

Subjectivity – Sling Blade

The human mind is a magnificent instrument capable of incredible feats, one of the greatest being the creation of a vast system of cultural relationships and identities. Some say it contains a soul, others say that it is only an illusion. However, it is acclaimed that the identities of self that each mind forms arise from the subject positions it experiences through stimuli. In the movie *Sling Blade*, Karl Childers may be deficient in the capabilities of his mind, but he is still subject to the ceaseless exchanges of power, identities and meanings. Set in rural Arkansas in 1996, Karl is the creation not only of his parents and his genetics, but rather the creation of society itself. After being freed from the asylum, his haven for 30 years, he strived to find his place in the new world, being only mildly aware of the social customs that were expected of him as he became established in his place. Throughout the movie, Karl faced a plethora of contexts in which his relation to others in terms of power and social standing varied extensively, and the way he was looked at fluctuated as he formulated his identity, his sense of self.

Karl would not be who he is, where he is, were it not for rules for where people like him ought to stand in the system. For one, after murdering his mother and her lover, he wasn't sent to prison. Instead, he was sent to a mental state hospital, an insane asylum, because that is where people like him go. Already, he was disassociated from normality by being turned away from the label of crime to the label of insanity. In the asylum, however, it is possible that throughout the years he had found comfort in the fellow outcasts, since none were to judge each other. In fact, even the authority in charge of the asylum seemed to him affable and compassionate, which is why Karl tried to return to the asylum to seek asylum from the fearful,

unfamiliar society that greeted his exit. Karl, at first, was not accepted, because the residents, and he himself, did not know his identity and where he fit in the societal chain.

Karl's self was not created from his being, but rather from the interaction with stimuli around him. He was taught the Bible and a few mannerisms, but was never really strong at basic social expectancies. According to Nealon and Giroux, "There is no meaning or self that exists temporally before the law." (40) As such, Karl became the subject of a multitude of relationships which worked to formulate his identity upon his departure from the asylum, within the guidelines of the social norms and rules established beforehand. The journalist treated him as a murderer, Doyle treated him as a pestering "it", Frank treated him as a "father" and many others simply treated him as a simpleton that should be shunned. Karl isn't any of these labels; rather, he is all of them. Karl is the culmination of the interactions and power relations established in each of these contexts throughout the movie, and that formation of his identity allowed him to understand his role in the world.

Dominating the general interactions seen with common people and Karl, he was usually treated with suspicion and contempt, and often the target of pity and belittling. His physical attributes, which include his mental deficiency, gravelly voice, hunched posture and an unusual facial expression, differentiated him from the norm represented in rural Arkansas and solidified his position. He was labeled, concisely and encompassing, as a "retard", such that he was neatly categorized out of the concern of the suspicious common observer. Such a common observer finds himself to be a part of the social norm, and as such is able shun those who are dissimilar and do not belong in the community. This is due to the fact that a greater threat than embodying a variant label is not clearly having one defined. Such a terrible disaster, both for

the subject and the observer, creates the danger of uncertainty of identity, and thus society quickly and efficiently works to effectively categorize its constituents, as to be “unique” and rejecting labels is to go against the very system of societal interactions. As expressed by Nealon and Giroux, “There is no ‘escape’ to some place of perfect freedom where we are untouched by culture, no longer subject to our surroundings.” (47) How is it possible for us to entertain interactions toward people without some prejudgment of their demeanor?

The act of setting Karl’s position in the community as a result of his physical attributes infers to the presence of norms that are present in rural Arkansas. To be respected as a common, affable, approachable individual, one must not be disabled, poor or homosexual. Additionally, a recurrent pattern of woman abuse is pertinent throughout the movie, where the norm calls for the males to be dominant, and be able to take whatever woman they want, from Charles in the insane asylum to Doyle in his position of power. Vaughan and Karl, however, have their own respective origins where such a disgrace is not the norm. For Vaughan, he originates from a large city, and as a homosexual, does not subscribe to the mantra of the dominant male, leading to ridicule of him as well as him enforcing his own subject position. For Karl, he had learned compassion from his mother’s teachings of the bible, and has also experienced it in his unforgettable moment where Jesse Dixon invaded the sanctity of his mother. Both of them used to be not too far away from the norm in their origins, the big city for Vaughan and the asylum for Karl, however they find themselves demoted on the power scale and ostracized in their new community.

