

OBSESITY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE MALE BODY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Locating representations of the male body in literature has traditionally proven more difficult than tracing representations of the female body, which have been extensively theorized since the emergence of feminist criticism in the 1970s. This paper examines the representation of the obese male body in contemporary American literature, focusing on Louis Gallo's long poem "Fat Man at the Aquarium" alongside Raymond Carver's short story "Fat." While obesity is frequently framed within cultural discourse as abnormal or aberrant, this study explores how literary form mediates such judgments. Through a comparative analysis, the paper argues that Carver's minimalist narrative contains bodily difference through restraint and exteriorization, whereas Gallo's poem radicalizes the gaze, transforming the obese male body into a site of anxiety, projection, and symbolic violence. Read together, these texts illuminate how regimes of bodily normativity shape the visibility, interpretation, and dehumanization of the obese male body in modern American culture.

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1 Introduction

Locating the theme of the male body in literature has traditionally been more difficult than tracing representations of the female body. Since the emergence of feminist criticism in the 1970s in the United States and its subsequent development, the female body – long neglected, repressed, or idealized – has been vigorously reclaimed as a central object of scholarly inquiry. By contrast, the male body and masculinity more broadly have often remained unmarked, functioning as the normative and therefore invisible standard against which other bodies are measured. As Sean Nixon observes, much early literary and cultural criticism concerned with masculinity focused primarily on “the negative effects of dominant definitions of masculinity on women’s relationship with men in both the public and private worlds” (Nixon 1997: 296), rather than on masculinity as a condition in its own right. Consequently, even when bodies are problematized in literary criticism, they are most often female bodies, while male embodiment continues to operate as an unmarked category.

This imbalance is particularly evident in critical discussions of fatness and obesity in literature, where the female body has been more frequently scrutinized, pathologized, and symbolically charged. In his essay “American Fat: Obesity and the Short Story,” Lionel Kelly analyzes four short stories united by their exploration of the relationship between obesity and sexuality. Significantly, three of the four protagonists he examines are female. The only exception is “Fat” by Raymond Carver, which centers on an obese male figure, yet even there the male body remains externally focalized and deprived of narrative interiority. The scarcity of critical attention to the obese male body thus mirrors a broader tendency to treat masculinity as a default, rather than as a historically and culturally contingent embodied position.

Against this critical backdrop, the present chapter analyzes representations of the fat male body in American literature through a comparative reading of the long poem “Fat Man at the Aquarium” by Louis Gallo¹ and Carver’s² short story “Fat.” While Carver’s minimalist narrative stages obesity as an object of quiet scrutiny and

¹ Louis Gallo has published numerous poetry collections, has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations, and is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant for fiction. He is professor emeritus at Radford University.

² Raymond Carver (1938–1988) was an influential American short-story writer and poet, closely associated with literary minimalism and known for his restrained depiction of everyday life and marginality.

subdued fascination, Gallo's poem radicalizes the gaze, transforming bodily deviation into a site of anxiety, misrecognition, and symbolic violence. Read together, these texts illuminate how the fat male body is rendered visible, judged, and ultimately destabilized within contemporary regimes of bodily normativity. By focusing on the male obese body as a representational problem rather than a medical condition, this chapter seeks to contribute to ongoing debates about male bodies, masculinity, and the cultural politics of obesity in modern literature. I will first outline theoretical approaches to bodily normativity, then analyze Carver's narrative containment of obesity, and finally Gallo's escalation of the gaze into symbolic violence.

2 Normativity, Masculinity, and the Obese Body

Discourses of the body in contemporary society are governed by an imperative of normativity, through which bodily difference is continuously measured, ranked, and evaluated. There is a persistent urge toward "normalcy," and the normal today is frequently equated with perfection. Individuals are expected to exercise, monitor their weight, and track cholesterol levels; within this framework, the normal or ideal body is certainly not fat. Lennard J. Davis explains that at one point in history the average became a kind of ideal, standing in opposition to an earlier belief in which only a divine body functioned as the ideal. As Davis points out, "the concept of a norm ... implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm" (Davis 1995: 29). This idea, however, no longer adequately accounts for contemporary bodily ideals. Instead, as Davis argues, a new model has emerged – an ideal of ranked order – "powered by the imperative of the norm, and then supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance, to create a dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should be" (Davis 1995: 35).

