



A LEADING AMERICAN UNIVERSITY WITH INTERNATIONAL REACH

August 1, 2017

UFVA Respondent, Travis Newton  
Assistant Professor of Film  
Western Kentucky University

Re: *The Homewreckers* by Frank Deese

The Milfords are in a bit of a rut. Warren Milford, the family patriarch, didn't find the success he hoped for in his last young adult novel, and his relationship with his wife has staled, to say the least. His wife, Barbara, who makes a hobby of cutting up and collaging old family photos, is also bored in their nineteen-year-marriage and open to an extramarital fling. Their children, Katie and Jeffrey, are teenagers with relationship problems of their own. And Warren's parents, Harrison and Eleanor, are in their declining years, but have only grown combative and spiteful toward each other. All three generations are in need of a shakeup, and each is intent on bringing about change in their own way.

When we first meet the Milfords, Barbara is cutting out photographs of her teenage son's head and placing him on a more attractive friend's body. Jeffrey has lost a lot of weight recently, and the old photographs don't reflect his current condition. While Warren bristles at this rewriting of history, Barbara seems content with the fantasy. Warren can't dwell on the photos because he's at wits' end trying to get his aging parents to answer the phone and learning from his wife that his teenage daughter is with her boyfriend at a hotel. The sequence comes to a climax when Warren learns, quite dramatically, that his daughter is not with her boyfriend at a hotel, but is, in fact, having sex with him in the Milford's attic.

After grounding his daughter, Warren drives the boyfriend home on his way to check on his parents. It turns out that the boyfriend is actually a fan of Warren's writing and plants the seed for a new novel idea, a sequel to his last novel, *Pocketful of Posies*. Warren drops off the boyfriend and continues on to his parents' house, where he finds his father has locked his mother in the bathroom as punishment for damaging one of his prized sculptures with her wheelchair. Harrison and Eleanor, Warren's parents, were lauded artists in their day (Harrison a sculptor and Eleanor a writer), but they've since declined into a pair of bickering invalids. Warren does his best to smooth over the situation.

While at his parents' house, Warren runs into an old fling who suggests an extra-marital dalliance to get the creative juices flowing. He resists at first but soon warms to the idea. Meanwhile, Harrison and Eleanor Milford scheme to break up their son's marriage by distracting him from Barbara, and Warren's daughter, Katie, plots to break up her parents' marriage by distracting Barbara from Warren. The elder Milfords proceed to move in with their children, while Katie orchestrates a meeting between her mother and her boyfriend's father, a rich reality TV producer. All the while, the teenagers are struggling with problems of their own: Katie can't find quality alone time with her boyfriend, and Jeffrey is having relationship problems at the pool where he teaches kids to swim.

Relationships grow increasingly precarious as the Milfords bumble through their schemes. Warren and Barbara both struggle with their consciences as they get deeper into their affairs. The elder Milfords struggle with their own aging and mortality (in fact, for awhile the art world thinks Harrison is dead), and the teenage Milfords must learn what really matters in a relationship. As their stories intertwine and plots fold in on themselves, it seems increasingly likely that no one will come out unscathed.

*The Spirit Makes the Master*

School of Journalism & Broadcasting | Western Kentucky University | 1906 College Heights Blvd. #11070 | Bowling Green, KY 42101-1070  
phone: 270.745.4144 | fax: 270.745.5835 | web: [www.wku.edu/journalism](http://www.wku.edu/journalism)

Equal Education and Employment Opportunities • Printing paid from state funds, KRS 57.375 • Hearing Impaired Only: 270.745.5389

The concept is a simple one: break up the Milford's marriage. Each character has his or her own reasons for intervening in the family's affairs. Warren is feeling creatively blocked; Barbara is in need of romantic excitement; Katie wants to increase her chances of getting into college; Eleanor feels she neglected her son. Jeffrey and Harrison choose not to get involved in Warren's marriage, and end up in their own tangential stories: Jeffrey's romantic interludes at the pool; Harrison cashing in on his supposed death.

Barbara and Warren remain active in wrecking their own marriage, but other characters less so. While Eleanor's plan to break up her son's marriage is vocalized in the first act (she mentions throwing a dinner party at her house), she never actively pursues this goal beyond moving in with him, which only serves as a mild irritation rather than a homewrecking force. Katie is much more active in setting her mother up with her boyfriend's father, but it's never quite clear why she would want to do this. She claims it's because she feels sorry for her parents' being in a loveless marriage, and perhaps her father would make more money if he were happy, but we're left wondering what her true ulterior motive might be.

Structurally, the film functions as an ensemble piece, weaving together various plots and characters, ultimately resolving itself when the elder Milfords choose to end their own lives by driving *Thelma and Louise*-style off a cliff. What appears to be their final moment is emotionally satisfying and exhilarating for the reader as it brings all of the family members together in the same moment albeit not the same space, since they are watching it live on television. It's a moment of earned stillness in a heretofore hectic narrative.

