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## Exchanging Symbolic Patriarchy for Narrative Patriarchy in *The Royal Tenenbaums*

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*This essay critiques the ideological basis of the conventional family unit by dissecting the presentation of patriarchy in Wes Anderson's The Royal Tenenbaums. The film's portrayal of patriarchy is analysed through reference to deeply embedded cultural attitudes that permeate societal structures through storytelling. The prevalence of Christianity within American society is acknowledged to justify both situating Tenenbaum's narrative within a predominantly Judeo-Christian tradition and referencing the Old Testament as a key influence upon standards of patriarchy. The research of biblical scholars is consulted to outline the various privileges afforded to Hebrew patriarchs within the thirteenth century B.C.E., revealing that the standards of patriarchy within this era informed the archetype of idealised patriarchy within the Old Testament. The attitudes of Royal Tenenbaum are recognised as acquiescent with the expectations of the idealised biblical patriarch, close analysis of the film revealing the ways in which he exhibits such entitlement. Analysis reveals that whilst the removal of Royal's conventional privileges occurs within the film, this reduction and realtering of his position as a father-figure allows for a subliminal patriarchal privilege to emerge. The film exposes the narrative privilege allocated to the patriarch in conventional storytelling, such that the portrayal of growth and redemption within the father-figure is heightened and glorified, and the patriarch is privileged as the focal point to the viewer's narrative catharsis. The film exposes the functioning of this process on an ideological level.*

### Introduction

The concept of patriarchy is seen to influence individuals through exposure to popular fiction on an intermedial level. Patriarchy refers to the hierarchical structuring of society by which men are given greater privilege and authority. Within the family unit, patriarchy is symbolically enacted through the authority of the father. The influence of the figurative patriarch across fiction is all-encompassing. The literary omnipresence of the father figure can be traced from ancient texts to immediate entries in contemporary fiction. Whether it is the rendering of the Christian God as a 'father', the perverse vanquishing of the father in the myth

of Oedipus, or the villainization of paternal omnipotence in *Star Wars*, a cultural fixation on the father persists within the literary and cinematic canon.

Theoretical contributions from Marxists, feminists, and critical race theorists have provided insight into how systems of patriarchy perpetuate racism, classism and misogyny. These developments are reflected by modern media, contemporary fiction criticising the privilege of the father and the power which the father-figure wields over the family unit. Cinematic entries like *The Squid and the Whale*, *The Tree of Life*, *The Father*, and *The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)* are indicative of such critical attitudes. Furthermore, television shows like *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Succession* model their narratives around a father wielding his authority maliciously and warping the ideal family unit within various cultural contexts.

I argue that although developing critical perspectives on patriarchy are represented in popular fiction, the father-figure retains certain narrative privileges at a subliminal level. Standards of male supremacy are certainly challenged in media, yet a cultural bias persists that awards the father a narratological privilege through the glorification of their redemption and their instrumentality to the viewer's narrative catharsis. Close analysis of Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums (TRT)* demonstrates this trend, as the eponymous family patriarch may be critiqued in a humorous manner, but his redemptive actions frame him as a saviour as he remedies his mistakes.

## Synopsis

*TRT* follows the strained relationships of three former childhood geniuses – Richie (Luke Wilson), Margot (Gwyneth Paltrow), and Chas (Ben Stiller) – to their estranged father, eponymously named Royal Tenenbaum (Gene Hackman). Despite their remarkable successes in their professional lives, their personal lives are fractured due to their father's abandonment, having been emotionally stunted since the separation of their parents. The three (adult) children all exhibit unique neuroses and struggle with personal relationships. Richie harbours romantic feelings for Margot which he struggles to accept, opting instead to isolate himself for years at sea. Margot grapples with romantic feelings for Richie and the rejection she feels from Royal, channelling her melancholy into hiding various infidelities from

