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Dialogic, but Monologic: Toxic Masculinity Meets #MeToo in Teddy Wayne's Campus Novel *Loner*

ABSTRACT

Teddy Wayne's 2016 *Loner* tells the story of a Harvard freshman's sexual obsession with a fellow student, leading to stalking and attempted rape. On a deeper level, the campus novel can be interpreted as a critique of wider processes taking place in American academia and generally in the US: the mainstreaming of the so-called "woke" movement and the growing impact of "political correctness." The novel also reflects on class inequality, privilege, gender politics, the ongoing crisis of white (heterosexual) masculinity, toxic masculinity, and online "incel culture." The present paper will analyze the problematic "dialogic, but monologic" nature of the book's unreliable narrative addressing the above problems. The paper's goal will be to read *Loner* in light of the #MeToo movement as an illustration of the current stage of the now decades-long reckoning with rape culture, and with patriarchy.

Keywords: academic fiction, the #MeToo movement, sexual assault, rape culture, toxic masculinity, crisis of masculinity.

INTRODUCTION

Teddy Wayne's 2016 campus novel *Loner* recounts an obsessive reliving of a Harvard freshman's first semester, and his sexual fixation on a female fellow-student. Wayne's chronicling of stalking culminating in attempted rape offers a useful educational tool and a warning in its own right. However, this paper will discuss *Loner* as a wider critique of contemporary academia and what it represents. Wayne's novel captures some of the most crucial recent developments in American academia and campus culture: the mainstreaming of the so-called "woke" movement and the growing impact of "political correctness." Transcending academia and responding to even broader processes unfolding in the US, the novel also reflects on class inequality, gender politics, the ongoing crisis of white (heterosexual) masculinity, toxic masculinity, as well as the so-called "incel culture." It will be the goal of the present paper to analyze the problematic "dialogic, but monologic" nature of the book's unreliable narrative, as it voices an academic understanding of gender inequality and patriarchal objectification of women, while simultaneously exemplifying American white male "aggrieved entitlement" leading to violence. I will read *Loner* in light of the #MeToo movement as an illustration of the current stage of the now decades-long reckoning with rape culture, and more broadly speaking patriarchy. I will argue that central to this stage is the white masculinity crisis—on the one hand, as male self-victimization weaponized by extreme political movements, and on the other, as a recognition of men's victimhood within patriarchy, "the male malaise" (Reeves 1), both of which need urgent intervention.

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LONER: RECEPTION, ZEITGEIST, AND INSPIRATION

Published in 2016, *Loner* is the third novel by Teddy Wayne. The American writer, a Harvard graduate himself (Wayne, Interview by Ryan Chapman), has written four other novels: *Kapitoil* (2010), *The Love Song of Jonny Valentine* (2013), *Apartment* (2020), and *The Great Man Theory* (2022). Like all of Wayne's works, *Loner* received many highly positive reviews (see *Teddy Wayne*). According to *The New York Post*, "Wayne is one of the most insightful, talented, criminally unknown writers of his generation" (Post Staff Report). Kirkus Reviews called *Loner* "[a] startlingly sharp study of not just collegiate culture, but of social forces at large." For another reviewer, it was "not a stretch to say the Whiting Award winner's third novel might become the most incendiary book since Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*" (Wayne, Interview by Ryan Chapman). *The New York Times* also saw a parallel with the same, by now, classic novel: "As Bret

Easton Ellis did with Patrick Bateman in 'American Psycho' (1991), Wayne seems to imply that [*Loner*'s protagonist] is somehow emblematic of this particular moment, with its apparently insurmountable class divisions paired with a voyeuristic internet culture" (Rosenfeld). Finally, a reviewer of Wayne's fourth novel, *Apartment*, where the author again exercises his skill in creating an unsympathetic loner, has observed that "[t]here's perhaps no living writer better at chronicling the most crucial emotional flash points of the young modern male than Teddy Wayne"[1] (Colburn).

Currently, HBO is developing an adaptation of *Loner* into a TV series, with the author as a co-executive producer (Wayne, Interview by Maris Kreizman). This investment by a major media corporation proves that *Loner* meets a present demand for shows such as Netflix's *You* (2018–) (about a stalker) and BBC Three and Hulu's *Normal People* (2020), an adaptation of Sally Rooney's 2018 bestseller. Like these two stories, Wayne's also tackles contemporary sexual and gender politics, specifically among young people, university students, as well as class inequality, privilege, and above all toxic masculinity and sexual abuse, with social media in the background. In addition, set at Harvard, Wayne's novel addresses on-campus rape culture and "political correctness." In short, it can be said that Wayne's "disturbingly prophetic" (Wayne, Interview by Maris Kreizman) novel taps into the current Zeitgeist. Its publication coincided with the beginning of the "Trump era," characterized by manifest misogyny and an anti-feminist backlash, additionally fuelled by a movement which started as Me Too, founded by the African American activist Tarana Burke in 2006, and then gained global recognition as #MeToo in October 2017, after accusations made by a group of Hollywood actresses against Harvey Weinstein became public (Kantor and Twohey 2, 185), following earlier similar public charges against Bill Cosby (in 2014; NBC10 Staff) and Roger Ailes (in 2016; Disis and Pallotta).

