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To Be a Man:

Black Male Vulnerability and Female Partnership in Terrence Hayes' American Sonnets

Douglas Wilson once said, "If Boys don't learn, men won't know". Since birth, the baby born with a phallus is placed in an incubator of masculinity, preparing the next generation of world leaders. This process is even more rigorous in the African American community, adding society survival tactics and generational curses. A man was born to control, yet how does one maintain control on a shaky foundation? Terrence Hayes wrote "American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin" during a political reality that cracked the foundation of American delusion. A man underqualified and heavily biased sat in the highest form of power in the United States in a world where media believed "racism was over". So as a minority and as a man, who does one turn to when in trouble with a government stacked against minorities? Terrence Hayes explores male vulnerability and female partnership to trailblaze a new reality for black male emotional support.

Manhood is a journey most boys find themselves on to discover who they are. From becoming more independent to facing their fears, they strip themselves of their little boy identities. When a boy loses his virginity or gets his first job, they slowly assimilate into the patriarch role, leaving no room for weakness or vulnerability. Hayes writes about the experience of being lost while trying to lead in his narration:

I'm not sure how to hold my face when I dance:  
In an expression of determination or euphoria?

And how should I look at my partner: in her eyes  
Or at her body? Should I mirror the rhythm of her hips,  
Or should I take the lead? (Hayes 18)

At first glance, this seems like a silly discussion of actions on the dance floor, but Hayes is insinuating something deeper. As a man, even in the simplest acts of dancing, their moves must be calculated. He uses this analogy of dancing with a partner to showcase the pressures on his masculinity. Is one manly if they follow a woman's lead? Is it feminine to look into her eyes instead of at her ass? The fragility of the masculine influence can be broken down simply by the mental battle of a waltz. Hayes writes from the perspective of a man who does not want to misstep in his manhood journey. Highlighting simple mannerism like looking into a woman's eyes shows the twisted reality of male identity. The level of intimacy that eye contact requires, allowing someone to see a soul truly, could lead to unveiling a man's flaws. Men are not allowed to be vulnerable, ask questions, or let a woman lead. The one job society puts on them is to have all the answers, and nowhere in the fine print does it leave room for moments of weakness or lapse of judgement.

Hayes is not the only black man who recognizes the pressures of being a man today. As early as 2014, Black men spoke out about the layers of their masculinity and their need for vulnerability. The National Public Radio interviewed Philadelphia-based artist and activist Shikeith Cathey about his short film "#Blackmendream on December 14, 2014. This film holds the testimonies of nine black men stripped naked answering simple questions like what makes you sad? Though these questions seem minuscule and irrelevant, the reality is American society never stops to ask men, especially Black men, how they are. In the podcast, *All Things Considered*, Cathey says that his inspiration for many of the men being shirtless/naked was rooted in "exposing being dressed in assumptions before even opening your mouth to say hello"(Cathey) . The short film covers many emotional concepts of manhood, from the simple

action of crying to the emotional lessons learned by fathers. The audience hearing one of Cathey's interviewees saying that their father taught them nothing and never to express their emotions is an ordinary reality amongst the black male community. Even in conversations of white fragility and white tears, the privilege of being able to be fragile is not discussed enough. Black men are covered with stereotypes of anger, yet have we ever reflected as a society and recognized the part we play in that? Aren't we responsible for teaching them this method of handling their emotions? It is one thing to be able to voice one's opinion and wants, but it is another to be able to feel emotions that are deeper than happiness and anger. Cathey and Hayes both explore the idea of black male vulnerability in their work.

While male vulnerability needs to become a priority in our society, there is also a need for a redefinition of female partnership value. The woman has been boxed into being submissive and second-rate for the uncontrollable circumstance of possessing a vagina. The castration anxiety of our ancestors has been deeply rooted in the development of our society, leaving men unable to seek and receive supportive partners. Hayes uses his poetry to express what he is looking for in a partner in our current political climate:

Over-aged, over grave, overlooked brother  
Seeks adjoining variable female structure  
Covered in chocolate, cinnamon, molasses,  
Freckled, sandy or sunset colored flesh  
Expressively motored by a blend of intellectual  
Fat & muscle while several complex & simple  
Emotional frequencies pulse along her veins.  
Must be a careful & moderately self-indulgent  
Cinematographer, modestly self-conscious, reasonably  
Self-important, spiritually self-educated, marginally  
Self-destructive. Must be willing to raise orchids  
Or kids in a land of assassins; willing to wield a fluid  
Expression in the war her lover wages against himself,  
And a silver tongue in the war we wage against death. (Hayes 78)

Beginning in an old newspaper want ad format, Hayes focuses his words on creating his dream woman. He seeks a partner that is equally and maybe even more strong and educated than he is. The common trend in media today searches for women who would rather be financially dependent on their male partners than discovering their purpose in the world. Women's, more specifically black women's worth, has been subjected to the curves of their body and the morals of their sexuality, creating a new form of relationship. Women are no longer desired to be submissive; they are framed as invisible entities of a man's success. Hayes presents a new form of the female relationship. He showcases that our society can no longer allow women to sit by the wayside, but instead, we should value their worldview. Using terms like modestly self-conscious and complex, he shows a want for deeper support than sexual. Ending the sonnet with "Expression in the war her lover wages against himself, and a silver tongue in the war we wage against death", Hayes concludes his argument in the most straightforward analogy. The ways of men are self-destructive, and women are the shields they need to survive.

Critics have raved about Terrence Hayes's original and creative redefinition of the Shakespearean sonnet in "American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin". With every poem under the same title, he uses the sonnet art form to showcase his perceptions of the African American life experience. In each group of fourteen lines, Hayes opens his reader's eyes to their contributions to the cracks in society's foundation no matter, color or creed. Providing the problems of male strength rather than weakness, and female companionship, he has given us the blueprint to supporting the patriarch and beginning the conversations to transform the culture of our world. He leaves the reader with one question: Now that one has learned, what will they do with what they know?

### Work Cited

Hayes, Terrance. *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*. Penguin Poets, 2018.

Neely, Priska. “‘#Blackmendream’: Showcasing a Different Side of Black Manhood.” *NPR*, NPR, 14 Dec. 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/12/14/370415400/-blackmendream-showcasing-a-different-side-of-black-manhood>.