



“In an orgy of violence”: Deconstructing hypermasculine identity in Todd Strasser’s

Give a Boy a Gun

Anne Mahler

School of English, UCC

Abstract

*In April 1999, after months of planning the most destructive rampage school shooting in US American history, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed thirteen people and themselves at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. In the aftermath of the shooting, different theories for the shooter’s motives and inspirations emerged, reaching from Goth culture and hard rock music to first-person shooter video games; and authors started to literarily engage with the phenomenon. Focussing on the construction and performance of masculine identity in American high schools, this article extends existing discussions surrounding the shooters’ motives, and puts toxic hegemonic masculine gender performances and their potential to traumatise subordinate masculinities at the centre of its analysis. The text serving as a basis is Todd Strasser’s young adult novel *Give a Boy a Gun* (2000) which was inspired by Columbine and the first school shooting book to be published after Harris’ and Klebold’s rampage. It is argued that, in the context of school shooting fictions, the performance of toxic hegemonic masculinity is a key component of the shooter’s motivations in literature, which has the potential to cause chronic trauma that manifests itself in a hyperviolent and hypermasculine school shooting.*

After months of planning the most destructive rampage school shooting in US American history, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered their high school in Littleton, Colorado in April 1999, heavily armed with semi-automatic weapons and explosives. During their rampage they killed twelve students, one teacher and ultimately themselves. Columbine was the unprecedented peak of a string of high school shootings in the second half of the 1990s. Although it has been exceeded as the deadliest school rampage shooting in the United States in recent years, it is one of the first of these incidents which received full media coverage and therefore gained notoriety. It “has come to stand for a category of offense, the school shooting, and Harris and Klebold for a type of criminal, the school shooter” (McWilliam 2015, p. 184). In the aftermath of the shooting, mainstream media, politicians and academics joined the debate about why Harris and Klebold went on such a rampage. Different theories emerged, and blame was put on various interests of the shooters including Goth culture, hard rock music and first-person shooter video games.

Brooks Brown, friend of shooter Dylan Klebold and co-author of *No Easy Answers: The Truth Behind Death at Columbine* (2002), however, focuses on the dynamic between students of Columbine High School prior to the shooting.

If a guy was acting in the Columbine drama program, he was immediately labelled a 'drama fag.' Not only was he not playing sports—which was what all normal guys were supposed to do at Columbine—but he was into that fine arts crap! The bullies found whatever weakness they could and went after it. I was a wuss because I wasn't in sports. I was gay because I liked theatre (p. 61).

Aside from Brown, other students also came forward and shared their story. Evan Todd, a football player who was wounded in the school's library—where most of the fatalities occurred and Harris and Klebold shot themselves—comments on his perception of the school and the shooters. In an interview with *Time Magazine* eight months after the shooting, he recalls:

Columbine is a clean, good place except for those rejects, [...] Most kids didn't want them there. [...] Sure, we teased them. [...] It's not just jocks; the whole school's disgusted with them. They're a bunch of homos, grabbing each other's private parts. If you want to get rid of someone, usually you tease 'em. So the whole school would call them homos, and when they did something sick, we'd tell them, 'You're sick and that's wrong' (Todd in Gibbs and Roche, 1999).

From two opposing perspectives, Brown's and Todd's statements illustrate the level of hostility against students—not just the shooters—who do not fit into what was considered status quo behaviour. Supporting Supporting Brown's description of Columbine High School as a hostile place for students who did not fit into the mainstream, Todd underlines the role of bullying in the students' discourse and, even after the shooting, views homosexuality as a disease which contaminates the school environment, using a highly homophobic rhetoric to insult the shooters. Todd raises the question of what role masculinity plays in American high schools and which consequences might occur if the students do not stick to what is perceived as the status quo in terms of masculinity.

This article focuses on the construction and performance of masculine identity in American high schools in the context of rampage school shootings; more specifically, it analyses how masculinity is enacted in high school environments and how this is represented in literary treatments of Columbine. The text serving as a basis of this analysis is Todd Strasser's young adult novel *Give a Boy a Gun* (2000) which is based on the 1999 shooting, and the first rampage school shooting book published after Harris' and Klebold's rampage (Bodart 2016, p. 61). I argue that each shooter fails to perform according to the standards of hegemonic masculinity, before they transform their identities and form one hypermasculine unit that claims back control through the means of physical violence. It is only through this

temporary alliance that both can attempt to escape their roles as emasculated outcasts before committing suicide and being overpowered, respectively.

