

# Making Sense of the “Monsters Next Door”: General Strain and the Rampage Violence Narrative

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## Abstract:

Following the Columbine High School Massacre in 1999, two distinct profiles of the rampage shooter emerged within the literary imagination: the type of narcissistic psychopath as which Eric Harris has been characterized, and the figure of the depressed pariah that was associated with Dylan Klebold. Employing a number of socially constructed myths that emerged following Columbine, many fictional accounts of school shootings utilize the media’s attempts to understand Eric and Dylan’s motives and therefore focus on the shooter’s internalization of social strain due to his inability to form social bonds within their schools and communities. Each character struggles to achieve some form of aspirational reference, whether it be popularity or hegemonic masculinity, and is frequently impeded by some form of noxious stimuli (i.e. general strain). The fictional shooters of rampage violence narratives perceive their strained existence as justification for violence; ultimately deeming themselves victims forced to kill by the societies that alienated them through a twisted take on retributive justice. The narratives’ differing characterizations of the rampage shooter, evoking the socially constructed myths that developed in the wake of the Columbine Massacre, typically compel utter disgust by employing the characterization of Eric or a hesitantly compassionate understanding towards the shooter in an effort promote tolerance towards those that are ostracized through representations of bullied outcasts like Dylan. Such narrative themes will be evinced through readings of Lionel Schiver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003) and Jodi Picoult’s *Nineteen Minutes* (2007).

1      On April 20, 1999, President Bill Clinton somberly declared that he and Hillary were “profoundly shocked and saddened by the tragedy . . . in Littleton where two students opened fire on their classmates before apparently turning the guns on themselves” (Cullen 93). Nearly two decades later, the tragic events that occurred at Columbine High School continue to resonate within the cultural imagination as America struggles to comprehend the massacre and an ever-increasing epidemic of rampage violence that developed in its wake. The *Washington Post* reports that throughout 2015, the United States averaged more than one mass shooting per day; many of which were carried out on the public stage in a horrifying spectacle (Ingraham). In the just first month of 2018, 11 school shootings occurred leaving several dead and many more injured (Blinder and Victor A1). On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Nikolas Cruz walked into a school in Parkland Florida killing 17 people with an AR-15 assault rifle: it was one of the worst mass

shootings in American history. Such tragedies have become such a common occurrence in the United States that President Barack Obama declared that shootings in America have “somehow. . . become routine. . . we become numb to this” (Time). Looking for answers, American society simply offers “thoughts and prayers,” does nothing to assuage the problem, and repeats the cycle when another tragedy occurs.

2 Due to the apparent increase of such shocking events and their ceaseless media exposure, there has been a dramatic rise in representations of rampage violence within contemporary literature, film, and television over the last decade.<sup>1</sup> Such narratives strive to understand seemingly senseless acts of violence and ultimately construct a profile of rampage shooters by employing various sociological discourses. Directly following the aftermath of Columbine, President Clinton stated that “we don’t know yet all the ‘hows’ or whys’ of this tragedy [and that] perhaps we may never fully understand it” (Cullen 93). Over a decade later, Americans still do not have answers and are continually shocked and saddened when similar tragedies occur. Katheryn E. Linder notes that, “when crime occurs among white youth, the innocence and whiteness are both called into question, bringing about what Stanley Cohen has coined a ‘moral panic’” (2). To alleviate negative feelings resulting from such anxieties, media outlets attempt to explicate the causation of rampage violence by delineating the shooter’s actions as a product of competing external forces: e.g. bullying, America’s culture of violence, the availability of guns, and failures in treating mental illness while simultaneously overlooking patriarchal male aggression. All of these competing discourses are explored in fictional representations of rampage violence. For this reason, contemporary literature has the potential to inform various debates concerning the threats of such violence in America.

3 Few scholarly works explicitly blend criminology and literary criticism. Those that do simply aim to illustrate the significance of literary works in the field of criminology and were written by and for criminologists as an impetus for new directions in future scholarship that, seemingly, has not been achieved. This is unfortunate, as Edward Sagarin notes, because to understand the social meanings of crime, “the criminologist locates a representative sample, [while] the novelist creates a representative character” (81). In this sense, fictional characters can help scholars develop a fuller understanding of violent behavior by illustrating criminological

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples include: *The Hour I First Believed* (2008), *Give a Boy a Gun* (2000), *Hey Nostradamus!* (2003), *Forgive Me Leonard Peacock* (2013), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003), *Nineteen Minutes* (2007), *American Horror Story* (2011), and *Elephant* (2003).

theory in practice. In addition to the lack of criminological approaches in the field of literary studies, few works explore fictional accounts of rampage violence. Linder's *Rampage Violence Narratives: What Fictional Accounts of Schooling Shootings Say about the Future of America's Youth* is the only book-length work to examine this topic. Her work, albeit enlightening and inspiring, is much more about the social construction of the shooter in the popular imagination rather than an examination of the causation of school shootings in America. Her work, for example, examines the differentiation of whiteness and blackness in fictional narratives concerning school shootings and dedicates several chapters to various fictional shooter's socially constructed sexualities through queer readings of the texts. In contrast, the following essay will examine the social roots of mass shootings by employing a criminological approach that examines criminal motivations and the fictional shooter's justifications for violence. The shooters' violent actions are delineated in such novels as a reaction to an American culture that perpetuates shame via social strains and feelings of intense isolation stemming from the dissolution of social bonds.

