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# I AM A MAN

## How inheritance and legacy bear a heavy burden on black masculinity in *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Barbershop*, and *Creed*

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By Aliyah Veal

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In January of this year, *Buzzfeed* writer Alexander Chee penned a [personal essay](#) about the lessons he took from his father's inheritance. Chee was brutally honest in his analysis of his relationship with money, as well as his mishandling of his trust fund left in his name. His father was 43 years old when he passed away. There was no will, so the money was split between Chee and the rest of his family. Chee was 18 years old when he received the trust fund, and for the next nine years he was free from the burdensome adulthood that many twentysomethings face. His college was paid for. He travelled around the world. He bought a fast car. He lived well in New York and California.

But when the money ran out, so did Chee's safety net. He was now free from freedom and he was tasked with working multiple jobs to support himself. Instead of budgeting and saving, he spent and splurged. And the last remnants of his father's life and hard work were nothing but receipts—fragile, weightless objects to remind him of what he no longer had.

"I imagined someday having to tell my father about everything I had bought with the trust fund I received after his death. And having to explain how I'd failed him," he writes. For Chee, his failure meant not living up to the standards his father set as a business owner, a smart investor, a hard worker.

Inheritance is normally passed down through a will—a legal document transferring all assets and possessions to a beneficiary—or in Chee's case, a trust fund, which allows a third party to hold a beneficiary's assets until they come to a certain age. There has been significant research about how inheritance functions across different cultures in the United States, especially in how it reinforces economic disparities. An article on [Economic Policy Institute](#) reported "white families are twice as likely to receive an inheritance as black families, and that inheritance is nearly three times as much."

For black families like mine, our circumstances don't allow us to save because we get so little, so we pass along what we do have. It's our traditions and our culture that we inherit. Those things that shape us, build character, and take us from a child to an adult. They don't burn as fast as money will, which makes it much more crucial if we fail our parents memory or fail to uphold what they passed onto us.

Real life instances of race, legacy, inheritance, and masculinity are manifesting themselves in the art we consume. *Creed II* recently debuted this past November, the boxing franchise that follows Adonis Creed, a heavyweight champion, as he grapples with family, fatherhood, fame, and his father's legacy. The precursor, *Creed* (2015), deals with similar themes, but this franchise is one of many other films that documents the a son's burgeoning black masculinity in the shadow of his father.

Topics such as these have been seen in works from years past and we'll examine three examples of how these themes have developed over time. In Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*, the 2002 comedy film *Barbershop*, and the original *Creed*, legacy is a marker for identity. Walter Lee Younger, Calvin Palmer, and Adonis Creed—the central characters in these works—are competing with the legacy their fathers left behind. Compound that with their inheritance and these men are revealed to be boys who are struggling to navigate their way to manhood. Their identity hinges on how masculine a man can be when measured against other men. In essence, the male characters at the center of these works are measuring themselves against their fathers. Their names, wealth, and careers are passed down and it's up to them to take from that small piece and make it their own. However, the process is not simple. These sons rebel in various ways, causing them to become angry, resentful, and make attempts to erase their father's inheritance and tarnish their legacy. And so, inheritance and legacy are burdens on these men.

Masculinity is a social construct made up of set rules and attributes that men must adhere to to be considered men. These attributes include financial wealth, the role of provider and protector, denial of emotions, and reliability in crisis. But masculinity functions differently for black men. In their 1993 book *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, Richard Majors and Janet Mancini describe black masculinity as “being psychologically castrated—rendered impotent in the economic, political, and social arenas that whites have historically dominated.” White men have access to a wealth of opportunities, money, and privilege that allows them to successfully adhere to the masculine standard. Majors and Billson note that black men have crafted “cool pose” to combat this disadvantage. Cool pose is set of mannerisms and posturing that evokes pride and strength. Because in white society black men can't naturally be masculine, they perform it.

Both ideas of masculinity create unrealistic pressures on men that does away with the human side of them. It's inauthentic. But the black men in the works to be discussed don't fall into either of these types of masculinity. Walter from *A Raisin in the Sun* and Calvin from *Barbershop* are so busy trying to fit standard image of masculinity that performing cool pose is far from their mind. And Adonis from *Creed* functions in a grey area that mixes masculine aggression with vulnerability. But it's important to note the generational differences between these men and the historical context surrounding these works. The parameters that make up masculinity will be the same, but the worlds they exist in are vastly different.

Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* follows a black family sharing an apartment on the Southside of Chicago in the 1950s. It debuted in 1959 and was the first play by a black woman to be performed on Broadway. She wrote the play when she was 27 years old, pulling inspiration from her personal life and the lives of black people in Chicago. Her father, Carl Hansberry, faced housing discrimination after purchasing an apartment building. He entered a three-year battle in court against covenants upholding racism that eventually led him to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1940.

