

(Watch Me)  
The Construction of Masculine Identity in *Chaos Walking*

BY JENNA DUTTON

*Murder is not weak and slow-witted; murder is gutsy and daring.*

– Luke Woodham

*Whatever they want, whatever the weakness is in me that I can't kill a man even when he deserves it, it's got to change for me to be a man.*

*It's got to or how can I hold my head up?*

– Patrick Ness, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*

*Hercules*, the ultimate film about masculinity in the Disney canon, expresses the following theme: a true hero is measured not by the size of his strength, but by the strength of his heart. This Disneyfied moral of manhood, however, does not reflect the pervading idea in today's society that being a man is being tough, dominant, powerful. Disney's idea of "hero," in fact, is expressly antithetical to Western culture's ideas of "hero." Yet even Disney's attempt to resist the social norm fails to an extent. In theory, Hercules could have learned the true meaning of heroism as a gawky teenager – but it is only after years of intensive physical training (he is, after all, *Hercules*, the quintessential masculine hero) that he is really given the opportunity to learn this hero's theme. Thus Western culture's beliefs of what masculinity entails, and what it means to be a *true hero*, is so omnipresent that even many attempts to resist it fall to its standards.

There have been, however, in recent years more efforts to call attention to a new sort of masculine hero, a hero that redefines the meaning of masculinity and resists the heteronormative masculine hegemony. The traditional male is a pillar of strength and power – and in Western culture this masculinity often presents itself in a violent and therefore destructive way. This new movement thus calls for a kind of man who has weaknesses, has emotions, and does not need to always be in charge. Like Jackson Katz explains in the documentary *Tough Guise*, “you don’t have to be the Man of Steel to be a real man.”<sup>1</sup>

This new-age, postmodern kind of man responds to the modern theory that gender, both masculine and feminine, is a social construction rather than a biological one. Instead of positing the essentialist view that men are inherently binary opposites of women, this theory suggests that the notion of gender itself is indeed something that is *done*, rather than something that biologically *is*. In other words, “gender is a socially scripted dramatization of the culture’s *idealization* of feminine and masculine natures, played for an audience that is well schooled in the presentational idiom.”<sup>2</sup> A man is not masculine because it is in his DNA to be a male and to exude certain masculine qualities, but instead because society has a clear vision of what being a man *ought* to be, and the young boy learns to conform to these social expectations. This conformation happens in part because of the positive reinforcement in conforming to societal expectation, and in part because of the negative reinforcement in resisting social norms. To explain further, when a *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, s. v. Synaesthesia,” by John Gage *The*

<sup>1</sup> *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity (with Jackson Katz)*, directed by Sut Jhally, (Media Education Foundation, 1999), DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Candace West, and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 125-151.

*Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, s. v. Synaesthesia," by John Gage *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, s. v. Synaesthesia," by John Gage *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, s. v. Synaesthesia," by John Gage *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, s. v. Synaesthesia," by John Gage boy is called out for "acting like a girl," it is in playground taunting the worst of insults. Being fast or tall or strong or highly competitive, however – stereotypically masculine traits – are praised and admired. Therefore, boys strive to *not* act "like girls," and strive to possess these socionormative "masculine" traits, regardless of whether or not they "naturally" possess these traits.

In Western society especially, men are drawn to violence; to exert power in a violent way is to exert oneself as a man. The masculine hegemony is defined by dominance, and for many, the way to earn respect is "by disrespecting another person."<sup>3</sup> Particularly through the media and its favorable representation of strong über-masculine hero types, in the last fifty years boys have been under more pressure than ever to encompass "masculine" qualities. And yet, explains Katz, "there's nothing inherent or natural about masculinity. Largely, it's playing a role."<sup>4</sup>

Related to this theory of role-play is Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance. In her seminal work *Bodies that Matter*, she discusses performativity, or the idea of social norms being constructed through reiterative acting – gender as she sees it is defined by societal expectations and by language. "The construction of gender," she explains, "operates through