4 Many rampage shooters, both real and fictional, display a sincere longing to be loved and maintain strong feelings of shame produced by competition and perceived emasculation. The majority of rampage violence narratives derive their inspiration from the tragic events that transpired at Columbine High School. For this reason, two distinct profiles of the rampage shooter have emerged within the literary imagination: the type of narcissistic psychopath as which Eric Harris has been characterized, and the figure of the depressed pariah that was associated with Dylan Klebold. Employing a number of socially constructed myths that emerged following Columbine, many fictional accounts of school shootings utilize the media's attempts to understand Eric and Dylan's motives and therefore focus on the shooter's internalization of social strain due to his inability to form social bonds within their schools and communities. Each character struggles to achieve some form of aspirational reference, whether it be popularity or hegemonic masculinity, and is frequently impeded by some form of noxious stimuli (i.e. general strain). General strain theory has evolved over the years to incorporate three major types of strains that incite violent behavior: 1) the actual or anticipated failure to achieve positively valued aspirations 2) the removal or anticipated removal of positively valued stimuli and 3) the actual or anticipated presentation of negatively valued stimuli (Agnew et al 44). The fictional shooters of rampage violence narratives perceive their strained existence as justification for

violence; ultimately deeming themselves victims forced to kill by the societies that alienated them through a twisted take on retributive justice. The narratives' differing characterizations of the rampage shooter, evoking the socially constructed myths that developed in the wake of the Columbine Massacre, typically compel utter disgust by employing the characterization of Eric or a hesitantly compassionate understanding towards the shooter in an effort promote tolerance towards those that are ostracized through representations of bullied outcasts like Dylan. Such narrative themes will be evinced through readings of Lionel Schriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003) and Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes* (2007).

5 Violence for men—predominately, white men—is deemed an appropriate response to feelings of anomie. Michael Kimmel argues

what transforms the aggrieved into mass murders is also a sense of entitlement, a sense that using violence against others, making others hurt as you hurt, is fully justified. Aggrieved entitlement justifies revenge against those who have wronged you; it is compensation for humiliation. Humiliation is emasculation: humiliate someone you take away his manhood. For many men, humiliation must be avenged, or you cease to be a man. Aggrieved entitlement is a gendered emotion, a fusion of that humiliating loss of manhood and moral obligation and entitlement to get it back. And its gender is masculine. (*Angry* 75)

James Gilligan likewise posits that violence has a symbolic logic for those that commit deadly crimes. After a series of interviews with violent offenders in a maximum-security prison in Massachusetts, he concluded that violence stems from essentially two emotions: shame and love. Violence is often how men express disappointment. Gilligan suggests, “the purpose of violence is to diminish the intensity of shame and replace it as far as possible with its opposite, pride, thus preventing the individual from being overwhelmed by the feeling of shame” (111). Males are more prone to depression, suicidal behavior, and various forms of out-of-control behaviors because of the social construction of masculinity that fosters feelings of inadequacy. Erving Goffman suggests,

in an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, with a recent record in sports. Any male that fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior. (128)

Accordingly, every man will feel inadequate at some point in his life resulting in a crisis of masculinity. It is from this feeling of inferiority and shame that men attempt to repair, restore, or reclaim their manhood. For many, this is achieved via violence. In addition, men that do not feel loved by others or do not achieve a sense of self-love are more prone to violent behaviors. The violent individual protects himself from a loveless atmosphere by withdrawing from others thus closing themselves off from further pain (Gilligan 51). Accordingly, violence is often a product of an individual desiring love too much but not knowing the proper way to express such desires. This is because men are conditioned to deny feelings of love and that patriarchy only values anger as a truly masculine emotion. Without love, Gilligan claims, the “self feels numb, empty, and dead” (47). Leonard Shengold deems this condition as “Soul Murder”: “a dramatic term for circumstances that eventuate in crime—the deliberate attempt to eradicate or compromise the separate identity of another person” (2). Many of the prisoners Gilligan interviewed claimed that their personalities had died and that, though their bodies live on, they ultimately feel dead inside compelling them towards a life of violence.

