an obsession.

Although many of the characters are portrayed as rather 'typical' of their social group, some display characteristics of several – although usually related – positions. Morgan, for example, is in many ways portrayed similarly to Lauren, the cheerleader, but has visibly less power; she is somewhere between 'popular' and 'undistinguished.' Jackson and Ian – Nate's best friend and brother, respectively – are clearly nerds but they become popular by affiliation as

Nate's hierarchical power is great enough to provide them with such advancement. This social structure is defined by both its rigidity and flexibility. There is potential for some mobility, in some cases from the bottom of the ladder to near the top, as is the case with Jackson. There are also hierarchies within each of these groups, where Nate clearly wields more power than his fellow teammates, and Lauren's struggle to remain at the top of the cheerleading pyramid mirrors the social hierarchy and demonstrates that there is always someone competing for this placement. Yet, those that find themselves in ruling positions in high school exert a great amount of control in the hierarchy, as evidenced by Jackson's popularity through his relationship with Nate. The mobility of the social structure seems to decrease the further down one finds oneself, and for those who find themselves at the bottom, the chances of advancing are, generally, weak.

Adolescent Identity and Models of Masculinity

From early childhood, children are taught what constitutes 'acceptable' gender behavior. This becomes increasingly evident during adolescence when teenagers turn toward their peers as they attempt to determine who they are and where they fit in. Silvia Canetto asserts that because adolescents are in the process of defining their identity, they "often take cultural messages about 'appropriate' gender behavior more seriously and more literally than adults" (1997, 339). This process of interpreting social cues regarding gender performance can be said to extend to all periods of life – from childhood to old age. Still, the vulnerable and formative nature of adolescence makes these messages clearer and of higher concern for teenagers who are trying to find their place in the world. Such social norms that dictate what is considered 'appropriate' gendered behavior are internalized and affect the development of personal identities (Coston and Kimmel 2012, 99). While an argument could be made that the developmental aspect of adolescent

masculinity makes it difficult to examine, gender expressions are constantly influenced and renegotiated; this may be true to a more significant degree during teenage identity formation but remains an important aspect of gender identity regardless of age. In relation to performances of masculinities, boys are often encouraged to be tough: “Young boys often learn that expressing soft vulnerable emotions like sadness will be followed by punishment and other forms of ridicule, particularly when this behavior occurs in the context of other dominant males” (Addis, Mansfield, and Syzdek 2010, 80). Whether these are peers, fathers, or other dominant males in their environment, young boys are taught, through reward and punishment, how to behave like ‘real’ men.

In several of the narratives in *Violent Ends*, characters address the different parenting styles of their mothers and fathers. A recurring theme is fathers’ lack of emotional connection with their sons and their inability to parent in a way characters expect or desire; displaying affection seems to be the mothers’ responsibility. When Nate asks his parents how Jackson’s parents are doing, his father replies, “Not too good [...] Not too good at all³.” His mother asks how Nate is doing, which prompts Nate to reflect that he wanted to “throw Dad’s words back in their faces – *not too good, not too good at all* – so they could hear how absurd they really sound” (317). This phrase is repeated later as Nate uses it to answer – or, rather, dodge – conversations with Katy, his girlfriend. Nate adopts his father’s simplistic and evasive response to a complicated and sensitive issue. Clearly lacking the emotional capacity to understand and express his experiences, Nate’s father becomes a model of behavior, despite his son’s comment on the absurdity of his word choice and that his father “doesn’t really know how to dad” (316). Nate’s

³ *Violent Ends* frequently uses three dots as a sign of pause that creates suspense and anticipation. In order to avoid confusion, quotations where parts of sentences or paragraphs have been omitted for the sake of relevance will, therefore, be marked with “[...]”

mother, on the other hand, refuses to let him get away with ambivalence. When he responds that he is “fine,” she replies, “You’re not fine, Nate [...] Tell us what’s on your mind. Don’t bottle it up. You know what happens when you do that” (317). Nate’s mother challenges the sentiment that boys don’t cry by calling attention to the dangers of suppressing emotions. She concludes with a warning; evidently, this has been an issue for Nate in the past and it is reasonable to assume that the outcome has been violent, as a main conflict in his narrative revolves around Nate having beaten up Kirby as a thirteen-year-old.

A similar divergence in the allocated responsibilities of mothers and fathers is evident as Carah reflects upon the changing roles that her parents take on after the shooting; her mother is incapacitated by grief, leaving her father in charge of funeral arrangements and consoling Carah. She comments, “my dad isn’t good at the forced enthusiasm, but since this type of thing would usually be Mom’s job, it isn’t like he has had a lot of practice, either” (240). Thinking back to before the shooting, Carah describes her father’s “unreliability” (241) and remembers Kirby commenting, “I swear to God, that man is useless” (245). Their father had turned to alcohol and pain medication as he struggled to cope with his brother’s suicide, which resulted in a drunken threat to kill his boss and his boss’ family. Mr. Matheson deals rather differently with the death of his son and the aftermath of Kirby’s actions; he takes on an active role in the household and becomes more emotionally available by opening up to Carah about his brother’s suicide and connecting with her in a way that her mother is no longer able to. In an emotional moment, he tells Carah, “It’s okay if you’re angry with him like Mom is. If you ... hate him. But it’s also okay to love him” (259). His display of sensitivity and sincerity helps Carah to reconcile her memories of Kirby as a loving brother with her abhorrence of his actions. It is difficult to speculate as to how Kirby’s father provided a model of gender performance for Kirby; Kirby’s

perspective on this matter is only present through Carah's recollection of their conversations and the changes evident in Mr. Matheson's behavior are prompted by Kirby's actions and death. However, it remains clear that his father's inability to cope with his brother's suicide – which, notably, culminated in a threat of violence – was observed by Kirby. While he evidently denounced his father's behavior, calling him useless, Kirby, too, ended up being secretive (i.e. emotionally closed-off) and resorting to violence.

The changes in Mr. Matheson's behavior toward emotional connection are directed at his *daughter*; such openness does not seem to be available in relationships between fathers and sons in the novel. This becomes particularly evident as fathers respond to the shooting and struggle to provide their sons with comfort in the wake of tragedy. Following the news of the shooting, Teddy's parents come home, his father with a pizza in his hands.

Teddy's dad goes straight to him, doesn't say a word, just drops the pizza on the counter and wraps Teddy up in a tight hug [...] [Teddy] hugs his dad back as hard he can. They just stand there, clinging to each other. They don't cry. They don't talk about what might have been. They just hold each other so tight that nothing else exists between them, not the fear, the doubt, the worry. (35)

A sensitive and supportive moment, his father seems to provide Teddy with exactly what he needs. Yet, the physical contact between them serves as a substitute for verbal communication. The intensity of the hug functions almost to suppress their emotions, extinguishing the fear, doubt, and worry they both inevitably experience. Noticeably, Teddy feels the need to comment on their lack of crying, drawing on the stereotypical portrayal of boys and men as tough and invulnerable. The sentiment that "boys don't cry" has become so ingrained in American culture

that Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis (2012) entitled their anthology on masculinity and emotion after it.

The preference for physical contact over emotional connection is apparent in the relationship between Nate and his father as well; “Dad claps a hand on my shoulder but he doesn’t leave it there, would never leave it there because he doesn’t really know how to dad” (316). Nate recognizes his father’s inability to connect with him – here in the form of prolonged physical contact – as an important aspect of parental responsibility that his father fails at. Both Nate’s and Teddy’s fathers respond to their sons’ need for consoling in the wake of trauma by providing physical contact rather than verbal communication. The difference, however, is that Teddy finds this comforting while Nate does not. However, the intensity of the physical contact is different; one is a tight hug, the other a brief clasp. The sons’ diverging reception of this contact reflects their relationships with their fathers; while Teddy finds the situation to provide bodily comfort, Nate seems unaffected and comments only on his father’s lacking parental skills. Additionally, Teddy’s father is the only ‘healthy’ role model presented in the novel. Other father figures are absent, abusive, or display signs of crisis; both Ruben and Ray’s fathers are absent to varying degrees, and the sons live with their mothers following their parents’ divorces; Zach’s father is abusive (although this abuse is directed at his daughter); and Nate further comments on his father’s midlife crisis and adultery. While home environment and parents as role models are significant influences on adolescent identity development, peer influence becomes increasingly important for teenagers, particularly within the social structure of high school. Although the school environment is not the only influence on gender identity, it is certainly a significant one and constitutes “one of the *major* sites of masculinity formation” (Connell 2000, 151; italics added).

Competing Over Gendered Power

The influence of peer dynamics on gender performance is evident in characters' childhood memories, prior to their attending high school, and is characterized by the stigmatization of 'inadequate' gender behavior at the hands of those who wield the most power in the peer group. As different characters displaying a variety of gender performances interact with each other, they clearly engage in a competition over gendered power. Our first impression of Kirby is through the eyes of nine-year-old Susanna who lives in his neighborhood. When three boys circle her on the playground, she spots Kirby, anxiously looking to him for help. When he addresses the boys, the reply is, "Shut up Matheson ... Don't be such a baby" (16). After the boys leave – having threatened Susanna and thrashed her new scooter – Kirby approaches her. He asks if she is okay and tells her that the boys pick on him too, and she snaps, "I'm nothing like you, because you're a *loser* and that's why those boys pick on you" (18; italics in the original). One would assume that Kirby, being three years her senior, holds more power in the relationship; however, it is Susanna who takes the position of superiority. Although Kirby is physically stronger than she is – as evidenced when she punches at his chest which causes him to shove her to the ground – the social power lies with Susanna. Despite Kirby's seniority in age, she calls him a loser and claims that it is his own fault that he gets bullied. In doing so, she places herself above Kirby in social status, leaving him in a position of inferiority, not only compared to the other boys, but to a younger girl like herself as well.

What Kirby, the three boys, and Susanna have in common is the desire to avoid being stigmatized as "babies." The expression challenges their maturity and acting like a baby is an insult used to denote authority in the hierarchy on the playground. Susanna is called a baby repeatedly as the boys surround her; Kirby is called a baby for defending her; and, finally, when

his behavior frightens the two other boys into letting Susanna go, the leader of the bullies calls his friends “a bunch of frightened *babies*” (17; italics in the original). Calling Susanna a baby is an expression of dominance which likely stems from the boys’ sense of overpowering her in terms of maturity. However, between the boys, it is an expression of superiority based on gender performance; the antithesis of being a man – thus, tough – is being a baby. The term is used not only to denote differences in gendered relations between the three boys on the one hand and Kirby on the other but also within the group of bullies. When the leader of the group calls his friends babies for backing down, he claims his position of supremacy; in the group, he wields the most gendered power, in his own eyes but likely also in the eyes of the others as they seem to follow his lead by accepting the insult. His reaction expresses superiority but his need to establish it presumably stems from a sense of being challenged. When he threatens Susanna physically, the two other boys back down; this is what spurs him to denounce their toughness since their withdrawal undermines his authority.

The situation on the playground thus speaks to the hierarchy of masculinities present already at such an early stage of adolescence. Kirby’s masculinity is severely challenged but so is that of the two other boys, although to a lesser extent. They all seem to be measured against the lead bully’s expression or perception of manhood. His gender performance is connected to his status in the group, in that the other boys – as well as Kirby and Susanna – are intimidated by him, either physically, psychologically, or both. His subordination of the two other boys indicates that this power must go beyond mere physical size or strength; a bigger bully is still outnumbered by two smaller ones. Furthermore, the two boys challenge, however subtly, his understanding of normative masculine behavior when his toughness goes too far. Although he quickly and efficiently corrects them, returning the situation to the status quo, the dynamics of their

interaction demonstrate the fluidity of gendered power and the means by which it is produced and maintained.

Research on the dynamics of men's relationships and displays of masculinity identifies competition as a key aspect (Bird 1996, 122; Coleman, Kaplan, and Casey 2011, 248; Flood 2008). In what he characterizes as the "game" of masculinity, David Buchbinder describes such competition among men, where those who most closely approach the ideal of hegemonic masculinity and thereby have the most "capital," or gendered power, win:

Those men who lack the necessary capital (membership in the dominant social group [normatively defined as white and middle-class], level of education, the ideal physique, measurable prowess in terms of profession, wealth, sexual attractiveness, and so on) are disadvantaged in the game of masculinity. (2013, 156)

Clearly, "capital" in the game of masculinity translates to attributes associated with hegemonic masculinity. Similar to the power relationship between the popular and the unpopular in the social structure of high school, those who conform to normative notions of gender performance wield greater power than those who do not. As one's masculinity is fluid, so is one's gendered power, meaning that conforming to what is considered normative masculinity can advance one's status, just as failure to do so can result in the loss of power. Buchbinder argues that mobility in these hierarchies is restricted as some masculinities are barred from the top, for example by racial, ethnic, or sexual affiliation (2013, 156). However, if one belongs to the dominant social group (i.e. white, middle-class, and heterosexual), mobility is available.

The possibility of advancing one's position by conforming to cultural scripts of masculine behavior is demonstrated in Teddy's chapter. He reflects on childhood memories of summer

camp (where he met Kirby). He describes himself as weak, overweight, and a victim of bullying before he changes over the summer, never again to be nicknamed “Teddy Bear” (32). His understanding of masculinity is heavily tied to physical appearance and the notion that ‘real’ men are strong, hard, and tough. In embodying what he views as the antithesis of this ideal, Teddy is not only lacking in power but is abused by those who have it. His story is portrayed as an uplifting one by illustrating that people can change. Teddy’s transformation proves that conforming to the ideals of normative masculinity is possible and desirable as it clearly advances his standing among other men and in his own self-perception, effectively ending the abuse that often accompanies displays of subordinate masculinities. Still, despite the possibility of transforming one’s gender expression and thereby increasing one’s masculine status, the confines placed on gender performance – particularly in a school environment but also in society at large – make it extremely difficult for those who do not belong to the dominant social group and possess the ‘right’ physique.

In this context, the “dominant social group” is much more specific than white middle-class, the group that scholars often identify as characteristic of hegemonic masculinity. Within the high school environment, the dominant social group consists of the ‘top’ of the social hierarchy. As we have seen, there are those masculinities that fall short of the hegemonic ideal but remain in a more inconspicuous state; they enjoy less power than those at the top but more than those at the bottom. As such, they have the possibility of advancing (or reducing) their status. These types are few, however, and for the remainder – and the majority – of the gender performances in such an environment, the only place left is at the bottom of the hierarchy, where mobility is much more restricted.

