
Delineating Toxic Masculinity in Tana French's *The Witch Elm*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of toxic masculinity in *The Witch Elm* (2018), a novel by Tana French, using R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Amy Wharton's sociology of gender frameworks. The research focuses on the protagonist, Toby, who shows toxic masculine traits such as emotional suppression, independence, aggression, and vulnerability avoidance. The study uses qualitative descriptive analysis, examining key scenes in the novel in which these behaviors manifest, especially in relation to family and romantic partners. Through this analysis, the findings reveal how toxic masculinity not only contributes to Toby's deteriorating mental health but also isolates him emotionally, resulting in damaged relationships and increased psychological distress. Ultimately, the article concludes that toxic masculinity extends emotional isolation, reinforcing harmful gender norms that prevent men from seeking support or expressing vulnerability. The research contributes to a broader discourse on how societal expectations of masculinity negatively impact individual males while continuing gender inequality. The study highlights the importance of challenging these norms to foster healthier emotional expression, stronger relationships, and more fair gender dynamics in society.

Keywords: *gender; hegemonic masculinity; masculinity; sociology of gender; toxic masculinity*

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INTRODUCTION

The depiction of masculinity in literature often reflects and critiques prevailing societal norms, providing insight into how gender roles shape behavior. In contemporary literature, toxic masculinity has emerged as a central theme, explored to highlight its harmful effects on men and society. Toxic masculinity refers to cultural expectations that demand men exhibit traits such as dominance, independence, aggression, and emotional oppression (Connell, 1995). These expectations limit men's emotional expression and create unhealthy power dynamics in personal and social relationships (Harrington, 2020). Tana French's *The Witch Elm* (2018) vividly illustrates this dynamic through its protagonist, Toby, whose adherence to masculine ideals of resilience and control exacerbates her psychological deterioration. After an attack of violence, Toby clings to emotional repression, isolating himself and refusing help, which ultimately leads to his downfall. His behavior exemplifies hegemonic masculinity, a culturally dominant form of masculinity that maintains male power through detachment, control,

and emotional aggression (Connell, 1995).

Tana French's unique Irish heritage enriches this exploration by introducing a bicultural critique of toxic masculinity. The American background of French reflects the individualistic and stoic ideals of American masculinity, while its Irish roots emphasize community and interpersonal relationships. This dual perspective allows *The Witch Elm* to highlight the conflict between the ideals of gross American individualism and Irish cultural values, revealing how toxic masculinity breaks personal and relationship well-being (Smith, 2022). The bicultural lens of French makes Toby's psychological revelation not only a personal crisis but also a critique of the broader cultural norms that shape male identity, reflecting how the historical context of Irish nationalism has influenced the representation of modern masculinity (Beatty, 2016).

Toxic masculinity not only in men but also in their relationships, reinforces gender inequality and promotes emotional isolation. Studies show that emotional repression—a toxic center of masculinity—correlates with higher levels

of depression, anxiety, and strained interpersonal relationships (Oliffe & Phillips, 2008; Rosida et al., 2022). In addition, cultural expectations of male independence prevent men from seeking help, deepening emotional struggles (Grieve et al., 2019). The French novel reflects this dynamic as Toby's oppression leads to his mental disorder eventually. The novel thus serves as a poignant illustration of how the cultural demands of masculinity, especially the avoidance of vulnerability, cause heavy psychological victimization in men.

While toxic masculinity has been widely studied in sociology and psychology, its portrayal in contemporary fiction is still less explored. *The Witch Elm* provides a critical case study, offering a nuanced depiction of masculinity in crisis. Through the lens of Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and the historical context of Irish nationalism (Beatty, 2016), this study aims to examine how society's expectations of masculinity shape Toby's relationships and mental health. By focusing on specific moments in which toxic masculinity manifests in the novel, this analysis will reveal how France critiques

destructive gender norms that contribute to Toby's emotional isolation and deteriorating mental state.