Most importantly, *Loner* captures the basic sentiment of the "incel movement" (the involuntary celibates' online subculture), which was not well-known in 2016, but has become notorious since (Hern; Williams; Broyd et al.), owing to a number of "lone shooters" whose online activity, combined with commercialized media coverage, helped spread the "contagion effect in mass shootings" (Israni 68). As Wayne has observed, stating a fact all too obvious to any American: "Every few weeks it seems there's another atrocity in the news perpetrated by invariably a man, often a young man, whether on a mass or individual scale. And very often when the news researches this individual's life, they call him a loner"

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[1] When it comes to the older modern male there is James Lasdun, author of *The Horned Man*, *Give Me Everything You Have: On Being Stalked*, *The Fall Guy* and *Afternoon of a Faun*.

(Wayne, Interview by Scott Simon). Consequently, the author said: "I was compelled to write from the perspective of one of these young men and try to understand what's going on in their head and what cultural forces influence them to act this way" (ibid.).

In an interview for *Kirkus Reviews*, Wayne revealed his immediate source of inspiration: an online video showing a teenage psychopathic murderer from Ohio, who in 2012 shot three classmates in a high school cafeteria. Even though Wayne does not directly mention incels in *Loner*, he recognizes that his own protagonist "shares some characteristics" with incels, but he does not belong to any community (Interview by Maris Kreizman). Still, reviewers have interpreted the novel as a story of "a burgeoning incel's embrace of the dark side" (Colburn).

Thus, Wayne's own eponymous "loner" is not as shockingly horrifying (yet) as his real-life inspiration, but he is horrifying enough. Even though he does not kill anyone, he becomes obsessed with Veronica Morgan Wells, whom he stalks and finally attempts to rape. In the meantime, in order to get close to her, he also exploits, including sexually, another young woman, Sara Cohen, who is Veronica's roommate. Consequently, *Loner* could be subtitled "A Portrait of a Socio- and Psychopath as a Young Man," even if the portrait is in fact a self-portrait painted in words by the novel's unreliable first-person narrator.

LONER'S LONER

The narrator and protagonist of *Loner* is David Alan Federman, a white, Jewish eighteen-year-old, who is a freshman at Harvard. Wayne's portrayal of his protagonist's Jewishness has been criticized "at this point in American history [as] not only a cliché but an anachronism" (Rosenfeld). However, while Wayne (who is Jewish himself) does rely on some Jewish male stereotypes, they are clearly intended to alienate his "loner" even further among the successful Harvard WASPs.

Coming from suburban middle-class background, David suffers from an inferiority complex, made only more acute by meeting the object of his desire. This is because Veronica Morgan Wells, originally from Manhattan, "came from money," and "[i]t wasn't just [her] financial capital that set [her] apart; it was [her] worldliness, [her] taste, [her] social capital" (Wayne, *Loner* 18)—in short, all the things denied David by his upbringing in a town in New Jersey.

Yet, despite his feeling of class inferiority, David has a very high sense of his intellectual superiority. Indeed, he was accepted to Harvard as a highly intelligent student. Such duality to his character, a simultaneously low and high self-esteem, is typical for incel or incel-like young men

(Broyd et al. 257), some of whom become domestic terrorists, and authors of long hateful online manifestos (Israni 67; Broyd et al. 255). What David also shares with incels is not living up to stereotypical ideas of masculinity (Broyd et al. 255): he is not muscular or macho; he describes himself as a "fragile" (Wayne, *Loner* 33), "effete, thin-wristed" (39), "vacuum of charisma" (21). This was one of the main reasons why he was—again typically for future incels—bullied at school (Israni 67; Broyd et al. 260).

