

MAILER'S NEW MAN: DIFFERING
MASCULINITIES IN THE FILM
TOUGH GUYS DON'T DANCE

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Although iconic in many ways, Norman Mailer is not known for his films. Having only created four Hollywood movies, he has been criticized, hailed, and ignored as a director and screenwriter. What follows is a look at his last film, Tough Guys Don't Dance (1987), and the way in which it allows Mailer to explore the ideology of male masculinity in new and unexpected ways. Bolstered by the visual aspect of cinema, Mailer brings to life the convoluted, conflicted, and controversial natures of men, interrogating their identities and pursuing a way of presenting a "new man" through his character of Tim Madden.

NORMAN MAILER IS AN ICON NO STRANGER TO CRITICISM. He battled constantly against critical readings of his work that lambasted his hypermasculine characters, their often complex relationships with sex and women, and his representation and interrogation of sexualities that verge from the narrow, culturally constructed lines of heteronormativity. And while many of his narratives can be read as antithetical to the feminist movement or even homophobic, depending on whose readings one engages with, in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Mailer offers

one of his formal calls for greater enlightenment on the psychological and physical dangers accruing to men's suppression of

one half of their psyche. Here Mailer engages with feminist condemnation of his alleged fascistic tendencies, by treating biologically- and socially-engendered constituents of self-awareness as a means of pitting his narrator against a bigoted spokesperson for the stereotypical and dangerous ideas that made Mailer a looming ideological target for his critics. (Howley 32)

The following analysis argues that Mailer, an ever-changing force in his exploration of gender, sex, and identity, offers through his own adaptation (released in 1987) of his 1984 novel, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, a series of characters that each clearly represent different ways of being “masculine,” setting boundaries between the absurd extremes of hypermasculine men and the masculinities present in women.¹ Emerging from this broad look at the ontology of masculinity is Mailer’s protagonist Tim Madden, a man who forcefully, through a bout of self-inflicted amnesia (an alcohol-based blackout), has not only to find his way through the maze of a noirish crime drama in which he appears to play a central role, but also reevaluates his own persona, his own ideals of manhood, and his identity as a whole.

This film is an aggressive engagement with masculinity, as all of Mailer’s works are aggressive in their interrogative nature. He seems to march forward through the narrative as both writer and director advancing to battle with his own former and present ideology of manhood, not in necessarily the self-reflective way most critics seem to assume, but as a man driven to solve a puzzle or tackle a mountain of ideas that remains untamed. It is reflective of what Christian Messenger discusses in his article “Norman Mailer: Boxing and the Art of His Narrative,” when he recalls Frederic Jameson’s discussion of Mailer’s engagement with ontology.

[Jameson] best expressed Mailer’s commitment to ‘some more primary form of the agon or ontological combat’ that points not merely to ‘unresolved aggressive impulses’ (a favorite psychoanalytic shorthand for critics dismissing what they believe to be Mailer’s privatizing tendencies) but rather to ‘some hypostasis of competition itself as a social and historical mode of being. It is as though within the competitive society Mailer had chosen not to repudiate the dominate value but to adopt it with the fa-

natical exaggeration of the newly-converted, to live it to its ultimate existential limits. . . .’ (86)

Jameson sees how Mailer’s search for answers goes beyond the personal with tendrils searching out for answers well beyond the boundaries of that which Mailer already knows. Using *Tough Guy’s Don’t Dance* as a primary example, he engages with men with grey concepts of sexual identity, men changing their own ideas of themselves due to age, illness, and circumstance. The murkiness of their views is the darkness into which he charges with his film. Mailer presents, in contrast to the patriarch of the film, Dougy (“Doughy” in the novel), different kinds of masculinity and the relevant issues with each, with Tim being a new kind of hero. Unlike the criticism Mailer receives for his emphasis on the hypermasculine and his interrogation of the fear of homosexuality—the violation of man and his power, as it has been described—he allows Tim sensitivity, a kindness towards other forms of men, and presents him as a complete male. It is progressive for the legendary American writer and the film boils down the key messages that are often lost in the study of the larger text from which it is adapted.