Narrated by several different and often counteracting characters, the epistolary novel *Give a Boy a Gun* tells the story of Brendan Lawlor's and Gary Searle's fictional rampage at Middletown High School and the events leading up to it. Strasser does so by using an unconventional narrative style. Much like traditional epistolary novels which are introduced by frame narratives or even fictional publisher notes, Strasser frames his narrative by the introduction of Denise Shipley, journalism student and, as it is revealed at the end of the novel, one of the perpetrators' stepsister. Her collection of interviews, e-mail and chat exchanges, journal entries and suicide notes is an attempt to make sense of the tragedy that shook the small town of Middletown, both for herself and for the community. A multitude of narrators, from the perpetrators, their families, victims and teachers gives different angles and tries to paint a comprehensive picture of the attack, much like it is done in the aftermath of real rampage school shootings. Since this is achieved through completing analepses, the voices of the perpetrators are only heard posthumously, through their suicide notes and online exchanges. All of these narrative tools create a realistic atmosphere and serve as a leeway to open up discussions which are furthermore supported by Strasser's extensive use of paratexts. On almost every page of the novel, studies and quotes from real newspaper articles reflect on subjects like gun violence or the influence of video games as they are mentioned in the narrative. And whilst other fictional treatments of school shootings usually have one main protagonist, *Give a Boy a Gun* is one of the few novels that tries to capture the dynamics between two shooters instead of just one.

Literary critics, however, have been hesitant to engage with the young adult novel (YA). Reviews of the text have been scarce and relatively mixed. On the one hand, Joni Richards Bodart calls the novel "choppy, and [...] potentially [...] confusing" (2016, p. 62), and *Publisher's Weekly's* review characterises it as "scattered and disconnected", with the epistolary format detracting "from the central drama" (2000). On the other hand, *Kirkus Reviews* points out that "the multiple points of view create empathy for a wide range of characters and enhance the book's in-your-face reality", calling it "[i]mportant, insightful, and chilling" (2000). Devon Clancy Sanner in his review for the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* finds that "*Give a Boy a Gun* provides excellent material for critical inquiry by students, educators, parents, and the public at large" (2002, p. 547), reinforcing its ability to spark discussions among adolescents and adults alike. The few scholarly analyses that have engaged with the text primarily focus on how it can be used in the English classroom. In her journal article "Politicizing Young Adult Literature: Reading Anderson's 'Speak' as a

Critical Text” (2003), Janet Alsup reads the novel, among others, with an eye to its use by English teachers, suggesting that reading it in class “can be an ethical as well as intellectual process, and as such it can assist adolescents in coping with their tumultuous lives” (p. 159). Candida Gillis, looking beyond the mere topical potential of the novel, emphasises how it can be employed to teach multi-voice and multi-genre writing to an adolescent audience and argues that this ‘untraditional’ narrative form reflects ever-shifting adolescent identity (2002, p. 52). None of these analyses, however, have so far commented on the relevance of masculinity to the novel, the performance of adolescent masculinity by the protagonists Brendan and Gary, or the significance of hegemonic masculinity and its performance in a high school environment.

Only a few literary scholars have so far explored the application of masculinity studies on YA fiction; however, a rise of studies on the subject at the end of the 2000s is noticeable. Thomas W. Bean and Helen Harper, in their article “Reading Men Differently: Alternative Portrayals of Masculinity in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction” (2007), address the subject both on a content and narrative level and conclude that YA fiction offers “more complex renderings of boys’ lives, address[ing] the effects of enforced hegemonic masculinity, l with the female protagonist, disrupt[ing] the connection between males and the performance of masculinity” (p. 11). Helen Harper explores the construction of adolescent masculinity in her analysis “Studying Masculinity(ies) in Books About Girls” (2007), examining literary adolescent masculinity in YA fiction written for and about girls, and noting that, although they have their limitations, YA texts offer

more complex renderings of gendered identity in the lives of female and male adolescent characters, address [...] the effects of enforced traditional masculinity, and productively, if only momentarily, disrupt [...] the connection between sex and gender in ways that allow for engagement with alternative notions of masculinity (p. 508).

Rolf Romøren and John Stephens observe that

[c]haracters who narrate or focalize [YA] novels which thematize masculinity are not usually represented at the outset as already interpellated within a particular masculine schema, but their actions and attitudes tend to instantiate a particular schema by the text’s point of closure (2013, p. 223).

This is particularly true for YA fiction dealing with a rampage school shooting, as this is often used to reinforce a particular type of hypermasculine behaviour.

