Power for the Powerless?

**Introduction**

Worrying about your potentially sudden death is never good. But if you are worried that a bus will hit you, it might be a good idea to assign a guardian for your child. Children that are assigned a guardian in the case of an unexpected death of their parents is a good plan. The children that have a guardian in case their parents die will be one less concern while coping with their loss. So imagine a scenario where the parents are considering guardians in order to ensure the child is raised by people they choose. Now imagine that the parents are a same sex couple. The story of a same sex couple trying to find guardians for their child is shown in the television series *Modern Family*. For a more detailed breakdown, Burkean Analysis will be applied to analyze the different parts present in the artifact.

The following critique will use Burkean Analysis to demonstrate how the idealistic portrayal of same sex couples in power does not fully match the realistic situation that such couples face in life. It is possible to see this in comparing the idealistic and realistic concept of guardianship, the portrayal of a same sex couple in a position of power within a heteronormative society, and the negativity that same sex couples actually face in society to this day.

**Description (Text/Context)**

The artifact that will be analyzed is an episode from *Modern Family* titled “Someone to Watch Over Lily” (Levitan; Lloyd, 2011). One point being made is finding out who will be the guardians for Lily, Cameron and Mitchell’s daughter. They look at two people related to Mitchell to decide a guardian. One of the people considered is Claire, Mitchell’s sister who is married to a man named Phil. The other person considered is Jay, Mitchell’s father, along with his second wife Gloria who has a son of her own.

To choose a guardian, Cameron and Mitchell go to Claire and Jay’s homes to assess the living situations. When visiting Claire, things occur and it ends with her telling Mitchell to “Come back in seven years and five months when they are all gone!” (Levitan; Lloyd, 2011). When visiting Jay, they decide to go with Jay and Gloria’s son to a sporting goods store. At the store Cameron and Mitchell observe Jay talking with Gloria’s son and they make comments about his parenting.

Cameron and Mitchell discuss who they believe is the best option to be Lily’s guardian between Claire and Jay, and Cameron makes a comment about how no one on his side of the family is considered. Mitchell eventually tells Jay that he will not be Lily’s guardian because of Jay’s parenting, but after Cameron hears about Jay parenting Gloria’s son on the way home he says that Jay and Gloria would be Lily’s guardians. Claire then asked if she had been considered, but her and Phil left their son in a parking lot and their two daughters were caught vandalizing. Once Gloria finds out that she is Lily’s guardian, Gloria begins her plans to keep her while disregarding how Lily would become her child in the event of her parent’s deaths.

**Description (Method/Approach)**

In order to look at the deeper messages in the artifact, Burkean Analysis will be used to identify key elements that are present. According to Kathleen Derby (2009), Burke names terms such as identification, hierarchy, and the guilt-redemption cycle. Burke’s concepts highlight the importance of identification to the rhetorical process and the relevance of social hierarchy in regard to the motivations of guilt and redemption from said guilt (Derby, 2009). Also, according to Christopher Graham (2011), Burke looks at humans as symbol users, the dramatistic pentad to analyze different parts of the artifact’s message, and the ratio that is present in the message parts of the artifact. As stated by Christopher Graham (2011) the dramatistic pentad consists of five parts: the agent, act, scene, purpose, and agency.

In using Burkean Analysis the critic first must look at the importance of the symbols people used in the artifact. Secondly, the critic must look at the identification occurring in the artifact and identify the social hierarchy occurring in the text. Next, the critic must examine the cycle of guilt and redemption that can be found in the artifact. Finally, the critic can relate the text to the dramatistic pentad and analyze the ratio present in the artifact; and can be further viewed in regard to philosophic schools of thought. Burkean Analysis is suitable for the study of the artifact because the critical question involves how *Modern Family* portrays a same sex couple in a position of power, and Burkean Analysis looks at the motives of humans in the artifact.

