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America Despises a Loser

Masculinity, Violence, and Failure in Joyce Carol Oates’s You Must Remember This

James Darrell Thompson

Joyce Carol Oates’s novel You Must Remember This explores how American culture socializes men and boys into violence and vividly portrays the disastrous results both for society at large and for the individual men and boys who are pressured into violence.

Much progress has been made in combating the limiting influence of gender roles. Only a few decades ago, it would have been unthinkable for women to be airline pilots, CEOs of Fortune 500 corporations, or major contenders for the U.S. Presidency. Today, men can be stay-at-home fathers, and women can be the breadwinners. Some gender stereotypes however, are surprisingly resilient, and one of the most notable of these is the expectation that men should act violently. Indeed, our society still feels that a willingness to engage in violence is one of the defining features of manhood. The noted sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that despite its benefits for men, male privilege is also a “trap [that] has its negative side in the permanent tension and contention, sometimes verging on the absurd, imposed on every man by the duty to assert his manliness in all circumstances” (50). It might be objected that this predicament is simply an outmoded remnant of patriarchal culture, and that men should simply ignore it. Yet any man who fails to meet this deeply-rooted expectation will face
serious consequences; it is likely that he will be ridiculed as a “wimp,” “sissy,” or “mama’s boy.”

The ideal of manhood in our culture includes: Fearlessness, supreme self-confidence, and invincibility. Germaine Greer observes that the romantic hero of the typical paperback romance novel is, “never nervous or uncertain or humble” (178). In contrast, any real-life man will inevitably find himself in many situations in which he has every cause for fear, indecision, and a crushing sense of inferiority. Men are human, after all, fallible in body and mind, susceptible to weaknesses, both of strength and of courage. No matter the extent of his physical or mental toughness, any man will eventually meet his match, if only as a result of that greatest vanquisher of all, age.

The result is a discrepancy that men experience between what they really are and what society expects them to be. In physical combat, the penalty for failure is particularly high: losing can result in severe injury or death. Men are more often victims of physical assault than women are, and assault against men is often viewed by perpetrators, authorities, and sometimes even the victims themselves, as simply an inevitable part of men’s place in society. Criminologists Kathy Hobdell and Elizabeth A. Stanko note, “the police sometimes assume that many assaults involving men are just ‘fair fights’ gone awry.” In their study of male victims’ responses to assault, Hobdell and Stanko observe that men “who were most severely affected all expressed strong notions about how men needed ‘to fend for themselves.’ Thus these men had difficulty sharing their emotional reactions to being victimized, and reconciling their intense feelings of vulnerability.” Hobdell and Stanko quote one male victim of violence: “Men are still measured by how tough they are, when you’re young, you’re tough, that’s how you get respected. We all suffer from that.” In a physical confrontation, even the victor may emerge scarred or mortally wounded. Moreover, in any context other than an officially sanctioned combat sport, winning itself can be a liability, for the victor is likely to find himself imprisoned for assault or depending on the outcome, murder. Thus, a man frequently finds himself in a dilemma. Refusing to fight means humiliation, yet triumph itself can lead to the ruination of his life.

Few writers have delved more deeply into the cultural and psychological issues of contemporary American society than Joyce Carol Oates. During a career that has spanned some of the most portentous decades in American history, she has produced a vast body of fiction that encompasses nearly every vortex of social upheaval, from racism to sexism to war protests to political
corruption. Gabrielle Antonello posits, “Although Oates often focuses on indi-
viduals or individual families, her characters are emblematic of American cul-
ture and values, and the conflicts that arise because of them” (4). Greg Johnson 
observes that “all [Oates’s] characters, regardless of background, suffer intensely
the conflicts and contradictions at the heart of our culture—a suffering Oates 
conveys with both scrupulous accuracy and great compassion” (Understanding 
Joyce Carol Oates 8). Though Oates’s subject matter often addresses the most
intimate details of (often highly dysfunctional) family life in the United States,
her real interest always clearly lies in exploring the submerged complexities of
the American psyche.

