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INTRODUCTION

Boys are trained to externalize our pain. When something bad has happened to us, we need to do something bad to somebody else; avenge the humiliation that we have suffered, the shame that we have experienced.

—Jackson Katz, *The Mask You Live In*

Adolescence is a crucial period for identity formation and brings with it internal and external conflicts, but also growth and maturation. Realistic young adult fiction describes many of these conflicts and its protagonists struggle with emotional, social and behavioral challenges such as peer group pressure, substance abuse, low self-esteem, bullying, eating disorders, violence and addictions. In this respect, young adult literature mirrors the problems teenagers face in today's world.

The above quotation reflects the experience and reality of the male protagonists in the selected young adult novels. When they feel shamed, belittled, humiliated, ridiculed or emasculated, they see their sense of self diminished by the negative evaluation of others and respond with anger and violence in order to externalize their feelings. This thesis thus argues that the violent behavior of the protagonists is a result of feelings of shame or the fear of experiencing this painful emotion.

The novels selected for this thesis are *Breathing Underwater* by Alex Flinn, *Dear Life, You Suck* by Scott Blagden and *Tyrell* by Coe Booth. They feature male protagonists between the age of fifteen and seventeen whose behavior is characterized by emotional withdrawal and violence. These novels were chosen to point out that as different as the protagonists' individual struggles are, their responses to them are similar: the protagonists turn to violence in order to prevent feelings of shame, to mask their painful emotions, to 'save face' and to restore a sense of self-esteem. All three authors chose realistic characters and an autodiegetic narrator to portray some of the conflicts young adult men face today. By giving them a narrative voice and telling the story from their perspective, the authors allow the reader to empathize and feel with the protagonists and to draw conclusions about the motivations for their behavior. Furthermore, all three novels are set in the United States. Sociologist Michael Kimmel baldly states that "[y]oung American men are the most violent group of people in the industrialized world" (*Society* 246).

Violence among young men in the United States is thus an important issue to tackle, and the analyzed fiction portrays the struggles of representative characters.

The argument that violence is a result of feelings of shame is based primarily on forensic psychiatrist James Gilligan's research on violent crime. Having worked in prisons in the United States for more than three decades, in his seminal work *Violence: Reflections on a national epidemic* he explains what he has found to be the psychological traits that characterize violent offenders, and the motivations behind their violent behavior. Gilligan's analysis reveals that while shame underlies every act of violence, it does not necessarily lead to violence (*Violence* 110). In order for shame to produce violent behavior, several other social and psychological factors need to be present. Male gender role expectations put men at greater risk, as many situations call for violence as a way to validate one's masculinity. The incapability to feel guilt and remorse and the lack of material and non-material resources to develop and restore self-esteem further increase the probability of resorting to violence in situations where the individual is confronted with shame (*Shame* 1165-67).

Gilligan is not the only theorist who sees violence as resulting from feelings of shame. In *Real Boys*, clinical psychologist William Pollack compresses twenty years of research with men and boys into a work that critically examines conventional expectations surrounding masculinity. He describes how boys and young men hide behind masks that shield them from letting their vulnerable emotions be seen (5). Their fear of experiencing shame makes them avoid this painful feeling at all costs. Therefore, they resort to withdrawal, anger or violent behavior when confronted with feelings of shame (33).

The term 'violence' is used in this thesis following the definition of the World Health Organization, which defines violence as "[t]he intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation" and includes "all types of physical, sexual and psychological abuse" (Krug et al. 5).

Another important term used in this thesis is 'shame'. Brené Brown, a professor of social work, who has been doing qualitative research on shame for over ten years, defines it as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging" (69). She argues that shame is an emotion that people

across different cultures, genders and age groups experience and that it is present in different areas of their lives. As such, it is one of the most basic emotions humans experience. Since a sense of belonging is crucial for the psychological well-being of a person, shame is a destructive emotion that results from “the fear that something we’ve done or fail to do, an ideal that we’ve not lived up to, or a goal that we’ve not accomplished makes us unworthy of connection” (68-69). Gilligan defines shame as “the absence or deficiency of self-love” (*Violence* 47) which may result from “being rejected or abandoned, assaulted or insulted, slighted or demeaned, humiliated or ridiculed, dishonored or disrespected” (48). Following these definitions, it may be argued that people feel shame when they experience a negative evaluation from others or themselves that threatens to diminish their self-worth and makes them feel unworthy of belonging.

Shame is often not recognized as such by the male narrators and they justify their violence by rationalizing their behavior, which makes it difficult for the reader to identify the reasons for the protagonists’ violence. Using a psychological approach and findings from masculinity studies to analyze the narratives and their fictional characters allows the reader to fill this gap that distances her from the protagonists. Applying psychology and masculinity studies to the analysis of fictional characters thus enriches literary interpretation and understanding of the text and allows the reader to make conclusions about the motivations behind the protagonists’ behavior. The aim of this thesis is thus to find out why and under what conditions male young adult protagonists resort to violence. In order to do so, this thesis is divided into three main chapters that explore different aspects of the protagonists’ circumstances, emotions and behaviors. The first chapter reflects on the factors that enhance the protagonists’ risk of becoming violent. The second chapter illustrates how shame manifests itself in the emotional life of the protagonists. It discusses how they deal with their vulnerable emotions and how these emotions contribute to violent behavior. The third chapter examines the emotional and behavioral responses to shame and discusses how the protagonists rationalize their violence. The concluding chapter discusses how the protagonists find or try to find ways out of their violence, and discusses how plot and structure of the novels contribute to the way in which the narrators resolve their conflicts.

CHAPTER ONE: PRECONDITIONS FOR VIOLENCE

1.1 Childhood experiences as a source of shame

In *The Meaning of Shame*, clinical psychologist Gershen Kaufman describes how shame influences psychological well-being and how, in its most extreme consequence, it can disrupt identity formation. Individuals who are chronically shamed and experience shame in their relationships may not be able to develop a secure sense of self. He argues that shame can result as a consequence of one person severing the emotional connection with another. Such shame-inducing experiences are especially devastating in childhood, particularly when they happen in the child's most important interpersonal relationships – the ones between them and their parents (570). Likewise, developmental psychologist Michael Lewis claims that children who do not feel loved by their parents will believe to be responsible for their parents' withdrawal of affection and will feel shame. The quality of the parent-child relationship thus significantly influences the child's development and affects, if characterized by a lack of love and affection, the degree to which a child develops a shame-prone identity (157-58).

All three protagonists remember their childhood as characterized either by parental absence or by physical and emotional abuse. These experiences shape their sense of self and foster the development of chronic feelings of shame. Recalled through flashbacks, these experiences bring painful memories to the young adult narrators. In *Breathing Underwater*, the reader gains little insight into the protagonist's childhood, but the few experiences Nick recalls are painful and leave him feeling ashamed. Probably the most traumatic experience is his mother leaving him and his violent father when he is only five years old. He tells Caitlin about this incident when they are driving home from Key West and Nick is afraid that she will break up with him. He remembers his mother as the only person he could trust and as his only way of escape from his violent father: “‘I thought we’d pack up and leave someday, her and I. I lived for that day.’ On the wheel, my knuckles were white. ‘Then one morning, I wake up, and she’s gone, never came back. She ran from the monster and left me there with him’” (Flinn 195). Having his hope shattered when his mother abandons him leaves Nick feeling unloved, rejected, and with the suspicion that something might be wrong with him, as otherwise his mother would have taken him with her. His emotional state can be paraphrased by Brown's definition of shame as the “‘intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging” (69). His mother's leaving might also be

part of the reason why Nick is so terrified about the idea that Caitlin could leave him, as he might feel thrown back into his childhood, afraid that the one source of love and belonging in his life could be gone from one moment to the next.

Tyrell's childhood is equally characterized by the absence of a parent, namely the repeated absence of his dad, who spends most of his son's childhood in jail. Tyrell experiences the first time his father leaves for jail as a disruptive moment in his life: "I was only four or five then so all I knew was one day he was there, and we was living in the projects all happy and shit, and things was good and then the next day my pops was gone and my moms was crying all the time" (Booth 52). Pollack writes that the absence of the father never leaves a boy undisturbed, as the father's presence and his participation in the upbringing of his son(s) is crucially important. He outlines various problems that are correlated with father absence, such as "diminished self-esteem, depression, delinquency, violence, crime, gang membership, academic failure, and difficulties with emotional commitments" (124-25). Tyrell's narrative exemplifies Pollack's observations. Being separated from his father negatively influences Tyrell's performance at school and the relationship with his peers:

After he got arrested, everything changed. Yeah, I was still going to school and all that, but things at home was so jacked up I couldn't even think straight. And at school, I just wasn't having it. If a nigga looked at me wrong, there was gonna be a fight. Anything used to just set me off. (Booth 168)

Tyrell is deeply affected by his father's absence, especially after his father's second imprisonment, as his grandmother is dead and his mother is unable to take care of Tyrell and his brother. Due to her neglect, Tyrell and Troy have to live with a foster mother until their dad is released from prison. While Miss Niles seems to like Troy and the other younger children, Tyrell feels unwanted:

[S]he let me know I wasn't wanted there every chance she got. But I ain't care how much she hated me or how much she yelled at me 'cause nothing mattered to me back then. Nothing. [...] Shit, my music was mad and so was I. Them rappers was saying shit I couldn't say to no one 'cause no one was listening to me. (104)

The reader gets to know very little about Tyrell's real feelings concerning the time he spends in foster care, as the vocabulary he uses to describe his emotions is very limited. The only feeling he describes when he reflects on the time spent in foster care is anger. Although he wants to make the reader believe that "nothing mattered to [him] back then" (104), the fact that he is unwanted by his foster mother, separated from his parents and

left with nobody to talk to about his problems suggests that he must have felt abandoned and rejected. He later tells Jasmine that “[b]eing there was hard” (254). His frustration is masked by anger and an ‘I don’t care’ attitude, his only escape from reality is listening to “angry gangsta shit like Mobb Deep and DMX” (103). Apart from being angry with his foster mother, Tyrell might have felt rejected by his parents and have resented their lack of care for him and his brother which resulted in their living in a foster home. As he does not want the experience of living with a foster mother repeated, he does everything he can to support his mother and to prevent ending up in a foster home again when his father is locked up for the third time.

Not only parental absence, but also physical and emotional abuse is a source of shame in the protagonists’ childhood. According to Gilligan, child abuse is the most evident way to shame children and to show them that they are not loved. He argues that the opposite of shame, self-worth, can be attained either through being loved by oneself or by others (*Shame* 1153). However, if a person has never been loved by anyone, their capability of loving themselves is very limited: “Children who fail to receive sufficient love from others fail to build those reserves of self-love, and the capacity for self-love, which enable them to survive the inevitable rejections and humiliations which even the most fortunate of people cannot avoid” (*Violence* 47). This negative impact of physical and emotional abuse on children’s sense of self-worth is particularly evident in Nick’s and Cricket’s narratives.

Nick’s childhood is characterized by his father’s physical abuse: “[M]y father us[ed] me for a punching bag all these years” (Flinn 16). Just as the departure of his mother gives Nick the feeling that he is not important enough to take him with her, his father’s violence has a similarly shaming effect. It gives Nick the feeling that he is unworthy of love and affection. Throughout his entire childhood, his best friend’s family is a place for him to hide from his father and to flee his tantrums and excessive demands. Tom does not know about Nick’s problems at home, nor does Nick want him to know: “He’d never understand” (11). He does not only feel shame about his father’s violence, but he also fears that other people might become aware of his difficult family situation. Seeing Tom’s seemingly perfect family makes Nick ashamed to reveal anything about his own. The fear that Tom could reject him or think differently about him is too great, so he hides his secret and covers his pain. He remembers one incident in particular that makes him realize the need to keep the problems he experiences at home a secret:

I don't know when I first knew my family was different, that I could never tell anyone about the silences and rages in my father's *Architectural Digest* house. I knew for sure when I was eleven, the year my father bought the Mustang. [...] Father's Day, I got the brainy idea of detailing it for him. I hitched a ride to the mainland for supplies then begged off the beach with my friends and spent the hotter part of a Saturday spreading Turtle Wax, rubbing it down with an old, soft shirt that smelled of my father's cologne. I remembered him smiling the day he got the car. When he came home, I showed him what I'd done. In the garage's fluorescent light, my father inspected my handiwork. [...] 'What is this?' His green eyes barely flickering between the door and my face. [...] A scratch. To call it a nick would grossly exaggerate its size. More like a paper cut, and one that must have been there to begin with. I'd been too careful. But my father wasn't rounding up suspects, and my butt was there to kick. He never drove the car again. It went into hiding, and so did I. From then on, I avoided him, made good grades, and kept my room clean enough to perform surgery. It worked except when it didn't. (32-33)

After Nick's efforts to please his dad and show him his affection, he cannot but feel rejected by his father's reaction. The feeling of being worthless and inadequate in his father's eyes causes him to distance himself from his father while at the same time trying to please him through seemingly flawless behavior. In this sense, he is applying two of the three strategies described by psychologist Linda Hartling and colleagues which function as survival mechanisms when an individual is confronted with shame and humiliation. He is both "moving away" from his father in order to make himself unseen – a strategy often used by children who suffer from parental abuse – and "moving toward" (4) him in an attempt to please his father by perfect report cards and a tidy room.

Cricket's childhood is equally characterized by physical and emotional abuse. The first time the reader learns about Cricket's parents is when he tells his friend Grubs about the neglect he experienced as a child when his drug-addicted mother left him alone while funding her addiction by prostitution: "'Me crack-whore mumsy plunked me young arse in front of dee telly fer hours and hours whiles she strutted 'er ax-wound up and down Keelumbus Avenue, looking to cream dudes' knickers for a block of rock'" (Blagden 23). As the story continues, Cricket reveals more about his past and his tragic childhood:

If I was gonna say thank you to Mother Mary for anything, which, of course, I'm not, it'd be for not locking me in the basement when I cried too loud. For not making me walk to the store to buy Lucky Strikes in bare feet in January when I complained about the holes in my sneakers. For not tying me to the bed when I wet it. For not piercing my ear with a drug needle. For not pushing me into street fights with crackhead culls twice my size and betting against me. For not beating the back of my legs with a *****. For not Scotch-taping matches to my ***** and *****. For not ***** (118)

Cricket still seems deeply affected by the traumatic experiences he describes in the above passage. As the narrator replaces letters by asterisks, the reader is left with the impression that some of the abusive behaviors of the protagonist's parents were so humiliating that he struggles to put them into words. His childhood experiences leave him deeply ashamed, unable to love himself and to trust others, especially adults: "Adults are wacky. Even the sane-seeming ones" (218). When Cricket writes about the behavior of his parents – one of the reasons why his life sucks and he wants to end it – almost ten years after he has last seen them, he is still filled with feelings of anger so intense that he does not manage to keep his tone neutral:

My parents are adults. Where the fuck are they? Splitsville, North Crackalina, that's where. They know they have a kid. I ain't no Homeland Security secret. What the fuck? How can you make a kid and then punt him over the backyard fence and be like, I'm bored, game over, let's go grab a beer. It doesn't make sense. Not that I'd want those deadbeat crackheads for parents anyway. (140-41)

The fact that Cricket is still so emotionally involved when talking about his parents shows how severe and damaging their behavior must have been to him. In what follows in his essay, he describes how he wants his father to be beaten every day in prison "so the asshole knows what it feels like" (141) and expresses the wish to take revenge and punish his parents for their behavior:

I've thought about looking them up through one of them Find Your Lost Parents websites. Not for a teary-eyed hugfest. More like a cheery-bye plugfest. Yeah, I've considered tracking them down for the sole purpose of planting lead slugs in their soulless hearts. See what color their blood is. Black, probably. Black heart, black blood. You probably think I'm kidding, but I ain't. Grubs can get me an untraceable hunting rifle. I've already asked him. I'd do it, too. Walk right up to them and blow their fugly heads off. (141-42)

The rage that Cricket feels when thinking about his parents mirrors the intensity of the humiliation he has suffered at their hands and writing about it helps him to externalize his pain. Cricket's language is equally emotionally laden when he recalls his "piece-of-shit foster whore" (222), who bribes him not to tell anybody about her occupation by offering him sexual favors:

She tried to keep me from spilling the beans by spilling my genes with a little rub-a-dub-dub bald stiffy in a tub, but I never finagled that bagel. That's messed up when you think about it. Not that I ever think about it. It wasn't like she was my real mom or anything. Just another scheming grownup trying to score green from humans or clean from God by pretending to give a flying fuck about the miniature hostage tossing and turning on the pee-stained mattress in the basement. (223)

Instead of taking care of him and finally giving him a place to call home after he is taken away from his drug-addicted parents by social services, his foster mother is yet another source of shame and humiliation for Cricket. In the first years of his life, he has never experienced genuine love and care from adults and that inevitably leads to a lack of self-love. This is evident in the way Cricket thinks about himself, using terms such as “loser” (60), “scar-faced beast” (89) and “ugly fuck” (185), and in the way he thinks about his future, repeatedly contemplating suicide as he feels worthless and considers his life meaningless.

While all the childhood memories Cricket recalls are tragic, two events seem particularly traumatic and determine the course of his life. Both incidents are only hinted at earlier in the narrative, keeping the reader in suspense until the end of the novel about what happened. Cricket’s first draft of the letter to his teacher, which he then discards, evokes the reader’s curiosity: “Dear Attorney General Lynchmynuts, My baby brother was killed when I was eight. And it’s all my fault. Sorry, Cricket” (41). Only later in the novel does he decide to write a letter to his teacher about the guilt-laden memory of the Christmas Eve when he was eight years old: “I recline in my fire-escape lounge chair and stare at the stars. A buried Dear Life Reason has been prickling my gray matter. One I never thought I’d write about” (255). Cricket describes seeing his baby brother dead in the bathtub, and blaming himself for Eli’s death. It is his mother who has killed his brother, but Cricket is overcome by self-hate and guilt and nobody tells him that he is not responsible for Eli’s death. Although this incident primarily evokes guilt, Cricket is also ashamed of himself: “I didn’t hate her. I wasn’t mad at her. I hated *me*. I was mad at *me*. I never should have believed in that shrub. Why did I believe in that shrub? Maybe if I hadn’t believed in that shrub...” (259; emphasis added). H. Lewis states that “[s]hame may operate underneath guilty ideation. [...] [O]ne may simultaneously blame himself for some *action*, and blame the *self* for failure to live up to expectations” (197). Cricket’s sense of shame is based on his failure to live up to his own standards, as he “usually volunteered to give Eli his bath when Mom was high” (257). While he feels guilt about leaving his brother alone with his mother, the shame he feels about it becomes a part of his identity he wants to hide.

His most traumatic and shameful childhood experience is revealed in Cricket’s last Dear Life letter, which he writes for himself only and does not want anybody else to see. It tells the story of the day he got his scar and his father’s ring, which are both used as symbols

in the novel. His scar represents his painful past and reminds him of the day when he was stabbed twice by drug dealers because of his father's unwillingness to give the drugs he had hidden in Cricket's shoe to them. The ring reminds him of his father's pride "for being brave and not ratting about the drugs" (297). The incident leaves him both physically scarred and emotionally harmed and the memory of it is so painful that he does not want to talk about it with anyone. When Wynona visits him at the orphanage, he prevents her from touching his scar and from finding out about its story: "She raises her fingers. I block them with my hand. 'I'm sorry,' she whispers. I have this weird feeling she's about to ask me about it. Like how it happened" (176).

1.2 Role of fathers in identity formation

The values and messages fathers pass on to their sons in childhood and adolescence determine how the protagonists feel about themselves, how they view their masculinity and how they think about the use of violence. In this sense, fathers contribute to the construction of their sons' identity and they can be viewed as role models for their sons, but their behavior also triggers resistance.

It has already been pointed out in the last chapter that childhood constitutes a critical period for identity formation and the development of shame. Pattison argues that

[i]t is not only in infancy that people's attitudes towards themselves are shaped by social relationships. We are what others make us, and expect us to be. It is easy to fall into chronic shame if one's own sense of intrinsic personal and social worth and belonging is not well-founded and reinforced. (108)

Nick's narrative reveals that not only his childhood but also his adolescence is marred by his father's constant criticism, humiliation and rejection, which hinders him from developing a secure sense of self. The reader becomes aware of the nature of the father-son relationship already at the beginning of the novel, when Nick describes being in the courtroom with his father: "He leaves a gap between us, opens his briefcase, and removes a thick folder. Work. I try to catch his eye. 'Do you think they'll –?' His eyes narrow in annoyance. 'Nicos, this is important.' He gestures at the folder. I look away" (Flinn 3). While Nick feels vulnerable, hurting after the breakup with Caitlin, and afraid of a restraining order, his father is more preoccupied with his work than with his son. Instead of offering him support, he makes him feel unimportant and worthless. After Nick's futile attempt to please his father by denying what he has done to Caitlin, his dad is infuriated and does not hide his contempt from Nick:

He slams his door and shoves the key into the ignition. 'You had to talk, did you?' he says over the motor. 'You just had to open your big, fat mouth.' [...] I say, 'I'm sorry, Dad.' 'You always are,' he replies. 'And yet, you always say the wrong thing, always the stupid thing. This is why you always fail.' *I don't fail*, I want to say. But, for an instant, I remember Caitlin's face, and I know my father's right about me. (9-10)

His father's words lead Nick to the conclusion that he is indeed a failure. They serve as a constant reminder of Nick's inadequacy: "I try not to look because looking makes me hear my father's voice – the voice that's always, always telling me how bad I screwed up, what a loser I am. I can't deal with his voice" (24).