Moreover, the image of the modern body is produced and reinforced through media, whether literary or visual. While contemporary culture applies these bodily norms to both female and male bodies, I will focus on the representation of the male body in American literature, a field that has received comparatively less critical attention. Conceptions of the male body have, of course, shifted historically. In her work on representations of the fat male body, Ann Mikkelsen notes that "while fat men early in the nineteenth century could be prominent and admired, 'protective and reassuring' members of society, their days as representative citizens were numbered"

(Mikkelsen 2003: 111). She further observes that by the 1920s, Americans began dieting in large numbers, following new fads in an effort to counteract overconsumption and disease (Mikkelsen 2003: 111). During this period, the term *fat* increasingly acquired negative connotations.³ As a result, the modern male body must be understood as “the product of an American society in which masculinity was an extremely fraught and contested cultural site” (Mikkelsen 2003: 106).

Mid-twentieth-century cultural icons such as James Dean, particularly in the movie *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), contributed significantly to reshaping the image of the modern man. Along with figures such as Marlon Brando, Dean embodied a new visual ideal of masculinity that later persisted through advertising campaigns – most notably Levi’s jeans, the Marlboro Man, and Calvin Klein models. Many cultural critics have identified this shift as a sexualization of the male body. As Sean Nixon observes, “a foregrounding of similar physical characteristics (the developed arm and chest muscles), together with highly groomed hair and skin, also figured in the range of male pin-ups featured on posters, postcards and greetings cards...” (Nixon 1997: 294). In American society, this visual regime has intensified to the point where bodily perfection – defined by leanness, muscular definition, and flawless appearance – has become an implicit requirement. As Maud Ellmann observes in her essay “Eating, Obesity and Literature,” in the United States “the ‘war on fat’ dominates the media, with doctors and politicians constantly exhorting us to eat less and move more” (Ellmann 2015: 59).

In the twenty-first century, however, these visual norms are no longer disseminated primarily through film, print advertising, or literature alone, but through social media platforms, where the ideal male body is continuously produced, circulated, and evaluated. Social media intensifies the imperative of bodily normalcy by transforming the gaze into a participatory and measurable practice: bodies are not only seen, but ranked, liked, followed, and algorithmically rewarded. Within this environment, the male body becomes a project of permanent self-optimization, while bodies that deviate from the dominant aesthetic – particularly obese bodies – are rendered hyper-visible as failures of discipline, control, and masculinity.

³ The term *fat* is used here in an analytical and historical sense, reflecting its circulation within both the primary literary texts by both Carver and Gallo, and the critical discourse under discussion. While the term has acquired increasingly negative connotations within modern medical, aesthetic, and moral frameworks, its retention here serves to foreground the cultural work performed by bodily naming rather than to adopt euphemistic or strictly medicalized alternatives such as *overweight* or *obese*.

Against this visual economy, the tradition of idealized masculinity has not disappeared but has instead intensified and diversified. Contemporary figures such as David Beckham, whose athletic body circulated extensively through fashion campaigns and lifestyle branding, and Chris Hemsworth, whose hyper-muscular physique exemplifies contemporary fitness and superhero aesthetics, represent forms of masculinity defined by visible discipline, bodily optimization, and permanent display. Circulated through advertising and, increasingly, through social media, such bodies function as normative templates against which other male bodies – particularly obese ones – are rendered deficient, excessive, or unintelligible.

The only context in which contemporary culture appears to tolerate the fat male body is comedy.⁴ One may consider the actor John Candy, whose fatness remained a stable, non-transitional feature of his comic persona rather than a condition framed through narratives of bodily correction or transformation. In contemporary popular culture, figures such as Jack Black continue this tradition, in which the fat male body is rendered socially acceptable through excess, humor, and self-parody, rather than through normalization. By contrast, the public reception of Jonah Hill reveals the conditional nature of this acceptance, insofar as fatness is tolerated only when embedded in narratives of comic vulnerability, arrested development, or eventual bodily transformation.

Despite the pervasive cultural imperative toward bodily ideality, statistical data indicate that a substantial proportion of the population remains overweight. As Lionel Kelly notes, within medical discourse obesity in contemporary America is commonly attributed to sedentary lifestyles, excessive consumption, and the widespread availability of inexpensive, highly palatable food, even as it may signify either wealth or poverty in individual cases (Kelly 2001: 218). Yet the prevalence of overweight bodies has not resulted in their cultural normalization. On the contrary, within societies structured by norms of bodily discipline and self-control, obese individuals are frequently rendered socially unacceptable or implicitly inferior. As Kelly observes, “bearing in mind the norms of physical well-being as these are socially construed, the obese figure ... is commonly represented as the abnormal and aberrant” (Kelly 2001: 219).