Most critical attention to Oates’s treatment of gender issues has focused
on her female characters and how the social construction of reality limits their
opportunities for growth and happiness. The majority of critical discussions of
her use of violence have focused on her female characters as victims of male vio-
ence. For instance, Johnson emphasizes women’s oppression and its societal
source in Oates’s fiction. He asserts that, in their conflicts with male characters,
Oates’s female characters “usually find themselves on the losing side because
of their culturally enforced passive roles. . . . Male aggression and violence,
whether through actual rape, psychological trauma, or institutional domina-
tion, lie at the heart of all these women’s torn and conflicted lives” (Joyce Carol
Oates 42). Marilyn C. Wesley argues that Oates “mounts a feminist challenge to
the status quo which produces both patriarchy and its [female] victims” (253). J.
Samuel Kirubahar posits that Oates’s fiction “participates in feminist discourse
by attempting to assess how women are made and unmade by male definitions
of womanhood” (110). One critic, Ellen G. Friedman, does discuss male char-
acters, but she focuses on fathers and patriarchy, emphasizing Oates’s male
characters’ role as beneficiaries, rather than as victims, of social pressures. She
opines that “in the plot lines of Oates’s fiction . . . fathers may begin as mytho-
logical large presences unlike other characters, but they end up reduced and
quite ordinary. . . . The effect . . . registers on the remaining family members,
whose agency increases with [the fathers’] lost power” (482). It should be noted
that those remaining family members in Friedman’s examples all are female.

Though critical attention to Oates’s female characters and the difficulties
they undergo has been essential in developing our understanding of the role of
gender in her work, the paucity of attention to male characters in her oeuvre is
regrettable. One should not be left with the impression that Oates ignores the
plight of men and the social pressures they also experience. On the contrary,
she has a special skill for conveying the dilemmas that men face in a patriarchal, violent society, and she devotes much attention in her novels to the consequences for men, who fail to match society’s expectations that they be violent and aggressive. She also presents moving portraits of those men who embrace the violence that society expects of them, invariably with disastrous results not only for others but also for the men themselves.

One of the best examples of a work in which Oates explores the consequences of America’s obsession with violence is *You Must Remember This* (1987), a novel set in the 1950s in the fictional upstate New York city of Port Oriskany. Many of the characters have been physically and emotionally scarred by the violence of World War II and the Korean War; the nuclear threat posed by the Cold War looms over every thread in the narrative. Violence at a more personal level also permeates the book, and violence defines masculinity for the male characters as they find themselves expected to fulfill a masculine ideal impossible to achieve. Though the novel takes place in a time far removed from our own, it comments on many of the predicaments that men still face today.

**Felix Stevick: Disillusionment with Violence**

One of the main characters in the novel is Felix Stevick, a former professional pugilist turned real-estate developer with ties to organized crime; he epitomizes the man who embraces violence as a means to prove his manliness both to others and to himself. Felix’s father is a well-to-do businessman who invests in boxing promotion. When Felix is a boy, his father often takes him to watch exhibition matches at the local gym. The young Felix idolizes the fighters and begins to see boxing as the ultimate expression of male achievement, as well as the only true expression of male emotional bonding. Bourdieu observes that “manliness must be validated by other men, in its reality as actual or potential violence, and certified by recognition of membership of the group of ‘real men’” (52). In one fight that Felix witnesses, a local amateur faces the world middleweight champion. Unsurprisingly, the latter easily wins, but at the conclusion of the match, “the world champion was hugging the young man he’d so badly beaten as if they were brothers” (Oates 153). For the young Felix, boxing provides the sense of love, belonging, and acceptance he craves. He takes boxing lessons and finds fulfillment in every aspect of fighting, even in the risk of physical harm, for “in the ring, elevated above the crowd of ordinary men,
even injury was meaningful.” Felix believes that defeat itself is far preferable to staying out of the ring: “If he wasn’t to be . . . the world champion, he’d be the young man who dared climb into the ring with [him] for three amazing rounds, locally famous for the rest of his life for a single lucky left hook that caught the champion on the jaw and set him back on his heels.” Felix fully internalizes the concept of manliness as defined by violence, measuring “all men, all male behavior, against that world [of boxing]—which was a twin or mirror of the ‘real’ world and far more significant” (155).