Nick's life could be described as an attempt to drown out the ever-critical voice of his father. In order to overcome his sense of shame that is fueled by the discouraging messages of his father, he tries to make his life perfect to cover up his inadequacies. Trying to be perfect is, according to Brown, a "defensive move": "It's the belief that if we do things perfectly [...], we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame" (129). Nick's striving for perfection is an attempt to avoid the negative judgment of his dad. After all, "[m]y father liked perfect" (32). But instead of bringing him approval from his dad, Nick's controlling, obsessive and violent behavior drives Caitlin away from him:

An idea's forming in my head, but I don't mean to speak. Still, it pops out. 'I think it's about being a loser.' Except that wasn't what I'd meant to say. 'Who you calling a loser?' Tiny says. I stand. 'Me, Tiny. *I'm* a loser. That's what my dad says, anyway. Loser. Failure. I tried to prove him wrong, finding things I could control, like my grades. And Caitlin. When she said *no*, or I'd think there was someone else, there'd be this voice in my head, almost too soft to hear, whispering *loser. You're a loser, a mistake*. And I had to drown it out, had to win, no matter the cost.' I feel a bead of sweat on my forehead. 'But, what it cost was Caitlin. Hurting her made me a loser.' (265)

The above passage makes evident how much Nick's sense of self is influenced by his father's humiliating comments. Gilligan notes that "[w]ords alone can shame and reject, insult and humiliate, dishonor and disgrace, tear down self-esteem, and murder the soul" (*Violence* 49). Just as the violence used against Nick by his father gives him the feeling that he is unloved, his words are equally harmful.

In one of his journal entries, Nick remembers the only moment in his life when his father is proud of him, congratulating him for "'becoming a man'" (Flinn 222). But his father's praise tastes bitter – just as the Scotch he offers his son – because it shows Nick that his years of hard work and effort are of no value to his father, while having slept with his girlfriend is worthy of his father's approval:

I figured I must have heard him wrong. [...] For years, I'd brought home perfect report cards, trying to make him happy. But now, he was proud. *Is this the only thing that makes me a man in your eyes?* I wanted to scream it. But that clinking ice brought reality back. My father was finally proud of me. (222-23)

The reader is as hesitant as Nick to believe his father being serious about his compliments. Rather than trusting in the genuineness of his words, the reader gets the impression that Nick's father uses them as a prelude to humiliation, as his tone quickly changes and gives

way to shaming comments. By providing his son with money to buy contraceptive pills for Caitlin, he wants Nick to be spared from making his father's "mistake" – having a child he never wanted – something that Nick has "heard [...] before, too many times to care" (224). The verbs that Nick uses in his journal entry describe very well the relationship between him and his father: his dad "thrust[s]" the drink toward him, "ignore[s]" Nick's comment about Caitlin's name (223) and "shove[s]" the money at him (224). The narrator's description of his father's meanness causes the reader to feel a deep aversion against him and – despite the reader's knowledge of Nick's controlling behavior toward his girlfriend – causes her to feel sympathy toward Nick, seeing him as the victim rather than the perpetrator.

Just as Nick's sense of self is influenced by his father's shaming comments and behavior, Tyrell's ideas about successful masculinity are formed by his father's definition of manhood. Upon feeling frustrated in his relationship with Novisha, he remembers his father's criticism about his choice of girls: "I know the kinda man you gonna grow up to be 'cause you gonna be like me, and me and you is strong men. We need women we can take care of. Now Lynette, she a nice girl, but smart girls like that ain't gonna let a man take care of them. They independent. They wanna take care of theyself" (Booth 146). Tyrell takes on his father's definition of masculinity, namely that being a man means being able to take care of one's girlfriend. He does not listen to his father's advice and continues to go out with Lynette and later with Novisha, but his father's ideal is deeply ingrained in him and is responsible for his frustration concerning his inability to take care of his girlfriend and the shame of not being needed by her. Although Tyrell agrees with much of what his father taught him before going to jail, he does not want to emulate the type of man he has become: "I don't wanna be the kinda man my pops turned out to be, the kinda man that don't step up and do what he gotta do. Nah. I'ma hafta do better than him" (59).

In *Dear Life, You Suck*, Cricket's memory of the day his father was proud of him for "being brave and not ratting about the drugs" (Blagden 297) defines his identity, as courage is a major theme in Cricket's narrative, symbolized by his father's ring which he got that day. This becomes evident in a conversation he has with Mother Mary after his fight with Pitbull: "I ain't gonna turn the other cheek if a dude attacks me, if that's what you're wondering. I'd rather go to prison than be a coward. I ain't Jesus" (163). Cricket's unwillingness to be perceived as weak stems from his belief that being courageous would

bring him pride and would protect him from feelings of worthlessness. As Cricket uses his fists to prove that he is brave, his violence can be seen as an indirect consequence of his father's pride.

The way the protagonists use and view the use of violence is not only influenced by the messages about masculinity they are subjected to, but also by the experience of seeing their fathers use violence at home. Social psychologists Robert Baron and Deborah Richardson argue that violent behavior is learned, first and foremost, in the family: "The extent to which a child is exposed to aggression in the home relates to the likelihood that she will behave aggressively" (88). While not everybody who experiences or witnesses violence in the family will later become violent, it certainly rings true for the fictive characters analyzed.

In *Breathing Underwater*, Nick tells Caitlin about how he used to experience his parents' fights: "'I was four, five, I'd lie awake at nights, listening to her and my dad fighting, him hitting her'" (Flinn 195). Witnessing his father's violence against his mother as a child and spending most of his childhood and adolescence without a mother, he does not learn how to treat women with respect and this is also reflected in his relationship to Caitlin.

Tyrell is also a witness to domestic violence. When faced with his mother's blame and criticism for leaving Troy alone, he recounts his father's ability to deal with this kind of disrespect from his mother. The two incidents Tyrell recalls are narrated through flashbacks:

My pops was cursing and screaming, and my moms was crying. He had her in a headlock and he was just dragging her from the kitchen to the living room to the bathroom, showing her everything he thought wasn't clean enough. She tried to talk back to him, but he would just tighten his hold on her and tell her to shut up. [...] He backhanded her 'cross the face so hard, she fell up against the bathroom door, crying. And I was standing there the whole time with my mouth open, but I couldn't say nothing [...] The second time was, like, two years ago, right after we moved out the projects [...] She said he been outta jail for almost a year, and he shoulda been able to set her up in a better place. Man, she hardly got them last words out her mouth before he stood up and punched her dead in her face like she was a dude. A second later he was back on the terrace like nothing happened. (95-97)

While Tyrell admires his father for being able to control his mother, he is faced with his own inability to earn respect from her and to keep her from blaming her irresponsible behavior on him. Despite his constant frustration and anger at her, Tyrell does not use violence against his mother, but he later becomes violent toward his girlfriend when he

feels disrespected by her. In this sense, his father's way of dealing with his mother might be seen as a direct influence on Tyrell's behavior, as his father's explanation for his violence "made [Tyrell] think 'bout shit different" (98):

He told me that when you a man, you spend all day handling your shit on the streets, and when you get home, you don't need to put up with nothing. And when a man find hisself in a situation that need correcting, he gotta find the easiest way to get the job done. 'Let me school you, Ty,' my pops told me that night. 'My whole thing is respect. I don't got no respect for a man that be beating his wife all the time for no reason. But I don't got no respect for a man that never beat his wife neither, 'cause every now and then a man gotta show a woman who running things. He need to get her respect. And if she don't give it to him, he got to demand it.' (97-98)

While at first Tyrell is shocked at the violence he witnesses, his father's words make him change his mind and influence the way he views the use of violence and his role as a man.

Nick not only witnesses but also experiences his father's violence first-hand, both as a child and as a young adult. In one of his journal entries, Nick remembers an incident that occurs shortly after his first date with Caitlin at Zack's party:

Lights blazed on, and I saw the clock. 3:00 A.M. I blinked, tried to cover my face with the sheet, but my father pulled it away. 'What is this?' he yelled, shoving a paper in my face. I said I didn't know. [...] 'Thief! I did not raise you a thief, but you are one. When I was your age, I was away from home, working. You only steal from me.' 'I didn't--' He hit me hard in the face, and I stumbled back onto my bed. I lay not moving, not speaking. Arguing made his anger worse, and now I only wanted him to leave. He raged on about how hard he worked, what a lazy ingrate I was, but I stopped listening, my brain carrying me to an alternative reality, where I was watching someone else lying under my black bay window. Then, I went further. I don't know if it was a minute or an hour. I stopped caring whether Rosa heard. I don't even know if he hit me again. [...] Finally, he left. My cheek throbbed. (Flinn 78-79)

The above passage reveals how the only way Nick's father tries to solve conflicts is by using violence. Nick feels so helpless in the situation described above that he tunes out in an attempt to dissociate from reality. As the only way of resolving conflicts that Nick has ever seen or experienced is violence, it is not surprising that the same pattern becomes evident in his relationship with Caitlin. Sociologist Michael Kimmel concurs: "The most evident consequence of parental violence against children is observed in the behaviors of children. Children see that violence is a legitimate way to resolve disputes, and learn to use it themselves" (*Society* 146). However, Nick does not want to face the possibility that his violence against Caitlin could have something to do with his dad's violence against him. This becomes clear to the reader already at the beginning of the novel: "Me, I have

no intention of talking. I have enough problems without some Ph.D. deciding the reason Caitlin and I fought has something to do with my father using me for a punching bag all these years” (16). Nick does not want to identify with his dad, neither outwardly nor inwardly: “My father and I look alike. [...] Still, I search the mirror for differences, anything to avoid seeing him in myself” (6). This also becomes evident when Mario asks Nick about his relationship to his father and Nick hides his pain, instead of sharing it:

‘He’s my hero,’ I say, then try to swallow. ‘A self-made man living the American dream.’ I’m quoting one of my father’s speeches. [...] Mario walks toward me. ‘He ever get stressed out?’ ‘He’s fine,’ I say, squirming. ‘We get along great.’ ‘What about when he gets mad? Everyone gets mad sometimes. What’s he do then?’ ‘Not much. Yells sometimes. Doesn’t everyone?’ Around the circle, others nod, except Leo, who stares out the window. Do they know I’m lying? (93)

While Nick’s unwillingness to talk about his father’s violence can be read as a lack of vulnerability, it also stems from the fear of becoming like him. As he does not want to see his own violence as a consequence of his father’s assaults, he alters the description of his father’s behavior to keep the others from making conclusions about its impact on him. This fear is also contained in a list he has to write in his violence class: “I glance at Mario. ‘You really won’t read these?’ He raises a palm. ‘Scout’s honor.’ At the top of the page, I write: *When I have kids, I will never hit them.* I hope that’s true” (139). What Nick writes reveals both his shame about his father’s violence against him, as he makes sure Mario is not going to read the list before he writes it down, and his fear of turning into a violent father himself.

1.3 Male identity and shame

In the lives of the protagonists shame is often generated through male gender expectations and the fear or reality of not being able to live up to them. What triggers shame in the male protagonists depends both on the external, cultural messages about manhood they are subjected to, and on their own definition of masculinity that is influenced by gender role models – such as fathers and peers – and by their individual circumstances.

After researching shame for over a decade, Brown comes to the conclusion that while both men and women experience shame, the “messages and expectations that fuel shame are most definitely organized by gender” (85). The following ‘male’ shame triggers emerged from her research: failure in all areas of life, including sports, work, and sex; showing fear; revealing weakness and being ridiculed or criticized (91-92). She argues that men “live under the pressure of one unrelenting message: Do not be perceived as weak” (92), or, to use the words of one of her research participants: “Shame happens when people think you’re soft. It’s degrading and shaming to be seen as anything but tough” (92). Kimmel states that this fear of being seen as a ‘sissy’ by other men starts “in our earliest moments of boyhood” and requires boys, young and older men alike to behave in a way that prevents others from evaluating them as effeminate or homosexual: “We have constructed an idea of masculinity in the United States that doesn’t give young boys a way to feel secure in their masculinity. So we make them go prove it all the time” (*The Mask You Live In*). Much of the protagonists’ behavior is motivated by their wish to avoid being seen as weak, and in that sense to protect themselves from the shame that would follow such an evaluation. Their desire to appear strong puts them at a greater risk of being violent since violence functions as a way of demonstrating strength and stands in contrast to the appearance of weakness.

Cricket’s unwillingness to being seen as a ‘wimp’ by others becomes evident when he is confronted by Mother Mary about his fight with Pitbull and advised to exercise self-control, but rejects her suggestion: “‘If controlling myself means being a coward, then I’d rather be out of control’” (Blagden 161) and tells her he would “‘rather go to prison than be a coward’” (163). His fear of appearing weak also characterizes his relationship to Wynona. When he is hesitant to go horse-riding with her and she questions his courage: “‘You can fistfight a guy as big as a horse, but you’re afraid to ride one?’” (244), his thoughts reveal his fear of being perceived as unmanly: “I’d rather get thrown off a horse to my death than have Wynona think I’m a pussy” (244). This fear also prevents him from

being open with her and from sharing his concerns about their future which includes the possibility of her leaving him: “Going on another date with Wynona is stupid. I should cancel. Do it nice and friendly so I don’t hurt her. Maybe be totally honest and tell her all the stuff I’m feeling. No, that wouldn’t work, because they’re not feelings, they’re fears, and I’d come off sounding like a pussy” (262-63). It seems as if Cricket is so afraid of being perceived as weak that he is ready to do anything – end his relationship with his girlfriend, go to prison, and even die – to prevent himself from feeling shame about being seen as a ‘coward’.

Tyrell feels equally vulnerable to being perceived as weak: “Then I try to figure out what Jasmine meant when she said I was a good guy. She just met me. How she know what kinda guy I am? I hope she don’t think I’m all soft and shit, ’cause that would just make me mad. I don’t want people looking at me and thinking that” (Booth 18).

Nick’s unwillingness to tell anybody about his father’s violence can also be interpreted as the fear of being called a ‘sissy’. When Caitlin discovers the mark on his face and concludes that his dad must be responsible for it, Nick tries to downplay his father’s behavior in order to appear tough: ““He hit me, okay. Once. I can handle it.”” (Flinn 89). He fears that confiding in teachers would bring humiliation, as they would advise him to grow up and ‘be a man’: ““Tell them what? I’m sixteen years old, and my dad still hits me?” It infuriated me to have to whisper. ‘I know what they’d say: Butch up, kid. Well, that’s what I’m doing’” (90).

What Nick associates with successful masculinity becomes evident at the end of the novel when he shares his lessons learned from anger management class: ““It’s about being a man, isn’t it? A real man. Not just about who’s bigger or stronger or who gets more women. But...’ I stop. Everyone’s looking at me, and I don’t like it. I sound like a wuss” (269). Although at that point in the narrative he realizes that masculinity means more than being physically strong and sexually successful, his statement reveals why earlier in the narrative he feels so vulnerable about his athletic ability and sexual adequacy. Former NFL player and social activist Joe Ehrmann claims that the first ‘lie’ about masculinity boys in America are told is that manhood is associated with “athletic ability, strength, size, or some kind of skill set”. These expectations put young men on a trajectory toward failure and frustration because only those who succeed in sports are elevated while the others feel they are not ‘man enough’ (*The Mask You Live In*). Similarly, Kimmel states

that “[f]rom a very early age, physical appearance is tied to social definitions of masculinity and femininity. [...] Boys discover that athletic ability and performance are what count for males” (*Society* 124). For Nick, being a man is linked to being physically strong and successful in sports. As he considers himself a failure in football, athletic ability is associated with shame in his life. At the very beginning of the novel he describes Caitlin as the only person who “knew how humiliating it was warming the bench in football all season” (Flinn 3). Being ashamed about his lack of athletic skills, he feels inferior to guys like Saint O’Connor: “I envied his size and gunlike arm” (118). These feelings are intensified through the behavior of his teammates and his coach. One incident is especially significant in this regard as it reveals how vulnerable Nick truly is concerning his skills in playing football: “It would be a perfect pass. Now, all I had to do was catch it. I was praying. *Please, please let me catch it this once.* Better yet, don’t pass it to me. I’d rather have the certainty of not being humiliated than the possibility of greatness” (119). When one of his teammates drops the ball in order to avoid losing possession in case Nick does not catch it, Nick both feels ashamed: “God, I’d screwed up without even the chance to screw up” (120) and is shamed by his coach: ““And you, Andreas. Push in that lip! Be a man for once in your pathetic life”” (120).

While insecurities about body image are common among adolescents of either gender, Brown sees these insecurities in (young) men rooted in their fear of sexual rejection, as they are brought up to believe that it is their responsibility to initiate sex. Therefore, sexual rejection may be viewed as the “the hallmark of masculine shame” (103). Similarly, Pollack maintains that young men view sex as a way of validating their masculinity. While young men are often criticized for their “macho approach to sex” (150), he argues that their behavior is a “compromise between a desire for connection and the fears of rejection” (151). The protagonists’ romantic relationships are characterized both by shame around sexual adequacy and fear of sexual rejection. Nick’s journal entry on football practice, which includes a description of the “bizzare experience” of communal showers (Flinn 120), reveals his insecurities about his body, which are grounded in the fear that he could be not good enough for Caitlin:

The whole time, you’re trying to stare at anything except the obvious. Impossible, because deep down, you want to look. Just a frame of reference, you know. I mean, I knew I was one of the smallest guys on the team, but was I also the *smallest*? Did height equal size? In other words, was I a runt in more ways than one? [...] The reason I’d been considering the subject of height equals size was Caitlin. We’d been going further lately [...] I was pushing for the home run, as Tom called

it. [...] Zack had invited the group to spend Thanksgiving at his parents' place in Key West. I'd make my move then. But could I come through when the time came? (121-22)

Tyrell is equally affected by the kind of shame that is associated with sexual rejection. For him it is not the fear, but the actual experience of being rejected, as his girlfriend Novisha does not want to have sex with him. Her choice is motivated by religious convictions, and while Tyrell reluctantly accepts that, his friend Cal makes Tyrell's lack of initiative responsible for Novisha's independency:

'The problem is, you still ain't hitting that, you know what I mean? She don't need you 'cause you ain't doing the right thing where it count. Now the first time she give it up to you, she aint gonna wanna go nowhere without you. That's how you gonna get to be her man for real.' 'I am her man.' 'You keep telling yourself that, but females need you to show them that. Show her, man, then she gonna be hooked on you and things is gonna change, watch.' I rub my eyes. Damn. Cal is making mad sense today. But the problem is, Novisha ain't gonna give me none. (Booth 147)

As every time Tyrell spends time at Novisha's, he discovers a new journal entry that triggers feelings of shame in him, he decides to have sex with Jasmine: "I lose my head for a while staring at her body. And I make a decision right there. I'ma get me some of that tonight. Shit, I'm tired of trying to do the right thing. Why I gotta be faithful to my girl when all she do is constantly put me down?" (193) While at first sight Tyrell's decision might be motivated only by sexual desire, there is a deeper wish underlying his advances. He is trying to validate his masculinity after feeling diminished by Novisha, because he consciously or unconsciously knows that sexual conquest would bring him a sense of pride and would diminish his feelings of inadequacy. When Jasmine rejects him too, his frustration is intensified: "Damn. That hurt [...] I turn my body away from hers. I ain't looking to cuddle. I'm tired of all that. How many days I'm s'posed to put up with that shit?" (193-94).

Understanding how Tyrell's self-worth and his ideal of successful masculinity are linked to sexual adequacy and conquest is crucial for explaining his violent behavior against other men, but the feelings of inferiority he experiences in his relationship to Novisha are also grounded in her assertions that she is independent and does not need him. Prison journalist Wilbert Rideau offers insight into why this sense of not being needed is so shaming for men: "Man's greatest pain [...] is the sense of personal insignificance, of being helpless and of no real value as a person, an individual – a man" (qtd. in Gilligan,

Violence 181). Gilligan further explains why men want to be needed by their women. He argues that many men are ashamed about their need to be loved and taken care of because they equate this need for love with passivity, weakness and dependence. Consequently, they try to make their female partners depend on them – both to mask their own neediness and dependence, and to make it impossible for their women to leave them (*Violence* 131-32). Tyrell's definition of masculinity includes being needed by his girlfriend. When Novisha tells him that she is old enough to look after herself, Tyrell's response reveals how his self-worth is tied to his notion of manhood: “‘Then what you need me for? What kinda man I’m a be if I can’t take care of my girl?’” (Booth 72). Desperate to validate his masculinity by helping Novisha, he is angry about her refusal of protection: “Man, that shit just frustrate the hell outta me. What she want from me, to just sit here while she going through all this and not do nothing? ‘Cause if that’s what she want, I don’t know if I can do that. That ain’t who I am. Shit, my pops ain’t raise me to be no pussy” (72). Tyrell's feelings of worthlessness are intensified when he reads one of Novisha's journal entries in which she expresses her independence: “That shit get to me. What, she just wanna go to college by herself, not with me like we said we was gonna do? I don’t know if she mean it, but what she saying is real clear to me. She don’t need me” (81). Not being needed by his girlfriend triggers shame in Tyrell as it gives him the feeling that he is worthless as a man since his job would be to provide for her. In order to overcome his sense of inadequacy, Tyrell follows Cal's advice and after a successful attempt to be more intimate with Novisha, he concludes: “A couple more Wednesdays like this and she ain’t gonna be thinking ‘bout going away to no college without me. She gonna know she need me” (178). His feelings of pride about his accomplishment do not last long, however, as he discovers another journal entry in which Novisha expresses her embarrassment about Tyrell's unwillingness to go to school and get a high school diploma. When he leaves her apartment without confronting her about his disappointment, the reader is left with the impression that Tyrell needs his girlfriend more than she needs him: “I know I shoulda said something ‘bout what I read, but I ain’t looking to get into no argument with Novisha ‘bout the shit she be writing in her diary. I’m trying to hold on to her, not push her away. *She all I got*” (179; emphasis added).

Tyrell also experiences shame about not being able to take care of his family. His mother expects him to provide for her and Troy and, at his inability to do so, she questions his manhood: “‘You spend all your time walking around the streets and screwing that little girl, but that don’t make you a man, you understand what I’m saying? A man gotta take

care of his family” (22). By doing so, she gives him the feeling that he is inadequate both as a caregiver for his family and as a man. Tyrell’s feelings of inferiority are intensified when Dante, a friend of his father’s whom he despises, buys food for his family and new clothes for Troy. Tyrell is so angry that he refuses to spend the night in his family’s motel room, as he does not want to “hafta stare at the jacket and boots Dante got Troy” (187). He later explains to Jasmine why Troy’s new clothes bother him so much: “‘The point is, I was gonna be the one that got them things for him. Me. We don’t need Dante’” (195). While Tyrell wants to prove his masculinity by providing for his family, Dante’s help confronts him with his inadequacy and triggers feelings of shame and inferiority.

