

Questioning Sexuality in Sinclair Ross's "As For Me and My House"

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Take your time, settle in, make friends—
And learn to read the signals.

SINCLAIR ROSS, *Sawbones Memorial*

SINCLAIR ROSS'S *As For Me and My House* (1941), an acknowledged classic of Canadian literature, has received extensive critical attention. What has been left virtually ignored by the critics, however, are the possibilities inherent in the novel when the heterosexual assumption—or the assumption that every character we meet in literature is exclusively heterosexual until proven otherwise—is called into question. In a graduate course in Canadian Literature at University of Nebraska, some years ago, during one of our discussions, a woman wondered out loud whether the protagonist, Philip Bentley, might be a closeted gay man. She quickly retracted the statement, however, and said it was really about a more "universal"—meaning "heterosexual"—concern: the failure of communication in the Bentley marriage. While the second reading is perhaps more widely accepted, why did the woman feel pressed into rejecting her first impressions? Could not Bentley's denied yet palpable homosexual inclinations be a major factor in his inability to communicate with his wife? Could not a full and illuminating line of inquiry in this direction bring new meaning to the novel? Is not this the goal of critical reading in the first place?

As Keath Fraser makes clear in his memoir of Ross, *As for Me and My Body*, Ross also questioned the sexuality of his protagonist Philip Bentley. At first Ross did not allow himself to recognize the

homosexual content in *As For Me and My House*. However, as Ross and Fraser's friendship developed over the years and Ross became more comfortable discussing his own homosexuality with Fraser, Ross finally admitted the presence of homosexuality in his novel: "It's there," Ross said to Fraser, though "unintentional." Fraser observes that it "had thus taken him eight years (with me) to acknowledge what he never had before" (41).

Some critics too seem uncomfortable discussing the homosexual presence in Ross's novel. While much has been written about *As For Me and My House*, very little has been written about the possibilities inherent in the novel when Philip's sexuality is called into question. No doubt, many critics see such a discussion as reductive, that art somehow "rises above" the particulars of homosexuality to address more "universal" concerns. While it is possible, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, that such critics read a successful transmutation of homosexual desires into written heterosexual desires, a translation so complete and effective that the "difference *makes* no difference" (197), it is more likely this attitude stems from the cultural phenomenon that once we have categorized someone as homosexual or gay or lesbian then that is all we are capable of seeing. For many, these categories are singularly and narrowly sexual, presupposing evidence of same-sex sexual contact. These readers cannot or will not perceive the various other nuances in an author's work that directly relate to a gay or lesbian meaning: a unique perception, for example, a cognizance of difference, a dissatisfaction with strict gender roles or heterosexual relations, an intense same-sex affection, a homoerotic desire, and/or various other distinctions.

On the other hand, these readers may also be refusing to acknowledge the vast importance of sexuality to most—even heterosexual—authors. Who can deny the significance of sexual relations or the construction of sexual identities to such diverse writers as Ernest Hemingway, Jane Austen, Margaret Laurence, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ford Maddox Ford, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, or any other writer that comes to mind? As University of Illinois Professor of Philosophy Richard Mohr correctly asserts:

For gays, sexuality affects everyday existence, whereas for straights sexuality, especially what might be called heterosexual presumption, is an unacknowledged phenomenon. For straights, sexuality is like the air at room temperature, pervasive and dominant, yet entirely unnoticed. (7)

It is to notice the unnoticed that lesbian and gay criticism holds as one of its primary tenets.¹

I believe Ross's difference does make a difference in his art, and I believe acknowledging his homosexual orientation adds new and profound dimensions to the way we interpret his fiction. And even if the homosexual content in *As For Me and My House* is "unintentional" as he wanted Fraser to believe, where exactly do these traces of sexual difference rise to the surface and leave their marks in his writing?

According to W. H. New, Ross's world is an ambivalent and ambiguous one where absolutes do not exist. New explains Ross "blur[s] the edges of his images" and delivers various contrasting viewpoints to undercut the notions of truth and reality (52). Sinclair Ross believes humanity's conceptions of truth and reality are often tainted by hypocrisy, false-fronts, and small-mindedness, and, therefore, these notions are impossible to recognize. The absence of absolutes affords Ross the opportunity to suggest multiple meanings in his writing, for ambiguity is defined by its refusal to settle on one meaning. For example, while reading Ross's *As For Me and My House*, we are told numerous times that Philip is an artist, but are we to believe it? We get this information only from Mrs. Bentley—can we trust her judgement? Furthermore, the far from clear cut ending of the novel is another instance of ambiguity as we are left in doubt, wondering if we should be hopeful for the Bentleys' future or if we should assume that they will continue to suffer in silence.

This ambiguity, however, can also be utilized by Ross to suggest a diversity of meanings, including one concerning sexuality. If Ross's work refuses to settle on one meaning, then a homosexual meaning (while not the only meaning) is certainly one of the possible meanings that can be located. And while Ross admits to an "unintentional" homosexual presence in the novel, I would like to suggest that on another, perhaps similarly subconscious

level, Ross's desire to create homosexual meaning is one of the primary motivating sources of ambiguity in the first place.²

Told from Mrs. Bentley's perspective, the novel, like Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, puts the author in the unique position to explore publicly and safely feelings of intense love and desire for a person of the same sex, a love and desire that, for whatever reason, cannot be returned. For in *As For Me and My House*, it is obvious that Mrs. Bentley does love her husband Philip with great passion, and she has a covetous need to maintain her relationship with him. That he does not reciprocate her desire causes her intense pain, and she devotes much of her time to creating an environment she believes will foster mutual feelings of desire from her husband. Indeed, the entire novel is permeated with Mrs. Bentley's aching sorrow as she tries to get her husband to notice her, and no reader can leave *As For Me and My House* without being affected by Mrs. Bentley's plight. She seems driven by a desperate series of *if I just*: *if I just* give Philip plenty of private time he will notice me; *if I just* get Philip another pipe he will appreciate me; *if I just* give Philip a son of his own he will value me; *if I just* save enough money to allow us to escape to the city he will treasure me; *if I just* enable Philip to give up his life as an unbelieving minister to become the artist he wants to be he will need me. What she will not allow herself to believe, however, is that Philip may never desire her, that he is incapable of desiring her. What Mrs. Bentley (and many critics) assume is universal heterosexuality: What if the reason Philip does not, will not, or can not desire Mrs. Bentley is because he has other desires?