As we learn from his memories, he was a quiet, studious, and lonely child (even his younger sister disowned him in public). His high school English teacher described him in her letter of recommendation as "most gifted" (Wayne, *Loner* 6), but also as "somewhat of a loner" (7) and mentioned "the immense strain human interactions put on him" (6). David matches the stereotype of an extreme introvert, perhaps from the autistic spectrum, although these terms are not used in his narrative.[2] To complete this picture, Wayne equips his protagonist with a rare OCD quirk. As David puts it: "At twelve, without many interlocutors to speak of (or to), I began a dialogue with language itself; mentally reversing nearly every word I encountered in speech, signs, objects I saw" (8). He described this skill in his Harvard application:

> "To continuously reflect the world in a linguistic mirror," I postulated in the essay, "is to question the ontological arbitrariness of everything and everyone. Why is an *apple* not an *elppa*, nor, for that matter, an *orange*? Why am I *me* and not *you*?" I titled it "Backwords" and typed the whole thing in a reverse font and word order (by line), preparing to mail in a hard copy so that the reader needed to hold it up in front of a mirror. My parents, however, feared the admission committee would think it was gibberish. Bowing to prudence, I compromised by writing the body of the essay normally and changing just the title to ꟼɹOWꓘƆAꓭ. My "unique" essay had "rather intrigued" the Harvard admissions committee, my guidance counselor later informed me. (9)

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2   Broyd et al. stress that research on the mental health of incels "is in its infancy" (262); however, their review of current literature on the subject leads to the following conclusion: "Inceldom is a poorly understood but significant online movement that shows potential for extremism and violence, particularly among those with mental health difficulties. Although depression, autism and personality disorder are not associated with violence themselves, they may accelerate or produce a vulnerability to extreme overvalued beliefs" (ibid.). Furthermore, "the literature suggests that there may be a specific relationship between autism and incel-related activity" (257), and "the co-occurrence of autism and narcissism may be a particularly explosive combination, increasing the risk of someone with autism engaging in violent behaviour" (257–58). However, alongside activists for autistic people (Gilman), the authors of the study stress the need for caution and warn against overgeneralization in inferring a correlation between autism and violence, as violence stems from a co-occurrence of multiple risk factors (Broyd et al. 257–60).

This fragment offers a good illustration of David's style and character. It is not only the Harvard essay that sounds pretentious; the whole narrative and the narrator are entirely self-absorbed. However, the resultant self-reflexivity lacks any self-criticism, and any other perspective; this would require empathy, which David lacks entirely, while showing a great deal of megalomania. David recognizes himself as different—but meaning only unique. Ironically, the self-reflection—highlighted by the figure of the mirror above—points to a self-perception that mirrors other people's perception of David only in the sense that it is its reversal. What David sees in himself is often the opposite of what people see in him. As David put it in Chapter 7, thinking of Veronica: "you, too, felt like you had always seen the world differently from everyone else" (74). He keeps seeing what he wants to see—in this instance: that he and the object of his desire are the same. At the same time, he knows that they come from very different worlds, but imagines himself belonging to Veronica's affluent, privileged milieu. She represents both his sexual and class aspirations: the desire for who he feels he ought to become.

THE NOVEL'S NARRATIVE MONOLOGUE AND INCELDOM

The passage quoted above showed the narrator engaged in "a dialogue with language itself"[3] (8). In fact, David's entire narrative can be defined this way. While it is supposedly written to and for someone, it turns out to be entirely one-sided: fittingly for a loner, it is a monologue, but we can only fully appreciate this by reading the novel backwards from its ending.

David chooses to begin his story on his first day at Harvard: when he first saw Veronica. From this moment, located towards the end of Chapter 1, the first-person narrative, unchanged for approximately ten pages, begins to regularly address a second-person "you": Veronica. As we learn from the penultimate section of the final Chapter 16, David is reconstructing the story of his fascination with her—in retrospect, more than five years after the described events. Writing from a temporal distance is occasionally signalled in the narrative, as in this early example of foreshadowing at the end of Chapter 3: "It's convenient, in hindsight, to blame Harvard. But it wasn't the guilty party" (29). However, predominantly, the narrative is organized chronologically, reflecting the narrator's state of mind and knowledge at the given moment being narrated, deliberately withholding and delaying already possessed information. This technique

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[3]   The novel is engaged also in an intertextual dialogue with many other literary works.

creates an effect of immediacy, as if the narrator was intentionally—still obsessively—re-living the described events. Importantly, as signalled, the second-person address remains monologic, because Veronica never reads the story and never replies. As David says towards the end, "I didn't write it for you . . . I wrote it *about* you" (202).