Gender Policing and Heteromascularity

The hierarchical order that we have seen take form already on the playground demonstrates the power relations between masculinities and femininities, and between different masculinities. As the characters grow older and enter high school, this hierarchy is conventionalized. Restrictions on gender behavior become increasingly evident and it becomes more difficult to influence one's position, which Teddy was able to do as a child. Adolescents are subjected to – and engage in – gender policing, which functions as a means of maintaining a hierarchical gender order (Kimmel 2008a, 76). Those who do not embody and express the 'correct' or 'ideal' gender performance are stigmatized through teasing, bullying, and sometimes violence. Performances of masculinities that exhibit characteristics associated with femininity and/or homosexuality are normatively understood as conflicting with the notion of manhood or manliness. David Buchbinder argues that "conventional masculinity sustains itself by *abjecting* both the feminine and the homosexual from within itself" (2013, 99; italics in the original). Thus, "misogyny (the rejection of women) and homophobia (the [irrational] fear of homosexuality or homosexuals) in effect constitute the boundaries of masculinity itself, and so help to construct the masculine" (101). This becomes evident in the use of the slur 'fag' in American high schools; it is not only one of the most common insults but identified by students as the worst possible insult as it challenges the youths' manhood and, thus, questions their sense of identity (DeFrancisco, Palczewski, and McGeough 2014, 233; Kimmel 2008a, 76).

A prime example of gender policing, 'fag' is used to maintain normative assumptions about masculinity by correcting behavior that is considered un-masculine, often characterized by (perceived) (ef)feminization. Using 'fag' as an insult denotes much more than sexual preference; it has become synonymous with 'dumb,' 'stupid,' or 'wrong,' much like the phrase "that's so

gay” (Kimmel 2008a, 76; Stoudt 2006, 280; Newman 2013, 69). In his study on masculinity and homophobia, David Plummer found that words like ‘faggot’ were not only used to refer to boys who acted like girls but “in references to boys who stood out from their peers because they were slow to develop physically, soft, shy, smart and/or showed insufficient commitment to male peer group structures and values” (2001, 18). The term seems, then, to be connected more to the notion of inadequate gender performance than to sexual preference. Similarly, in her investigation on male talk and the use of the term ‘gay,’ Deborah Cameron concludes that the term denotes not *sexual* deviance but *gender* deviance, i.e. failing to measure up to the perceived standards of masculinity (1997, 53). While ‘fag’ remains strongly associated with homosexuality, its interpretation and usage among adolescents suggest that it mainly challenges gender behavior – specifically the perception of inadequacy – and that gender performance and sexual preference are not only understood as interconnected but potentially inseparable.

The use of ‘fag’ as a means of policing gender behavior can be seen in YA novels on school shootings such as *Endgame* (Garden 2006, 40; 50; 57), reflecting its widespread use among adolescents. Neither ‘fag’ nor ‘gay’ (as in “that’s so gay”) make an appearance in *Violent Ends*. While the term is absent from the novel, similar strategies of gender policing are present, most explicitly directed toward female gender behavior, predominantly Billie’s and Lauren’s. Billie is constantly subjected to insults such as “she can’t help it that her face is fucked up” and “you should smile more [...] Nobody wants to fuck a girl who doesn’t smile” (117). She also experiences getting wadded-up bits of paper thrown at her, being bumped into, and having gum stuck in her hair, all to the amusement of her classmates. The main reason for this treatment seems to be connected to her physical appearance, for example when her protruding chin is ridiculed with “chin up” (117). Billie is one of the protagonists whose concern with how she

appears to others is most evident and her insecurities about her looks are often mentioned. She comments on envying other girls' curves, long hair, and lashes, in general, and remarks on the appeal of other female character and how she envies them; Katy's breasts, Morgan's beauty, and Lauren's body. She has considered surgery on her chin as she reveals that "fixing it is considered cosmetic, and Papa's insurance won't cover it" (117) and she specifies that she orders water instead of coke because the latter makes her skin break out. Throughout her chapter, an emphasis is placed on how much time she invests in picking out the perfect outfits; yet, she ends up fumbling with her clothes and crossing her legs repeatedly. Her physical appearance is an important part of her gender expression and is most directly challenged when she finds a piece of gum stuck in her hair. When her father explains that they can just cut it out, Billie muses; "It took me two years to grow my hair this long. Two fucking years! I can't remove the gum without cutting off pieces of me" (128). More than simply an issue of appearance, having to cut her hair represents a violation of her female identity, a challenge to the attempt to stage her female identity.

The perception of Billie's gender performance as inadequate seems to be worsened by her attempts to belong. She tries her hardest to fit in by conforming to what she perceives as ideal femininity (in her peers' eyes). In contrast, another female protagonist in the novel who is also considered an outcast, Reba, rejects the notion of conformity. New to Middleborough, she acknowledges that "back home [...] guns and girls like me are normal, not weird," but here, she is "the only girl in Birdland who ever peeled the face off a deer" (188). Reba accepts her position as an outcast without attempting to change who she is in order to fit in, because "this is not [her] place and these are not [her] people" (188). Although she comes across as an outcast, she is not targeted in the same way as Billie is. A comparison of these two characters indicates that attempts

at conforming to gender ideals that are considered failures by the peer group warrant ridicule and gender policing; Reba is left to herself, without friends or enemies, while Billie's attempts at conformity place a target on her back.

This sort of gender policing is also noticeable among Lauren's peers. Lauren is desperate to maintain her place at the top of the social hierarchy, a position dependent on 'appropriate' gender performance. Lauren's chapter opens with her statement, "I do what I do for one reason: because I love flying. The less I weigh, the higher I go" (73). She takes great pride in her appearance and recognizes the connection between her looks and her popularity. Her position at the top of the social hierarchy is dependent upon her sustaining her place at the top of the cheerleading pyramid, which requires her to watch her weight carefully, maintaining a size zero. She describes how her hunger causes her to be unable to concentrate in class and the subsequent deterioration of her grades; how skilled she is at pretending to eat; how she is always cold; and how she and her fellow cheerleaders gather in the bathroom, gagging and applying makeup. While she names flying as her main motivation to refrain from eating, her "next favorite part is what happens between classes" (74). Walking through the halls, picking up members of their clique as they go, the jocks and cheerleaders are envied by everyone; "Every boy looks at us with unstoppable hunger and yearning, and every single girl we pass is filled with jealousy and hope. This is what they all wish they were, where they want to be" (74-75). Lauren's concern with staying on top of the pyramid – which represents the top of the social hierarchy – demonstrates her recognition of its benefits. It makes her popular, a source of envy and desire. Therefore, she watches her weight carefully, as there is "no worse punishment than standing on the ground" (76), i.e. finding oneself at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Like Teddy, Lauren illustrates people's ability to change and advance their position; Lauren's transformation, too, is physical. She thinks back to her sixth-grade yearbook photo; "pudgy and shy with glasses and braces and frizzy hair, playing my nicked-up oboe between Kirby Matheson and Jenny Bernard like a nobody. That was before my mama married into money and everything changed" (75). To her mother, "looking good is a religion" (74) and Lauren's appearance has been transformed with strict dietary regulations, a weave that makes her hair look like a "shampoo commercial" (75), lip gloss and fake eyelashes, and hours spent practicing the perfect smile so that she looks like a beauty pageant contestant; "Perfectly pretty, perfectly posed, perfectly empty" (83). Yet, in her struggle to become "perfect" in the eyes of others, Lauren loses her sense of self. As she is sitting in class doing group work, she thinks to herself, "I know them, but I don't *know* them. Before ninth grade, I knew everybody, knew their histories and where they sat on the bus and who was cool and who wasn't. But now I don't waste energy caring. There's the cheerleading squad, the football players, and the basketball and soccer teams, if you're desperate. And everyone else is nobody" (77; italics in the original). Lauren's reflection demonstrates the hierarchical structure of the high school social fabric; you are either cool or you are not. The royalty of high school – the jocks and cheerleaders – are the only ones who matter. Those who do not belong to these groups are nobody; they are, largely, powerless.

"Pussy," "Bitch," and "Princess": Slurs That Regulate Gender Behavior

One of the most explicit examples of gender policing and its relation to the hierarchy of masculinities in the novel comes to the fore in an encounter between Kirby and Lauren's boyfriend, Javier. A marginal character and part of the royalty of jocks and cheerleaders, Javier is "the biggest, hottest guy in school," someone "you don't mess with" (80). Javier walks into the

cafeteria as Lauren offers Kirby a chocolate bar. A seemingly harmless encounter, Javier grabs hold of Kirby and tells him that he is not allowed to talk to Lauren. Directed at Lauren, Javier says, “tell him if he ever touches you again, I’ll pound his face in, and nobody will care, because he’s a nothing little pussy” (81). Lauren reluctantly obeys and Kirby leaves. In this situation, Kirby occupies the position of inferiority, socially and physically. Although his initial response is somewhat challenging – “She talked to me first” (80) – Kirby quickly returns to passivity; Lauren notices his face turning red and his shoulders hunching as he, as well as the entire cafeteria, wait for the insult. Kirby withdraws, thus demonstrating his resignation which reads like a defeat.

In addition to his social power and physical threat, Javier also enacts gendered power by calling Kirby a “nothing little pussy.” In the social hierarchy, Kirby is – as Lauren pointed out earlier – “nothing,” and compared to Javier’s physical size and threat of violence, he is “little.” Calling him a “pussy,” however, demonstrates how Javier exercises power by verbally abusing him, thus drawing attention to his status in the clique and the high school environment at large. Raewyn Connell explains that insults such as ‘wimp,’ ‘sissy,’ and ‘nerd’ are part of a vocabulary of subordination as their meaning is symbolically blurred with femininity (2005, 79). Although Connell does not include ‘pussy’ specifically, the similarities are striking and the connection to femininity is even more definitive given its use as a derogatory descriptor of female genitalia. Further, ‘pussy’ is linked to both cowardice and homosexuality (OED, s.v. “pussy, n. and adj.2”) and, as such, serves to outline the boundaries associated with performances of masculinity; to be a ‘pussy’ is to be less than a man.

Nate’s chapter at the end of the novel demonstrates how the term ‘pussy’ constitutes a challenge to masculinity not only when used to label or insult others but as an internalized conceptualization of gender performance as well. As the chapter progresses, Nate becomes

increasingly conflicted and anxious. When he enters the school for the first time since the shooting, he feels his stomach turning and panic rising. Suddenly, “a locker slams shut and the sharp, surprising cut of sound makes [him] flinch like a pussy” (320). His go-to description of being startled, which he interprets as a sign of weakness, is to label himself a ‘pussy’ and, thus, reading his own reaction as an inadequate reaction – a failed gender performance.

Similar to the younger adolescents’ use of ‘baby’ to establish hierarchy on the playground, the older adolescents’ substitution of ‘baby’ with ‘pussy’ connotes inferiority. The difference in meaning of these two words, however, is their gendered aspect. While ‘baby’ is largely gender neutral in the sense that it is used about both boys and girls (although it does have a gendered element, as discussed earlier), ‘pussy’ is gender-specific. It refers explicitly to men and is consistently uttered by other men. While the term can be applied to and uttered by women, all references in *Violent Ends* are in homosocial contexts⁴. Thus, ‘pussy’ becomes not only a gendered insult but an exclusively masculine one, denouncing certain performances of masculinity as less-than. Denoting physical inferiority, cowardice, and effeminacy all in one word becomes a powerful tool of gender policing. In his study on hegemonic masculinity and violence in school, Brett Stoudt finds that “a boy who calls someone a ‘faggot’ or a ‘pussy,’ even in fun, is implying that he himself is not, thus asserting his own privileged masculinity by subordinating and marginalizing the masculinity of another” (2006, 280). In other words, gender policing among boys as regulated through slurs such as ‘pussy’ functions to maintain the hierarchical ordering of masculinities. Yet, Stoudt points out that such insults are often used “in fun,” which demonstrates the widespread and casual use of these slurs. As with the use of ‘fag’

⁴ Homosocial is “a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with ‘homosexual,’ and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from ‘homosexual.’ In fact, it is applied to such activities as ‘male bonding,’ which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality” (Sedgwick 1985, 1).

and ‘that’s so gay,’ ‘pussy’ seems to be so frequently and uncritically employed that its definitional meaning is pushed to the background. If so, this suggests, again, that such insults function as a means of policing gender deviancy rather than sexual deviancy.

Understanding misogyny and homophobia as boundaries of masculinity established through gender policing is evident in the use of other derogatory descriptors such as ‘bitch’ and ‘princess.’ The slur ‘bitch’ appears several times in the novel, and is uttered by and refers to both men and women; Zach’s father calls her a “bitch” (55); Lauren says she has been acting like a “bitch” (92); and Kirby calls Carah’s friends “bitches” (244). ‘Bitch’ is an insult regardless of the sex of the addressed and, like ‘pussy,’ derogatory by definition and strongly connected to femininity. Nate describes Ian’s behavior as “bitching” and “making this bitch-face” (321) when Nate tries to make Ian skip school; in both situation it implies complaint. The OED notes that the term “bitch-face” is “typically with reference to a woman” (s.v. “bitch, n.1). When ‘bitch’ is applied to men, then, it draws into question their manhood by associating their gender performance with femininity. Both Zach’s father and Kirby apply the term in response to being challenged, arguably in heated situations; Zach’s father responds to Zach insulting him, and Kirby responds to being insulted by one of Carah’s friends. In contrast, Nate’s usage of the term demonstrates how it has been internalized, as it is not in direct conversation but in his own thoughts that he associates the term with Ian in different situations. Similarly, when Nate becomes upset, he thinks to himself, “last think I’m going to do is cry like a bitch” (329). It seems as if ‘bitch’ is used by men as an explicit, derogatory insult to or about women in order to emphasize an argument or convey aggression. Its application to men, on the other hand, reflects on their gender expression and functions as marker of masculine performance and hierarchy without necessarily being connected to aggressiveness or defensiveness.

Nate thinks back to a memory of introducing Ian to beer; after Ian said he did not like it, Nate “called him a prissy princess who didn’t appreciate the manlier things in life” (323). While Ian is described as bookish, awkward, flushed, and pimply, Nate is superior in terms of social and gendered power as well as age. However, when Nate reveals that the first time he got drunk was on peach schnapps, Ian throws his insult back at him with a simple question: “Who’s the prissy princess now?” (326). Surprised at Ian’s cleverness, Nate can do nothing but laugh in response to being outsmarted. Their choice of vocabulary is telling; in addition to the blow to masculinity that the term “princess” and its connection to femininity deals, adding the adjective “prissy” underscores the insults, denoting effeminacy (OED, s.v. “prissy, adj. and n.”). The tone between them is light and joking, demonstrating the interpretation of such insults as ‘in fun.’