<sup>3</sup> *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity (with Jackson Katz)*, directed by Sut Jhally, (Media Education Foundation, 1999), DVD.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

*exclusionary* means.”<sup>5</sup> She explains that society constructs the meaning of gender, establishes norms, and regulates the norms “through a forcible reiteration.”<sup>6</sup> This forces a societal structure of binary opposition, in which men are seen as *essentially* different from women and therefore a person must be solely one or the other; no overlap is possible. This structure, however, is by nature damaging. When men and women are seen as entirely separate entities, the relationship between the two becomes a dichotomy in which “the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject.”<sup>7</sup> Butler believes that this essentialist notion of gender must be questioned, repudiated, and deconstructed.

*Chaos Walking*, by Patrick Ness, exercises this deconstruction of traditional masculinity. *Chaos* is a young adult science fiction trilogy about identity and masculinity in a dystopian future on a colonized planet called New World. The trilogy is a bildungsroman about a boy named Todd Hewitt who, throughout the series, goes on a figurative journey to adulthood and a literal journey through New World. By way of Todd’s journey and experiences across New World, Ness juxtaposes Western society’s ideal of masculinity with its destructive side effects and thereby shows what a “real man” ought to be. As Todd learns from various mentors and his own experiences of what being an adult entails, he both confirms and resists traditional ideals of masculine identity, both in his innate self and in his conditioning of identity.

<sup>5</sup>Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 3.

*Chaos Walking* chronicles the coming-of-age of a young teenage boy, a popular topic of young adult fiction for its obvious relatability to its reader demographic. However, it is clear that there is much more to *Chaos* than others with the same readership. What makes this trilogy special, at least in part, is the way in which Ness uses his characters and situations to comment on Western society and the way we have been constructing masculine identity. Through Todd and his experiences, Ness exposes the destructive qualities of traditional masculinity and deconstructs and re-constructs the societal norm of the “right” kind of man. As a character, Todd is used as a vessel for the reconstruction of masculinity through his own personal qualities, and in the way Ness shows his reactions to the other men he encounters.

*The Knife of Never Letting Go*, the first book of the trilogy, focuses on Todd’s preliminary journey into becoming a man. The story begins with twelve-year-old Todd in his blue-collar farm life. He lives in a village called Prentisstown which, he has been brought up to believe, is the only settlement on New World. Prentisstown, however, is a dying society, because it is comprised of 146 men (and one almost-man) – and no women. He is one month away from turning thirteen, the age at which a Prentisstown boy becomes a man. And he is the youngest boy in Prentisstown, the last boy left. His entire life, Todd has been taught that there are no other settlements on New World, and that all the women died from the Noise virus. Perhaps the main quirk of New World is the existence of this virus called Noise, which is, in essence, audible thoughts. And Noise is loud and omnipresent, guaranteeing that “there is no such thing as silence. Not here, not nowhere. Not when yer asleep, not when yer by yerself, never.”<sup>8</sup> Every

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Ness, *The Knife of Never Letting Go* (Somerville: Candlewick Press, 2010), 17.  
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thought a man has, conscious and unconscious, is aloud for the world to hear. This Noise ensures that secrets are hard to keep.

New World is a place of constant sound and never-ending information. “The Noise,” says Todd in the sentence that gives the trilogy its name, “is a man unfiltered, and without a filter, a man is just chaos walking.”<sup>9</sup> Thus Todd’s preliminary view of manhood – the masculinity specific to Prentisstown – is that of anger and chaos. The kind of man Todd knows – the only kind of man he has been around – is man with ugly, messy Noise. And because the Noise is all thoughts ever thought at all times, Todd’s understanding of men is dark. It is desirable to be a man, because then he will no longer be left out and treated like a child, but the men he knows – besides his foster parents, Ben and Cillian – are not “good” men. They are men of despair, loneliness, and anger.

