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### Toxic Masculinity in *Twelve Angry Men*

When I was young, I would watch movies with my father. At pivotal moments, he would pause the scene and ask me what the characters might be thinking or feeling. He was asking me to peer inside their character and perceive their subjective experience in that moment and convey the feeling in words. One such film that I remember fondly was *Twelve Angry Men* written by Reginald Rose and directed by Sidney Lumet. It was a near perfect movie for that game we played for a variety of the reasons. Most obviously, *Twelve Angry Men* is a uniquely intimate experience taking place almost entirely in a single deliberation room. The feeling of intimacy is created by a downplayed cinegraphic style which emphasizes character and dialogue. There are no cuts which imply passage of time—we experience the same amount of time the jurors do—and for the most part we see and hear only what the jurors do. When a standing character talks to a sitting character we tend to get low angle shots from the sitting characters perspective and vice versa. The beats are entirely made up of human dialogue and interaction. Nothing in the film feels larger than life: we discover the truth with the jury.

Perhaps the best example of this ‘about people, for people’ is the plot. The film solely consists twelve white, male, jurors deliberating over a murder case. A poor, 18-year-old male of an unclear (although notably not white) ethnic background is being tried for murdering his father, and the jury must decide whether to send him to the electric chair or set him free. While the case

seems like it should be open-and-shut with the mountain of evidence against the teenager, there are two important factors which allow the story to happen. First, the judge stipulates that there can be no dissenting jurors; everyone must come to a consensus on guilty or innocent. Secondly, our hero, Henry Fonda playing Juror 8, believes something about this case isn't quite right and refuses to send the kid to death without a proper analysis of the evidence. The eighth juror slowly convinces all 11 other jurors that the evidence doesn't form a cohesive enough case to dissuade reasonable doubt. He wins battles of rhetoric, illuminates others' biases, and does his civil duty. It truly is an American film that demonstrates the virtue of the American court system. This film wants to be part of a shifting white American attitude that isn't racist or classist, but inclusive. It fits well into a larger trend of patriotic American movies showing how great America is. *Twelve Angry Men* wants to invigorate Americans with the simultaneously progressive and problematic message: the bigots are a bad minority and our freedom ensuring institutions help us find the truth.

I am by no means the first person to notice the innovation and creative genius that is *12 Angry Men*. It's a bona fide classic! Even at the time it came out, critics such as A.H. Weiler wrote for the New York Times that "It makes for taut, absorbing and compelling drama that reaches far beyond the close confines of its jury room setting" (Weiler). He argues, "In being strikingly emotional [Juror #8] is both natural and effective. Strangely enough, the illogical aspect of the plot is embodied in his exclusive discoveries of evidence and improbabilities in the trial itself," which reveals his bias about what he believes make this film great. An American who feels the need to apply his logical facilities towards solving the case in a way that reinforces what he sees as American ideals.

However, there is much more to dig into than just plot and character of the film. Look at Roger Ebert's review of the film which emphasizes Lumet's, cinematography. He wrote:

The movie plays like a textbook for directors interested in how lens choices affect mood. By gradually lowering his camera, Lumet illustrates another principle of composition: A higher camera tends to dominate, a lower camera tends to be dominated. As the film begins we look down on the characters, and the angle suggests they can be comprehended and mastered. By the end, they loom over us, and we feel overwhelmed by the force of their passion.

Furthermore, Ebert notes the well-written characters, are entirely convincing and add to the realistic feel which the shots create (Ebert). Other critics, such as Thomas Williams, note the convincing characters, who all seem distinct yet identifiable (Williams). Another critic named John Simon adds to the conversation that because these characters are all so well rounded yet lack many individual traits such as names, we see them all universally (Simon).

This kind of analysis is all well and good but, oddly, reviewers don't seem to move past it. They all comment on how well-written the characters are but fail to comment on what the characters well-written dialogue and action imply about the American jury system, instead implicitly agreeing that this film is a great representation of the American ideal. Even when these reviewers do critique the film they often solely point out how small details of the case don't really add up, such as when Simon noted, "I refer to certain lapses in logic or credibility that are, however, outweighed by the strong writing, with slight predictability not slackening the suspense, underlying faith in democratic procedure not neutralizing the frightful precariousness of its realization," (Simon). This is so close to questioning the film's faith in the democratic ideals, yet he never takes a step past this.

