

Tea and sympathy: a foucauldian analysis



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Vincente Minnelli's 1956 production *Tea and Sympathy* evaluates the intricacies of accepted gender normativity in 1950's America, providing a groundwork for understanding how human behavior is classified based on sex. The film further examines the use of the confession as a way of simultaneously police oneself to the norm while receiving personal fulfillment. In his seminal work *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault verbalizes this when he says: "The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface" (60). Minnelli's final scene of *Tea and Sympathy* can be used as tool for analyzing both the film as a whole as well Foucault's ideas on confession. In the concluding scene, the personal liberation of discourse is exemplified through Laura's unsent 'confessional' letter and her desire to confess her feelings to both her husband and Tom. This confession is motivated by societal norms regarding adultery, and thereby shape her feelings of immorality and provide her with catharsis. Thus, the example of *Tea and Sympathy* indicates that personal confession is dictated by by societal conceptions of right and wrong and are paired with a sense of personal liberation. This suggests that Foucault's 'power' may play a role in both the incitement to discourse and in shaping a moral code.

Foucault pins the urge to confess on a society so deeply infiltrated by power, that it has transformed the religious rite of confession before God into a secular habit. He claims that this "obligation to confess" stems from a pre-modern pressure to reveal deviation from the norm to those in authority via

the mask of religion. This thereby granted representatives of the church complete knowledge of all deeds and misdeeds occurring in the community. Thus, where before power trickled down from clerical heads of state, Foucault argues that power in the modern world has metamorphosed into an invisible force, where an obligation to tell the truth is no longer a top-down process. Instead, the incitement to discourse is prevalent at the level of the people, engaging in a police state without police, where we act to shun each other and mold society according to accepted norms despite a lack of apparent threat. This is prevalent both via accepted sexual behavior and by a given moral code: both likely stem from the biblical origins of confession. Thus, we believe that by revealing the innermost parts of ourselves “ in public and in private, to one’s parents, one’s educators, one’s doctor, to those one loves”, we become more fit members of society and more equipped to the norm.

In addition to a desire to police oneself and others, ‘ power’ also innately demands truth due to the valuable nature of the information it obtains. By controlling the most basic aspects of human life, power’s focus on sex and normalized sexual identity allows for insight into the most private aspects of life. This act of ‘ spilling our guts’ we feel is contrary to power thus fuels it further by providing truth while simultaneously acting as a sense of personal liberation or fulfillment. As a result, individual satisfaction becomes deeply intertwined with personal confession. By verbalizing the most vile and non-normative aspects of ourselves, we feel psychological relief, while at the same time allowing ourselves to be normalized to the social order. This act inadvertently removes any disturbance our deviance may have on societal

structure, and helps us reconfirm to the norm. In this way, confession becomes a gateway drug to societal acceptance, an incitement to discourse transformed into a therapeutic tool.

These aspects of confession as a personal outlet and as a measure of normativity are illustrated in the many examples throughout *Tea and Sympathy*, where confession is largely utilized as a means to an end, and is concentrated on the issue of sex. Minnelli demonstrates this from the very first scene, where in order to incite a conversation with Laura, who is attractive and likely the only woman Tom knows, Tom shares personal aspects of his childhood, including his father's aversion to him gardening, and his abandonment by his mother. This suggests that Tom likely uses these 'confessions' concerning lack of family life and painful aspects of childhood as a subject of conversation intended to foster personal intimacy and closeness with Laura. We see another instance of the 'altruistic' confession when Al, Tom's roommate, confesses that he has never had a sexual experience with a woman. Al likely uses this information to both make Tom feel better about his own virginity, while at the same time exposing his own deviance from an expected masculinity. In addition to the men at the center of this film, Laura also frequently uses confession as both a therapeutic tool and as a way to expose personal sexual deviance. When attempting to prevent Tom from going to see Ellie, she confesses to Tom about his similarity to her first husband for both his and her own benefit. Although she does this to provide a life lesson for him, she also speaks about this deeply personal time in her life in order to alleviate her own experiences with gender non-normativity. By acknowledging the inability of her first

husband to live up to the masculine ideals expected of him, she negates his deviance from the norm by speaking about it. Thus, by divulging private aspects of her inner life to Tom, she feels liberated from it while simultaneously making it public knowledge.

