

Construction of nice
guy manhood within
"the brief wondrous
life of oscar wao"
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Rasmussen Tinsley of Annie Proulx's " People in Hell just want a Drink of Water" and Oscar de León of Junot Díaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao represent male characters who interact with a constructed form of manhood, which this paper identifies as the nice guy. This form of manhood showcases how cultures manipulate expectations of hegemonic masculinity so that men are always positioned as the dominant members of a society, especially over women. To begin to understand how both Oscar de León and Rasmussen Tinsley fit into this identity, it is important to first understand the ways in which the idea of manhood and the idea of the nice guy operate in relation to one another.

Hegemonic masculinity is the normative prescription of male identities within a specific context. However, to understand masculinity solely in this way has its pitfalls, as observed by Gail Bederman within " Remaking Manhood through Race and Civilization," because it erases less dominant male identities which still hold power. As Bederman explains, " to define manhood as a coherent set of prescriptive ideals, traits, or sex roles obscures the complexities and contradictions of any historical moment" (7). Although there may be one set of dominant ideals that male identities are understood in relation to, to simplify a society's interaction with a multitude of types of manhood erases the contradictory identities that are awarded authority without achieving the ideal.

This concept becomes especially important in relation to Oscar and Rasmussen when considering the dynamic nature of manhood. Since manhood is responsive to changes in culture, new forms of manhood are constantly created to position certain identities as powerful or not in a

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societal hierarchy. Manhood encourages individuals living among a set of hegemonized ideals to link different contemporary identities that do not meet these ideals with a level of authority to maintain a hierarchy that prioritizes men. These constantly recreated identities, as Bederman explains, allow “men [to] claim certain kinds of authority, based upon their particular type of bodies” (7). One of these created forms of manhood through which men can claim authority is the nice guy. The nice guy is a male identity which cannot fit into a hegemonized form of masculinity, so a concept of manhood has been created that emphasizes the male aspect of the identity. This emphasizing of the nice guy’s male-ness allows the male identity to consider, and be considered, as dominant over women, thus protecting the validity of the hierarchy of men over women. Both Rasmussen Tinsley and Oscar de León are examples of men who find themselves unable to live up to cultural ideals of hegemonic masculinity, who then embody forms of nice guy manhood, which allows them to still be considered entitled to the attention, time and space of women without exerting the expected masculine characteristics of a hegemonic masculinity.

Even though neither Rasmussen or Oscar embody hegemonized masculinity, their male identities execute nice guy manhood and thus infer their societal dominance over women. To fully understand the implication of nice guy manhood, it is important to acknowledge how the idea of being nice manifests for both Rasmussen and Oscar. To do so, one must understand how nice guy manhood manifests itself in a contemporary context.

It is vital to identify that the driving force at the base of nice guy manhood is not a question of the validity of hegemonic masculinity, or a criticism of men <https://assignbuster.com/construction-of-nice-guy-manhood-within-the-brief-wondrous-life-of-oscar-wao-and-close-range-wyoming-stories/>

who may fit this mold better than the nice guy does, but a desire for a manhood that still allows the nice guy a sense of hierarchal dominance. As explained by Mia Consalvo within “ The Monsters Next Door: Media Constructions of Boys and Masculinity”, different forms of masculinity and manhood do not work to oppose each other but instead “ work in concert to ultimately retain the dominance of masculinity as a whole, defining and redefining what is masculine in order to retain its privilege” (30). The nice guy may view himself as the exact opposite of hegemonic masculinity, much as Oscar does, but ultimately both the ideal and the nice guy are dominant in a societal understanding because they are both male identities.