⁴ Additionally, Ellmann has observed, the fat body may also find conditional acceptance within certain marginal genres of pornography, where excess becomes eroticized through prohibition. As she notes, “like other secret vices, however, fat and gluttony have gained a new allure by virtue of their prohibition” (Ellmann 2015: 60).

While Kelly's discussion is grounded in an American context, the stigmatization of obesity operates more broadly across contemporary Western societies, where similar regimes of bodily surveillance, aesthetic regulation, and moralized health prevail through media, medicine, and popular culture. Within such contexts, obesity functions not merely as a physical condition but as a culturally charged marker of deviation, failure, and excess. At the same time, the American context remains particularly revealing due to its global cultural influence and its central role in producing and exporting visual ideals of masculinity. Literary representations emerging from this context therefore offer a concentrated view of how obesity becomes marked as deviance, excess, and social threat. It is this representational logic – rather than medical causality – that informs the literary constructions of the fat male body examined in the analyses that follow.

3 Representing the Obese Male Body: From Narrative Containment to Symbolic Violence

In the short story "Fat" by Raymond Carver, first published in 1976, the obese male body is rendered visible within everyday social interaction, yet carefully neutralized through narrative restraint, external focalization, and the absence of overt moral judgment. The narrative follows a young waitress working in a diner, whose attention is repeatedly drawn to the physical presence of an obese male customer, whom she describes as "the fattest person I have ever seen" (Carver 1992: 3). Crucially, however, the fat male body is not granted narrative interiority; instead, it is mediated entirely through another's perspective, which fixates on bodily details such as the man's excessively fat fingers, described as "long, thick, creamy fingers" – details registered with a mixture of fascination and unease.

As Maud Ellmann observes, these particularities appear "more teat-like than phallic," suggesting something "feminine" rather than conventionally masculine (Ellmann 2015: 67). Such a description resonates with a broader cultural association that links obese male bodies to asexuality or even impotence. This, in turn, recalls Freud's notion of sexuality in relation to normalcy. As Lennard J. Davis summarizes Freud's position, "if the *vita sexualis* is normal, there can be no neurosis" (Davis 1992: 39). Rather than functioning as a causal explanation, this logic reflects a cultural fantasy in which bodily normativity and sexual normativity are imagined as mutually reinforcing: if the fat man had a "normal" psychosexual development, he

would not be fat, and because he is fat, he is presumed not to enjoy a “normal” sexuality.

In this sense, obesity becomes legible not merely as a physical condition but as a signifier of psychological, moral, or social failure. In his essay “Disease and Anti-naturalism in Raymond Carver’s “Fat” and “A Small, Good Thing” and David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*,” David Roche similarly connects obesity to disease, arguing that in Carver’s story “physical disease operates mainly as a metaphor for mental, moral and even social ills” (Roche 2006: 160).

Carver’s story thus exemplifies a representational mode in which the obese male body, when it appears in literature, is rendered primarily as an object of the gaze rather than as a speaking or self-interpreting subject. Although the waitress herself remains relatively neutral and approaches the man with curiosity—at one point even telling him that she likes “to see a man eat and enjoy himself” (Carver 1992: 5) – this attitude is not shared by the other staff members in the diner. Their reactions are marked by ridicule, as they refer to the customer as “a fatty,” “an old tub-of-guts,” or “a fat man from the circus.” As Ellmann notes, “the chorus of mockery serves to distance and dehumanize the fat man, but also indicates excited interest: the fat man causes a stir in what is evidently a tedious routine. The name-calling is an attempt to keep the fat man in his place, to prevent his fat from overflowing and engulfing his observers” (Ellmann 2015: 67).

To this group, the fat man appears abnormal, even threatening, particularly in moments of physical closeness. Another waitress, Harriet, warns the narrator: “He’s going to run your legs off” (Carver 1992: 5). Roche characterizes such a body that fails to conform to dominant norms as a “foreign body” (Roche 2006: 161). This process of marking bodily difference recalls Judith Butler’s argument that the human body is fashioned by norms articulated through multiple discourses. As Butler explains, “sex’ as an imperative in this way means that a subject is addressed and produced by such a norm, and that this norm—and the regulatory power of which it is a token—materializes bodies as an effect of that injunction” (Butler 1993: 187). In Carver’s story, these regulatory norms are not dramatized through overt conflict or symbolic excess but are instead mediated through a restrained narrative form that limits their representational impact.