### **Evaluating Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold: From Columbine Students to NBK**

6      Following the horrific events that took place at Columbine High School in 1999, news pundits quickly began offering their insight into the motivations of the two shooters’ heinous actions. As the first mass shooting to be nationally televised, the tragedy incited a media circus constructed from various cultural scripts. As Linder argues, the idea of the school shooter in popular narrative is a product of hyperrealities and Roland Barthes’ notion of myth that, in context of the school shooter, is tied directly to hegemonic understandings of youth identity (xxiv). In attempting to better understand the adolescent’s catalyst for violence, various interest groups attempt to construct a narrative to explain the horrific actions through previously established discourses that offer up various scapegoats. Joel Best argues that “declaring war is simply one instance of a broader tendency to use militarized language to describe social problems”, using a clearly understood metaphor that encourages open conflict with a unanimously chosen enemy (144-145). As a product of a delineative process, social problems typically develop under three conditions: First, an individual or group must declare something or someone as a potential threat to normalcy. Subsequently, the perceived problem must stimulate a general cause for concern among a large population of people, and, finally, those individuals

acknowledging the social problem must labor to eliminate the irritant through a collective moral crusade. In this sense, “social problems do not exist ‘objectively’ in the same sense that a rock, a frog, or a tree exists; instead, they are *constructed* by the human mind, *called into being* or *constituted* by the definitional process” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 151, italics in original).

7 The popular interpretation of the school shooter in the United States incorporates numerous myths. First, for example, mental illness is often deemed a cause of the shooter’s motivation for killing.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, numerous school shooters experience mental illness and took psychotropic drugs for clinical depression and schizophrenia at the time of their violent outbursts. Yet, as Katherine Newman suggests, “given the number of adolescents who are depressed and suicidal, mental illness cannot be viewed as a straightforward predictor of rampage school shootings” (60). Violent media is also often presented as a cause for the shooter’s homicidal actions though causation is difficult to prove. Eric and Dylan were huge fans of the video game, *Doom*, and often commented how it would be fun to act as the game’s protagonist in real life. In addition, Littleton Colorado was a predominantly Christian town and the influence of goth culture, satanic media, and the myth of evil were likewise utilized to understand the two boys’ actions. Marilyn Manson was offered up as a folk devil that influenced Harris and Klebold to shoot up their school in works such as *She Said Yes: The Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall*, and it was widely believed that the boys were members of the notorious trench coat mafia.<sup>3</sup> Such myths have been adequately disproven. Eric and Dylan, for example, disliked Manson’s music, preferring German industrial groups like KMFDM and Rammstein instead.

8 Currently, the most popular myth used to understand youth violence and, to this day, remains consistent in news reports following such tragedies, is peer victimization: “bullying at school is probably the most commonly accepted explanation for school shootings, and for good reason. Shooters do express fury at being excluded, teased, and tormented” (Newman 63). Following Columbine, the bully narrative was highly utilized to understand the boys’ actions: “the killers were quickly cast as outcasts and ‘fags’” (Cullen 155). As Jessie Klein suggests, this was because, “Eric and Dylan were seen as weak, nerdy, and weird; in short, they were outside the narrow ideal of what people in their school and community believe a boy should be, and

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<sup>2</sup> Following Nikolas Cruz’s attack on Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, President Trump seized upon the rhetoric of mental illness in a likely attempt to elude a serious conversation on gun control.

<sup>3</sup> Misty Bernall points to Manson’s song, “Get Your Gunn,” as a favorite of the two boys at Columbine that killed her daughter (52).

therefore treated as less than human” (14). For example, a female student recounted an experience of being slammed against a locker by a jock and called a “fag lover” for simply having a conversation with Dylan (Klein 14). Yet, this long-standing and popular perception of Eric and Dylan as loners has been largely discredited by Dave Cullen’s exceptional work of investigative journalism: “‘Outcast’ was a matter of perception. Kids who slapped on that label on Eric and Dylan meant the boys rejected the preppy model, but so did hundreds of other kids at the school. Eric and Dylan had very active social calendars, and far more friends than the average adolescent” (147).

9        Rather than feeling like losers, the two boys deemed themselves gods on a quest for fame and notoriety. In their journals, they wrote of desiring to become the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, and perceived others as lesser individuals that needed to be eradicated. For Eric, this manifested in extreme misanthropy. In his journals, he declares a desire to “KILL MANKIND” and that “I hate the fucking world . . . *people are STUPID, I’m not respected, everyone has their own god damn opinions on every god damn thing . . . I feel like God . . . I’m higher than almost anyone in the fucking world in terms of universal intelligence*” (qtd in Cullen 258; 234, italics in original). Such rantings are clearly the product of a young man feeling aggrieved from not being heard and feeling shame for not being extolled by others as the superior human he perceived himself as. Looking at Eric’s insecurity about his spelling, Peter Langman suggests that

although Eric tried to maintain an image of himself as a superior being, inside he felt insecure and vulnerable. It is hard to sustain the illusion of superiority when you cannot even spell the words you want to use. But Eric found a solution—he rejected the whole concept of spelling: “spelling is stupid . . . I say spell it how it sounds. What is the solution when there is a threat to your identity? Eliminate the threat. (27)

It is also evident that he had insecurities concerning masculinity. If the world makes you unsure your identity, the perceived solution for the two boys was to burn the world down. Both Eric and Dylan were consistently referred to as “fags” by students higher up on the school’s social hierarchy of popularity. Eric maintained a small frame with a sunken chest, therefore making him smaller than the jock elite. In response to such insecurities, Eric adopted the ideology of superiority proposed by the Nazi party that provided him a model of hypermasculinity: a macho, militaristic ideal of manhood ingrained in a culture of violence. While others perceived him as different, he was, as Rachel Kalish and Michael Kimmel suggests, actually, an “over-conformist

to a particular normative construction of masculinity, a construction that defines violence as a legitimate response to perceived humiliation” (Suicide 461).