The protagonists want to avoid being seen as weak, passive and dependent in order to confirm their masculinity, and the most powerful way to do so is through violent behavior. Kimmel sees violence as the “single most evident marker of manhood” and maintains that men’s willingness to be violent protects them from being seen as feminine (*Masculinity* 132). In order to prove their manhood, men are therefore expected to use violence, or, as social psychologist and criminologist Hans Toch puts it: “In cultures of masculinity, the demonstrated willingness to fight and the capacity for combat are measures of worth and of self-worth” (170). The fear of being seen as unmanly motivates men to become violent, because according to the male gender role, men are honored when they use violence and shamed when they refuse to use violence (Gilligan, *Violence* 233). This notion is reinforced by some of the female characters in the young adult novels. After Tyrell assaults the night manager, Jasmine rewards him with a kiss on the cheek: “‘That’s for beating that guy up,’ she say. ‘I didn’t know you could fight like that.’ ‘I can take care of myself,’ I say, and I gotta admit, it kinda feel good hearing her say that. Like she respect me for doing what I had to do” (Booth 120). Similarly, after Nick physically attacks Dirk at Zack’s party, Caitlin is proud of him for defending her: “‘Don’t apologize. It’s so incredible what you did. No one’s ever fought for me, but you [...] You’re a hero, Nick. You’re my knight in shining armor’” (Flinn 58-59). Just as Jasmine in *Tyrell* is proud of Tyrell for using violence, Caitlin honors Nick’s violent behavior. In this way, the two girls reinforce the notion that violence in men is desirable, at least when it happens to protect them. Ironically, it is Caitlin who later in the novel suffers most from Nick’s violent tendencies.

Right before Cricket’s fight with Pitbull, he realizes that Wynona is watching: “I’m glad she’s here, but it raises the stakes. I have to win now” (Blagden 78). For Cricket, defeating

his opponent would mean proving his manhood to Wynona, making sure that she does not think of him as a ‘weakling’, but sees him as a man who is willing to fight and who knows how to do it. He suspects that winning would result in feelings of pride while having to acknowledge defeat would bring him shame. Although Wynona – unlike Jasmine and Caitlin – does not reward violence but is angry at Cricket for assaulting her boyfriend (92), she later tells him: “‘I don’t like fighting, but I was secretly rooting for you’” (251).

That the protagonists view violence as a way to validate their masculinity is also evident in the way they evaluate others or are evaluated by others. As Kimmel puts it: “Being seen as unmanly is a fear that propels American men to deny manhood to others, as a way of proving the unprovable – that one is fully manly” (*Masculinity* 135). The homosocial setting of Nick’s family violence class fosters the young men’s ambitions to validate their masculinity through misogynistic jokes, displays of unemotionality and aggressiveness, but also through attempts to ridicule anybody who does not conform to their ‘macho’¹ notion of masculinity: “‘When is it okay to use violence?’ Mario asks at the beginning of class. As usual, Ray has the kiss-ass answer. ‘It’s never all right,’ he says, and some guys – truth be told, I’m one of them – start making kissy noises. (Flinn 134) The reaction of the young men reveals that they – including Nick – think of non-violence as feminine behavior. Tyrell too defines masculine behavior as the readiness to fight and therefore does not respect men who refuse to use violence. This is evident in the way he talks about other men. Both the guys who run away because one of them gets beaten by Regg (Booth 109), as well as Mr. Mendoza, who, in order to prevent another fight, does not look at Jasmine anymore after having been assaulted by Tyrell (190), are labeled “pussies” (109) by Tyrell, making it clear that he sees men who are afraid to fight as unmanly.

How men are shamed for their unwillingness to engage in violent behavior is also evident when Cricket refuses to fight in the boxing gym: “‘C’mon, Mary,” the boxer yells. ‘What you ’fraid of? I’ll be gentle, cherry’” (Blagden 157). Addressing him as a girl, and using the term ‘gentle’, the boxer aims at diminishing Cricket’s masculinity by suggesting that he is too weak, afraid and feminine to fight. When Cricket, despite considering to “shut the jerk up” (157), does not act upon his violent impulses, he is further humiliated when

¹ John Beynon, professor of cultural, media and communication studies, defines machismo as the behavior of a man who is “compelled to be dominant and controlling and refuses to tolerate any disrespect or challenge to his honour and feels obligated to respond with threatened or actual violence” (81).

he leaves the boxing gym: “Chants of *pussy* and *faggot* chase me down the hallway” (157).

1.4 Outer powerlessness: The lack of nonviolent resources

The circumstances the protagonists find themselves in affect their sense of self and indirectly also contribute to their violence. Gilligan's analysis of the factors that facilitate acts of violence reveals that perpetrators often lack resources that would allow them to restore their self-esteem when being confronted with feelings of shame and humiliation:

Most of us, when shamed or insulted [...] have sufficient other sources of self-esteem—some degree of knowledge or skills or achievements, some standing in the community or esteem in the eyes of our friends, family, or colleagues, or just material status symbols—that our selves and our self-esteem are not wiped out even by a severe humiliation. But the violent criminals with whom I worked for the most part lacked all of these barriers against violence. (*Shame* 1166)

When looking at the living conditions of the protagonists, it becomes evident that they do not possess most of the above-mentioned resources that would give them a sense of self-worth.

The lack of economic resources drives much of the plot in *Tyrell*, as the narrative is characterized by the protagonist's attempt to put an end to his family's homelessness and poverty. It is portrayed as a direct result of his father being in jail and his mother's unwillingness to get a job:

‘My pops is locked up,’ I tell her [Jasmine]. ‘And my moms can’t keep no job. After a couple months of not paying the rent, our landlord took us to court and got us evicted.’ I say all this like it ain’t no big deal, but the truth is, I’m real fuckin’ mad ’bout the way my moms handled her shit. She knew what my pops was up to, and she knew he was gonna violate his parole, so why she ain’t plan what she was gonna do when he got locked up again? And why my pops ain’t plan to take care of his family? What kinda man do that to his wife and kids? (Booth 51)

While his parents are unable to provide for their family, Tyrell feels and is made to feel responsible for earning enough money to ensure decent living conditions for his family. Problematic for Tyrell is not only his poverty, but also the lack of space that the homelessness creates. Having to share a room with his little brother and his mother, whose unrealistic expectations and constant criticism drive Tyrell mad, gives him no room to let off steam: “I grab my cell and my jacket, open the door, and I’m gone. I get in the hall and just wanna punch or kick something. [...] I can feel the blood pounding in my brain. I gotta do something. I wanna go somewhere, but I don’t got nowhere to go” (23).

Besides suffering from the poverty of his family and the pressure to reduce it, he also feels humiliated about having to accept other people's help, such as the food he receives from members of Jasmine's church: "Man, this shit is fucking embarrassing already. How many times they gonna make us line up and beg for food?" (50) and the money he borrows from Cal: "I gotta admit, sometimes I can't stand coming to Cal like this. Me and him is cool and everything, but I wish things was like they used to be, when we was both broke as a joke. Now that he selling weed and making money, things is different. It's like now I gotta come to him for help, like I need him to save me or something" (62). As Tyrell's definition of masculinity requires him to take care of himself and his family, accepting help is shaming, and it reminds him of the financial gap between him and others. Rather than poverty in an absolute sense, it is this gap – the feeling of relative deprivation – that makes people like Tyrell feel ashamed about his humble circumstances (Gilligan, *Violence* 201). While Tyrell feels comfortable about talking over his situation with Jasmine, who finds herself in equally difficult circumstances, he does not want his girlfriend to know about his living conditions:

Novisha don't got a clue how I'm living. She don't know that all my clothes and shit is in garbage bags and my little brother is 'sleep in a room full of roaches. [...] But Jasmine do know what I'm going through 'cause she in it with me. Me and her is the same. And that's something me and Novisha ain't never gonna be. (Booth 160)

This passage reveals Tyrell's shame about his poverty, which alienates him from his girlfriend.

Cricket is equally embarrassed by his poverty. Having to wear second-hand clothes makes him aware of the material disparity between him and others:

It ain't as bad as it sounds. The only time it really frosts your jewels is when the donation dumpster is overloaded, 'cause it reminds me that I'm stepping out in other people's garbage. This probably sounds whiny, but it kinda makes ya feel like a piece of trash when you see a pant leg from your future wardrobe dangling out of a Hefty Cinch Sak on the side of the road. (Blagden 31)

Masked by the narrator's humorous tone, this passage reveals how having to go to the Salvation Army for a new outfit makes him feel as shabby as his clothes. Even more excruciating is the idea of not having enough money to invite Wynona to a slice of pizza: "I know she knows I'm not rich or anything, but I can't get the image out of my head of her standing at the pizza counter thinking, *Jesus, you can't even scrape up enough cash*

to snorkel me a slice of pepperoni, you cheapskate” (261). Cricket’s and Tyrell’s economic situation increases their risk of becoming violent: “For men at the foot of the socio-economic ladder, their lack of resources render their sense of masculinity problematical; a resource to violence is one of the ways they have of confronting powerlessness and exerting authority over other men and women” (Beynon 82).

Being poor makes Cricket feel inferior and, in combination with the limited options for his future, creates a sense of hopelessness:

Fists or drugs. Are those really my only two options? Grubs’s words play in my mind. *Naskeag ain’t got a scale small enough*. Maybe I could come up with my own option, like getting a shit-ass minimum-wage job pumping gas or mowing lawns. But that would just prolong the inevitable. [...] Option number three plays in my mind. A shiver scrubwiggles the back of my neck. (Blagden 158-59)

Just as Cricket is confronted with the choice between fighting, dealing drugs or committing suicide, Tyrell too feels that his options in life are limited. As he wants to provide for his family, he drops out of school, but by selling metro cards he hardly earns enough to feed his family. He knows that dealing drugs for Cal would solve his financial problems, but he fears the risk of ending up like his father – in prison: “‘Cal, you ain’t never been in the system, but we was, and I ain’t going down like that again. I wanna keep things easy. I need to make some money, but I gotta keep myself out of jail, least ’til my pops get out, know what I mean?’” (Booth 62). His situation is rendered problematic not only by his poverty and his family’s homelessness, but also by his lack of academic and occupational achievements that could function as sources of pride and self-esteem. His circumstances expose him to a greater risk of becoming violent, as Gilligan mentions being “uneducated [...], unskilled or unemployed, poor or even homeless” as factors that increase the propensity for violence (*Shame* 1166). The people close to Tyrell are critical of his choices, which intensifies his feelings of shame and inadequacy. While his mother criticizes him directly: “‘You never do nothing. Look at you. You don’t go to school ’cause you too damn lazy and ign’ant. And when you do get your Black ass to school, all you do is fight and get in trouble’” (Booth 22), Novisha’s criticism is more subtle, as she expresses her concerns in her diary, knowing that Tyrell is going to read it: “*Am I going to have to live my whole life feeling embarrassed because my man doesn’t even have a high school diploma? I hope not*” (179).

While the living conditions of the protagonists render their lives difficult and increase their risk of becoming violent, part of the powerlessness they experience is created by a lack of awareness for having certain resources such as talents and skills. As discussed above, Cricket sees himself confronted with three equally undesirable options for his future. The fact that he never considers other possibilities for his life can be explained by a lack of people who encourage him to discover and cultivate his talents. When Caretaker urges him to pursue a career as a professional fighter, Cricket suddenly realizes why: “Then it hits me. Like a straight right to the forehead. Caretaker thinks that’s all I’m good for. Fighting” (Blagden 154). Consequently, Cricket concludes that he might not have any other talents apart from fighting. This becomes apparent when his English teacher talks to him about his writing skills:

She leans in. ‘Writing the way you do can’t be taught. It’s spontaneous, original, and honest. It doesn’t just flow – it overflows. And you let it follow its own course. You’re a natural, kid.’ Her words overflow me. Caretaker used to say I was a natural when I first started working out with him in the boathouse. When he taught me the basics of boxing. He was the first person in my life to ever tell me I was a natural at something. The first and last. Until today. Eight years later. *Jesus, eight years.* (235)

The above passage offers an explanation for Cricket’s violent behavior. As he has never been told by anybody, apart from Caretaker, to have any skills, he concludes that fighting is his only talent and the only means to restore a sense of pride and self-esteem. His teacher’s compliments flatter him, but when she asks him to consider going to college and pursuing a writing career, his response underlines his belief that his only skill is his fighting: “‘Why the hell would I go to college? There ain’t nothing I’m good at except cracking numbskull skulls’” (236).

Nick, like Cricket, is an excellent writer, but is not aware of his talent. Only toward the end of the narrative, after receiving positive feedback from his English teacher about his poetry, which she thinks should be published in the school’s literary journal, does he feel proud of his skill, probably for the first time in his life: “I can’t help taking out the poem again. I feel kind of weird about it. It takes me a minute to realize the weird feeling is pride. Maybe I can actually write. [...] But no one’s ever really said I was good at anything before” (Flinn 229). Nick’s thoughts reveal that he never believed in his abilities simply because nobody had ever encouraged him to pursue his talents.

CHAPTER TWO: MANIFESTATIONS OF SHAME

2.1 Dealing with emotions: Hiding, masking, numbing

The way the protagonists deal with their emotions puts them on a trajectory toward destructive behavior and violence. Instead of letting other people see their emotions and allowing them to help them in resolving their conflicts, the protagonists hide, mask and numb their emotions.

The concealment of emotions often results from male gender expectations. In his article on male emotions and violence, sociologist Thomas Scheff observes that men are expected to display characteristics such as strength, courage and competence, while suppressing vulnerable feelings, particularly shame and fear. Therefore, most men hide or mask these emotions (729). Likewise, Michael Kaufman, theorist on masculinity, states that the dominant notion of masculinity is associated with the suppression of emotions that are seen as incoherent with manhood. He states that these emotions are still present, but that men hide them, because they associate these vulnerable feelings with femininity. However, the emotions that are suppressed gain control over men and dominate them. He exemplifies this argument by referring to men who batter their wives because they experience feelings of powerlessness and to teenage boys who turn their feelings of inadequacy into rage against others (148-49). The reason why men are hesitant to share, talk about and show their emotions is because they are afraid of vulnerability, which Brown defines as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (34). Men avoid being seen as vulnerable because of the cultural myth that equates vulnerability with weakness (33). As the greatest fear of many men is to be perceived as weak (92), it is not surprising that they are afraid to show their deepest feelings and be vulnerable. Just as M. Kaufman argues that suppressed emotions dominate men’s lives (149), Brown maintains that “[t]he less we talk about shame, the more control it has over our lives” (68). She argues that it is vulnerability that can help individuals to overcome shame by sharing painful experiences and emotions with someone they trust, who empathizes with them and is willing to help them (45).

The narratives of Nick, Cricket and Tyrell reveal that they – rather than be vulnerable – hide their emotions. Nick’s friendship with Tom is characterized by this lack of vulnerability. Although they have been best friends since first grade, Nick does not share his pain with Tom. This becomes apparent in one of his journal entries, where he recounts

a sleepover at Tom's. Despite feeling a strong desire to talk to Tom about his struggles with Caitlin and the fear of becoming like his father (Flinn 231), Nick decides not to tell him:

Tom's head disappeared from view, and I thought he'd gone to sleep until he said, 'How about you and your dad?' I stroked Wimpy's bumpy fur. Then I let my hand drop to the side of the bed. I couldn't tell Tom. His problems were normal, the kind on Very Special Episodes of TV sitcoms. Mine were intense foreign films. What could I say: *By the way, my father calls me a mistake, and I slapped Caitlin on the way back from Key West?* What could Tom do besides think I was subhuman? Maybe he'd even be right. Finally, I said, 'You know. He's not around much, doesn't care what I do. Guess he likes work better.' [...] 'You're lucky,' Tom said. 'Maybe so.' I lay there, listening to Tom's breathing become even with sleep [...] I always wondered if things would have turned out different if I'd talked to Tom that night. (232-33)

Nick's unwillingness to be open is caused by the fear that sharing his problems might lead to more shame. He thinks that there is something deeply flawed about him and that if Tom found out, he would think less of him. How Nick hides his shame and his lack of vulnerability can be further illustrated by the second verse of the poem he writes for his English class, which describes the dynamics of his friendship with Tom in hindsight:

Your eyes meet mine and see only reflection.
Your legs piston, powerful, a hero once more;
And I stand alone, drenched in sweat and untold secrets;
But slapping your hand, saying everything's fine. (191)

Nick's inability to share his problems and be vulnerable alienates him from his best friend. Since he fears that Tom would not understand him, he does not want him to see behind his façade. While he wonders whether Tom could have helped him with his problems, he concludes that "[h]e'd have laughed at me" (192). Likewise, the relationship with his counselor Mario is initially characterized by Nick's reluctance to show his true feelings and to accept help. After the second violence class, Mario offers Nick his help, but Nick refuses it: "'You want to talk about it?' 'I won't be late again, okay?' [...] 'Need a ride home, son?' I've been looking out the window. It's eleven o'clock, but outside is night, with rain pounding worse than before. Still, I say, 'Someone's picking me up.'" After he leaves, I walk to the train" (36). Nick declines Mario's offer because he is afraid that on the ride home, Mario would ask uncomfortable questions. It is his unwillingness to be vulnerable and to tell Mario about how his relationship with his father affects him that hinders him from trusting Mario. Nick's unwillingness to be vulnerable can be explained by what Brown mentions as the reason why people are so reluctant to talk about their

emotions: “Our rejection of vulnerability often stems from our associating it with dark emotions like fear, shame, grief, sadness, and disappointment – emotions that we don’t want to discuss, even when they profoundly affect the way we live, love, work, and even lead” (33-34). Nick fears that talking about the difficulties in his life would intensify them, and he thinks that holding it all in will prevent others from seeing how much he suffers and would protect him from further shame.

Tyrell also seems to have difficulties to share his true feelings and prefers to pretend everything is ‘a’ight’. When Tyrell picks Novisha up from school, but she does not want to spend time with him, he feels disrespected, jealous and disappointed. However, when she calls him in the evening of the same day to apologize, he denies being mad at her or affected by her rebuff: ““Look, Novisha. You don’t gotta do nothing for me, okay? You keep doing what you doing, and I’m keep doing what I’m doing. And what I’m do is make sure you okay. And if something ever happen to you, I’m hafta go to jail ’cause somebody gonna die”” (Booth 154). This passage reveals how Tyrell wants to be perceived as strong and protective, not as hurt, emotional and disappointed. However, not talking to Novisha about his feelings intensifies his anger and resentment. He describes that while he can share his difficult emotions with Jasmine, his relationship with Novisha is not characterized by this kind of vulnerability: “I don’t know, but when I’m with Jasmine I don’t gotta act like everything is okay when it ain’t. I can just relax and let my guard down. Novisha [...] don’t know how bad I feel that I can’t get my family outta this situation faster” (160).

When Tyrell reads one of Novisha’s diary entries in which she wonders whether she will always have to live with the embarrassment of having a boyfriend without a high school diploma, he feels “like crap” and “kinda tired of reading how she too good for me” (179). However, instead of telling her about his emotions, he leaves after a hasty goodbye. The shame Tyrell feels about not being good enough for Novisha, combined with his fear of losing her, causes him to hide the pain he feels and hinders him from talking openly to his girlfriend about his emotions:

‘Are you okay?’ She try to take my hand, but I don’t let her. I just open the door. ‘Did I do something?’ ‘Nah, we good,’ I tell her. ‘Don’t forget to call me tomorrow.’ ‘I won’t.’ She smile, but I can tell she still trying to figure out what’s wrong with me. ‘I had a nice time today.’ ‘Me too.’ And I leave, go out in the hall and press the DOWN button for the elevator. I know I shoulda said something ’bout what I read, but I ain’t looking to get into no argument with Novisha ’bout

the shit she be writing in her diary. I'm trying to hold on to her, not push her away. She all I got. (179)

Just as Tyrell is unwilling to share his feelings, Cricket also hides his vulnerable emotions, especially his fear. While the reader knows that Cricket is afraid of Pitbull's revenge, he does not acknowledge his fear to his friend Grubs: "'You need help with this dude?' he asks. 'You think he'll come after you with the whole football team or something?' That's exactly what I'm thinking. 'Nah, I got it under control'" (Blagden 109). Cricket pretends to be indifferent to the possibility of Pitbull's revenge, probably because he does not want to be perceived as weak, since that would contradict his notion of masculinity.

While hiding and refusing to be vulnerable is one way of dealing with shame and with difficult emotions, masking is another way in which the protagonists try to not let their vulnerability be seen. Pollack states that boys are trained to hide their emotions behind a "mask of masculinity". This means that when they experience pain, they cannot let others see their pain, because it would diminish their sense of masculinity and would prove that they are not 'real' boys. As they are ashamed to fall short of the gender expectations they see themselves confronted with, they put on a mask that hinders them from expressing their true feelings (*The Mask You Live In*). M. Kaufman calls this mask a "suit of armor" that hides a man's pain and keeps others at a safe distance from his emotions (150). Nick and Cricket are both aware of their masks and in their narratives they describe how this emotional barrier affects them. Cricket calls his mask a "wall" that separates him from other people and makes it impossible for him to connect with them:

I've thought about trying to be more social, more outgoing, to make more of an effort. But I can't. And it's not because I don't want to. It's really not. [...] But here's the thing. I have a wall. It's not an ordinary wall. Everyone has ordinary walls. My wall's the friggin' Great Wall of China. (Blagden 114)

The way he describes his mask, repeating the word 'wall' five times and using the Great Wall of China as a metaphor for it, shows how prominent it is in his life. Nick describes his mask at the very beginning of his narrative, when he talks about being in the courtroom and feeling Caitlin's and her mother's gaze on him: "I concentrate, really concentrate, on making my face a mask. I'm good at that. People at school – my ex-friends, even Tom, who used to be my best friend – see me how I want them to: Nick Andreas, sixteen-year-old rich kid, honor student, coolest guy around. All fake" (Flinn 3). The description of his mask explains Nick's above-mentioned unwillingness to share his problems and difficult

emotions with others. Since he wants to keep up his façade of self-confidence, he does not allow himself to be and to appear vulnerable.