her husband Raleigh (Bill Murray) and secretly developing a smoking habit from a young age. Chas exhibits the most outward disdain for Royal, being overbearingly present in the lives of his children Ari (Grant Rosenmeyer) and Uzi (Jonah Meyerson) after the tragic death of his wife. After discovering he is bankrupt, Royal learns that after 20 years of separation (but not divorce), his wife Etheline (Angelica Huston) plans to marry the family accountant Henry Sherman (Danny Glover). Royal then fakes a terminal cancer diagnosis to rekindle his relationship with the family, yet this backfires when Henry exposes his diagnosis as false, expelling Royal from the family home. The family falls into further crisis after his expulsion, as their grief over his abandonment is reawakened and Richie attempts suicide after learning of Margot's affairs. After uncovering his desire for his family's love and approval, Royal takes a job as an elevator operator at his former residence to try and prove his worth. Royal then makes various redemptive gestures to each of his family members, constructing a more honest foundation for their future relationships. He withholds judgement on Richie's admission of his romantic feelings for Margot, complies with Etheline's wishes for divorce after 20 years of stasis, paternally takes Margot on an outing for ice cream to attempt to resolve their estrangement, and saves Chas's children from a car crash. After relieving his children of their emotional abandonment and re-entering the family unit, Royal suffers a heart attack and dies. The film ends with the family standing around Royal's grave mourning his loss.

### Placing Patriarchy

I define symbolic patriarchy with reference to the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence. In summary of Bourdieu, Schubert recounts that "contemporary social hierarchies and social inequality" are maintained more so by "symbolic violence" than physical force (193). Political efforts to "legitimize those systems of classification and categorisation" (ibid) which produce social inequality result in symbolic violence when people "misrecognize as natural those systems of classification that are actually culturally arbitrary and historical" (ibid). This process is recognised with reference to Judaeo-Christian literature. Bourdieu recognises that due to constant cultural efforts to enable this misrecognition, privileged members of society need only "let the system they dominate take its own course in order to exercise their domination" (Bourdieu and Wacquant

190). Royal's relaxed demeanour throughout the film demonstrates an awareness of the minimum effort required for him to maintain his privilege, due to the system he exists within.

Bourdieu recognises the importance of symbolic violence to the maintenance of patriarchy, claiming "the case of gender domination shows better than any other that symbolic violence accomplishes itself through an act of cognition and misrecognition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 171-2). This viewpoint is reflected in the claims of intersectional feminists like Judith Butler, who highlight the efforts of authoritarian forces to maintain symbolic patriarchy. Butler claims that challenges to normalised gender roles represent "challenges to patriarchal power and social structures within the state" (7). Therefore, villainising deviations under the "phantasm" (Butler 8) of gender acts to "frighten people to come back into their ranks, to accept censorship, and to externalize their fear and hatred onto vulnerable communities" (ibid). Butler therefore recognises Bourdieu's process of misrecognition within the maintenance of symbolic patriarchy. The resulting query concerns how one traces the origins of such hierarchical structures of patriarchy within contemporary art and society.

Analysing the expectations and perceived intrinsic roles that accompany sex and gender encourages a poststructuralist outlook on cultural tradition and art. Poststructuralism's forefather structuralism is traceable to eighteenth century developments in theory, positing that "man constructs the myths, the social institutions, virtually the whole world as he perceives it, and in so doing he constructs himself" (Hawkes 4). Processes of 'structuring' allow for symbolic misrecognition. Hawkes recognises that structural signification acts as a "producer of meaning at a level where an impression of 'god-given' or 'natural' reality prevails, largely because we are not normally able to perceive the processes by which it has been manufactured" (109). Therefore, uncovering the structures of gendered difference requires close interrogation of mistaken divinely ordained societal codes present within cultural mythologies. This is the intent of poststructuralist academics, who critique social structures and recognise underlying currents of symbolic violence within cultural institutions.

The author and theorist bell hooks contributes to the poststructuralist dialogue, unmercifully interrogating and recognising the various intersections by which systems of prejudice sustain each other. Through hook's methodology, the impact of symbolic patriarchy and gendered discrimination works symbiotically with concurrent systems of oppression,

leading her to frame patriarchy as “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, *Salvation* 152). hooks emphasises the “sentiments shared by folks across race, class, gender, and sexual practice” (*Yearning* 12), and the ways in which such oppression affects the majority detrimentally. This outlook on systems of oppression is relevant to close analysis as Royal exhibits racist sentiments which emerge from his self-perception as a white patriarch. Furthermore, it allows recognition of Royal as a symbolic placeholder for oppression, the patriarch as a symptom of structural flaws within both family and society.