The main research questions discussed in this article are: How does toxic masculinity affect Toby's behavior and relationships in *The Witch Elm*? This study aims to explore how ideals of masculinity—such as independence, aggression, and emotional repression—contribute to Toby's psychological disorder and strained relationships. As such, this analysis will contribute to a broader discussion of the cultural and psychological consequences of toxic masculinity. The portrayal of French masculinity, informed by its American-Irish background, highlights the need for a healthier model of masculinity that emphasizes openness and emotional vulnerability (Smith, 2022). The following sections will focus on key moments in the novel where Toby's toxic masculine traits are evident and how these traits shape his emotional and interpersonal fall.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the concept of toxic masculinity in *The Witch Elm* (2018) by Tana

French. This analysis is based on R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, which provides a framework for understanding how society's expectations of masculinity shape male behavior and contribute to emotional isolation as well as relational struggles. In addition, insights from Amy Wharton's gender sociology are integrated to highlight how gender roles are socially constructed and maintained through cultural practices.

Data were collected by a thorough reading of the novel's content, and then data such as narratives and dialogues relevant to the issue of toxic masculinity were collected in an analysis table. In the data analysis stage, the data that has been collected is analyzed using the theory of toxic masculinity. Furthermore, the results of the analysis were linked to existing studies using a gender approach.

DISCUSSION

Tana French's novel *The Witch Elm* offers an intricate depiction of toxic masculinity, both through its protagonist Toby, and the dynamics between the various characters. By examining these interactions, we gain a deeper understanding of how toxic masculinity manifests in behaviors such as

emotional oppression, manipulation, aggression, and independence. These traits are in line with R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, which encourages men to dominate, avoid vulnerability, and maintain control. Amy Wharton's gender sociology further contextualizes these behaviors as social constructs, showing how they are reinforced by cultural norms. French's unique American-Irish heritage adds another layer to this analysis, allowing him to critique how these toxic masculine ideals are shaped by American individualism and Irish relational dynamics. By investigating key scenes from the novel, this discussion will explore the cultural influences that shape Toby's behavior and relationships, describing how these toxic norms lead to emotional isolation and mental decline.

Toby and Susanna: Manipulation and the Need for Control

In one of the novel's pivotal moments, Toby's relationship with his cousin Susanna becomes strained after the discovery of a skull in the family garden. Faced with the possibility that his life may spiral out of control, Toby's toxic masculine traits begin to surface more clearly. His immediate response is not to

address the situation directly or engage in a meaningful conversation but rather to manipulate Susanna into supporting him.

The tension in the scene is palpable as Susanna tries to confront the reality of the situation. She states: *"We need to figure this out, Toby. We can't just pretend it didn't happen. Something's buried here, and we have to deal with it."* (French, 2018, p. 189).

Toby's response, however, is to deflect the conversation: *"Come on, Susanna, you know I'd never let anything bad happen to us. We've always looked out for each other."* (French, 2018, p. 190).

This dialogue illustrates a key element of toxic masculinity—Toby avoids taking responsibility and instead appeals to family loyalty. According to Connell (1995), hegemonic masculinity emphasizes dominance and control over situations. Toby's manipulation of Susanna reflects this need for control, as he tries to emotionally coerce her into siding with him rather than addressing the problem head-on. By using their familial bond as leverage, Toby reinforces the toxic masculine ideal that men should use emotional manipulation to avoid

appearing vulnerable or culpable.

However, Susanna resists Toby's manipulation, showing her awareness of his tactics: *"This isn't about loyalty, Toby. Stop trying to guilt me into covering for you. We need to face this together, or not at all."* (French, 2018, p. 191).

This exchange highlights the limitations of toxic masculine behaviors when confronted with someone who refuses to comply. Toby's inability to openly discuss the issue, coupled with his need to manipulate Susanna, reveals his reliance on toxic masculine traits to maintain control. Connell (1995) argues that such behaviors reinforce power imbalances in relationships, preventing meaningful emotional engagement and creating further alienation between the characters.

Toby and Melissa: Emotional Suppression and Relationship Breakdown

Toby's relationship with Melissa is another clear example of how toxic masculinity leads to emotional isolation and the breakdown of intimacy. Following his traumatic attack, Toby becomes increasingly withdrawn, refusing to share his emotions

with Melissa despite her efforts to help him. This dynamic reflects Connell's assertion that hegemonic masculinity demands emotional stoicism, even when openness could lead to healing.

In one scene, Melissa attempts to reach out to Toby, hoping to help him process his trauma. She gently asks: "You've been distant, Toby. I'm worried about you. Can we talk about what happened?" (French, 2018, p. 78). Toby, uncomfortable with the idea of vulnerability, shuts down the conversation: "There's nothing to talk about. I'm fine, Melissa. We need to move past this." (French, 2018, p. 79).