10 Cullen rightfully deems Eric as a psychopath in his best-selling true crime book, *Columbine* (236). Eric’s heroes were the aggrieved vigilantes that evoked violence as a form of retributive justice on an American society that failed to honor their desires. Rather than being a shooting, the Columbine Massacre was intended to be a bombing. Eric was fascinated by the Oklahoma City bombing and perceived Timothy McVeigh as a heroic figure. In 1995, McVeigh committed one of the most horrific acts of domestic terrorism in the United States prior to 9/11. Angered by the government’s siege of Waco and Ruby Ridge, McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, killing 168 people as revenge on a government that oppressed white nationalists. Eric was fascinated by such carnage and desired to up the body count in copy-cat fashion, and for over a year studied McVeigh’s tactics. For Eric, McVeigh was an ideal of masculinity that took action into his own hands and eliminated anyone that had perceivably had done him wrong. Because of his crimes, McVeigh achieved celebrity status months before his execution and was highlighted by MSNBC’s *Headliners and Legends*: a series usually devoted to Hollywood stars thus cementing his fame (Kellner, *Guns* 104). Eric also wanted such infamy. For him, the attack on Columbine was “clearly a ‘self-enhancing’ antisocial act, and during it, Eric got to experience himself as invincible. His antisocial concern with status was interwoven with his paranoid preoccupation with status” (Langman 37-38): killing equated power and a demonstration of the hegemonic masculinity he had previously been denied at Columbine.

11 Dylan, on the other hand, was a young man desperately trying to connect with society. Evaluating his demeanor, Langman suggests Dylan appears to suffer from social anxiety disorder and maintained an avoidant personality fearing rejection from others (51). While Eric’s journals are filled with rantings of hate and misanthropy, the most common word used throughout Dylan’s journals is “Love” (Solomon xv): He claims he had fallen for “fake love” and that his unrequited love for a girl (who has yet to be named) “didn’t give a good fuck about him” (qtd in Cullen 186). Cullen argues, Dylan had no happiness, no ambitions, no friends, and “no LOVE”: he desperately desired “to find love” while “still fret[ing] about ‘this toilet earth,’ but his focus shifted dramatically toward love. Love. It had been prominent from the first page of the journal, but now, a year in, it grew overwhelmingly” (186; 216). Depressed and isolated (despite having many friends), Dylan found himself unable to form the necessary attachments he believed would



give him the love he so desperately needed. Travis Hirschi posits that, “positive feelings toward controlling institutions and persons at the same time neutralize their moral force. Such neutralization, is in control theory, a major link between lack of attachment and delinquency” (127). Lack of positive attachments to conventional peers and social institutions heightens the probability of delinquency. Because Dylan felt alienated by his school environment and perceived his inability to form attachments at Columbine, he maintained low self-esteem: Accordingly, Dylan had deficiency of self-love and “when self-love is sufficiently diminished, one feels shame” (Gilligan 47). As aforementioned, such feelings of shame can lead to restorative violence, “as those who receive less support should be less able to cope with their strains in a legal manner” (Agnew, *Pressured* 98). For Dylan, his strains and the inability to form social bonds developed into suicidal ideation. However, his desire for self-harm would later be alleviated through his friendship with Eric.

12 Langman perceives Dylan as an enigma. Dylan was a shy, peace loving individual, that transformed into one of the most violent mass murderers in United States history. He perceives Dylan as a “pseudopsycopath” that when in the presence of Eric acted tough, engaged in criminal behavior, adopted Nazi symbolism (even though he was Jewish), and ultimately planned mass murder. Yet, in his journals, Dylan is a confused and lonely boy with a strong desire to find social attachments and love (Langman 68). Dylan perceived himself a god, much like Eric, and believed all humans to be brainless zombies. However, unlike Eric, he saw zombies as toys to be played with rather than something needed to be eradicated (Cullen 182). Like Eric, Dylan desired to achieve a sense of hegemonic masculinity that he had failed to obtain and, for this reason, constructed an identity with the outlaw. In a paper written for an English class, Dylan wrote about “the Man” who challenged school bullies and preppies to fights and killed them using guns, knives, and a metal truncheon: “‘The man’ can be viewed as Dylan Klebold’s ego ideal: two inches taller than, he, muscular, smart, self-assured, resolute, in control, and coldly murderous. ‘The man’ was, quite literally, an avenging angel” (Larkin 142). With the aid of Eric, Dylan learned to perform the role of the man and adopted violent masculinity as a way of restoring feelings of shame. The two boys desperately needed each other. Eric taught Dylan the violent mannerisms of being “the man”: Eric gave Dylan’s life purpose and an attachment he so desperately craved (freedom from alienation), while Dylan provided Eric an accomplice and validation for his hate and violent misanthropy. As Andrew Solomon claims, “Eric was a failed

Hitler; Dylan was a failed Holden Caulfield” (xv). Together the narcissistic psychopath and the depressed pariah initiated one the most violent school shootings in American history, and compelled many authors to write novels in an attempt to understand why such tragedies occur.