Notably, hooks also recognises the importance of cinema in structuring social norms, identifying the “pedagogical role” (*Reel* 2) of cinema in engaging cultural attitudes. She claims cinema provides a “narrative for discourses of race, sex, and class” (*Reel* 3) and a “starting point” (ibid) for “dialogue about these charged issues” (ibid). This affirms my approach in asserting the salience of Royal’s attitudes within the film, and that *TRT* initiates a discourse surrounding the deconstruction of the patriarch. Royal’s redemption further aligns with hooks’ theory of vanquishing oppression through love, as ‘illumination’ and ‘insights’ on his part allow him to take “accountability and atonement” (West 544) for his role as the white patriarch. However, my analysis shows that whilst Royal demonstrates such accountability through love, the privilege of the white patriarch still persists at a subliminal level, intrinsic to the film’s narrative infrastructure.

### **The Inception of Western Patriarchy**

Within Western society, many cultural values arise from Judaeo-Christian religious tradition due to the prominence of Christianity within the USA. In 2002 (just one year after the film’s release) Christians made up 78% of the American population (Pew Research Center). Since the era in which *TRT* takes place is never specified, the year of its release seems the most appropriate substitute for measuring its cultural reception (the same year in which a novel sharing *TRT*’s title is checked out of a library at the film’s opening). Anderson stated that in the conceptual period of the film’s creation he envisioned “an F. Scott Fitzgerald-type New York story” (Dilley 116). Other scholars have noted that within the film Anderson utilises “inventive interplay with existing and fictional literary works to conjure the ambience of a faded past” (Dilley 104). This suggested intertextual ambience compels engagement with the

symbolic themes of the text and its relation to the literary canon. In studying patriarchy within a film that revels in intertextuality and alludes towards a predominantly Christian real-world setting, it is appropriate to use the bible as a source.

The bible offers valuable insights into the standards of symbolic patriarchy that carry forward into the modern era. Lerner<sup>11</sup> posits that the influence of the bible has informed the perspective of traditionalists on patriarchy that women's subordination is "universal, God-given, or natural" (16). Traditionalist views are informed by a male-oriented anthropological conception of ancient hunter-gatherer societies, within which men being "superior in strength" (Lerner 17) granted them a privileged position in protecting and providing for "the more vulnerable female" (ibid) whose biology "destines her for motherhood and nurturance" (ibid). Lerner disputes this, claiming that analysis of hunter-gatherer societies finds "complementarity between the sexes" (18) and women having "relatively high status" (ibid). Leacock demonstrates this through reference to the Trobriand Islanders of Melanesia, recognising a "division of labour between the sexes" (20) that is "reciprocal" (ibid), and a lack of "dependence of the wife and children on the husband" (ibid). Research finds that "patriarchal assumptions on the part of ethnographers and investigators" have warped conclusions in finding "male dominance virtually universal in all known societies" (Lerner 18). The masculine bias in projecting this worldview stems from socially ingrained misogyny, flawed in concept considering that the privilege men wield in modern society has no basis in hunting proficiency. Royal exhibits no physical prowess within the film yet still expects the respect afforded the imaginary archetype of the male hunter. This retroactive overvaluing of a historically innocuous role arguably results from the prevalence of Christianity within Western society, with masculine predominance encouraged through biblical interpretations of history.

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<sup>11</sup> My argument regarding the emergence of symbolic patriarchy is greatly indebted to the insights of historian Gerda Lerner. Lerner was a pioneer of female academia. After emigrating from Austria to America in 1939 following the start of WW2, she became a decorated historian and was an originator of college courses that emphasise prominent women within history. Lerner wrote extensively on patriarchy, challenging the notion that male dominance is natural and biological, instead attributing its prominence to historical/cultural developments in the middle east before the common era. My analysis links attitudes exhibited within *TRT* to sentiments Lerner recognises as emergent from this specific era.