But despite the negativity and the darkness of Prentisstown Noise, it is still everything Todd knows and everything he is used to. Because of Noise’s overwhelming presence in Todd’s world – from men, from animals – the idea of silence is completely foreign to him. Todd spends much of his time in the swamp, because it’s quiet there. “I mean,” he explains, “sure it is [Noisy], there’s no escaping Noise, not nowhere at all, but it’s quieter than the town.”<sup>10</sup> Even away from people, there is always the Noise of the animals thinking their mindless animal thoughts – in Todd’s twelve years on New World, he has never heard *silence*.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Ness, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

It is, therefore, quite a shock when he notices a “hole” in the Noise, and this strange, alien lack of sound provokes an intense physical reaction:

...the emptiness of it is touching my chest and the stillness of it pulls at me and there's so much quiet in it, no, not quiet, *silence*, so much unbelievable silence that I start to feel really torn up, like I'm about to lose the most valuable thing ever, like there it is, a death, and I'm running and my eyes are watering and my chest is just crushing and there's no one to see but I still mind and my eyes start crying, they start crying, they start *effing crying*, and I stop for a minute and I bend over and Jesus H. Dammit, you can just shut up right now, but I waste a whole stinking, stupid minute bent over there...<sup>11</sup>

The sudden block of silence – this strange non-entity that Todd has never experienced and cannot yet understand – hits him so hard and with such force that it makes him cry. What is most interesting to note, of course, is that despite knowing he is alone, with no man around to see him, Todd is annoyed at himself for being weak – for crying. He even refuses to admit *he* was the one crying, blaming his *eyes* instead, as if they were separate autonomous beings.

Men are expected to be strong not only physically, but emotionally as well. Todd's Prentisstown culture, existing entirely of men, has so engrained in him what it means to *be a man*, and Prentisstown masculinity is not a masculinity that forgives tears. Although the Noise of men is so loud and so sad that it can be suffocating, the Prentisstown men try to put up a front of strength and invulnerability.

The men of Prentisstown have based their woman-less society upon overcompensation of masculine ideals; yet thoughts of women still roam wild throughout the Noise – as hard as

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 15-16.

they may try to erase femininity from their culture, masculinity cannot exist without feminine counterbalance, even if it is only memory. Theorist Sally Johnson explains this idea of femininity and masculinity being equally dependent on each other and how both are defined by negative opposition; “neither construct,” she explains, “is ultimately feasible without the other.”<sup>12</sup> This differs slightly from Butler’s explanation of negative opposition in that while Butler considers the dichotomy an essentialist theory that completely separates the two, Johnson sees it as each essentially needing the other to survive. She continues:

...if masculinity is constructed at least partly in terms of its opposition to femininity, the very omnipresence of the feminine means that those men who have a stake in hegemonic masculinity must constantly reassert their symbolic opposition to femininity in order to confirm their own sense of masculinity.<sup>13</sup>

Todd’s description of the darkness of Prentisstown Noise shows not only how dark a place is without corporeal feminine balance, but also how gender identity is far from immutable. Rather, as Butler and Connell and others suggest, “masculinity” and “femininity” are social constructs. And as Prentisstown shows, both aspects of sex and gender are necessary for a society to thrive.

When Todd returns home and tells his foster parents about the silence in the Noise, they send him on a journey away from Prentisstown, away from everything he has ever known, and into the wilderness that is the rest of New World, because this knowledge is dangerous. Soon

<sup>12</sup> Sally Johnson, “Theorizing Language and Masculinity: A Feminist Perspective,” in *Language and Masculinity*, ed Sally Johnson and Ulrike Hanna Meinhof, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 22.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Todd discovers that the block of silence is actually a girl, and here Todd's world simultaneously falls apart and comes together: he learns that all he has been taught is a lie. The women are *not* all dead, Prentisstown is *not* the only town on the planet, and there are much deeper consequences to "becoming a man" than Todd ever realized.