This refusal to engage emotionally reflects a key trait of toxic masculinity—emotional suppression. Connell (1995) notes that men are often socialized to see vulnerability as a sign of weakness. Toby's need to suppress his emotions rather than share them with Melissa illustrates this mindset. He believes that by maintaining emotional distance, he is preserving his sense of masculine strength. However, this behavior only serves to isolate him further, preventing any real emotional connection with Melissa.

Melissa, growing increasingly frustrated, pushes back: "You're not fine, Toby. I can see it. I just want to help, but you're not letting me in." (French, 2018, p. 80). Toby, again deflecting, responds: "I don't need help, Melissa. I've handled worse, and I'll handle this too." (French, 2018, p. 80).

Toby's belief in self-reliance—another aspect of toxic masculinity—becomes apparent. According to Connell (1995), men are often conditioned to believe that they must deal with problems on their own, without seeking emotional or practical support. Toby's insistence that he can "handle" his trauma reflects this toxic masculine ideal, even though it prevents him from accessing the support he needs. This emotional suppression ultimately creates a rift between him and Melissa, as she feels increasingly shut out and powerless to help.

Toby and Leon: Fragile Masculinity and Friendship

Male friendships are often portrayed in literature as spaces where emotional vulnerability is limited, and *The Witch Elm* is no exception. Toby's interactions with his childhood friend Leon reveal the fragility of masculinity, especially when one man tries

to offer emotional support to another. Leon's concern for Toby's mental health is met with defensiveness, as Toby perceives any offer of help as a threat to his independence.

In an essential scene, Leon tries to broach the subject of Toby's well-being: "You've been acting strange lately, mate. I'm worried about you. You don't have to go through this alone." (French, 2018, p. 142). Toby immediately rejects this offer of support: "I'm fine, Leon. I don't need anyone's help. Stop trying to make this into something it's not." (French, 2018, p. 142).

Connell (1995) explains that hegemonic masculinity discourages men from seeking emotional support, particularly from other men. Toby's fragile masculinity becomes evident—he perceives Leon's concern as an attack on his independence rather than as a genuine offer of help. Toby's rejection of Leon's support reflects the toxic masculine belief that men should be entirely self-reliant, even at the cost of their mental health.

Leon, determined to help, tries again: "It's okay to admit you're struggling. We all go through tough times. That doesn't make you weak." (French, 2018, p. 143). Toby,

however, remains defensive: "I'm not struggling, Leon. I don't need you analyzing me. Just drop it." (French, 2018, p. 143).

This exchange highlights the fragility of Toby's masculinity—any suggestion that he might need help is seen as a threat to his sense of self. Connell (1995) notes that toxic masculinity often leads to the rejection of emotional vulnerability, even in friendships where support is readily available. By refusing Leon's offer of help, Toby isolates himself further, reinforcing the toxic masculine ideal that men must "handle" everything on their own.

Toby and Hugo: Avoiding Vulnerability in Family Relationships

Toby's relationship with his dying uncle Hugo provides another example of how toxic masculinity fosters emotional avoidance, even within close family relationships. Hugo, aware of his terminal condition, repeatedly tries to engage Toby in conversations about his impending death, hoping to prepare him for the future. However, Toby consistently avoids these discussions, reflecting his discomfort with vulnerability and emotional confrontation.

In one scene, Hugo gently says to Toby: "We should talk about what's going to happen when I'm gone. It's important that you're prepared." (French, 2018, p. 108). Toby, uncomfortable with the subject, responds dismissively: "There's no need to talk about that now, Hugo. We'll deal with it when the time comes." (French, 2018, p. 108).

This dialogue illustrates a key aspect of toxic masculinity—Toby's refusal to confront emotional realities, particularly those that involve vulnerability. Connell (1995) argues that men are often conditioned to avoid discussions of death, grief, or illness, as these topics force them to acknowledge their own emotional fragility. By deflecting Hugo's attempts to engage in meaningful conversation, Toby reinforces the toxic masculine ideal that men must remain emotionally invulnerable, even in the face of profound personal loss.