**“Good Wombs Have Borne Bad Sons”: Evoking Eric Harris in Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin***

13     Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk About Kevin* delineates a mother’s struggle to come to terms with her son’s violent actions; a few years before the novel takes place her son, Kevin, horrifically murdered eleven people at his school with a crossbow. Written in an epistolary format, the novel consists solely of Eva’s letters (written as a form of therapy) that sketch Kevin’s early childhood and retrospectively search for an answer as to why he killed his classmates. While no clear motive is explicitly stated in the novel, the narrative highlights three likely reasons for the rampage attack: the social construction of a deviant hypermasculinity via violence, the celebrity status of mass murders, and Eva’s ambivalence towards motherhood. Written after the tragedy at Columbine, Shiver portrays Kevin as a narcissistic psychopath and employs the myths that surround the media’s understanding of Eric Harris. Kevin mutilates animals, pours bleach into his sister’s eyes, and maintains a strong sense of schadenfreude while maintaining little empathy for others. He demonstrates no remorse for his violent actions and believes the massacre has made him a public icon: he hopes to be played by Brad Pitt in the film version of the tragedy, and perceives his heinous actions as a source of entertainment for the American population. In perceiving himself as a celerity, Kevin hides behind a mask of violence and postures himself a traditional school shooter: a “tough guise” that demands respect and infamy via aggression.<sup>4</sup> James Messerschmitt argues that “for many men, crime may serve as a suitable *resource* for ‘doing gender’—for separating themselves from the feminine. . . [as] particular types of crime can provide an alternative resource for accomplishing gender and, therefore, affirming a particular type of masculinity” (*Masculinities* 84, italics in original). Kevin perceives his horrific actions as an avenue for successfully doing gender, as his deviant actions correct his previous subordinated social situation as an outcast (Messerschmidt, *Nine Lives* 13). Accordingly, “basking in the celebrity status he obtained through his rampage at Gladstone High

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<sup>4</sup> See Jason Katz’s *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help*.

School, Kevin skews the massacre as evidence of his abrupt ascent to the top of a masculine hierarchy” (Phipps 110).

14 Mikhael Bakhtin argues in *Rabelias and His World* that the folk carnival allows for a momentary suspension of class hierarchies in which the peasantry could elide their social boundaries via a temporarily permitted spectacle of misbehavior and iconoclasm. During a period of carnival, the conventional world is turned upside down and the lower classes gain a feeling of catharsis by parodying and aping the dominant social order. A major source for this inversion and misrule lies in the grotesque: custom, body, and self-presentation take on a fantastical design and people and their actions become characterized by vivid distortions of the body and transgressions against the social order (7; 21). The school shooting represents such a carnivalesque moment as time comes to a still and social hierarchies are briefly inversed: the individual that once perceived him/herself as inferior becomes omnipotent granting either life or death to those previously maintaining a higher social status. Newman claims school shooters “no longer would . . . try to accommodate themselves by scraping and bowing before the lords of adolescent society; instead they would show who was really in charge and stake their claim to a notorious reputation. The performance was a public one . . . that no one would doubt who was responsible” (152). As such, Kevin views his massacre as a public spectacle that elevates his social status. Gregory Phipps notes, “Kevin tries to extend the carnivalesque moment for as long as possible, but, as Eva herself reminds him, the media inevitably will forget about him at some point in the future” thus making his massacre meaningless (112).

15 Emile Durkheim writes in his seminal work, *Rules of Sociological Method*, that crime serves several functions, and, because criminality is inevitable in all populations, it ultimately benefits rather than harms society: “Crime is, then, necessary; it is bound up with the fundamental conditions of all social life, and by that very fact it is useful, because these conditions of which it is a part are themselves indispensable to the normal evolution of morality and law” (70). In this sense, the presence of crime allows society to define various social facts: it enforces conformity to the social structure as the population constructs punishment to deter criminality and ultimately incites social change. Furthermore, because crime disturbs the collective conscious of a given society it encourages a unified response to deviance that strengthens normative behavior and fosters social solidarity to restore the carnivalesque moment to normalcy (Hawdon, Ryan, and Agnich 682). However, in doing so it must present the criminal

as the ominous other. Today's media outlets irresponsibly turn mass murders into household names and sensationalize violence via pornoviolence.<sup>5</sup> Douglas Kellner argues that such spectacles reflect "acts of societal violence that embody a crisis of masculinity and male rage, an out-of-control gun culture, and media that project normative images of violent masculinities and make celebrities out of murders" (*Guys and Guns* 14). Would-be killers latch on to such violent images of masculinity and perceive murder as an acceptable approach to doing gender.