Vaughan’s induction into the rural community is perhaps even more tenuous than Karl’s, since Vaughan naïvely believed that his condition is not very noticeable, and that he has

been keeping his secret well, while in reality Melinda has exposed that everyone already knows. Vaughan is in denial of the negative connotations of the label imposed upon him, and attempts to resist it by hiding his identity. By doing this, however, he believes that people see him differently than they do, and at the same time solidifies the same stereotypes that come with that label. Certain expectations are imposed upon him, and as he complies with them, it allows him to further the formation of his identity as a subject to his surroundings. As Doyle expressed in his innumerable insults, Vaughan was weak and could not protect Linda, stepping back during the extradition of Doyle from the house to let Frank conduct the fighting. Even Frank does not respect him as much due to the label enveloping his subject, not seeing him as a “guy guy” that can replace his lost father, and that is why he sought solace in Karl.

The notion of Karl as a fatherly figure excited Frank, as he was distressed from the loss of his father who thought himself incapable filling the task. As their relationship progressed, Frank started treating Karl more and more as a father, and a protector. Between Karl and Frank, a different context was established, where Karl was instead the guardian, instead of the one to be pitied. Toward the end of the movie, it can be seen that a transformation had occurred, and Karl gave his final send-offs to those precious to him and did indeed act like a father sacrificing everything for his son. This heartwarming relationship clearly indicates the strength of the manner in which a subject is treated, as described in *The Theory Toolbox*. The way he was treated by Frank and Linda transformed his identity, because his identity was entirely made up of how others treated him. Every speaker-subject relation that befell upon him impacted him greatly, and built up his view of the world around his feet. It is not that we have no will to choose our path and identity, for Karl visited his father in contempt, but like Vaughan, chose

against killing him and led his own path. However, the path that he led was paved by the all the relationships that tied him to the community and granted him his sense of place.

In addition to Frank and Linda, Karl's sense of place was formulated when he had found a niche in the community fixing small engines. Skilled in the craft, he found an identity that he could undertake in the workplace, and he became almost equal to Scooter, copying his jokes and sharing French fries. In many ways, though, he was still seen as an outsider, especially out of the workplace where he had formed his identity, and was nearly shunned to exile by the community. According to Foucault, "The exile of the leper and the arrest of the plague do not bring with them the same political dream. The first is that of a pure community, the second is that of a disciplined society. Two ways of exercising power over men, of controlling their relations, of separating out their dangerous mixtures." The extradition of the stranger can be related to the exile of the leper, in that it seeks purification. The small town does not want to see homosexuality or deal with mental deficiency. Rather, they would like to see the community clean of the extraordinary, free from freaks. The arrest of the plague, however, is the power relation that Doyle had attempted to impose upon Frank's home, and would have led to a dangerous road of abuse.

Doyle was represented as the cruel, destructive power against which the struggle was enacted. Doyle attempted to convert Linda's house into an autocratic system of the arrest of the plague, dispersing the outcasts from his house and imposing strict control over his subjects. Using his economic advantage and friendliness with the chief of police, he takes to acting as if he owns the house and controls their actions. They are only to speak when spoken to, they are to sit and talk to him on his whim, and Linda is always ready to be his servant. Doyle throws

insulting labels like “faggot”, “retard” and “wimpy” to categorize his subject and demean them, like in Foucault’s plague-stricken town. It is his overarching power that induces fear in his subjects and forms their identities as his slaves, compounding them into the unifying label of “the outcast”.