Set outside of the mainstream American cultural context, not devoid of socio-political commentary but not dependent upon it, the crime drama pushes its audience to study character rather than context, to study the qualities of modern man without necessarily having to place them within the time period of the film. Although it is arguable that the film, released in 1987 and the book, written in 1984, bring with them unmistakable commentary on 1980s US culture, such as the drug/cartel issues mainstreaming in culture and the emphasis on crime and corruption presented in the book film with white characters, in contrast with the emphasis on black urban violence the news media and politicians of the time was heavily relying on as a kind of catch-all scapegoat for the major problems in US culture. This allusion is a subtle reference, but politically important statement about race.

The detachment of the film offers clearer insight into Mailer’s interrogation of men than the novel, nearly isolating it from the distractions of city life and the political arena. The setting, Provincetown, RI, and the surrounding areas, undoubtedly helps the development of the narrative and serves as a metaphor for the kind of obstacles that Tim must overcome as he searches for his own sense of self.

This interpretation focuses on the film *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, as it is an adaptation that presents a paired down, hard-boiled version of the original text. Through specific directorial decision-making, the manipulation of visuals, strong similarities to classic film noir, and location shooting, Mailer offers his audience his own vision of his novel. The script took six months to write, whereas the novel took two months, which one could argue gave Mailer a second chance to truly develop his story. Mailer has removed large scenes and condensed or even abandoned others for the film. The essence of the story is the same but the insight into the characters, I argue, is more powerful. And the subtleties of the film add sophistication to the theme of male identity that the novel loses in its verbosity.

The noirish qualities of the film help this succinctness as well. "Film noir is almost always retrospective . . . usually relying on flashbacks and voice-over to explain how the protagonist has arrived at his or her fated moment" (Merrill 202). These techniques allow Mailer's adaptation to cut and paste moments from the book into simple allusions or brief off-hand remarks, adding up to narration that is subtle, but important, allowing for less plot discussion and more character development. The retrospective aspect of the film begins with Tim and Dougy's early morning encounter.

THE OLD AND THE NEW

The opening of the film shows aerial views of Provincetown and the surrounding areas. The sky is grey, wind is blowing, the scenery, though beautiful in its melancholy, presents audiences with an immediate feeling of discontent. We feel the isolation of the area, the drab, empty streets and the cabins and homes shut tightly against the weather. The clips of the islands are particularly fascinating in that they emphasize the way in which the setting of the story is cut off from the mainstream socio-political arena of America, the inlets and bays seem like moats around the castle that is Mailer's setting. It is a very stark way to present a crime drama. According to Carl Rollyson in his biography *The Lives of Norman Mailer*,

Tough Guys Don't Dance is about an intermingling of spirits . . . Fortified by the strong presence of Provincetown as a place and, as a paradigm of history, a paradigm of division between perversity and propriety, Mailer is able to create his characters and plot with considerable, if occult, persuasiveness. (336)

The opening shots are noticeably desaturated in color and this quality continues throughout the film. There is also a hint of a blue filter that remains throughout the film. Cinematically we are set up for a sense of world as Tim Madden sees it—unclear, almost foggy, the blue hues setting both tone and hinting at the underlying theme of the study of the masculine.

Tim Madden, the first character introduced, awakens with a sense of dread. He is beaten, bruised, limping, and struggling to compose himself when he hears a noise downstairs that unnerves him. Grabbing a tire iron, he heads cautiously downstairs. He sneaks down the stairwell of a peach- and cream-colored, gilded frame dominated house, one that is clearly feminine and holding all the demarcations of a moneyed home. In addition to the tension the audience feels as Tim approaches the source of the noise, they may also be wondering why a man who has obviously been in a fairly large fight is waking up in a disastrously dainty 1980s bedroom. To the relief of Madden, rather than a murderer awaiting him quietly in his kitchen, he finds his father, Dougy. Not ecstatic at his presence, Tim relaxes regardless, slumping towards the older man in the kind of patriarchal bond common between men and sons with difficult relationships. The trappings of the house reek of new money and questionable decorative taste, yet meet the ideals of a certain mid-1980s US aesthetic, the design of Tim's errant wife Patty Lareine. Mailer manages to convey all of this visually, a well-crafted introduction to his movie that is both helpful for audiences and succinct for narrative purposes. Already Tim is presented as alienated by his surroundings while at the same time, through Dougy's presence, grounded by his past, an excellent introduction to a man searching for answers as to who he truly is.