16 Like Eric and Dylan, Kevin desires to demonstrate his masculinity and gain notoriety through mass murder. Linder's reading of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* examines Kevin's queer mannerisms: he wears clothes that are too small, he maintains traces of effeminacy, he masturbates openly in front of his mother, and has an ambiguous relationship with a male friend (38). However, these examples also depict his performance of hegemonic masculinity. While Kevin is small in stature, his "shrunken mode of dress has the opposite effect of making him look bigger—more adult, bursting . . . Kevin's crotch cuts revealingly into his testicles, and the painted-on T-shirts make his nipples protrude" (170-171). His acts of masturbation are clearly a demonstration of virility and patriarchal power over his mother, and his relationship with his friend, while not clearly homoerotic, can be viewed as a Dom/Sub relationship in which Kevin maintains all the power. While Eva clearly sees these behaviors as disturbing, her husband, Franklin, views such deviant behaviors as natural, upholding a culture of entitlement, silence, and protection—i.e. "boys will be boys". Kimmel suggests, "guys implicitly support criminals in their midst who take that silence as tacit approval. And not only does that silence support them, it also protects them" (*Guyland* 63). Franklin and Eva's parenting styles conflict, positioning the mother and father in a good cop/bad cop binary opposition; forcing Eva to constantly perform the role of disciplinarian. Franklin beams with pride at Kevin's "archetypal teenage toughness . . . a candy-coated savagery for [his] consumption" (295). When Franklin asks Kevin if boys at his school ever settle their differences in a good-old-fashioned fist fight, he responds that "choice of weapons . . . is half the fight": "Fistfight's a low percentage. A doughboy's got way better odds with a 30 millimeter. Smart call" (259). Franklin sees this as humorous, however, Eva perceives that "this teenage angst of his, it wasn't *cute*" and believes a boy to be a very dangerous animal (295; 62).

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<sup>5</sup> See Tom Wolfe's *Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine*.

17     Indeed, Kevin is a very dangerous animal and believes violent actions will grant him the upmost masculine power. Discussing his actions with Eva during a visiting session in prison, Kevin beams when Eva asks if the other boys mess with him: “Are you kidding me? The fucking worship me, *Mumsey*. There’s not a juve in this joint that hasn’t taken out fifty dickheads in his peer group before breakfast—in his head. I’m the only one with the stones to do it in real life” (41). Violence, in this sense, provides Kevin an impression of a positive self-worth that has ultimately been denied to him by the social structure. Because alternative modes of self-expression have been closed off, many marginalized adolescents attempt to regain a sense of their lost dignity by appropriating respect through aggression. Elijah Anderson notes that criminal activity garners respect by others through the perpetrator’s demonstration of manifesting nerve (91). Richard T. Evans suggests, “it is [Kevin’s] desire for the public’s recognition of the wickedness and daring of his crime . . . [that provide] his certainty that the murders of his father, his little sister, a teacher, and some classmates guarantee him unquestionable manhood and masculine power” (14). Kevin has indubitably over-conformed to a patriarchal mode of masculinity that denies men proper means of expressing emotion and only extols aggression as a favorable trait. Kellner argues, “although the motivations for the shootings may vary, they have in common crises in masculinities in which young men use guns and violence to create ultramasculine identities in producing a media spectacle that generates fame and celebrity for the shooters” (“Media” 157). Kevin has bought into a violent ideal of hegemonic masculinity that is tied to American nationalism, and, since American culture breeds violence, Kevin’s crimes offer excitement and interest on which he thrives (Jeremiah 177-178). As Eva claims, school shootings in America and her own son’s horrific actions as a response to toxic masculinity are as “American as Smith and Wesson” (61).

### **“They Started It”: Evoking Dylan Klebold in Jodi Picoult’s *Nineteen Minutes***

18     While Shriver’s representation of the school shooter has no redeeming qualities, Jodi Picoult’s *Nineteen Minutes* characterizes Peter Houghton as a sympathetic individual compelled to kill due to peer-victimization: Peter is a likable character that desires love and social inclusion, however, since he is perceived as different is ostracized by his fellow students and is tormented daily. Much like Dylan, Peter desires love: he yearns for a relationship with his childhood friend, Josie, however his longing is ultimately exploited by the popular students at his school. The

