

"territory" by david leavitt essay sample



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“ Territory” by David Leavitt is a short, yet complexly intimate tale of a mother’s futile attempts to accept her son’s homosexual identity and his on-going struggle with internalized homophobia. The story opens with twenty-three year old Neil visiting his mother, Mrs. Campbell, at his childhood home. As they prepare for the first arrival of Neil’s lover, Wayne, the anticipation triggers anxieties both Neil, causing him to have painful flashbacks of the past. As these images reveal, Neil has lived with feelings of shame, embarrassment and guilt over his sexual identity, as well as an exposure to the impactful role that his mother has played in his life. We are also made privy to the numerous effects of her emotional detachment, which she ultimately leaves him to cope with, void of genuine support or feelings of positive self-regard. The narrative carries overtones of how Neil’s sexual identity development has been affected by socially constructed ideology, internalization of negative self-identity, interpersonal relationships and institutional oppressive forces in the transitions from the adolescent to emerging adulthood stages.

Internalized heterosexism and homophobia

Neil has internalized the cultural homophobia and bias that he has experienced both interpersonally and socially (Green, 2003; Sullivan, 2008). Although the polarization of masculine and feminine gender roles had already been established well before he came out to his parents (Gilmore, 1990), his mother’s reaction to this life-changing revelation marked the beginning of internalized homophobia for Neil. His mother’s stoic reserve and sparse choice of words at the point of his disclosure made an immediate

effect, leading him to feel embarrassed, inadequate and pitiful. This also marked a more observable emotional detachment from her son, which inherently brought with it messages of her own internalized biases and lacking acceptance of the man that he had become.

Her attention turned to the apparent support of this new "cause", which she manifested by acquiring immediate membership to the Coalition of Parents of Lesbians and Gays, followed by an aggressively speedy rise to its presidency. However, her activities in this alleged support of his sexual identity would involve situating herself in front of gay bath houses and distributing pamphlets that warn the exiting men, who in her mind "did violent things to each other", against the dangers of drugs and anonymous sex. Her actions made these men re-live the shame and guilt and Neil was no exception, as he would often find himself wondering if she have would have changed him for a son that she could be proud of. As he observes Wayne and his mother conversing, he unconsciously thinks of Wayne as "a faggot son's sodomist", which is what he imagines his mother truly thinks of them both.

A system of rewards and punishments for following cultural expectations of gender norms are the basic underpinnings of socially constructed homophobia and heterosexism (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Kimmel, 1994), which is often first experienced at home. Neil's experience is exemplary of this premise, as his mother's home was described as "this place of his childhood, of his earliest shame". When Neil cowers away from the thought of holding his lover's hand at the dinner table with Mrs. Campbell present, Wayne takes hold Neil's hand and she finds herself forced to recognize the

reality of Neil's sexual preference. Her physical response of eyes flickering tells us that she was not prepared for this outward gesture of their unity. For Neil, it symbolized " every taboo nurtured since childhood".

Unearned heterosexual privilege, heterosexism and homophobia

It is commonplace for Neil and Wayne to be forced to deal with the unearned heterosexual privileges (Appleby & Anastas, 1998) that are engrained into society on interpersonal, community and institutional levels. When they first meet at the airport, they wait until they reach the car in order to greet each other as lovers would normally do. However, their private moment is interrupted by the passerby's gawking stares into the car, this symbolizing the heterosexist society's disapproval of their gender norm violation (Appleby & Anastis, 1998). Neil's initial move to New York City was based on the city's liberal and tolerant nature of diversity. However, even living in what was considered one of the most progressive areas of the city, they publicly found themselves ashamed of their identity and uncomfortable to freely express themselves, falling victims once again to these feelings of internalized homophobia that did not allow them to walk down the street holding hands. According to Sullivan (2008), same-sex attraction has not always been considered a deviation.

However, post-war societal reaction to prohibition, gay bathhouses and other establishments were adverse and a new war on immorality arose, which was supported by American individuals, religious and governmental institutions. This outlook prevailed throughout the 1950's and led to blatant anti-gay attitudes. The persecution of the gay life style brought on renewed shame and guilt for the homosexual community as gay men were forced to cope

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with the stigmatization by " passing" as heterosexuals and thus become invisible. This resulted in the development of their own discriminatory social construct, with a hierarchy where males who were able to prove their masculinity through assimilation were held in the highest regards, while those that did not were looked down upon by their own gay communities (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Sullivan, 2008; Kimmel, 1994, Gilmore, 1990).