Words like ‘princess’ and ‘baby’ are not derogatory in themselves, in the way that ‘bitch’ or ‘pussy’ is. Their power as insults arises from the context of boys or men using them about each other and are thus directly linked to performances of masculinities. In their definitional sense, both ‘princess’ and ‘baby’ are neutral words and can be used as terms of endearment. Still, this depends on the context, regardless of whether they are uttered by and directed toward men or women. For example, ‘baby’ is connected to age and maturity and can, therefore, be perceived as an insult by adolescents seeking to establish their independence; ‘princess’ is tied to power, wealth, and royalty, and can be understood as a critique of someone’s social class or upbringing, i.e. being spoiled. Regardless, these terms become derogatory only in the explicit context of their usage. When applied to male gender performance, ‘princess’ becomes an insult that denotes inadequacy or failure to exhibit hegemonic traits; as Nate (stereotypically) points out, real men enjoy the taste of beer. Additionally, applying gender-specific terms like ‘princess’ and ‘bitch’ to men signifies not only a threat to masculinity but misogyny as well. Acting like a girl becomes

the antithesis of being a real man, which positions women – or femininity – in opposition and subordinate to manhood. The policing of masculinities through insults with homophobic and misogynistic connotations thus functions to maintain the gender order, both in relation to a hierarchy of masculinities and in contributing to the patriarchal dividend.

Challenging Gender Conformity and Heteronormativity: Inclusive Masculinity Theory

Scholars seem to agree that subordinated masculinities tend to be associated with homosexuality and effeminacy, frequently marked by such derogatory terms that have been discussed. Yet, despite the common use of ‘fag’ among adolescents and their perception of its forcefulness as a challenge to their sense of manhood, the term remains absent from *Violent Ends*. However, this does not automatically entail that the fear of being labeled ‘gay’ or ‘fag’ is not present. While YA fiction is concerned with realistic representations that adolescents can relate to, which often includes incorporating language adolescents use, thus also profanities, it is possible that these slurs have been avoided in order not to perpetuate this discourse. In a way, the novel then fails to challenge such a discourse; one that is inevitably linked to gay-baiting and school shootings (see Kimmel and Mahler 2003). Gender policing in the novel is less explicitly connected to homosexuality than to gender performance. While characters who exhibit subordinated masculinities are subjected to harassment and policing directed at their gender behavior, this does not seem to be consciously directed toward sexual preference. On the occasions where sexual orientation is mentioned specifically, characters generally exhibit and experience acceptance and understanding.

By all accounts, we read Kirby as heterosexual and he has a girlfriend for a brief period. His sexual orientation is brought into question once when his sister thinks back to conversations

with her mom, where they “talked about Kirby never having girlfriends, and discussed possibilities of where he went when he disappeared from his room at night” (249). Carah then comments that “Mom had a theory” (250), and with the information available the deduction becomes that Kirby was secretive because he was gay. When Kirby mentions to Carah that he considers inviting “a footballer” (249) to winter formal, she wonders if her mom’s theory – which she had been convinced was wrong – could be true. Carah asks Kirby if he is trying to tell her that he wants to ask a boy but he corrects her, informing her that he meant a girl soccer player. Carah’s reaction in this situation is nothing short of accepting; before confronting him, she thinks to herself, “I turned the radio all the way down, so I could make sure I did this the right way” (250). This situation happens in the context of a familial relationship and not the high school peer group. Yet, Carah is still a part of the social fabric of Middleborough High and the situation takes place in the school parking lot; as such, it indicates an openness toward non-heterosexual preferences.

The only other questioning of sexual orientation is featured in Ray’s chapter. After his parents got divorced and sold their house, Kirby and his family moved in, and Ray has become obsessed with the notion that “Kirby Matheson stole [his] life” (199). Having to wait on the Mathesons at their local pizza place, Ray observes how they interact with each other and draws parallels to his own life. One of the waitresses, Nicole, notices Ray staring at Kirby and interprets his interest as romantic. Her response is to place Kirby in Ray’s section, saying “You’re welcome [...] I gave him to you,” and encouraging him to “go for it” (212). Ray denies being interested in Kirby – which he clearly is but not for the reason Nicole suspects – and although he claims not to care what people think, he “want[s] *her* to know,” implying that he is romantically interested in her (216; italics in the original). This situation, too, is situated outside of school and dismissed

rather quickly as a wrongful interpretation. Yet, given the analysis of the community of Middleborough and the focal placement of the school in community life, it is reasonable to assume that the values demonstrated in these situations likely reflect those present in the community as a whole, including the school environment.

As such, these situations indicate an inclusive and non-heteronormative environment. The notion of homosexuality as antithetical to masculinity is challenged by Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack's "inclusive masculinity theory" (2016). Questioning the boundaries placed on masculinity as outlined in frameworks of sociologists like Raewyn Connell and David Buchbinder, Anderson and McCormack argue that cultures with decreasing *homophobia* – the fear of being socially perceived as gay – will experience a profound change in their understanding of masculinities. Such cultures will experience a challenging of hierarchies and allow for more diverse forms of masculinities, for example by accepting masculinities that exhibit features traditionally associated with femininity. They argue that a culture is homophobic if it meets the following conditions: "(i) the culture maintains antipathy towards gay men; (ii) there is mass awareness that gay people exist in significant numbers in that culture; and (iii) the belief that gender and sexuality are conflated" (Anderson and McCormack 2016, 2). The milieu presented in *Violent Ends* – both within the context of the school environment and the larger local culture – seems to be inclusive and non-homophobic. This is evidenced in characters' acceptance of men whom they believe to be gay as well as the lacking 'fag' discourse (see Pascoe 2005).

Still, this inclusiveness does not seem to impact the understanding of hegemonic masculinity to any significant degree because the characters who are perceived as gay, however briefly and mistakenly, exhibit subordinated masculinities; there is no mention of homosexuality

or gay-baiting directed toward hegemonic masculinities or complicit ones. In addition, these situations of inclusiveness occur mainly outside of the school environment, a significant arena for gender policing. This suggests that while non-heterosexual preferences may be accepted, they remain connected to subordinated masculinities. Thus, the boundary between hegemonic masculinity and homosexuality is maintained. Furthermore, while terms commonly associated with gender policing (most notably ‘fag’ and ‘gay’) are omitted from the novel, insults such as ‘bitch’ and ‘pussy’ function in a similar way to maintain the gender order. However, the discourse used to police masculinities as outlined by sociologists differ from that represented in the novel. The latter, as discussed earlier, seems to place greater emphasis on understanding masculinity in opposition to femininity, rather than homosexuality. This can be seen in the sections of the novel that suggest acceptance of non-heterosexual preferences as well as in characters’ choice of vocabulary, which often links ‘inadequate’ performances of masculinities to femininity.

In a way, then, *Violent Ends* indicates a shift in our understanding of sexual orientation, moving toward a more inclusive environment. It is possible that the authors have deliberately painted such a picture in order to advocate sexual equality and, as such, selected vocabulary with this in mind. Given the genre’s concern with authenticity and realistic portrayals of adolescents’ everyday concerns and experiences, YA novels frequently feature issues related to LGBTQ experiences and strive to encourage equality regardless of sexual orientation and gender expression. Likely, this is tied to changing societal conditions such as decreasing homophobia⁵ and increasing awareness of LGBTQ issues, as evidenced by acceptance programs in universities

⁵ The notion of decreasing homophobia is a rather broad statement and will, inevitably, vary according to cultural conditions and regional/local context. See Anderson and McCormack (2016) for surveys and discussions on declining trends of homophobia.

and the growing focus on PC language, for example (see, for example, Worthen 2011; Woodford et al. 2012). However, the acceptance with which perceived non-heterosexual orientations are met does not extend to cases that endorse gender ambivalence or resist clear gender demarcation. This is evident in the character of Billie, who encounters a hostile environment. Her failure to live up to normative ideals of feminine behavior causes her peers to challenge her gender performance as an expression of inadequate femininity. Her peers do not seem to know that she is transgendered, and her chapter indicates that her experiences would worsen if they were to gain this knowledge. This is established in her reluctance to create a new Facebook profile because she remembers how it became a forum for bullying at her previous school, and in her father's concerns; he is hesitant to her sharing her "secret" with Kirby because he does not "want this to be like [her] last school" (116). What happened at her previous school, exactly, remains unknown, but the treatment she is subjected to at Middleborough where her peers do not know her secret suggests quite horrifying ordeals.

Deconstructing (Hegemonic) Ideals

In this gender hierarchy, appearances of masculinities and femininities are measured against the 'ideal,' which is represented by the characters of Lauren and Nate. As a somewhat stereotypical and to-be-envied jock character, Nate functions as the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity in the novel. His status is highly recognizable in several situations; he is at the top of the school hierarchy and, thus, holds a coveted position. Both physically and verbally imposing, he embodies traits such as strength, toughness, lack of emotion, invulnerability, and, importantly, aggression. While he might be a source of envy for other characters, to the literary masculinity critic he represents a 'bad guy' (see Schwenger 1979). Nate appears in several protagonists'

stories, always as a bully and consistently portrayed negatively. However, the concluding chapter of the novel is told from Nate's perspective, presenting a deeply troubled and somewhat more nuanced character. By concluding the novel with Nate's chapter, the reader is provided with a different perspective on his powerful and dominating behavior. Nate's personal narrative challenges his demonstration of power by deconstructing his embodiment of hegemonic masculinity.

Nate is mean and misogynistic, and clearly uses humor, sarcasm, and insults to avoid having to deal with genuine issues and concerns. This is evident in conversations with others but also in his own mind, as he cynically comments to himself, "I don't know how many days you get off [from school] after your best friend's insides end up all over your outsides, but I'm pretty sure I'm going to take them all" (318). Such displays of sarcasm and anger become the tools through which he expresses himself. These are manifested in his performances for others but have clearly been internalized as well, becoming a part of his identity. Accustomed to "bottl[ing] it up" (317), as his mother puts it, Nate's only available outlets seem to be sex and alcohol. When his girlfriend, Katy, brings up the shooting in a conversation, Nate effectively avoids the subject by telling her "I'm going upstairs" (312) or "Let's go upstairs" (336). He averts her questions by retorting to sex, despite remarking that neither he nor she is really "into this" (312). As the narrative progresses and he becomes increasingly anxious, he also resorts to alcohol, commenting that the beer is warm but it "doesn't have to be cold to get you drunk" (325). He uses these displacement strategies to conceal his inability to communicate, i.e. show weakness.

Although Nate seems to use sexual encounters with Katy and drinking with Ian to avoid having 'real' conversations, these situations also function as bonding experiences, as it is in relation to sex and drunkenness that he opens up the most. As he is drinking with Ian, he thinks,

“it’s four beers before I feel like talking and four more before I wonder who’s going to drive us home” (323). The conversation begins with Ian’s crush on Susanna but quickly moves to Nate’s experience of trauma and their parents’ concern. Ian brings up Nate’s relationship to Kirby, how Nate was “the one who beat him bloody” (326), and questions why Kirby did not kill him. Nate dismisses Ian but these thoughts stay with him and when Katy comes to pick him up (because he is too drunk to drive), a question appears and he “can’t seem to not ask it out loud” (327). He asks, “What’ve I got to be sorry for?” (327) and the assumption becomes that he will open up to Katy about his parents’ reaction and Ian’s question. However, when she does not respond the way he anticipates or expects her to, he returns to avoidance and sarcasm. As the conversation ends, he thinks, “just this second, I wish [Katy] were as dumb as she pretended to be, because between Ian and her, I got this thought in my head and it’s that I gave Kirby Matheson shit and he had a shot at me and he didn’t take it” (329). Under the influence of alcohol, Nate seems to be able to let his guard down a little bit; he is less able to control his thoughts and they manifest in displays of vulnerability. Still, when he is challenged, he quickly puts his walls back up.

In the final scene of the chapter, the reader starts to get hopeful that Nate will finally open up to someone. He takes Katy upstairs and they start undressing when he is overwhelmed by nostalgia and realizes that the moment is over. Just as alcohol seemed to somewhat reduce his inhibitions, emotional and sexual intimacy prompts him to initiate a conversation, asking Katy, “Can I ask you a question?” to which Katy replies, “You can ask me anything” (338). He then gets lost in thoughts of Kirby and Jackson again, building tension so the reader expects him to finally share something. What Katy lastly asks, “What is it?” he replies, “Nothing” (338). Then they have sex. While he uses sex and alcohol to avoid conversation, these situations are the closest he comes to being emotionally available. Still, he seems to be too dependent on control

and stoicism to open up. He dismisses his conversation with Katy with one word; “Nothing,” just as he did in the conversation in the car and with his parents. Although he effectively ends conversations that can leave him vulnerable, he continuously avoids being alone. After he insults Ian, causing him to leave, Nate is “sorry for all the silence that’s left behind” (316). At the psychologists’ office, Nate remarks on the uncomfortable silence, wondering “if she remembers how I don’t do well with it” (332). He seems to be looking for distractions in order to avoid being left with his own thoughts. His use of alcohol and sex when things become difficult to control can be considered a way of mediating between exercising control and relinquishing it. Whether he is deliberately putting himself in positions that enable him to renounce control or not, these situations nevertheless challenge the boundaries of his self-perception.

Viewing Nate as a poster-boy of sorts for hegemonic masculinity is complicated in the concluding chapter which challenges the harmful consequences of the rigid boundaries placed on gender performance. Alex Hobbs (2013) claims that literary representations often differ from the hegemonic masculinity of sociologists, bringing the opposite type of man to the forefront; and while there are hegemonic heroes in literary fiction they are largely deconstructed.