Walter Lee Younger, the play's central character, is living a life unfulfilled and burdened by being a chauffeur for a white man. He shares his apartment with his wife, son, mother, and sister. He's haunted by dreams of being his own boss, dreams he feels can be accomplished using the \$10,000 life insurance check following his father's death.

The 1950s and 60s in Chicago, where the play is set, was a time heightened by racism and housing discrimination for black families. It also was the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the fight for equality and rights for African Americans. Walter's job as a chauffeur and that of his wife, a domestic worker, paid poorly. The family's money is tight and they're practically pinching pennies. Walter and his wife, Ruth, argue over \$1 he gave to their son, Travis. That dollar is of huge importance, showing the bleak predicament the family finds themselves in.

The argument also reveals Walter's insecurities as a provider, a reflection upon his masculinity. "I'm thirty-five years old; I been married eleven years and I got a boy who sleeps in the living room and all I got to give him is stories about how rich white people live," he says.

The life insurance check, a stand-in for the physical presence of his father, holds the key to solving all the family's problems. Technically, it's all of their inheritance, but as the head of the household, Walter holds the power and no one wants it as bad as he does. Tied up in that \$10,000 is his father's hard work, tired nights, and sacrifices, that in Mama's words, ultimately worked him into his grave. "But he sure loved his children. Always wanted them to have something be something," she says.

Parts of Walter's inheritance are his father's name, the apartment they reside in, poverty; and his father's legacy is wrapped up in his capabilities as a father and man. The reverence with which Mama speaks of her husband sets him on a pedestal that Walter can't touch. And not because he can't, but because he won't. Walter's selfishness throughout the play doesn't allow him to make the same sacrifices his father would make to keep his family secure and happy.

He's fighting an inner conflict between the man he wants to be and the man his mother expects him to be. Walter wants to be a man like his white counterpart: a man with wealth, a man with status, a man with authority. He completely disregards the example of masculinity his father presented him, one that doesn't fill his pockets. He buckles under the pressure, which comes to a head when his mother challenges him to step up after his wife announces she'll be getting an abortion.

"I'm waiting to hear how you be your father's son. Be the man he was... And I'm waiting to hear you talk like him and say we a people who give children life, not who destroys them. I'm waiting to see you stand up and look like your daddy," she says.

Further distancing himself from his father's image and his masculinity, he uses majority of the life insurance check to invest in his liquor store business. Unfortunately for him, one of the partners runs off with the money, everything his father worked and died for.

"I seen him grow thin and old before he was forty . . . working and working and working like somebody's old horse . . . killing himself . . . and you you give it all away in a day," Mama says.

His father endures another death at the hands of Walter's impulsiveness and disregard for his family. Thus, Walter has failed himself and tarnished his father's legacy. The family's only saving grace is that Mama used a portion of the money as a down payment on a house. But Walter almost ruins that small victory, calling the neighborhood representative over to accept his offer on buying back the house. Sacrificing that house his mother and father always wanted for

his family would do his father's life no justice. And relinquishing power to another man, a white man, would feed the emasculation and humiliation Walter already feels.

It's not until he rejects Mr. Lindner's offer that he enters his manhood. "We have decided to move into our house because my father, my father he earned it for us brick by brick," Walter says.

It's the first time Walter has acknowledged his father's legacy and by keeping the house he embraces the masculine energy that's always been with him. It's what his father would do. It's what he should do to finally be a real provider and put his family first.

Masculinity the 1950s and 60s was simpler: men worked and provided, while women were the caretakers. There was no grey area, which means there was no room for vulnerability. Walter couldn't cry or falter under pressure, having to be a pillar the family can lean on at all times. Anything outside these confines results in emasculation. With competing between who he needs to be and who he wants to be, there's an instability in Walter that escapes in a multitude of volatile ways. Walter was very well on the verge of creating a fractured family, which is common amongst many black families. Rejecting Mr. Lindner, a representation of masculinity he loathed and loved, shifts the power back in his hands. Mr. Lindner doesn't emasculate Walter, he emasculates him.

Speaking of the play in 1961, Lorraine Hansberry said, "We really don't have very much in the world at all if we allow any aspect of money values to transcend the requirements that are necessary for human dignity." It's an apt description of Walter Lee and many others who believe that money is the key to happiness. Some 40 years later, the statement still bears relevance in the case in Mark Brown's film comedy *Barbershop*.

The film follows Calvin Palmer, played by Ice Cube, who owns a barbershop he inherited from his father. The actor, who first made his name as a rapper in the group N.W.A., takes a detour from his gangster persona to take on the role of a loving husband and father with dreams of getting his family a house as big as Oprah's guesthouse. But the family is nowhere near that goal as Calvin struggles to manage a shop and all that it entails, including its debt. So blinded by materialism, he doesn't stop to realize that the real wealth lies in his community and the family he creates in his shop.