Within “‘Oh No! I’m a Nerd!’ Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum,” Lori Kendall observes this disinclination of the nice guy to question the validity of hegemonic masculinity through the discussion of various men on an online forum, BlueSky. In one specific conversation, Kendall observed male participants discussing the belief that women are attracted to abusive male partners, and their belief that men who subscribe to expectations of aggressive and violent male partners are more successful sexually with women. Kendall observes that “ although they designate more sexually successful men as (by definition) ‘ jerks,’ their discussion implies that the real problem is not with ‘ assholish’ men but rather with the women who like the abuse they get from such men” (267). Nice guy identities do not view other more dominant masculine identities as undeserving of authority over women, but instead place on women an expectation of their complacency in this dominance. It is within this frame of a nice guy manhood that both Rasmussen and Oscar benefit.

An example of nice guy manhood being prescribed onto a male character by other characters manifests in Rasmussen Tinsley. Because his disfigurement occurs early in the narrative, the reader is invited to partake in an understanding of Rasmussen's male identity which emphasizes a sense of pity. This inclination is emphasized through the behavior of characters who police hegemonic masculinity characteristics, and it is made especially clear by the behavior of figures such as Jax Dunmire that Rasmussen does not fit into hegemonized ideals.

Not only did Rasmussen grow up displaying " a kind of awkward zaniness", but his disfigurement and resulting mental illness places him squarely outside the ideal form of masculinity (105). The reader learns that as a child Rasmussen was enthralled with books and learning, a hobby that does not subscribe to the hegemonic ideals as established by the Dunmire family. The idea that Rasmussen is not representative of a hegemonized masculinity is enforced repeatedly within the narrative. Emphasizing this lack of conformity, Jax threatens to Rasmussen's father that he is invested in making " sure he don't breed no more half-wits", thus identifying one of the main reasons why Rasmussen does not fit into the expectations of male identities as prescribed by the society both Jax and Rasmussen exist within (114). The language used by Jax Dunmire to describe Rasmussen's troublesome behavior emphasizes the importance of neurotypicality to hegemonized masculinity within their context, and emphasizes that Rasmussen does not fit that ideal.

Rasmussen's identity as an example of nice guy manhood becomes complicated when considering the specifics of his situation. Arguably, <https://assignbuster.com/construction-of-nice-guy-manhood-within-the-brief-wondrous-life-of-oscar-wao-and-close-range-wyoming-stories/>

Rasmussen does not identify the idea of a nice guy manhood within himself, but other characters prescribe this manhood onto him and utilize it to excuse his behavior and protect his authority. It is important to note that by exposing himself to women, such as when “ Ras had showed himself to a rancher’s wife”, he is exercising dominance over their space and autonomy (111). Even though it is possible that Rasmussen was not fully conscious of such implications, flashing women is an act through which he exerts a decidedly masculine power over them, and the excusing of such actions by other characters is a refusal to deny Rasmussen such power. When Horm Tinsley, Rasmussen’s father, responds to Jax Dunmire’s thinly veiled threats that Rasmussen “ was hurt but he’s a man like anybody else”, he is dismissing dangerous behavior because of his sense of pity towards his son for being unable to fit into expectations of a male identity (114). There is duality to this comment, in that Horm may both be advocating for the right of his son to not be castrated because he is deserving of basic respect as a man, or a possible attempt at explaining that his son has been exposing himself to women because he is a man, and that identity necessitates a display of power. Either way, Horm is projecting a form of manhood onto his son which, at least to Horm, begins to excuse or at the very least rationalize Rasmussen’s problematic behavior because despite not fitting into expectations, Rasmussen is still “ a man like anybody else” (114). Horm even denies outright the danger in Rasmussen’s behavior, claiming “ there’s no harm in him” (114). It is through such behavior that Rasmussen is prescribed a nice guy manhood, as characters allow him to exert his power as a man despite his inability to fit into hegemonized ideals. Such a decision

is made with the intent of protecting his authority as man, which involved a feeling of dominance over the autonomy of women.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao offers Oscar de León as a prime example of a nice guy manhood. Dorky, overweight and painfully self-deprecating, Oscar is far from an example of hegemonic Dominican masculinity in that he is lacking sexual experience, a suave personality, conventionally fit body, or a cool countenance. But, despite referring to himself as things like “ a Morlock”, agreeing with his sister that he would “ die a virgin unless [he] start[ed] changing”, and acting as if he was “ apologizing for his existence”, Oscar continued to feel entitled to the attention and time of women because of his male identity (30, 25, 172). This is a particularly obvious trend when considering the multiple times in the novel that Oscar is cited as having approached women, and through his relationship with his coworker Nataly.

