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An Analysis of, *Housekeeping* Through, *Sex In Public*

Marilynne Robinson's, *Housekeeping* focuses on the structural depiction of a family, the expected roles of females and the impact that a society can have on an individual. It is throughout the novel, that we, the readers are exposed to these conflicts and how they affect the main characters, specifically Ruth, Lucille and their Aunt Sylvie. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's, *Sex In Public* further assists in the analyzing of Robinson's book, by dissecting this concept called heteronormativity, which suggests that everything that a society does is seeded by heterosexuality and this attempt to install this conduct of normalization into our everyday lives. I believe that it is through, *Sex In Public* that it can be seen that Fingerbone (the town in which the novel takes place in) thrives off of this sense of heteronormativity and that Sylvie is an opposing force, that serves as a threat to the entire stabilization of the town, which is due to the town's own fears, concerns and norms that they have set in place.

It is established early on in the novel that Ruth's family is not a traditional one, which eventually causes the town some major concern. This is shown when Ruth reminisces about the sheriff visiting their house, writing, "In the weeks that followed the sheriff came twice... Everything in his manner suggested the deepest embarrassment... This man regularly led the Fourth of July parade, dressed in buckskins and tooled-leather boots... He carried an oversized flag that rested in his stirrup." (Robinson, 176). When analyzing this quote, it is important to consider why the sheriff felt so embarrassed. Now Ruth makes it clear that usually, this man dealt with forest fires, blizzards and other events that were caused by nature; so going to people's

houses to check on them was not something that the sheriff did regularly, which is why he felt so uncomfortable. Also, by checking up on Ruth's family, there is an implication that they need to be surveilled, which implies that their quality of life is in question. Now admitting this to Ruth's family would be an extremely difficult thing to do, because that would then exploit this perceived notion of superiority, that although the town feels entitled to, does not want to admit. This seems to be a common pattern that runs throughout the novel, almost as if being too aggressive with interrupting in people's lives is an un-american thing to do. This of course forces readers to reflect on why Ruth would describe the sheriff's patriotism, which is due to him representing what Fingerbone considers to be the perfect American. So because of the sheriff's embarrassment, patriotism and representation of the town in this encounter, the people of the Fingerbone begin to reveal their need to exemplify perfection, living their reserved, quiet lives, that are regulated by the expectations and rules that they have so preciously inaugurated.

These ideas are only continued and further proven when members of the town play off of this false sense of politeness, by visiting Ruth's house. Ruth discusses these visits, writing,

“So long as the ladies were seated in that room, or in that house, I knew that their attention would never wander, the subject would never change... In their conversations with Sylvie, there were many silences... one would say, “I’ll send my husband over to fix those broken windows,” and another would say, “My little Milton’ll split some kindling for you. He needs the exercise.” Then there would be a silence.” (181).

When Ruth establishes this idea of there being a subject that will never change, she means herself and her family. Her use of the word, “subject” serves as an implication that these women feel a need to fix this family, as if they have the authority to determine that the family

needs to be improved. It is also interesting to note these women offering their husbands and sons help, which are only passive aggressive ways of suggesting that Sylvie is not capable of taking care of the house by herself, and that she is missing this male presence that could only make her life better; just notice the mere fact that sheriff (who is a man) is who they first send to check on them in the first place. The silence at the end of this quote also further proves these women's agendas and that these encounters are not meant to be friendly, despite that being the surfaced perception. This is them simply flexing the power that they believe they possess to Sylvie and it is them subconsciously pushing off the heterosexual norms that they abide so passionately by.

In Berlant and Warner's essay, they discuss this idea of heterosexual culture and how it conflicts with society, which ultimately makes it easier to understand the thinking process in the town of Fingerbone. They write,

“The conflicts between these strands (of heterosexual culture) are seldom more than dimly perceived in practice, where the givenness of male-female relations is part of the ordinary rightness of the world... Such conflicts have also gone unrecognized in theory, partly because of the metacultural work of the very category of heterosexuality... partly because the sciences of social knowledge are themselves so deeply anchored in the process of normalization...” (Berlant and Warner, 2604).

When Berlant and Warner bring up this idea surrounding the male-female relationship, it further proves why the wives would come and visit Sylvie. As mentioned previously, these women feel a sense of concern over Sylvie, which is due to the fact that they are in, “normalized” heterosexual relationships. So when they come over with their gifts and suggestions, it is simply them trying to install a little bit of themselves into Sylvie and her nieces

lives; to define it as Berlant and Warner would, it is, “the anchoring of normalization” for these women. Having said this, it is interesting to question this anchoring, because it leads to questioning the relationship between danger and actual harm. Although Sylvie leaves her nieces alone in the woods and has Ruth jumping trains, never once in the book, does she physically harm Lucille or Ruth, nor do they actually ever get hurt; she simply has them living lives that are different than the rest of Fingerbone. So because Sylvie’s decision making goes against Fingerbone as a whole, these, “concerned” women of the town have socially constructed Lucille and Ruth into being in danger, which ultimately means that the family needs to find its anchor, which is why these women come to visit them in the first place.