These attitudes were further conveyed through negative propaganda spread by local police, government officials proclaiming that homosexuals were dangerous to national security and in New York, even serving alcohol to " known homosexuals" was banned as late as the year 1970 (Sullivan, 2008). Additionally, the medical community was one of the most influential forces of marginalization against the American gay community. Freudian theories on homosexuality served as a basis for making homosexuality a pathological mental illness that needed treatment (Green, 2003; Sullivan, 2008) and the mid-eighties also saw the peak of the AIDS epidemic, which provoked a litany of negative rumors regarding the gay male's association with the spread of the virus. Neil's internalized homophobia of disease-carrying older gay men is exemplified when he wants to warn his mother to wash after shaking hands with his lover from the previous night, who Neil thinks looks older and therefore more " likely to carry diseases". Mrs. Campbell

We can surmise that Mrs. Campbell was going through her own stage of emerging adulthood in the 1950's, given her references about the use of Technicolor, and still experiencing nightmares of " tanks coming down my street". One of the main features of the emerging adulthood stage is that it is a period most identifiable with exploration of love, work and world views

(Arnett, 2000). Considering the political and social climate of the post-war 1940's and 1950's, it is not surprising that Mrs. Campbell's world views on homosexuality were established during this time period. We see a blatant example of her internalized bias against the homosexual life style when she attends the Gay Pride parade and stands in shock when she is introduced to a man in drag. Neil sees what he describes as " pain and regret" in her expression, which once again leaves him shameful and feeling unworthy as a son.

His feelings are solidified by his mother's reaction to the man in drag, when she states that the man's mother must truly be brave to display such pride. A more personal example of this is when Neil sits between her and Wayne at the movie theatre. In a symbolic effort to unite the two worlds that he lives in, he makes a gesture to simultaneously put his arms around both of them, but her gasp at the gesture and stillness thereafter has signaled to him that he has " gone too far" in his attempt to forge the two worlds within which he must continuously negotiate his identity.

We can estimate that Mrs. Campbell falls within the middle adulthood stage, which is characterized by a number of transitions, including those tasks that are respective to parenting roles (Lesser & Pope, 2011). While she shows positive mastery in the increased use of friends and social outlets in the restructuring of her social roles, her lack of ability in transmitting her values in gender roles to Neil has resulted in lament, resentment and a breakdown in the parent-child relationship (Lachman, 2004; Saltzburg, 2004). As she evaluates Neil's sexual identity within the scope of parenting, she must face the finality of what meeting his lover means for her (Saltzburg, 2004).

She must also mourn the loss of the traditional life which having a heterosexual son may have given her, for example, a potential daughter-in-law, a role which neither Wayne or any of Neil's potential partners could ever fill, the loss of the son that she envisioned he would grow up to be and the extension of self through an extended traditional family (Saltzburg, 2004). As openness is unlikely to increase, Mrs. Campbell's limited acceptance of Neil's life style will most likely result in decreased contact (Lachman, 2004).

Her inability to realign the parent-child relationship with Neil, as well as Neil's failed attempts to reconcile her world with his has resulted in negative circular causality behavior patterns where she uses passive-aggressive communication with undertones of disapproval and he responds by recoiling with negative feelings of self and disparaging attempts at connecting emotionally with his mother (Collins, Jordan & Coleman, 2013) (See figure 1).

Mrs. Campbell has felt betrayed

by all of the males in her life, and Neil feels that he has now "joined the ranks". Neil's world has become foreign to her and she comments to Wayne and Neil that they are both "only children", as if to estimate if their life style could be contributed to experiences of growing up.

While her extensive history of active involvement in causes for the good of the children paints a picture of a mother concerned for the welfare of her child, Neil's frequent memory involves her smoking in a dark room, detached and compelled to step out of that darkness due to her obligations as a mother, thus providing Neil just enough attention to tend to his basic needs. While she made sure to keep him physically healthy, she de-activates her

attachment system in order to avoid the stressful experience of emotional attachment and instead, seeks out displaced attachment figures through involvement in the numerous social causes and peers (Obegi & Berant, 2010).

In order to handle the distress that Wayne's visit brings, she attempts to normalize the event by engaging him in cordial conversations and social outings. We also see her employment of the reaction formation defense when, despite the fact that she is internally disapproving and unaccepting of their gay life style, she still proceeds to set up Neil's room for both of them to sleep in.