Viola, the silence, is the first female person Todd has ever met. From the pictures in men's Noise, Todd knows what women look like, but Viola is nothing like the females of Prentisstown memory and fantasy – though he is able to recognize her as female. Even so, Todd does not immediately refer to the girl as *she* or *her*. She is *it*. "There it is," he says, the moment she comes into view, and his description is animalistic: "There it is, looking back at [me], breathing heavy, crouched at the base of a tree...its eyes practically dying from fright but still trying to offer up a pitiful threat with its arms."<sup>14</sup> And for the first few moments, he thinks of her as an "it," and she thinks of him as a threat – he is holding a knife toward her (the ultimate phallic symbol of masculine power) and that, Todd notices, is all she really sees: the knife and the threat. Though he mentally knows she is a girl, Todd does not think of her as a "she" until she sees him as more than just a knife: "It looks at my knife, then it looks at my face above my knife. *She* looks at me. *She* does. *She*."<sup>15</sup> Until she really notices the *Todd* behind the *knife*, he cannot see her as a *girl* behind the *it*. Certainly they both, on an intellectual level, are aware of each other's humanity, but when the focus is on the symbol and not the person, their actual self goes unnoticed and, for each, their identity is based on the object and the fear – not on who they actually are.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Ness, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, 64.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

At this point in the relationship between Todd and Viola, the relationship between masculinity/violence and the relationship between masculinity/femininity is extraordinarily clear. From the moment Todd is introduced to Viola, she sees him as a threat – a real, tangible representation of violent masculinity. Todd sees Viola as a threat too – but a threat to his masculine identity, not to his life:

She's looking at me. She's looking at my face, in my eyes.  
Looking and looking.  
And I'm not hearing *nothing*.  
Oh, man. My chest. It's like falling.  
"Who are you?" I say again but my voice actually *catches*, like it  
breaks up cuz I'm so sad (shut up). I grit my teeth and I get a little madder  
and I say it yet again.  
"Who are you?" and I hold out the knife a little farther. With my other  
arm, I have to wipe my eyes real fast.<sup>16</sup>

When Todd can see her as a girl, she is no longer an animal; she is as human as he is. And this puts Todd in a very vulnerable position. When they are both humans, similarly-sized and similarly-aged, and she has the advantage of alien silence, Todd naturally feels threatened. So he tries – at first – to go into attack mode, by keeping the knife out and pointed at her. Like Katz describes, "boys...become 'real men' through power and control...respect is linked to physical strength and the threat of violence and the ability to scare people."<sup>17</sup> Todd, therefore, attempts to assert his dominance and his masculinity by taking control of a situation neither party understands, and using his knife as a shield.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>17</sup> *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity (with Jackson Katz)*, directed by Sut Jhally, (Media Education Foundation, 1999), DVD.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the Noise bug is the fact that women are unaffected by it. Women have the power of silence: while they can hear men's Noise and men can hear each other's Noise, no one can hear the silent Noise of women. When Viola smacks Todd with the stick, he comments that "it's here that I learn [that] things with no Noise can sneak right up on you...like they ain't even there."<sup>18</sup> Instead of silence being a representation of powerlessness, as women's silence is often portrayed, here it is a very real example of how very powerful silence can be, not only in a theoretical sense but to Todd personally. Really, until she speaks, Viola serves as a sort of outward representation of the holes in Todd's own life: "...the quiet makes me ache so much I can barely stop from ruddy *weeping*, like I'm missing something so bad I can't even think straight, like the emptiness ain't her, it's *me* and there ain't nothing that's ever gonna fix it."<sup>19</sup> Viola's very existence forces Todd to not only look at *her*, but at *himself* as a human being and, indeed, as an almost-man.

Having been brought up in the über-masculine Prentisstown, Todd has definite expectations of the kind of man he is supposed to be: the "typical," "traditional" male is "strong, powerful, competitive, brave, rational, heterosexual, and macho...This is the power of hegemonic masculinity to shape our perceptions of what makes a 'real man' or 'real boy' and our constructions of masculinity."<sup>20</sup> And having been brought up in the über-masculine Prentisstown, this is Todd's expectation of the kind of man he is supposed to be. On some level,

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Ness, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, 72.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Josephine Peyton Young, "Displaying Practices of Masculinity: Critical Literacy and Social Contexts," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 45, no. 1 (2001): 2.

however, Todd is already resistant to these ideals, and perhaps this is why his reaction to Viola is more accepting than the other men of his town.