This anchoring that Berlant and Warner speak of also finds itself in the gender roles that Fingerbone believes must stay permanent. Now one major expectation for a woman in this novel is being able to keep a tighty house, which stands as a symbolic measure to how womanly a female is, which is perhaps why Robinson titled the novel, *Housekeeping*. Ruth discusses Sylvie’s unorthodox housekeeping, writing, “... once she washed half the kitchen ceiling and a door. Sylvie believed in stern solvents, and most of all in air. It was for the sake of air that she opened the doors and windows, though it was probably through forgetfulness that she left them open.” (85). When it comes to keeping a tighty house for Sylvie, housekeeping is a concept, rather than an actuality. She cleans what she wants to and only when she feels like doing it, and that includes forgetting what she starts sometimes. Because of this, the lines between traditionalism (cleaning the house the Fingerbone way), and individualism (cleaning it her way) are blurred, which is ultimately a reason to why there is so much concern caused over Sylvie. To

put it in more simple terms: the members of Fingerbone are not comfortable at all with this ideology that individualism represents.

This favoring of traditionalism can be further explored through Lucille's arc in the novel, especially when she moves out. Ruth discusses her sister's departure, writing, "Lucille, as we learned the next morning, had walked... to the home of Miss Royce, the Home Economics teacher... Miss Royce gave her the spare room. In effect, she adopted her, and I had no sister after that night." (139-140). The reason that it is so interesting that Lucille moved out is because she turned to a woman that teaches schoolgirls how to be womanly, which brings Fingerbone's expectations for women around full circle. You see, a woman is taught young in this book that they are destined to be a wife and when that path begins to shift (like Lucille felt it was for herself), they depart because it is not the life that they have been prepped for, which is why this conflict is brought around full circle, furthering proving those who depend on this sense of, "normalcy" because it is all that they know. Ruth somewhat acknowledges this concept when she claims that she no longer had a sister after that night, which establishes this implication that Lucille chose the traditionalist, Fingerbone life over her own blood. Having said this, it is important to make clear that it would be unfair to infer that Lucille considers traditionalism more important or more lovable than her own sister.

Lucille's decision can be further understood through Berlant and Warner's paper, specifically when they discuss the pressure surrounding heteronormativity. They write,

"... this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness- embedded in things and not just in sex is what we call heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays

and lesbians: it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life..." (2605).

When applying this concept to the novel, Lucille's adolescence needs to be considered. She is written as a young girl who is confused as she evolves into becoming a young woman. Not only is her father not in the picture, but her mother killed herself; so due to all the hardships that she had faced, there is this sense of loss that Lucille cannot help but to feel. She finds it difficult to connect with her aunt, because her aunt acts in a way that opposes her, a way that isolates her entire family. So it is not that Lucille does not care about her sister, she is just missing this sense of belonging, a belonging that Ruth luckily feels with Sylvie. She simply could not adapt to this individualistic lifestyle that Sylvie had embraced so vividly, so she runs off, joining the Fingerbone way, because it is considered ideal and accepted, which makes it a norm and a, "sense of rightness" for this society.

This, "sense of rightness" is also deeply ingrained into this aspect of simplicity that the town lives by, which only reinforces this idea of being content with living in Fingerbone. Ruth touches on this idea when the sheriff comes to visit them, writing, "It was not the theft of the boat that he came about... nor my truancy... It was that we returned to Fingerbone in a freight car. Sylvie was an unredeemed transient, and she was making a transient of me." (177). When analyzing this quote, it is important to study the use of the word, "transient", which labels Ruth and her aunt as impermanent members of the town. This label deeply disturbs the authoritative members of Fingerbone because it has the power to inspire others to leave as well; if people began to leave, Fingerbone would evaporate because their economy is dependent on people staying put. So it is not only the town's beliefs but their actual economic dependence (which of

course correlates through their ambition of staying put) that negatively affects Ruth and Sylvie, which is a crucial reason to why Fingerbone's concern only increases and to why the sheriff eventually tries to take Ruth home with him.

In terms of Berlant and Warner's essay, Ruth and Sylvie's transience is considered the rupturing of heteronormativity and Fingerbone's attempt to remove Ruth from the household is actually a form of punishment that serves as a response due to their actions. This idea is further explored when the two writers discuss the closing of five gay sex shops in New York, writing, "None of these businesses has been a target of local complaints. Gay men have come to take for granted the availability of explicit sexual materials, theaters, and clubs. That is how they have learned to find each other, to map a commonly accessible world..." (2603). In terms of how this tragedy actually relates to the novel, it is a simple: both cases are struck with misplacements of identity. Having said this, it is also important to recognize that the sheriff did not care about the stolen boat or the fact that Ruth was not going to school consistently; he simply did not like the fact that they were leaving Fingerbone, which only exploits just how important it is to for them to stay (because it sustains their normative structure). So because these gay men are trying to establish their own society and because Ruth and Sylvie are not content with staying put in Fingerbone (or at least that is the breaking point for the sheriff), they are outlawed and there is this ambition to tame them, whether that means splitting them all apart or labeling them as unfit to raise a child. It is all in the effort to prioritize a heteronormative configuration, while sacrificing democracy, which then of course minimizes those who refuse to comply.

When reading, *Housekeeping* it is important to consider why Robinson wrote such complex and complicated characters. Thinking about these aspects only forces readers to reflect

on how they actually feel about these character's actions. By incorporating the minds of Berlant and Warner, readers are able to get past the abnormality of figures like Sylvie, only to realize that in real life (like the novel), we have grown up in a pre structured culture, that determines what is okay and what is not. I believe that it is through, *Sex In Public* that it can be seen that Fingerbone lives off a form of heterosexual structure and that Sylvie is established as a true concern when she refuses to comply with the town's demands and ideals.



Works Cited

Berlant, Lauren, and Michael Warner. *Sex in Public*. 2002.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Housekeeping*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980.