Carver's minimalist narrative style plays a crucial role in containing the representational force of the obese male body. By resisting metaphorical excess, psychological speculation, or symbolic inflation, the text limits the range of meanings that can be projected onto the fat man's body. Obesity remains conspicuous, but it is not transformed into an allegory or moral spectacle. This aesthetic restraint produces a form of ethical containment: the fat male body is subjected to scrutiny and social regulation, yet it is not driven toward narrative catastrophe or symbolic annihilation. In this way, "Fat" exemplifies a mode of representation in which bodily difference is acknowledged and managed, rather than violently expelled – a mode that will be radically destabilized in Louis Gallo's long poem "Fat Man at the Aquarium."

"Fat Man at the Aquarium" consists of five parts and situates the reader in an aquarium in New Orleans, which the speaker visits together with his family. The family includes his seventy-five-year-old mother, his wife Cathy, and two daughters, Claire and Maddie. Immediately upon stepping out of their car, they encounter a man and his companion. Gallo introduces this figure simply and insistently as fat. His first portrayal of the fat man reads: "The man is behemoth, at least four feet wide, / and supports himself on titanium canes / which I'm guessing will snap at any moment..." (Gallo 2020: 73). Similar descriptions recur throughout the poem – "that bounty of flesh, / the fragile heart flapping inside like butterfly wings, / reports of epidemic heat strokes" – formulated in an intensely ironic and often sarcastic tone.

Although there is no direct interaction between the family and the fat man or his companion at this point, the reader is immediately confronted with the speaker's irritation at the man's presence. The speaker cannot understand "why a human boulder would want to venture out [...]" (Gallo 2020: 73), even though he himself and his entire family are "out there." Given the language used to describe the fat man, the speaker's dislike – and even disgust – appears to stem solely from his contemptuous perception of the man's body. Inside the aquarium, as the family observes various sea animals, "from nowhere, the fat man appears" (Gallo 2020: 74). The speaker exaggerates his panicked response: "But he's too close / to the girls, to Cathy. I don't want him there, in the videos, / in our memories" (Gallo 2020: 74). The fat man's proximity is experienced as a threat to the speaker's family, despite the absence of any concrete action, producing a sense of unease that closely recalls

Carver's depiction of bodily closeness as inherently disruptive, where the obese male body is perceived as potentially dangerous simply by occupying shared space.

In response to this perceived threat, the family withdraws into another room, attempting to reestablish distance and regain a sense of control, eventually settling in McDonald's. They eat hamburgers and French fries, and the speaker suddenly reflects: "McDonald's! We could be in China" (Gallo 2020: 77). Alongside this reference, the poem includes other recognizable markers of American consumer culture: popcorn, Milky Way, Pepsi. Their presence in McDonald's is ostensibly motivated by hunger and convenience. Yet when "the fat man and his consort arrive" (Gallo 2020: 77), the speaker's wife also becomes irritated by their presence. When the fat man begins to eat, the speaker re-describes the same type of food the family has just consumed as "a tray stacked with heavy, oily burgers. / No glandular distress here, just basic gluttony" (Gallo 2020: 77). The speaker's attitude is openly judgmental, and his depiction of the fat man grows increasingly grotesque: "The fat man tears off a paper wrapper and consumes half the sandwich / in a single bite... He seems rhapsodic, / closes his eyes and daven[s] as he chews, spittle and bits of food inching down his chin" (Gallo 2020: 77). The insistence on "consumes" rather than *eats* reinforces an exaggerated and dehumanizing portrayal, a strategy that sharply intensifies a logic already present in Carver's story, where eating likewise becomes a site of scrutiny and ridicule. In Carver, this dehumanization is articulated through a collective mechanism of derision that distances the fat man from social normativity, even as his brief appeal to the collective "we" registers as a limited and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to resist that process.

