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### The Price of Comfortable Constraints

The film *Safe* is a hauntingly impersonal depiction of life in an affluent white community in southern California during the 1980s, specifically set during the nationwide AIDS epidemic. While the term “AIDS” is never explicitly used, this story’s protagonist, Carol White, develops a condition that she refers to as “environmental sensitivity,” which ultimately forces her to undergo a complete lifestyle modification and seek refuge through a remote community program called Wrenwood. As Carol develops this illness, her peers react with a certain degree of detachment and indifference, primarily because they now see her as an outsider and with that label comes an implication of danger. In this conservative climate of individualist rhetoric that largely assigns blame to the victims, Carol comes to be seen as monstrous by her community not only because she disproves their assumptions about what “kind of people” contract AIDS, but also because she exposes the fragile nature of the overall belief system that governs their behavior. The term “monster” in this context signifies someone who embodies the complexities and contradictions their larger society seeks to repress, meaning that Carol herself becomes the monster in this narrative. Moreover, Carol’s contact with this disease reveals how social disconnect and isolation, patriarchal gender roles, and white privilege as a kind of feigned immunity are all destructive aspects of her world and yet despite this newfound knowledge, she remains unable to escape her own monstrosity, as depicted in the film’s lack of resolution.

There is a cold sense of detachment that underlies the entirety of this film and Carol's suffering as a result of this personal and public disconnect further reinforces that isolation as a cultural norm fosters a lack of meaningful relationships with others and with oneself. The director Todd Haynes has characterized his protagonist as an "absent center," meaning that while Carol may be the focal point of this narrative, she still appears vacant. Each of her choices have a weak sense of intentionality and none of her relationships have any indication of depth or significance. Her environment is clinical and cosmetic, which explains why Carol's character is overwhelmingly empty; the lack of visual closeness communicates that not only is the audience detached from Carol, she is detached from herself. When she visits a psychologist to address her symptoms, she expresses visible discomfort at being asked questions that require her to be introspective. Carol's world is one that preaches individualism to a toxic extent and thus, she has learned that problems are a product of weakness. This mindset is incredibly alienating and forces her into a position of willful ignorance as a means of self-preservation; she strives to avoid confrontation with what she is unable or refuses to understand and this is why the monster that resides within her is forcing her to do precisely that. Moreover, Carol's experiences at Wrenwood illustrate another facet of societal disconnect that can be produced by defamiliarizing collectivism. The atmosphere at Wrenwood is permeated by the rhetoric of self love and positive thinking as the panacea, which also perpetuates the idea that blaming the victim is a justifiable course of action. It is in this communal society that Carol discovers the depth of her isolation when she repeats the statement "I love you" over and over again in the mirror without being able to convince herself it is true. This film offers no resolution to Carol's suffering because that is not the purpose of the monster; rather monsters exist to highlight the existence of systemic

problems and demand that they be addressed in full transparency. Furthermore, the sense of disconnect that characterizes this society is a cultural phenomenon and it is Carol's transitional space between blind acceptance and outright rebellion that earns her a monstrous identity. As articulated in "Monster Culture," cultural disparities are often exaggerated to portray one group as morally justified and the other as villainous (Cohen 4) and thus, the severity of Carol's illness serves to emphasize the extent of her separation from the community and its potential consequences. Carol's sensitivity to her environment necessitates a reevaluation of detachment not as a personal limitation, but as a socially accepted way to avoid taking accountability.

Additionally, the gender binary is deeply embedded within this microcosm of American society and subsequently, Carol's opposition to such sexist constructs via her environmental sensitivity is deemed problematic, showing that the separate spheres are indeed a monstrous entity here. The stereotypical distinctions between masculine and feminine very much inform Carol's perception of herself in relation to her environment without any conscious awareness and thus, it is impossible for her to separate the reality she is living from the societal constructs that have created it. This protagonist's interests, hobbies, and preoccupations all blatantly align with a conventional and limiting understanding of womanhood, which in America during the 1980s mainly revolved around gendered consumption for its aesthetic sake. This sense of superficiality saturates the setting of this film and the overwhelming depth of Carol's detachment from her surroundings prohibits her from being self reflective. Furthermore, the only display of dissatisfaction against the constraints that have been placed on Carol by her husband, peers, and larger community comes through her illness. As Carol's health begins to decline, her character experiences a physical revolt against the roles and situations that were previously comfortable,