While an argument could be made to suggest that by portraying weak or flawed men, American literature effectively endorses hegemonic masculinity by comparison, this depends on whether hegemonic ideals remain desirable within the same text. If this occurs, then certainly such fictional masculinities should be considered examples of positive alternatives to sociologically defined hegemonic masculinity. (2013, 392)

Although Nate is seemingly content with his place, the reader’s perspective is likely to differ from his. In the final chapter, Nate thinks back to the incident with Susanna and Kirby at the playground, establishing – perhaps to the reader’s surprise – himself as one of the bullies but not

the leader. Instead, the leader is identified as Rick Harris, the boy who also bullied Teddy as a child. Rick was clearly a source of envy for Nate: “He was the kind of guy the world answered to. So fucking cool. I wanted to be that guy. When he moved a couple of months after that, I was” (323). Nate was one of the boys that Rick labeled “baby” and thereby placed in a position of inferiority. Feeling both jealous and competitive, Nate managed to replace Rick at the top of the social hierarchy. However, this achievement happened by chance, as Rick moved away, which leaves the reader to wonder how Nate’s character, as well as the social and gendered hierarchies in the novel, would be shaped by Rick’s presence had he remained a part of the community. Nevertheless, his acquisition of Rick’s position speaks to Nate’s gendered power, indicating that while chance might have placed him at the very top of the hierarchy, he likely would not have been far from the top regardless.

Hegemonic ideals such as physical toughness and emotional invulnerability are largely deconstructed as the novel approaches its end. For Nate, being tough and invulnerable is crucial; it is an important part of his gender identity. When he wakes up in the hospital after having been hit by a car, he thinks, “I got bruised ribs, a bruised hip, but no broken bones, which in my opinion means I faced off with a car and won” (331). A logical impossibility, his interpretation of the accident is similar to a fight, in which the opponent was bigger, stronger, and at an advantage, but he prevailed, with the scars to prove it. His childish, comic-like interpretation of a dangerous situation demonstrates the risks of adhering to such ideals. Notions of toughness and invulnerability extend beyond his emotional life to become an important aspect of his physique as well. After the accident, his body is sore, and his reaction is to “grit [his] teeth against it. Pretend it doesn’t hurt until it goes away” (336). While this passage refers to physical pain, the description clearly mimics traditional masculine ideals of toughness and stoicism. Nate’s go-to

reaction for both emotional and physical pain is ignoring it and hoping it will go away, an approach that is recognizable to the reader as both unhealthy and futile.

Furthermore, Nate's character demonstrates a preference for physical pain over emotional pain, which reflects his belief that physical pain is temporary. After another disappointing conversation with Katy where she again fails to tell him what he wants to hear, he thinks to himself, "Last thing I'm going to do is cry like a bitch next to the river, so I bump my head against the windshield until it's the only thing I feel" (329). His emotional expressions when engaging with others are largely limited to anger and sarcasm which only work to a certain degree when he attempts to control his own thoughts. By himself, he either attempts to justify his experiences or control them by avoiding them. When this does not work, he turns to physical pain as a last resort to maintain control. His limited repertoire of means through which he can express himself suggests that his gender project is doomed to fail or, at the very least, render him psychologically unbalanced.

Nate experiences a variety of emotions, such as jealousy, loss of control, disappointment, anxiety, and nostalgia, but he is unable to recognize these and separate them from each other. As he struggles to make sense of and describe what exactly he is feeling, he describes "turning inside out" (319) and feeling like everything is "getting smaller, or something" (333). His need to be in control extends not only to relationships with other people but to himself as well. When a memory of Jackson plays in his head, a thought sneaks in, "(Like Matheson. *Stop it.*)" (323; italics in the original). This parenthetical thought, one of few that seems to seep through his barriers, is quickly discarded and he returns to the memory of Jackson. In attempting to control his own thoughts and feelings by suppressing them, Nate has lost the ability to identify them and ends up interpreting or turning all of them into one; anger. He describes how it drove him "nuts"

to see Jackson and Kirby bonding (314); his emotional reaction is clearly based on jealousy but he interprets it, whether consciously or not, as anger.

Nate's concern with being invulnerable, which manifests as emotional incompetence, demonstrates the confines of masculine ideals. Furthermore, it shows how such ideals are not simply performed around others but internalized, as they become a part of Nate's gender identity. Even as we gain a glimpse into Nate's emotional life in a way that elucidates its complexities, this internalization is evident, for example in how he attempts to control his own thoughts. While Nate can be said to embody and express hegemonic masculinity, wielding the power that goes with it, he represents, as Hobbs puts it, a deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity in the sense that the ideals he exhibits are subverted, bordering on ridiculed, as in the example with the car crash. Despite his view of himself as reigning at the top of the hierarchy, having taken Rick's seat of power, his masculine status does not come across as desirable to the reader, as it clearly comes at great expense.

Such a deconstruction of normative ideals is evident in Lauren's chapter as well. While her position establishes her as a source of boys' desire and girls' jealousy, her display of emphasized femininity⁶ is as deconstructed as Nate's hegemonic masculinity and the message conveyed to the reader is more of a cautionary tale than an ideal. She is always hungry, clearly unhappy, and questions whether it is all worth it to be perfect. Lauren struggles with the experience of finally getting what she always wanted – being the most popular girl in school – but feeling that it comes at too great a cost. She thinks back to band practice with Kirby and

⁶ The term “emphasized femininity” is used in a similar manner as “hegemonic masculinity,” representing what is considered ideal or cultivated in a particular culture/context at a particular time. See Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 848) for a discussion on the term as a substitute for “hegemonic femininity,” given the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in the patriarchal gender order.

Jenny, whose company she misses, and she appreciates art class because it is the only place without other jocks and cheerleaders; the only place she can be herself. Surrounded by a sense of “feel[ing] like two people who don’t add up to one,” Lauren gets “a horrible, wonderful, insane idea” (87). She buys a variety of chocolates – “forbidden treasure” (87) that she has never tasted because of both her dietary restrictions and a severe nut allergy. She heads for school, the one place “where no one will find [her] until it is too late to stop [her]” (88). As she lines up the chocolates, she thinks to herself, “considering that even a touch of almond flour can send me to my EpiPen and the hospital, a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup is suicide. That’s why I’m going to eat that one first” (89). She is, however, interrupted by Kirby, who knows about her allergy, challenges her plan, and takes the chocolates with him as he leaves.

Lauren’s story remains one of caution, which demonstrates the pressures of high school and the difficulty of defining one’s identity within the confines placed on gender performance. Torn between who she is and who she wants to be, Lauren’s story ends on a somewhat optimistic note as she reconnects with who she used to be. When she receives the message of the shooting at school, she is at home, in bed, having skipped school and cheerleading practice. She watches the news while eating pizza, crying, and playing her oboe. The ‘moral’ of Lauren’s story is that conforming to expectations and ideals does not necessarily bring happiness; rather, her realizations of what she has been missing culminate in her defiance of these expectations and what can be interpreted as a decision to be true to her sense of self rather than whom she has been lead to believe she should be. In this sense, as a work of fiction, *Violent Ends* does, in some way, portray different ideals of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity than that of sociologists. Although both point out traits associated with these ideals and the consequences of

conforming to them, literary representations can provide a more complex and nuanced image, particularly as masculinities and femininities interact.

Chapter Two: Violence

Incidents of school shootings spark a flurry of conversation and debate attempting to answer the difficult questions of how and why that inevitably arise in their wake. The issue of gun control flares up but quickly dies out again – until next time. Typically, perpetrators are portrayed as madmen; crazed individuals who ‘snap.’ The conversation tends to revolve around signs – whether apparent or real – of mental illness and/or psychological issues as well as a fascination with guns. Popular media points fingers at lax gun control laws, the effects of exposure to violent media, neglectful parents, and mental illness, while simultaneously denouncing any patterns of behavior in presenting school shootings as random acts of violence (Klein and Chancer 2001, 131; Spina 2000, 178). Glenn Muschert argues that the public relies on media presentations to understand rare and unprecedented catastrophes such as school shootings because they have no prior experience to draw on in attempting to make sense of these incidents (2013, 267). As such, “the heavily mediatized discourse about school shootings thus has very real effects in that it defines the general understanding of the problem itself, and, therefore, serves to strongly limit the variety measures available for prevention, intervention, and posttragedy response” (277). The media’s causal monopoly on presenting school shootings limits not only the public’s understanding of these tragedies but the potential for preventive measures as well.

Despite these individualized and, arguably, simplistic media depictions of causality, sociologists identify patterns common to most cases of school shootings. Regardless of their home environment and past record of violent or aggressive behavior, nearly all perpetrators are middle-class, white, adolescent men (Bushman et al. 2016, 19; Kimmel 2008b, 67; Katz 2006, 98). Despite these common features of gender, class, and race, these factors are largely absent from the conversations sparked by such tragedies. Addressing this discrepancy between

sociological research and public/mediatized perception, Michael Kimmel prompts the reader to imagine how the conversations following school shootings would be characterized if the perpetrators had been black girls from poor families. He speculates that the media would turn their focus to race, class, and gender: “We’d hear about the culture of poverty; about how living in the city breeds crime and violence; about some putative natural tendency among blacks toward violence” (2008b, 67). As the conversation unfolds, these factors are rendered invisible. Consequently, the focus is shifted away from societal conditions and issues, placing the blame, instead, on individualized aspects.

Looking for Explanations: Perpetrators as Monsters in the Media Spectacle

While the search for answers that arises in the wake of school shootings seems perfectly natural, the outcome tends to draw attention to oversimplified explanations that target individual psychopathology. When broader social questions are addressed, these too only scratch the surface and fail to take the intersectionality of factors into account; for example, while school shooters often experience bullying and social marginalization, such experiences do not necessarily lead to acts of violence. Yet, media portrayals and public perception, with its “demands for simple explanation[s], scapegoats, and actions” (Kellner 2008, 46) often reflect such a simplistic understanding of causality.

This frantic search for answers is evident as the community of Middleborough attempts to make sense of the tragedy. As the news of the shooting spreads to the residents of Middleborough and reporters start filing in, Teddy and his parents follow the news broadcasts and their analyses of the perpetrator.

Kirby Matheson seemed like a classic American boy,” the reporter says in a calm voice, like she’s narrating a documentary or something. “But beneath his gentle exterior lay a monster.” The image of Kirby’s school photograph flips to a negative, making him look monstrous. (36)

This dramatic description and its choice of words function to draw people in and keep their attention. The reporter paints a vivid picture of a person who fooled everyone with his “gentle exterior,” eventually declaring him a “monster.” Simultaneously, this narrative is aided by the photography of Kirby turning to a negative, which underscores his monstrosity. The dramatic flair of what is portrayed as an analytical “portrait of a killer” (36) demonstrates the media’s role in shaping the public’s perception of school violence. As people turn to the news outlets for information, they are fed a story of an evil individual lurking in the shadows, fooling everyone, hiding their monstrous ‘nature.’ Such an image becomes internalized, as demonstrated when Teddy’s father turns to him, asking if Kirby had seemed “like the kind of kid who could grow up and become a monster” (38). Teddy reflects:

Everyone keeps asking the same question. Everyone wants to know – needs to know – if there was some sign of something broken inside of Kirby. They want proof that he was a monster from the start. They want to take comfort in the idea that it takes a special kind of evil inside a person to kill like that.

But ... there is no proof. Teddy never would have thought that the Kirby he knew would grow up to become the Kirby that killed. If he had had to guess, he would have said that Rick would have become a murderer. Not Kirby. (38)

The idea that such violent behavior can only be explained as acts of pure evil – and, therefore, must be committed by an evil person – is an easy solution and one that thwarts any debate regarding societal conditions (with the brief exception of gun control). This notion of evil as a causal explanation is so ingrained in people’s perception that Kirby’s mother concludes that her son’s life was a lie; he could not have loved them – if he did, he would not have committed such an act. “A person who loves their family [...] who has *empathy*, who isn’t evil, they don’t get a gun and start firing. They ... they wouldn’t be capable of it. But he did. He *was*. [...] So that’s how I know he didn’t love us” (237-238; italics in the original). This grand narrative of evil represents a binary understanding of causality. A person who has empathy and is not evil would not be capable of committing such an act; therefore, a person who does commit such an act must be devoid of empathy and, consequently, unable to love. There does not seem to be room for nuances and complexities in his mother’s interpretation and, as a result, she denies Kirby’s personal experiences and emotions, turning him, instead, into an evil.

Teddy’s reflection on people’s need for simple, understandable explanations to horrific events challenges the idea that there are recognizable signs that can be identified so as to prevent such tragedies. The reaction of shock and disbelief that Teddy expresses is consistent throughout the novel as different characters struggle to fathom how Kirby could do this, as well as their inability to foresee it. The underlying message in the second part of Teddy’s reflection is that something must have changed; something must have happened that turned Teddy’s childhood friend into a killer. Teddy’s choice of words to describe this change is noteworthy; “the Kirby he knew would *grow up* to become the Kirby that killed” (38; italics added). This might simply demonstrate the fact that Teddy no longer knows Kirby; he knew him only as a child. It is, however, possible that the word choice points directly at factors influencing adolescents as they

grow up. In a particularly vulnerable stage of life, something happened that changed Kirby. Although Teddy does not consider what this might have been specifically, his commentary challenges the notion of innate evil; Teddy did not see Kirby as a monster but, rather, as a protector. This is not to suggest that any one incident has the potential to turn a happy child into a murderous teenager, nor that explanations for such tragic acts of violence can be found in external factors only. Undoubtedly, a multiplicity of factors plays a role, from individual to structural and contextual. Still, it is clear that any attempt to understand school shootings and the boys who perpetrate them must go beyond individual explanations.

The mediatized discourse on school shootings is a recurrent theme throughout the novel as characters turn on the TV or check the Internet for information; yet, they often shy away from these mediums as they do not provide them with the understanding they are looking for and they cannot seem to reconcile the image portrayed with their understanding of the event or their recollection of Kirby. Reba describes news broadcasts moving from reporters at the scene to doctors in the hospital, back to the crowd huddled around the school, and then to a debate on gun control. The news does not answer her questions but, rather, provides her with more confusion; “Did that kid feel like he was defending himself? Is that what made him dangerous? When he turned the gun on himself, was that part of the plan? Was it straight-up suicide? In the second when he put the gun to his own head, were all his other choices gone?” (193-194). She then turns to her laptop for answers but this, too, fails: “The search engine answers, but it’s not better than the television. I don’t know what happened today, even after I see a picture of that boy, the one with the silky flop of hair” (194). Her deep-dive into the search engine’s results for school shootings again leads her to more questions as she reflects on whether they are a distinctly American problem and questions their very definition; “Does it count as a school shooting when

the Taliban boards a bus and shoots three girls because they are students? Is there a big difference between shooting a six-year-old in a classroom and killing a six-year-old in a movie theater?” (195). Reba’s search for answers demonstrates the mediatized monopoly on information regarding such events as she immediately turns to news broadcasts and then the Internet for answers. She does not, however, gain any; rather, the information she encounters only sparks more questions. This challenges the portrayal of an evil monster as seen in Teddy’s chapter and demonstrates the failure of monocausal explanations. Further, Reba comments on issues that pose challenges for researchers attempting to understand and, thus, prevent such tragedies as contextual and definitional boundaries may limit the already sparse material available for scientific analysis.