The speaker's condemnation of the fat man's eating in Gallo's poem is particularly revealing given that the family has just *consumed* the same food moments earlier. This asymmetry exposes the instability of moral judgment under regimes of bodily normativity, where identical actions acquire radically different meanings depending on the body that performs them. In this sense, obesity functions as a visual and moral filter through which ordinary behaviors are recorded as excessive, obscene, or threatening. The fat man's body thus becomes the site onto which broader anxieties about consumption, self-control, and social order are projected, allowing the speaker to externalize his own participation in the very practices he condemns. What is at stake here is not food itself, but the visibility of bodily excess, which transforms eating into a spectacle of moral failure when performed by the obese body. Gallo's

poem therefore stages not simply personal prejudice, but the operation of a wider cultural logic in which bodily form determines ethical meaning.

This judgment does not remain confined to the fat man's body; rather, it extends to his companion, whose presence is likewise interpreted through the speaker's normative assumptions. He assumes that the woman accompanying him must be either his sister or caretaker: "I also know the woman with the fat man is not his mother or wife. / Sister maybe, his last linkage with that easy, wondrous realm of women" (Gallo 2020: 75). This preconception stands in stark contrast to the speaker's own situation, which he earlier presents with pride: "[...] my family / which has come to consist solely of women" (Gallo 2020: 73). As in Carver's "Fat," obesity is implicitly associated with asexuality: the fat man is imagined as incapable of being a husband or romantic partner. Gallo thus reinforces a cultural notion in which the obese male body is positioned outside normative sexuality.

In addition to the human body, Gallo's poem presents a series of animal bodies. While the fat man's body is repeatedly framed as excessive and unacceptable, the bodies of sea animals are consistently rendered as pleasurable to observe. Each species is described as admirable, powerful, or charming. Sharks, though not beautiful, are depicted as bestial and therefore respected; tortoises are "ancient as the earth itself" (Gallo 2020: 74), a quality the speaker appears to admire; penguins are "tuxedoed clowns" (Gallo 2020: 75). The most elaborate description is reserved for a jellyfish, portrayed as "a sole, flamboyant jelly-fish: translucent, a fanfare of silken [...] ethereal, sovereign, majestically alone..." (Gallo 2020: 75). In this visual imagery, animal bodies are rendered pleasurable, while the fat man's body fails to find a place.

The only moment of partial alignment occurs when the speaker compares the fat man to a whale. This comparison is paradoxical: although the speaker accepts other sea creatures, the whale – like the fat man – is rejected. At one point, the speaker even exclaims, "*Get out of my ocean!*" (Gallo 2020: 76), a possessive gesture that reveals a fantasy of territorial ownership. This projection invites the reader to question what the speaker seeks to protect or conceal. As David William Foster notes, the body often functions "as a metonym for social issues" (Foster 1994: 320). The whale metaphor extends further when the speaker imagines his lost daughter "*riding one of the sea horses, lassoing a sardine or two*" (Gallo 2020: 76), while the whale remains a

disturbing presence. Like whales, the fat man cannot abandon his environment; his very existence disrupts the normative order.

Although the poem unfolds within an aquarium, the speaker rarely engages fully with this environment, continually redirecting attention back to the fat man and compelling the reader to follow. The speaker's gaze becomes obsessive. Drawing on Freudian theory, this dynamic may be understood through the lens of scopophilia. As Laura Mulvey explains, "scopophilic [aspect] arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (Mulvey 2009: 20). In Gallo's poem, however, the gaze produces not pleasure but disgust, revealing scopophilia stripped of erotic reward and reconfigured as a mechanism of surveillance and control. The spectator continues to look, yet derives no satisfaction – a dynamic that may be described as anti-scopophilia. In this configuration, looking functions not as a source of pleasure but as a compulsive act of monitoring, through which bodily difference is repeatedly confirmed, judged, and rendered intolerable. The fat man is constructed as object, destabilizing the speaker's sense of the ordinary.

This destabilization culminates in the speaker's perception of the situation as dreamlike. The images become "archetypal omens torpedoed out of some dream" (Gallo 2020: 77), yet the speaker remains unable to interpret them: "But what dream? What do they represent? / Signs, a universe of signs: sharks, jellyfish, sardines [...] the fat man" (Gallo 2020: 77). Carl Gustav Jung suggests that works of art draw upon the "collective unconscious," whose archetypal images possess intense emotional force but require interpretation (Jung 2001: 1000–1001). The speaker, however, is "at a loss to translate" (Gallo 2020: 77), and Jung himself reminds us that such figures "still have to be translated into conceptual language" (Jung 2001: 1001).