And while this interwoven climax is one of the most satisfying elements of the script, the script takes a while to find its narrative footing. Even though we bounce around briefly in the opening scenes, it feels solidly like Warren's film, since we are introduced to the family through his point-of-view. However, eight pages in, Katie seems to take the reigns as she explains to her brother how she plans to break up their parents' marriage in a reverse *Parent Trap*-style plot. At this point, it feels like this is actually going to be Katie's film, since has a very real problem and vocalizes an active goal, a goal that coincides with the title of the film. When we jump back to Warren for the rest of the first act, it seems to thwart audience expectation, and it's not until well into act two that we find ourselves in a true ensemble film.

The six main characters are each given their own identity and problem, but the strongest, most interesting characters come in the form the elder Milfords and their grandson, Jeffrey. Each of them felt the most fully fleshed-out and their problems most relatable. Eleanor's trip to the doctor is heartbreaking as much as her decision to end her life on her own terms up-lifting. Harrison's connection to his art is palpable, and his scheme to cash in on his apparent death helps endear him to his grandson and to the audience. Jeffrey's escapades at the pool where he works present a real dilemma when he is forced to choose between a girl his own age who shows a genuine interest in him, and an older woman who seemingly only wants him for his underage body.

I honestly found Warren, Barbara, and Katie the least compelling aspects of the script (even though they receive a majority of page count), since their characters felt the least developed and their situations the least inventive. We're told of Warren's work as a writer, but it never felt as real as Harrison's work as a sculptor. Perhaps that's because a sculpture is much more tangible and visual than a book. Warren's struggle with writer's block felt a bit cliché, especially when it came to his affair with Charlotte. It was never clear to me what Charlotte saw in Warren, besides the fact that they have some history together. Warren is presented as being very average, and so I couldn't see what a successful and beautiful woman would find attractive about him, especially if their relationship ended over 19 years ago. He doesn't seem to be bringing much to the table.

As mentioned earlier, it was never really clear why Katie felt compelled to break up her parents' marriage. She tells her brother it's because they're in a loveless marriage, but relationship espionage seems a strong reaction for a teenager really take it upon themselves, especially if it means breaking up their

family. If it was retaliation for being separated from her boyfriend, that never quite played out either. She quickly finds alone time with her boyfriend again, yet carries on with her plan to set her mother up anyway. If it's because Warren is, as she describes, "desperate and dictatorial," this seems like a gross overstatement, even allowing for teenage exaggeration. Warren comes off as a pushover who lets his family do whatever they want, not a tyrannical patriarch separating a would be Romeo and Juliet. If her motivation is financial (she mentions money for college a few times), it was never quite clear how she plans to benefit monetarily from a divorce.

Barbara is the more sympathetic in her affair (despite not knowing much about her except that she makes collages), since it's clear that Warren is not giving her what she needs emotionally or physically. However, her partner in the affair, Karson, doesn't give her much to play off of, since he comes off as terribly superficial. On the flip side, he's not entirely repulsive in his interactions with Barbara, either. There's little thrill or conflict in their romance, since Warren has resolved himself not to put up a fight and is distracted by his own affair, anyway. It's clear from the outset that she's too good for Karson, so it's difficult to root for them (or against them) as a reader.

In general, the dialogue crackles, particularly the exchanges between Harrison and Eleanor. The witty repartee keeps the scenes light and fun, especially when they start threatening to do each other in. There were a couple issues with the dialogue in the beginning, as Warren and Barbara are tasked with laying out the exposition in their opening scene. Jeffrey's introduction also comes off a bit stilted, since at the outset it's not clear how old Jeffrey is. He's only described as a teenager, yet says things like "May I suggest a bold, heroic, and embarrassing intervention?!" Is he 13, 14, 15? We later learn that he's 17.

While the script is squarely a comedy, I was never quite sure of the tone or audience. It seemed to swing from very broad comedy (like when Warren finds his daughter and her boyfriend in the attic) to very poignant moments, particularly the scenes with the elder Milfords or Jeffrey's interactions with his swimming students. The broadest moments harken back to the teenage sex comedies of the 80s, while issues of fidelity and parental concern would appeal to a more mature audience. I'm not sure how much those audiences overlap. Personally, I was more drawn to the situational comedy than the sight gags.

Finally, at 120 pages, it reads quite long for a comedy, even with the amount of plot it contains. Taken as a whole, it feels like a season's worth of sitcom in a feature-length script. A bit of trimming of the extraneous would make for a breezier read. For example, while the plot to cash in on Harrison's death is one of my favorite aspects of the script and helps bond grandfather to grandson, it has little to do with the main plot or theme. At times it feels like Harrison and Jeffrey are in their own movie, since their stories have so little to do with the other Milfords. Honestly, I could see an entire script focused on their escapades as art world con artists. The clueless leading the blind.

Overall, the script is successful in weaving multiple comedic plots into an emotional climax and resolution. However, the multiple threads also contribute to a lack of narrative and thematic focus throughout the second act. By narrowing the tone a bit and honing down the extraneous plot elements, the script will make for a more cohesive and, ultimately, satisfying read.

Respectfully submitted by



Travis Newton

Assistant Professor of Film  
Western Kentucky University