All these studies stand at the beginning of a new branch of literary gender studies whose scope is the application of masculinity studies to literary texts, especially to those targeted at an adolescent audience. Hypermasculinity, in this context, is understood as “the

exhibition of stereotypic gendered displays of power and consequent suppression of signs of vulnerability” and an “exaggerated presentation of masculinity” (Spencer et al. 2004, p. 234) which, in this example, includes displays of exaggerated physical violence and emotional detachment. In that respect, the rampage school shooting as performance of hypermasculinity can be considered toxic, as it endangers lives of students and teachers. As “hegemonic masculinity actually does refer to men’s engaging in toxic practices—including physical violence” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, p. 840), a rampage school shooting might furthermore be regarded as direct reaction to the performances of hegemonic males and their influence on the perpetrators’ decision for a hyperviolent revenge crime. This article therefore exclusively focuses on the relations between adolescent males. In the following, I examine the concept of hegemonic masculinity as defined by R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt and its performance in American high schools as studied by J.C. Pascoe. Based on these theories, further analyses illustrate how the masculine identities of both protagonists are challenged throughout the novel, discussing the roles of physical and verbal harassment as well as the protagonists’ relationships with girls, all of which have an impact on their masculine identity and how it is perceived by other students. The last part is concerned with the reaction of both shooters and how they subsequently decide to overcome their public images by becoming co-offenders and forming a hypermasculine union which allows them to take lethal revenge.

Just like in any other social environment, gender and masculinity in American high schools are fluid concepts that are negotiated and performed according to the socio-geographical context of the school and of the students. One of the most influential concepts to assess masculinity and how it is enacted, is R.W. Connell’s and James Messerschmidt’s concept of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity attempts to explain power relations and gender roles, especially between men. Connell’s and Messerschmidt’s theory consists of four main elements: First, it assumes that even though there is only one male sex, a variety of different masculinities exists. Looking at these different masculinities in relation to each other, secondly, it can be observed that they are in a hierarchical order. Third, hegemonic masculinity is on top of this hierarchy. Fourth, other masculinities which are valued as lesser, depending on how close they are to hegemonic masculinity, either benefit passively from hegemonic masculinity, or are suppressed by it (2005, p. 832). This theory acknowledges the differences between men and how they perceive and enact their own and other’s masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity therefore embodies “the currently most honoured way of being a man” (2005, p. 832) and supports gender inequality—not just in regard to weakening femininity, but also other masculinities that are not in line with the

predominant notion of what it means to be ‘masculine’. Unlike female gender performance which has been widely explored in feminist studies, scholarship on this kind of male gender performance has only recently become the focus of scholarship.

What is perceived as the dominating perception of masculinity differs according to the environment in which it is enacted. Variables such as age, cultural background or social status play a crucial role in the establishment of a society’s hegemonic masculinity. Learning about gender norms in a society starts in the family home and is continued throughout school. Messerschmidt even goes so far as to argue that “school is the primary place where gender is learned and reinforced” (2013, p. 46). It therefore plays a pivotal role as a place of grievance or humiliation if standards of masculinity are not met by an individual. In their observations about the student culture in US American schools, Wooden and Gillam define hegemonic masculinity in the school environment as “built largely of aggression, athleticism, competitive success, and emotional isolation” (2014, p. 60). In other words, physical strength is valued over emotional strength and mental well-being. The lack of attention to mental health is compensated with a detachment of emotions. The result is a toxic environment in which every emotional struggle undermines adolescent males’ efforts to publicly embody hegemonic masculinity.

Understanding masculinity as a power structure also implies the idea that positions in that hierarchy can be contested and need to be validated in order to stay on top. As illustrated by the introductory quote by Evan Todd, verbal harassment by the adolescents who represent hegemonic masculinity occupies a central place in this process. C.J. Pascoe in her field study on masculinity and sexuality in high schools finds especially that “homophobic teasing often characterizes masculinity in adolescence and early adulthood” (2011, p. 53). In addition to physical dominance, the hegemonic male establishes his power through verbal aggression against peers representing alternative masculinities. As a result, Jessie Klein summarises, “boys who are denied full male privileges and status [...] feel pressured to demonstrate extreme male behaviour to overcompensate for their diminished social position” (2013, p. 48). The question of which form this “extreme male behaviour” might take is partly answered by the way it is provoked: “[g]iven that such interactions question, undermine, and/or threaten one’s masculinity, only contextually ‘appropriate’ masculine practices can help overcome the challenges” (Messerschmidt 2004, p. 111). “Engagement in assaultive violence” (Messerschmidt 2004, p. 111) therefore is perceived as an appropriate way to counteract the public humiliation and degradation in front of peers.