jocks mock his expression of feelings toward Josie, spreading a love letter he wrote, and consequently embarrass him in front of the entire school. Picoult claims in interviews that she chose to take up to topic of bullying after recalling her own high school experiences and those of her children: One day “I was reaching into my locker and a kid walked by, called me a freak, and slammed the locker shut on my hand, breaking three fingers. Years later, as a mom, I saw all three of my kids face bullying—and it begged the question: In a post-Columbine world, why haven’t we figured this out yet” (Q&A 25). While the conception of bullying transformed from an omnipresent rite of passage to a serious social problem following the horrific tragedy at Columbine, the specter of bullying still lingers in America’s schools. Newman argues “bullying is a nationwide problem. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, about 160,000 children miss school every day for fear of being bullying” (64). Jessie Klein likewise argues that American society is designed around a bully economy. To be successful in our society an individual must be competitive, aggressive, and powerful: characteristics linked by the values of masculinity and capitalism (156). Those that fail to measure up are easy targets for ridicule and bullying which have damaging psychological effects: “The impact of bullying can affect the physical, mental, and academic well being of an individual, resulting in high levels of anxiety, low self-esteem, and more frequent thoughts of suicidal ideation” (Beebe and Robey 34). Feelings of depression may also turn outward making the bullied individual a threat to others. Klein suggests, “of the 166 school shooting perpetrators whose identities are known, 147 were male. Most of those who committed massacres . . . struggled for recognition and status among their peers. The majority of them languished at the bottom of the social hierarchy” and were bullied for not meeting the masculine ideal (17). Kimmel found that 88% of students in Midwestern towns reported having observed bullying in their high schools and 77% report having been a victim; two out of three students state they have been bullied based on appearance, gender, and sexual orientation (*Guyland* 80). Another similar study conducted by Friedericke Sommer, Vincenz Leuschner, and Herbert Scheithauer states 67% of school shooters had been marginalized and 63% had been bullied; nearly every one of the perpetrators they analyzed had been accused of being gay and not measuring up to the hegemonic notion of masculinity (4).

19 Picoult opens *Nineteen Minutes* with Alex speaking to her daughter, Josie, about her homework: in chemistry she learns that “Catalysts . . . [are] substances that speed up a reaction, but stay unchanged by it” (6-7). Later in the school day, she discusses some hearsay with her

friend Courtney: “Courtney’s eyes lit up; gossip was as good a catalyst as any chemical” (17). The image of the catalyst is, of course, conspicuous as the novel aims to explore the impetus for Peter’s massacre. The pressures to conform to a toxic notion of hegemonic masculinity serves as a noxious stimulus for Peter as other students perceive him as not being able to live up to the standard. As a result, they deem him a “fag” as a result, mock his unrequited romantic interest to Josie, and conclusively pull down his pants in the school cafeteria. It is clear in the novel that Peter does not have any homosexual tendencies as he maintains an unrequited love for his childhood friend, Josie, who has blossomed in high school and has been integrated into the popular clique at Sterling High School. However, being deemed a “fag” has little to do with homosexuality. As C.J. Pascoe explains,

‘Fag’ is not necessarily a static identity attached to a particular (homosexual) boy. Fag talk and fag imitations serve as a discourse with which boys discipline themselves and each other through joking relationships. Any boy can temporarily become a fag in a given social space or interaction. This does not mean that those boys who identify as or are perceived to be homosexual are not subject to intense harassment. But becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or an anyway revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with a sexual identity. This fluidity of the fag identity is what makes the specter of the fag such a powerful disciplinary mechanism. It is fluid enough that boys police most of their behaviors out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognize a fag behavior and strive to avoid it. (330)

Kimmel argues that guys watch how other men perform gender waiting for someone to slip up in an effort to assert their dominance—because masculinity is a constant contest and is largely a homosocial experience performed a judged by other men. He argues such contests, as a result, construct three cultures of masculinity: that of entitlement, silence, and protection (*Guyland* 59). First, men feel entitled to power defined by their masculine status. When this is challenged or thwarted, an individual must heroically defend their right to manhood through violence. Secondly, this violence is not discussed via a culture of silence. Bullying, for example, is not challenged, as “boys will be boys”: peer-victimization is ultimately viewed as an omnipresent rite of passage and other boys do not challenge the norm in fear of being alienated. While Josie dislikes seeing her old friend Peter being bullied, she does nothing to alleviate the situation in fear of being ostracized from the popular clique. Lastly, such silence grants protection: the

violent nature of men becomes engrained in the very fabric of society and, in the case of bullying, no one questions the possible negative outcomes.

20 Being deemed a “fag” causes Peter general strain. Agnew claims that one of the strains most likely to induce a criminal response, especially among youth, is abusive peer relationships: “peer abuse includes insults, ridicule, gossip, threats, attempts to coerce, and physical assaults” (72). He further suggests adolescents are more likely to cope with strain via criminal channels as they have yet to develop problem-solving skills (*Pressured* 117), and that males are more likely to experience rage as a response to their anomic condition as anger is a legitimate affirmation of their masculinity (136). This is very much the case with Peter. Following his shooting spree at Sterling High School, Peter drops his gun when approached by the police. When being questioned in his holding cell he whispers: “They started it” (55). Violence, for Peter, is a justified retributive act for years of torment. Picoult delineates Peter’s early experiences in elementary school, suggesting he is “sensitive, and he’s sweet. But that means he’s far less likely to be running around with the other boys playing police chase than he is to be coloring in the corner with Josie” (72). As a result, his teacher tells Peter’s mother that he must adopt a more aggressive approach to masculinity if he is not to be bullied (72). However, Peter is unreceptive to the normative behaviors that define masculine success in American society. Picoult thus presents the aspirational references of hypermasculinity and homogeneity as socializing agents that force Peter into accepting certain beliefs, aspirations, and norms that conflict with his individual desires. As a result, the demands of Peter’s peers and Sterling High School become alienating social constructs that force Peter into a socially strained existence as he consistently fails to conform to the social norms provided by his superiors, and, in turn, loathes the idea of adhering to “fake” notions of idealized popularity he deems “bullshit” (160).