In the first two active scenes of the film, we are introduced to both Tim and Dougy, the state of Tim as he begins his tale, a foreshadowing of the story to come, and insight into the relationship between father and son. As the second scene progresses, we learn of Tim's plight, his current situation, and we learn about Dougy in detail.

Dougy, a large man, clearly once muscular and physically powerful, is showing the marks of age, and as the audience learns, illness. Tim is shocked at his loss of hair, asking about his chemotherapy. "I quit," Dougy tells him. "The nausea was a disgrace." Aside from an unanswered question about his prognosis, the men leave the illness alone. Tim does ask Dougy if he should drink as the man pours them both large glasses of scotch. "Six months ago

they told me to stop or I'd be dead," he replies. "Now the spirits dance around my bed and they tell me to dance. Tough guys don't dance, I tell 'em. They say 'keep dancing.'" So despite the bleak outlook, the Old Bull, as Tim calls him, is focused very much on the present. Resilient and resistant, he performs the kind of unbendable masculinity associated with some of Mailer's well-known protagonists.

As Dougy grills Tim on where his missing wife is and why he looks so bad, Tim tries to fob him off. When Dougy hears that Patty Lareine took off, he blames Tim. "Any man that marries a rich dame deserves what he gets," he argues. This exchange leads to what seems to be a running conversation between the two, with Dougy telling Tim some women (like Patty Lareine) should wear "shirts that say I'll make a cocksucker outta you." "No offense," he offers, telling Tim it's "just a word." Tim replies, "you always thought I'd turn out queer." But, he is quick to inform his father, he did his three years in the slammer "standing up," not becoming anyone's "punk." Dougy is relieved. He blames Tim's delicate and nurturing mother for his fears that Tim might be gay, but moves the conversation to one that's more touching, more honest. He knows that he is dying and he wants his son to know of his affection for him.

Moving swiftly from this awkward moment of tenderness, he then badgers Tim into recalling his tale of why he is bruised and limping and Tim begins to tell his story of the previous few days. The two bond, Dougy listening actively and, ultimately, helping Tim literally dispose of body parts as the film progresses, an act that implies more than simple fatherly help and protection. The bodies are of the main characters explored in the film, the men and women whose masculinities are interrogated by Mailer. The grey areas of their lives, their differences and Otherness, represent what is initially a gulf between father and son. Dougy fears Tim's lack of traditional masculinity. But as they discard the bodies, the two are left alone: the traditional male ideal of earlier eras and the new man of the latter part of the twentieth century, a man secure in himself yet honest and unafraid of his feminine side.

THOSE IN-BETWEEN

In Tim's first flashback as he relates his last few days to Dougy, his story begins with Patty Lareine's departure with Bolo, "her chauffeur," a reference that some critics have inferred as her taking off romantically with her African American lover. Tim even tells Bolo, "I was her chauffeur once," as the man

loads the bags into the car. But aside from this brief conversation, there is no indication of a relationship between the two. However he is the first man in the story by whom Tim is threatened, a virile male literally taking his wife away, a moment that is repeated throughout the story.