Published in 2000, Todd Strasser’s *Give a Boy a Gun* addresses the “epidemic of school shootings” (Kellner 2015, p. 19) in the late 1990s and makes the complex subject

accessible for readers of young adult fiction. Although it received mixed reviews at the time of its publication, the novel is still considered influential in YA literature (Bodart 2016, p. 62). In the Author's Note, Strasser expresses his concerns that subjects like "murder [...] and various other immoral or criminal activities" (2000) increasingly become a topic for younger audiences. However, Strasser does not just strongly advocate gun control¹, he also addresses the subject of adolescent masculinity in American high schools in his fiction and picks up on the issues addressed by the researchers mentioned above.

Strasser builds the characters of his two protagonists through both direct and indirect characterisation, setting a contextual framework, and answering the question why Gary and Brendan are at the lower end of the social hierarchy of their high school. Brendan is initially described as popular, before his family moves to Middletown and he transfers to Middletown High School. Being taken out of his social environment has a traumatising effect on Brendan: He turns from a popular athlete into a quiet outsider who has trouble adjusting to his new school (Strasser 2000, pp. 26–28). In addition to problems with adjusting to a new social environment, he also deals with temper and anger management issues throughout his childhood and adolescence (Strasser 2000, pp. 19–20), a character trait which is also reflected in the impulsive way he reacts to bullying.

Whilst Brendan is the more impulsive of the two shooters, Gary internalises most of his issues and withdraws into himself. His childhood and adolescence have been fundamentally shaped by his parents' divorce in which he has been "caught in the middle" and used by his mother as a means to get more money (Strasser 2000, p. 13). After his parents separate, Gary's father disappears from Gary's life. Gary struggles immensely with his father's absence, but neither his mother, nor a psychotherapist, is able to help him overcome the breakup of his family and the loss of his father. He is left with an 'overprotective' mother who tries to take the roles of both mother and father, and no masculine role model. His withdrawn and shy demeanour, which can be interpreted as a symptom of his depression, as well as his weight, make him an easy target for bullies. As a result, both Brendan and Gary experience physical and verbal harassment which questions their masculinity.

¹ The public debate about gun control has not lost any of its relevance since Strasser published the novel in 2000. Whereas defenders of gun culture refer to the Second Amendment to the US Constitution which states that "the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed" (Constitution of the United States 1791), a growing number of citizens demands tighter gun control laws. Through highly successful lobbying work by the National Rifle Association (NRA), however, politicians have been very hesitant to modernise laws (Rushe 2018).

Physical harassment is a common occurrence at the fictional Middletown High School. According to one student, “anyone who wasn’t big and strong and on a team got it” (Strasser 2000, p. 37), or, as Brendan puts it, “[T]he athletes are the dominant males” (p. 47). They exhibit the hegemonic masculinity during breaks, after school, and even in class where their status as football players keeps them from being punished. As one of the characters, recalls after the shooting, they acted “like they ruled the school” (p. 100). Brendan especially is a victim of constant physical aggression. He “got it worse than the other kids”, presumably because his anger management issues lead him to react to the aggression directed towards him (p. 46). For Brendan, even small gestures towards girls, like holding a door open for a popular cheerleader, have grave consequences. Since this is perceived as a deliberate provocation and not a polite gesture, he is beaten up by a football player who “smash[ed] him like a wild animal” (115).

In his account of the events leading up to the shooting, Brendan’s friend Ryan recalls a pivotal event when a group of football players “held [Brendan] by the ankles and dunked his head in the toilet. It was all over school in no time” (Strasser 2000, 61). Conflicts like these on school grounds should have consequences for the aggressors who physically abuse and degrade Brendan, but even teachers reinforce the students’ culture of physical aggression and ensure the athletes’ place on top of the social hierarchy. They either support it passively by looking away, or actively by encouraging the behaviour, for example by deliberately pairing physically domineering football players with physically weaker students in gym class (Strasser 2000, pp. 39–41). This does not just add to the feeling of emasculation, it also increases a sense of injustice among the students harmed in the process. That teachers cannot be regarded as confidants who have the best interest of all their students in mind, is another problem Jessie Klein addresses in *The Bully Society*. She observes that “[a]dults too often exacerbate rather than mitigate such difficulties” (Klein 2013, p. 133). In other words, teachers rather add to the hostile environment which leads Brendan to perceive the school as a place of constant humiliation and consequently as a place to execute revenge. The choice of guns as weapons is not arbitrary either. Neither Brendan, nor Gary are physically able to control the football players who bully them. Guns are therefore an easy way to exert power and “out-man” those who harass them.