Another reason why David's story has to be a monologue is that, effectively, it is a confession to stalking, a fetishistic obsession, and attempted rape, which he fully intended to carry out and would have completed if no one had stopped him. David takes comfort in the fact that "there aren't judicial consequences" (202), due to a "plea bargain" arranged between the district attorney, Veronica's wealthy and "publicity-weary" parents (201), on the one hand, and David's lawyer parents and his lawyer, on the other. As David put it in his smug words to Veronica: "The burden of proof was on you" (200), which is not far from victim blaming, while on the other hand, Veronica had very little say in how the matter of attempted rape of her was handled. Consequently, to quote from David: "To put it in layman's terms, I [got] off scot-free" (201).

The only real punishment for the attempted rape was David's expulsion from Harvard, although this had less to do with Harvard's sense of justice than with the institution's fear of negative publicity (also about drugs and Veronica's consensual relationship with a married teaching assistant). Without addressing the problem, the university got rid of one instance of it and protected its reputation. Presumably for the same reason, to protect his and his family's reputation, David keeps his account to himself, at least for now.

Initially we may read the text as personal self-therapy suggested by David's mother, meant to give him "closure." His mother did give him this idea for writing a letter but never sending it, after he vaguely confided in her about his rejection by Veronica (189). Yet, it can be inferred that David is using the idea for the opposite effect: not for closure, but for keeping the source of pleasure—and pain—open. This corresponds with David's sexual and pornographic preferences, where pleasure, loneliness, women's suffering, and his own humiliation are mixed. It also proves that the writing is a prolonged exercise in nostalgia, itself a mixture of pleasure and pain.

Thus, *Loner*'s ending is an open one for David, who, now, at twenty-four, is even more of a loner than before his single semester at Harvard. Having effortlessly attended a community college, David lives with his parents: "I don't leave the house much these days. Usually I'm in my bedroom, on the Internet. You can burn a great deal of hours like that" (202). This detail in particular brings to mind the incel subculture, especially since the very last words of the novel are about no one knowing David's name: he remembers being arrested (on campus, soon after the attempted rape), while no one among the onlookers, his fellow students,

even recognized him. Since this is the last thing that David writes, non-chronologically, such departure from his rigid narrative pattern suggests that his anonymity bothers him.

Incels, some of whom become violent, sometimes as "lone shooters," typically seek fame (Israni 60; Broyd et al. 260). They see themselves in the same warped mirror in which David sees his own paradoxical, self-serving image: both victim and hero—a heroic victim, a victimized hero. Parts of David's writing already sound like an incel manifesto:

> I collected my thoughts, reminded myself of the original plan. Fleeing was for the cowardly and deceitful. For the weak. You were the one who'd fled. The heroic manifested their own destinies and accepted their undeserved punishments without complaint. . . . [I] returned to your room. . . . I waited for the authorities. (Wayne, *Loner* 199)

About Veronica he writes: "There's just one Everest, and only the most heroic can reach the summit" (24). To himself (or some virtual reader) he says: "For years everyone could believe you were a faceless foot soldier. . . . Then, in a single stroke, you could prove them all wrong" (36). The military reference, the veiled threat of violence and a hint of a desire for revenge reinforce the association between *Loner*'s protagonist and inceldom.

Although we are not given information about David's online activity allowing us to gauge his potential incel indoctrination, his text's features correspond with the key "risk factors associated with inceldom," namely "the 'triad of risk' consisting of (a) fixation on a lack of sexual experience, (b) cognitive distortions and (c) blaming women for [one's] frustrations" (Broyd et al. 259–60), as well as lack of important "stabilising/protective influences" such as support from friends, employment and empathy (ibid.).

The young man tried to rape someone at eighteen; the question of what he may still do looms unanswered as the novel ends. He should be in therapy; his mental health should be treated by a specialist; instead, he is online, stuck in an interior monologue. Through this problem, *Loner* demonstrates its engagement in another dialogue: with toxic masculinity.

TOXIC MASCULINITY IN *LONER*

While the novel's ending leaves us with a vague premonition about David's future, his already available self-portrait offers a valuable insight into toxic masculinity. The novel's protagonist, tragically a victim of toxic masculinity inflicted upon him by other boys, his bullies, himself grows to inflict toxic masculinity—not upon other boys or men, but upon young women.

According to the standards of hegemonic masculinity,[4] David's masculinity is deficient, and this is the reason why he was oppressed at school by stronger boys, and why, as he believes, he remains a virgin at the age of eighteen, which is a source of intense stigma to him. It is this shame that drives him to emotionally manipulate and sexually exploit Sara, also a virgin, who does not feel ready for intercourse (Wayne, *Loner* 125), and who is pressurized by David when she is drunk, and thus incapable of giving true consent. David pressurized her into having sex one more time, and the next day broke up with her, loudly enough for Veronica to hear his voice and Sara's crying in the adjacent room, hoping to impress the object of his real desire as "someone who had the power to wound another person" (136).