Profiling School Shooters

This heavy focus on media outlets as the only available sources of information demonstrates the media’s role in creating a master narrative that is easy to relate to; by telling people what they want to hear, for example by reducing an unfathomable tragedy to an act of evil, the inevitable search for answers might become more easily attainable but at the cost of oversimplifying a complex picture by focusing on monocausal explanations. One consequence of this is the notion that there are tell-tale signals of such behavior that are possible to recognize and, therefore, prevent. The media’s monopoly on the school shooting narrative and its connection to profiling is addressed in Laura’s chapter. A marginal character in the novel, Laura does not attend Middleborough High but is drawn into the media spectacle when people find out that she used to live next-door to Kirby. Laura is a writer for the school newspaper and, as her editor and fellow journalists learn of her connection to Kirby, she is asked to do a personal piece on him. Laura

struggles with the idea of writing a piece that memorializes someone who killed people; additionally, her sense of not really knowing Kirby challenges her abilities to do so. As a result, she agrees to be interviewed instead. She is instructed to tell a story, a childhood memory, to start the piece. The story that she decides on presents Kirby as gentle, sympathetic, and clever. The interviewer is happy with the story and Laura's job is done. As the chapter draws to an end, her voice addresses the reader, asking, "You want to hear a story?" (307). Then, she tells the reader another version of the same story; here, Kirby is cruel, forceful, and aggressive.

Laura's choice of which story to tell in the interview is particularly noteworthy given her extensive challenging of journalism's integrity and impartiality, which is present throughout the narrative. Critical of what story 'they' want to tell – 'they' being her editor, her fellow journalist students, her friends, and people at large – she argues that the motive behind the piece is not empathy, but edginess: "everyone will think we're so ahead of the times to be able to write about this guy as a fully developed whatever so soon after it happened" (301). Despite her critique of the school newspaper's motives, Laura gives them what they want: a story. The story that she decides to present is influenced by her perception of what people want to read and what her editor wants her to write. Yet, it is reasonable to assume that her personal motives for presenting the 'nice' version of the story might overshadow her critical perspective on the role of the media. As rumors of her connection to Kirby spread throughout the school, she constantly faces questions like "did you ever think he'd do something like this?" (304). Desperate to establish distance between herself and Kirby, she repeatedly states that she did not really know him and does not remember much about him. When the rumors begin to spread and people start to whisper behind her back, she contemplates, "I swear I felt them thinking, *Hey, didn't that guy kind of keep to himself too?*" (295; italics in the original). Laura's decision to present that particular version of

the story can be considered an extenuation of her need to separate herself from Kirby because of the unwanted attention it brings her – in the form of questions and comments – and in order to preserve her own safety. As she indicates in the quote above, she worries about the possibility of being flagged as dangerous and senses the implications it could bring. Even if her personal motives triumph in the end, Laura’s narrative nevertheless draws attention to the act of storytelling and questions the perspective and authority of the media as (the) storyteller.

The potential for being singled out by means of warning signals is demonstrated in Ruben’s chapter as well. Another marginal character, Ruben only knew Kirby by acquaintance. As the students return to Middleborough High after the shooting, Ruben’s fictional horror stories – which up until this point had received nothing but praise – cause him to be flagged by his teacher and the school administrator. Ruben does not understand why he has been singled out and believes he can correct the misunderstanding by going to his teacher’s house; she calls the police and Ruben is arrested. The situation is quickly resolved but Ruben’s story remains a cautionary tale. As a protagonist in the novel, Ruben, like Laura, is not connected to the other characters like many of the other protagonists. It seems as if the main function of including their narratives is to challenge the way in which school shootings are portrayed and perceived; their stories demonstrate how fear can influence perspectives and cause misunderstandings that can have significant consequences, and how the tendency to look for simple explanations and recognizable signals of deviant behavior can lead to stereotyping rather than prevention.

Media influence is singled out as responsible for escalating Ruben’s problems. The insistence of a reporter prompts Ruben to lash out verbally – a situation which is later used against him when he tries to defend himself from the accusations. Furthermore, the fear and panic that arise in the wake of the shootings and place him in the limelight are fueled by media

speculations of a coconspirator. Following his arrest, he is singled out by reporters as a potential coconspirator. While this implication is ungrounded, it impacts his life significantly, as evidenced in the final pages of the chapter when he realizes that the parents of the girl he has a crush on “are going to see that and – ” (276). Ruben’s chapter ends on a somewhat happy note; his mother hugs him and he is relieved to realize that she is not afraid of him. Still, while the direct consequences of the rumors are not stated, the open ending of the narrative demonstrates that suspicion is likely to follow him and limit his possibilities, at least in the immediate future, as the community tries to cope with the shooting. In his analysis of Columbine, Benjamin Frymer addresses the role of the media in portraying alienated youth as dangerous; “the media’s real power and consequence lies in the overarching narrative the spectacle provided for its American audience – one that turned Columbine into a story of a class of new, vicious, alien creatures to be feared by the public” (2009, 1402). This notion is hinted at early on in Ruben’s chapter as well, when his friend tells him that he had better hang up the long black coat he is wearing in his locker because “people will wonder what [he’s] hiding under there” (267). His friend’s comment suggests that the discourse of school shootings as portrayed in the media becomes an ingrained part of people’s perception by drawing a parallel to the stories of the Columbine ‘trenchcoat mafia’; in the aftermath, something as trivial as an item of clothing can be grounds for suspicion and profiling.

Who’s to Blame?

Although the authors of *Violent Ends* have omitted Kirby’s perspective from the novel, we get to know him through the eyes of the different protagonists; most intimately from the perspective of the gun. Placed in the middle of the narrative, the gun chapter is written in the first person, with unique insight into Kirby’s mind. Its ability to sense Kirby’s “unnamable pain” (175) causes the

gun to contemplate how to help Kirby and wonder what is going to happen as his emotional state debilitates and his resolve strengthens. When Kirby loads the gun with a single bullet and points it at his head, the gun desperately but futilely tries to resist: “*Lay me down, I plead. Lay me down and walk away. Call your parents to the room. Let them see me. Let them know. There is nothing ambiguous about a gun! If they see me, they will finally tear through their own denial and pull you in from this icy edge*” (182; italics in the original). To the gun’s relief, Kirby does not pull the trigger and, in a way, the situation is resolved. However, the gun’s quote comments on the inability of Kirby’s parents to recognize the extent of his desperation. While Kirby’s mother had observed him sneaking out at night and being secretive – which she believed was with regard to his sexual orientation – she is either unable or unwilling to see how deeply troubled he is. When Kirby draws a picture of the gun and hangs it on the fridge, his mother is displeased but not worried. The gun muses that “to her, a drawing is a drawing, and kids draw guns and battles and other violent things. They play games of graphic carnage and go on to lead productive normal lives. She does not see that today a gun really is a gun” (178).

Although this focus on the parents’ denial could be interpreted as a failure to recognize signs of deviant behavior and possibly prevent its escalation, the notion of denial is present throughout the gun’s chapter, often referring to its own or Kirby’s. For example, the gun contemplates its future, picturing Kirby keeping it as a trophy and teaching his children how to use it and how dangerous it can be in the wrong hands; “But even as I think about this, I know the wrong hands may be his. I bury my thoughts in a casing of denial, and when he takes me out again, I realize he’s encased himself in denial as well” (181). Thus, denial, in this context, seems to be understood not as negligence or ignorance but as inability and *reluctance* to recognize and

address such issues, possibly because none of them – the parents, the gun, or Kirby – know how to do so or because they are afraid of the results.

Additionally, these passages challenge our perception of the nature of weapons. The phrase “there is nothing ambiguous about a gun” is repeated twice (175; 182), indicating that the very presence of such a weapon is undisputed; it has one purpose, and one purpose only.

However, this notion is complicated by the comment on the mother’s failure to perceive the drawing as a warning sign. The gun points out that adolescents are exposed to and engage in a violence-saturated media culture – it is part of their everyday lives and does not stop them from growing up to become productive members of society. Whether this is intended to avoid placing blame on parental neglect or take a jab at the tendency to scapegoat violent video games, music, and the like in the wake of such tragedies, it nevertheless paints a picture of the cultural and societal conditions within which adolescents define their identities. At the same time, it demonstrates how a media culture saturated with violence can contribute to a numbing of perspectives. While research on the effects of violent media content on aggressive behavior is inconclusive (Sitzer 2013), the prevalence of violence in our everyday lives likely leads to a decrease in its shocking effect; it may appear to become the norm.

Scapegoating violence in different forms of popular media is far too simple; take, for instance, the critique of Marilyn Manson’s music in the wake of the Columbine shooting (see Kellner 2008, 46). The gun describes a situation where Kirby brings it to a rooftop, aiming and ‘firing’ at pedestrians on the street – the gun remains unloaded and each pull of the trigger is followed by a click, as well as a comment from Kirby. This ‘game’ highly resembles a video game and while no actual injury is intended – the gun is not only unloaded but the clip is left at home – the lines between reality and fiction are blurred. Afterward, the gun is left to wonder if

Kirby would have actually shot someone if it had been loaded; “Or is it truly just a game to him? A reality game. When does reality start for him? Is it when the bullets go into my chamber? Is that when it becomes real for him, or will it still be just a game?” (180). Even with its insight into Kirby’s mind, the gun is unable to make sense of whether Kirby views his actions as reality or fiction.

Still, the gun also comments on the ability of this game to “ease Kirby’s pain” (179). Similarly, when Kirby picks up the gun on a later occasion, the gun recognizes that his intentions are no longer turned inward and pleads, “*Fire me Kirby [...] Take me to target practice. Expel that pain with my bullets, shredding a paper target*” (183). The gun’s reflection on the game and its suggestion of target practice implies that firing a weapon can release tension. As such, the notion that guns or weapons are harmful in and of themselves is challenged by proposing that engaging in what would likely be termed ‘violent’ behavior – and possibly identified as a warning sign – has the potential to relieve stress or anger. Stephanie Urso Spina suggests that a ‘violent’ medium – be it music, video games, or movies – “actually dissipates aggression rather than encourages it” (2000, 192). It becomes a way for adolescents to let out steam. This notion is certainly present in the gun’s pleading but it is also clear that the game’s potential to be an outlet is insufficient; “Yes, the game eases his pain, but not enough” (179). Additionally, in this game, Kirby uses an actual gun, thus moving the game from screen to reality.

Furthermore, Nate’s chapter describes him playing such a video game with his brother, massacring zombies. The game seems to provide them with a rare opportunity to spend time together, an offshoot to the “fuck you” (314) and “get lost” (316) comments that usually make up their conversations. However, playing the game sends Nate into a panic attack, where he mixes descriptions of what is happening on-screen with memories of the shooting. This reads as a

critique of violence-saturated media by demonstrating the harmful effects it can have, particularly in relation to experiences of trauma. Still, this is one of the few incidents in which Nate's struggle to process trauma becomes evident to others and carries potential for healing as well. The notion of violent games as a means of healing or escaping is also suggested in Zach's chapter. In addition to school, her only escape from her abusive father is when she sneaks out at night to join Kirby and their group of friends playing an adventure board game where their characters, armed with swords and daggers, fight orcs. This game becomes Zach's only secret and only relief, and when she picks up the dice, she thinks, "there's magic in them, transformative and transportive – turning me into something else and taking me somewhere else" (51). In the game, she takes on the role of her character, Murrion, whose bravery is emphasized. The game they play is very violent, as Zach describes; "I play well: Murrion decimates three orcs on his own with his daggers, disemboweling two and cutting the throat of another" (54). While her method of escaping real violence by turning to fictional violence might seem ironic, she points out the therapeutic qualities of the game, as "there's no question that pretending to hack up bad guys feels good" (54). While it is unclear whether the game relieves her anger or fuels it, as the latter quote might suggest, it nevertheless becomes a means of escape. *Violent Ends* thus comments on the relationship between exposure to violent media and actual aggressive behavior, even though the direction of such commentary is up to interpretation. While the novel indicates that the effects of exposure to violent media can be both damaging and healing, it is important to note that these characters are all influenced by their relationship with trauma, whether it is the school shooting or parental abuse, and, in any case, there is no direct causal relationship between exposure to violent media content and increased aggression. Whereas exposure to violent media content can certainly be considered a societal issue, it cannot be declared responsible for acts of school shootings.

Guns and Masculine Performance

The gun embodies remarkably human-like sensations and its anthropomorphic qualities make it possible to identify with it as a protagonist. The gun's main concern is with the question of its purpose. On the one hand, it longs for the excitement of being used and belonging to someone; on the other, it wants to be used for an honorable purpose. At the beginning of the chapter, the gun muses that it comes "from a family of both fame and infamy. Distant cousins fought wars, bringing both devastation and freedom. Some kept the peace in the streets of cities but were also abused by those sworn to protect" (171). The gun is described in a way that highlights its esthetic and protective attributes, as demonstrated when the gun anxiously awaits its first owner; "Who shall own me? I wondered. And for what purpose? Would I be used for a family's protection? Would I fire upon coyotes or other scavengers? Or would I be put on a pedestal in a collection, to be revered as a work of art?" (174). It wants to be a trophy, a source of admiration; it wants to be used for protection and it wants its owner to teach others how to use it safely and honestly. The focus on the gun's protective qualities is demonstrated in Zach's chapter as well. In a fictional conversation, a lawyer from a television show tells Zach, "No girl should put up with what you put up with," to which Zach replies, "Easy to say when you carry a gun" (43). The notion conveyed here is that a gun provides power in the form of the ability to protect oneself. This is further demonstrated as Kirby offers the gun to Zach for protection against her abusive father, an offer she refuses. Contrastingly, the gun expresses disappointment at its first owner who uses it in a "lowly heist," which leaves the gun with a feeling of shame (173). The gun insists that "[its] kind is honest, even in dishonest hands" (175). This shifts the focus from the gun itself to the person wielding it and indicates that guns, in and of themselves, are not evil or dishonest, *per se*. Still, while the gun's narrative does not position itself explicitly in the political debate on gun

control, its preoccupation with the motives of the persons wielding it demonstrates a critical perspective on its usage.