The discovery of Viola's existence completely throws off Todd's expectations. Prentisstown's über-masculinity mirrors Western society's valorization of "men who are loners and rugged individualists,"<sup>21</sup> and without *any* women, super masculine Prentisstown is wildly off-balance. Notes Christopher M. Massad, "Social stereotypes...continually reaffirm that males should be aggressive, unemotional, and rugged, while females should be tender, emotional, and nonaggressive."<sup>22</sup> Todd, of course, has no background with women, but he knows what men are *supposed* to be like; in the same way, he knows what women are *supposed* to be like. Brought up in a town that taught him all the women on New World were dead, this discovery of a human girl his age acts as a metaphorical catalyst for him to grow up, and a physical catalyst to leave Prentisstown. Viola's femaleness gives Todd certain expectations of how she is *supposed* to act, but of course in the same way that Todd does not fit in with what a Prentisstown man is *supposed* to be, neither does Viola fit in with what a woman is *supposed* to be. Throughout the text, then, Ness subverts essentialized gender norms and thereby demonstrates the necessity of both the masculine and the feminine in a healthy society.

Todd is a compassionate person – which does not fit in with his image of what a man is supposed to look like. When Viola hits him with a stick, Todd instinctively swings up his knife

<sup>21</sup>Thomas W. Bean and Helen Harper, "Reading Men Differently: Alternative Portrayals of Masculinity in Contemporary Adult Fiction," *Reading Psychology* 28, no. 1 (2007): 16.

<sup>22</sup>Christopher M. Massad, "Sex Role Identity and Adjustment During Adolescence," *Child Development* 52, no. 4 (1981): 1291.

and ends up cutting her. They injure each other at the same time, fall over at the same time, and through this physical exchange Ness shows that they truly are equals. Todd's defensive reaction, however, quickly moves to worry and to his compassionate instinct. Though Todd admits he is "sick of being hit,"<sup>23</sup> and is clearly in pain, he almost immediately forgets about his own woes in favor of what he has inadvertently done to the girl. "Healing," stereotypically, is a feminine art, but Todd takes the initiative to help her, finding a bandage to wrap her arm. "There ain't no answers," thinks Todd, "there's just this girl who's bleeding cuz I cut her even tho she deserved it and if I can stop the bleeding then maybe that's doing something...I don't know what to do, so I just do this."<sup>24</sup> Todd moves almost immediately from knife to bandage, in an interesting turn from traditional masculinity to traditional femininity. This subversion of tradition is representative of the necessity for balance between masculinity and femininity.

At this moment, literal and figurative bonds are formed, and the act of bandaging the cut he caused is, in brief, the essence of the man Todd becomes. Thus when Aaron, the corrupt Prentisstown preacher who tracks Todd down for purposes of forcing Todd to complete the ritual step to "becoming a man," tries to kill Viola, Todd's protective instinct suddenly bursts into high gear: he hears "the terrible, terrible scream that of course is the girl getting caught...The next scream comes a second later but [he's] already on [his] feet without even really thinking it...the knife in [his] hand and running."<sup>25</sup> Throughout the text, Todd struggles with what the knife represents; sometimes it is offensive and sometimes it is defensive, but the knife is always an *action*. Here, instead of trying to force himself to offensively kill someone,

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Ness, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, 72.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

Todd readies the knife to protect Viola from Aaron, ready to do whatever necessary in order to save Viola.

Western society – and Prentisstown – teaches that “physical violence [is] the fitting and well-chosen masculine response to threat.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, “in industrialized societies hegemonic masculinity is associated with aggressiveness and the capacity for violence.”<sup>27</sup> However, from almost the start of the novel it is clear that Todd does not fit into the Prentisstown mold.