During Vaughan’s conversation with Karl, to whom he refers to as “a gentle, simple man”, he describes “the hand we’re dealt in life” and explains how “we’re different; people see us as different.” Vaughan and Karl find comfort in each other because they are both disgraced in their subject position, putting them lower in the ranking of power and equalizing them. Rather than being so different, from two antithetical origins and varying conditions, they find that they are similar because society made them similar by the way they are viewed. As previously mentioned, there is no “escape” to a place without labels, and while Karl, Vaughan and especially Frank may want to run away to some place where they would not be judged under a label or convicted by a higher power, they are always going to be someone. As such they find themselves convened around the same table with some other outsiders, like Linda and Melinda, and feel at ease at their formed identities. With Vaughan’s statement, “I care about each and every one of you,” it is solidified that they accept their subject positions, because they can find solace in familiarity. Through Althusser’s recruitment by interpellation, the outcasts band together and fall into their subject positions by the manner in which they are hailed.

Throughout the movie, relationships formed between characters and power binaries were made to mediate the manner of communication between the levels of power. In the beginning, Karl was subject to the blabbering of Charles in the asylum, as a patient listener, and

to the power of his captors, and when he was set free, he had lost all his precious power relations. Just as it is necessary to form an identity and inhabit a subject position, it is necessary to formulate power relations between oneself and those around one, in order to perceive where one stands in the world and the extent of their agency, in each particular context. Most of the power binaries he encountered involved the common man treating him as the stranger, and since he was the outsider, he felt powerless to resist. Throughout the whole movie, Karl never once rejected an invitation to something, perhaps because he felt he couldn't. When he was employed, he was given greater agency in order to fulfill his niche, and therefore was given a semblance of power with which he could dictate the operations of fixing small engines.

Karl's general power relationship flipped when he was introduced to a new context in which he formed a new, distinct power binary. As Karl took a liking to Frank and accompanied him to his sacred places, Karl became a guardian over Frank, and became protective. It is a position Karl has never known before, for now he had power and authority over another, which also gave him the opportunity to be the father he never had. Several times Karl had protected or even scolded Frank for what he hears or says, saying that he is "just a boy". To him, Frank became precious, and to Frank, Karl had power. However, the entire power structure flipped again when Doyle began his authoritarian rule over the house. Doyle could freely insult Karl, prejudging him as "drooling", "rubbing shit in his hair", and saying that he "can't eat around that thing." In an instance, the context transformed, and Karl was demoted from a guardian to a thing. Similarly, Frank was again referred to as "just a kid", in which he doesn't have any worries like adults do. As a result, Frank remained completely powerless, because according to his subject position, he did not matter as much as adults, as he was just a kid.

When Doyle was confronted about his cruel nature, his reply was “I ain’t saying it’s right; it’s just the truth.” This allows us to peek into Doyle’s context, where he had grown up in a community which has shunned outsiders like Karl and Vaughan. The only culture he was subjected to when growing up was one of prejudice and discrimination, as well as male domination, so there should be no reason for why he would think differently. Doyle had formed his identity around the laws the govern identities in the community, and as such his presence only bolstered the conservative status quo. At his drunken breakdown, however, Doyle found his power vanishing, as he himself was being violently extradited from the house he had called his own. As Karl and Vaughan kept as peaceful bystanders, Frank forced him down and attempted a reversal of power, but in the end it was only Karl’s final act of heroism which reset the power binaries.

In the end, everyone’s identities had been preserved. No one had transgressed over the law and become their own true self. Karl had returned to the asylum because his identity as an insane killer was renewed, though touched by the designations of society, and had better perceived an understanding of self. Finally, Karl had found himself with more power because he had an identity, and he used that identity as a protector to reject Charles. As Karl found his sense of place within relationships affirming his subject position, his agency grew and he gained in potential power. Karl used his agency to protect what he found precious, yet in the end he was but a drop in a wave clashing in a tumultuous sea of subjectivity, where every man is made by the law that came before, and in turn becomes the law. The world was simply “too big”.