Hugo, sensing Toby's discomfort, tries to push further: "I just don't want you to feel unprepared, Toby. It's okay to talk about these things." (French, 2018, p. 109). Toby, still resistant, replies: "I'm not thinking about that, Hugo. Let's just

focus on the present." (French, 2018, p. 109).

Toby's avoidance of emotional vulnerability prevents him from forming a deeper connection with Hugo during his final days. Connell (1995) highlights how the suppression of emotions not only isolates men but also deprives them of the opportunity to engage in deeper, more authentic relationships. By refusing to confront the impending loss, Toby denies both himself and Hugo a chance for emotional closure, demonstrating the damaging effects of toxic masculinity on familial relationships.

Toby and His Mother: The Strain of Control and Aggression

Toby's interactions with his mother exemplify the toxic masculine traits of control and aggression. After the attack, she expresses her concern for him, which is met with Toby's irritation and defensiveness.

"You've been so distant lately, Toby. I'm worried about you. I feel like I don't know you anymore," she says gently, seeking to connect (French, 2018, p. 143).

Toby responds sharply, "I told you, I'm fine. Stop worrying about me!" (French, 2018, p. 143).

This response illustrates a classic example of toxic masculinity, where emotional vulnerability is perceived as a threat. Connell (1995) explains that men often respond to perceived emotional intrusion with aggression, aiming to reassert control over the situation. In this case, Toby's aggressive dismissal of his mother's concern not only alienates her but also highlights his need to maintain a façade of strength. His emotional outburst reflects the internalized belief that expressing vulnerability equates to weakness.

When Toby's mother persists, trying to understand his emotional state, Toby grows increasingly hostile: "I don't want to talk about it, just stop asking!" (French, 2018, p. 144).

Toby and the Police: Defensiveness and Distrust of Authority

Another moment where toxic masculinity is evident in *The Witch Elm* occurs during Toby's interaction with the police, following the discovery of a human skull on his family's property. Rather than cooperating or showing concern for the investigation, Toby becomes defensive and confrontational, perceiving the police's questions as a

direct challenge to his integrity and control over the situation.

As the police officers calmly question him about the skull, Toby's irritation quickly escalates: "Why are you asking me this? I didn't do anything wrong! You're acting like I'm a suspect!" (French, 2018, p. 215).

The officer responds patiently, "We're simply following up on the discovery, Mr. Hennessy. There's no need to be defensive." Toby, still agitated, retorts: "It sure feels like you're accusing me. I didn't ask for this mess, and now you're all over me like I'm guilty!" (French, 2018, p. 216).

Toby's hostile reaction reflects the toxic masculine belief that any challenge to one's authority or autonomy must be met with aggression and defensiveness. Connell (1995) explains that hegemonic masculinity encourages men to distrust external authority figures, especially when those figures threaten their sense of control or challenge their position of dominance. Toby's outburst against the police is a clear manifestation of this mindset, as he interprets the investigation not as a neutral inquiry but as an affront to his status.

This defensiveness also speaks to the fragility of Toby's sense of self, as any implication that he might be implicated in wrongdoing sends him into a state of emotional volatility. Rather than remaining calm and cooperative, Toby's toxic masculine instincts compel him to fight back against perceived threats, even when no direct accusation has been made. This behavior undermines his credibility and escalates the situation unnecessarily, illustrating the destructive nature of toxic masculinity's emphasis on dominance and control.

Toby and Hugo: The Avoidance of Mortality and Emotion

Toby's relationship with his uncle Hugo is further complicated by Toby's refusal to engage in emotionally charged conversations, especially those that deal with mortality. Hugo, who is terminally ill, tries multiple times to discuss his impending death with Toby, hoping to prepare him for what's to come. However, Toby's avoidance of the topic demonstrates another core aspect of toxic masculinity—denial of vulnerability, especially in the face of death and loss.

In one particularly emotional moment, Hugo says: "We should talk about the

future, Toby. I won't be here much longer, and I want you to be prepared for that." (French, 2018, p. 109). Toby, visibly uncomfortable, replies: "There's no point in talking about that now, Hugo. Let's just focus on the good days we have left. Why make things harder by dwelling on it?" (French, 2018, p. 110).