The two masks all three protagonists wear to hide their vulnerable emotions are indifference and anger. According to Gilligan, violent men often hide their shame “behind a defensive mask of bravado, arrogance, ‘machismo’, self-satisfaction, insouciance, or studied indifference” (*Violence* 111). How Nick masks his emotions with indifference becomes apparent in his family violence classes. When Mario talks about isolation as a form of controlling behavior, Nick wonders whether his behavior ruined his relationship to Caitlin. The reader knows that Nick still cares about Caitlin, but in front of the other guys in his violence class, Nick pretends to be indifferent toward Caitlin, not interested in her as a person, but only seeing her as an object: “‘So I’ll find someone else,’ I say. ‘They all have the same thing between their legs.’ This gets me some chuckles, some raised thumbs” (Flinn 75). Nick’s reaction reveals that he is too afraid to talk about his real feelings because acknowledging them would mean letting other guys see behind his façade of coolness. This fear is also apparent in Nick’s unwillingness to share the pain of his difficult relationship with his father. When Mario asks him about it in class, Nick has a bitter-sweet memory of a day he spent with his father, but which remained a onetime experience. However, he pretends not to care much about their relationship:

My stomach tightens, and I remember a long-ago Dolphins game with some lawyer and the lawyer’s son. My father bought me a jersey, even high-fived when the ’Fins scored an overtime field goal. For months after, I’d slept in that shirt. We never went again. I say to Mario, ‘We’re not into that touchy-feely crap.’ (93-94)

He says “touchy-feely crap” (94) as if being close to one’s father was undesirable, but he only does so because he secretly wishes he had this kind of relationship with his dad. The fact that he is not indifferent can be observed by his physical reaction as his “stomach tightens” (93) upon thinking about his father. Likewise, when the conversation in Mario’s class revolves around reactions to tardiness of girlfriends, Nick pretends to be indifferent to such situations:

‘She’s not there. And you’re thinking...’ Mario glances around. ‘Nick?’ ‘I’m thinking she forgot,’ I say. [...] ‘[W]hat else are you thinking besides ‘she forgot’?’ He leans back. ‘You’re thinking she found something better to do? Or *someone* better? She doesn’t care if you melt in this heat because she’s never seeing you again?’ ‘I’m just thinking she forgot,’ I say. But he’s right. I’d probably think all that. I *had* thought all that. (136-37).

Although Nick knows about his emotional reactions to Caitlin's lateness, which he documented a week earlier in his journal and which include anxiety, fear, jealousy and shame (128), he pretends not to care in order to keep his mask up.

Tyrell seems equally determined to mask his feelings with indifference, especially in front of other guys. One evening, after his second unsuccessful attempt to find Jasmine, he meets Wayne, who knows that Tyrell has been looking for Jasmine earlier. Instead of sharing his concerns, Tyrell pretends to be indifferent to Jasmine's absence: "'Your girl still missing?' Wayne. I throw the bag away and try to act like I don't care what he say. 'I ain't looking for her,' I tell him. 'I'm throwing away a bag of roaches'" (Booth 115). Tyrell's response reveals that he is unwilling to reveal his emotional involvement with Jasmine, because for him, showing emotions would be synonymous with weakness. However, masking his concerns with indifference in an attempt to appear unemotional does not prevent him from having a strong emotional reaction when he sees Jasmine a few minutes later coming out of the night manager's office.

A similar behavior is evident in Cricket's friendship with Grubs. When his friend asks him about Wynona, Cricket pretends to be indifferent to the girl he likes, probably because he fears – like Tyrell – that his feelings could be interpreted as weakness: "'What the fuck, faggot? You soft on this bitch or something?' 'Shit, no. She ain't nothing to me' (Blagden 195). The fact that Grubs sees emotional involvement as incoherent with the dominant notion of masculinity is apparent from his choice of words, since the terms 'faggot' and 'soft' connote unmanliness. As Cricket does not want to be diminished in his masculinity by Grubs, he masks his feelings with indifference. When Cricket is verbally and physically attacked by Pitbull in the cafeteria, his first impulse is to fight back, but when teachers appear, he pretends not to care about his opponent's insults and dismisses his behavior as a joke: "Mrs. Hershberger scurries to my side and touches my shoulder. I shrug her off and walk away. The Little Ones are terrified. I plaster a smile over the pain. 'Anyone want some Mountain Dew?' They don't laugh. 'No worries, guys. Just high school hijinks. Go on, get to class'" (64-65). The fact that he is not indifferent to Pitbull's behavior, but uses his indifference as a mask, becomes apparent at the end of the same school day, when Cricket takes revenge for being humiliated by Pitbull.

While masking emotions often happens through indifference, pretense of coolness and unemotionality, it can also happen through the replacement of one emotion with another.

Instead of expressing pain, disappointment, hurt, embarrassment, shame and sadness, the protagonists display the one emotion they are not afraid to show – anger. Brown states that anger is a “secondary emotion” which functions as a “socially acceptable mask for many of the more difficult underlying emotions we feel” (34). Or, as Pollack puts it: “[I]t is through anger [...] that most boys express their vulnerability and powerlessness. [...] [They] turn most to anger in order to mute and rein in the full range of emotional responsiveness they would otherwise exhibit. The more tender feelings seem too shameful to show and thus boys turn to anger” (44).

Anger as a way to mask more vulnerable emotions is evident in all three narratives. Tyrell, for one, seems unable or unwilling to express other emotions than anger, which is seen in his frequent use of words like ‘pissed’ and ‘mad’ to describe his emotional state. For instance, when he is afraid that Troy could end up in a foster home again, he tells his little brother “how mad” he is that he went outside on his own (Booth 166). And while the reader expects Tyrell to feel hurt, disappointed and maybe even ashamed after discovering Novisha’s private diary that she kept hidden from him, and after finding out that she knows about his party, Tyrell exhibits a much smaller range of emotions when he talks about the incident: “She take her little diary and leave the room. A second later I hear her talking to Troy all nice and friendly. I don’t know how she do that. Just flip like that. ‘Cause me, I’m pissed. Pissed that she keeping that diary from me. Pissed that she know ‘bout the party” (248).

Cricket also uses anger to cover up other emotions. When he sees Pitbull coming toward him at school a few days after their fight, he expects to be killed by him: “Pitbull’s gonna solve my problems for me. I stuff my hands in my pockets and savor my final breaths. This won’t be a bad way to go. I’ll die a hero. Clint Eastwood-style. I hope Wynona’s watching. It’ll be a full-blown *Romeo and Juliet* murder-in-the-courtyard love scene” (Blagden 230). When he finds himself lying on the ground, not dying, but surprised his attacker hardly injured him, he feels embarrassed by his fantasies, humiliated by Pitbull and ashamed that the Little Ones witness the scene and question his courage. However, he masks these emotions with anger:

He slams into me with his shoulder. Hard. So hard it knocks me to the ground. And then...he’s gone. *What the fuck?* The Little Ones sprint to my side. ‘You okay, Crick?’ ‘How come you let him shove ya?’ ‘How come ya just stood there?’ ‘Are you gonna go after him?’ ‘Are you gonna pound his face again?’ My warm fuzzies evaporate, leaving my insides dry and brittle. I yell louder than I should.

‘How many friggin’ times do I gotta tell you idiots I don’t fight unless it’s self-defense? He fucking bumped into me. Big deal.’ Before I walk away, I glimpse their twisted faces. *But we gave you a standing ovation in the dining room and you didn’t yell at us then.* At the high school entrance, I turn. They haven’t moved. I yell to them. ‘Go on, guys. The bell’s gonna ring.’ (230-31)

As he does not want to see his masculinity questioned by those witnessing the scene, he reacts with anger to deter their attention from his real feelings.

Likewise, Nick is unwilling to let the other young men in his family violence class know about the fear he experienced on the day when he first hit Caitlin. Therefore, when Mario asks him in front of the others about his emotions that day, he only describes feelings of anger, although he later tells Mario that what he felt on the Seven Mile Bridge was fear:

‘What emotion were you feeling then?’ ‘What emotion?’ ‘Name it, it’s yours.’ ‘Guess I was pissed off.’ [...] ‘What, my volatile boy, did you feel besides *pissed off*?’ I don’t feel like answering. ‘Here are some choices.’ Mario smiles, patient, a botanist waiting for flowers to grow. ‘Were you afraid? Embarrassed? Ashamed of being a jerk to the woman you supposedly loved?’ [...] ‘What’s your point?’ ‘You’ve got two speeds, pissed off and asleep. You can’t operate like that. You’ve got to acknowledge other emotions, other ways of dealing with them.’ (Flinn 234-35)

While the reader is aware that all young men in the anger management class have experienced fear in their relationship to their (ex-)girlfriends, Nick seems to be blinded by the emotional masks of the others. Therefore, he describes feeling anger, not fear, in order to avoid being considered weak or unmanly by them and to prevent them from seeing behind his mask.

A third way in which the protagonists deal with their painful emotions is through numbing them. Brown defines numbing as “the embrace of whatever deadens the pain of discomfort and pain” (117). She writes that whenever people feel lonely, afraid and vulnerable they might turn to alcohol, food, work, or any other activity or substance that has the potential to become addictive (137-38). According to her, “the most powerful need for numbing seems to come from combinations of [...] shame, anxiety and disconnection” (138). Pattison also describes that in order to avoid feelings of shame, people use addictive substances to “deadens pain and fill the void of emptiness and depletion” (114). One way of numbing, which is common among young men, is alcohol and drug consumption. Especially when men take these substances by themselves they do so in order to get numb (Kimmel, *Guyland* 87). Psychologist Michael Thompson also

argues that when boys and young men are in psychic pain and unable to articulate their emotions, they drink and take drugs to numb their feelings (*The Mask You Live In*).

Dear Life, You Suck exemplifies the way alcohol and drugs can be used to numb emotions. When Cricket describes how he normally spends his evenings, he reveals that he regularly numbs his emotions and the painful memories of his past by drinking alcohol and smoking weed: “If this was all there was, things might be okay. This and my fire escape. Fluid and fog to raise me up, Matis-yahu. Ultimate darkness to make me invisible. Kick-ass tunage to drown out ancient sounds” (Blagden 53). Cricket also numbs his feelings after any experience that causes him to feel shame. After he is too shy to talk to Wynona in class, he numbs the negative emotions he feels toward himself: “*Goddamn it! Why didn’t I say something? Anything. I’m such a loser.* I ditch History and spend the period chillaxing with Professor Panama” (60). After his fight with Pitbull, he is confronted with Wynona’s contempt, the principal’s anger and with memories of the day he was brought to the orphanage. In order to numb the painful emotions that arise, he runs all the way from school to the Boys’ Home and then smokes weed to forget about the happenings of the day:

After catching my breath, I slip out my wallet and dig into the secret compartment for a flattened funk stick. [...] No better pollution than the commingling fumes of ocean and herb. I movie-reel the fight in my mind. The first punch. The first kick. The thud, thud, thud of Pitbull’s head against the cobblestones. Wynona’s hair, Wynona’s glare. Wynona’s scream. *Fuck you, asshole.* I suck another toke and close my eyes. Pitbull’s not the only one I obliterated today. (106-107)

The way Cricket handles difficult situations and feelings shows that he has not learnt to deal with his emotions in a constructive way. After Wynona’s apology, Cricket panics and accidentally hurts Wynona, but then feels so ashamed about his behavior that, in an attempt to drown out his uncomfortable feelings, he injures himself. After not being able to find Wynona, he magnifies the mistake he has made and is faced with hopelessness and despair: “I ruined everything. Ruined everything forever [...] Maybe I should just forget the whole thing. Forget everything. Wynona, my chores, everything. Just go to Grubs’s apartment and get wasted” (183). As he is convinced that Wynona hates him and does not want to see him anymore, he concludes that alcohol would help him to numb his painful emotions: “I head to my attic asylum to drown my sorrows. I’m like Rooster Cogburn in *True Grit*. We both *love to pull a cork*” (189). He then drinks so much that he has a hangover the next day.

Similarly, after Tyrell unsuccessfully attempts to convince Novisha to spend the afternoon with him, he tries to numb the pain and disappointment he feels about his girlfriend's behavior, but realizes that there is no substance which could make him forget what happened:

[W]e just chill in the living room watching videos on BET, getting high and drinking forties. To be honest, I don't think even Cal and them got weed strong enough to make me forget 'bout Novisha and how she just walked away with her friends and left me standing there like a chump. Man, I'ma hafta be real fucked up for that not to mess with my head. (Booth 142-43)

Tyrell might be so deeply affected by his girlfriend's behavior because he fears that he is not good enough for her anymore, as she rather spends time with other people than with him. The feeling of being disconnected from Novisha, the disappointment about her behavior and the fear that their relationship might be falling apart thus cause him to drink and take drugs in order to numb his pain.

2.2 Jealousy and feelings of inferiority

One of the ways in which shame manifests itself in the lives of individuals is through feelings of inferiority. G. Kaufman states that feelings of shame cause individuals to feel inferior and insecure, to doubt themselves and to struggle with low self-esteem (*Psychology of Shame* 5). He argues that if people feel chronic shame, they often think of themselves as not being good enough to belong (24). He thus calls shame the “affect of inferiority” (16). Likewise, Gilligan maintains that shame is “synonymous with feelings of inferiority” (*Violence* 202) and argues that if men feel inadequate and worthless, they are at a greater risk to become violent (129). He sees feelings of inferiority as a result of an individual comparing him- or herself to another person (202). In this sense, feelings of inferiority are closely related to jealousy: “[E]nvy, like jealousy, is a form of shame, a member of the same family of feelings. For to feel envious of someone is to feel inferior to that person, with respect to whatever it is one envies about the other” (*Violence* 69). Following his statement, it could be hypothesized that the jealous behavior of the protagonists is grounded in their feelings of inferiority. While feelings of inferiority are present in the lives of all three protagonists, only Nick’s and Tyrell’s narratives contain examples of jealousy.

The reader becomes aware of Nick’s feelings of inferiority already at the beginning of the novel when, in one of his first journal entries, he describes seeing Caitlin but being too timid to start a conversation with her: “I wished, also, to be one-tenth as cool as people thought I was – cool enough to talk to her” (Flinn 25). This quote reveals that although Nick appears self-confident on the outside, he feels differently on the inside. His feelings of inferiority, which are present before he starts dating Caitlin, might also explain why he feels so jealous in their relationship. As he sees other young men as superior to him in some respect or other – either in appearance, talent, or popularity – he perceives them as a threat to himself and to his relationship with Caitlin, because he fears that she would leave him for somebody else who is ‘better’ than him.

It is also significant that the day of their breakup, when Nick injures Caitlin severely, starts with Nick feeling inferior:

The day Caitlin and I broke up began typically. Tom was a hero [...] We’d lost 7-3, but Columbus scored the touchdown when Tom-the-hero wasn’t even on the field. It was an offensive fumble, recovered by Columbus and run into score. One

guess who fumbled. Good guess. We were out of the regionals, and it was my fault. (248)

The reason why being responsible for the loss of the game induces shame in Nick and makes him feel inferior has to do with his definition of masculinity that requires him to be a skilled football player. Although the lost game is not the cause for his violent behavior against Caitlin a few hours later, the feelings of inferiority his failure provokes contribute to his feelings of shame and intensify his behavioral response to her perceived disrespect later that day.

Tyrell is also affected by feelings of inferiority which are triggered by Novisha's behavior. Although she knows that he is not going to school anymore, she tells her mother that Tyrell excels at school. When he finds out, because Ms. Jenkins congratulates him on his improvement at school, he concludes that Novisha thinks he is not good enough for her and therefore has to lie to her mother about him: "[H]ere she is talking 'bout my grades and shit. Straight-out lying. Like she gotta make up shit to make me look good or something" (Booth 43). Only when he is under the influence of drugs does he tell her about his feelings: "Maybe it's the weed, but all of a sudden I'm just telling her what I really think 'bout what she did. 'You ain't had to say nothing to your moms 'bout me, you know. You just making stuff up 'cause you don't think I'm good enough for you the way I am. How you think that make me feel?" (73). The shame Tyrell feels about not being accepted for who he is by his girlfriend is intensified when he reads an entry in Novisha's diary:

Yesterday, Shanice asked me what school Ty goes to and I finally admitted to her that he hasn't gone back to school since Christmas break. She told me she would never go out with a boy who dropped out of school, and while she was talking I felt really embarrassed. I'm not proud of myself for feeling that way, but I did. Am I going to have to live my whole life feeling embarrassed because my man doesn't even have a high school diploma? I hope not. (178-79)

Tyrell states that whenever he reads his girlfriend's journal, "she got something in it that make me feel like crap" (179). He feels ashamed because she is embarrassed of him, but also because he feels inferior to her and not good enough to be her boyfriend.

Feelings of inferiority are also evident in Cricket's narrative. How he thinks about himself is revealed when he considers the possibility of dating Wynona: "A beauty like her would never be drawn to a hooded, fisticuffin', Prison-dwelling, scar-faced beast like me" (Blagden 89). As Cricket does not believe himself to be an attractive, worthwhile person

anybody – and especially Wynona – would enjoy spending time with, he thinks of her compliments as a way to trick him:

I can't believe I freaked out like that. I felt so certain she was bulldozing me into a mushy pile so Pitbull could drop-kick my ass into the briny deep. Why else would she talk all that crap about me being good-looking and stuff? I know I'm an ugly fuck. I know my scar freaks people out. First expressions don't lie. But if she wasn't setting me up, why was she buttering me up like some tasty stud muffin? There's no way she can really think I'm a hot tamale or anything. Her eyes seem to work fine. (185)

Cricket does not believe in his own worth and the way he refers to himself in the above passage reveals this self-critical attitude. His feelings of self-contempt are intensified after he unintentionally injures Wynona: "She came here to apologize, and I scared her. Her initial instincts were right. I am a freak. A freak of nature" (185). When later in the narrative Wynona and Cricket start dating, Cricket still feels inadequate: "She's probably looking at that faraway place again and thinking the same thing I'm thinking. What a waste it is to spend time with me. What a waste I am" (216). These feelings cause him to be pessimistic about their future and his lack of self-worth jeopardizes the continuation of their relationship: "Before her first semester is over, she'll meet some *GQ* cover model who can buy her the whole Pizza Palace instead of one stupid slice. Going on another date with Wynona is stupid. I should cancel. Do it nice and friendly so I don't hurt her" (262).

As mentioned above, feelings of inferiority are closely related to jealousy. There are several instances of jealousy in *Tyrell* and *Breathing Underwater*, and most of them are motivated by the protagonists' underlying fear of not being good enough. When Tyrell picks up Novisha from school, he critically examines the boys who are with her and her friends: "Course I look them brothas over real fast, not like they competition or nothing, but 'cause I wanna make sure none of them is the guy writing her them letters and calling her at home [...] I just hope none of them is trying to step to my girl 'cause I'm not having that" (Booth 139). Underlying the wish that none of the boys is trying to make advances on Novisha is the fear that she would find something in them that she does not find in him, such as their determination to get a high school diploma. However, he primarily feels jealous because Novisha, instead of spending time with him, chooses to do volunteer work with them that afternoon:

I know she doing something good, spending her time with them old folks that don't got no family visiting them or nothing, but at the same time I'm, like, damn, who more important to her, them or me? [...] [I]t's like everybody and everything come first. Instead of me. (141)

Tyrell feels disrespected because he expects his girlfriend to spend most of her time with him. The fact that she prefers the company of other people might make him doubt whether he is good enough for her.

Intense feelings of jealousy are provoked when Tyrell learns that Novisha has slept with Jamal:

'Fuck you,' I tell her. It's probably the first time she ever heard me curse, but I don't give a shit. 'I mean, I'm here thinking you waiting for the right guy, and when me and you get married, I'ma be the only guy you was ever with, but now, come to find out you was lying from day one. So what I'm s'posed to think? That you can give it up to some asshole like that in a couple weeks at camp, but me, the guy you say you love and all that, you put on hold for a fuckin' year and a half? What up with that?' (281-82)

While Tyrell feels disrespected by Novisha, he is also jealous because Jamal has been granted more intimacy with Novisha than he ever has. It makes Tyrell feel inadequate as a man, as he considers sexual conquest a crucial part of his masculine identity. His shame of not being good enough triggers anger in him and makes him attack his girlfriend verbally.

Tyrell does not only feel jealous when it comes to his girlfriend, he is also jealous of the men who show interest in Jasmine. Although she is not his girlfriend, Tyrell derives a sense of self-worth from being needed by her. When Wayne tells him that Jasmine spent the night with another guy, Tyrell is angry:

Wayne raise his hands like he ain't in it. 'Now, I don't know what happened, but I do know that guy is going 'round saying he hit that all night.' 'She ain't do nothin' with him,' I say, but both of us know I'm talking mad shit 'cause Jasmine coulda did anything she wanted with him. I tell Wayne I'ma check him later and walk back to my room. I'm mad, but I ain't even sure why. Ain't like Jasmine my girl or nothing. (106)

While Tyrell does not understand his feelings, the reader sees Tyrell's jealousy rooted in his desire to be the only guy Jasmine needs. Upon finding out that she can replace him so easily, he feels jealous, but does not want to acknowledge these feelings and therefore tries to convince himself and Wayne that Jasmine "'ain't do nothing with him'" (106).

When Jasmine takes Tyrell to her old schools to invite people to his party, he is jealous of her schoolmates:

She say the same thing to every guy. The way I figure it, by the time we through with both schools, she done promised to dance with, like, forty-something guys. And the way them dudes was looking at her, and putting they arms 'round her waist and kissing her on the cheek and shit, I ain't really like it. How they know me and her wasn't together? Why they think they could get with her when I'm standing right there? (211)

He feels disrespected by the young men Jasmine talks to, because he wants to be seen as Jasmine's boyfriend, and thus nobody should dare to touch his supposed girlfriend. The fact that Jasmine's male acquaintances do not hesitate to flirt with her makes Tyrell feel jealous and insecure, as he wonders why they do not pay him respect.