The gun's concern with its owners' motives is demonstrated in the contrast between its first owner, the gang member, and Kirby. The gang member wants the power the gun seems to secure. Disappointed, the gun reflects; "From the moment he held me, I knew what I was to him. A symbol. An icon of his manhood, of his pride, of his ascension from impoverished mediocrity" (172). The man keeps the gun loaded and shows it off to his friends. He acquires the gun in order to gain power which, in turn, is connected to his sense of manhood. In analyzing its own symbolism, the gun links his gender performance to his pride; the assumption becomes that his performance of masculinity is inadequate and that he believes the gun – a symbol of violence and power – will enable him to restore his sense of manhood and pride, thus raising him from mediocrity. It is a somewhat stereotypical image; a seemingly tough gang member who needs a gun to wave in the face of his friends and prove his manhood but who, beneath this tough exterior, is weak, cowardly, and simple. Later on, the gun compares its first owner to Kirby, describing Kirby's emotional experiences as "a blinding spectrum of feelings my previous owner only scraped the surface of" (175). In addressing such a "tough guise" – to borrow a term from Jackson Katz (2006) – the gun calls attention to the connection between masculinity and violence by drawing on the notion of violent behavior as a means of enhancing one's status in the hierarchy of masculinities.

Clearly, the man's attempt is a failed one, both with regard to his self-perception and his actions which lead him to embarrassment and defeat. He tries to rob a convenience store but is surprised by the clerk who draws his own weapon. The gun observes; "And just like that, the tables turned. A standoff. I could see the gun the man was holding. A Desert Eagle .50 caliber. It

was a beautiful weapon that made me feel inadequate, inferior” (173). The gun’s sense of inferiority in comparison to the semi-automatic pulled by the clerk mirrors the competition between the two men’s display of power. This situation draws attention to the connection between masculinity and power through the concept of *phallogentrism*. David Buchbinder argues that power – under a patriarchal order – is vested in the symbolic phallus, which represents “the sum of potential masculine power,” making it an object of desire that can be thought of as “always *to be attained*, but as ultimate *unattainable*” (2013, 75; italics in the original). For the owner, the acquisition, display, and use of the gun become a way of attaining such power. The gun’s sense of *inadequacy* when comparing itself to the semi-automatic mirrors the owner’s subordination. Buchbinder goes on to argue that in order to “protect its vulnerability and to maintain the idea of phallic power, the penis becomes culturally represented as weapon-like” (132). In this interaction, the gun becomes a symbol of the owner’s phallic power. His need for a gun to prove his manhood and his subsequent failure to do so when the gun is bested by the semi-automatic demonstrate the clerk’s supremacy.

The clerk’s superior display of gendered power does not stem solely from his possession of a *larger* gun; the character descriptions that the gun provides establishes the clerk as calm and controlled while the owner is uncertain and cowardly. Yet, these are closely connected; regardless of whether the high-caliber power of the semi-automatic enables the clerk to display his authority, the connection between weapons and phallic power remains clear. As the owner falters, the clerk shoots him in the arm and the owner flees the scene, defeated. According to Buchbinder, the ideal male body is hard and shapely, and, as such, creates a boundary between itself and the physical world.

The extreme form of the exterior world's incursion into the male body is the physical penetration of the latter by that world. Such penetration is often regarded not only as a sign of weakness but also of feminization. This is especially true, of course, of the sexual penetration of the male body, but it holds also for invasions of the male body by such things as bullets, parts of machinery, and so on. It is no doubt for this reason that men will often articulate a kind of heroic masculine stoicism when wounded, often quite severely ('It's nothing – just a scratch!'). (141)

The owner's final defeat is cemented as the clerk shoots, but not fatally wounds, him in a violation of his bodily display of masculinity. Whatever power he believed acquiring the gun would grant him is denounced through his failure and the gun's perception of him; "I could feel his broken manhood, his lost dreams" (174). His manhood is drawn into question as the gun reveals that he needs its power in order to feel like a man, and further condemned as he is defeated and consequently described as a coward.

A Culture of Violence

If we suppose that violent acts such as school shootings are, in fact, not random acts of rampage and that simple explanations which focus on the individual or their immediate environment (i.e. home situation, mental illness, exposure to violent media, etc.) are neither complete nor useful, we must look to the larger context within which these events happen. Within the social environment of the novel – suburbia and high school – there exists a culture which arguably condones, if not encourages, the use of violence. While the shooting inevitably shocks the community of Middleborough, other 'milder' forms of violence are certainly acceptable, particularly in connection with performances of masculinities. In situations previously discussed

– like the childhood bullies physically and emotionally tyrannizing Susanna, Teddy, Kirby, and Billie, as well as Javier’s physical threat to Kirby – violence functions to solidify or advance one’s superiority in the hierarchy of masculinities and, importantly, it is generally accepted as a means to do so.

Besides the actual shooting, the most prominent example of physical violence is featured in Zach’s chapter. The sort of violence that Zach endures at the hands of her father is in no way tolerated; rather, it is very clear that there is no justification for his behavior. However, this serves as a comparison to other forms of violence in the novel. In particular, bullying *among* boys is condoned. Nate’s chapter repeatedly looks back at an incident where he beat up Kirby; this is addressed by his psychiatrist, his girlfriend, and, indirectly, by his mother, when she warns him not to bottle up his feelings. Nate’s behavior caused his parents to send him to a psychiatrist but there does not seem to have been any other disciplinary actions taken. Further, his behavior is only drawn into question by other characters in the aftermath of the shooting; Katy comments on how mean Nate was to Kirby and Ian questions why Kirby killed Jackson and not Nate. The violent behavior that Nate displayed in the past does raise questions and is interpreted as problematic (if only by his parents) but his attack on Kirby seems quite severe as well as largely unprovoked. Other, ‘milder’ forms of bullying and physical violence, such as that directed against Teddy, Susanna, Kirby, and Billie seem to be considered ‘normal’ behavior.

In the incidents that are mentioned involving Teddy, Rick is cheered on by other boys without anyone questioning his actions, except Kirby. Teddy remembers a specific situation where Rick was about to urinate on Teddy when Kirby “came out of nowhere and rammed himself into Rick” (27). This marks the start of their friendship and Kirby becomes a protector of sorts in Teddy’s eyes. Teddy points out that Kirby “wasn’t one of the popular kids, but he was

tall, and there was something fierce about him, something that none of the other boys wanted to mess with” (28). Although Rick supersedes Kirby in popularity, Kirby’s show of force keeps Rick at bay. Aggressive behavior is thus portrayed as a means to avoid becoming a target of bullying and Teddy remembers Kirby with fondness, as his friend and protector. Later incidents demonstrate that Rick’s bullying of Kirby continues and as Kirby’s physical superiority diminishes – the other boys grow tall as well while Kirby becomes skinny – so too does his leverage in the relationship. Once Kirby’s physical stature ceases to be a threat, he has no means of protecting himself against abuse. This demonstrates that violent behavior – within certain boundaries – is an acceptable part of adolescent male behavior and *necessary* in order to protect oneself, particularly in the lack of other means of power, i.e. gendered and/or social.

Certain limits decide whether such behavior is tolerable or not; it seems to be condoned in male-to-male situations only – even if this includes uneven numbers, such as a group of boys abusing one – and within the same age group. This latter factor might be taken to indicate equal footing if one assumes that it is tolerable to act violently toward someone in the same age group but not younger, like Susanna. Yet, the analysis of the social hierarchy, whether on the playground or in high school, as well as hierarchy of masculinities demonstrate that these incidents do not, in fact, take place between equals; there is usually an expression or threat of violence from someone whose social and/or gendered power exceeds that of the target. In the situation with the three boys and Susanna on the playground, the two subordinated bullies become hesitant when faced with Rick’s threat of violence, which results in him chastising them for acting like girls. Rick’s bullying and physical abuse of Teddy encounter no challenge but from Kirby, whose protection of Teddy relies on the show of physical force. In these situations, the male characters – whether they display hegemonic, dominant, subordinated, or complicit

masculinities – all turn to some form of violence or threat thereof to challenge or maintain the hierarchy, thus enforcing the notion of violent behavior as normal; boys will be boys. In addition to the challenge that Kirby poses, Rick’s behavior is also discouraged by Teddy’s father who comments, “That kid was a dick” (38). Yet, this behavior becomes a model for Nate’s expression of hegemonic masculinity. Despite the portrayal of Rick’s behavior as mean and controlling, his position in the social hierarchy inspires envy and competition.

Jockocracy: Legitimizing Violent Behavior

This tolerance of aggressive behavior is especially evident in the behavior of characters who exhibit hegemonic masculinity – Nate and Javier – and in their peers’ acceptance of it. The encouragement of aggressive behavior as an expression of masculinity seems widespread in homosocial settings and, particularly, among the jocks. In “Legitimated Adolescent Violence: Lessons from Columbine,” Ralph W. Larkin argues that “much of the violence in middle and high schools is perpetrated by student elites organized around athletics that incorporate a norm of hypermasculinity. They use physical violence to enhance their own status and create social distance between themselves and their lower-status peers” (2013, 172). Further, he claims that this violence, perpetrated by “the jocks/cheerleader set,” remains hidden because of its legitimization by adults. For such communities that are depicted in the novel, the school becomes an important arena for communal life and its prestigious sports teams contribute to the school’s reputation. Therefore, Larkin argues, “adults cede authority to peer group elites to police their own in so far as they do not undermine adult authority, interfere with the functioning of the school, or come to the attention of authorities outside the school” (172).

There are few examples of adult complicity or engagement in bullying or violent behavior in the novel. Yet, adults are rarely present in these situations despite their happening in spaces that are meant to have adult supervision. Javier threatens Kirby in the cafeteria and Mark confronts Kirby in the hallway. Both these situations happen between classes and in front of an audience of students; adult presence either is or should have been visible in both arenas. This does not mean that teachers and staff necessarily condone violence, but the absence of adult authority enables this behavior. Contrastingly, adults' direct legitimization of bullying can be seen in Teddy's recollection of summer camp. When Rick filled his backpack with rocks, Teddy complained to the camp leader who responded by mocking him. Then, "everyone started calling him 'Teddy Bear' and the older boys started to poke Teddy in the stomach to see if he'd giggle like the Pillsbury Doughboy" (27). While Rick initiates the ostracizing of Teddy, it is the participation of the camp leader that causes the bullying to escalate, making Teddy a target for the whole group of boys. This situation takes place outside the school environment but, given the size of the community, the peers encountered at summer camp overlap with those at school (see 33).

Even if bullying and other displays of aggressive behavior are not explicitly condoned by teachers and school administration, the lack of consequences following such behavior demonstrates the authority of the high school's ruling few. The only mention of potential consequences is featured in Mark's chapter when he considers picking a fight with Kirby but is concerned that it might get him suspended. However, his concern is somewhat fleeting; as it occurs to him that he might end up in a fight after all, he thinks that "it might be worth getting a suspension" (161). To him, then, avenging himself and proving himself to Kaitlyn is more important than the potential consequences, meaning that peer authority surpasses adult authority.

Regardless, given Mark's status in the social hierarchy, he does not enjoy the leeway often bestowed upon jocks. Thus, his concern does not necessarily discourage the notions of concealing and legitimizing violence perpetrated by jocks/cheerleaders. Additionally, the entire confrontation between Mark and Kirby is prompted by a group of jocks who bump into Mark, who then accidentally shoves Kirby. This prompts the conversation where Kirby snaps at Mark and Kaitlyn, which ignites Mark's anger and need for revenge. This seems to be an innocent misunderstanding but still draws into question whether the situation would have escalated had it not been for the reckless and forceful behavior of the jocks.

The leeway that this group enjoys is also present in Lauren's chapter. When she comments on the decline of her grades, she thinks, "but I'm the head cheerleader and my mom is terrifying, so I get Cs that become As as if by magic" (77). Although this is not directly linked to either displays of violence or performances of masculinities, it demonstrates the power of the jock/cheerleader group in high school – not only in relation to their peers but to the school as an institution as well. In his attempt to profile school shooters and the schools in which they occur, Michael Kimmel argues that "one of the things that seems to have bound all the school shooters together in their murderous madness was their perception that their school was a jockocracy, a place where difference was not valued, a place where, in fact, it was punished" (2008b, 76). There are too few references in *Violent Ends* to either adult legitimization or contestation of violent behavior – although the absence of adult supervision is noteworthy. Still, the environment at Middleborough certainly fits the description of a 'jockocracy,' where peer validation is of crucial importance.

The performances of masculinities that are celebrated in this environment – evident through the measure of power enjoyed by those expressing them as well as their function as a

source of envy – rely on aggression, violence, and/or the threat thereof to maintain their status, both in the social structure of high school and in the hierarchy of masculinities. The masculine performances that Nate and Javier express are characterized by displays of dominance. James Messerschmidt asserts that culturally dominant masculinities do not automatically legitimate hierarchical gender relations. He distinguishes between two types; “dominant” masculinities are the most powerful or celebrated in a certain social setting while “dominating” masculinities “involve commanding and controlling specific interactions and exercising power and control over people and events” (2012, 73). Neither of these is hegemonic if they do not legitimate patriarchal relations.

Nate’s and Javier’s performances of masculinities are certainly the most celebrated within the context of the novel and, as demonstrated in chapter one, they contribute to the maintenance of the gender order through the suppression of femininities and other displays of masculinities. Yet, as they do so through aggressive, violent, and/or threatening behavior, their expressions of masculinities become dominating. The aspect of domination as it relates to the novel’s description of hegemonic masculinity can be seen in several of the situations that have been analyzed in chapter one; Rick’s response to being challenged on the playground which leads him to assert his domination over the other boys by labelling them “babies”; Javier’s confrontation of Kirby in the cafeteria which relies on Lauren’s complicity; and Nate’s display of authority through his bullying of several characters, as well as his subordination of Katy. The power expressed in these situations does not necessarily rely on physical violence, *per se*, but the characters express (complete) control over situations and the people they interact with.

This dominating behavior – whether it is acts or threats of violence and aggression, verbal abuse, or other forms of controlling behavior that stems from characters’ social and gendered

status – illustrates the cultural dominance of a particular type of hegemonic behavior which is dominating. Thus, *Violent Ends* implies that the local environment of a suburban, predominantly white and middle-class, community and the distinctive context of high school and its social structure fosters expressions of dominating hegemonic masculinity. While the environment presented in the novel can be read as tolerating and encouraging violent behavior as a ‘natural’ part of adolescent masculinity, this does not explain the occurrence of acts such as school shootings, as the latter clearly deviates from what constitutes ‘acceptable’ displays of violence. Still, the cultural scripts of gendered behavior that these adolescents are exposed to link violence to manhood.