Usually, when Todd uses his knife, it is in defense of himself or protection of another. When Todd finds Aaron about to kill Viola, he realizes: “I’m gonna have to kill him. I raise the knife. I’ve raised the knife...Aaron takes a step toward me. I take a step back (shut up, please just shut up).”<sup>28</sup> He is frightened of Aaron, and ashamed of his fear. But he manages to knock Aaron down, and he realizes that this is the moment. Aaron is faint, Todd has the knife: “I could do it,” he thinks. “No one on New World would blame me. It’d be my right [to kill him].”<sup>29</sup>

At this moment, however, Todd realizes something incredibly important. Standing there, the girl quiet beside him, and holding the knife, in his right to kill Aaron, completely in physical control, he realizes: “But a knife ain’t just a thing, is it? It’s a choice, it’s something you *do*. A knife says yes or no, cut or not, die or don’t. A knife takes a decision out of your hand and

<sup>26</sup> James W. Messerschmidt, “Becoming ‘Real Men’: Adolescent Masculinity Challenges and Sexual Violence,” *Men and Masculinities* 2 no. 3 (2000): 298.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Patrick Ness, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, 81

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 83.

puts it into the world and it never goes back again.”<sup>30</sup> Suddenly able to kill, Todd becomes aware of the consequences that come with every choice.

The knife, obvious phallic imagery, is a physical representation of how Todd is formed as a man. The knife is just a knife until the choice of how to use it is made. A knife can be used to break bonds, and it can be used to murder. What a knife does is what a person does with it. In one of the most poignant lines of the novel Todd is told that “a knife is only as good as the one who wields it.”<sup>31</sup> The idea, of course, rings true for the phallus and thereby masculinity. The type of man Todd becomes is a matter of choice. Biological manhood is one thing; *doing* something, making a conscious choice to be a Prentisstown man or something else; that makes the difference.

And he does not kill Aaron. Later, he regrets it, feels ashamed that he was unable to perform the utterly masculine task of murder, feeling the knife “rest[ing] there in [his] hand, shining at [him] like blame itself, like the word *coward* flashing again and again.”<sup>32</sup> Todd feels like a coward for not committing murder. Todd is the boy who doesn’t kill, who *can’t* kill. He is not a murderer, however badly he sometimes *wishes* he were, and therefore he does not, and never will, fit the Prentisstown mold of *man*.

Brought up in a society that values brashness, violence, and dominance, Todd is ashamed of his “failure” of masculinity. So when he and Viola discover a Spackle, an alien native of New World – their annihilation yet another lie fed him by the Prentisstown patriarchy

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 258.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 85.

– Todd feels the need to prove that he *is* capable of killing, that he *is* capable of doing masculine things, that he *is* capable of being a man. And this need to prove something allows him the mindset to do the unthinkable – murder:

(Watch me.)...  
All I'm thinking and sending forward to him in my red,  
red Noise are images and words and feelings, of all I know, all  
that's happened to me, all the times I failed to use the knife, every  
bit of me screaming –  
*I'll show you who's a killer.*  
...there ain't no stopping my Noise now....  
And all my hate erupts into me like a volcano at full bright red...  
And I punch the knife into his chest.<sup>33</sup>

With that, Todd channels all his frustration and all his shame into killing an alien. Perhaps one of the reasons Todd is so easily able to attack the Spackle, besides his rage, is because it is not human; initially Todd is able to dehumanize the creature. Of course, as soon as the Spackle is finally dead and the enormity of his violent action hits him, Todd loses control, loses his sense of *being a man*, and vomits. He is horrified by what he has done, and the guilt and shame of the murder haunts Todd for the rest of his life: despite what he thought he knew, at this moment Todd discovers for himself that this act of proving “masculinity” does *not*, in fact, make a man.

Even worse than his own realization and feelings is Viola's reaction to his murder of the Spackle. “I don't hear nothing from Viola but her silence,” Todd says, and her frightened silence prompts him to attempt to justify himself to her (and, at the same time, to himself). But “Viola's face is a terrible thing,” Todd says, “grieving and scared and horrified, all at me, all at me.”<sup>34</sup> As

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 273-274.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 278.

the full force of what he has done hits him, Viola's fear of *him* hits even harder than his own realization.