The societal attitudes of Hebrew tribes within the Bronze/Iron age in the Middle East bear a surprising amount of cultural resonance with the expectations of Royal as a modern patriarch. Lerner outlines that “the predominant family structure in the Biblical narrative is the patriarchal family” (170) and records the historical events that inform the literary emphasis of this family structure. Lerner references the mass exodus of Israelites from Egypt, settling in Canaan, “a region which had been sparsely settled, due to poor soil and scarce water supply” (164). Wars between the Israelites and Canaanites persisted until the Israelite’s full conquest of the region in 1250 B.C.E.; this bloodshed existed alongside famine and agricultural turmoil. The various life-threatening crises occurring when “the rudimentary principles of Jewish thought came into being” (Lerner 164) likely influenced the “Biblical emphasis” (ibid) on “women’s procreative role” (ibid), in the interests of continuing the population. This era is believed to coincide with the conception of the earliest passages of the Hebrew bible (Lerner 165), influencing both the structures of proceeding Judaeo-Christian societies and the patriarchal attitudes that persist to this day. The traditionalist worldview that is retrofitted onto history generates from an overvaluation of patriarchal values within this era, Lerner asserting that the stories in Genesis offer “indications of a transition from matrilineal and matrilineal to patrilineal and patrilineal family organization” (167).

### **The Symbolic Patriarch of the Tenenbaums**

I now turn to *TRT* and highlight its exhibition of such patriarchal attitudes. While no evidence is given that Royal practices any religion, his religious background is specified in his conversation with the officiator of Etheline and Henry’s wedding: “I’m Half Hebrew. But the children are three quarter Mick Catholic” (*TRT* 1:31:48-1:32:00). We can therefore surmise that Royal is half Jewish and half Irish-Catholic. Whilst he proceeds to exhibit ambivalence towards such beliefs (demonstrated through his casual use of the Irish slur “mick”), the influence of Judaeo-Christian familial values upon his upbringing is implied. This line of dialogue allows one to recognise connections between Royal’s patriarchal expectations and the standards enabled within Judaeo-Christian tradition. As a matter of fact, regarding Royal as an unconscious apostle of this worldview is illuminating when analysing the particulars of his characterisation.



The humorousness of Royal's behaviour is due to the brazen entitlement which he exhibits in claiming ownership over anyone or anything within the family unit. Alongside this, his dismissal of responsibility for the mistreatment of his family heightens the comic effect of such grandiose expectations. His expectations are incongruent with the era he exists in. Similarly to the way in which the film's aesthetic evokes a retro New York, Royal's expectations appear born of an era preceding his existence by centuries. Lerner notes that in the tenth commandment, "the wife is listed among a man's possessions" (168), as the man is prohibited from coveting his neighbour's "servants, his ox, and his ass" (*ibid*) as well as his wife. The notion of conflating material possession with personhood is reflected in Royal's attitudes towards the family. The gall with which he claims that Etheline is "still my wife" (*TRT* 15:53-16:27) in objecting to her and Henry's union undermines her independence, reducing her to a periphery ornament of Royal's existence. Furthermore, Royal claims possession of the household's modern servants in enlisting the covert assistance of Pagoda, the family valet, to report information to him and assist him in his deceptions.

Royal exhibits the same brazenness as the archetypal biblical patriarch when it comes to material possession. This is demonstrated through flashback, revealing Chas suing Royal for his various selfish and illegal actions. Chas informs the judge that Royal "stole bonds out of my safety deposit box when I was fourteen" (*TRT* 38:30-38:52), to which Royal merely laughs uncomfortably (*ibid*). Royal expects to be entitled to ownership of all possession within the family home and is uneasy when challenged over this. When Royal first returns home, in a moment evocative of the biblical man's ownership of ox and ass, Royal scans the various artworks adorning the stairwell and inquires "Pagoda! Where's my Javelina?" (*TRT* 29:13-29:40). Royal is referring to the mounted head of a species of pig, which he later finds in the closet after an argument with Chas. The viewer may deduce that the Javelina does not conform with Etheline's taste, her having removed it after their separation. Royal's upset at the Javelina's absence is therefore rather telling. Whilst a Javelina is neither ox nor ass, as a wild animal it may be read as a symbol of the patriarch's intrinsic authority over the household as evoked through reference to animal possession in the decalogue. However, the javelina is shown to still be missing from the stairwell when Royal is expelled from the family home (*TRT* 1:02:41-1:03:46). One may expect Royal to adamantly remount the Javelina, staking a symbolic claim of possession over the house. His failure to do so may reflect his changing

attitude towards his family at this point in the narrative, yet comprehensive conclusions regarding Royal's narrative arc will be reserved for later analysis.