Masculine dominance, however, is not just enacted through physical harassment, but is also expressed in oversexualised conversations among male teenagers, for example locker room talk. J.C. Pascoe argues that “adolescent masculinity is understood [...] as a form of dominance usually expressed through sexualized discourses. [...] Boys [...] assert masculine selves by engaging in heterosexist discussions of girls’ bodies and their own sexual

experiences (2011, p. 5). In pro-actively discussing their sexual experiences with girls, male teenagers stress their heterosexuality and therefore negate the possibility of being homosexual or being perceived as such. Not joining these conversations even if having the experience, according to Pascoe, has the same effect as not being experienced at all. In regard to expressing their heterosexuality, Brendan and Gary therefore display what Kimmel and Mahler call “inadequate gender performance” (2003, p. 1440).

In the novel, this becomes specifically apparent when analysing Gary’s relationship with his girlfriend. Although he has dated a girl for two years, he is still the victim of ridicule because he does not engage in these over-sexualised discussions. His girlfriend describes the moment when they are caught by a group of athletes in an emotionally—not physically—intimate moment: “I wanted to die. Gary did too. [...] It was like they’d just stuck a knife in his heart. Sometimes Gary and I could escape into that world where no one bothered us or laughed or made fun. But it never lasted long” (Strasser 2000, p. 34). Gary’s relationship does not fit into the picture of the oversexualised discourse that is part of hegemonic masculinity, so even though he has a girlfriend, he is still considered inferior. Brendan’s dating life is only rarely discussed in the novel. He is not described as going on dates and it is only once that he shows an interest and makes an advance towards a girl. The girl, however, is Allison, Gary’s girlfriend, who strongly refuses his advances (Strasser 2000, pp. 92–93). Nobody else witnesses his failed attempt, but Brendan, arguably, perceives it as emasculating nonetheless. The rejection therefore fuels his need to assert his masculinity in a different way.

This emasculation is further underlined by the severe verbal harassment both Brendan and Gary experience. This harassment especially centres around homophobic insults. Pascoe’s study found that “[h]omophobia is [...] a central mechanism in the making of contemporary American adolescent masculinity” (2011, p. 53). In an oversexualised discourse in which masculinity is measured according to experience with girls to establish oneself as high as possible in the ‘pecking order’, it serves as a means to support heterosexual norms.

Strasser implements this verbal bullying in addition to physical harassment. A friend of Brendan’s summarises the general sentiment at the school:

[y]ou see this guy, and he just sneers at you and says, ‘Hey faggot.’ Thing is, to him it’s nothing. Two seconds later he’s probably forgotten he even said it. But it’s burned in your brain. It’s a permanent scar. A week later, you’re still asking yourself [...] Does anyone think you’re a faggot? Maybe you are a faggot and you don’t even know it (Strasser 2000, p. 50).

This name-calling serves two purposes: first, it strengthens the image of bullies as superior; second, it causes the bullied to permanently question their masculine identity. On the one hand, by insulting peers with homophobic terms, the hegemonic male asserts his own heterosexuality. He metaphorically kills two birds with one stone: degrading and humiliating his peer whilst also dissociating himself from any kind of homosexual thoughts or practice. He therefore strengthens his status at the top of the school hierarchy by threatening to unmask others as feminine (Kimmel 1994, p. 215). On the other hand, he causes an identity crisis within the bullied. Here, the homophobic insult does not necessarily result in the victim questioning his sexuality. It rather draws on the question of how his own masculinity is perceived by peers (Kimmel 1994, p. 215). Brendan and Gary themselves are both called “faggot” (Strasser 2000, p. 47) on various occasions throughout the narrative. This does not necessarily mean that they are perceived as homosexual. It rather shows how traits which are stereotypically perceived as feminine are assigned to their characters. This practice is integral to the power structure in American high schools. It establishes a social order which does not only favour the alpha males and excludes other masculinities, but also creates a hotbed for violence as it causes the bullied to assure their masculinity, not just to themselves but also to those questioning it publicly. One account illustrates how football players violently enact their top spot at the social hierarchy at Middletown High school and how this behaviour is endorsed by teachers (Strasser 2000, pp. 38–41).