21 In Peter’s defense, his lawyers suggest that he has experienced something similar to battered women syndrome, serving as a catalyst for his rampage, and has developed PTSD as a result of constant harassment. This interesting, yet still inexcusable, defense does indeed have merit. Thormod Idsoe, Atie Dyregrov and Ella Cosmovici Idsoe found that “the level of PTSD symptoms among the bullied children was quite high. Slightly more than one third of the students who reported being bullied had scores within the clinical range for PTSD symptoms” (907). Clinical psychologists Charlie Donaldson and Randy Flood likewise perceive the omnipresent demand of hegemonic masculinity for men as a potential catalyst for PTSD



symptoms. They suggest current patriarchal norms concerning hegemonic masculinity construct a cultural malaise for men that fosters strains due the fears of gender role strain—i.e. mascupathy. Although many men attempt to portray themselves as confident and powerful, their fears and anxieties leave them constantly frightened and fragile beneath the façade of their tough exterior. This “generalized vigilance is a deep and abiding form of stress, and can be termed Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome” (Chapter 5, para. 25). Such stressors can lead to violent outbursts, as is the case with Peter in *Nineteen Minutes*. Socialized to adhere to hegemonic conceptions of masculine success and not having the means or the desires to do so, Peter ultimately snaps due to the demands of normative society and kills as a means of escaping from the aspirational reference. In this sense, Picoult presents Peter’s rampage in Mertonian terms: Individuals that struggle to achieve societal goals or are affected by noxious stimuli cope via antisocial channels—in this case, the murder of ten classmates. While he is indeed a monster for his rampage, he is also a sympathetic character exposing his need for love: unable to foster the necessary bonds conducive to hindering criminal behavior, Peter explodes as a result of his extreme alienation from idealized notions of manhood.

### **“I Want to Find Love”: Mental Illness and the American Male**

22     Following the tragic events that occurred at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Valentine’s day 2018 (a day meant to represent love and friendship), President Trump invoked the rhetoric of mental illness in an attempt to understand Nikolas Cruz’s homicidal actions. While the discourse of mental health was, of course, a means to elide a more serious discussion of stricter gun control in America, the social problem of mental health in the United States is indeed warranted: the current cultural climate fosters feelings of social strain while simultaneously dismantles social bonds therefore perpetuating feelings of depression and isolation. While most American’s desire a structure of belonging, western culture extols individualism and grants limited avenues to convectional means of success perpetuating higher rates of social strain. Bruce E. Levine argues that, for this reason, “Americans have increasingly lost autonomy and community, liberty and fraternity, and sovereignty and support and have acquired something I call *institutionalization*” (*Surviving* 30, italics in original). Institutionalization, such as patriarchal norms, construct notions of hegemonic masculinity and creates a definitive pressure for men to succeed at various gender role expectations. Any failure

in doing so increases perceptions of shame, and, as aforementioned, feelings of inadequacy concerning gender role strain can often lead to violent outbursts. Accordingly, bell hooks claims, “patriarchy is the single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation” (*The Will* 17). Many American men are hurting, and, because they have no outlet for expressing their pain other than violence, the nation cannot heal until the social structure decreases feelings of social strain and increases social bonding. In the state of the union following the Parkland massacre, Trump suggested “we must also work together to create a culture in our country that embraces the dignity of life, that creates deep and meaningful human connections, and that turns classmates and colleagues into friends and neighbors” (“Statement by President Trump”). Indeed, such social bonding would likely decrease violence in America as criminological theory implicates. However, “our culture does not value human relationships at all. It is that our extreme industrial society values other things more than human connectedness. Rather than spending energy on family, intimacy, and friendship, Americans pour energy into efficiency, productivity, and consumption” (Levine, *Surviving* 157). America’s culture of competition and patriarchy promotes insanity (hooks, *The Will* 30), and, until we address a society that perpetuates feelings of shame and devalues love, the United States will continue producing the “monsters next door.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On May 3, 1999, *Time* Magazine featured an article concerning the Columbine Massacre and featured pictures of Eric and Dylan on the cover of the issue. The issue was called “The Monsters Next Door: What Made Them Do It?” I employ the phrase “Monsters Next Door” in reference to the issue.

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