

Man Up, Man Down: Black Masculinity in 'Django Unchained'

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Introduction

To be masculine is for one's behavior to conform to cultural notions of specific gendered traits. These gendered traits can include strength, assertiveness, and emotionlessness as well as external performances such as one's walk, talk, mannerisms, and clothing choice. According to a social constructionist view of gender, one is not born masculine but instead adopts certain behaviors that are socially associated with masculinity. There can be a variety of masculinities within a cultural context constantly in contestation with each other because different subgroups may have their own definition of what traits and behaviors are deemed masculine. However, hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity within a certain culture and time. Those who are part of the hegemonic group has a privileged social position and are exalted (Connell, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity changes over time and from place to place. What it is to be a man today in America is quite different from what it meant to be a man in the Old South. In this paper, I will use 'masculinity' and 'manhood' interchangeably to refer to men seeing themselves as gendered-subjects, as an exercise of agency, a goal-oriented performance, an adherence to or rejection of gendered norms, and as a continual process. In the following, I will describe hegemonic masculinity in the Antebellum South, the time in which the movie "*Django Unchained*" takes place. I will also examine to what extent the black male characters, Django and Stephen, stood in contrast to or in accordance with hegemonic masculinity, which was and still is a white privileged position. In the end, I hope to provide lessons we can learn from black masculinity during this time as well as provide important warnings.

I. Old South Masculinity & Property

In the Antebellum South, property became a new way of defining manhood. Influenced by John Locke who believed property was the rational and moral basis for citizenship, one's visibility in the southern political realm was based on property (Brown, 177). Through property a man was made visible. Property was a way for a white man to be known and recognized in his community. If he owned property, he was eligible to gain political office and respect in his community. Property was also a way for him to be trusted. With property, he was able to deal with creditors. According to Historian Kathleen M. Brown, property was his rights of passage into manhood and a prerequisite to marrying

and creating a household. If a man owned property he was not a wild card. In the community, he could be counted on to be a man in an economic and political sense. If he did not own property, not only could he not be counted on but he was not considered a man. This relationship between the community and men allowed the community to use white men's manhood as a resource and not as a threat (Brown, 179).

In the Antebellum South, slavery made humans into another's property. Thus, white gendered identity was also tied to owning black bodies. A white man not only became a man by owning land but by owning slaves. A Black body's subjugation was a white man's ticket to participation in the elite sphere called "manhood." Unsurprisingly, the black man became the antithesis of the white man. Only whites could own property and because black men were slaves and did not own property but were property themselves, they were not men. As Edward E. Baptist notes, to commodify others meant that one was a man; to be commodified meant that one was not (Baptist, 143). As a result, the denial of black manhood became central to white manhood.

How did black men exert their black masculinity in the midst of this hegemonic and exclusive form of masculinity? Django gives us some insight. Django's run away attempt was one way to reject the claim that black men were property and not men. Running away or "stealing oneself" was a way for Django to claim possession of his own body. It was a way for him to make his body his property and thus exert his manhood. Perhaps he headed to David Walker's fiery words that [black men] are men, and not brutes and saw freedom and manhood as inseparable (Baptist, 138). Although the hegemonic masculine standard was to own black bodies and land in order to become a man, Django's attempt to steal himself and eventually get his freedom papers was his standard for claiming his manhood and way of exerting black masculinity. But the white standard would remain. The white manhood standard is displayed in Calvin's instructions to his slave Stephen on how to treat Django as a guest. Calvin tells Stephen that Django is not a slave but a freeman. "Treat him like white folks?" asks Stephen. Calvin replies, "That's not what I said!" To Calvin, Django may have been free but he did not own property so he was not a man. However, Django's standards were quite different.

On the other hand, Stephen, a black slave, defends white hegemonic masculinity and attempts to embody it through a delusional concept of ownership. For Stephen, being a man is about owning property, particularly black bodies. When Django surrenders and is tied up side down, Stephen tries to intimidate and scare him with the phrase, "Niggas WE sale." In the last scene as Stephen lies on the ground shot, he screams, "This Candy land, WE been here, always gonna be Candy land." Note that Stephen is the head house slave and does not own anything so he is not a man in the hegemonic sense, however the "We" is uttered because Stephen finds his manhood by affixing himself to what his master owns,

black bodies, thus white masculinity. This is why in the final scene, Django states, "All you black folks, I suggest you get away from all these white folks. Not you Stephen, you are right where you belong." Stephen clings to hegemonic masculinity and defines himself by the white masculine standard of property ownership. On the other hand, Django fights for his manhood not by owning others but by refusing to be owned by another.

II. The Trait of Mastery

Mastery was one of the dominant idealized masculine traits among southern white men. Only those who owned property could possess this trait. Mastery manifested itself by a man's ability to dominant his wife, children, and slaves. This household authority made him a man in his own home and mind. To have the trait of mastery, a white man refused to be mastered by others and insisted on mastering slaves. This trait was at the heart of southern political culture (Friend and Glover, ix-xi). However, Black men exerted their own masculinity by resisting such mastery through violence, clothing, and by caring for others not by mastering them.