Royal's expectations regarding his relationship with Etheline are equally archaic, reflecting further patriarchal standards inherited from the biblical male archetype. This is demonstrated in an exchange between Royal and Pagoda early in the film, when Pagoda informs Royal of Henry's proposal to Etheline by saying "the Black man asked her to be his wife" (15:53-16:27). Royal's response, in saying that "I don't like the sound of this one damn bit" (*ibid*) is inflammatory. He proceeds to justify this feeling by saying "Lord knows I've had my share of infidelities. But she's still my wife" (*ibid*). The construction of this line is masterful in exposing the many facets of Royal's warped world view. Royal references his infidelities without expressing remorse, then claiming legal ownership of Etheline through their marriage by assigning her as his, wishing to prohibit her sexual freedom. Furthermore, the use of the expression "Lord knows" alludes to the religious/patriarchal dimension to Royal's belief system. Lerner provides understanding of the foundations of this belief system, in noting that Hebrew men within Israelite society "enjoyed complete sexual freedom within and outside of marriage" (170) whilst "virginity was expected" (*ibid*) of women prior to marriage, and "the wife owed her husband absolute fidelity" (*ibid*) once married. Whilst "monogamous marriage became the ideal and the rule" (*ibid*) for both parties, Lerner notes that exceptions were made "for royalty" (*ibid*), the eponymous name 'Royal' taking on a remarkably layered meaning when read through this lens. Royal's expectation of his wife's celibacy concurrent with his extramarital proclivities acquiesces with the expectations of the most privileged men within Hebrew society. Furthermore, it should be noted that the tenure of Royal and Etheline's prolonged union symbolically reflects the marriage traditions of Hebrew society. Lerner records that "divorce was obtainable by the husband, but it was never obtainable by the wife" (170). Whilst Royal's decision to finally grant Etheline her divorce is framed as a moment of growth, it privileges him within the text, presenting his authority as patriarch, him being "an obstacle... blocking the union" (Buckland 101), their marriage necessitating that he "undergoes a reversal" (*ibid*). Whilst subtle, the execution of Royal's narrative growth and redemption subliminally upholds his symbolic privilege.

Furthermore, there is a racial dimension introduced within this scene, which is made more explicit at later points in the film. Henry's identity is diminished by Pagoda's racialised

phrasing (it is possible he is deliberately imitating the language Royal would use to describe Henry, yet this remains to be seen). Refusing to address Henry by name or occupation ('the accountant' would have been less dehumanising) and identifying him exclusively by his racial identity frames Henry as encroaching upon the racial homogeneity of the family unit. Buckland recognises this dimension to Royal's motivations, as the upholding of his "sense of male privilege" (91) requires the expulsion of "what Royal sees as a racial threat to his family" (ibid). The racial component to Royal's discomfort with Henry's presence is emphasised by their confrontation in the kitchen of the family home (*TRT* 57:02-58:35). Royal asserts his authority as patriarch by accusing Henry of trying to "steal [his] woman" (ibid). He then deliberately selects racially provocative terms to anger Henry, such as calling him "Coltrane" (ibid) and challenging him to "talk some jive" (ibid). This challenge reveals the extent of Royal's racialisation of Henry, as Dilley aptly points out that the language "most natural" (105) to Henry is "the legalese of taxation law" (ibid). Royal's racism reflects aspects of modern patriarchal standards, as "race- and class-based oppressions are intertwined with patriarchy" (Small 29), and the insecurities of white men are heightened by the supposed threat of racially othered men challenging their sense of social superiority. Whilst this modern conception of the patriarch's racial position within society contrasts with the ancient standards which inform Royal's expectations, this conflict likely functions to situate Royal's archaic worldview within modern place and space. In evoking the imagery of a twentieth-century 'bygone era' of New York, Anderson engages with an era that reflects greater ethnic diversity than ancient Hebrew society (Dilley 103). To not address the racial component that accompanies patriarchal attitudes within the modern era would expose the cracks of Royal's conceptual composition and render his characterisation incomprehensible. Furthermore, the construction of modern white hegemonic masculinity "requires all men to position themselves" (Small 29) within hegemonic norms, such that race and class are simultaneous determiners of male privilege. Therefore, Royal's attitude towards Henry does not diverge from but contributes toward traditional notions of patriarchy.

