

Kathleen Kendall - The Woman Who Turns Back Commentary Transcription

I think that this script is a really interesting cultural artefact. It tells us quite a lot about the history of psychiatry in the post-war period. It provides important insight into the dominant discourse and power relations of the time. And it particularly illustrates how the concepts of normality, regression, dependency and heteronormativity shaped mental health education, policy and practice.

Overall, the 'The Woman Who Turns Back' reflects the mental hygiene message by suggesting that something went terribly wrong in Ruby's childhood. The fact that she spent her summer holiday mornings lying in bed suggests that she was either neglected or over-indulged and consequently, she regresses and becomes over-dependent. Another sign of Ruby's abnormality is the fact that she makes unwanted advances toward Frances – implying that she may be a lesbian. So heterosexuality, is represented here, both implicitly and explicitly, as the healthy norm.

The concepts of regression and dependency; and the notion of heteronormativity really were fundamentally shaped by Sigmund Freud's theory of psychosexual development. And although not all Canadian psychiatrists agreed with Freud, his ideas were very influential in shaping mental health practice and policy in the post-war era. They certainly informed the general mental hygiene message at the time which was that childhood experiences profoundly shape later life, so that poor mental health is the consequence of bad parenting. Freud believed that the libido or psychosexual energy drove human behaviour and that a person's personality is largely established by their progress through 5 key stages of psychosexual development. Each stage was based on different erogenous zones and he called these stages the following: oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital.

Regression was another really important concept. And it was regarded by Freud as a kind of defence mechanism in which a person turns back to an earlier stage of their psychosexual development -- acting in childish ways – in order to avoid difficult and distressing adult situations. As the accompanying In Search of Ourselves educational pamphlet for the episode states: 'the

mechanism of regression represents a turning back away from maturity and the responsibilities and feelings of adulthood into the more dependent phases of adolescence and childhood'.

The final point I want to discuss is the message of heteronormativity imbedded in the script. The assumption that heterosexuality is normal and homosexuality is abnormal is apparent in France's ability to establish a heterosexual relationship with Bert which is seen as really healthy and Ruby's unsuccessful relationship with Lee; as well as Ruby's unwanted sexual advances upon Frances.

Like so much thinking around mental health issues at the time, the influence of Freud is really important here too. So Freud believed that successful transition through each psychosexual stage resulted in adult heterosexuality. Mature sexuality therefore, was heterosexuality. And in contrast, homosexuality was regarded as an expression of immature or infantile sexuality; an indication of fixation or regression to an earlier stage of psychosocial development. In this framework for example, a woman like Ruby who has experienced a gravely disappointing heterosexual experience might give up on men and become a lesbian.

Close female friendships were also regarded by some experts as a danger because if a girl spent too much emotional energy on another girl, she could get stuck at this stage and not learn how to meet and attract boys and this seems to be reflected in Ruby's behaviour as well. But whatever the cause, in the immediate post-war period it was generally regarded as a pathology that needed to be avoided. And if it was not avoided, then it needed to be treated.