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Such behaviour is David's attempt to make himself belong to the dominant group, despite his deficiencies. The novel captures well the common phenomenon of heterosexual male-bonding where women's bodies and sexuality are exchanged through words and images between male group members for each individual member's status within that group. David's entire Thanksgiving high school reunion with a few male former schoolmates is spent on interrogations about conquests of "sluts" and bragging about invented "blow jobs," and "tapped asses"; any claimed "hookup tally" (163) supported with pictures on Facebook passed around with "greasy fingers" (164).

Such treatment of women is very old and so commonplace that when Donald Trump was recorded engaging in it in 2016 ("Transcript"), he could dismiss it as mere "locker room talk" and go on to become the president of the US with the support of America's most conservative religious organizations. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls such (and similar, as they are wide-ranging) practices "traffic in women: it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men" (25–26), which ultimately serve as "structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power" (25). The book defining these mechanisms, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, was published in the 1980s and examines 19th century literature. But as Gerda Lerner explains in her *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) patriarchal power began with the *literal* use of women as exchangeable property. In fact, "[f]or much of recorded history women were the property of men, with their value as property measured largely by their sexual 'purity'" (see "1. Common Themes and the Liberal-to-Radical Continuum" in Whisnant).

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[4] The term, meaning the most dominant type of masculinity in a given time and culture (and pointing to a plurality of masculinities), was introduced by R. W. Connell in 1979 (Beasley 31).

Wayne breaks with the tradition of women's objectification in *Loner*. Rather than normalized and dismissed as "locker room talk," the behaviour representing toxic masculinity in the novel is shown as actively dangerous, also for men, but especially for women. Most importantly, the novel shows that David is a product of a whole culture that simultaneously punishes him, too, while (at least for the time being) offering him shelter.

RAPE CULTURE VS. "WOKE" ACADEMIA

The culture that has shaped David is not only patriarchy, but also, more specifically, rape culture. It is "a culture in which rape is normalized and rarely punished" (Jensen, *Getting* 175); it "doesn't command men to rape but does blur the line between consensual sex and non-consensual rape, and also reduces the likelihood that rapists will be identified, arrested, prosecuted, convicted and punished" (Jensen, *The End* 84). Furthermore, this culture "endorse[s] a vision of masculinity that makes rape inviting" (Jensen, *Getting* 48) through (increasingly violent and degrading) mainstream pornography (ibid. 103), as well as the peer-pressure and competitive male homosocial trading in objectified women as trophies and means for gaining status within hegemonic masculinity.

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In *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo*, Mithu Sanyal points out that "American universities"—to their credit (or others' discredit)—"have gone further in their efforts to eradicate rape culture than institutions anywhere else" (102), and "have become a microcosm of the way our understanding of rape culture can inform our actions" (ibid.). However, in her *Citadels of Pride: Sexual Assault, Accountability, and Reconciliation*, Martha C. Nussbaum writes about the titular "zones of unusually well-insulated male privilege" (84), among them college campuses. Discussing student-on-student assault and harassment, Nussbaum stresses that "our [American legal] system is protective of defendants in multiple ways" (116).

Feminisms' (plural) reckoning with rape culture and rape has gone on for decades. It was only in the 1970s that the most prominent second-wave activists and writers in this area, Susan Brownmiller and Andrea Dworkin, intensified public debate on rape, framing it as an active war on women (Dworkin; Sanyal 23, 25, 116), which is considered too radical even by otherwise appreciative feminists today (Sanyal 46). Legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon continues this approach addressing the rape crisis, and has succeeded in changing federal law (Abrams 1539, 1549). In the early 1990s, after the "sex wars" of the 1980s (ibid. 1533), the most outspoken opponents of this strand of anti-pornography rape-crisis feminism were the postfeminist Camille Paglia (ibid. 1534) and Katie Roiphe, who in her