Felix enjoys remarkable success in his boxing career, winning twenty-nine bouts, twenty-five of them by knockout. Finally, however, he too experiences the inevitability of failure when he faces Gino Corvino, a brawler with far more physical strength and stamina than Felix. For all Felix’s skill and dexterity, he finds himself unable to compete with this boxer. Felix learns what every man must accept: No matter how tough one is, there is always someone tougher. As Corvino knocks Felix unconscious, Felix sees “[his death] and tastes it.” His doctors tell him he is “lucky he didn’t lose [his] right eye” (Oates 157). For the rest of his life, Felix considers a resultant scar on his eyebrow “the mark of his humiliation” (373).

This brush with death so traumatizes Felix that he quits boxing, though he remains in the scene as a trainer and promoter. He recognizes, however, that his friends think less of him because of his decision to leave the ring. His boyhood friend and fellow boxing promoter, Vince Matiuzzio, blithely downplays the significance of Felix’s maiming and near death, insisting that, in a rematch with Corvino, Felix would “have had Corvino down cold” (Oates 236). Felix is constantly frustrated by his inability to express his feelings about his failed fighting career to his friends, for to admit the fear and inadequacy he had felt is sure to be taken as a sign of weakness. Not only does he find it difficult to talk about his experiences, he discovers that others are often reluctant to listen.

In a moment of uncharacteristic candor, Felix confesses his innumerable weaknesses to his young boxing protégé Jo-Jo Pearl at a dinner party, telling Jo-Jo how nervous and frightened he had been before his fights, to the point that he had difficulty sleeping and eating, even losing “weight he couldn’t afford to lose.” One would expect Jo-Jo to empathize with Felix, appreciating the emotional connection that Felix is trying to forge with him through this display of self-deprecating frankness. At the least, one would expect Jo-Jo to value the truths Felix is seeking to impart to him about their sport. Instead, Jo-Jo is uncomfortable that a man he so admires would admit to such vulnerability, and
he wonders if Felix is “maybe a little drunk? — Saying things the other men might overhear” (Oates 226). Of course, as Bourdieu reminds us, the esteem of other men is crucial to maintaining one’s identity as a “real man.” For his part, Jo-Jo cultivates the air of steely bravado that American society demands of men; he assures Felix, “I’m one of those guys . . . that could almost fall asleep in the dressing room . . . Or drink a bottle of beer and then go out and fight” (227). Jo-Jo’s glib machismo is doubly ironic—and tragic—in light of his subsequent death as a result of injuries sustained in a match against an aging journeyman boxer whom both Felix and Vince assumed he would beat easily.

Jo-Jo’s repudiation of Felix’s attempted emotional openness is particularly devastating to Felix’s self-esteem because as a young man he had himself measured all male behavior against boxing. Felix experiences a dilemma that many men have faced through the ages; he can either remain in the world of violence and risk death or debilitating injury, or he can leave and suffer the stigma of cowardice. Unable to connect with others, even with his family members, Felix becomes emotionally isolated. His half-brother Lyle attributes Felix’s habitual mistrust of everyone to his training as a boxer, epitomized by the exhortation that the referee gives the fighters before each match: “[K]eep your guard up, protect yourself at all times” (Oates 263). Yet Felix’s reticence is understandable given the belittlement he experiences; the admonishment to “keep your guard up at all times” could apply to all men in American society, even those who never set foot in a boxing ring.

Robbie, the Bus Driver, and the Pimp: Violence and the Inevitability of Failure

Felix’s disillusionment with violence is a gradual process that ebbs and flows throughout the novel; for much of the narrative, he is still very much attracted to fighting. In particular, during moments of stress or depression, he often turns to violence as a means of managing his emotions. He knows violence will invigorate him and make him feel alive, and sometimes he is willing to risk injury or imprisonment simply to improve his emotional state. Even as a child, he had “thrived on opposition, resistance . . . [T]he sudden assertion of another’s will in relationship to his own excited Felix to combat; within seconds he was flooded with emotion and purpose” (154). It might be tempting to see Felix’s obsession with competition, particularly violent competition, as
mere personal idiosyncrasy. Many men, however, feel the pressure to gain status by asserting themselves against other men. The sociologist Victor J. Seidler observes “often as men we can only feel good about ourselves at the expense of others, for we are tied into competitive relations” (23). All too often, this competitiveness manifests itself violently. Time and again, Felix seeks to prove his manliness by demonstrating that he can defeat other men in a fight.