This avoidance of discussions about death reflects Toby's deep discomfort with emotional vulnerability. Connell (1995) argues that toxic masculinity conditions men to avoid facing emotions like fear, grief, or sadness, as these are seen as weaknesses. In this scene, Toby's refusal to engage with Hugo's impending death mirrors his broader reluctance to face his own emotional fragility. Rather than embracing the opportunity for a deeper emotional connection with his uncle, Toby deflects, focusing instead on superficial distractions.

Recognizing Toby's discomfort, responds with gentle persistence: "Talking about these things doesn't make it worse, Toby. It's important. I don't want to leave things unsaid." (French, 2018, p. 110). Toby, still resisting, says: "I don't need to think about that, Hugo. Let's just enjoy the time we have now. I'm

not ready to deal with any of that." (French, 2018, p. 111).

Toby's toxic masculinity prevents him from forming a deeper emotional bond with Hugo in the final stages of his life. Connell (1995) explains that the avoidance of vulnerability often leads men to miss out on meaningful relationships, as they prioritize emotional self-preservation over connection. Toby's inability to face the reality of Hugo's mortality deprives him of the chance to engage in a healing conversation about death, loss, and love. This emotional distance not only harms Toby but also leaves Hugo without the closure he seeks in his final days.

Toby and His Cousins: Aggression and Rivalry

Toxic masculinity also manifests in Toby's interactions with his cousins, where competition and aggression often define their relationships. In a scene where family tensions rise over the secrets that have been uncovered, Toby's defensive posture escalates into outright hostility, as he feels threatened by their accusations.

When one of his cousins, who has uncovered some damaging

information, confronts Toby, they say: "You've always had everything handed to you, Toby. Now that things are falling apart, you can't handle it." (French, 2018, p. 230). Toby reacts aggressively, "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Don't act like you know me or what I've been through." (French, 2018, p. 230).

This exchange highlights the toxic masculine trait of interpreting criticism or challenge as a personal attack. Connell (1995) describes how men are often conditioned to respond to rivalry or confrontation with aggression, as a way to reassert dominance. In this scene, Toby's reaction is not to engage in a conversation or address the accusations calmly but to lash out, using anger to shield himself from vulnerability.

The cousin continues to press: "We all know you've skated by your whole life, Toby. You're only freaking out now because you've never had to deal with anything hard." (French, 2018, p. 231). Toby, unable to contain his frustration, shouts: "Shut up! You don't know what you're talking about. Just keep your mouth shut!" (French, 2018, p. 231).

This moment reflects the way toxic masculinity fosters

competition and rivalry within families, particularly among male relatives. Connell (1995) argues that toxic masculinity encourages men to see their peers, even family members, as rivals rather than allies. Toby's aggression toward his cousins reveals his fragile masculinity, as he feels his sense of entitlement and superiority are being questioned. Rather than engage in a constructive dialogue, Toby defaults to aggression, further straining his family relationships and isolating himself.

Throughout *The Witch Elm*, Tana French portrayed the damaging effects of toxic masculinity on Toby's relationships and mental state. His inability to express vulnerability, reliance on control, and aggressive responses to emotional situations create patterns of isolation and self-destruction. By refusing to confront his emotions and refusing help from those who care about him, Toby exemplifies the dangerous consequences of toxic masculine ideals as defined by Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. The use of the American-Irish background by French enriches this critique, highlighting how cultural expectations from both sides of

the Atlantic reinforce this destructive behavior. Ultimately, *The Witch Elm* serves as a powerful commentary on the need for a more open and emotionally supportive model of masculinity that prioritizes mental health and fosters genuine human relationships.

CONCLUSION

The Witch Elm provides an intriguing exploration of how toxic masculinity affects the protagonist Toby's actions, relationships, and emotional health. Through his behavior characterized by emotional suppression, control, aggression, and an aversion to vulnerability, the novel shows how the social pressures of hegemonic masculinity negatively affect men and those around them. As Toby's relationships deteriorate, especially with his family and romantic partner, it becomes clear that these traits lead to emotional isolation and psychological decline. The analysis, which is based on R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, reveals that this behavior is not only personally damaging but also serves to enforce destructive gender norms. By showcasing Toby's internal struggles and his outward effects, the novel offers a critique of traditional masculine ideals and underscores the importance

of embracing openness and emotional vulnerability. This article contributes to the ongoing discussion about the need to dismantle toxic masculinity and promote a healthier and more balanced model of masculinity that fosters emotional well-being and positive relationships.

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