The setting is the Southside of Chicago, but this time in 2002. Things have shifted from the period portrayed in *A Raisin in the Sun*, and the sociological setting is less about housing discrimination and more about the internal problems facing the black community, as shown by the opening of the film which shows the theft of an ATM machine from a local business. Things are no better and may have possibly gotten worse. Compared to the circumstances of some of his counterparts, Calvin doesn't have to lean on theft to get by. But that just isn't enough for him.

"That damn shop. Boy they shall know how to kill a man's dreams," Calvin says, in his first introduction to the audience. Just like Walter, Calvin's sense of himself as a man depends on the life he can provide his family: the house they live in, the car they drive, the debt they don't have.

However, that “damn shop” is a generational wealth passed down from his grandfather to his father and now to him. The shop has been around since the 50s, surviving the Civil Rights Era (there is actually a scene in the sequel where the shop is almost burned down after Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination). It’s a slice of history. But Calvin calls it a dream killer, completely ignoring what it represents: hard work, independence, and a safe haven. As Eddie, eldest barber and the patriarch of the shop, says, “The place where a black man mean something. Our very own country club.”

Calvin only sees the shop as a nuisance, an obstacle in the way to achieving his dreams, especially with the debt on it that’s left to be unpaid. Part of the debt is a marker for what type of man his father was. His father gave free haircuts and allowed barbers to pay their booth rent at their leisure. He was a man that valued the community way more than what it could do for his pockets. His legacy is entrenched in that debt, but Calvin muddies it by accumulating it tenfold with his get-rich-quick schemes.

He’s totally blind to his own actions and selfishness, ready at the drop of a hat to relinquish his inheritance for \$20,000. “I’m not gone work my ass off for that,” he says in a conversation with his wife, referring to his father’s charitable acts.

The very idea of hard work escapes him, and his inability to step up to the plate, for not only the sake of his ancestors, but the barbers whose livelihood rests in the shop, instills a sense of desperation.. It’s not until his wife, Jennifer, challenges him that he realizes that selling the shop was a mistake.

“How could you sell this place? I met you here. My father used to come here every Saturday. He loved this place. You used to love it too. What happened?,” she says.

The weight of responsibilities weigh on him, and the pressure is too much. He looks around the shop and asks his father, “How’d you do this for 40 years?”

Calvin’s frustrations take an explosive turn. He throws the local DVD man out his shop forcefully and banishes him from ever entering the shop again. He denies a customer a free haircut and is told as a painful reminder that his dad would have done it. His father’s legacy is inescapable, and he knows he can’t live up to it.

It’s so much easier for him to forfeit, in an act he beliefs will better him as a man. But after a day at the shop and taking in it’s value to the community and his life, he reneges on his deal to sell the shop to Mr. Wallace, a loan shark. Unfortunately, it backfires and Calvin is left to deal with the consequences.

“You know that’s the problem with your whole generation. You don’t believe in nothing, but your father . . . he believed and understood that something as simple as a little haircut could change the way a man felt on the inside,” Eddie says, after finding out the news about the shop.

Calvin is then forced to tell everyone else in the shop about his decision, eliciting reactions of shock and anger from his employees. And while Calvin does wallow in self-pity, he doesn't give up, and is willing to fight for what rightfully belongs to him. In an interesting twist of events, Calvin outsmarts Mr. Wallace, gains back his shop, and walks away with more money than he came in with after claiming the reward for the stolen ATM machine.

Walter paved the way for a character like Calvin, and their stories have various parallels. Outside of setting, both men stick firmly to the belief that their masculinity is predicated on their ability to provide. The image of a provider is linked to money, and the more money you have, the more masculine you are. They bundle their selfishness under the pretense that it's for their family, without much concern to how others may feel and think. And so despite the 40 year difference between the two, it appears that masculinity still retains its rigid rules.

Director Ryan Coogler is masterful when it comes to creating strong, black male characters. After the success of his debut film, 2013's *Fruitvale Station*, Coogler sunk his hands into the Rocky Balboa boxing saga to create its next generation, *Creed*. As detailed in [Deadline](#), the film's plot is inspired by Coogler's father, who became ill to the point that he nearly died. Coogler was watching his hero deteriorate before his eyes and he began to imagine a life without him. How would he feel? What type of man would he be?

The sports-drama follows Adonis Creed (Michael B. Jordan), an amateur boxer following in the footsteps of his father, heavyweight champion, Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers, who played in the part in *Rocky* films in the 1970s and 80s). Despite naysayers, he leaves his well paid job and comfortable life in Los Angeles to tough it out in Philly, seeking his father's friend and rival, Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone), for training. Not only is Adonis following his dreams, but he's setting out to prove he's worthy of holding the Creed name.