Nick's relationship to Caitlin is also characterized by intense jealousy. This is evident already at the beginning of their relationship when Saint O'Connor talks to Caitlin at Zack's party: "Man, you are one hot babe. You must've lost thirty pounds at least." "Thank you, Patrick." Patrick? *Patrick*? I felt my jaw clench. I'd never suspected O'Connor had a real name. How did Caitlin know? I chugged my beer, wanting to tell him to leave Caitlin alone. She was mine" (Flinn 51). The jealousy Nick feels in this situation might be explained by his feelings of insecurity and inferiority. As he is afraid that Caitlin might find another guy to be a better boyfriend than him, every guy who approaches Caitlin is seen as a possible threat, especially Saint, who Nick feels inferior to because of his athletic ability. Therefore, he tries to keep Saint at a distance from his girlfriend. An intense feeling of jealousy is also provoked when Nick sees Caitlin practicing a song with Derek. While the reader cannot discover any clues that would indicate a secret relationship between Caitlin and Derek, Nick sees his girlfriend's behavior as a clear sign of her unfaithfulness:

She leaned to turn the page, her blond hair brushing his pale face. My fists clenched. She shouldn't touch another guy like that. She continued singing, every high and low note hitting like ice through my eye. [...] 'You know you have the best voice around.' 'Oh, sure.' But she returned his smile, encouraging him, like she'd take on anyone who'd have her. Slut. (129)

Interpreting Caitlin's smile as a gesture that invites Derek to pursue her and calling her a slut for accepting his compliments seems as irrational to the reader as being angry about Caitlin's hair accidentally brushing Derek's face. However, Nick is unable to see how distorted his perception is. In what follows, Nick insults Caitlin, accusing her of infidelity

and threatening to be violent against her. The intensity of Nick's emotional and behavioral reaction is out of proportion, and can only be explained by his underlying fear of being inferior to other guys and not as important to Caitlin as he wants to be:

'Why didn't you throw him down and screw him right there?' Caitlin stopped, backed away. 'What?' 'You know what. The way you were coming on to him.' 'Are you crazy?' she said. 'It was *Derek*.' The air was thick, heavy. 'That's it. I'm crazy. I saw you. I saw you flirting with him, touching him. I saw him looking at you.' [...] 'Slut! I can't let you out of my sight, can I? You can't be trusted, you bitch!' Caitlin turned to me. 'You can trust me. How can you say this?' 'How can I?' Like I didn't know better. 'How can *you* be like that with other guys when you said you loved me? Are you lying about being a virgin? Sweet little Caitlin – you play hard to get with me, but you'd spread your legs for him, wouldn't you? (130-31)

While the above passage reveals that Nick does not feel secure of Caitlin's love, it is not her behavior that makes him doubt her faithfulness, but his feelings of inferiority and the resulting fear of being betrayed that make him interpret her behavior as infidelity.

Nick's feelings of jealousy and inferiority are so intense that he tries to prevent Caitlin from becoming popular. When talking about the election of homecoming queen at their high school, he states: "Did I mention that Caitlin was nominated? Needless to say, I wasn't thrilled at her getting that kind of publicity. I wouldn't be good enough for her anymore. Still, I avoided the issue of how I'd voted" (141), suggesting that he does not vote for his girlfriend out of fear that if she became popular, she would leave him for somebody else. While his attitude is symptomatic of his feelings of inferiority, it also makes the reader wonder whether Nick deliberately chose Caitlin – an unpopular, insecure and unnoticed girl – as his girlfriend to reduce the probability of her leaving him. His jealousy and the fear to be left by Caitlin for another boy is constantly present in their relationship. On the way back from Key West, when Nick fears that Caitlin could leave him, he immediately assumes that she found another guy: "She *was* trying to break up. Who was it? Saint? Maybe even Zack?" (194). Although his suspicions at that time are unjustified, two months after Nick and Caitlin have separated, he sees her kissing Saint O'Connor and his jealousy upon seeing them makes him attack Caitlin verbally, because he feels ashamed about being so easily replaced: "Is she showing off? Trying to make me jealous? It works. My pancreas is gripped by a giant hand. Caitlin and Saint separate. She heads my way alone. Does she see me? I want to say *I love you, I miss you*. Instead, I whisper, 'Fat pig,' and move on" (166-67).

2.3 Powerlessness and control

Masculinity is traditionally associated with dominance and power, but Kimmel points out that many men do not experience power in their everyday lives: “Men’s feelings are not the feelings of the powerful, but of those who see themselves as powerless. [...] They are the feelings of men who were raised to believe themselves entitled to feel that power, but do not feel it” (Kimmel, *Masculinity* 136). This contrast between the feeling of entitlement to power and the actual experience of feeling powerless might also explain psychologist Gershen Kaufman’s claim that feelings of powerlessness can lead to shame (*Psychology of Shame* 55). If men have been taught to believe that they are entitled to feel powerful, they might attribute feelings of powerlessness and a failure to control and dominate their surroundings to some flaw in themselves and thus feel shame. Therefore, in order to protect themselves from experiencing shame about being powerless, individuals may seek to exert control over others in relationships or may try to control circumstances. In this sense, power can function as a way of “maintaining security and enhancing self-esteem” (98). Tyrell’s and Nick’s narratives underline G. Kaufman’s observation; the protagonists’ feelings of powerlessness are often accompanied by attempts to control people in order to overcome feelings of helplessness. As they experience loss of power primarily in their romantic relationships, they show their wish for control in the way they treat their girlfriends. In its most extreme form control is achieved through violence, but the protagonists also use milder forms of control to attain a certain emotional or behavioral reaction from their girlfriends and to feel less weak and powerless themselves.

When Nick stays home from school because he bears a visible sign of his father’s violence on his face that he does not want anybody to see, his inability to monitor Caitlin leaves him feeling powerless. These feelings are reinforced when she does not answer his calls: “I texted Caitlin to call me. Then, I waited. She didn’t call back. After five minutes, I texted her again. Then, three more times. Still, no answer. Where was she? Maybe she’d never call back, and I’d just drop off the face of the earth” (Flinn 81-82). Out of fear that she might spend more time being with other people than thinking about him, Nick tries to gain control over her emotions through making her feel guilty when she finally does call him back:

‘Where were you?’ I answered it. ‘It was ten minutes, Nick. I was in class.’ I heard voices in the background and looked at my watch. She’d waited until passing time

to call. Bitch. [...] ‘I’m sick, if you care,’ I said. I knew I sounded pathetic, but I wanted her to be miserable like me, and she didn’t sound miserable enough. (82)

The expectation that his girlfriend would constantly inform him of her whereabouts characterizes Nick’s relationship to her and as their relationship continues, his controlling behavior intensifies. One day, when she does not text him after his football practice, as she usually does, Nick instantly experiences feelings of fear: “A crowd headed toward the activities bus. Some were from chorus, but Caitlin wasn’t there. Where was she? And with whom? I’d said I’d pick her up, but she should have come out” (124). When he discovers that she is still practicing a song with Derek, Nick is not only jealous, but also feels his power over Caitlin diminished: “I felt so weak, so used. She was making a fool of me, and I couldn’t stop it” (130), which leads him to intimidate her in order to regain a sense of dominance and control: “I raised an arm. It was a gesture. I wasn’t going to hit her, was I? But she flinched” (131).

Just as Nick wants to be informed about Caitlin’s every movement and activity, Tyrell is adamant to know everything about his girlfriend’s admirer. The fact that Novisha is unwilling to reveal Jamal’s identity makes Tyrell feel unable to stop him from going after his girlfriend. In order to overcome this powerlessness, he tries to convince his girlfriend to be honest with him:

‘I just don’t like when you keep stuff from me, ’specially when you got some nigga stalking you.’ ‘He’s not stalking me, Ty. Anyway, if anything else happens, I’ll tell you. I’ll even tell the guidance counselor. Okay?’ ‘Yeah, okay. Just make sure you keep it real with me. I don’t like secrets. You know that.’ (Booth 16)

When after a few days Novisha has not given Tyrell more information about her stalker, he tries to gain control over the situation by invading her privacy: “She leave the room and, without even hardly thinking ’bout what I’m doing, I grab her schoolbag off the floor and start searching it for letters. If she ain’t gonna tell me what’s going on at that school, I’m a find out my damn self” (246). Feeling entitled to know every detail of his girlfriend’s life, he is angry, offended and controlling when he finds a diary in her bag that he has never seen before:

When I get to the last pocket, I pull out some kinda small notebook that got **ASSIGNMENTS** on it. [...] Damn. It’s another goddamn diary. I open to the last page: *I don’t know what to do about Jamal anymore*. That’s all I get to see before Novisha rip the diary out my hands. ‘What are you doing? I can’t believe you’re going through my stuff!’ [...] ‘How many diaries you got?’ I ask her. I ain’t screaming or nothing, but I’m talking kinda loud. ‘What you need that one for?’

[...] 'For privacy, what do you think?' She holding the little diary real close to her body now, like it's a football or something. 'I need a diary that nobody else is gonna read.' 'Nobody else, like me?' She nod. 'Yeah.' 'Let me see it,' I say. 'We not s'posed to have no secrets from each other. Ain't that what we said?' (247)

Tyrell tries to exert control over Novisha through making her feel bad for keeping secrets from him when their relationship should be based on trust. While he expects her to be honest with him, Tyrell does not tell Novisha about his affair with Jasmine nor about the party he is planning. The way he justifies his behavior to himself reveals how he thinks of men as entitled to more power than women: "[S]ometimes a brotha gotta keep shit to hisself. But what a female need to keep secrets for? There ain't no reason for that. Never" (248). Being angry at Novisha for keeping secrets from him and knowing that she will not let him read more of her diary, Tyrell decides to control the situation through teaching Jamal a lesson:

I'm still pissed that Novisha feel she gotta keep shit from me. Like, she got some guy stalking her, but she doing everything she can to keep me outta it. But that shit ain't gonna work no more. Monday afternoon I'ma be waiting outside that school, asking everybody who the fuck Jamal is. And when I find that nigga, I'ma kick his ass and tell him if he even look Novisha way again I'ma be back. It's time to put a end to this already. Then maybe me and Novisha can go back to the way we was before all this started. (255)

As he is not willing to feel powerless concerning the situation with Novisha's stalker any longer, controlling Jamal's behavior seems the only way for Tyrell to regain control over his relationship and overcome his feelings of powerlessness.

Another way in which the protagonists try to exert control is through isolation, which is a form of emotional violence (Renzetti 570). As Nick feels criticized and diminished by Caitlin's friend Elsa, he is afraid that she could convince Caitlin to break up with him. Unlike Caitlin, Elsa is not impressed by Nick's popularity, his friends or his car. Knowing that Elsa is Caitlin's best friend makes Nick feel powerless, because he cannot control Elsa's influence on his girlfriend. In order to overcome this powerlessness, he forces Caitlin to choose between her and him: "'Make your choice, Cat. That bitch or me.' Caitlin touched my shoulder, whispering, 'Nicky...' I shrugged her off. 'Her or me? Hang with me and all my friends, or sit in the cafeteria with Elsa and her Disney lunch box.'" (Flinn 69). He hopes that through isolating Caitlin from her friends, he will not only be able to spend more time with her, but also have complete control over her: "'I plan on being around more and more. I want to be together all the time'" (70). In order to make

her depend on him, he tries to convince her that he is the only person who genuinely loves her: “‘I’m the only one who cares about you, not your dad, not Elsa. Even these guys [her new friends] are just jealous of you. I’m the only one you can trust’” (145).

Tyrell also tries to isolate his girlfriend from her friends. When he is waiting outside Novisha’s school unannounced to insure Novisha’s stalker is not following her, he sees Novisha with her best friends and three boys he does not know: “[S]he looking too happy with them other guys and, straight up, I don’t like what I’m seeing” (Booth 139). As he feels that Novisha spends too much time with other people instead of with him, he tries to impede her from going with them:

I take her arm and kinda move her away from the other kids so we can talk. ‘Who them boys?’ She look at me like I’m acting crazy or something. ‘Them? They volunteer at the home on Tuesdays, so we decided to all go together today. We’re gonna have fun.’ ‘That dude wrote you today?’ ‘No.’ She sound like she tired of me asking her that. ‘Why are you bringing that up? C’mon. They’re all waiting for me.’ ‘Let them go without you. I wanna talk to you.’ I put my arms ’round her again and lean over to kiss her on her neck, which ain’t easy with that thick jacket she got on. [...] She kiss me back, but she pulling away at the same time. ‘This is embarrassing, Ty. My friends are watching us.’ (140)

Although he knows that she is not lying to him about doing voluntary work, he feels like he has no control over their relationship anymore: “I ain’t sure why, but shit between us don’t feel right no more” (141).

In his analysis of the different types of violence men use against women, sociologist Jeff Hearn identifies “men’s control of women’s definition of their situation and reality” as one of the most powerful forms of non-physical violence. He defines this form of abuse as including “woman’s definition of how she dresses, appears, defines herself, monitors her behaviour or potential behaviour, [and] stops doing things that might bring an adverse reaction from the man”. Although verbal in nature, this kind of violence often accompanies or follows physical abuse and has equally harming effects on women’s emotional and physical state (88). Nick’s narrative illustrates this form of violence, as he wants to be in control over every aspect of Caitlin’s life, including the way she dresses. Controlling her gives him a sense of power, security and self-worth that is contrary to his feelings of inadequacy, powerlessness and worthlessness. When Nick sees Caitlin wearing a necklace she bought with Peyton, Nick does not hide the fact that he dislikes it, and even forces her to remove it: “I turned back to Caitlin. ‘I said, take that stupid thing off.’ [...] Caitlin removed the necklace and held it up. [...] ‘Last thing you need is to

dress like Peyton,' I said. [...] We drove a block before I plucked it off and threw it out the window" (Flinn 103-104) A similar situation arises when Nick convinces Caitlin to wear a T-shirt over her bathing suit because he does not want the others to see her body:

'Look, I didn't want to say anything, but you've been eating like a pig lately, and it shows.' She examined her stomach. 'You think so?' 'I'm the only one who'll tell you the truth.' It worked. Caitlin sighed, slipped her swim vest over the T-shirt [...] Cat had courage stored for the winter. I loved and hated that, hated it because I wanted her to need me. She had to need me. (183)

His emotionally abusive comments aim at evoking feelings of shame in Caitlin that would force her to cover herself and hide her body from the looks of the other guys. Nick knows how easily he can manipulate her by criticizing her body, and her reaction reveals that she still feels insecure about her appearance. By making his girlfriend believe that he is the only person she could trust – and the only one who loves her despite her supposed weight gain – he tries to make her dependent on him. This need of being in control of her stems from his feelings of powerlessness and inferiority, and his behavior aims at making her emotionally depend on him. Nick believes that her needing him would impede her from leaving him, because his greatest fear is being without her.

Nick's fear of losing Caitlin motivates much of his controlling behavior, but it is this behavior which ultimately separates him from her. In this respect, his narrative mirrors what forensic psychologist Anna Motz sees as a repercussion of men's violence: "Ironically, in the process of trying to maintain control and power in their own relationships, [...] men often drive their partners [...] away, becoming so tyrannical and brutalising that they destroy the very relationships they desperately want to preserve" (325). Whenever he fears that Caitlin might leave him, Nick experiences a strong feeling of powerlessness that he tries to overcome by controlling her. After throwing away her necklace, he fears that "[i]f I took her home now, it would be over for sure" (Flinn 106) and therefore forces her to stay with him, despite her unwillingness to do so:

She didn't move. 'Take me home, Nick. My curfew's –' 'I know when it is. Just stay fifteen minutes, okay?' [...] I grabbed her hand and pulled her from her seat and down the gravel path before she could change her mind. [...] Again, she begged me to take her home. I could hear tears in her voice. 'Fifteen minutes,' I repeated. I was lying, but it didn't matter. (106)

When driving home from Key West, Nick is afraid that Caitlin could leave him and in order to deal with his fear and his feelings of powerlessness, he threatens to drive the car

into the water: “‘Trust me, Cat?’ She could not leave me. I swerved again. ‘Cause if you haven’t figured it out, life doesn’t mean much to me. Without you, it’s worthless” (196). By making her believe that he would kill himself (and her) if she left him, he tries to gain power over her. Caitlin’s attempt to take the wheel to control the car is thwarted by Nick hitting her. His violence is thus a means to regain control over the car and power over her.

According to Kimmel, using violence as a means to control women aims at restoring the perceived power balance in a relationship: “Violence is restorative, a means to reclaim the power that he believes is rightfully his” (*Society* 262). He argues that when their female partners do not behave the way they want them to, men feel humiliated, small and powerless. Believing that men are supposed to feel powerful then motivates them to hit their partners in order to regain feelings of power (*Angry Men* 220). Using violence as a way to transform feelings of humiliation and powerlessness into feelings of power is most evident when Nick assaults his girlfriend after her performance at the talent show: “I was small, weak. Gaining power, though. Gaining power by taking it from her” (Flinn 260). Nick’s experience can be paraphrased by Gilligan’s explanation of why men control their women: “[T]heir desire for omnipotence is in direct proportion to their feeling of impotence” (*Violence* 132).

CHAPTER THREE: RESPONSES TO SHAME

3.1 Anger and imagined violence

In their work entitled *Emotions and Violence*, sociologists Thomas Scheff and Suzanne Retzinger explore the causes of interpersonal violence. Their research suggests that a certain sequence of emotions leads to violence. Feelings of shame provoke anger and subsequently lead to aggressive behavior (3). Shame is evoked when individuals feel rejected, insulted, betrayed and disrespected, or when they perceive their identity to be attacked by others (65). Anger is then used to defend the self against feelings of shame, and can be seen as “an attempt to ward off perceived attack and ‘save face’” (66). Similarly, psychologist M. Lewis argues that men – more so than women – substitute shame with anger to avoid feelings of shame (201).

When the protagonists feel belittled, humiliated, disrespected or shamed, they experience anger and act aggressively toward others. However, not every incident of interpersonal conflict that triggers shame and anger leads to actual violence. There are instances in which the protagonists react with anger and think about attacking the person who has – or who they perceive as having – injured their pride. Often the attack is simply imagined, but never actually implemented; sometimes it is hindered by an intervening third party. Although most instances of anger and imagined violence discussed in this chapter are not, or not immediately, followed by actual violence, they offer insight into the characters’ emotions and explain their violent tendencies. When analyzing the reasons underlying anger and violent thoughts, the reader can distinguish three main categories: the protagonists feel emasculated and see their masculinity questioned, they feel disrespected and see their identities attacked, or they feel betrayed by others.

Kimmel states that men in the United States constantly have to prove their masculinity to other men. Whenever they feel their manliness questioned or challenged, men respond aggressively: “You can pretty much guarantee starting a fight virtually anywhere in America by questioning someone’s manhood” (*Guyland* 100). Nick is – like Tyrell and Cricket – vulnerable to any negative evaluation of his masculine identity. When Leo defends him in Mario’s class, Nick responds with anger, and is determined to fight Leo, but is hindered to do so by Mario:

‘You aren’t my mother,’ I say. But that gets me mad. Why is he calling attention to me when I just want to be ignored? Why is he making me out like I’m some

weakling? I feel blood coursing through my wrists, and I stand. I start toward Leo. But Mario gets between us, real quick. [...] ‘I don’t need his help,’ I say. ‘I’ve eaten as much shit as anyone here. He’s got no right to act like I can’t.’ (Flinn 76)

Nick perceives Leo’s attempt to help him as an attack on his identity; as a way of demonstrating that he is not man enough to stand up for himself. Not wanting to be perceived as a helpless, defenseless “weakling”, he reacts aggressively, trying to prove his masculinity by attacking his opponent. In this sense, Nick is trying to protect himself from feelings of shame and from accepting the negative evaluation by which he sees himself confronted.

Cricket responds equally aggressively when he feels humiliated and sees his manhood questioned by Pitbull in the school cafeteria. After throwing Charlie’s pie on the floor, Pitbull challenges Cricket to respond: “‘You gonna do something ’bout it, Scarface?’” (Blagden 63). When Cricket walks off, despite considering “breaking my fighting rule and hurling a right hook at Pitbull’s left temple” (64), Pitbull insults him: “‘Didn’t think so, faggot’” (64) and smashes a soda can on the back of his head. Willing to fight back, Cricket turns, but at that moment, several teachers appear and prevent him from taking revenge. Pitbull’s insult implies that he does not consider Cricket courageous and manly enough to fight him and in so doing diminishes his masculinity. As Cricket is particularly vulnerable to being perceived as a coward, Pitbull’s words provoke shame about his masculinity and motivate him to fight. Cricket’s shame upon being considered weak is also evident when he visits a boxing gym with Caretaker, but declines the job offer of being a professional boxer:

As I push the door open, the guy inside the ring hollers at me. “Running away, pussy?” [...] ‘C’mon, Mary,” the boxer yells. ‘What you ‘fraid of? I’ll be gentle, cherry.’ I turn. The guy inside the ring straightens up and puffs out his scrawny chest. Rage bubbles explode inside me. I should do it. Jump into the ring without headgear or gloves and shut the jerk up. Beat the living fuck out of the bigmouth asshole. (156-57)

Cricket’s rage and the violence he imagines are so intense because he feels shamed, humiliated and emasculated by the boxer. As the terms ‘pussy’, ‘Mary’ and ‘cherry’ connote femininity and stand in stark contrast to the image of the brave young man Cricket wants to be, he feels attacked by the boxer and therefore feels the urge to retaliate.

Tyrell's masculinity is repeatedly questioned by his mother, who sees his responsibility in providing for his family and confronts him about his supposed laziness whenever she can:

'You don't go to school and you don't even work. You damn near sixteen. What kinda man you gonna be? Some lazy-ass nigga?' I get right in her face now. 'What you want? You want me to go out there and sell weed? That what you want?' She don't back down none. 'We wouldn't be at Bennett if you *was* out there, would we?' [...] 'You spend all your time walking around the streets and screwing that little girl, but that don't make you a man, you understand what I'm saying? A man gotta take care of his family' 'Well, what your man doing for his family? You want me to take care of you 'cause your man can't keep his ass outta Rikers. Well, that ain't my problem. That's your problem.' I grab my cell and my jacket, open the door, and I'm gone. I get in the hall and just wanna punch or kick something. I make a fist and rub it into my other hand, but I really wanna put my fist through the wall. I can't calm myself down. I can feel the blood pounding in my brain. (Booth 22-23)

Although Tyrell recognizes that it is not his passivity that forces them to live in poverty, but both his mother's inability to take care of herself and her children, and his father's repeated violations of the law, he still feels ashamed for being unable to provide for his mother and brother. As Tyrell's definition of masculinity includes the ability to take care of his family, he feels shame about his mother's negative evaluation of his manhood and the anger he feels is so intense that he considers externalizing it by "punch[ing] or kick[ing] something" (23).