**Discussion**

When viewing the episode of *Modern Family* titled “Someone to Watch Over Lily” while applying Burkean Analysis, the first step is to look at the symbols that are present in the text. As stated by Burke (1966), language is a form of symbolic action and is in itself a tool. The words that are present in the artifact are symbols through symbolic action, and displacements occur as presented by Burke (1966). Mitchell constantly refers to Cameron and himself as “we”, even though Cameron constantly voices his concern about how his family is not being considered to be guardians for their daughter. And even though Cameron and Mitchell are considering both Claire and Jay to be Lily’s guardian, Mitchell voices a bias where he favors Jay over Claire because of how Gloria treats Lily. Mitchell even goes so far as to tell Gloria what they are planning for Lily without consulting Cameron beforehand. Through symbolic action, Mitchell has assumed a position of power in his relationship by overriding and disqualifying Cameron’s opinions. Mitchell uses a joined “we” even though Cameron is not in agreement. Cameron is not part of the decision making process through Mitchell’s language asserting power.

After the language has been observed to identify a power structure in Cameron and Mitchell’s relationship, the next step is to look at the social hierarchy that is present in the artifact. In this episode of *Modern Family*, Cameron and Mitchell are in a position of power because they are in control of who they decide becomes Lily’s guardian. The people being considered for guardianship, Jay and Claire, do not have the same amount of power because they are not Lily’s parents. The social hierarchy in this episode puts Cameron and Mitchell at the top with Jay and Claire beneath them.

Once the social hierarchy has been identified, it is essential to examine the cycle of guilt and redemption that is present in relation to the artifact. In the case of the episode of *Modern Family* being analyzed, the cycle of guilt and redemption is present within the text itself. Cameron and Mitchell are planning for the future and they need to make a decision about Lily’s future in case both of them die before she becomes an adult. If both Cameron and Mitchell were to unexpectedly die before Lily turned eighteen, it would lead her future on an uncertain path and they couldn’t bear to think of what that entails. So in order to make sure nothing bad happens to Lily, the selection of a guardian occurs. Cameron and Mitchell assess the candidates they are considering. The first candidate is Jay, Mitchell’s father who is portrayed as stern and Cameron dislikes his parenting style based on Jay’s interactions with Gloria’s son in the sporting goods store. When considering Jay as a guardian, they also look at how Gloria treats Lily and comment on how “wonderful” she is with her. The second candidate is Claire, who at the beginning of the episode is screaming at her three kids and Mitchell. Claire is also shown forgetting about her son in a parking lot, as did her husband Phil; portraying Claire and Phil as neglectful. After the stressful process of considering their candidates for guardianship for Lily, Cameron and Mitchell redeem themselves by choosing Jay and Gloria as he guardians. Once Cameron and Mitchell believe the guilt of not having the guardians named in case of an emergency resolved, a new sense of guilt is established when they recognize Gloria’s possessive personality over Lily as she screams “All mine!” and her disregard of how she only gets Lily if they die unexpectedly.

Now that the cycle of guilt and redemption was identified in the text, it is possible to apply the dramatistic pentad in relation to the artifact. There are five parts that create the dramatistic pentad. One of the parts is the agent, who may be a person or a group of persons (Graham, pg.38). In relation to this episode, the agents are Cameron and Mitchell. While Cameron and Mitchell are the agent, the act, which Christopher Graham (2011) identifies as plot, is the story of how they are trying to find guardians for Lily. The scene is the background setting of the act or the environment (Graham, pg. 38). In the case of the artifact, the scene is the places where Cameron and Mitchell interact with Jay and Claire. The scene is Jay and Claire’s homes, as well as the sporting goods store Cameron, Mitchell, and Jay spent time. The purpose is the result or outcome of the act that the agent wishes to occur by conducting the act (Graham, pg. 39). So when Cameron and Mitchell are trying to fulfill the act of finding Lily a guardian, the purpose of doing so is to ensure that Lily has someone already chosen to watch her in case her parents die before she becomes an adult. The agency is either the concrete instrument the agent used to accomplish the act or something more abstract (Graham, pg. 39). In regard to the artifact the agency is more abstract in that it was through Cameron and Mitchell’s process of decision making that made choosing Lily’s guardian possible.

Since the five parts of the dramatistic pentad have been identified in relation to the artifact, a ratio can be derived between two of the five elements of the pentad. As mentioned in Christopher Graham (2011), determining a ratio is a systematic process to consider the relationship between two parts of the dramatistic pentad. The elements of the pentad being analyzed in relation to each other are not equal (Graham, pg. 40). In regard to “Someone to Watch Over Lily”, the ratio that is prevalent is agent-act. The act of finding guardians for Lily would not ever have occurred if the agent, Cameron and Mitchell, had not been concerned for her future.