Viola acts as Todd's balance, the reason to his instinct, the balance to his skew, the practicality to his rashness. In this sense, both Viola and Todd confirm "traditional" masculine and feminine stereotypes; Todd is rash and unstable and wild, while Viola is practical and balanced and calm. They balance each other and, indeed, need each other to become adults and to embrace their own personal brands of masculinity and femininity. By subverting tradition, they affirm balance. Theorist Peggy Giordano comments that: "Friendships at their base are egalitarian –close friendships are...typically depicted as richly rewarding, relatively intimate, and highly useful ...[and] conflict, disagreement, and change are an integral part of friendship dynamics."<sup>35</sup> This dynamic is especially important when Viola makes it clear that all they have is each other; her parents, incoming colonists, died in a crash landing onto New World, and Todd has been led to believe both Ben and Cillian have been killed by the Mayor's men. Todd, in the middle of an existential crisis, seems ready to give up. Viola is again the one to "save" him, reminding him that the two of them are, basically, alone in the world – and this admission serves to help Todd realize even more explicitly how important their relationship is.

Viola, in fact, becomes Todd's entire motivation for any violence he commits (or doesn't commit). In *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, this motivation climaxes when Aaron catches up to the two adolescents and, instead of running away, Todd and Viola decide to stand their ground; Todd realizes that instead of running away (like a child), the *adult* thing to do is to face him

<sup>35</sup> Peggy C. Giordano, "Relationships in Adolescence," *Annual Review of Sociology* 29, (2003): 261.

“like a man.” Todd, his protective instinct taking over, as always fears more for Viola than for himself: “I grip the knife and I look over at Viola, her face looking straight back up the tunnel, so much fear on it my chest begins to hurt. I grip the knife harder. If he *touches* her –”<sup>36</sup> With Viola being all Todd has in the world – and vice versa – Todd especially embraces his inclination to protect and save; his realized “form” of masculinity is that of a hero. Todd’s heroism, though, is not traditional hierarchy: it is an egalitarian relationship with Viola of savior and saved – Todd saves Viola, and Viola saves Todd.

Yet even with this knowledge that he would be willing to do literally anything for Viola, and his conviction that he knows the right thing to do, Todd still is not completely autonomous; he still draws much of his strength from Viola: “‘I’m not hiding,’ she says. ‘If you’re not, I’m not.’ And that’s all I need.”<sup>37</sup> “I’m ready,” Todd thinks. Because of everything he has been through “I realize I *am* ready.”<sup>38</sup> This time, he is not saying this to convince himself. When Aaron finally comes to meet Todd and Viola, Ness’s criticism of Western society’s masculine ideal reaches one of its most explicit points: Todd reveals that the way that a boy in Prentisstown becomes a man is “by killing another [Prentisstown] man. All by themselves.”<sup>39</sup> As Todd is the last boy of Prentisstown, Aaron makes himself the “sacrifice” – the man Todd must murder.

<sup>36</sup> Patrick Ness, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, 442.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 444.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 446.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 448-449.

It is well-known, however, that Todd has always been different from the rest of the town. "And that's why yer so very special, ain't you?" Aaron says. "The boy who can't kill."<sup>40</sup> Todd is a *fighter* but not a *killer*. Aaron and Todd engage in a physical altercation, but Todd refuses to use the knife the way Aaron wants him to ("I raise my knife hand to block [Aaron's fist] – but keep the knife edge sideways," Todd notes<sup>41</sup>). Eventually, Aaron knocks Todd down and he drops the knife, where "It clatters away toward the edge...Useless as ever."<sup>42</sup> Yet again Todd is figuratively emasculated; now, however, he realizes the knife is merely an object, an outward representation of a choice. Without a wielder, a knife is nothing. The person using the knife is who makes it good or evil. The metaphor is explicit.