After this incident, Denise Shipley, the fictional collector of the material which forms the narrative, starts to add more accounts by the future perpetrators. These fictional chats and e-mail exchanges recount anecdotes about public humiliation of Brendan and Gary from their perspective and sheds light on how angry and out of control it makes them feel. Here, the author’s choice to not implement journal entries or other private writings from the future perpetrators, but rather communication with each other and some of their closest friends, reinforces the idea that both still hide the majority of their actual emotional response and, especially in Brendan’s case, rather display anger as appropriate masculine response. Thus, they already practice performing the type of hegemonic masculinity they aspire to embody. Even though their accounts are still negotiated through their public personas (Strasser 2000, p. 41 ff.), the reader nevertheless gets an insight into their minds and thoughts, and from that point forward, both protagonists are given a stronger narrative voice.

Accounts from Brendan’s and Gary’s antagonists are contrasted with a larger number of accounts by characters who reflect and attempt to understand their behaviours instead of entirely opposing them, and, most importantly, by Brendan and Gary themselves. Reports about physical abuse are balanced with writings of the shooters who swear to take revenge on

their bullies. The phrasing of these writings becomes increasingly violent over time. “We talked all the time about getting back at the jocks. For every time they called you a faggot. For every time they bodychecked you into a wall. [...] We would tie them up and use pliers to pull their fingernails off. We would gouge their eyes out and castrate them” (Strasser 2000, p. 70). Especially the last part which recalls to the reader the image of medieval torture practices which counteract the constant torture they had to go through. The mentioning of castration implies the idea that the future perpetrators want to take their bully’s masculinity, therefore emasculating the dominant males and replacing them at the top of the hierarchy. Torture fantasies quickly turn into death threats. In an e-mail, Brendan writes that he “will kill every friggin’ one of them. It’s gonna be Columbine all over again, only better. Harris and Klebold did it right. Blow the friggin’ school, then blow yourself away” (Strasser 2000, p. 71). Here, Brendan directly references the Columbine High School shooting and its potential to serve as a blueprint for further shootings and as inspiration for his own plans. Hyperviolent revenge inspired by Harris’ and Klebold’s rampage appears to be the only way for Brendan and Gary to gain back control over the situation and redefine their challenged masculine identities. Since “[v]iolence is often the single most evident marker of manhood” (Kimmel 1994, p. 215) and both shooters feel let down by authority figures, other non-violent options to ease their pain are not considered.

Even though Brendan and Gary react differently to the issues they face, they do not plan to act on their grievances on their own and therefore become co-offenders. Two years prior to their rampage, Brendan and Gary get to know and start to influence one another. As one of their class mates recalls, “[w]hatever the dark thing in Brendan was, it started to come out in Gary, too. [...] the two of them together...I don’t know, they just fed off each other” (p. 77). Whilst Brendan becomes considerably more aggressive, Gary withdraws into himself and internalises his pain. However, they follow the same goal, namely to end the harassment and gain back control over their social lives. Yet, neither of them has the ambition to take revenge by themselves. Together, the idea of complementing each other and ‘feeding off each other’ becomes essential. In criminological terms, this dynamic is called accomplice offending, or co-offending, a type of crime that “involve[s] more than one offender” (U.S. Department of Justice 2005, p. ii). As Lisa Stolzenberg and Stewart J. D'Alessio point out, co-offending is regarded as “the dominate form of criminal offending among juveniles because of the enhanced salience of peer pressure during adolescence” (2008, p. 65). In other words, juveniles are more likely to commit violent crimes with a co-offender instead of by themselves. For example, Brendan and Gary complement each other during the planning process: whereas Brendan attains the guns necessary for their rampage by stealing them from

his neighbour (Strasser 2000, p. 140), Gary builds “well constructed [sic] and intricate” pipe bombs that serve as booby-traps for doors (Strasser 2000, p. 103) to keep their hostages trapped and under control. What Stolzenberg and D’Alessio describe as “enhanced salience of peer pressure”, however, needs to be re-evaluated in the context of the novel. In Brendan’s and Gary’s case, it is rather the idea of achieving their personal goals by executing an attack that, as lowest common denominators, satisfies both Brendan’s desire for revenge and Gary’s suicidal thoughts. As one of the accounts of the day of the shooting reads,

Gary might have been thinking about killing himself. Brendan never struck me that way. It was like he was too angry to do that. He wanted to get too many people. But if you put them together, you can almost see the idea coming to them. Deciding to do themselves in, but going to school and taking as many of those guys with them as they could (Strasser 2000, pp. 119–120).