In addition to these examples, the most poignant illustration of confession in the film occurs when Tom receives an unsent letter from Laura years after he has left the school and Mr. Reynolds' home. When visiting the former housemaster during a school reunion, he is given the unposted letter, and learns of Laura's regret for abandoning her husband after her tryst with Tom. She begins by telling Tom: " I shall probably never send this letter. I probably shouldn't even write it", suggesting the diary-like nature of her feelings, ones which Foucault suggests are " lodged in our most secret nature". She blames the letter on her inherent ' impulsivity', relaying intensely personal thoughts, which Foucault argues "[demand] only to surface". Thus, it can be said that Laura writes this letter mainly to herself, that the concept of confession is so largely ingrained in her that she must confess even to herself. As the content of her concerns are deviant, and evidently deeply trouble her, and as it is suggested that she writes the letter late at night, Laura finds catharsis only through their verbalization. Since the letter is never stamped, addressed, or sent, it is likely that it was never meant for Tom at all, but rather for herself. She hints this when she writes that " perhaps in the cold light of morning I will tear it up". These words point to the imperative nature of her confession, and the mental havoc that causes her to verbalize such personal emotions. Further, as the letter appears more similar to a stream of consciousness rather than a correspondence, this moreso suggests that Laura is divulging

unfiltered and raw feeling. Although it is also possible that the letter may be an inadvertent apology to Mr. Reynolds, this furthers its confessional nature and the emotional purge it provides for Laura. Thus, the Foucauldian assumption of constantly examining and revealing the self is exemplified in Laura's confessional letter, even if she is its sole recipient.

Laura continues the letter by writing of recently reading Tom's largely autobiographical novel, claiming that he romanticizes their sexual and romantic interactions, as her infidelity deeply wronged her husband. Further, it is also important to examine why Tom confesses the thinly veiled secrets of his affair to the world in his novel. The notion of confession is also deeply ingrained enough as to lead him to divulge its intricacies and deviant nature to the public. As the relationship between Tom and Laura verges on adultery, this relationship between an older, married woman and adolescent boy thus deviates from what is accepted in society, and is subversive. For this reason, Laura is likely incited to write this confession to Tom, as he feels it necessary to write his confession to the world, as she feels she must atone for her actions and thereby restore order. Thus, despite her sexless and one-sided relationship with Mr. Reynolds, she feels her relationship with Tom is wrong. Close reading of Foucault would explain her actions as predisposed by the 'power' that dictates the dynamics of all relationships: that her sexual behavior with a man who is not her husband and who is her junior is deviant and nonnormative. For this reason, she feels it imperative to confess her behavior to both her husband and Tom. By doing so, she allows herself to be normalized to the social order by acknowledging the wrong of adultery, and

leaves her husband. These actions demonstrate the invisible force of ‘power’ which lead her to confess to her husband, and to Tom.

Despite the motivators which lead Laura to confess her adultery, an additional complication present in this example to Foucault’s argument is the role of morality. Although society has conditioned Laura to believe that adultery is wrong due to its subversive effect on the integrity of the family unit, it is likely that Laura also reveals her feelings to Tom and to Mr. Reynolds due to conscience. As she has had a sexual encounter with a man who is not her husband, it is likely that she cannot continue a relationship on the foundation of corrupted trust. This complicates Foucault’s argument because it presents the dilemma of whether societal pressure to confess or personal moral compass is the greater factor in confessional behavior. In this sense, the question of whether morality is an inherent human property, as part of the conscience, or if it arose from biblical teachings and flourished via the rite of confession is presented. If an inner sense of right and wrong is the major motivator for our society, then Foucault’s propositions are negated in favor of a more humane, biological force. However, it is also possible that pre-modern morality was enforced via religious figures in order to keep society in check, as per Foucauldian logic. Keeping both these factors in mind, Laura’s decision to confess to her husband of her infidelity was likely driven by feeling that she had betrayed her husband, a result of an amalgamation of both an innate sense of conscience and a moral code impinged on her by society. Given what we know of her sensitive nature, when she writes to Tom saying that she was unable to return to her husband

and pretend that nothing had happened between them, her sense of right and wrong becomes the focus of the letter.

