



# Toxic masculinity in film

## Exploring the critique of machismo personalities in film

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Cinema and films are art. With art, artists seek out, not only to incorporate their themes, ideas and concepts into their art, that will help shape and craft their work, but also to reflect upon themselves. The director of a film is a painter and the film are their empty canvas to paint on. They paint the film with their ideas and themes and shape it into becoming whole. With this, cinema has always presented itself as a canvas for reflection, where filmmakers are able to talk about and reflect upon ideas and themes, such as poverty, the unjust system of the law and sexism. But in recent years, a theme that has become more present than ever, is one that conflicts many of us: toxic masculinity.

Described as the adherence to traditional male gender roles, toxic masculinity is a modern matter that clouds many people. The complications of toxic masculinity sit on the line of emotional restriction, including social expectations to be dominant and to be limited in the emotional range they feel. A massive problem with toxic masculinity is that it assumes there is only one way of being a man: to restrict any sadness or happiness, to normalise the need to feel dominant, and to normalise anger and the crudeness of restricting most emotion.

Film has always been mixed on its display of toxic masculinity in films, at times glamourizing certain aspects of toxic masculinity, leading certain fanbases to worshipping these flawed, toxic characters they're not meant to worship. In recent years, films have acted as a critique of toxic masculinity, at times even acting as a sort of therapeutic catharsis towards the matter. These films not only manage to talk about the manifested issues of toxic masculinity in modern society, but also manage to help viewers in finding some inner peace.

Looking back in film history, the end of the twentieth century played a big part in addressing the issue of toxic masculinity, with many films manifesting men's gendered self-consciousness, in how they were meant to act and

behave, according to the stereotypical male normalizations of dominance and masculinity that were enforced upon them. Being the end of the century, and promising new change, 1999 was a big year for the representation of toxic masculinity in film, with two films in particular talking about the issue.

The first of the two films, *Fight Club* (1999) has always been one of the first biggest films to talk about the issue of toxic masculinity in contemporary men, confronting it in a very critical way, despite not being centred only on the problems of toxic masculinity. Directed by David Fincher, the film tackled an anti-capitalist view, as Tyler (Edward Norton) forms an underground fight club for men to feel free and loose. As commonly associated with the film, Rule #1 of *Fight Club* is that you do not talk about it. The club served as a scenario in which the men got to release their anger by brutally fighting each other.

Fincher's 1999 cult classic explores the emotional trauma of emasculation, and the need to be held against the stereotypes of what a man is. It looks at the relationship between these men's emotional lives and their attempts at maintaining social memories. In the film, they are treated with the purgative of support group confession. It showed that men felt that opening up felt like an emotional commitment, which put their mentality in a state of peril.

The second film came in the form of Paul Thomas Anderson's masterful interconnecting mosaic, *Magnolia* (1999). In particular, *Magnolia* looked at toxic masculinity as an inner demon that haunts us. An operatic journey through our emotional demons, it examines the fragility and obsolescence of toxic masculinity. Not only does it present us with the non-stereotypical display of failed masculine figures, but it shows us that the constant patriarchal performance of masculinity is doomed for failure.

In the role of a failed masculine figure, Earl Partridge (Jason Robards) – a man on his deathbed – is the last

remnants of white masculinity. His decaying bloated corpse is symbolism for the disruption of toxic masculinity – a fallen masculine figure on the brink of death, proving that masculinity is doomed for failure.

Magnolia is Paul Thomas Anderson's meditation on masculinity and morality – linking the two as inner demons that haunt us. With this film, he proves the fragility of masculinity with a cathartic critique on how our past demons that manifest as toxic masculinity are what make us what we are.

The most notable of recent examples would be James Gray's *Ad Astra* (2019) – a film wholly based around the harms of toxic masculinity and the subtle manifestation of it in ourselves. With most of the film taking place in space – a vast, boundless frontier upon which we get to contemplate upon our individual selves – the film is a vessel for self-reflection and self-betterment. It reflectively comments on the nature of humanity, and as such, the toxically masculine aspects of its lead character, Roy McBride (Brad Pitt).

Addressing his self-doubting side, with the stereotypically male problem of dealing with his emotions and fear of showing vulnerability, the film meditatively deals with his issues of emotional repression, resentment over his actions and explores the deterrents of emotional mutilation and destructive behaviour. In this dissection of his personality, the film dives down into the cause of his toxicity, originating in the absence of his dad from his life. As soon as getting to the origin of his problems, it goes a step further in acknowledging these problems and using this acknowledgement to remedy Roy's personality. Roy stops repressing his emotion and starts to open up.

Having had his own struggles with his emotions and masculinity, Pitt and the film's director, Gray sort out to seek whether being more open with one's emotions was better for personal relationships. The end of *Ad Astra* manifests this in its hopeful ending, showing that being more open emotionally is not only better mentally, but proven to be better for one's relationships.

The critique and representation of toxic masculinity in films should be taken as a sign of hope; toxic masculinity isn't a permanent issue, but rather one that can be healed over time. Portraying toxic masculinity in a complexly conflicted light, films show us the deterrents of repressing emotions and feeling the need to commit to societal gender norms placed onto men. The constant gendered pressure of needing to be strong, emotionless and stoic not only takes a toll on our mental health, but also diminishes our understanding of those around us, disrupting our relationships and the emotion we feel towards them. Often playing a role as a moving catharsis on toxic masculinity that helps us identify the faults in our own ways, the therapeutic and meditative nature of cinema is definitely a step-forward in the remedy of toxic masculinity.