Aggressive Masculinity in Homosocial and Heterosexual Settings

Characters’ performances of masculinities are influenced by the people around them, depending on whether they are engaging with other men or with women. Homosocial settings seem to encourage performances of masculinities that abject feminine qualities in favor of notions associated with hegemonic masculinity. This is most evident in the character of Mark, whose expression of complicit masculinity makes his gender performance more flexible than that of other characters. Without the constraints that hierarchical positions of hegemony and subordination place on his gender expression – although he still has to position himself with regard to these constraints – he enjoys some leeway. Similar to the mobility of the neither-popular-nor-unpopular students in the social structure of high school, he has less to lose than those at the top and less to gain than those at the bottom; positions that both experience an intense pressure to conform. Mark’s gender performance is influenced in different ways by men and women, represented by his best friend, Jason, and his girlfriend, Kaitlyn. Mark’s chapter revolves

around his infatuation with Kaitlyn and he struggles to focus on anything else. As he stands in the hallway smiling at his phone after receiving a text from Kaitlyn, Jason approaches and asks what he is grinning at. Mark quickly puts his phone back in his pocket, responding, “Nothing” (154). Mark’s decision not to share this with his best friend, particularly given how the entire chapter revolves around him thinking about Kaitlyn, indicates that his feelings for her are something private; something not to be shared with his (male) friend.

The influence of homosociality on performances of masculinity has been widely researched and acknowledged (Sedgwick 1985, 1; see also Bird 1996; Flood 2008; Buchbinder 1998, 64). Its effect is evident in how Mark describes – or rather, refrains from describing – his relationship in interactions with Jason, as opposed to how he thinks about and acts around Kaitlyn. In *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, Michael Kimmel remarks on his discovery that “men subscribe to these ideals not because they want to impress women, let alone any inner drive or desire to test themselves against some abstract standards. They do it because they want to be positively evaluated by other men (2008a, 47). Conforming to cultural scripts of appropriate masculine behavior seems to be of higher importance in homosocial settings. In *Violent Ends*, behavior that can be considered an expression of hegemonic masculinity is encouraged by men but often challenged by women. Mark’s seemingly harmless prank on Kirby demonstrates this; Kirby’s habit of stuffing smashed-up Pop-Tarts into his locker becomes an in-joke between Mark and Kaitlyn. When Mark questions Kirby about this, Kirby tells the couple to “mind [their] own fucking business” (159). Mark begins to confront Kirby but Kaitlyn pulls him away, leaving him with an uneasy feeling that he cannot shake off. Mark has difficulties deciphering what he is feeling and describes it as “something he couldn’t see, or reach, or quite get rid of” (159). Although he had followed Kaitlyn’s lead and walked away from

the confrontation, he is upset by “the way [Kirby had] talked to Kaitlyn” (159). Thus, his uneasiness with the confrontation seems to be centered not so much on Kirby’s behavior, as it was directed equally toward the two – perhaps more so at Mark, since he initiated the confrontation – but on Mark’s perception of his own failure to stand up for his girlfriend. Later, he describes the feelings he is struggling with to Jason; “[Kirby] pissed me off this morning” (160). The itching feeling of “something” that he had been unable to identify has now turned into one very explicit sensation; anger.

Jason summarizes Mark’s experience: “You’re pissed because he emasculated you in front of your woman” (160). In addition to its misogynistic tone – implying that Kaitlyn belongs to Mark – Jason’s comment challenges Mark’s gender performance and ties his failure to stand up for Kaitlyn to weakness, effeminacy, and castration. Jason explains that Mark only has two choices; “One: Let it go. Two: Remasculate yourself” (160). His conversation with Jason prompts Mark to question Kaitlyn’s perception of him. He decides to go with option number two and starts to plan his revenge. Mark’s need to remasculate himself is largely influenced by Jason and demonstrates a perception of manhood that responds to humiliation or defeat by means of revenge. As Kimmel and Mahler argue; “In this culture, when someone questions your manhood, we do not just get mad, we get even” (2003, 1451). Mark’s initial thought is to pick a fight with Kirby, looking to violence as restorative of masculinity. His final decision, however, is based on his relationship with Kaitlyn and his desire to find something she “would appreciate” (161). Mark tapes a box of Pop-Tarts to Kirby’s locker, an action meant to make Kirby feel “sorry he acted the way he did” (163). Mark’s triumphant feeling swells as he sees Kirby looking “defeated” and “broken” (160). Kirby’s reaction obviously stirs compassion in Mark; yet, his sense of being entitled to retribution overshadows this, and he expects Kaitlyn to be impressed by his cleverness.

To his surprise, Kaitlyn thinks his actions were mean and calls him a “jerk” (165), which prompts Mark to lash out at her. Jason enters the conversation and while Kaitlyn believes he will side with her, he calls Mark’s actions “awesome” (163), and Kaitlyn leaves in frustration.

The discrepancy between Kaitlyn’s and Jason’s interpretations of Mark’s actions suggests how performances of masculinity are influenced differently by interactions with femininities and other masculinities. Firstly, it is the conversation with Jason that prompts Mark to perceive his sense of manhood as emasculated, and it is the cultural scripts of masculinity that evoke the notion of being entitled to retribution. Further, Mark’s initial thoughts on the form of his vengeance point to his understanding of violence as a means of restoring one’s manhood. Secondly, Jason’s response supports this notion of entitlement to retribution; this is underscored by Kaitlyn’s surprise and subsequent annoyance with the two boys, as she does not understand how they see Mark’s actions as anything but mean.

The picture that is painted is one in which men condone violent or otherwise vengeful behavior as an affirmation of masculinity while women value compassion. Toward the end of the chapter, Mark realizes that “everything he’d done had been to win Kaitlyn’s affection back after Kirby had made him lose face” (164). Although he does not seem to change his opinion that he was entitled to retribution, he comes to the realization that his actions may cause him to lose Kaitlyn. As he struggles to regain her affection, he does reflect upon his actions; “He’d been trying to ... what? Impress Kaitlyn? Protect her? Prove himself to her, maybe. And instead, he’d ruined everything” (165). He does win back her favor and the conclusion of the chapter thus calls attention to the destructiveness of these ideals. His recognition that what he perceived as a need to validate himself to her almost cost him his relationship indicates that conforming to normative notions of masculinity can jeopardize or even be incompatible with romantic relationships.

Cultivation: Women Who Contribute to Hegemony

In *Violent Ends*, women engaged in relationships with men who exhibit hegemonic or dominant masculinities often reinforce hegemonic ideals. In Nate and Katy's relationship, she is in a position of inferiority. While she does attempt to challenge Nate by engaging him in conversations about the shooting, she surrenders to his evasions. This is evident in the repetition of two situations; Nate dribbles his basketball, it rolls to the street, and he tells Katy to get it, "like she always does" (309; see also 336); and Nate tells her to go upstairs and she follows, "like [he] knew she would" (312; see also 336). For the most part, Katy seems completely submissive. Nate calls all the shots and she enables him to do so, as demonstrated early on when he thinks, "I decide I'm going to fuck Katy today" (310). Her sense of agency is completely removed from any decision-making process. Later on, Nate reveals that he was initially attracted to Katy's intelligence and her "no-bullshit, this-girl-could-finish-my-insults look" (337). He also comments on Katy being "a lot smarter than she lets people in on" (329). Katy thus seems to possess the ability to stand up to Nate but chooses not to. The role that she has taken on in the relationship, like the self she chooses to portray to others, is a conscious decision; one that likely facilitates her attempt at belonging in the social hierarchy at Middleborough as well as in her relationship with Nate. In taking on this role, she enables Nate's dominating behavior. Thus, her gender performance in her relationship with Nate contributes to the *cultivation* of hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt 2012, 64), empowering Nate to establish his superior position in the hierarchy of masculinities through the conquest and subjugation of women.

A similar example of cultivation can be seen in Lauren and Javier's relationship, in the scene with Kirby and the chocolate bar in the cafeteria. As discussed earlier, this situation is used by Javier to solidify his gendered status, but this act depends on Lauren's cooperation. As he

turns to her for support in his confrontation with Kirby, she hesitates, which makes him upset and increasingly aggressive, insisting that she follows through with his demand. Lauren remains quiet and Javier keeps pushing her to tell Kirby “he’s nothing” (81). When she finally speaks, she says, quietly, “I’m not saying that,” causing Javier to turn from Kirby toward her, “staring daggers.” This prompts her to do as she is told, attempting to tone down the insult as much as possible, starting with “Kirby [...] Don’t touch me.” But Javier refuses to let it go until Lauren tells Kirby he is “nothing.” With the entire cafeteria watching, Lauren does what she is told before contemplating, “I’m the one who feels like nothing” (81). Lauren clearly feels uneasy in this situation and recognizes that her boyfriend demands her support in a way that she disagrees and feels uncomfortable with. Despite this, she obeys, thus contributing to Javier’s sense of power. The outcome of this confrontation is largely dependent upon Lauren’s reaction and the stakes are high for Javier, given that the situation happens before an audience. Her decision to comply functions to justify Javier’s behavior and enables his expression of superiority in terms of gendered power, thus contributing to the cultivation of hegemony.

This situation also demonstrates how expressions of aggressive or dominant masculinity are perceived differently by male and female peers. While Lauren is left feeling horrible about the situation, Javier rejoins his group of friends and “Tyler smacks Javier on the back, and they bump fists and laugh and laugh and laugh” (81). Similar to Jason’s reaction to Mark’s prank, Tyler fully supports Javier. Although Lauren’s submissiveness enables Javier’s expression of dominance, she does so reluctantly and is uncomfortable with the situation. Tyler’s show of support is demonstrated with a physical gesture and the boys go on to laugh at the situation; they either do not perceive it as cruel, like Lauren does, or they simply do not care. In both confrontations of Kirby, female characters are present and, to some extent, challenge or question

the normative understanding of manhood in homosocial groups. While Kaitlyn certainly represents more of a direct challenge than Lauren's reluctance and eventual complicity do, Lauren's feeling of disappointment conveys critique. These differing levels of challenge and critique seem to be dependent upon the relationships between masculinities; both Lauren and Katy take on more submissive roles, enabling their partners' display of dominant or hegemonic masculinity. Kaitlyn, on the other hand, challenges Mark when his display of masculinity is aggressive and, to some degree, it makes him reevaluate his own identity. This demonstrates that complicit masculinities are more flexible and susceptible to influence by expressions of femininities, while hegemonic or dominant ones, with their superior placement in the gender order, are less so.

While women often serve the purpose of challenging and negotiating expectations of masculine behavior as dictated by male peers, heterosexual relationships and interest can also be a catalyst that propels expressions of hegemonic or dominant masculinity. While Kaitlyn functions to challenge the expectations placed on Mark's gender performance by the homosocial environment, it is his desire to impress her that ultimately leads to his need for retribution. His anger at feeling emasculated and his sense of entitlement to retribution are fostered by Jason but his prime motivation is his heterosexual interest in Kaitlyn. As such, relationships with women become an important arena in which conformity to such ideals are expressed. Homosocial groups seem to encourage expressions of masculinity that conform to hegemonic or dominant ideals, including aggressive or violent behavior. Interactions with female characters question or challenge these ideals; whether they make an impact on the characters' gendered identity (i.e. Mark) or not (i.e. Nate and Javier), these challenges remain observable to the reader. At the same

time, heterosexual interest seems to propel and contribute to the justification of such behavior that is outlined in homosocial environments.

Retribution

It is clear that Kirby does not conform to ideals of hegemonic masculinity as stipulated by his peers, and his repeated defeat in confrontational situations with males above him in the hierarchy demonstrate his subordination. The cultural scripts that dictate masculine behavior include a sense of entitlement to power. In *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, Michael Kimmel (2008a) outlines a framework for understanding the confines placed on men's gender performance in America and its consequences. He argues that among the cultural dynamics supporting "Guyland" is a culture of entitlement; "even when they feel powerless, unlike women, men feel entitled to power" (60). This sense of entitlement can be seen in the competitive hierarchy among men as well, not only in comparing men and women. This is demonstrated in Mark's sense of being entitled to retribution after his performance of masculinity is questioned. The most definitive demonstration of entitlement is, however, evident in Nate's behavior. His issue with Kirby is due to his jealousy of Kirby and Jackson's friendship. He tells his psychiatrist; "Matheson tried to take Jackson away from me when I needed him more" (335). Nate is envious of their relationship, mainly how they bond over interests that he and Jackson do not share, such as books. This jealousy transforms into anger and, likely, aggression; while it is not stated explicitly why Nate beat up Kirby, it is likely connected to his jealousy. In the conversation with the psychiatrist, which Nate has not seen since the incident with Kirby as a thirteen-year-old, she tells him how she remembers him struggling with things out of his control; "Your dad walking out on you, your mom not handling it so well, and then Kirby Matheson –."

Before she can finish, Nate interjects, “and then Matheson comes along and tries to steal the last good thing I got left” (334). It seems as if Nate’s jealousy of Kirby and Jackson’s relationship becomes a final straw, of sorts. It manifests in anger and aggression because of Nate’s sense that Jackson ‘belonged’ to him and he, therefore, felt entitled to revenge.

It would, perhaps, be reasonable to assume that this sense of entitlement applies particularly to those at the top of the gendered hierarchy, as it is most evident in Nate’s behavior, as well as Mark’s. Yet, this notion is also expressed by Kirby, through the perspective of the gun. When contemplating the game that Kirby plays with it, pretending to shoot people from the rooftop, the gun is hopeful that the game can function as an outlet for his pain but recognizes that it is futile; “Yes, the game eases his pain, but not enough. It’s like trying to bail water from a sinking, shotgun-blasted boat. With each pull of my trigger, there’s even greater longing in him. Greater need to carve some sort of retribution out of the world” (179). Although he seems to share the same sense of entitlement to retribution that Nate and Mark demonstrate, Kirby stands out because of the direction it takes. While Nate and Mark experience a need and right to avenge themselves against someone they believe have challenged them, Kirby’s need for retribution does not seem to be directed explicitly at anyone. In his analysis of school shooters and their schools, Michael Kimmel argues that while the perpetrators are typically subjected to bullying and gay-baiting, this is not sufficient to explain their actions; “they also had to believe that they were justified, that their murderous rampage was legitimate” (73). He suggests that boys who became school shooters were not deviants but rather “overconformists to a particular normative construction of masculinity, a construction that defines violence as a legitimate response to a perceived humiliation” (2008b, 68).

Who's Kirby?