Obviously, this behavior is problematic for many men Felix encounters in daily life; any man, outside his circle of friends and business associates, is a potential target for Felix’s violence. To mitigate the physical dangers, Felix usually engages in street fights or bar brawls in which he knows that, as a former professional pugilist, he will be guaranteed almost certain victory. One incident in particular demonstrates the vulnerability every man faces when confronted with a situation in which he feels he must defend his honor and manhood. Felix has been having an affair with his fifteen-year-old niece Enid, who attempts suicide and is hospitalized. Overcome by a range of emotions, including guilt, anger, and fear that she will expose him to prosecution, Felix drives out into the countryside and stops at a bar. He attempts to flirt with a woman whose boyfriend, Robbie, is a large, muscular man with a Navy tattoo. Despite Robbie’s formidable appearance, Felix exults in his own superiority as he envisions the ensuing fisticuffs. He imagines toying with Robbie, “try[ing] for the classic solar plexus punch you never get a chance to throw in the ring, just under the heart and your opponent drops as if dead.” Felix also considers inflicting more serious damage, similar to what Corvino has done to him, perhaps displacing his desired vengeance: “[M]aybe he’d chop up Robbie’s face” (Oates 168).

Robbie is the sort of man most people would find physically intimidating, but for all his height, strength, bulk, military training, and (likely) combat experience, he is utterly helpless in this situation. If he backs down from the fight, everyone in the bar, including his girlfriend, will despise him as a coward, but if he fights Felix, he is doomed to almost certain failure. Whichever option he chooses, he faces humiliation, either of cowardice or of defeat. Even the best-case scenario for Robbie is not particularly appealing; Felix knows that “if Robbie got lucky and landed a few good shots, if Robbie had ever boxed in the navy . . . he’d kill Felix” (Oates 168). Indeed, we might justifiably wonder whether Felix is self-soothing or attempting suicide. In that case, Robbie would be able to congratulate himself on his victory as he sits in a prison cell for decades, perhaps for the rest of his life.
In an ironic reversal of the “damsel-in-distress” scenario, it is Robbie’s girlfriend who rescues him. Observing Felix’s fixation on her, she urges Robbie out of the bar; as they leave, she refuses “even [to] glance back over her shoulder at Felix in a flirty reproachful farewell,” because “he’d scared her—something tight, mean, vicious in his face” (168). Whether she is primarily concerned for Robbie’s safety or for her own is unclear; it is possible that Felix’s demeanor so terrifies her that she simply wants to escape him. Nevertheless, there can be no question that if she had wanted Robbie to fight Felix, he would have. If she were flattered by Felix’s attention, and even more flattered at the prospect of two men fighting over her—if she felt that getting into a physical confrontation is part of a man’s “job”—there would have been a fight. That the instigation of a confrontation is avoided is simply a matter of good luck for Robbie. As is true for any man, his essential defenseless against the prospect of a more skilled fighter challenging and “besting” him as a man remains unchanged.

Later, we encounter another incident that demonstrates the helplessness of a man who is called upon to exert his manliness physically. Felix and Enid are involved in yet another lovers’ spat. As they drive through a residential suburb of Port Oriskany, Enid bolts from Felix’s car at a stoplight, and he chases her and seizes her on the sidewalk. A city bus happens to pull into a stop nearby, and the driver and all the passengers observe Enid struggling to pry herself from Felix’s grasp. The bus driver calls out, “What’s going on there? What’s happening?” Felix replies, “Mind your own business!” The driver is a perfect example of a man caught in the predicament of needing to look fearless, confident, and strong, when he possesses none of these qualities. Leaning from the bus door, the driver attempts “to look courageous,” despite his “fat gut inside the uniform, beefy jowls, frightened eyes.” He is an out-of-shape, middle-aged man, and “Felix could kill him, and they both [know] it.” Nevertheless, the driver asks Enid, “Miss? Do you need help?” (300). He feels the need to project a façade of puissance and self-assurance, though he is in fact powerless to protect Enid from Felix. If Felix, maddened by rage, were to assault the driver, a single punch would likely prove fatal, before any of the passengers would have time to intervene.