### **The Exchange of Symbolic Social Status for Narrative Cathartic Status**

It is essential to locate the position of the film in relation to Royal's attitudes. What message does one draw from the film's conclusion, as the family gathers around Royal's grave

and mourns the loss of their (once loathed, now loved) father, having allowed him forgiveness and granted him his fictitiously heroic epitaph (1:41:16-1:43:32)? I answer this query by closely analysing narrative structure to uncover the film's framing of Royal.

The simplest reading of the film would be to view Royal's narrative arc as a condemnation of the traditional patriarch and an attempt to reconstruct the archetypal father as a more diplomatic and emotionally present figure. This viewpoint aligns with scholarship on this film specifically, as well as with patriarchal theory in a broad sense. Buckland frames the film's "logical trajectory" (90) as "degrad[ing] Royal Tenenbaum's symbolic function as head of the family and as paternal ideal" (ibid). Alongside this, Hartmann theorises that the emotional absence common to conventional father figures is a byproduct of patriarchy. Hartmann claims the status of the patriarch "prevents them from recognising both human needs for nurturance, sharing, and growth, and the potential for meeting those needs in a non-hierarchical, nonpatriarchal society" (164). The symbolic degradation identified by Buckland results in Royal's increased emotional maturity and nurturance of his children, aligning with Hartmann's solution for realtering patriarchal relations. Robé suggests that the dissection of patriarchy is a common reoccurrence in Anderson's work, his films identifying "the complex cultural matrices that surround twenty-first century entitled masculinity" (118). This claim rings especially true in light of the various connections drawn between Royal's expectations and the ideal society purported by the bible. The cultural influences of patriarchy are identified in Royal and the privileges afforded him are subsequently undermined, fundamentally altering his relationships within the family unit.

However, whilst Royal's character growth is precipitated by a loss of conventional privilege, his redemption and forgiveness awaken a subliminal privilege that exists subtextually, narratively framing the father as the emotional core of the family unit, determining the respective emotional states of his kin. Buckland's semiotic reading of the film uncovers the omnipresence of this privilege, despite Buckland's insistence on the degradation of Royal's position as father. Buckland identifies that all the kinship conflicts within the film are a result of Royal's mistreatment (90). Royal neglects Etheline yet prohibits her marriage to Henry. Royal emphasises Margot's status as an "adopted daughter" (Buckland 92), causing her neurosis due to her being "never fully integrated" (ibid) into the family unit. Royal's rejection of Margot further heightens the emotional conflict between Margot and Richie, the

confusion over her sibling status complicating their love for each other and allowing romantic feelings to develop. Royal's childhood favouring of Richie and simultaneous neglect of Chas and Margot causes conflict between the siblings, fracturing their adult relationships. Royal's entitled attitude toward the supposed 'servants' of the family unit even influences Chas, who is reluctant to accept Henry as a stepfather (*TRT* 42:34-43:55). The first time we see Henry join the family at the dinner table, Chas refuses to acknowledge him on a personal level, insisting that he call him 'Mr Sherman' and that he only knows him as Etheline's accountant. Even Chas, who exhibits the most disdain and distrust toward Royal, is influenced by him detrimentally.