In one chapter of their book *Violence, Aggression and Coercive Actions*, psychologist James Tedeschi and sociologist Richard Felson explain how social identity is linked to aggression and violence. They argue that people often perceive disrespect as an attack on their identity. This perceived attack causes them to feel humiliated and diminished in power and status. If they believe they were harmed on purpose, they are likely to respond with aggression, imposing punishment on the offender (256-57). Tyrell wants to be perceived as a strong, independent man, and not as vulnerable and emotional. When others challenge his identity, he feels threatened and reacts with an actual or imagined attack:

'What your problem, man?' Cal ask me. 'Nothing.' 'How long I know you? Man, you ain't look this bad since you and Lynette broke up.' 'I wasn't like this when me and her broke up,' I tell him. 'I'm the one that dropped her for Novisha.' 'Yeah, right,' he say. 'Fuck you, bitch. What you know?' I look at Cal and just wanna hurt him all of a sudden. 'I'm tired of you trying to tell me shit you don't know.' (Booth 145)

While the reader has no knowledge about the protagonist's feelings after the breakup with Lynette, it seems evident that Tyrell wants to remember this period of his life as devoid of painful feelings, as it was his own independent decision to leave Lynette for his current girlfriend. The fact that Cal casts doubt on Tyrell's version of the truth makes him angry and he attacks his best friend verbally. Tyrell wants to hurt Cal because he feels disrespected and wants to protect his identity from further attack.

Tyrell's anger is also directed at Emiliano, Reyna's ex-boyfriend. When Jasmine tells him that Emiliano wants her to be his girlfriend and move in with him, Tyrell is angry: "Damn. Every guy this girl meet just wanna get with her, use her. It's messed up. 'I'ma kick his ass,' I tell her, trying to remember the address where Emiliano live at. I'm pissed and he gonna hafta know it" (294). Knowing how important Jasmine is to Tyrell enables the reader to better understand Tyrell's anger and his imagined violence: "She [Jasmine] kissing me like she really need me, and right 'bout now, I know I need her. 'Cause really, she all I got" (290). After the fight with Novisha and the fallout with his mother, Jasmine is the only person he can trust and the only one who gives him a sense of self-esteem and pride. The fact that another man, who knows about Jasmine's and Tyrell's special friendship, is trying to take her away from him thus provokes Tyrell's anger. Not being able to offer Jasmine anything apart from the bunkbed at Cal's apartment adds to his feelings of powerlessness. He sees his life falling apart and by directing his anger at the perceived source of this attack on his identity, he wants to prevent himself from feeling shame.

When Cricket expresses his desire to end his life in his first letter to his teacher, he expects to "be confronted at the entrance by a flapping gaggle of school officials, police, paramedics, and psychologists waving straitjackets and testicular jumper cables" (Blagden 56), but his teacher does not seem to take his letter seriously, as "[s]he's all patronizing and inquisitive" (56), asking him to write his letter in greater detail, but not being preoccupied about his psychological state. Cricket is surprised, if not disappointed, at her reaction and feels disrespected. He plays with the thought of killing himself that very day in order to make her suffer and take revenge, knowing that she would probably struggle with feelings of guilt for not having stopped him: "I should do it. Tonight. Show her who's boss. That would teach her cheeky ass a lesson" (58). As he fears any negative evaluation of himself, his plan to take revenge is grounded in his wish to replace humiliation and feelings of inferiority by pride and feelings of superiority.

Cricket feels equally disrespected by the principal of his school. While discussing the fight with Pitbull with Principal LaChance, Cricket describes feelings of anger and imagines attacking the principal:

LaChance's lips tighten, and he slams his fist on the desk. 'The bottom line is you incapacitated Buster with one punch, and for the rest of the fight he was on the ground completely helpless.' LaChance quotation-marks the air when he says *fight*, which I find thoroughly offensive. Especially from a seven-foot monster who wouldn't step into the ring with Pitbull for all the Astroglide in Provincetown. 'What's wrong with you? Do you take pleasure in hurting people? Do you enjoy inflicting pain on completely defenseless victims?' LaChance's cheeks are glowing like targets under his orange eyebrows. The urge to jump on his desk and hurl a bull's-eye is making my hands quiver. 'Answer me, Cricket!' I grip the arms of my chair. Rage bubbles float from my gut to my throat. (103)

At that point in the narrative, the only source of pride in Cricket's life is his fighting, as he believes he has no other talents or competences. Therefore, putting his 'fight' in quotation marks is perceived as an attack on his identity, suggesting that he does not have the ability to fight, but only to assault helpless individuals. Calling Pitbull 'defenseless' further implies that hurting him was an easy task, as he was not able to strike back. Cricket's evaluation of the principal as a coward helps him to feel superior, better about himself and less ashamed. His rage is motivated by the principal's lack of respect and regard for what he has done, which threatens to rob Cricket of his pride and confronts him with feelings of inadequacy.

Another source of shame and anger in the protagonists' lives is the perceived betrayal by the girls who are important to them. After seeing Caitlin practicing a song with Derek, Nick verbally abuses her: "'Slut! [...] You can't be trusted, you bitch!'" (Flinn 131). Nick's anger is motivated by the shame he feels about not being as important to Caitlin as he wants to be, coupled with his fear of losing her, given the fact that she prefers to spend time with Derek instead of with him. In his understanding of masculinity and his Hollywood version of romance, a girl should be so head-over-heels in love with her boyfriend that she does not voluntarily miss a chance of being with him. Staying on to practice after the rehearsal is officially over thus intensifies his fear that she does not love him. His anger, which is fueled by his fear, is so intense that he has violent thoughts that include hitting and raping her: "I grabbed her arm. The anger inside me was alive, and it made me want things, crazy things. Part of me wanted to hit her. The other part wanted to force her against the car and take what she wouldn't let me have, what I knew she was giving him" (131).

Similarly, Tyrell is angry at Jasmine after he sees her coming out of the office at Bennett with the night manager:

Me and Wayne get to the stairs, and Jasmine is behind us crying. I swear I don't get this female. Why she gonna let that man do whatever the fuck he did to her? I just wanna grab her and ask her what she doing, but if I put my hands on her, I ain't gonna be able to control myself. Not now. Not when I'm so fuckin' mad. (Booth 118)

Although she is not his girlfriend, Tyrell feels betrayed by Jasmine because he suspects her of having engaged in a sexual act with the night manager. As he wants to be the only guy who Jasmine needs, he is angry at her, because her behavior makes him question his adequacy as a man.

Anger and violent thoughts also occur when Cricket suspects Wynona of having lured him into a trap with Pitbull. After being softened by her apology and his comments, Cricket suddenly realizes that she might be lying to him in order to trap him. He feels utterly betrayed, humiliated and angry: "*Goddamn it, Wynona! You lying fucking whore. I shoulda pushed you off the cliff when I had the chance*" (Blagden 179). As he imagines Wynona and Pitbull ridiculing him for his naivety, he tries to eliminate his feelings of shame through attacking his offenders: "I search the ground for a weapon. I grab the first thing I see, a thick piece of driftwood with spiky roots on one end. I race toward the parking lot. Wynona's bike is still there. They're probably hugging, laughing, and scheming out phase two. My chest feels like it's gonna explode" (179). The reader's assumption of Wynona's innocence is confirmed when Cricket finds no attacker, but Wynona being terrified about Cricket's anger. His reaction, perceiving Wynona's behavior as betrayal, is symptomatic of his chronic feelings of inadequacy and shame that render it difficult for him to be vulnerable and to trust others.

3.2 Physical and emotional violence

Gilligan argues that feelings of shame underlie all acts of violence: “[T]he basic psychological motive, or cause, of violent behavior is the wish to ward off or eliminate the feeling of shame and humiliation—a feeling that is painful and can even be intolerable and overwhelming—and replace it with its opposite, the feeling of pride” (*Shame* 1154). He maintains that violence is caused by feelings of shame and humiliation, by disrespect, dishonor and ridicule, and that by resorting to violence, perpetrators try to avoid ‘losing face’ (*Violence* 110). While most people experience shame, only those who feel they have no other means available to restore their self-esteem resort to violence, and even they only engage in violent behavior when something happens that intensifies their feelings of shame to the point that they see their identity threatened, or when they feel a ‘loss of face’ would result if they did not act violently (114). Similarly, Pollack sustains that since shame is such a painful, unpleasant feeling, boys and men are ready to do anything – even resort to intense violence – in order to avoid experiencing it (33). In *Tyrell, Breathing Underwater*, and *Dear Life, You Suck* the protagonists’ violence is a response to shame and humiliation and to the fear of experiencing these painful emotions. Their narratives reveal that they use violence to avenge humiliation, to overcome shame about male inadequacy, to protect themselves from losing face after affronts to their honor, and to thwart feelings of shame that threaten their identity.

Tedeschi and Felson argue that when somebody feels their identity has been attacked, they feel humiliated and are likely to attack the perceived source of humiliation in order to “nullify that negative identity and reduce humiliation” (258-59). In the face of suffering ridicule and shame, an individual might resort to violence in order to “prevent others from laughing at oneself by making them weep instead” (Gilligan, *Violence* 77). This behavior can be observed in Cricket’s and Nick’s narratives.

The most atrocious act of violence at the hand of Cricket described in *Dear Life, You Suck* is undoubtedly his fight with Pitbull, in which he injures his opponent so severely that he needs hospital treatment. The events that precede the fight help the reader to uncover the reasons why Cricket resorts to such drastic behavior. Cricket has been humiliated by Pitbull for months and he no longer wants to endure his behavior. Therefore, he devises a strategy and practices his fighting moves with Caretaker. The duel with Pitbull does not happen unexpectedly, as can be seen by Cricket’s thoughts shortly before their encounter:

My throwdown with Pitbull is getting closer by the minute. He's been hassling me like a warthog in heat since last spring, saying I have a horseshoe stuffed up my ass and that's the only reason I managed to kick the snot out of two of his football buddies who were bullying some Little Ones. He's been promoting this fight like he's Don King or something. (Blagden 69)

Although Cricket later states that his fight with Pitbull was a means to protect Andrew (157), the above passage makes evident that fighting Pitbull is mainly motivated by the desire to repay him for the humiliation suffered by him. Furthermore, Cricket knows that using violence against Pitbull will bring him pride: "Anyone who's ever fought me knows the price. Even those who've won. You may win, but you'll feel like you lost. I don't go down easy. You'll limp away with painful mementos: split lip, bruised ribs, black eye, smashed nuts, a busted nose. That's why I've never had a rematch. Not one" (78).

When, a few hours before the fight, Cricket does not use violence in the school cafeteria to take revenge for Pitbull's treatment of Charlie, he is called a "faggot" by Pitbull (64). Since Cricket does not want to be seen as passive, weak and unmanly, unwilling and unprepared to fight, his assault on Pitbull can be seen as a way to avenge the humiliation suffered and to restore his honor:

In one smooth motion, I do the move I've been practicing for months. I dive under his punch and hurl a straight right into his solar plexus. I connect hard just under his ribs. His fat swallows my fist. I yank it out and spin. Pitbull groans and buckles. It's knocked the wind out of him. He wheezes for air and drops to one knee. He's trying to cuss me out something fierce, but words aren't coming. Just growls and drool. Suddenly, I don't see Pitbull. I see a Doberman pinscher. The crowd reappears, and I hear them mumbling. Some of them turn away. They think the fight's over. *Think again, dipshits*. The only way I'll keep this dog from coming after me for revenge is by ripping his heart in half here and now. I charge Pitbull and bash him in the side of the head with my boot heel. He topples over [...] He tries to push himself to his feet, but stumbles. A tinge of admiration drips down my throat. (79-80)

The above passage reveals that Cricket wants to convince Pitbull, as well as the students who are observing the fight, that he is 'man enough' to fight and that nobody should dare to humiliate or ridicule him. He feels hostility toward those watching, as he thinks of them as 'dipshits'. The fact that Cricket feels pride – "[a] tinge of admiration" (80) – when Pitbull is not able to get on his feet makes the motivation for his fighting apparent; being able to hurt Pitbull so severely that it makes him, others and Cricket himself forget about the humiliation suffered earlier gives him pride and boosts – at least temporarily – his

self-esteem. The fact that he does not fight in self-defense or to protect others, but rather to take revenge becomes even more evident when looking at how the fight continues:

Pitbull's blubbering like a baby. I can tell that he's done fighting. Too bad I ain't. His moans jam more rage into me than pity. I drop to one knee and start bashing him in the face with my ring fist. His head thuds against the cobblestones. Spectators shriek and scatter. Bam, mouth. Bam, cheek. Bam, forehead. Bam, nose. Bam, eye. Each time I cock my arm for the next strike, I see the cut my ring has made. It's strange to see up close. Each bloody slice unleashes a desire to rip open a new one. As his face blurs, reality fades, so I keep hitting. I hit and hit and hit. I don't know how many punches I land before I'm yanked off Pitbull, but it's plenty because his face looks like a slab of raw roast beef in a deli case. (81)

The intensity with which Cricket assaults Pitbull is symptomatic for the intensity of the shame that he tries to overcome and replace with pride through diminishing Pitbull. His violence also functions as a warning to let everybody know that whoever dares to humiliate him will suffer. However, the description of the trance-like state Cricket is in at the end of the above passage makes the reader wonder whether Cricket's violence is aimed exclusively at Pitbull. Since the narrator describes how Pitbull's "face blurs" and "reality fades" (81), his violent blows might be meant to fight the shameful experiences and painful memories of his past. This assumption can be underlined by Cricket's description of what goes through his mind before the fight, when he sees Andrew on the ground: "I focus on his tears. Stare until reality morphs into memory, memory into fear, fear into pain, pain into rage, and rage into energy. Another part of the strategy. It usually doesn't take long" (77). In this quote, Cricket describes how he externalizes his pain. By concentrating on his past, he wants to reproduce the shame- and painful feelings of his childhood in order to fight them through fighting others. Cricket's violence can therefore be seen as a response to the shame of his past and present, both an attempt to silence the pain of his past, as well as replace the humiliation and disrespect suffered in the present with feelings of honor and pride.

The fight with Pitbull is not the only time Cricket responds with violence to humiliation:

I feel a hard shove on my back, and I start slipping down the boulder over the edge of the cliff. I lunge my hands out to grab something, but the rock is smooth, and there's nothing to hold on to. Black terror explodes inside me. My mind goes blank. I scream. A hand grabs my sweatshirt and yanks me back up the boulder. I roll away from the edge and scramble to my feet. Grubs is laughing like crazy, pointing at me. 'Oh my God, I got you so fucking good, dude.' I charge him and swing a wild right hook at his head. It connects on his chin and he drops like a

sack of rice. My entire body's trembling. 'That ain't fucking funny, you fucking fuck!' (108)

As he assumes that it is Pitbull who wants to throw him off the cliff, Cricket screams in fear of death. When he is then ridiculed by Grubs, Cricket gets angry, because he feels humiliated. Although Grubs is his friend, Cricket does not talk about, let alone display vulnerable emotions when he is with Grubs, because he is afraid of being perceived as unmanly. As Cricket does not want to be seen as weak, he feels ashamed about his display of such a vulnerable emotion as fear and therefore aims his violence at the perceived source of humiliation. When Grubs imitates his scream, Cricket feels further humiliated and insults him: "'Fuck you, asshole.'" while pulling him toward the cliff (109) in order to avenge his humiliation.

Nick also reacts aggressively when faced with humiliation. As seen in the chapter on masculine shame, Nick feels inadequate about his lack of athletic skills. When one of his classmates ridicules him after an important football game, Nick pushes and threatens him in an attempt to thwart the shame of being so openly humiliated for his lack of athletic ability: "At the gate, Josh Brandon, a skinny, unwashed-looking kid from my chemistry class, knocked against me. 'Hey, Andreas, I ever tell you you're my hero?' He nudged the redhead standing by him. 'Really. It takes guts to play that bad.' I shoved him back. 'You value your life?'" (Flinn 251). When Caitlin tries to comfort him, he reacts in an equally aggressive way: "Caitlin squeezed my hand, and through the deafening laughter, I heard her voice. 'I love you, Nicky. You don't have to be a football hero for me to love you.' I pushed her back, her words like a hand clutching my throat" (255). Although Caitlin does not shame him, but tries to console him, Nick experiences her sympathy as humiliation. These incidents reveal that since Nick feels humiliated, the only reaction he is capable of is attacking others.

For men, violent behavior can function as a way of validating their masculinity. In some situations, men even perceive violence to be the only means to demonstrate that they are men (DeKeseredy and Schwarz 362; Hearn 37). Following this argument, violence might be used by men in order to rid themselves of the shame they experience in relation to their masculine identity. *Tyrell* exemplifies this use of violence to overcome shame and to confirm masculinity. The first time the reader witnesses Tyrell's violence is on Tyrell's fourth night at the Bennett motel, when he is in the lobby talking to Wayne and sees Jasmine and the night manager come out of his office:

She got her head down so I can't hardly see her face. A second later the night manager come out behind her. He fixing his hair with his hands and looking at Jasmine body with a real nasty smile on his face. And I can tell that something went on in there. Ain't no doubt in my mind. And I don't gotta think 'bout what I'ma do. I'ma kick his Puerto Rican ass. It don't take me more than a second before I'm jumping over the front desk and rushing the night manager. I grab him by the neck hard, and when I slam his head back into the wall, he look at me like he don't even know what the fuck is going on. I can hear Jasmine screaming, but I'm so mad there ain't no way to stop myself. I punch the night manager in the stomach and he go down and, man, I wish I had my sneakers on so I could stomp him on the face. But before I fuck him up anymore, Wayne grab me and pull me away from him. 'C'mon, man,' he say. 'C'mon, man.' [...] I look the night manager in the face. 'You like little girls? What, you a fuckin' child molester?' [...] Finally I break away from the guard, and in a second, I'm on Mr. Mendoza again. And when my fist connect with his jaw, I can hear the cracking sound, and I know he gonna be feeling that for a while. (Booth 116-17)

Tyrell's behavior might be interpreted as what he presents it to be – a way to punish the night manager for abusing Jasmine, although at this point in the narrative neither Tyrell nor the reader know what happened in the office and why it happened. However, when looking at the events that precede the act of violence, it becomes evident that there are other reasons for Tyrell's aggression. Having spent the previous night at Novisha's, he returns to Bennett in the morning and still thinks about what he read in her diary, namely that she does not need him. Back at Bennett, he discovers that his mother has exchanged his storage keys for food from Dante. Not only that, his mother also confronts him with his inadequacy as a caregiver for their family. Both Novisha's and his mother's behavior frustrate Tyrell because he feels his adequacy as a man questioned. Determined to forget about the perceived disrespect, he walks to Jasmine's room, probably to spend a relaxed evening with her, but discovers she is not there and then learns from Wayne that she has spent the previous night with another guy. This makes Tyrell feel even more diminished in his masculinity, because it gives him the feeling that he can be replaced by any other man and that he is not needed by Jasmine. After his second unsuccessful attempt to find her, he sees Jasmine and the night manager come out of the latter's office. The intensity of Tyrell's anger – "I wish I had my sneakers on so I could stomp him on the face" (116) – leaves the reader with the impression that Mr. Mendoza is not only a welcome target on which Tyrell can project his frustration, but that there is also something about the night manager's behavior that triggers the attack. Tyrell is angry at him because he engages in a sexual act with the girl who Tyrell needs and who he does not want to share with anyone. Having to face all the problems he experiences in his relationship to Novisha, he thinks of the friendship with Jasmine as a way to restore his self-worth, because she gives him

the feeling that he is needed. However, he feels diminished in his masculinity because hearing from Wayne that Jasmine spent the night with another boy and seeing Jasmine with the night manager makes him think that she does not need him and thus he starts to doubt his adequacy as a man. By assaulting the night manager Tyrell shows him that Jasmine belongs to him and with his violent behavior he also proves his masculinity in order to overcome the shame surrounding his male identity. Furthermore, through attacking the night manager, Tyrell gets the feeling that he is not worthless, but that Jasmine needs him to defend her in order to keep ill-meaning guys away. Tyrell's violence against the night manager can therefore be seen both as a response to his frustration about being disrespected by the women in his life and as a way to demonstrate his masculinity in order to show the night manager that he should not dare to disrespect him again.

Pollack states that violence is often associated with shame and honor. A boy is expected to follow the 'Boy Code rules' and use violence whenever he feels disrespected in order to "protect his honor and prevent shame" (338). Kimmel agrees when he writes that "[r]esorting to violence to restore one's honor from perceived humiliations has been around ever since one caveman chided another on the size of his club" (*Guyland* 56). He argues that young men today are still expected to fight in order to defend or restore their honor (57). Motz observes that this demonstration of male power mostly happens in the public realm, as using violence in front of others helps men to "replace shame with respect" (323). Since men are, according to psychologists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, known by other men either as those "who can be pushed around" or as those who "won't take any shit", they feel obliged to demonstrate their power to others in order to be respected. Therefore, men try to defend their honor through violence and to communicate to other men that they do not accept competition (128). Nick's and Tyrell's narratives offer examples of how violence can be used to protect honor and prevent feelings of shame that would result from a 'loss of face'. Their behavior can be paraphrased by how psychiatrist Anthony Clare defines the behavior of 'macho men': "Such men rate highly their competitiveness, their pride, their strength, their independence, their refusal to be pushed around [...] Their very honor is at stake in every challenge, in every act of disrespect. Such men are truly men only if they are prepared to fight like men" (36, qtd. in Beynon 81).