Of course, anyone, male or female, of any age or physical condition, would want to assist a young woman in evident danger, but many aspects of the driver’s dilemma arise from his position as a man in American society. For instance, it would be acceptable for a woman in a similar situation to run to a nearby house and call the police, but for a man, that would likely be interpreted as cowardice.
Most of the passengers doubtless expect a man to interpose directly on Enid’s behalf, and, having grown up in a society that expects men to act violently, the driver clearly expects it, consciously or unconsciously, of himself. Also, though Felix is hardly a paragon of gentlemanly behavior, he is less inclined to assault a woman than a man; other than once slapping Enid, he reserves his considerable propensity for violence to men. He might simply ignore a woman who challenged him as the driver does, but he would likely feel the need to respond violently against a man. Yet again, it is the woman in the situation who averts the confrontation. Enid tells the driver that she is all right and allows Felix to lead her back to his car. This outcome merely underscores the driver’s essential helplessness, however; if Felix had wanted to beat him to death, there would be nothing the driver could do to stop him, and, as a man, the idea of simply fleeing would be too humiliating to be countenanced.

Intriguingly, in the only episode in which Felix actually assaults a man outside the ring, the victim makes no effort to defend himself. Perhaps even more than the first two, this incident illustrates the utter hopelessness of a man’s defending himself against a highly skilled opponent. Felix is distraught over the break-up of his relationship with Enid and over Jo-Jo’s death. When a prostitute approaches Felix on a lonely street late one winter night, he capitalizes on the opportunity to vent his frustration by “giv[ing] [her pimp] the beating he deserved.” Felix justifies his actions to himself by appealing to a primitive notion of chivalry; he reviles the pimp for “[p]utting a girl out on the street to make a buck for him.” Yet he also takes evident masculine pleasure in “besting” another man, especially in front of a woman. The pimp is the antithesis of everything American society expects of a man: He begs “Felix not to hurt him, to let him go. He hadn’t any strength in his legs he was so terrified, didn’t even try to block Felix’s blows, just whimpered and begged,” while “shielding his face like a woman” (376). As a man in our violence-oriented society, the disgrace the pimp suffers is complete; Felix emasculates him as fully as conceivably possible, short of actual castration. The pimp endures both the physical pain and the humiliation that had threatened Robbie and the bus driver. Yet what options does the pimp have? Felix has defeated the vast majority of the professional boxers whom he faced in the ring, most of them by knockout. What chance does an ordinary man have against him? Resisting Felix’s assault might only enrage him all the more. The pimp’s plight underscores the vulnerability all men face; Felix humiliates the pimp just as Corvino has humiliated Felix. Undoubtedly,
someone else will humiliate Corvino. Whenever violence is involved, after all, someone must lose.

Warren Stevick: The Consequences of Rejecting Violence

While Felix embraces violence, and other male characters cope (or fail to cope) with the expectation of violence as best they can, Felix’s nephew, Warren Stevick, rejects violence altogether. Warren serves as a foil to Felix; while Felix is aggressive both physically and in his business dealings, Warren eschews violence and the self-aggrandizing impulse that guide Felix’s life. Though the two men are closely related, live in the same city, and are both war veterans, their personalities and life goals could hardly be more different. Warren’s selfless devotion to the peace movement stands in stark contrast to Felix’s self-centeredness and obsession with personal glory and gain. Notably, of all the male characters in the book, Warren attains the highest level of contentment. Yet his rejection of violence and his devotion to pacifism create their own unique problems.