Tim then recalls a party Patty hosted before she left him. It was at this party, a drug and alcohol-fuelled bacchanal showcasing the pseudo-New York party scene being recreated in the isolation of the Provincetown area, there are several members of the LGBTQ community briefly represented and the controlled chaos of a world that Patty clearly enjoys ruling. Yet mid-party the new police captain, Regency, arrives, asking that the noise levels drop. His official role fulfilled, he proceeds to join the party, ogling the women, indulging in illegal substances, and grilling Tim about his wife and his life. Tim is visibly uncomfortable amidst the decadence and equally uncomfortable in the hypermasculine *tête-à-tête* into which he is dragged by the police captain. Amidst the music dancing and chaos and very brief glimpses in the “Other” world of Providence’s LGBTQ community, Regency stands out in his overt masculinity. He is dominating, sexual, and subtly violent in both mannerism and conversation. Through the character of Regency Mailer offers the very picture of a man who has oppressed his feminine side completely. He is uber-masculine, which, as will be discussed below, is to his detriment. His character allows Mailer present a character, a man, losing a war within himself—a war of his own design.

The plot of the film is a twisting turn of a crime drama. It is an interesting take on a man framed, a man who is ill prepared to stop the forces conspiring against him and who, as more elements of the plot reveal themselves, loses rather than gains momentum in his self-assurance that he can clear his name. This residue is evident in the way his voice-overs and flashbacks reveal the lack of clarity of his own story. What is interesting, as Ashton Howley notes in “Mailer Again: Heterophobia in Tough Guys Don’t Dance,” as Tim attempts to struggle to

make personal history out of his alcoholic blackouts, amnesia, and nightterrors, [he] quickly sees that his dependencies on booze and dope are mechanisms that manifest the endless tautologies of his eddying sexual fears and anxieties. As his narrative, the emerging narrative of his subconscious, soon reveals, his attempts to re-examine heights and depths of his sexual ex-

periences with Patty, Madeline, and Jessica, modulate into his desire to compare himself to other men who have been physically intimate with the same women. (36)

As Tim's tale progresses, so too the introduction of more and more characters, all of whom have a connection with both the murder plot and his sexual history. Madeline, for example, the woman he left behind to marry Patty, is now married to Regency. Tim struggles throughout the film (both in flashbacks and in his discussion with Dougy) to understand how she could move onto a man like Regency. He is a violent, unstable man. A Vietnam vet, a corrupt cop, and, ultimately, a murderer. He tells Tim he has two sides to himself: the enforcer and the maniac. He has carved out what are typically identified as the "feminine" traits within himself and it becomes obvious that by destroying half of his true self he ultimately goes insane—he becomes "the maniac."

Tim's flashbacks to Madeline go from happy to dissatisfied, at one point so much so that he suggests swinging as a way to lighten up their life together. She agrees and the two travel south where they meet Patty and Big Stoop, a mountain of a man who seems to truly give Madeline an enjoyable night of sexual satisfaction. He is also a backwoods preacher, giving the audience a uniquely awkward moment in the film as both couples find themselves in church together. But beyond the sex, however, Tim finds himself drawn to Patty and, as she so boldly tells him, she will leave Big Stoop, marry for money, then come find Tim and support his writing.

With dedication and single-minded selfishness, Patty does as she told Tim she would—she leaves Stoop, marries Wardley Meeks III, divorces him, and marries Tim. She bores of Tim, however, and it is her leaving (with Bolo, who may or may not be her new lover) that spurs the actions of the film into high gear. In his depressed state after Patty's departure, a drunk and miserable Tim meets a couple from California, who suggest that they are simply "on vacation." As the night wears on, Tim, the older and very effeminate Lonnie Pangborn, and his former pornstar wife Jessica move their party onward. It is later that evening that Tim shamelessly engages in numerous sexual acts with Jessica in front of Lonnie. From this moment forward, however, Tim's memory starts to disappear and days later Lonnie is found dead in his own car trunk. Jessica's head turns up in Tim's marijuana stash in the woods, and the protagonist's life completely unravels.

As Howley suggests above, as Tim tries to recover his memories and clear his name, he is constantly faced not only with the other men his former partners have been with, but he is also faced with complex ideals of good and evil and right and wrong. From his time with Madeline and their swinger experience, it appears that Tim's life is a series of questions about his own morality, his own culpability in various tragedies, and his role in other peoples' lives. Most notably he struggles with the guilt he feels for causing Madeline's infertility. After their trip to see Patty and Stoop, the car Tim is driving is involved in a crash, forever changing her life. The epistemological struggle is real for him, just as is the practical ontological struggle as he tries to untangle the crime drama in which he is embroiled.