When Nick is at Zack's party with Caitlin and another boy makes advances on her, Nick does not hesitate to use violence:

Dirk came at her, stoned and cursing. He eyed Cat in her still-dripping swimsuit. 'We're just having fun, baby.' He touched her waist. She made a sound like a hurt bird. 'We could have fun with you, you little –' He didn't finish. He didn't finish, because my fist met his jaw. Then, I was on top of him, waling on him, not seeing his face, just the paint-mottled walls and Caitlin. And Dirk's hand, touching her, hurting her. My breath in my ears drowned out the crowd sounds around me. Glass splinters ripped my skin. My fists flew, hitting and hitting him until finally his face was the colors of those walls, and I felt arms lifting me off him. (Flinn 57-58)

At first sight, Nick's violence can be seen as an attempt to protect Caitlin, which is probably part of the reason why he hits Dirk. But for Nick, there is more at stake than his girlfriend's safety. He views Caitlin as his possession and therefore sees another guy touching her and making inappropriate remarks as an affront to his honor. He does not want to be perceived as the kind of man "whose girlfriends you can chat up with impunity" but rather as the guy "you don't want to mess with" (Daly and Wilson 128). Therefore, his violence serves both to protect Caitlin and to protect his honor and self-esteem.

Likewise, Tyrell thinks that the only way to earn respect from other men and to prevent them from dishonoring him by pursuing his girlfriend is by using violence against them: "I'ma hafta do something to this guy. I can't have some dude thinking he can touch my girl whenever he want" (Booth 6). Although Jamal knows that Novisha has a boyfriend, he keeps pursuing her and his behavior thus causes Tyrell to feel dishonored. Tyrell wants to be respected by other men and he is willing to use violence in order to achieve this goal and communicate to others that he is not to be trifled with. His mindset reveals his underlying fragile self-esteem that is built on a narrow definition of masculinity. Since having something happen to his girlfriend would prove that he is unable to take care of her and thus inadequate as a man – at least according to his understanding of masculinity – Tyrell perceives Novisha's stalker as a threat to his masculine identity and his relationship to Novisha. This explains his emotional and behavioral response when he sees Jamal at his party:

It don't take me a second to run up on that nigga. He ain't even looking my way when I bum-rush him and knock him down on the floor. Then, before he even know what hit him I'm on top of him punching him over and over in his face. Blood shoot out his nose, and my fists is covered in it, but that don't stop me none. I ain't thinking 'bout nothing 'cept killing that dude. And I'm yelling at him too. 'You put your fuckin' hands on my girl? And now you following her?' Jamal ain't get one punch off me. He looking up at me in shock. 'Who the fuck is you?' he ask me. 'Her man, what you think?' He turn his head to block my next punch, so

my fist connect with his ear. But that don't stop me. It's like I ain't even there no more, like I'm somebody else. Or a animal protecting what's his. And just like my last fight, Wayne is there trying to get me to stop. 'Ty, you gonna kill him, yo.' I feel Wayne grabbing me from behind, trying to lift me up off the dude. But he can't move me [...] It take Regg to get me off Jamal. (278-79)

The intensity of Tyrell's reaction, him being determined to kill Jamal, reveals how much he perceives Jamal's behavior as dishonoring him. As he does not want to see his self-worth diminished by Novisha's stalker and as he fears that Jamal would be able to bring further obstacles to his relationship with his girlfriend, he sees no other way but to kill this source of shame in his life. Tyrell knows that if he did not attack Jamal, he would tolerate his behavior and accept dishonor, while having to live with the shame of being a 'pussy' who is not willing to fight those who disrespect him. When Jamal further dishonors Tyrell while everybody at the party is watching, Tyrell cannot restrain himself from attacking him again:

Jamal get up and wipe the blood from his nose. Shit is thick and nasty. He take that same bloody hand and point to Novisha who crying while all her friends is hugging her. 'That bitch is your girl?' he ask me. [...] 'You calling my girl a bitch?' I yell. He laugh at me. 'Nigga, she got you believing all that virgin bullshit, man? 'Cause I hit that so many times. Busted her out.' That's it. I get away from Regg and I'm back on Jamal, punching him dead in the eye. I feel the pain in my own hand, the punch is so hard. (279)

The fact that the others are watching the fight makes it impossible for Tyrell to ignore Jamal's comments and he feels obliged to retaliate. Tyrell feels disrespected by Jamal calling his girlfriend a 'bitch' and humiliated by his ridicule, but he is also overcome by shame because assuming that Jamal did sleep with Novisha makes him feel deeply inadequate. Therefore, Tyrell feels that the only way to escape the shame, humiliation, dishonor and ridicule is to obliterate his opponent. Tyrell's experience can be paraphrased by Gilligan's evaluation of why men use violence: "[They] resort to violence when they feel that they can wipe out shame only by shaming those who they feel shamed them. The most powerful way to shame anyone is by means of violence, just as the most powerful way to provoke anyone into committing violence is by shaming him" (Gilligan, *Shame* 1163). Many men only resort to violence when they are faced with feelings of shame and humiliation that are so intense that they threaten their identity (1165-66). This is also evident in Tyrell's and Nick's violent behavior against their girlfriends.

What Jamal says stirs Tyrell's doubts, fears and insecurities surrounding his relationship with Novisha and his adequacy as a man. While he is furious at Jamal, he fears that his

words contain some truth and that Novisha has in fact betrayed him. Suddenly, he is not the honorable, not-to-be-messed-with boyfriend, but the betrayed boyfriend, who is openly ridiculed by his girlfriend's lover – at least this is how Tyrell and those watching might evaluate the situation at that moment. He thinks that the only possibility for him to avoid feelings of shame is by shaming those who have humiliated and dishonored him. When Regg makes Jamal leave the party, Tyrell thus turns to Novisha:

Everybody eyes is one me, and my heart is pumping. I'm outta my mind. I break through Novisha little circle of friends, grab her wrist and pull her outta the room, down the hall to one of them empty offices. She crying the whole time, saying, 'You're hurting me, Tyrell. Ow, you're hurting me.' But I don't give a fuck. I turn the lights on and kick the door closed. Then I take Novisha and slam her against the wall. Hard. For a second she don't say nothing, and I know I probably knocked the wind outta her. (Booth 279)

Tyrell externalizes his pain and hurts Novisha because discovering her sexual relationship with Jamal leaves him feeling ashamed and humiliated. Tyrell's reaction is so intense because he considers his relationship with Novisha "the only thing I got going for me right now" (28). Therefore, when Novisha admits that she slept with Jamal, Tyrell feels crushed:

[I]t's like the wind is knocked outta me now. That pain hit my stomach like a fist. It take me a couple seconds to catch my breath, and when it come back, I'm breathing hard. When I look at Novisha, she still up against the wall with tears rolling down her face. I grab both her shoulders and hold her there in place. 'I can't believe you played me like this,' I say, pressing her against the wall real hard. 'I can't believe this.' And I know I could hurt her. I could beat the shit outta her right here. And I'm so fucking pissed at her right now, it's like my body is revving me up to do something to her. Make her feel some pain. (280)

The pain he feels is fear that becomes reality; while throughout the narrative he suspects that something is wrong in their relationship, he is now confronted with an explanation. Although he wants to hurt his girlfriend in order to take revenge for the shame he feels about being humiliated, betrayed and disrespected, seeing the fear in her eyes prevents him from doing so: "The only thing that stop me is the look on her face. She scared. Scared of me" (280).

Just as Tyrell is vulnerable when it comes to his relationship with Novisha, Nick considers Caitlin equally important for his self-worth. Therefore, he does everything he can to hold on to her and to control her in order to prevent her from leaving him. He does so both through emotional as well as physical violence. As he interprets every instance of

disrespect as a sign of his own inadequacy, he does not tolerate any behavior that is contrary to his expectations and wishes. Whenever Caitlin does not do what he wants her to do, he is confronted with a voice in his head that tells him that he is a loser (Flinn 265). In order to silence this voice, he forces his girlfriend to obey him. For instance, when Caitlin tells Nick that, instead of spending Thanksgiving with him at Zack's place, she will spend the holiday with her father, he tells her that he does not need her, as he could be with any other girl: "I hung a right into a space, then got out and slammed the door behind me, finishing with, 'You can be replaced!'" (144). His scheme is to threaten Caitlin into going with him because her plan to spend Thanksgiving with somebody else makes him feel unimportant to her.

The event that triggers much of Nick's emotional and physical violence is Caitlin's performance at the talent show. The reason he does not want her to sing in public is that he feels insecure about his worth and thus fears that he would lose Caitlin if she became popular. By making her believe that she is not good, thin, and talented enough, he wants to control her and shift the shame he feels unto her in order to make her feel small and insecure:

I didn't like it. She'd have extra practices. Then be parading herself on stage for everyone to see. [...] I said, 'Look, I'm trying to protect you. I've heard you sing. You suck. I don't want you embarrassing both of us.' She started babbling about what Mrs. Reyes had said, and I said, 'Are you deaf or just stupid? I said no. Subject closed' Why did she have to do stuff to set me off? I saw my fist clench in my lap. Caitlin saw it too. She stared at my hand, then at my face. Finally, she said, 'I guess you're right. I'm really not good enough' 'That's my girl.' I put my arm around her, kissing her. (218)

Two weeks later Nick learns that Caitlin attends rehearsals for the talent show and feels disrespected and personally attacked by her behavior: "Why had she defied me? She knew how I felt, yet she'd gone to an audition and rehearsal without telling me. Didn't I matter to her?" (244). This quote reveals that Nick interprets Caitlin's behavior as a sign of his own inadequacy, as a way of showing him that he is not important to her. It does not occur to him that she might not have told him for fear of his reaction. As he wants to thwart the shame he feels, he lets Caitlin know that if she disrespects and mistreats him, he will do the same with her:

I said, 'Say, Ash, I just found out Caitlin's in a talent show Saturday night. Want to go?' Ashley stopped talking and flipped her auburn hair. 'Of course I'm going. Everyone is.' 'I meant with me', I said. 'Seems the seat next to mine's open. Seat

in my car too.’ I leaned close, ignoring Caitlin. If she didn’t care what I thought, I’d teach her a lesson. ‘You messing with me?’ Ashley asked, so I knew she still liked me. ‘No way,’ I said. ‘We’ll have dinner after. Rusty Pelican’s nice.’ I cast a sidelong glance at Cat. The Rusty Pelican was our place where we’d gone for each month’s anniversary. The third one was that week. I could see Caitlin’s lips pressed together, her eyes ready to spill. (244-45)

Nick intentionally hurts Caitlin because he cannot bear the fear of losing her. The idea of “teach[ing] her a lesson” (244) suggests that he wants to use (emotional) violence in order to punish her for disrespecting him. Despite his resistance, she decides to sing on stage when she is asked to by her teacher and encouraged by Nick’s friends. Instead of being proud of her for her courage and talent, he sees her performance as a personal affront:

The aqua dress she wore was my favorite. I thought she’d worn it for me. She wore it to sing. [...] Caitlin’s solo was next. The song she sang was sexy, about love and meeting the man of her dreams. I felt every eye on her. Slut. I watched her face for some sign she meant me. Nothing. Not a glance my way. My neck muscles tightened. My eyebrows were frozen in position, my mouth paralyzed in a smile. The ungrateful bitch had betrayed me. I felt like shit, and it was her fault. All she wanted was to control me, use me. And I’d let her. I’d let her humiliate me, but this was the last time. She couldn’t treat me like this. When the lights came up, I bolted for the door. (257-58)

Nick feels shamed and humiliated by Caitlin’s behavior and the fact that he “fe[els] like shit” (257) has different reasons. Firstly, his attempts to hide her have failed and he is confronted with the fear that she could leave him for any boy who watches her performance and likes it. Secondly, he interprets her behavior as disrespectful and feels not taken seriously because Caitlin does not honor his decisions. Her perceived disrespect diminishes Nick’s self-worth because it makes him feel unimportant. Thirdly, he thinks that Caitlin sings to humiliate him on purpose. He interprets her behavior as humiliating because of his underlying sense of shame; as he already feels unworthy of belonging, every behavior of Caitlin that is adverse to his expectations functions as a proof of his unworthiness. And since the feeling of being humiliated is unbearable to him and threatens his identity, Nick feels he must act to protect himself from further shame, which results in the violence that follows:

I pushed her toward my car, parked near the back. ‘Get in!’ She struggled against me, somehow managing to break free and run several steps before tripping. [...] We were under a light pole, our shadows tall as dinosaurs. I threw her against it. My mind was reeling, detached from my body. All I could think was to show her she couldn’t do this, couldn’t defy me, treat me like I didn’t matter. [...] ‘Bitch!’ I slapped her across the face and reeled back from the force of the blow. Her head smashed the lamppost. [...] I hit her again. This time, my fist was clenched, my

feet set. The earth shuddered to a stop, gained momentum with my fist. Knuckles meeting her jaw. [...] I was small, weak. Gaining power, though. Gaining power by taking it from her and the words coursing from my throat. I hit her again, not seeing her face, couldn't make it real if I wanted. Only anger, red, violent, on me like a cloak. My hands closing around her neck, barely knowing who she was. Then she was on the ground, not even crying, whispering something I couldn't hear. 'Get up!' I screamed [...] I didn't see her face then, but I see it now, bruised, broken. Blood seeped from one nostril and out her mouth [...] Her hands still struggled to protect her face. I pulled her up, pulled her toward me so I could hurt her. Someone walked by, heading for a car. And another, and another. Caitlin called weakly, and I laughed. A dozen people passed like nothing. I dragged her up again, my arm arching back. No one could stop me. (258-61)

In this passage, Nick's violence can be seen as an attempt to regain respect, honor and control, but also as a way of showing Caitlin that he will not accept the way she treats him. He does not only shame her by physical violence, but his hostility and anger find an outlet by humiliating her and laughing at her when she struggles to escape him and to call for help. Her attempt to protect herself, her pleadings for him to let her go, and her cry for help do not prevent him from further harming her – as is the case with Tyrell when he sees the fear in Novisha's eyes – but he consciously and willfully hurts her because he feels his identity threatened by her behavior. The fact that his "fist was clenched" and his "feet set" (259) show that he has enough control over his body to decide what would hurt her most and would help him not to lose his footing, so he purposefully inflicts pain on her. The powerlessness he feels is a result of his shame and of being humiliated by Caitlin. Nick thinks that the only way to feel better about himself is to have control over Caitlin and make her obey him. Therefore, he yells at her and commands her to get up, because he expects her obedience to restore his self-esteem, to overcome his feelings of powerlessness and to make him forget about how she disrespected him by singing at the talent show. The only thing that stops him is Tom hitting him, so he is unable to hurt Caitlin any further (261).

3.3 Absence of guilt, justifications for violence and externalization of blame

After their violent actions, the protagonists have similar emotional and behavioral reactions: they do not feel guilty for their violent behavior, they find justifications for it and they put the blame on other people.

All three protagonists seem to lack guilt, “a painful feeling of regret and responsibility for one’s actions” (Fossum and Mason 5) that motivates people to apologize and make amends (Tangney, Stuewig and Hafez 708). Gilligan, who has worked with violent criminals in prisons for decades, writes about his initial astonishment at discovering that these offenders did not exhibit feelings of guilt and remorse for what they had done to other people (*Shame* 1154). He states that while shame causes aggressive impulses, guilt functions as a “motive of defense” against these wishes to inflict pain on others (1168) and argues that the absence of guilt is a necessary condition for the occurrence of violence: “[O]ne would almost have to be lacking in the capacity to feel guilt and remorse about hurting others in order to be capable of hurting them with so little inhibition” (1154). While being humiliated intensifies feelings of shame, it also diminishes feelings of guilt (Gilligan, *Violence* 113). Gilligan thus concludes that “violence is most likely to occur when shame is maximized and guilt is minimized” (*Shame* 1165). Kimmel argues that in order for violence to occur, men must feel entitled to resort to violence. Violence then happens to restore men’s feelings of pride and power that they feel have been taken away from them (*Angry Men* 215). This sense of entitlement might also explain the protagonists’ lack of guilt. If they feel entitled to use violence because they see their honor, self-esteem and identity threatened, they will not feel guilty for their violent behavior, because they perceive it to be the only means available to restore their honor and self-esteem.

Breathing Underwater begins with the protagonist in court, where the reader is witness to the hearing about the restraining order required by Caitlin. Seeing matters through Nick’s eyes, the reader is inclined to believe his account that “[i]t was a slap [...] One slap, when she pushed me way too far. I never beat her up, would never hurt her. I loved her, love her still” (Flinn 5). The perceived hostility of the judge and of Caitlin’s mother create the impression that Nick is unjustly accused. The reader only gradually discovers that it is Nick’s vision that is blurred, and that he is indeed guilty of more than just one slap.

Reading the beginning of Nick's narrative with the knowledge of what he has done makes evident that he lacks feelings of guilt, as he denies and downplays his violent behavior. In the courtroom, he tells the judge: "I never hit her. Caitlin's making this up to get back at me for breaking up with her. She's nuts" (6), which reveals that he does not feel guilty about the pain he inflicted on his ex-girlfriend. When the judge orders him to get counseling for half a year, he thinks: "Six months for a slap. Well, that's fair" (8), which again makes evident that he does not feel guilty, but regards his violence against Caitlin as a minor mistake that could happen to anybody and should not have any serious consequences. Likewise, when he is in his anger management class for the first time, he denies his actions: "I never hit anyone either," I say [...] 'My relationship with Caitlin wasn't violent. It was damn near perfect'" (23). His behavior reveals that he has not managed to take on responsibility for his violent behavior and therefore tries to convince others to believe in his innocence in order to avoid negative evaluation from them. When he realizes that Mario does not accept denial, he presents his violence as a singular, harmless act, downplaying the pain he inflicted on Caitlin: "I don't know why I'm here. I lost it once and slapped my girlfriend. That's it. One lousy slap' [...] Open hand. Her face didn't turn red or anything'" (23). The reader gets the impression that through his constant denial Nick tries to make himself believe in his own version of the truth, as if insisting on his innocence would change the past.

While Nick is quick to point out the failures of others, he is not able to see his own mistakes for what they are. When he tells Caitlin after their breakup how her new boyfriend talks about her body, it becomes evident that Nick is unable to admit and understand the severity of his emotionally abusive behavior:

I repeat Saint's comment, figuring she'll know what a sleaze she's with. Instead, she says, 'Sounds like something you'd say.' 'I never talked about your body to other guys.' 'No, just to me, putting me down and making me want to die.' 'I didn't do that.' 'Spare me. You did it all the time.' 'I'm sorry. I didn't know I made you feel that way.' (147)

Although Nick apologizes, he seems to feel no genuine remorse for his behavior, as he does not understand how much pain he inflicted on Caitlin. Furthermore, Nick does not recognize his behavior as controlling. This becomes apparent when Leo tells Nick that he is angry with his girlfriend for spending time with her family. Although Nick wonders whether Leo is emotionally abusive, he pushes away his doubts and concludes that Leo's behavior is as acceptable as his own: "I hear Mario's voice in my ear, talking about

controlling behavior. I shake it off. Leo's not controlling. He's like me. He's just looking out for his relationship" (178).

When Nick reflects on his violence against Caitlin, he concludes that he was entitled to assault her, because her behavior was an attack on his identity: "What about getting a guy so crazy he *has* to use his fists – hands – in self-defense?" (18; emphasis added). This absence of guilt, coupled with a sense of entitlement to violence, is also evident in Tyrell's narrative. When Novisha tells him that Jamal put his arm around her at school, Tyrell is determined to use violence against him: "I'ma hafta do something to this guy. I can't have some dude thinking he can touch my girl whenever he want" (Booth 6). Tyrell believes that he is entitled to assault Jamal, because he considers his behavior inappropriate. His lack of feelings of guilt is also apparent when Jasmine tells him about her astonishment concerning his fighting skills: "I gotta admit, it kinda feel good hearing her say that. Like she respect me for doing what I *had* to do" (Booth 120; emphasis added). As he feels entitled to use violence against the night manager, he does not feel any regret, guilt or remorse about having attacked and injured him. Likewise, he feels proud about having assaulted his girlfriend's stalker when he returns to the DJ table: "Then I put the headphones back on, lower the music volume, and get on the mic. 'A'ight. A'ight. I'm back, and I ain't got a scratch on me.' Everybody cheer when I say that. Ain't nothing like kicking a nigga ass to get people to like you" (286). He feels no guilt for attacking Jamal, but rather self-admiration and pride, which underlines the hypothesis that Tyrell uses his violence in order to restore his honor and replace his feelings of shame and humiliation with pride.

Just as Nick and Tyrell do not feel guilty about their violent behavior, Cricket feels equally innocent. After his fight with Pitbull, Cricket does not take on responsibility for his behavior, but is enraged about getting the blame: "This is effed. I didn't do nothing wrong. Why am I the friggin' villain instead of Pitbull? I hate this world. And every hypocritical lump of shit running it" (Blagden 102). Moreover, when he talks to Mother Mary about the incident, he states: "'Right is right'" (130), insisting on the fact that he was entitled to beat Pitbull almost unconscious.

From the journal entries in *Breathing Underwater*, the reader gains insight into the dynamics of the protagonist's relationship with his girlfriend and into his abusive behavior toward her. It becomes evident that Nick tries to justify his behavior to himself

and to Caitlin. After Nick forces her to choose between him and her best friend Elsa, he thinks: “Maybe I’d gone too far. For some reason, I remembered her telling Dirk off at Zack’s party. But I wasn’t Dirk. What I was saying was for her own good” (Flinn 69) and makes himself believe that he only wants what is best for his girlfriend and is therefore entitled to isolate her from her friends. Likewise, when Nick impedes Caitlin from performing at the talent show through emotionally abusing her he makes her – and himself – believe that he is acting in her best interest:

‘I don’t want you embarrassing yourself in that talent show. You go there, singing like you do, looking like a fat slob, and people will laugh.’ I was so worked up, I almost believed what I said. Caitlin did believe it. She metamorphosed with my words, arms drooping at her sides. She said, ‘Okay, I won’t sing. It was a stupid idea.’ ‘I’m only saying this for your own good.’ I twined my arm around her waist, loving the feel of her hair against my lips. ‘Someday, you’ll realize I want what’s best for you.’ (245-46)

When Nick verbally abuses Caitlin after her chorus practice with Derek and holds her arm so tight that a red mark is visible on it, he dreads the consequences of his behavior and therefore tries to justify it by making her believe that his violence and his controlling behavior are signs of his love for her: “I wanted to kiss every hair on her head to keep her with me. ‘Sometimes, I get crazy. It’s just, I’d die if I lost you’” (133). And after hitting her for the first time in his car on the way back from Key West, he even tries to justify his behavior by blaming it on his maleness: “‘Sorry I freaked you out, Kitty cat. I forget you aren’t used to guys. You don’t know we play rough sometimes’” (199).