Now that the ratio of agent-act has been determined, we can go even further and determine the philosophical schools of thought being shown in that ratio. When considering the agent the philosophy being shown is idealism, which views the agents as rational and reality as being made by the agent’s choices (Graham, pg. 43). The agent is essentially being portrayed as rational based on their thoughts of their daughter, and the reality of who becomes Lily’s guardians is based on what they decide. When viewing the act the philosophy related to this part of the dramatistic pentad is realism, which looks at how the world is a product of how we experience the world as a whole (Graham, pg. 42). The realism that occurs in the artifact is that Cameron and Mitchell have a daughter named Lily and they are in a position of power in deciding who will become her guardian based off of who is related to her.

The theme of idealism over realism in the artifact is interesting because what is ideal in the world is not always the reality we face, and the artifact portrays an ideal scenario that is not generally true. Not every child gets to have their parents choose a guardian to watch over them if certain circumstances occur that prevent the parents from being there. Guardians are typically associated with the process of finding permanent families for children in the foster care system (Testa, pg. 115). When it comes to Lily however, Cameron and Mitchell are her parents and they are naming a guardian for her future. It is an ideal situation in which they are preparing for the possibility of their untimely deaths, but the reality of naming a guardian is more heavily focused around children that do not have loving parents.

While it is an ideal situation for Cameron and Mitchell to name the guardians for Lily, it is also an ideal situation where a same-sex couple is in a position of power in a heteronormative society. The portrayal of Cameron and Mitchell naming a guardian for Lily is ideal in that it creates an image of power in a marginalized group of society. Same sex couples are marginalized in a heteronormative society because of, as stated by Lamphere (2005), the controversy that is made surrounding gay marriage and the passage of amendments that define marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Marriage in the United States is biased by Eurocentric views of kinship (Lamphere, pg. 34). While Cameron and Mitchell live in a society biased by a view that marriages should be between a man and a woman, it is very powerful that a couple that defies that image is portrayed in a position of power to decide the guardian for their daughter Lily.

Since Cameron and Mitchell are being portrayed in a position of power, it is important to identify the reality of the negativity that same sex couples face in society. According to Cheryl Dickter, PhD (2012), prejudice among gay and lesbian individuals has declined but hate speech is still a common occurrence for same sex attracted individuals. In no way was there any form of prejudice or hate speech present in Cameron and Mitchell’s efforts to find a guardian for Lily. Cameron and Mitchell are treated as equals in their search for Lily’s guardian, which is a beautiful idea, but the reality they could face is not as pleasant.

**Conclusion**

When considering idealism versus realism that is present in the agent-act ratio, it is important to identify that while Cameron and Mitchell were in the ideal situation of finding Lily a guardian; the reality of guardianship is usually centered on children that do not have parents to begin with. Another ideal theme that challenges the reality of our society present in the text is that a same sex couple is shown in a position of power in a heteronormative society. And that sense of power shown in Cameron and Mitchell is important because the reality is that gay and lesbians face prejudice in modern times.

It is a beautiful to show a same sex couple deciding a guardian for their child, but the reality facing same sex individuals is not seen in this scenario. The artifact uses one of the least common uses of guardianship to define it. Guardianship is mostly used for foster youth, children that have no parents, not for a child that has parents. And portraying a same sex couple in a position of power is a refreshing image in a society where parents are usually shown as one man and one woman. The fact that Cameron and Mitchell get to decide a guardian for Lily is important to their rights as parents, but placing them in a situation where there is no suitable choice for a guardian takes away that power. Cameron and Mitchell’s options were a mother that is overwhelmed with three kids, a father that is generally unkind, and whose wife completely disregards the fact that she only gets Lily if her parents die. And the lack of realism in regard to negative speech used against same sex couples does not make the story applicable to the reality it is supposed to represent. To just highlight a same sex couple looking for guardians does not provide an opportunity to create any real change.

If giving power to people marginalized in society, it is important to reinforce that power. Cameron and Mitchell were powerless because none of their options were viable for guardianship. Each candidate they examined had flaws they could not forget and just picked one to get it over with. The artifact could have created an example of giving power to a same sex couple while highlighting the struggles they face, in order to create a precedent to make a stand for equality and power for all.

References

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