With Todd down and bleeding and without his "choice," Aaron takes the opportunity to use Todd's "feminine" compassionate nature to make Todd angry enough to murder – he attacks Viola. When Todd thinks Viola is dead, he loses his balance, both emotionally and in the theoretical relationship of his masculinity with her femininity. Therefore, with Viola "dead," Todd is left like Prentisstown and he immediately steels himself to embrace his hometown's masculine ideal; the anger makes his Noise "*Murderous red*."<sup>43</sup> The hatred gives Todd the strength to attack Aaron – embracing society – and just as Todd makes the conscious decision to use the knife to kill and to give in to tradition, as he reaches for the knife, Viola moves and reaches for the knife too. Seeing her alive, Todd explains that suddenly there is "A rush [in his

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 451.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 456.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 456.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 459.

Noise] that rises higher in the red.”<sup>44</sup> Viola’s *life* is suddenly much more important than Aaron’s *death*, and as Todd realizes she is not dead, his balance returns and her very presence at least momentarily draws his attention away from the act he was about to commit.

What is interesting is what happens next: Viola grabs the knife and kills Aaron. This one quick action immediately subverts Prentisstown’s entire hegemony: if, in order to be considered a Prentisstown man, one must murder another man, then by Prentisstown’s standards, Viola has become a man. Like Butler, West and Zimmerman suggest that gender is something *done* rather than something that concretely *is*, and that “Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures.’”<sup>45</sup> When, therefore, Viola performs the “masculine” action of murder, she *does* masculinity and by societal standards *becomes* a man.

Numerous times throughout the text, Viola and Todd take turns saving each other physically – here, however, Viola saves Todd’s ideal. By, basically, taking Todd’s birthright and murdering Aaron, she saves him from becoming a Prentisstown man, allowing him to be his *own* kind of man. Viola sacrifices her own ideals in order to preserve his. Although Todd was ready and willing to give up his self for her sake (“I woulda done it. I woulda done it for her,” he repeats multiple times<sup>46</sup>), Viola saves him and he is able to stay innocent. In the most theoretical sense, Viola sacrifices her femininity for Todd’s masculinity.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 461.

<sup>45</sup> Candace West, and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 126.

<sup>46</sup> Patrick Ness, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, 464.

Throughout the entirety of *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, Todd struggles with his identity and with figuring out what kind of man he is, in his own mind and against the masculine identity of Prentisstown and the feminine identity of Viola. Through his adventures with Viola, Todd realizes that the Prentisstown ideal of the super-masculine and the anti-feminine, is inherently flawed. Of course, it thus stands to reason that the super-feminine and anti-masculine is flawed too. Balance and equality is necessary, and in *Knife* Todd begins to learn this. In light of the negative constructions he witnesses and experiences, mostly due to his relationship with Viola, Todd begins to reshape the meaning of being a man. In some ways, Todd does confirm traditional Western ideals of man; however, in his refusal to murder and to succumb to the Prentisstown hegemony, as well as in his own thoughts about himself and about being a man, he makes the sharpest turn from societal pressures to become a different kind of man. Through Todd, Ness shows the reader that the system needs to be changed, the hegemony is flawed, and, like Katz suggests, it takes courage to be vulnerable.<sup>47</sup>

Ness complicates the idea of “masculinity” with Todd and Viola, as separate entities and with their relationship as a whole. He shows that masculinity and femininity cannot exist without the other, both in society and, indeed, within the individual. The idea of “gender” should not then be determined solely by sex; to dichotomize “masculine” and “feminine” is destructive to society and to the individual. Ness refutes the concept of the Rugged Individual and the über-masculine hero, showing that community – of both men and women – is

<sup>47</sup> *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity (with Jackson Katz)*, directed by Sut Jhally, (Media Education Foundation, 1999), DVD.

necessary, and thereby deconstructs essentialist Western society's notion of naturalized, traditionalized gender.

Todd's resistance of these norms, his refusal to be complicit and fit into Prentisstown's mold of man, and his construction of his own identity is best summed up in the following way:

*I'm Todd effing Hewitt.  
That's who I effing well am.*<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Patrick Ness, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, 470.  
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