Although Lonnie and Jessica depart his life in dramatic fashion, it seems Patty and Wardley are destined to remain entangled with him. Lonnie and a homosexual man, supposedly finding physical enjoyment with Jessica, who is a friend (possibly a partner?) of Wardley's. Wardley and the ever-plotting Patty Lareine had sent Jessica and Lonnie to secure cocaine from the former dealer Tim. However, Tim remained unaware of the situation, until Wardley shows up searching for the money. Not only is Wardley Jessica's former husband, he is also a former college football teammate of Tim's. And so Tim is yet again face to face with a former lover's partner, worse yet as he is, in some form, a former friend. Wardley Meeks, however, is anything but hypermasculine. Effeminate with a strong preference for male lovers, Wardley's "strength" comes from his excessive wealth and ability to manipulate situations in his favor. He can outsmart and outspend Tim, even if he cannot match his physical strength. Tim is faced with the reality of his situation: did he damage Lonnie's psyche with his antics with Jessica to prove his masculinity? Is he determined to rid himself of Meeks for self-preservation or to once again prove his dominance? The plot and the personal struggles become one at this point in the film.

As Tim faces enough struggles to drown any protagonist, he receives word from Madeline that Regency is having an affair with Patty. He goes to see Madeline in her home, only to recognize how truly disturbed Regency is, his weaponry from Vietnam proudly displayed with the exception of a missing machete. Fearing for Madeline's safety, Tim begins to try to solve the mystery with verve.

Although determined to help himself alone, when Patty's head turns up next to Jessica's, Dougy comes to Tim's aid as the two struggle to put the

pieces together. Dougy also offers to dispose of the heads, certain that Tim's disposition cannot handle the gruesome task. So now Tim is working with Dougy, the traditional patriarch, working against Regency, the authoritative, hypermasculine, psychopath and somehow finds himself working both with and against Wardley, the effete pretender. As the plot thickens, so does Tim's dance with more and more complex masculine ideologies.

When Tim realizes it was Wardley who had set him up against Lonnie and Jessica, and Wardley becomes more and more determined to regain his missing drug money, the two have what appears will be a final standoff. Wardley is armed as he marches Tim through the dunes. The two sit, at Wardley's request, and talk, Tim trying to talk himself out of being on the wrong side of Wardley's gun and Wardley trying to find some kind of equality with Tim. Having both admired and loved him, Wardley struggles with his emotions. As the two talk, Tim actually comforts Wardley, taking his head onto his shoulder tenderly before the weeping Wardley kills himself. It is in this moment that Tim becomes truly the man the audience sees at the film's end.

By the end of the film, he has found peace in the Lonnie and Jessica situation, learning that she killed Lonnie and he was not responsible for driving him to suicide. He accepts Wardley for who he truly is, giving the man his own sense of peace before he ends his life, he takes on Regency and proves his guilt, and he reunites with Madeline, the "right" girl for him, according to his father. And a smart one, too—she's the only one to find the missing money and presents Tim with their new mansion at the end of the film. Tim accepts it with a smile, proud of his brilliant girlfriend and in no way threatened by her final coup over Regency.

In the body-tossing scene, Tim and Dougy truly connect, and the wholeness of Tim's identity appears strong as the gulf between estranged father and son is crossed. Dougy no longer questions Tim's manhood and Tim is no longer threatened by his father's lack of respect. The others they toss into the bay represent the ideologies that have kept them apart, and, once the boat is empty, it is clear that Tim is his own man, a new ideal of masculine strength that is both feminine and masculine, tough and sensitive, smart and physical.

NOTE

1. Although an exploration of the women in the film, their masculinity in particular, would be a fascinating discussion, due to length restrictions this article focuses on the men of the novel.

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