Cricket in *Dear Life, You Suck* is also quick to find excuses for his violent behavior, but slow to take on responsibility for his actions. At the beginning of the novel he states: “I’ve been brawling since I’ve been crawling. But that’s only self-defense” (Blagden 2). His violence against others is, according to Cricket, mainly motivated by the wish to protect the Little Ones and therefore, he feels entitled to avenge every affront against them. When the principal asks him why he “‘punched Mitchell Burke in the nose [...] and held his head underwater in the science lab fish tank’”, Cricket replies: “‘Remember? He stole Gregory Bullivant’s lucky Popeye pen’” (3). After his fight with Pitbull in which he reduces his face to something that “looks like a slab of raw roast beef in a deli case” (81), he justifies his behavior to Wynona: “‘I’m not sure what time you arrived at the melee, but did you happen to notice the scrawny fifth-grader on the ground in tears?’” (94), suggesting that he was entitled to use violence because Pitbull made one of the Little Ones cry. Furthermore, he is convinced that everybody in his school would “love to kick

the ever-lovin shit out of him [...] [b]ut no one does because they're either too scared, too weak, or too shackled-up by rules" (104), while he is the only one courageous enough to confront the school bully. While he judges the teachers and other students for their passivity, he elevates himself as a redeemer figure who is, however, not acknowledged as such by teachers, the principal and the nuns, but only by the Little Ones, who applaud him for his courage. As he sees himself entitled to resort to violence in order to protect the Little Ones from Pitbull, he is unable to feel guilt for what he does.

While Cricket is adamant in believing in his own version of the truth, namely that he "fight[s] to protect the Little Ones" (156), the people around him are not ready to accept his justifications. Caretaker, for one, is convinced that Cricket does not fight to defend others: "'Don't blow smoke up my ass and say you fight to protect the Little Ones. *Puuuh*. How fuckin' stupid do you think I am? I know better, Cricks. I know you're fighting something a damn sight scarier than them little kiddlins getting picked on'" (155). He thinks that Cricket fights the demons of his past, but Cricket's opinion differs: "Caretaker doesn't know what he's talking about. I fight to protect the Little Ones" (156). Mother Mary does not believe Cricket's justifications for his violence either. When he tells her that fighting Pitbull was self-defense, she says: "'Bullshit. It was assault and battery, and it's a crime'" (161) and the excuse that he is protecting the Little Ones does not impress her either: "'First of all, let's not pretend we both don't know what your fighting is about. Secondly, there are ways of defending the meek without jeopardizing your future'" (164). Caretaker and Mother Mary are thus convinced that Cricket knows why he is fighting, but that he is not ready to acknowledge it.

Another behavior that the protagonists exhibit after their violent actions is the externalization of blame. Clinical psychologist June Tangney, who is a researcher on emotions like shame and guilt, observes that shame is linked to blame and that people who feel shame are likely to blame their behavior on others (135). She defines the externalization of blame as "attributing cause or blame to external factors – aspects of the situation or of another person involved in the event" (121). By externalizing blame, shamed individuals try to "regain some sense of control and superiority in their life" (Tangney, Stuewig and Hafez 710). Brown's research also affirms that people who feel guilt are more likely to apologize or to change their behavior while people who feel shame tend to blame circumstances or people for their mistakes (72).

In his first family violence class, when Mario lectures the young men about taking responsibility for their violence and one of them asks: “‘But what if it really wasn’t our fault?’”, Nick feels as if “the big guy echoes my thoughts again” (Flinn 17). His thoughts suggest that he seeks the reason for his behavior outside of himself. This becomes even more evident when he reflects on his girlfriend’s behavior: “Caitlin never hit me, of course, but what about mental torture?” (18). At this point, the reader does not know yet what Nick has done to his girlfriend and therefore does not see how distorted Nick’s perception is and how much he has managed to believe his own version of the truth. Moreover, the fact that Nick puts the blame on his ex-girlfriend makes the reader wonder what Caitlin did to make him hit her. While Nick admits that he made a mistake, he sees Caitlin as being responsible for it: “‘I shouldn’t have, okay? I know that. But she pissed me off this one time. Once.’” (23). This externalization of blame is evident in the frame narrative, but also in Nick’s journal entries. While Nick is able to convince the reader of his innocence at the beginning of the novel, he is not able to do so when documenting his relationship with Caitlin in his journal. Immediately after hitting Caitlin in the car on the way back from Key West, Nick blames his behavior on his girlfriend: “I’d had to stop her. She’d been irrational, overwrought, shouldn’t have touched the wheel. She could have killed us” (197); “[S]he was grabbing the wheel. We’d almost creamed the Bronco. I had to get her off me before we got killed” (198). Nick does not take into consideration that he provoked Caitlin’s attempt to control the car through his reckless, dangerous driving. He wants to avoid feelings of shame for having slapped Caitlin, and therefore tries to blame her for his violence.

Cricket also blames other people for his violent behavior. When Mother Mary asks him when he will stop being violent, he replies: “‘As soon as every asshole in that place sees himself for what he really is’” (Blagden 8). He is convinced that other people need to realize how badly they behave and that the best way to show them is through violence. When Cricket accidentally punches a teacher in the nose after his fight with Pitbull, he does not feel guilty and apologizes, but blames the teacher: “Serves the caddywhompus prick right for sticking his pompous snoot where it don’t belong” (82). While he blames other people for his need to resort to violence, he is unable to see that he himself is guilty of inflicting pain on others.

Tyrell blames his violence against the night manager on the latter’s inappropriate behavior: “How I’m a let that dude get away with what he did? Any man that’s gonna see

a girl like Jasmine and take advantage of her just 'cause she homeless and hot need to get his face broke, you ask me (Booth 124). However, Tyrell attacks the night manager before he knows what happened in the office. While it might seem noble that Tyrell wants to protect Jasmine, he seems to apply double standards because despite having a girlfriend, Tyrell is determined to exploit Jasmine's fear of loneliness and the fact that she likes him: "When Jasmine finish studying, she get up to turn the light off and I lose my head for a while staring at her body. And I make a decision right there. I'ma get me some of that tonight. Shit, I'm tired of trying to do the right thing" (193).

CONCLUSION: TOWARD HEALING

The three young adult novels discussed in this thesis revolve around the inner and outer conflicts of the protagonists, but their narratives all end on a hopeful note, offering solutions toward healing and ways out of the shame-violence spiral. In this respect, not only the plot, but also the structure of the narratives and the story time influence to what extent the protagonists experience growth and healing. The fact that *Tyrell* covers only a week of the protagonist's life restricts the amount of change that the protagonist undergoes. Moreover, there is no narrative distance that allows the protagonist to reflect on his choices. However, the plot suggests that there is some change in the mindset of the protagonist and that he matures as a result of his experiences. While the reader is witness to Tyrell's constant struggle to hold his life together, to provide for his homeless family, to defend himself against the accusations of his ever-critical mother, to be a father for his little brother and a protective, strong man for his girlfriend, some of this pressure is reduced when he gives himself permission not to feel responsible for anybody but himself for a while: "I do kinda feel free. I mean, I know I ain't s'posed to feel this way, but it's like what Jasmine was saying before, that her sister deserve her freedom. And I need that too. I need time where I don't gotta worry 'bout nobody but myself. I mean, it ain't my job to be no father at fifteen" (Booth 308-309). He understands that it is impossible for him to live up to the expectations of others and himself concerning his role as a provider for his family. By accepting his limitations, he tries to overcome the shame of being inadequate as a man.

Nick's narrative spans over nine months, and together with the flashbacks contained in his journal entries, it covers a year of his life. While the frame narrative takes the reader on a journey into nine months of Nick's life, starting in the court room after his breakup with Caitlin, the journal entries that Nick writes every week recount the three months of their relationship from beginning to end. The structure of the narrative makes it possible for the protagonist as well as for the reader to trace the steps that lead to Nick's violence. Moreover, the distance in Nick's journal entries between the narrating I and the experiencing I allow for reflection and help the protagonist to examine his motives and actions. Writing his journal becomes a way for Nick to deal with his emotions and to voice his struggles when he is unable or unwilling to tell his story to anybody else. At the beginning of the narrative, writing is something he has to do, but it becomes an activity which helps him to escape his challenges and therefore he feels compelled to finish his

story: “I’m way over the word count I needed. I could probably stop. But I have to see this through to the end. If I don’t, I have the feeling I’ll drown” (Flinn 215).

Nick’s journey toward healing is marked by his willingness to be vulnerable and to share his difficult emotions. While at first he is hesitant to reveal any details about his personal life and about his feelings, toward the end of the narrative, he opens himself up to his counselor Mario: “‘That day on the bridge, when I slapped Caitlin...’ ‘Yeah?’ He turns to give me his full attention. ‘I was afraid, okay? I was afraid she’d leave me.’ Mario nods. ‘I know you were.’ He starts to reach his hand out, then takes it back when he sees my face. ‘It’s okay to be afraid, Nick.’ I shrug and walk out” (Flinn 238).

While Nick is reluctant to admit that there have been any serious problems in his relationship to Caitlin and in his attitude toward her, he gradually discovers that he has been controlling, obsessive and abusive. He does so not only by reflecting on his behavior in his journal entries, but also by becoming aware of Leo’s abusive behavior which he is then able to identify in himself. The last time Nick spends an afternoon with Leo, he is appalled by his friend’s controlling behavior toward his girlfriend Neysa. When he comes home, he asks himself: “God, was I like that with Caitlin?” (242) and writes a journal entry about one of his attempts to pressure Caitlin into not performing at the talent show. As he finishes writing, he realizes: “I *was* like Leo” (246). This realization marks a moment of epiphany and leads the protagonist to understand the severity of his behavior. When he waits for the train after hearing about Leo’s murder of Neysa and his suicide, Nick becomes aware of the possible consequences of his obsession:

I shut my eyes. Neysa. What did she look like, even? But I see Caitlin’s face, Caitlin’s blue eyes, staring. Could it have been me, me and Caitlin? No. I want to scream it. No! My brain tells me different. You and Leo were the same, it says. Lonely, obsessed. Angry and out of control too. I saw it in Leo, I see it in myself. All I did to Caitlin, everything I said. Of course she’s afraid of me. I’m no different from Leo. I wasn’t, and I’m not. But can I be? Is there time? (253-54)

While the realization that he has been abusive is painful to Nick, it is also necessary for his growth. While Leo never acknowledges that there is a problem in his relationship to Neysa, Nick becomes aware of his obsessive, controlling behavior toward Caitlin by seeing the signs of abuse in Leo’s relationship with Neysa. Following this realization, Nick feels genuine remorse and calls his ex-girlfriend in order to apologize: “‘I’m just sorry. I thought I meant it before, but I didn’t know. I mean, it’s like apologizing for

stepping on someone's foot. You say you're sorry, but you don't really understand how bad you hurt them'" (262).

Another step Nick takes toward healing is the decision to let go of Caitlin. The ring he gives her after their first break-up following the incident on the Seven Mile Bridge functions as a symbol for his control over Caitlin and his ability to convince her of being with him: "I hang up, fingering the ring in my pocket. In two hours, it will be back on Caitlin's finger" (148). Throwing away the ring at the end of the novel symbolizes Nick's willingness to let go of Caitlin and to refrain from any further attempts to get her back:

I feel in my pocket for the ring, Caitlin's ring. My fingers meet coldness, and I take it out, hold it to the light. Purple prisms reflect around me. The train descends. I clutch the ring. Only the ring supports me. I step toward the tracks. The horn sounds. I hoist the ring to the sky and raise my arm. Then it's flying out, out over the track, then crashing to the street below. (254)

He also talks about the importance of letting go in his family violence class, sharing with the others what he has learnt from Mario: "'It's about doing the right thing even if you don't want to do it. About taking responsibility for your actions, like you always told us.' I think of Caitlin and add, 'It's about letting go when you really, really want to hold on so bad'" (269).

It is also crucial for Nick to understand why he resorted to violence in his relationship to Caitlin:

I stand. 'Me, Tiny. *I'm* a loser. That's what my dad says, anyway. Loser. Failure. I tried to prove him wrong, finding things I could control, like my grades. And Caitlin. When she said *no*, or I'd think there was someone else, there'd be this voice in my head, almost too soft to hear, whispering *loser*. *You're a loser, a mistake*. And I had to drown it out, had to win, no matter the cost.' (265)

This passage reveals that Nick sees his violent behavior as a result of his attempts to overcome his feelings of inferiority and shame that are caused by the disparaging words of his father. He knows that in order to not become a violent father himself, he needs to work on his personality. Therefore, he decides to retake the family violence class. Furthermore, he gives Mario his journal in which his relationship with Caitlin and the violence of his father are documented. Giving the journal to his counselor is a way of being vulnerable and of sharing painful experiences. It also helps Nick to overcome his shame, as Brown argues that shame is most powerful when it remains unspoken: "Shame derives its power from being unspeakable [...] Shame hates having words wrapped

around it. If we speak shame, it begins to wither” (67). In this sense, Nick’s journal functions as a way of ‘speaking shame’ and giving it to his counselor helps him to share his pain and to allow somebody he trusts to see his vulnerabilities. When Nick leaves the room, there is a moment of hesitation: “I’m out the door before I remember all the things I wrote about my father. I reach for the knob, wanting to ask for my notebook, say I was kidding about coming back. Then I decide I don’t care – I’ve been trying to breathe underwater too long. It’s time to get some fresh air into my lungs” (270). Nick understands that being vulnerable comes at a risk, but he also understands that retaking the class and giving his journal to Mario are important steps to take in order to escape from his self-built prison. The metaphor he uses illustrates this; after trying to hide his shame, his struggles and his pain – to breathe underwater – he decides to let himself be seen in order to find healing.

Nick’s path toward healing is marked by the healing of his relationships. He apologizes to Caitlin, stops trying to win her back and lets go of her. He allows Mario to see beneath his mask and is finally willing to accept his help. And, in the last chapter, he is able to reconcile with his best friend:

[Tom] starts to cross the street, and suddenly I don’t want him to leave. I yell after him, ‘What do you want, Tom?’ He stops, blocking traffic. ‘I want things like they used to be.’ ‘They aren’t.’ He finishes crossing and sinks onto the curb. I follow him. I can’t say why. [...] I watch Tom, leaning back, staring at the sky now. I’ve always known Tom, but I never looked at him, never saw him before now. He was always Tom the athlete, Time the most likely to...everything. How could I expect him to see me when I didn’t see him? ‘I should have told you,’ I say finally. (277-78)

While at first he is reluctant to talk to Tom, he realizes that he wants and needs his best friend to be part of his life again and to share his struggles with him.

Dear Life, You Suck covers about a month of Cricket’s life and despite the relatively short story time – as compared to Nick’s narrative – the protagonist undergoes considerable growth. While Cricket is first presented as a traumatized young man whose fighting is a way to cope with the pain of his past and present, and who considers his only options in life to be fighting, drug-dealing and suicide, his perspective on life and his mood change in the course of his narrative. The relationship with Wynona helps him to gain a new perspective for his life, but it also requires him to embrace vulnerability. While at first he seems reluctant to show his emotions so openly, he then decides that he does not want to

jeopardize his relationship with Wynona, neither for fear of being seen as unmanly by other guys, nor for fear of being hurt. Gilligan suggests that “[s]ince the sense of aliveness and humanness that comes from loving includes a vulnerability to pain, only those who are capable of risking pain can experience joy” (*Violence* 52). Following this statement, Cricket’s willingness to risk the pain of being hurt is decisive in his quest for love and belonging. While Cricket’s view of life is quite pessimistic at first and he cannot believe that Wynona is genuinely interested in him, he suspects that believing in the possibility of their happiness might help him to tear down the wall he has built around himself: “I gaze at the dark, distant sea. I think about Apollo and Wynona. They both feel so real and yet so make-believe. I wonder what would happen if I believed in them. I wonder if believing in them would help me escape my island” (Blagden 255). Although he initially wants to stop seeing Wynona because he is too afraid of getting hurt, he decides that he might as well risk the pain and enjoy the relationship as long as it lasts. In doing so, he fights against his fear and dares to be vulnerable:

[I]f I know it’s gonna end, and I know *how* it’s gonna end, and I know it’s gonna hurt, and it’s inevitable anyway, why not just float as far as the hypnotic helium carries me and let the crash happen when it happens? I’m already floating in the clouds anyway, and the drop won’t be much greater, so what the hell? (263)

While it is difficult for Cricket to trust Wynona, their relationship helps him to have a more positive outlook on life and a more positive attitude toward himself. The transition in Cricket’s character can be paraphrased by how Pattison describes the process of conquering shame: “The self-rejecting person who has internalised a sense of shame will find it difficult to trust and integrate herself within human relationships. However, it is these very relationships that are ultimately the only means to overcoming shame” (109).

The letters Cricket writes are an important structural element that help the reader to gain insight into the protagonist’s past, but they also help the narrator to understand his hopelessness and to find healing through writing about his pain. Writing helps him to externalize his negative emotions, to let go of his anger and to deal with his emotions in a healthy way:

I haven’t given my *why* much thought. *Why do I want out?* I look up at Jesus’ pained, peaceful face. He’s at peace because he understands his *why*. I look down at my letter. I suddenly know what I need to do. What I need to accomplish. Back in my room, I grab a pen and notebook, climb onto the fire escape, and recline in my lawn chair. (Blagden 140)

Cricket's letters have a similar function as Nick's journal entries. They help him to reflect on the reasons why his life sucks and to put the painful experiences of his childhood into words instead of fighting them with his fists.

The narrative seems to suggest that there are two major causes for the change that the reader witnesses in Cricket's character. One of them is the realization that Cricket is not responsible for the death of his little brother: "I think He [God] told me that what happened to my baby brother wasn't my fault. That it's not one kid's fault what the mom does to the other kid no matter what the first kid did on account of he's just a kid" (304). Another reason for Nick's change is his determination to not let his past influence his future. The ring Cricket wears functions as a symbol for his father's pride, and as a recurring motif it reminds the protagonist of his painful past. He describes that growing up, he believed that the ring had some special power. However, after writing down his last Dear Life letter, he realizes that he only kept the ring because "[my dad] told me I was brave" (297) when in fact his father's behavior revealed that drugs were more important to him than his son: "A memory of Dad's ugly face yelling 'Fuck you' at the drug dealers flashes in my mind. *He chose drugs over me.* I look at my ring. *BC. Broken Cricket* [...] Maybe I kept the ring to distract myself from the real scars I got that day. [...] I step closer to the edge of the cliff and throw my ring into the ocean" (298). Throwing the ring away thus symbolizes Cricket's determination to let go of his past.

All three protagonists come to terms with their childhood through standing up against their parents. Cricket casts away his father's ring in order to overcome his past, Nick tells his father to respect him and to not hit him anymore, and Tyrell leaves his mother and refuses to go to court with her and to take the blame and responsibility for her leaving Troy alone. In doing so, the protagonists show their determination not to be influenced by their parent's choices in order to establish independent identities.

As these novels address some of the issues teenagers struggle with, they offer a valuable contribution for young adult readers who identify with the characters and their situation. The narratives might be helpful both for teenagers who struggle with violent impulses and for young victims of violence. *Breathing Underwater* might help abusive young men to recognize their behavior as controlling and to find ways out of their violence by seeking help and confiding in people they trust, as the novel teaches that getting and accepting help are fundamental in order to change controlling, violent behavior. It might also help

victims of teen dating violence to recognize signs of abuse in their relationships. Furthermore, it allows young adults to see and understand that feelings of inadequacy are a part of growing up and that hiding their problems from others does not solve them. *Tyrell* makes readers understand which circumstances can lead to violence. However, it does not offer a satisfactory solution, nor does it deconstruct the protagonist's gender ideology. *Dear Life, You Suck* invites readers to consider how a person's past can determine and influence their behavior. It might help young readers to understand why certain people become violent; not because they feel particularly strong or powerful, but rather because they do not. By reading these narratives, young adults might understand the importance of coming to terms with past experiences, finding people they trust, writing about their emotions and experiences, and of realizing that they are not alone in their struggles.

While these young adult novels exemplify how the protagonists' shame can result in the physical or emotional abuse of another person, they also hint at paths toward healing and suggest that the narrators are able to overcome their shame by sharing their pain.

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APPENDIX

Abstract

This thesis explores the connection between shame and violence in three US-American young adult novels. It argues that the violent behavior of the male protagonists is caused by feelings of shame or by the fear of experiencing this painful emotion. The novels discussed in this thesis are *Breathing Underwater* by Alex Flinn, *Dear Life, You Suck* by Scott Blagden and *Tyrell* by Coe Booth. These narratives, which are written from the perspective of the male protagonists, allow the reader to access their thoughts and feelings and to draw conclusions about the motivations for their violent behavior. The aim of this thesis is to find out why and under what circumstances young men resort to violence. In order to do so, it employs findings from psychology and gender studies and applies them to the literary analysis of the selected young adult novels.

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich mit dem Zusammenhang von Scham und Gewalt in drei Werken der US-amerikanischen Jugendliteratur. Die drei Romane, mit der sich diese Diplomarbeit befasst, sind *Breathing Underwater* von Alex Flinn, *Dear Life, You Suck* von Scott Blagden und *Tyrell* von Coe Booth. Diese Werke, die aus Sicht der männlichen Ich-Erzähler Einblick in das Gedanken- und Gefühlsleben der Protagonisten geben, werden einer literarischen Analyse unterzogen, die Erkenntnisse aus Psychologie und Genderforschung berücksichtigt. Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, herauszufinden, warum und unter welchen Umständen junge Männer gewalttätig werden. Die Analyse der fiktiven Charaktere gibt Aufschluss darüber, wodurch das Verhalten der Protagonisten beeinflusst wird und inwiefern Gefühle der Scham dazu beitragen, dass sie in zwischenmenschlichen Konflikten Gewalt anwenden.