Brendan and Gary therefore enable each other not just in regard to their skills, but also mentally. Having an accomplice who holds the other accountable, makes it less likely for them to abandon their plans. Furthermore, the noticeable absence of any discussion of a backup plan which takes into account that one of them would withdraw from their scheme suggests that their union is crucial for the execution of the shooting.

With a revenge crime that involves heavy firearms and bombs, they substitute both their lack of physical strength with weapons and, therefore, for the duration of their rampage, re-invent themselves as a hypermasculine, almost god-like entity. Here, it is worth pausing and returning to the physical descriptions of both perpetrators. Gary is described as “sort of chubby” (Strasser 2000, p. 126), while Brendan is characterised as an “average-size, thin kid” (p. 18). Physically, they are distinctively different, and inferior, to the image of hegemonic males at Middletown High School, namely the football players who are bigger and more muscular (p. 30). Physical constitution and especially the display of muscles, according to Alan M. Klein, is “about more than just the functional ability of men to defend home and hearth or perform heavy labor; muscles are markers that separate men from each other” (1993, p. 16). Muscles therefore are an important bodily indicator where an individual is placed in the gender hierarchy and how he is able to perform as hegemonic male. Brendan and Gary’s choice of a rampage school shooting as an act of revenge is therefore an infallible solution to their physical inferiority. Their choice of guns as the weapons of assault does not just ensure absolute physical dominance over the hostages by making the missing muscles futile, they also serve as a phallic symbol which displays the shooters dominance, playing into the “cliché that the gun is a penis symbol as well as a weapon” (Connell 2008, p. 212). Katz notes that “[g]uns are an important signifier of virility and power and hence are an

important part of the way violent masculinity is constructed” (2003, p. 357), and Stange and Oyster add that guns also serve “a symbolic function that exceeds any practical utility. It has become the symbol par excellence of masculinity: of power, force, aggressiveness, decisiveness, deadly accuracy, cold rationality” (2000, p. 22). Because of these connotations, “it seems logical that men could use them to perform masculinity” (Stroud 2012, p. 217). Brendan’s and Gary’s choice to re-invent their masculinities is therefore practical as well as symbolic. It means that, without changing their physical appearance, the two of them are able to control all the popular students and teachers at the school dance, although being outnumbered thirty to one (Strasser 2000, p. 131). Instead, it is enough to add semi-automatic guns in a transhuman, prosthetic way. With that, they mix two performances “that are particularly problematic in combination: (1) a hyper-masculine one of aggression, strength, and dominance, and (2) a transhumanist one where the human pursues perfection through science and technology (Keeling 2012, p. 134). The outcome is the perfected process of aggression and dominance, a deadly combination. Brendan and Gary counteract the football players’ physical dominance with artificial means and, therefore, place themselves on top of the social pecking order, meeting and exceeding the standards set by their bullies.

Brendan’s and Gary’s strategy therefore results in their ultimate god-like ability to decide who, including themselves, will be killed and who will survive the attack. Thus, they have ultimate control and turn the school dance into their own ‘night of judgement’. Empowered by their firearms, they have the rest of the, predominantly popular, students entirely at their mercy. This becomes especially apparent when looking at their choice of the school dance as the time of their attack since, traditionally, only “the popular kids [are] at the dance” (Strasser 2000, p. 120). Gary makes sure that his girlfriend Allison is not endangered by picking this event, whereas Brendan calls one of his friends to tell her not to attend. She recalls that

he asked me if I was going to the dance that night [...] because he’d noticed that I was getting friendly with some of the [...] ‘popular’ girls. I assured him there was absolutely, positively no way I was going. And then he said he was glad, and that he’d always liked me (Strasser 2000, p. 119).

While they spare certain students, they also target certain individuals, specifically the school’s headmaster and Sam Flach, the football player who is portrayed as Brendan’s main bully. Both represent the social groups that they feel most wronged by, namely the bullying football players and the teachers who enabled this behaviour by not intervening (Strasser 2000, pp. 152–153).