However, to a careful eye, there is a lot of reason to question these ideals. It is difficult to applaud a film in 1957 on an anti-bigotry message if it doesn't acknowledge the Jim Crow south,

to name just one way American institutions at the time weren't and continue to not be free. Secondly, the pro-America veneer on the film pervades every moment. The one person on the jury who can empathize with living in a slum as the the boy does, is a classic "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" guy who has notably escaped. Lastly, and most interestingly for my analysis, the traits which *Twelve Angry Men* tries to espouse as proper American values are a bit of a jumbled mess. For example, this story is understood by most critics as a heroic story despite the ubiquitous toxic masculinity which taints the way we should understand the film. This analysis is important because while most people don't play games that explicitly teach empathy like my father and I did, everyone watches media and learns from it. We learn about our world through art, and therefore it is important to know what media is morally good and bad. Critics are a powerful of the process of judging films as people go to them to get tools and authority to understand the work they see. 12 Angry Men remains an extremely important film today that has been remade several times, and continues to be adapted and put on in new forms to this day. Just in the last few months it was put on by at least two different companies in DC ("Get Tickets"; Baumann). For this reason it's important that reviewers don't just single mindedly applaud the film. To focus the essay I will examine a single flaw in the process: toxic masculinity in this film is ignored by reviewers and that is to our detriment.

To explain let's first take a step back and define an important term: what do I mean when I write "toxic masculinity"? The term is derived from the term "hegemonic masculinity" which was formulated in the 1980s and 1990s by R. W. Connell. In a retrospective on the history of the formulation of the term, she wrote, "[Hegemonic masculinity] embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and

it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.” To put it simply, it was the self-perpetuating model of masculinity through which the patriarchy was both legitimized and maintained. Connell goes further arguing that it was not only this model but the “pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity)” which made up the hegemonic masculinity. Since Connell’s original formulation many have specifically analyzed the “toxic” aspects of hegemonic masculinity, which describes negative patterns of practices previously described (Connell & Messerschmidt). However, due to how hegemonic masculinity as a whole can be described as negative the terms have become synonyms in the popular vernacular. While the term “toxic masculinity” has its roots in “hegemonic masculinity” I from here on out I will use toxic masculinity due to the cultural purchase it has won in the modern media.

The concept has been applied often in film as media is an important institution in understanding hegemonic masculinity. For example in the article, “Cinematic Symptoms of Masculinity in Transition: Memory, History and Mythology in Contemporary Film” Caroline Bainbridge and Candida Yates analyze a series of films through the lense of toxic masculinity. For example, they argue that while *Fight Club* “may not seem to offer a progressive representation of masculinity, its themes and narrative strategies work to produce a mode of spectatorship that challenges the status quo.” In other words, Yates and Bainbridge are analyzing what *Fight Club* says about masculinity and how it reaffirms or challenges toxic masculinity (Bainbridge & Yates). This lays a pretty clear framework of how we can analyze *Twelve Angry Men*. What does this movie say about masculinity? *Twelve Angry Men* more or less fully embraces toxic masculinity as part of its American ideal and trying to deconstruct all of the

different ways it is omnipresent in this film is too large a task to do in this review. I am going to trace one specific aspect of toxic masculinity, violence and insults as a rhetoric, throughout the film to demonstrate how it affirms toxic masculinity.