Unable to make sense of these signs, the speaker ultimately imagines killing the fat man in the aquarium gift shop. He lists an escalating series of justifications for the act – ranging from moral outrage to bodily disgust – in a frantic accumulation of accusations:

I kill him for abducting my lost daughter, for / mayhem of spirit, for lack of
equipoise, for getting too close / to Cathy, Maddie and Claire, for the obscenity of
his being, for enslaving his sister, / caretaker or whatever [...] I kill him for imposing
his severity into our memories, / for sweating too much, for leaving the death bed

to visit an aquarium, / for devouring the world, for diving into a tank of sharks, / for strangling the jelly fish with his swollen fingers, for loitering / near female bathrooms . . . I kill him for all of us, for the world, / for justice and peace of mind, for atonement (Gallo 2020: 79).

Yet this symbolic act of violence ultimately fails. The fat man does not die; instead, “he grows fatter” (Gallo 2020: 79), exposing the futility of attempting to eradicate bodily deviance through projection or destruction. The excessiveness of this catalogue is crucial. The speaker’s justifications move rapidly from imagined personal threat (“getting too close to Cathy, / Maddie and Claire”) to moral judgment (“the obscenity of his being”), from bodily processes (“sweating too much”) to grandiose abstractions (“for the world, for justice / and peace of mind”). In this way, the fat man becomes a repository for heterogeneous anxieties that far exceed any plausible individual action. What the list stages is not causality but accumulation: each charge reinforces the previous one, producing a logic in which bodily excess is conflated with moral, social, and even cosmic disorder. The fantasy of murder thus emerges as an attempt to restore coherence and control in the face of a body that resists interpretation and containment. Importantly, the speaker frames the act as collective and altruistic – “for all of us” – thereby converting private disgust into a purportedly universal ethical imperative. Symbolic violence is here legitimized through appeal to normativity itself, revealing how the obese body is constructed not merely as undesirable, but as a threat whose eradication appears, within this distorted logic, both necessary and justifiable.

4 Conclusion

To conclude, representations of the obese male body in American literature reveal a persistent tension between visibility, normativity, and control, a tension that culminates most violently in Gallo’s “Fat Man at the Aquarium.” Considered within the broader cultural and theoretical context outlined at the beginning of this chapter, the motives for this symbolic violence may be understood as threefold: first, the speaker’s inability to accept the fat man’s appearance within a culture governed by ideals of bodily perfection; second, the failure of scopophilic desire, in which the act of looking produces not pleasure but anxiety and disgust; and third, the speaker’s incapacity to translate the archetypal figures that overwhelm him – an incapacity he himself acknowledges when he confesses to have misread the omens. What emerges

here is not a singular motivation but a convergence of cultural pressures that render bodily difference unreadable except through fear, projection, and moralization.

As David William Foster suggests, literary representations of the body often function as sites where “the relationship between one’s body and one’s perceptions of it, ranging from inner spiritual feelings to various forms of self-contemplation,” are exposed (Foster 1994: 320). In Gallo’s poem, the speaker does arrive at a moment of self-contemplation, yet this moment is defined less by insight than by failure. His reflection serves only to register his inability to reconcile bodily difference with normative expectations. In his pursuit of an “ideal normalcy,” the speaker fails – fails to interpret the signs before him, fails to contain his anxiety, and ultimately fails to destroy what he perceives as disturbing or threatening. This failure is not merely personal, but symptomatic of a broader cultural logic that demands bodily conformity while offering no stable framework for engaging with deviation.

Read in relation to the short story “Fat,” this failure becomes particularly revealing. Where Carver’s minimalist narrative contains the obese male body through restraint and ethical distance, Gallo’s poem dramatizes the consequences of excess: the escalation of the gaze into obsession, the transformation of difference into threat, and the fantasy of eradication as a solution to discomfort. Yet even this fantasy collapses. The fat man does not die; instead, he “grows fatter,” underscoring the futility of symbolic violence as a response to bodily deviance and the persistence of the body as that which resists narrative and moral closure.

Taken together, these texts illuminate how the obese male body in American literature functions as a site of cultural tension, where norms of masculinity, visibility, and control are both enforced and undone. Rather than offering resolution, both works expose the instability of bodily normativity itself, suggesting that what appears excessive or aberrant cannot ultimately be expelled, but only repeatedly misrecognized within cultural frameworks that seek to discipline the body while remaining unable to accommodate its difference. In this sense, literary representations of obesity do not simply reflect social attitudes, but actively interrogate the limits of normative thinking itself.

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