The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism, shared Paglia's concern about stressing women's victimhood, weakness and passivity, as well as Paglia's lack of concern for class, race and power structures e.g., in the workplace. Roiphe criticized rape-crisis feminists as conformity-imposing thought police and saw on-campus safe-sex workshops as policing sexuality and an infringement of sexual freedom. Both Roiphe and Paglia could be seen as early critics of "political correctness" (Abrams 1534) already then gaining dominance in American academia, leading to today's "woke" movement at universities and beyond, especially in social media.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "politically correct" means "conforming to a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matters of sex or race) should be eliminated," and "woke" means "aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)." The word "woke" originated in African American English, and since 2014, in connection with the Black Lives Matter movement, has been gaining more widespread use ("Stay Woke") "[l]ike many other terms from black culture that have been taken into the mainstream" (ibid.). By the end of the 2010s "it was also being applied by some as a general *pejorative* for anyone who is or appears to be politically left-leaning" (ibid.; emphasis mine). However, by the present moment, even those who are not against left-leaning politics may use both terms negatively, if what "offends" becomes extremely broad, leading to what would be more accurately defined as "political hypercorrectness" (as distinct from actually socially useful "political correctness"—a distinction needed not to throw the baby of pro-equality movements' progress out with the herd mentality bathwater). A good illustration of the "woke" movement going too far even for the otherwise "aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues" ("Woke") is the 2019 case of a Harvard law professor, Ron Sullivan, who was dismissed as (incidentally, the first Black) faculty dean after law students protested (some waving #MeToo signs) against his joining Harvey Weinstein's defense team (Russo). This—i.e. legal representation of the innocent until proven guilty, ensuring that the due process rights are maintained for everyone—made the law students feel "unsafe" (Parloff); therefore Sullivan was "cancelled."

Such is *Loner*'s context of contemporary academia, where progressive ideology or "wokeness" clashes with conservative ideology and the status quo, such as the legal system often shielding actual harassers, as indicated by Nussbaum. Three years after the novel's publication, Wayne observed: "Colleges have become even more of America's ground zero for the culture wars the last few years, after both #MeToo and Trump's ascendancy" (Interview by Maris Kreizman).

Wayne's tool for a mild parody of campus "political correctness" is Sara. A reader of *Anti-Imperialist Marxism in Latin America*, she observes about missing a salsa event: "'Maybe it's a good thing for us to experience being unseen at a Latino event,' she whispered. 'You know—when Latinos have to deal with being unseen more systematically every day in the US'" (Wayne, *Loner* 47). Later, recognizing her act of virtue signaling as potentially hubristic, she adds: "I realize that comment about Latinos' being unseen sounded pretty sanctimonious. I didn't mean to imply that you're someone who doesn't recognize his privilege" (49). Sara's "wokeness" sounds rote, is only performative and ultimately self-serving; but she may yet put her reading of *101 Idealistic Jobs that Actually Exist* to good use.

However, the main example of Wayne's critique of the current campus "culture wars" can be found in *Loner* in the scene where David attempts to join one of Veronica's classes: "Gender and the Consumerist Impulse," taught by a tattooed and otherwise hip feminist professor. The "woke" group, surely opposed to inequality and minorities' discrimination, fail to embrace inclusivity and diversity when given an opportunity: "There was only one (clearly gay) male at the oval table. Everyone looked at me as if my presence were unwelcome, a grotesque insect crawling over their lovely picnic spread" (43). David believed he experienced hostility due to being a white straight male, which he makes clear in a conversation with Sara:

> "I almost wish I belonged to a marginalized community so I'd have a safe space for all occasions," I said.
>
> "The whole world is your safe space," [Sara] snapped.
>
> "Not true. I shopped a feminism class and didn't feel particularly welcome there." (121)

Later still he observes about the same class: "It was dicey to loiter outside any classroom for you [Veronica], especially for a feminism course, where my being caught might itself be fodder for an entire conversation about the male gaze" (141). Ironically, such a conversation would be entirely applicable to David stalking Veronica (during a feminist class, too). This serves as a perfect illustration of David's "bilingualism": being fluent in "woke" and "toxic" at the same time. What finally proves it is the scene where David actually "mansplains" to Veronica "the male gaze" from Laura Mulvey's essay, while constantly subjecting Veronica to his own "male gaze"—in fact, his whole narrative is an example of it.

Thus, "bilingual" David is partly "blind": he can instantly define the problem, but he does not seem to realize that he is part of it. Theory and

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practice remain separate; there is no true self-reflection and no dialogue, only David's self-victimization on the one hand—and the "feminist class" group's oblivious self-righteousness on the other. Academia's charged political climate is something that "David, as an insecure and entitled young white male, chafes against" (Wayne, Interview by Ryan Chapman)—even though, in the end, his ultimate rape attempt does not help his case: "He is threatened by what he sees as the silencing of his own voice, feels he is being persecuted for the sins of his ilk elsewhere, and most of all frustrated that he is not reaping the sexual and social benefits of his privileged status" (ibid.).