While no actual violence takes place during the film there are a few notable examples of near violence. Take the third juror, the last to turn to an innocent vote and biggest antagonist to the eighth juror throughout the film. At one point the third juror brings up how a witness heard someone say “I’ll kill you” on the floor the murder took place. Juror 8, the hero of the story, brings up that people say, “I’ll kill you” all the time but don’t mean it. Juror 3 disagrees vehemently. Later after juror 8, insults the third juror he comes at him violently, only held back by several other jurors. Juror 3 shouts that he will kill juror 8. After the third juror stops struggling juror 8 responds that juror 3 didn’t really mean that he would kill him thus winning that battle of rhetoric. This act of near violence is clearly framed as bad as juror 8 wins a rhetorical point immediately after it happens by proving juror 3 wrong on a previously argued point, and winning him more support from other jurors. Yet, the act of violence is simultaneously seen as unimportant and this moment is shrugged off by the film; all of the characters act like the transgression hadn’t taken place even going to far as to tell the guard who came in a minute later that were just friendly arguing the facts of the case.

This is obviously somewhat problematic, as this presentation of losing a rhetorical battle through violence while treating that violence as a typical rhetorical action equates the two as equally valid forms of interactions. You might argue that because he loses the point and the violence comes from an antagonistic character, the film is saying this is bad. However, in the larger context of the film this isn’t a departure from any of the other threats of violence used by

any other characters in the film, good or bad. For example, look at juror 9. He is the eldest juror and the first one to vote innocent other than juror 8. He is consistently good and also makes some important logical conclusions which help move the case forward. However, even he at one point in the film gets angry, stands up and makes a threat of violence at one of the jurors who was antagonizing him. Similarly, juror 6 often makes explicit threats of violence if certain people don't stop doing certain things, such as ignore or interrupt the ninth juror. This is particularly notable as the ninth juror is notably the oldest and therefore can't use his body to provide credence to his points like the others can.

Even the cinematography reinforces violence as a rhetorical strategy. All of the characters frequently stand up and are shot from below when making their points, making them appear larger and more imposing, which in turn signals to the audience that size and ability to physically force their points on to others is an important part of what makes the points valid. These threats of violence keep the audience on edge and are exciting because it feels like anything can happen. However, these threats of violence can more or less be interpreted as good things, as they are done by the characters the film wants us to see as the right ones as well as the wrong jurors. The fact that threats of violence are legitimized and equated to other forms of rhetoric is classic toxic masculinity and is most definitely a flawed thing for a film to frame as normal.

Similarly problematic is the way jurors talk to one another: insults and interruptions are constant. At first this is done primarily by jurors 3 and 10 who as I previously mentioned are the main antagonists of the film. For example, at the beginning of the deliberation when juror 10 hears juror 8 start talking he goes "oh boy, oh boy" demonstrating that he thinks nothing of value will come of the conversation. Or in the first round of convincing juror 3 just cuts off

juror 2 in a way that says to the audience that juror 3 couldn't care less about what juror 2 has to say. Similarly juror three constantly throws out words like "bleeding hearts" and "liberals" pejoratively. One might argue that because these are done by the bad characters the actions are accepted as wrong. However, the good jurors do it too. For example juror 2 later calls juror 3 a "loudmouth" which at the time seems like the rudest word the well mannered man could think of, and juror 8 calls him a "a self-appointed public avenger" and a "sadist". By giving these bad characters moments where they are insulted they seem to get their comeuppance for being jerks, and this is presented as a good thing. Eye for an eye one might suppose. However, this legitimizes the use of insults between people. The movie accepts insults as a legitimate form of rhetoric making a part of toxic masculinity appear acceptable in society.

When my father showed me *Twelve Angry Men* he was thinking like the reviewers did. It has some amazing strengths such as well-written characters, great cinematography, a convincing story and classic American virtue. However, the toxic masculinity which is accepted as the norm throughout the film undercuts the apparent goal of reaffirming American values which critics like John Simon and Roger Ebert noted the film set out to demonstrate. It is important that we think critically about our media as it is an important part of what teaches us emotional and ethical literacy. When I first saw this film I took the toxic masculinity seriously and that is a problem for all of society because I am certainly not alone in that. Critics have a responsibility to not just shower the film with praise but actually comment on what the film is saying because it is an important part of what makes a movie good or bad. In this case violence and insults are equated with rhetoric which is a weakness of a really good movie worth noting. Hopefully other reviewers agree and place more importance on what a film is saying in the future.



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