Black men in the Antebellum South like the character Django were able to exert black masculinity by confronting white men with violence. Black men used their bodies to fight subordination. If successful, they communicated to whites and others that mastery and humiliation has its limits. This is illustrated clearly when Django confronts the Brittle Brothers. He gives both John and Raj time to recognize who is was, to perhaps remember when they had mastery over him. He shoots John and throws his words back at him, "I like the way you die, boy." He then whips and shoots the other brother not only as an act of revenge but for the gaze of the slave witnesses.

Django also resists white masculine mastery through clothing. The clothes a black rebel slave wore may not sound as radical as the overseers he kills, but clothing was another way that black men enacted manhood. When slaves 'stole themselves', they often ran away with some of the master's clothing. Runaway Slaves Ads often identified these fancy clothing. On Sunday's, a slave's day of rest, church-going men as well as women slaves, took off their rags and donned their "Sunday best." This gives us a glance into the aesthetic and consumer sensibilities of black slaves. It also shows that through clothing, black men seized their own personhood by what they chose to wear (Brown, 181).

Django depicted this when Schultz tells him he can pick out his own clothes. Django was excited to do this and it was clear he was doing this for the very first time. Picking out his clothes was an act of autonomy and expression. By becoming a self-styling subject he could announce his own presence in the world. Although the French aristocratic outfit he chose to wear was quite bold and outrageous, it showed Django expressing his own manhood. Perhaps it worked,

for it changed the way white men looked at him. One white man called him a "fancy pants nigga." Yes, Django may have been a 'nigga' in the white man's eyes, but he was a fancy one and a white man had to recognize this fact. That is why it is no surprise that in the closing scene, he steals and dons Calvin's clothes as he taunts and finally destroys Candy land. Clothing was not just fabric one wore but through clothing, Django and other black men could assert their manhood and redefine their status. Since their bodies had always been on display since the auction block, clothing allowed them to control how others saw them. Transforming the white gaze was not the main goal. More importantly, black men allowed external clothing to confirm what the internal soul had always felt, "I AM A MAN!"

Django resisted white mastery through violence and clothing while Stephen exerted his manhood by mastering others. In the film, Stephen runs the house with an iron fist. It is recommended that house slaves get on his good side if they do not want trouble. He is disappointed that Broomhilda gets out the hot box early. He terrifies her as he inquires into her and Django's history. He complains when Django gets to sleep in the big house instead of with the other slaves. Stephen is the head house slave. The master endows power to Stephen and Stephen exerts and keeps it by mastering others. But his mastery is only towards other blacks. In public, Stephen talks with a slave dialect, walks with a cane, and his words are his masters. He is loud but appears harmless to Whites. However, in private with Calvin, all of these things disappear. He speaks intelligently, acts younger yet mature and insightful, and his reliance on his cane disappears. In public, because Stephen's manhood is connected to Calvin's, Stephen must not show that he has his own thoughts or can be a threat to white men. He is the 'Head Nigga In Charge' but never a 'man in charge'. That is Calvin's role. Stephen may master other black bodies but he cannot be seen in public as a rival to or on the level of his white male master. His manhood must disappear in order for white masculinity to remain visible.

Django also exerts his masculinity by caring for others. There has been a divide among historians and sociologists over who should be counted as the rebel black slave: the one who fought back and ran away or the one who stayed and took care of other slaves. Stories from runaways like Frederick Douglas explain that black men were able to gain their manhood when they resisted their master. David Walker believed that trying to prove one's heroic manhood through death was better than living in slavery. Views like this seem to support white views that if slaves were men they would have never submitted to slavery in the first place. This kind of thinking has led us to value only heroic black masculinity. However, the view of heroic manhood as 'the' authentic manhood for black slaves is misleading. There were black slaves who never ran away; instead they stayed on the plantation. Instead of participating in revolutions, they became caretakers and surrogate fathers and uncles for those on the plantation (Baptist, 138).

Maintaining dignity while still a slave and caring for others were ways black men enacted black manhood and this was just as revolutionary as running away.

Django displays heroic masculinity throughout the movie. He tries to escape, he kills white men, and he is not afraid to talk back. But heroic masculinity was not the sole feature of his manhood. Django was also dignified and caring. He refuses to let Broomhilda be a comfort woman. In a flash back scene, he begs the Brittle Brothers to whip him instead of his wife. When he finds Schultz's dead body in the shack he pays respect to him instead of treating him as a means to an end. He treats other slaves with respect and the only exception is when he is playing the part of a black slaver.

However, Stephen is not caring. He strips Broomhilda and humiliates her in order to hurt Django. He rules the house with an iron fist not a caring heart. The only caring moment from Stephen is when Calvin is killed. Stephen screams his name and runs over to hold Calvin's body, weeping as he does so. As Malcolm X put it, "he loved his master more than he loved himself." Perhaps in Stephen grieving Calvin, he was also grieving his own masculinity. If Stephen's manhood is affixed to Calvin's white masculinity then without Calvin, Stephen fears he will become a black boy again, no longer a man in the hegemonic sense.

III. Lessons and Warnings

I believe there are several lessons we can learn from the masculinity of black slaves and freeman like the fictional character Django.