This sentiment, characteristic for the crisis of white masculinity, is not new, similarly to the debates on rape culture, and even "political correctness," briefly summarized earlier. In *Stiffed*, Susan Faludi identified the problems experienced by white male Americans in the 1990s. In his *Angry White Men*, first published in 2013, Michael Kimmel diagnosed the titular hitherto most privileged group's sense of victimization due to their increasing loss of privilege and defined "aggrieved entitlement": "[T]hat sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you" (18). Kimmel pointed to a direct link with violence as a consequence: "Again and again, what the research on rape and on domestic violence finds is that men initiate violence when they feel a loss of power to which they feel entitled" (186). The violence can have many forms and targets, as, due to the widespread conviction among many American white men of being unjustly scapegoated, they in turn scapegoat "Jews, minorities, immigrants, women, whomever" (24). The fact that David is Jewish himself is only one reason why his privileged status and entitlement are problematic.

David's privilege is not equally and always obvious to everyone—including himself. On the one hand, to simplify matters, at a time of intense tribalism, from the "woke" perspective he is presumed to be part of the broadly speaking unenlightened privileged white heterosexual male "tribe." Yet from this "tribe's" perspective he is a loser undeserving of privilege (a scarce resource and a reward for the most powerful). Even though he is a near-rapist oppressor, he is defeated in his design by Sara who helps Veronica escape, and by Veronica, who, in a surprising twist, turns out to have had her own design manipulating, using and objectifying David as a "Beta" in her, admittedly, pseudo-scientific paper.

It transpires that for "Gender and the Consumerist Impulse," where she was assigned "a lengthy 'anthropological study requiring local fieldwork'" (Wayne, *Loner* 45) she devised an experimental project: "A QUID PRO QUO: A Market-Based Study of Fe(male) Sexual Transactions" (182), involving an Alpha male with "high market value in the heteronormative undergraduate social economy," and a Beta male—David. One of her

research questions was: "To what lengths would Beta extend himself for the presumptive possibility of sex?" (184). It emerges that David, seemingly playfully (?), considered murdering Sara for Veronica, who, when rereading the text, can be seen clearly carefully selecting her sparse words, testing, probing and maneuvering David, as in the scene where she pretends to be stupid, or just lazy and spoilt, and asks David to engage in plagiarism and write essays for her, although as we now see she is perfectly adept at academic writing (if not academic ethics).

Thus, Veronica turns out to be not "just" a victim—contrary to Roiphe's fears, even after attending a safe-sex talk she is not weak and desexualized; in fact, she is very sexually "liberated" and unstereotypically empowered to the point of being fully in control. This is true until the last night before her moving out from the campus (due to David's increasing obnoxiousness), that is—the night she is drunk and takes a sleeping pill and is cowardly attacked by David now feeling double desire: for Veronica and for revenge. The Beta male wants to prove he is Alpha; but all he proves is that he is toxic.

Wayne's *Loner* makes us ponder not just where the toxicity leads, but also where it comes from. Ultimately, the novel's analysis of toxic masculinity points to "the ways that the patriarchy can be damaging to men, not just women" (Wayne, Interview by Scott Simon). This leads to my conclusions about the novel's focus on a toxic masculine perspective, and the victimhood of men undergoing a crisis of traditional patriarchal masculinity.

CONCLUSIONS: MALE VICTIMHOOD—HELP US OR ELSE

It has been the purpose of this paper to demonstrate how *Loner* can be read as a literary commentary on the recent developments within American academia—synecdochically standing for the "culture wars" in the US immediately before and during the "#MeToo era." The novel, in dialogue with American culture and academic discourse, is a monologic narrative with no true dialogue within its plot. The novel's academia is already—theoretically—"politically correct." However, the novel's Harvard is shown as a bastion of elitism, classism, and rape culture, wrapped in the "politically hypercorrect" jargon of the insular, unwelcoming "woke." It proves to be a setting where discourses are embodied, words become flesh, and ideologies clash in practice—either confirming or belying theory, which those studying theory fail to see. This is how the two sides—feminist "wokeness" and male "toxicity"—meet in the text. On the one

hand, through its narrator, the novel voices an academic proficiency in the discourse of feminist theory, women's studies, gender studies and masculinities studies, an academic understanding of gender politics, and the feminist take on sexual abuse and the patriarchal objectification of women (David is intelligent, knows the language, and learns a great deal by mimicry). On the other hand, the novel's narrator embodies many of the very problems that these studies and their practitioners identify and struggle against—at times equating problems with types of people, in effect alienating them. This is how the already alienated David feels discriminated against as an American straight white male in "woke" academia.

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The novel privileges his voice and perspective. This may seem emblematic of the dominant patriarchal norm, which—until very recently—has enforced the routine silencing of women's voices, especially in the context of rape, which in her *Women & Power* Mary Beard dates back to ancient Greece, whose myths and archetypes are proved to still hold a grip on the Western collective imagination.[5] However, what is this privileged voice saying? That he is the victim.