natural to her. For example, her husband is extremely dismissive of her initial symptoms and is frustrated when Carol becomes disinterested in sex. This behavior reveals that Greg views his wife as a sexual object and does not value her in any way beyond what she has to offer him physically. Additionally, Carol's experience at the salon ends in a sudden nose bleed to which she reacts with visible shock and horror. Her hasty decision to get her hair permed not only exposes her to severely harsh chemicals, but also signifies the danger of altering one's appearance purely for cosmetic purposes or with the intention of pleasing a certain audience. To further confound the unsettling atmosphere of *Safe*, a highly disturbing instance in this film occurs when Carol attends a baby shower where the women's elaborate clothing and obligatory exchange of expensive gifts serve to highlight the lack of substance in these interactions. Carol begins to hyperventilate in the middle of this scene and the attempts to console her are to no avail because these women are part of the problem - they are perpetuating the stereotypes that have been created to compartmentalize their gender into inherently degrading roles. The destructive nature of institutionalized sexism is plainly visible to the audience and yet, Carol remains unable to escape these restrictions, which indicates a fundamental aspect of the monster as the physical embodiment of difference. Her community has labeled her as monstrous because "The difficult project of constructing and maintaining gender identities..." (Cohen 4) is threatened by Carol's unconscious rebellion against the stifling gender roles that constitute the status quo. The patriarchal anxiety that created the monster in this film has not been eradicated and thus, Carol cannot liberate herself from her own monstrosity. This protagonist is trapped by the narrow expectations that accompany her sex and it is the progression of Carol's illness that catalyzes her alienation from the community that has forced her into a particular model of femininity.

Carol's overall role in this film highlights white privilege and racialized affluence as a kind of economic monstrosity as the members of her community use their prosperity as a defense against what they find threatening; moreover, it is her disease which proves that immunity is not a product of class distinction. The inherent advantages white people possess in America due to systemic racial injustice and inequality are clearly visible here in this setting where a white neighborhood lives comfortably under the assumption that they are protected from the dangers of the supposedly hostile and poisonous outside world. This gated community gives the individuals who reside within an illusion of security that informs their attitudes of superiority, which can be seen in the way Carol and her friends discuss diets, clothing, and other superficial indicators of status. Furthermore, this community also ignorantly assumes that a disease like AIDS cannot impact them because it is stereotypically more prevalent among minority groups and the LGBTQ community. However, Carol contracting this disease contradicts these beliefs and demonstrates how fragile the fabric of their community truly is. They are reliant on societally recognized but artificial constructs of success and prestige to feel valid, which further enables people to avoid confrontation with how they feel about themselves. Carol is equally as embedded in this belief system as her counterparts, but her illness forces her to separate from such tendencies. As her symptoms worsen, it becomes abundantly clear that the indifference and lack of empathy she is met with by her peers signifies their unwillingness to recognize the presence of this disease in a community that never saw that as a possibility. "By revealing that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating, mutable rather than essential..." (Cohen 6), Carol becomes a monstrous entity because she threatens to abolish the social, political, and economic distinctions that constitute "whiteness" as an ideology. Her environmental sensitivity demonstrates that her

community's assumption of safety is unfounded and in order to continually avoid reevaluating their position of privilege, her peers maintain their detachment from reality and from themselves. Carol is suffocated by her racial identity, but this is not to portray her as a victim, rather this film aims to show the consequences of relying upon societal tools of oppression to define oneself in opposition to others. White privilege is a systemic aspect of American society and because this community refuses to recognize the unjust nature of racial oppression, Carol develops environmental sensitivity not only to show that economic class is not a defense mechanism, but also to prove that there is no such thing as immunity, regardless of how "safe" one may feel.

The film *Safe* portrays a highly privileged white community whose isolation from the world beyond their neighborhood gates is challenged by the onset of the AIDS epidemic during the 1980s. The protagonist, Carol White, becomes extremely sensitive to her environment, which serves to illustrate how suffocated the members of her community are by the rigidity of their roles and expectations. Carol's illness exposes the extent to which her community relies on detachment from reality, institutionalized sexism, and white privilege to provide a defense against what they find potentially harmful. She becomes a monstrous entity due to her own community's anxiety, rather than by conscious choice. Carol is forcibly separated from the limiting and formulaic nature of her world and this is profoundly threatening to the people who depend on those restrictions to avoid confronting their own unhappiness and lack of fulfillment. Despite the fact that Carol's suffering is never alleviated throughout the duration of this film, *Safe* is not pessimistic in intent; rather it aims to display how the mechanisms of injustice operate to demand that both individuals and society itself take accountability for change.

Works Cited

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