Considering the vast responsibility Royal shoulders in his family's dysfunctionality, the narrative privileges him with the honour of mending their neuroses and providing both the family and the viewer narrative catharsis. Royal grants Etheline divorce and permits Henry's ingratiation within the family unit, allowing her to move on from their marriage and proceed with her romantic life. Royal attempts to remedy his neglect of Margot and withholds judgement of Richie's feelings for her, demonstrating radical acceptance of his children and attempting to make up for his lack of guidance in their development. Royal saves Chas's children from injury/death and replaces their family dog, protecting Chas's family and allowing him to acknowledge his grief at the loss of his wife. Royal's eventual acceptance of Henry even results in Chas welcoming Henry as a substitute father figure, as at Henry's wedding he bonds with Chas over their shared widower status (*TRT* 1:30:51-1:31:30). Royal's actions have a positive impact on the children and their personal lives. Richie begins teaching tennis lessons, Margot processes her childhood trauma through her autobiographical play *The Levinsons in the Trees*, and Chas joins Royal on his fun days out with Ari and Uzi.

It may be easier to reason with the generous rendering of Royal's wrongdoing and redemption when considering the frame narrative that surrounds the family's story. The film begins with an overhead shot of a novel which shares the film's title being checked out of a library, the film then being demarcated by book chapters and featuring an occasional pseudo-diegetic narrator (00:09-00:20). This repeated attempt to "remind the viewer that the film is based on a literary work" (Dilley 98) is exceptionally relevant to understanding the narrative construction of the film. The events of the film can be read as a metanarrative reflection of popular fiction, the film's aesthetic generating the "literary personalities of Joseph Mitchell,

A.J. Liebling, Lillian Ross, J.D. Sallinger” (Dilley 103) and more. The narrative intertextually reflects a trend in storytelling of privileging the patriarchal figure, positioning them as the lynchpin of narrative catharsis and situating their growth as the emotional focal point of the narrative, ensuring the growth of those surrounding them. The film then functions self-reflexively, refuting the corporeal influence of patriarchy at a surface level yet demonstrating its prominence at a metanarrative level. Robé emphasises the complexity with which Anderson criticises patriarchal figures in his films, such that “an aura of nostalgia slips through” (118) despite their obvious faults.

The complex narrative privileging of Royal as father figure is reflected in the epitaph that adorns his gravestone (which we know to have been endorsed by the family, as he asks Etheline to proofread it earlier in the film). Royal’s headstone reads that he “died tragically rescuing his family from the wreckage of a destroyed sinking battleship” (*TRT* 1:42:24). This statement conveys the reading which the family’s catharsis hinges upon, that being the perspective of Royal as a heroic saviour who rescues his family from their trauma and sadness. This outlook is a hard sell for some, Robé believing that it “rings hollow” (Dilley 117) considering that Royal’s parenting was the root cause of the family’s pain. However, the epitaph appears to acknowledge this reality, the wreckage representing “the state of the family as it imploded” (*ibid*) due to his abandonment. Following this veiled admission, he could be viewed as a saviour in “rescuing them from psychological wreckage and loneliness” (*ibid*), yet the gratitude he deserves for this is debatable, considering he is the one who figuratively crashed the ship. The epitaph skilfully reflects the tenuousness of Royal’s saviour status, and self-reflexively draws attention to the narrative’s generous valorisation of Royal’s growth.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it may be suggested that the film offers a portrayal of how the privileged position of the father figure lingers culturally, emanating from the stories we tell within the prism of family. In tracing the connections between the brash entitlement of Royal Tenenbaum and the familial ideal endorsed by the Old Testament, this essay has demonstrated the symbolic power of patriarchy as pervasive and recognisable within eras far

removed from the conditions of its conception. What Anderson's film exposes, whether intentional or otherwise, is the capacity for masculine hierarchical privilege to pervade stories which challenge the image of conventional symbolic patriarchy. Royal's development from an absent deadbeat dad to a present nurturing father reflects a cultural favourability toward the patriarch, a ready willingness to forgive prematurely. Whether the film enables or critiques this favourability is debatable, and ultimately the conclusions drawn by audiences depend upon the biases of the viewer and their own relationship to patriarchy on a conceptual level. The reason for the film's complexity and ambiguity regarding this topic arises from the complex metanarrative storytelling techniques Anderson incorporates into his filmmaking. By presenting the film through the catalyst of a novel and incorporating an aesthetic which evokes the classical American literary canon of the twentieth century, Anderson's story reads simultaneously as both a sincere character study of a dysfunctional family and a self-reflexive parody of its own classic genre tropes. The narrative occupies the middle ground between classical narrative storytelling and revisionist narrative criticism.

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