Descriptions of Kirby's demeanor vary vastly from character to character; some portray him as kind, clever, and loyal; others paint him as sullen, withdrawn, and snarky. However, besides Laura, none of the protagonists portrays Kirby as malevolent. Even when he is portrayed negatively – moody, secretive, mean to his sister, etc. – he is never *evil* in their recollections; more often than not, he is compassionate and protective. He seems particularly concerned with injustices in the world, as related to hierarchical positionings of power, and with protecting those who are unable to protect themselves. Characters like Teddy, Zach, and Susanna are all caught in situations of skewed power relations; Teddy is bullied by the other boys at camp, who supersede him in status both because of their gendered power and by their sheer numbers; Zach is abused by her father; and Susanna is tormented by a group of older boys. Kirby's world-view is demonstrated in Jenny's chapter as he tells her about a school project in which the students were to create their own fictitious kingdoms. The project is inspired by the story of King Arthur, and Kirby explains that his kingdom had “no knights. No kings or queens or princesses needing rescue” (101). He states; “My kingdom is ruled by the little people” (110). His vision for this kingdom demonstrates his recognition and critique of social differences. He does not explicitly state which social differences he is referring to, although the references to damsels, kings, and knights indicate class differences. Still, his world-view as presented in his notion of an ‘ideal’ kingdom demonstrate his concern with social injustice and is consistent with his preoccupation with protecting others, principally those who find themselves in abusive relationships where the distribution of power is uneven.

This concern is predominantly evident in Zach's chapter; she is, arguably, placed in the ‘weakest’ position in the novel, because of the severity of her physical (and emotional) abuse,

and because it is perpetrated by her father. Kirby offering the gun to Zach demonstrates his desire to protect her at the expense of his own emotional release, as he does so after the game, which provides him, temporarily, with an outlet for his emotions when he pretends to shoot people. When Zach refuses to take the gun, Kirby responds, “I know what he’s doing, and I know it hurts because you can barely walk. But can you guess how much it hurts to know that it’s happening and I can’t do a damn thing about it? People shouldn’t be able to do that. He shouldn’t be allowed to hurt you. I’m sick of it. I’m sick of –” (59). Kirby’s inability to help Zach clearly weighs heavily on him but it also seems like he is not referring to Zach’s father exclusively. While his comment initially concerns Zach and her relationship with her father, it leads him to a more general reflection on power distribution, remarking instead to “people” doing “that.” The figure of Zach’s father as an abuser becomes intertwined with *people’s* abuse of power in general.

As his comment comes to an end, he seems to be “sick of” not only the abuse Zach endures but something else as well – something he stops himself from saying. His pause at the end could imply that he is unable to recognize and articulate what, specifically, he is sick of, or it could demonstrate a deliberate decision not to share this with Zach – such a constraint might reveal a concern that Zach would be displeased or alarmed at whatever Kirby wanted to say. The effect that this situation has on Kirby is demonstrated later on, from the perspective of the gun. When Kirby loads the gun with a single bullet and aims it at his head, the gun observes; “Something happened today. I don’t know what it is. Something to his friend perhaps? Whatever it is, it’s tipped the boy off his delicate balance” (181). Whether there is a direct link between Kirby’s suicide attempt and his failure to protect Zach or not is uncertain, yet it is certainly worth noting. While the gun had remarked on Kirby’s debilitating mental state prior to this, his actions

following his visit to Zach's house are unprecedented and suggest that his failure to protect her becomes the final straw.

While he states that he offers the gun to Zach for her protection, this decision could also be interpreted as an attempt to protect others from himself. It is not clear when, exactly, Kirby's anger and despair manifests in a need for retribution; the gun recognizes that his intentions are no longer turned inward after his encounter with Zach but its perspective is limited. Earlier, the gun remarked on Kirby's denial and how, after the game, Kirby put the gun in the back of his sock drawer, "ignoring [it], perhaps denying [its] existence" (181). This suggests that Kirby might already recognize a desire or need for retribution. After Zach's rejection and Kirby's attempted suicide, the gun remarks that "he hides me not just from others this time, but from himself" (182). The notion of his intention to use the gun to harm others is alluded to in his conversation with Zach; as she rejects his offer, saying "sorry," he responds, "don't apologize to *me*" (60; italics in the original). This could be directed at her; she is the one who will suffer from her refusal to protect herself. However, his statement could also indicate that this was a final attempt of sorts to rid himself of the gun, the means through which his need for retribution becomes violent. Similarly, him hanging the drawing of the gun on the refrigerator could be interpreted as a call for attention; as the gun points out, if his parents were to see it, they would "pull [him] in from this icy edge" (182). Lastly, in a conversation with Carah he gives her his dog and asks for a coin in return; he explains that his uncle gave him a coin collection when he visited them a few days before his suicide, and he would like to finish it. Carah contemplates their uncle's visit and how he gave her a ring but does not see the parallel between her uncle's behavior and Kirby's. As such, what could be interpreted as another call for attention goes unnoticed. These situations

indicate that Kirby is struggling with his recognition that his anger is turning into a need for revenge, which contrasts with his desire to protect others.

Kirby's role as a protector is evident in Jenny's chapter as well, despite his expressed beliefs that people need to learn to protect themselves. As the ideas of his kingdom become an internal reference in Kirby's relationship to Jenny, she refers to herself as a "marching band damsel" (102) and repeatedly states how she "owes" Kirby (108); how he has saved her. This is somewhat contrasting with the ideas he has put forth through his kingdom; when Jenny asks how the little people can rule when they are used to being saved, Kirby replies that "they have to learn to survive on their own" (110). If they cannot, "they die too" (110). Sometime before the shooting, Kirby breaks up with Jenny, stating that he has too much on his plate. Still, on the day of the shooting, Kirby deliberately removes Jenny from the situation; he asks her to get coffee, challenging her reluctance by saying that she owes him, and then leaves her at the café before returning to the school. Thus, he deliberately saves the damsel, placing himself, again, in the position of the protector. This seems to conflict with his actions, particularly given the randomness of his targets. He clearly feels wronged by the world, trapped in an unjust system, and in need of revenge; yet, he does not seem to target anyone explicitly. Nate is left physically unscathed while Jackson, who used to be Kirby's friend, is killed; Morgan, the girl footballer who rejected him, also survives, while her best friend is killed. Other victims, both wounded and killed, do not, as far as we learn from the glimpses in the novel, have a problematic history with Kirby. In particular, both Nate and Lauren, who represent the hierarchical social order that Kirby criticizes, survive; Nate points out that Kirby had a shot at him but did not take it, and Lauren wonders why Kirby chose to save her when she "gave him hell" (93). As such, his attack seems to be directed toward the institution of the school rather than particular characters. This is

consistent with sociological research that “points to the conclusion that a school shooting itself may be a symbolic event directed at the school as an institution rather than specific individuals” (Bushman, et. al. 2016, 20), especially given Kirby’s reflections on the ‘ideal’ kingdom (or society) and his anger at the world as expressed through the gun’s perspective. Kirby’s concern with protecting others from an unjust world coincide with his personal struggles with the consequences of not fitting into this world. While the individual targets of the shooting seem random, they represent the institution of the school and, by extension, the society which, in Kirby’s mind, has failed.

An Impossible Conclusion

Violent Ends presents, in many ways, ‘typical’ teenagers, characterized by their belonging to the jocks, the nerds, the outcasts, or others. Notions of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are certainly present and these portrayals do run the risk of perpetuating a categorical perception of identity and gender. Still, even though the rewards of ‘proper’ gender behavior are demonstrated in the novel, it remains clear that this is not equated with happiness; rather, the characters of Nate and Lauren struggle under the pressure of gender scripts. Lauren’s narrative is more optimistic than Nate’s, as she rebels against these constraints in the final scene of her chapter. For Nate, there seems to be no hope. As his chapter progresses, he seems to recognize that his coping mechanisms do not work, and he tries to open up and be vulnerable. However, he is unable to do so because it conflicts with his self-perception. The characters have been socialized into already existing roles and have to maneuver within the constraints of these. Adaptation is rewarded and resistance punished; however, *failed* attempts at adaptation seem to warrant more severe consequences than resistance, as demonstrated through Billie’s experiences.

Analyzing *Violent Ends* from a masculinities studies lens indicates several factors that may prove insightful for further research into school shootings and literary (or cultural) portrayals of these. The environment presented in the novel seems to encourage expressions of masculinity that are dominating and rely on violent behavior – or the threat thereof – in order to maintain control over the social structure and gender hierarchy. Such cultural scripts of masculine behavior contribute to the maintenance of the gender order through its subordination of women and other masculinities. Still, these ‘ideal’ expressions of masculinity and femininity are, to varying degrees, deconstructed in the novel. Although the social status of characters like Nate and Lauren remains unchanged, the consequences of conforming to gender scripts become evident in both

narratives which read more as warnings than encouragements of conformity. Despite the typology of characters present in *Violent Ends*, the novel's fragmentation and manifold points of view challenge binaries and create nuances that sociological research on school shootings lacks. This provides the novel with its educational qualities, making it a fruitful approach to the subject of school shootings but also issues of gender, binaries, and heteronormativity, in addition to the multitude of other social concerns that the novel raises. Further, the novel addresses several important issues related to school shootings and factors often highlighted as scapegoats; however, while it is clearly critical, it avoids taking a firm stance on these issues. While this could be considered worthy of critique, particularly in relation to its reluctance to take a political stance on the issue of gun control, the focus is placed on reader interpretation, thus encouraging contemplation and engagement with these issues rather than providing a blueprint of sorts.

The character of Kirby, as presented through the different protagonists of *Violent Ends*, does not fit into the often-times stereotypical description of a school shooter. There are no signals of mental illness – except in media speculations and public perception – although it is clear that he was troubled. He is not considered an outcast in high school, nor a victim of bullying; although there certainly are examples of teasing, bullying, and gender policing present, he does not seem to have been singled out to a specific degree by the larger community at school. He comes from what seems to be a healthy and stable home and has a good relationship with his family, despite comments on his father's problems and sibling rivalry with his sister. The portrayal of Kirby is an important factor in the potential of *Violent Ends* to highlight nuances in the debate on school shootings. There are no clear-cut answers and where explanations are offered, they are often challenged and deconstructed. Other YA novels on school shootings sometimes tend to present a more straight-forward and stereotypical image of the perpetrator,

where it is easy for the reader to follow the path to when, where, and how it all went wrong.

Violent Ends stands out in contrast to these and, thus, provides a more accurate and challenging representation of reality; the truth is, we cannot provide clear-cut answers to the question of why some teenagers become school shooters, and in attempting to do so, we may do more harm than good.

What does it take to “create” a school shooter? Although shooters share commonalities, these are general, and the typical warning signs identified are usually displayed by adolescents who never become shooters; neither sociological research nor the novel provide an answer to this question. James Garbarino and Ellen deLara examine coping mechanisms and resilience in order to identify characteristics that make some teens less capable of dealing with emotional and physical violence. Although they identify certain factors that are important – for example, the experience of success, stable emotional relationship(s) with parent(s), social support outside of family, etc. – this is not enough to answer the question of why some teens act out violently while others do not (2002, 129). Furthermore, why do some teens act out inwardly (e.g. suicide, self-mutilation) while others focus their anger outward in the form of violence directed at others? Why do these teens act out in the specific form of school shootings? There are so many factors to take into account that it becomes impossible to pinpoint what, exactly, it takes to ‘create’ a school shooter and what potential warning signals one should look out for. Bullying prevention often lists certain behavioral changes and/or traits that demand attention from adults in teens’ lives, and while this certainly has value in that it can help draw attention to teens who are struggling, it is far too difficult and risky to predict how such behavioral signs of stress will play out. The danger in profiling potential shooters is that one risks targeting teens who – for different reasons and to varying degrees – do not feel accepted, included, or confident in their environment. As we have

seen in the characters of Laura and Ruben, this can contribute to a culture of fear, to the extent that it can stand in the way of preventive work. It is possible that Laura recognizes that Kirby's behavior should have been considered a 'red flag' and that she feels guilty for not doing something; this is likely exacerbated by the culture of fear that follows the shooting, where people desperately search for (easy) explanations, which makes them quick to point fingers and assign blame. Thus, such a focus on preventive work that outlines warning signals that are linked directly to external, aggressive behavior – and school shootings specifically – runs the risk of undermining its own agenda by feeding into a culture of fear that does more harm than good.

Analyzing a literary representation of a school shooting further points to a shortcoming in the theoretical prism of sociologists; perception. The 'grand narrative' of sociological research on school shootings tells the story of marginalized boys who are subjected to bullying and gender policing, and who struggle under the pressure to conform to (impossible) scripts of masculinity, their emotions building without any available outlets. While there is certainly valuable understanding to be found in this research, such an image runs the risk of victimizing perpetrators. Sally Robinson warns that "constructions of masculinity as dangerously blocked imply that the release of emotion is *inevitable* [...] blocked emotions *will* come pouring out in one way or another (135; italics in the original). The notion that boys don't cry is very much present in *Violent Ends* and, as demonstrated in Nate's attempts to cope with his emotions, vulnerability contrasts with cultural scripts of masculinity. However, this notion is problematized through the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity and the novel is critical of the limitations placed on male gender performance. While this is evident in characters who embody hegemonic masculinity, it is not connected directly to Kirby. The novel challenges the tendency to focus on individualized explanations and portrayals of perpetrators as monsters and draws attention to

social influences. Still, Kirby's *agency* is not overlooked. The novel problematizes the sentiment that Kirby 'snapped'; a discourse on school shootings that highlights factors that 'drove' the perpetrators over the edge inevitably suggests their passivity by undermining their agency, thus indicating that their actions were beyond their control. Kirby's perspective is omitted; yet, it is clear that the decision to harm others was his. We are left without clear explanations of why he did what he did but we are constantly subjected to the "what ifs" that characters struggle with; what if Teddy had kept in contact with him; what if Laura had told someone about his behavior; what if Nate had left him alone? As such, the reader constantly wonders what could have been done differently without reaching any conclusions. In a way, then, *Violent Ends* leaves us with more questions than answers, but this is characteristic of incidents of school shootings and the research that attempts to understand and prevent them. *Violent Ends* does not provide a neatly tied up ending to the narrative. Some chapters do have conflicts that are resolved but as a whole, the story remains as fragmented as it started. Ending with Nate's perspective leaves the novel in an unresolved state. As such, *Violent Ends* reflects the impossibility of providing a decisive conclusion to the issue of school shootings.

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