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“Looking Behind the Normative Mask: The Corrosive Effects of White Masculinity on Male and Female Performative Identities in *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz,” English Honors Thesis

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Judith Butler posited the idea that gender identity is essentially a performance. This performance is the culmination of centuries of ideas, customs, and behaviors that have changed in subtle ways over time, but often have retained core values that make them recognizable today. In modern American society, the most privileged gender identity is that of man, and more specifically, of a white man. This privilege stems from centuries of European patriarchal dominance in all aspects of life. Modern white masculinity is the child of the patriarchy, the gender expression that dictates the rules of gender normativity across various cultures. At its most basic level, white masculinity is a corrosive element within society, creating layers of “normative” regulations and expectations that are impossible to meet. The inability to live up to these standards causes the toxic element within our society. In addition to affecting men, masculinity in its capacity as a “dominant” gender expression causes ripple effects on alternate genders, most notably that of women. Femininity is the other half of the binary enforced by the patriarchy, and its own rules and standards are dictated by the more “dominant” masculine element.

In the novels *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz, the authors provide ample examples of white masculinity and its deleterious effects. Hemingway details a narrative rife with beauty and pain as his characters struggle to maintain a passing semblance of normalcy while coping with the effects of the First Great War. As their society begins to change in fundamental ways, these characters stop losing faith in the masks they wear and begin to show the immense strain of both living by the rules of society and of deliberately going against them. Díaz creates an equally vivid tale, but his characters are vastly different from Hemingway’s. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* explores the experience of a Dominican immigrant family. Readers watch Oscar De Leon, the titular character, grow up caught between the world of fantasy and the Dominican hypermasculinity portrayed in the novel, which is itself greatly influenced by European beliefs. He, his family, and the narrator all exemplify the experiences of people whose natural identities do not align with even the marginalized communities in which they find themselves. In both of these novels, gender is a complex, constantly growing and adapting concept, and its presence in lives of these characters is source of most, if not all, their internal conflicts.