Adonis is a special case. Masculinity has become more complex in 2015—black boy joy hashtags have sprung up, promoting an alternative black masculinity that's more complex. It's okay to be vulnerable, to dress different, to like different things. Of course, not everyone is on board, but there's more room for change than there would have been in the 50s or early 2000s. Adonis doesn't necessarily fall into this movement, but his masculinity isn't toxic, and there are moments in the film where he shows his emotions and cries actual tears.

Unlike Walter Lee and Calvin, Adonis isn't plagued by financial inadequacy. He lives a very good life, if the house his stepmother lives in is any indication, and worked at a financial group before he resigned. But money doesn't bring him fulfillment, boxing does. There's a sense that Adonis would rather be poor if it meant he could follow his passion. When he's denied training in Los Angeles, he moves to Philly in search of Rocky Balboa. His sacrifice is huge, forgoing family, wealth, and comfort.

Adonis was also robbed of having his father be physically present in his life. The only vestiges he has of his father are old trophies and YouTube clips of his boxing matches. "Every punch I've ever thrown was on my own. Nobody showed me how to do this," he says.

Furthermore, he only knows Apollo the boxer, not the father and husband. His only example of manhood is to be an athlete, the best of his class.

But what seems to be Adonis' Achilles heel is his father's legacy. Apollo was slated as the best for his prowess in the ring and as a heavyweight world champion. Sports is one of the many avenues men can assert their masculinity and boxing is one of the most violent of sports. Adonis has the ability to fight as it was inherited from his father following his death, as his very first scene is a fight between him and another detainee in a juvenile detention center. But is he better than his competition and more importantly, can he hold up the Creed name? His father's legacy is an added pressure, creating doubts and insecurities in Adonis, ones that were already there but are increased tenfold when he fully immerses himself into the boxing realm. Everyone wants to know if he's as good as his dad.

"Your father was special. To tell you the truth, I don't know if you're special. Only you're gonna know that when the time is right and it ain't gonna come over night," Rocky says to him.

Adonis is making all the right strides to be as good as his father, seeking out his old rival, Rocky Balboa, and trying to join the Delphi Gym, his father's old training grounds. He wins big by getting Rocky to agree to be his coach, and Rocky is also measurement for Adonis' masculinity. Here's a man who went toe-to-toe with his father on three occasions, won against him once, and is also a heavyweight champion. With all these strong masculine energies in his life, it seems appropriate that his stress eclipses that of Calvin and Walter Lee.

That stress manifests itself in ways, resulting in Adonis creating distance from his father's legacy, opting to not claim the Creed name. He goes by Johnson, his mother's last name, a deliberate choice so that he can make it on his own. However, his true motives reveal themselves in a conversation with his girlfriend, Bianca. "I'm afraid of taking on the name and losing. Call me a fraud. Fake Creed," he says.

"You love to fight right? Yeah, it makes you happy right? Yeah, and you are Apollo Creed's son right? So then use the name. It's yours," she replies.

Adonis does finally take the name, with help from another special lady in his life: his mother and widow of Apollo, Mary Anne (Phylicia Rashad). Before his big fight, she gifts him boxing shorts, red, white, and blue like the shorts his father wore, with Johnson and Creed on the front and back. Her note attached is simple: Build your own legacy.

Part of Adonis coming into his manhood is not measuring himself against his father's standards. Masculinity is built so much around making other men feel inferior. The fight, though he lost, proved



his skills met that of his father's, but it's Adonis' embrace of his father's last name that is his defining moment.

"Adonis, I know you never met your father, but if he was here tonight, what would you want to say to him?", a sports anchor asks after the fight.

"Just tell him that I love him. I know he didn't leave me on purpose. And I'm proud to be a Creed."

Adonis is proud to be a Creed. Not burdened, but *proud*. Accepting. Before he was intimidated by the enormity of Apollo's career, a presence that cast shadows of doubt over who he was as a man and who he could be as a boxer. But his ability to relinquish comparisons and build his own legacy, and not a replica, off his father's example is what affirms Adonis' masculinity.

Black men are boxed in on all sides by white society's notions of masculinity and the accomplishments of their fathers. What are the definition of black inheritance and its relationship with identity? As the definitions of manhood continue to develop, questions such as these will continue to persist with no definite answers.

The standard definition of masculinity does not apply to men who don't fit the qualifications. Adonis represents a new age masculinity that defies the old one and Walter and Calvin aren't the correct skin tone to have those standard definitions apply to them. This is where legacy and inheritance enter in. Legacy is how these male characters identify with their fathers, who in turn inform their masculinity. After their failed attempts at forging their own masculinity, they ultimately turn to the blueprint—their fathers—to help establish their masculinity. Once they move away from competing with their father's inheritance and legacy, they ascend into a masculinity that is not as destructive as cool pose or white masculinity. The point is to be *a* man, not *thee* man.