How fragile their union is, however, is exposed when Gary realises that his girlfriend is also trapped in the school's gym. Despite his precautions, she is in the group of students that they take hostage (Strasser 2000, p. 19). It forces Gary to re-evaluate the situation: "Gary wanted to talk. Brendan said there was nothing to talk about. They'd chosen their path. So Gary goes, 'Things have changed.'" (p. 156–157). While Brendan and Gary appear as one unit when entering the gym, this disagreement seriously jeopardises their union and brings their differences to light. Whereas Gary seems to be more open to the idea of compromising parts of their plan to guarantee Allison's safety, Brendan views her as collateral damage. This poses an irreconcilable conflict of interest which causes Gary to commit suicide earlier than planned. As soon as Brendan is on his own between the hostages, football players overpower him and beat him into a coma (p. 173). With this violent act, the athletes restore themselves at the top of the known gender hierarchy which has temporarily been challenged by the shooters.

Brendan and Gary ultimately unsuccessfully redefine their identities as hegemonic males by overcompensating for their physical shortcomings through the use of firearms, and through exerting power over those who emasculated them. As Douglas Kellner argues when analysing school shootings from Columbine to Virginia Tech, "motivations for the shootings may vary, [however] they have in common crises in masculinities" (2012, p. 497). Ultimately, the shooters do not just attack their bullies, but also the broader social system, and show that the construction of a masculine identity can indeed be a life and death matter in American high schools.

The role adolescent masculinity plays in motivating rampage school shootings has become a more prominent area of research, both in analyses of real attacks and their cultural representations.² By analysing how masculinity is enacted in high school environments and how it is represented in Strasser's *Give a Boy a Gun*, this article raises awareness for the interwoven issues of how hegemonic masculinity is enacted in American high schools and how disenfranchised adolescents who are not part of this enactment can reside to hyperviolent and hypermasculine behaviour to voice their grievances. The idea that boys learn that "violence [is] the only acceptable form [...] of emotional expression allowed them" (Kimmel 2008, p. 54) and at the same time, that "violence is not only an acceptable form of conflict resolution, but one that is admired" (Kimmel 2017, p. 75), creates a highly futile

² See for example: Lindner, K.E., 2014. *Rampage Violence Narratives: What Fictional Accounts of School Shootings Say About the Future of America's Youth*. Plymouth: Lexington, 2014. Or: Kimmel, M. and Kliff, C., 2015. "There Is a GunMAN On Campus": Including Identity in Mass Shooting Discourse. In: B. Agger and T.W. Luke, eds. 2015. *Gun Violence and Public Life*. New York: Routledge. pp. 176–185.

breeding ground for ideas centred around hypermasculine revenge. Kimmel and Mahler come to the conclusion that “masculinity is the single greatest risk factor in school violence” (2003, p. 140). Not being perceived as masculine enough by their peers and being exposed to homophobic insults and physical aggression therefore adds to Brendan’s and Gary’s perception of not being in control and to their need to take revenge.

That this revenge is unsuccessful shows, however, how dominant the system of hegemonic masculinity among adolescents is. Just like at Columbine High School, things return to the way they were before at the fictional Middletown High School. Collective and individual trauma is now part of this community’s identity; however, the social hierarchy appears to be unchanged. As seen by the homophobic and nonreflective statement by Evan Todd, ideas of social hierarchy are so deeply engrained in students like him that even a life-threatening situation like the shooting cannot change their views and behaviours. In fact, this attitude is also mirrored in the novel: injured football player Sam Flach addresses the idea of forgiveness and concludes: “[d]id I do anything that a thousand other guys at a thousand other schools haven’t done? [...] I’m not forgiving them. Ever.” (Strasser 2000, p. 177). He normalises his behaviour by hiding behind the broader social system and fails to re-evaluate his values. In that regard, *Give a Boy a Gun* accurately represents the persistence of the adolescent gender hierarchy and therefore reinforces existing power structures. Calls for changes in attitudes subside whilst social hierarchies, in general, remain unchanged: what Columbine shooter Eric Harris calls a “revolution of the dispossessed”, fails (Gibbs and Roche 1999). What remains, however, are new, negative role models for disenfranchised youths who turn to school shooting subcultures that, enabled by a variety of social media platforms, engage with and hail rampage school shooters (Daggett 2015, pp. 46–47). A fruitful discussion about healthy gender and social relations, however, is still in its infancy.

Anne Mahler is a PhD researcher at University College Cork under the supervision of Dr Alan Gibbs. Her PhD project focuses on the representations of trauma in school shooting fictions. She holds two BA degrees in British Studies and Sciences of Communication and Media from Leipzig University, and graduated from the University of Bristol with an MA in Victorian Literature. Her research interests centre on trauma studies, Victorian literature and the Gothic, as well as medical humanities.

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