What is this, the opposite of the millennia-old assertion of masculine power, telling us in the historical context of the novel's publication, on the eve of the Me Too movement becoming viral #MeToo, and several years later, upon reading it in light of the movement's impact? As Kantor and Twohey reflect in their 2019 *She Said*, an account of their work on the Weinstein case, some argued that not enough had changed: "Social attitudes were shifting, and there were dramatic accusatory headlines almost daily, but the fundamentals were still largely the same. Sexual harassment laws were largely outdated and spottily enforced" (186–87). On the other hand, "[m]ore and more critics were complaining that men were becoming the victims"; there was a "rising sense of grievance"; and Weinstein's attorney "argued that the charges against Weinstein were just another way in which the #MeToo movement was becoming a witch hunt, a moral panic" (186).

In 2018 Kimmel wrote: "[T]he biggest shift in American masculinity has [already] taken place quietly, with little fanfare and even less media coverage. As women have become increasingly equal, most men have simply accepted these changes" (*Manhood* 317). Yet many (men and women) have not accepted them. A lot has *not* changed in the decades-long reckoning with rape culture, and in the patriarchal gender dynamics. One prominent development is noticeable, however: in the last decade there has been increasing focus on the white man as a victim (Coston and Kimmel)—in a double sense, and *Loner*'s protagonist embodies them both.

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[5]   For more on this topic across ages, geographic locations and cultures, see also Eilberg-Schwartz and Doniger.

The first sense has been recently defined by Richard V. Reeves in his *Of Boys and Men* (2022). The book diagnoses the masculinity crisis as the result of "deep structural challenges" (xi) following "[t]he transformation of the economic relationship between men and women [which] has been so rapid that our culture has not yet caught up" (36). Although Faludi's argument in *Stiffed* about the transformation of the economic system into globalized neoliberal capitalism as the cause of the crisis is far more accurate, Reeves points to indisputable "deaths of despair"—i.e. "mortality from drug overdoses, suicides, and alcohol-related illnesses," which are "almost three times higher among men than women" (60). The latter observation corresponds with general data on a growing mental health crisis in America (Darcy and Mariano). According to Reeves, the solution is "a positive vision of masculinity that is compatible with gender equality" (xii). This view is a feminist one, acknowledging that (with all due proportions) both women and men have been victims of patriarchy, and recognizing that feminist anti-patriarchal struggle has brought more progress for women than for men; therefore, an analogous, effective movement for men's liberation from patriarchy is needed.

The second sense in which the current widely conceived discourse on gender sees the man as a victim is due to male self-victimization weaponized by extremists. Already in the 1990s, Faludi wondered: "Why don't contemporary men rise up in protest against their betrayal? . . . why don't they challenge the culture as women did?" (603). So far, instead of challenging the culture as women did, the most aggrieved contemporary men, like the earlier generations from the beginning of women's fight for equality, have repeatedly challenged women, especially the women who have challenged the culture. Several reasons for this can be listed. Firstly, Reeves points to "the potential for politicians to activate and exploit male anxiety about the loss of status" (126) and quotes former Trump adviser Stephen Bannon: "These guys, these rootless, white males, have monster power'" (120)—energy that can be harnessed for political gain. Secondly, the "rootles white males'" grievances can be capitalized on for financial gain in online "manosphere"—"a world of pickup artists, incels, and even some male separatists—MGTOWs (Men Going Their Own Way)" (121). Unlike any large men-focused anti-patriarchal movements, such pro-patriarchal movements have been more numerous and lasting—the 1970s pro-feminist Men's Liberation was replaced in the 1980s by the not-feminist mythopoetic men's movement and anti-feminist Men's Rights (Coston and Kimmel). On the far-right, a movement known as Proud Boys has joined them more recently. The general anti-feminist backlash is profitable, and its world-famous influencers (Today in Focus) spread online misogyny having visible impact on young people (Science Weekly). Thirdly, amid the abovementioned mental health crisis, US mental health (and other

public) services are famously underfunded, and moreover, those prone to radical indoctrination mistrust the mental health system, which renders therapeutic interventions very challenging (Broyd et al. 258). Real therapy is replaced by toxic "support" groups online. Finally, before the "shootings contagion" (Israni) there may be a "woke"-related victimhood contagion, as many successful social media cancellations have demonstrated that there is power in claiming victim status and righteous retribution-seeking (in the US greatly assisted by uniquely easy access to firearms).

This brings us back to *Loner*'s David—alone at home, online, like many others, harbouring his grievance for at least five years, perhaps longer. The questions about David with which Teddy Wayne leaves us—"What will he do now? What happens next?"— are also questions about America's nearest future.

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