Deconstructing Neil

Neil has gone through a number of expected stages in emerging adulthood. He explores beyond his geographical boundaries and moves to New York, a place where he expects to find support of his sexual identity, experiments in risky sexual behavior that he later claims to lament, and allows himself to be involved long-term with a man who he knew would not be his life partner (Arnett, 2000). In earlier stages of development, the transition from childhood to adolescence is especially significant, as this new stage involves physiological, biological and social developmental changes within the context of family, peers, school and work (Lesser & Pope, 2011).

The interactions and messages that are negotiated between the interpersonal contexts and the adolescent will have an effect on how the adolescent is able to adjust to areas of development such as identity formation, sexuality, social adjustments and intimacy (Lesser & Pope, 2011).

As to be expected, Neil initially subscribes to the learned gender role expectations and reflects on how throughout adolescence, he mistook the feeling of sexless love for heterosexual desire towards women. Sullivan (2008) notes on the stages of sexual identity formation and coming out for gay adolescents. Neil first takes notice of "sexual feelings" at the age of twelve and after realizing that he had same-sex attractions, he believed that his sexual desires were detachable, not truly a part of who he was inside (awareness and confusion of difference). At age seventeen, he discloses his sexual orientation to his parents (acknowledgement of homosexuality), engages in public activities which promote positive self-regard for the gay community (pride) and ultimately makes the decision to invite his lover to meet his family (comprehensive integration of identity).

Maylon states that the coming out process provides a fundamental function in resolving identity conflicts, self-actualization and reducing the effects of internalized homophobia (as cited in Appleby & Anastas, 1998). Neil begins to show increased strength in his identity when he confronts his mother and refuses to take blame for the unhappiness in her life. Another instance where he shows strength is when once again, his mother protests about his gesture to hug both her and Wayne in the theater. Instead of withdrawing and giving in to the shame caused by his internalized homophobia, he defends himself and his actions by stating "What do you mean?... I was only trying to show affection".

As a child, Neil's mother failed to provide for his emotional needs. Her lack of attunement and constant interruption in the attachment process caused Neil to develop a preoccupied adult attachment type, which is characterized by

low avoidance and high anxiety (Sable, 2007). As the son of a dismissing attachment type mother, Neil often finds himself in an overloaded, persistent pursuit of her validation, which in turn causes his mother to panic or reject him. He is extremely preoccupied with what she or others think of him, although we did see a positive transition from this at the end of the story, when he decides to hold hands with Wayne on the plane without worrying what others will think.

He vacillates between contradictory thoughts of his mother, first showering his mother with compliments about her intelligence and looks, to thoughts of how he did not want her to look at him when he was younger or how much he wanted to stay away from all of the causes that she was a part of (Obegi & Berant, 2010). Another example of this vacillating thought process is when he reflects on how his two-year absence has unaffected anything at home, but then immediately shifts his thoughts to berating himself for being egotistical. His use of regression as a defensive mechanism is demonstrated throughout the story, as it brings him comfort to think about a time when he was an infant and his mother was happier.

His intense connection to Wayne is typical of the preoccupied type, as this type deeply craves closeness. As his mother, was unable to deal with his high need for attention, Neil developed a deep bond with his dog, Rasputin. During his childhood and adolescent years, Rasputin served to provide Neil with the opportunity to give and receive predictable shows of affection that he was lacking from his parents. He also functioned as a transitional object in adolescence for Neil when he needed to feel comfort in the trust that he felt for his dog. In addition, Rasputin would sometimes represent an idealized

selfobject, when for example, Neil would dress him up and have him dance with him (Alper, 1993). While his dog could not provide Neil with the open communication and help in fostering a positive self-regard during his youth (Sullivan, 2008), he was able to provide Neil with a safe and predictable outlet for the affection that he craved.

Conclusion

As Neil and his mother each get closer to entering yet another stage in adulthood, the reconciliation of their relationship would need to be initiated by Mrs. Campbell's genuine acceptance of her son as a gay man, followed by an adaptation of her own identity as a parent of a gay man (Saltzburg, 2004). Her own "coming out" process would be enhanced by exposure to education and the support of having a gay mentor to help her through the journey of undoing internalized bias and the socially constructed belief that gender norms lay only in opposite sex partnerships (Saltzburg, 2004). Finally, she would need to show him that she has genuine empathy for the challenges that he has faced and sincere affirmation of acceptance (Saltzburg, 2004).

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