Throughout the novel Oscar is routinely noted as being very quick to approach women. He seemed to lack much of any discretion in coming on to women, as Yunió tells us his own “ favorite was the day on the E bus when he informed some hot morena, If you were in my game I would give you an eighteen Charisma” (174). Oscar is repeatedly mentioned doing this, even after Junior advises him to “[s]top hollering at strange girls on the street” (174). Oscar seems to constantly be “ walking up to strange girls with his I-love-you craziness” (176), and “ throwing himself kamikaze-style at the girls” (180). This same kind of confidence presents itself again in Oscar’s relationship with his coworker Nataly towards the end of the narrative.

Because of her “ homeliness” (265), Oscar deemed her “ not hot enough, in <https://assignbuster.com/construction-of-nice-guy-manhood-within-the-brief-wondrous-life-of-oscar-wao-and-close-range-wyoming-stories/>

his mind, to date openly” (265). This is surprisingly bold, considering the levels of non-hot-ness exhibited by the Morlock species of *The Time Machine* that Oscar self-identifies with.

There’s no shortage of Oscar approaching women with apparent confidence in *Oscar Wao*, and in the same way there’s no shortage of examples where Oscar displays a distinct lack of general confidence. To explain this inconsistency, one must understand Oscar’s relationship with women as one wherein he perceives himself as holding power over them, and on some level feels entitled to that authority despite his self-identified shortcomings. Although Oscar does not represent the hegemonized masculinity of his context, he exhibits a form of nice guy manhood which allows him to approach women at will without questioning his worth to them. Although approaching women on a bus is not necessarily an action of dominance, the fact that Oscar feels empowered to do so despite his intense issues with self-confidence is telling.

Oscar differs from Rasmussen in that his behavior is not necessarily excused by other characters, but it is nonetheless apparent that he has internalized some sense of self-worth that’s deserving of women’s attention, or else he would not feel empowered to approach women freely or deem a woman beneath him based off looks. One can argue that this is because he is above all identified as a man, much in the same way that Horm Tinsley identifies Rasmussen as, and is thus viewed as being able to exert dominant power over women through a hierarchal view. Even though neither Rasmussen nor Oscar embody their context’s hegemonic form of masculinity, their male

identities execute nice guy manhood and thus hold social dominance over women.

Nice guy manhood becomes self-acknowledged as a less-aggressive form of manhood, and is thus typified as more beneficial to women. This is viewable in the actions of Oscar when he attempts to confront Ana's boyfriend, Manny, an action which he does not question his legitimacy in doing but instead only the peril he puts himself in by doing so. Through this action, Oscar identifies his own form of manhood, and his love for Ana, as being the best choice for her, even though she has indicated no agreement at all with that idea. It is harder to identify this kind of behavior in Rasmussen, as his form of nice guy manhood operates more through other character's projections. Rasmussen's form of manhood is further complicated by the inability to know the intent which he operates with, as it is impossible to know his motivations and there is little value in guessing at them. Instead, Rasmussen is a solid example of the aspect of nice guy manhood which allows society to identify male identities as being dominant without the agreement of the identity themselves.

Being the nice guy allows for disenfranchised men to manipulate hegemonic masculinity so that they feel that their brand of manhood is entitled to the attention of women, while avoiding the discomfort of questioning male privilege. Ultimately, the function of nice guy manhood is to uphold societal dominance of men over women even when men are unable to live up to masculine ideals. Both Rasmussen and Oscar identify with this subset of men, and nice guy manhood allows them to still be considered dominant

over women without exerting the expected masculine characteristics of a hegemonized masculinity.

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