Laura's assertion that her relationship with Tom was wrong thus becomes her main argument, claiming that he failed to "look clearly [at] the wrong we did". She explains that his novel was wrong in assuming that Mr. Reynolds was better off without her, and that she entered a happier chapter of life after their affair. Laura maintains that his depiction of her as a saint is incorrect and untrue, stressing the wrongfulness of her adultery. She tells Tom that she sacrificed her husband and their marriage as a result of their tryst, despite her relationship with Mr. Reynolds being sexless and one-sided. Thus, Laura asserts that she should have stayed and continued her traditional, heteronormative relationship rather than pursue an affair with Tom. Despite Mr. Reynolds showing no remorse for his behavior or desire to work on their relationship in the multiple scenes where Laura confronts him, she believes herself wrong in abandoning their marriage. Laura claims that "she sacrificed Bill and our marriage" to help Tom prove his manliness, ultimately "ruining Bill's life". Although we do not see the impact of external forces which condemn Laura, she admits to her failure without Mr. Reynolds or society wronging her for it. Thus, this demonstrates that Laura does not need an external 'power' or a society to police her; she willingly does it herself.

Aside from Laura's feelings regarding the novel's conclusions, it is also important to realize Tom's failure in understanding the long-term implications of his affair. It is evident that before receiving the letter, he assumed that their interaction pursued Laura to lead a more fulfilling life

without the absent and cold Mr. Reynolds. However, he likely he does not fully grasp the hardships and societal stigma associated with being a single woman and divorcee in 1950's America. Thus, although Tom is painted as sensitive and considerate, he nonetheless fails to acknowledge his privilege as a man with freedom to choose and lose sexual partners, while women are tied down to their husbands due to prevailing stigma and lack of financial means to become independent.

Given Laura's remorse regarding her infidelity with Tom, she continues to postulate that their encounter was ultimately wrong. She goes on to doubt the usefulness of her aid to Tom during his school years, claiming that she should have had faith in him to "go through a crisis alone". Her utilization of the phrase "what doesn't kill us, makes us stronger" thus reinforces the societal notion that Tom should have overcome the bullying of his peers alone, rather than resorted to emotional support from others. Laura continues to further this idea of a heteronormative male when she shares her pleasure that Tom is married with children. In 1950's America, it does not seem to matter if happily or not: it is most important that he has conformed to what society thinks he should be.

Overall, it is evident that Laura's letter to Tom in the final scene of *Tea and Sympathy* illustrates the prevailing effect of societal norms on Tom and Laura's affair. Despite acting as a sense of comfort and moral support for each other, Laura ultimately denies the validity of their relationship due to a sense of right and wrong that cannot allow her to condone adultery. While reading the letter, Tom looks remorseful, evidently finally realizing the 'true' impact of his actions. This confirms the Foucauldian view that the effects of

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power have become so “ deeply ingrained” in Tom and Laura, that they are led to view their sexual relationship as sinful because of its non-normative nature. Laura confesses to Tom and her husband, but mostly to herself in the letter, supporting the notion that she does so due to a societal pressure she no longer consciously perceives, and which has become innate. Her ‘ truth’ that the affair was wrong due to its disruption of her heteronormative relationship thus reinforces the idea that society encourages conformation to the family unit it prescribes. That Laura feels moral wrongdoing in her actions furthers the idea of a ‘ moral code’ imposed on her by power, which ultimately shapes her ideas of right and wrong. This therefore corresponds to the larger meaning of *Tea and Sympathy*, which suggests to us that the act of confession is used as a way of incitement to discourse about sex in order to revert non-normative instances of deviances in society.

Works Cited

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