Unlike Felix, Warren spends his childhood in a lower-class neighborhood in inner city Port Oriskany. In Warren’s milieu, and even in his family, violence is expected of boys; they are conditioned to be willing to witness and to perform it. For instance, when Warren’s father wants to take Warren and his sisters to see one of Felix’s local bouts, Warren’s mother’s objection falls along predictable gender lines: “[S]he didn’t want her daughters exposed to violence,” though she can accept Warren going (Oates 23–24). Violence and maleness go hand in hand, even in the mind of Warren’s relatively peace-loving mother.

Though Warren is large and physically strong, he refuses to join the local East Clinton Street gang, so he cannot depend on other boys for camaraderie, or for protection. Warren must witness numerous acts of perverse cruelty in this turbulent environment. In one incident, a group of boys catch a mourning dove, douse it with gasoline, and immolate it. Warren buries the dead bird, but he does so alone; even his sister Enid, who had also witnessed the atrocity, neglects to accompany Warren during his grim task and thus fails to offer him emotional support. In his day-to-day life with other children, Warren, a rare compassionate person among bullies and thugs, faces the expectation that boys
should act brutally, and his refusal to participate leaves him socially isolated and emotionally alone.

Like Felix, Warren recognizes at an early age that violence and male emotional bonding are inextricably linked in American society. In an incident similar to Felix’s boyhood epiphany, the nine-year-old Warren watches a friendly sparring match between Felix and another fighter at the local gymnasium. When the two boxers embrace at the end, Warren realizes, “there would be no context in his [own] life in which he might embrace another man. To do that you would have to hurt him first” (142). The young Warren’s rejection of violence foreshadows the difficulties he will face as an adult in a society in which violence defines masculinity.

At eighteen, Warren is drafted into the Army and sent to Korea, where he is critically injured in combat. During his near-death experience, he receives a revelation for his purpose in life, to work to end war. After a lengthy and grueling convalescence, Warren enrolls in law school and joins the fledgling peace movement. The peace movement is extremely unpopular during the mid-1950s. At protests, passersby constantly insult Warren, but he refrains from responding in kind, choosing instead to preserve a demeanor of imperturbable calm. A man in our society is expected to react angrily, even violently, to insults, and Warren struggles to conceptualize himself as someone who is unbothered by such taunts: “[O]nly upon occasion was his pride—his manly vanity, it might be called— injured: but that was nothing” (277). Warren’s insistence that his “manly vanity” is “nothing” forms his primary conflict for much of the novel. One of Warren’s first disappointments occurs when he volunteers for Adlai Stevenson’s 1952 presidential campaign. Warren supports Stevenson in large part because he takes a more dovish stance on nuclear armament than his opponent Dwight Eisenhower does. At the height of the “Red Scare,” the American electorate is attracted to a militaristic posture, and Eisenhower’s supporters “accuse Stevenson of being ‘soft’ on communism” (Oates 105). Stevenson loses the election in a landslide, and Warren watches in despair as Stevenson gives his televised concession speech. Significantly, Oates’s narrator couches Stevenson’s electoral defeat in terms of violence and physical suffering: Stevenson appears “gracious in defeat, good-humored it might almost have seemed, for he knew well how America adores a winner and despises a loser, how closely America scrutinizes its losers to gauge the depths of their injury and humiliation: Is the wound mortal? Yes, but does it hurt?” (108). The American public’s morbid obsession with the spectacle of a defeated political
candidate's emotional pain mirrors the crowd's lurid fascination with boxers' physical pain in the ring. It should also be noted that it is Stevenson's position on violence (nuclear armament) that marks him as a “loser.” Violence on a mass scale looms large behind the election, and the consensus of the American electorate is closer to the young Felix’s vision than it is to Warren's: A “loser” is someone who refrains from fighting, far worse than someone who fights and loses. Warren and Stevenson, then, are “losers” in the sense in which that word is often used in the popular vernacular as a pejorative to demean someone who is deemed a failure in life. In the eyes of many Americans, Stevenson represents a “loser” mentality, a way of looking at the world that is incompatible with masculine ideals of aggression and violence. It is worth noting that the term loser is nearly exclusively applied to men.