Firstly, in oppressive conditions, men can assert their manhood in the most revolutionary ways and through subtle ways. In other words, there is no one-way to be a man. One can be heroic with their body or heroic with their mind and heart. One can display what Leonard Harris calls 'Walkerian virtues' like guile and assertiveness as well as stereotypical gendered virtues like empathy, charity, and compassion. Virtues like sympathy and kindness are not antithetical to manhood but they enrich it.

Secondly, Django, through the exertion of his black masculinity, shows us that manhood is not about independency or co-dependency but rather dependency. Independency is the liberal project taken to the extreme. It is the assumption that all a man needs is himself. This is the Enlightenment's conception of man as the autonomous being. Co-dependency occurs when there is a lack of interpersonal mutuality. In co-dependency, one not only needs the other and cannot continue without them but the other gives no reciprocity to the agent. However, Schultz and Django were partners not lone rangers or participants in the master/slave relationship (in a Hegelian sense). Schultz gets the Brittle Brothers with the help of Django. Django gets his freedom and his wife's with the

help of Schultz. If Django was co-dependent, the story would of ended when Shultz was murdered. If Django was independent we may not have had much of a story at all. Valuing dependency is not to say that a black man needs a white man to succeed or to be a man one needs another person but dependency reminds us of who we are and that being a lone man will only get a man so far. As Alasdair MacIntyre argues in "Dependent Rational Animals," dependency is central to our human condition. Without others making our good their good, we cannot survive or flourish. Django reminds us of MacIntyre's central argument in the book: we all need the virtues of giving and receiving, sympathy, mercy, affection, magnanimity, and just generosity. One is not less masculine when he possesses these traits. One is only able to survive, flourish, and help others when he does.

Thirdly, Django and other slaves, in exerting their black masculinity, queered or rejected hegemonic masculinity. They did this not merely as a counterculture move but as a way for self-definition and as a way to flourish by different means. By refusing to master others, they adopted human virtues not gendered ones. The lesson here is that hegemonic masculinity should not be the goal for men because it is the dominant conception of manhood. Rather, men should be free to decide for themselves how they will define themselves, what are their standards for manhood. If culture does this for them, men will be a slave to culture and never a rational moral agent. When men live out the dominant destructive norms they not only defend hegemonic masculinity but also perpetuate patriarchy and white supremacy. In doing so, they are not only complicit in the norms but remain a victim to them.

Another lesson we learn about masculinity through the film is that the expression of manhood should not stop at the body. Let me note that subjectivity is always embodied. Our bodies are always a part of our lived experience and who we are is entrenched in our bodily constitution. Through gender we construct ourselves and being a gendered subject is a voluntarily set of acts and skills (Butler, 1986). However, who we are should not be limited to the way we walk, dress, posture, or fight nor should embodiment only include these performances. My worry is that masculinity and manhood today has been defined as mere public bodily posturing while negating other embodied features such as mental strength, dignity, perseverance, discipline, responsibility, wisdom, and education. This has led men to not only cause harm to others but to also harm themselves. Django and historic slaves show us that manhood was not just about their outward bodies but those same bodies maintained dignity, exercised ingenuity, persevered in the face of difficulty, were responsible and dedicated to each other, they hoped, loved, cared, and dreamed in their bodies. These black men inspire men to go beyond a limited view of gendered subjectivity and add to their masculine repertoire characteristics and traits that will not only expand their own manhood but aid in their flourishing.

Lastly, let me remind you that Django is a spaghetti western film. Let us not get caught up in the fictitious ending that we forget historic realities. Black men who exerted their masculinity like Django did not always live to tell about it nor were they able to ride off in the moonlight with the woman they loved. Exerting black masculinity came at a price and that price was disenfranchisement, torture, and death. Calvin's runaway slave met such a tragedy. Nat Turner met such a tragedy. Today, black men are still penalized for exerting their manhood. Why are we so afraid of black masculinity?

Conclusion

New York Jets coach Joe Walton made the phrase "man up" popular. In 1985, he used the phrase to describe the man-to-man pass defense led by his defensive coordinator stating, "They're playing the kind of defense that I wanted...aggressive, man up, getting after it." Today "man-up" is used as a challenge for men to defend their manhood through a set of actions. However, this defense usually entails giving into hegemonic masculine norms. As long as manning up is a defensive move, men will be acted upon instead of being agents, they will give into destructive norms instead of virtuous ones, and live for the approval of culture and never for the satisfaction of themselves while so-called contrast figures such as women, queer folks, and other marginalized men pay the price for it all.

Perhaps what men ought to do is man-down. In manning down, one does not reject masculinity, but rather one is no longer on the defensive but on the offensive; they have the ball in their own hands. With this agency, men direct their paths, self-define, play by their own rules, and live out virtuous lives instead of mere macho ones; refusing to give into the gender police of American machismo. They don't lose their fire or give it away, instead they light it on their own terms. Black male slaves were not considered men according to the hegemonic standard. In response, with limited resources and no freedom, they exerted their own masculinity no matter the price. May the men of today be just as creative and courageous as those black men were and may we their audience, back off and give them the space to be.

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