More problems arising from Warren’s rejection of “manly vanity” are illustrated when he begins an unlikely love affair with Miriam Brancher, a pulchritudinous artist’s model who is constantly attracting attention from other men. Warren’s introverted nature, his speech impediment, and the physical scars resulting from his war injury make him self-conscious and awkward around women. He recognizes that under ordinary circumstances, he would be unable to attract Miriam. She becomes deeply attached to him, however, when he talks her down from the roof of their apartment complex, where she had climbed during a drunken, possibly suicidal episode in the wake of a breakup with one of her boyfriends.

In the first weeks of their courtship, Warren tries to interest Miriam in the peace movement. At first, she finds pacifism too extreme; she tells him, “You’ve got to be crazy taking [nuclear disarmament] seriously for more than five minutes. . . . Letting whatever happens happen without defending yourself” (Oates 288). Eventually, however, Warren succeeds in persuading her to join him and other activists at one of the protests. Miriam is unable to adopt Warren’s equanimity when facing hecklers; indeed, her response is more akin to that of a testosterone-fueled man: She is “the angriest of the protesters, incapable of not responding when provoked, shouting back curses.” Warren attempts to calm her by downplaying the importance of individual pride. Though Miriam initially resists Warren's view, she finally agrees and vows to “try to be wiser” (313). Most people would likely think of pride in one's individual accomplishments as more appealing in a romantic partner than the humility and self-negation that Warren espouses, so his ability to engage Miriam with his ideas as her lover is remarkable, especially given the number of other men who are pursuing her.
Readers have good cause, however, to wonder if Miriam’s attraction to Warren’s ideology is mere passing fancy. For instance, during their final conversation, which takes place after they had attended a speech given by a world-renowned peace activist, Warren sees Miriam looking pensive, and he offers her comfort: “Miriam, don’t be so sad. It isn’t too late [for nuclear disarmament]—it can’t be.” She responds, “Warren, what?—sorry, I didn’t hear” (Oates 317). One of the reasons that she does eventually leave him may be that he has failed to fulfill her (and society’s) expectations of him as a man. Perhaps Miriam feels that a willingness to fight to protect one’s honor and the honor of one’s girlfriend is part of a man’s job. After all, the hecklers’ jeers are directed at Miriam as well as at Warren and the other protesters. She might think more highly of him if he were willing to punch the hecklers, rather than treating them respectfully.

Though Miriam’s exact reason for leaving Warren is unclear, Warren himself at least partly blames his lack of aggressiveness. He ruminates on how he has always been “The shy boy. Big, but shy. A pushover” (Oates 317). These personality traits place Warren at an obvious disadvantage in a society that demands aggression from men. It is reasonable, then, for Warren to wonder if his lack of aggression has played at least some role in Miriam’s desertion of him. By rejecting violence altogether, Warren attempts to transcend the types of problems that Felix and many of the other male characters face, but he also ends up paying his own price.

Conclusion

Many people contend that men only benefit and never suffer as a result of patriarchy. A large component of this belief arises from the assumption that the socialization of boys and men into aggression gives them an advantage over girls and women. While there are, of course, certain benefits to aggression, these are often far outweighed by the disadvantages. The pressure to be violent can result in injury, imprisonment, the ruination of one’s life, and even death—not to mention the psychological strain of maintaining a demeanor of supreme self-confidence in all circumstances.

A project that demonstrates how men’s psychology is shaped by the social construction of masculinity is a natural extension of feminist ideas and the feminist critical method. The social philosopher David Benatar observes, “[E]nding discrimination against one sex is inseparable from ending
discrimination against the other sex,” because “the same sets of stereotypes underlie both kinds of discrimination” (198). A critical method that examines the role of the social construction of gender in literary works, while accepting that male as well as female characters can be victims of damaging and constraining gender stereotypes would be a welcome addition to the study of gender issues in literature. Without question, a better appreciation of how cultural pressures socialize boys and men into violence and an understanding of how these pressures can be reduced would benefit everyone.