This is not to suggest that Philip is without question a homosexual man. In fact, Philip is so entrenched behind false-fronts in all aspects of his life that he has probably not looked behind most of them, especially one so terrifying, so secretive as the one involving human sexuality. Rather, the ambiguity surrounding Philip—created by his story being told through the gaze of a woman desperately in love with him—creates numerous possibilities as to why Philip fails to desire his wife. But the potential that one of Philip's false-fronts masks a homosexual desire is imaginable: Philip's heterosexual marriage *is* one of the false-fronts behind which he is living, and it is the act of living as a

heterosexually married family man that adds to Philip's feelings of hypocrisy, a hypocrisy from which he continually—though ineffectually—attempts to escape.

That Philip desires escape from his familial relationships is excruciatingly clear from the opening stages of the novel. He is a silent, detached man, whose retreats into his private study and the accompanying shutting of the door become a cadence throughout the novel. The relationship from which he is most often escaping is with his wife, but the habit of withdrawal begins very early for Philip. We are told, for example, that, at an early age, he is estranged from both his mother, a waitress, and his father, a preacher and would-be artist. His estrangement from his father is not by choice; Philip's father never marries his mother and dies before Philip is born. His estrangement from his mother, however, is a conscious act. A bastard, Philip gradually "recoil[s]" from his mother as he begins to blame her for the "ridicule and shame" of his position in life. This shame causes Philip to shut the door on his relationship with his mother, and when she dies when he is fourteen, he has withdrawn himself so completely that it simply makes "no difference" (30). As Ross seems to suggest in *Sawbones Memorial* with his characterization of Benny Fox, he, like so many others in mid-twentieth century North America, believes a "faulty" family configuration is a major cause of homosexuality; is it possible, then, to assume that perhaps Philip's background, which includes an absent father and a "shameful" mother, fits into a pattern that suggests sexual difference?

Philip's desire for an intense male-male relationship is evidenced through his relationship with his father. Perhaps because it is far easier to establish and maintain a relationship with an absent idol than a living person, Philip begins to worship his father and strives to emulate him, first by becoming a preacher/painter and, ultimately, by fathering a bastard (or at least we can assume Philip's the father). Indeed, Philip's hero worship results in what can be seen as his first creative act: creating a perfect, imaginary father. Philip's father becomes a muse for him, as he is allied with "the escape world of his imagination," while his mother represents for Philip "the drab, sometimes sordid reality

of the restaurant" in which she works (30). Thus, a pattern is established that Philip follows for the rest of his life; throughout the novel, Philip finds inspiration in the male relationships he establishes and, we are told, views female relationships as hindrances.

Philip's relationship with his wife mirrors the relationship he had with his mother, and since his relationship with his mother was so disastrous, it becomes rather obvious that Mrs. Bentley's role as mother figure puts her in a rather hopeless situation. For example, both his relationship with his mother and with his wife remind Philip of his undesirable position in life: while his mother represented the drab reality of the restaurant in which she made her living, Mrs. Bentley represents the drab reality of Philip's role as small town minister and married man. Mrs. Bentley's behavior is also very maternalistic as she fusses and worries over Philip and gets "impatient being just his wife, and start[s] in trying to mother him too" (4). And like a stereotypical "good" mother, Mrs. Bentley sacrifices her own needs and feelings to support the needs of Philip.

Mrs. Bentley's impatience at "being just his wife" stems from Philip's negligent treatment of her *as* wife. That she would attempt to become a mother to him indicates she is trying to establish some role, some importance in Philip's life. As she is well aware, being Philip's wife does not equate with primacy in his life. Having a relationship with a woman does not hold much import for Philip at all. As Mrs. Bentley reflects, "Women weren't necessary or important to him as to most men" (16). In fact, Mrs. Bentley comes to believe Philip resents her for *being* a woman: "There are times when I think he has never quite forgiven me for being just a woman"—there is the tell-tale "just" again (23). Philip is so indifferent when it comes to women, that even when he has an affair with Judith West, Mrs. Bentley does not seem too threatened. As she reasons, "she was there, that was all" (126), and given Philip's lack of passion, we have little reason to doubt her word. Philip is physically divorced from his wife as well; not only does he wait an hour before going to bed to be certain she is asleep and thereby avoid the embarrassing possibility of sexual activity, but when Mrs. Bentley does reach out to touch or kiss him, more often than not, he reacts "like a lump of stone" (89).

While Philip is passionless in his relationships with women, he is, as stated before, inspired by his relationships with men, and Fran Kaye is correct in surmising "Philip's emotional and sensual passions are for other men, first for the father he idealizes and then for the boy Steve, who so quickly usurps Mrs. Bentley's place as Philip's companion" (103). His father's memory, for example, inspires him to explore the fantasy world of imagination; and Philip idealizes Steve as a "Pegasus" who "takes him off into the clouds" (53). As Kaye points out, while Philip avoids physical contact with Mrs. Bentley and reacts "like a lump of stone" to her touch, he immediately reaches out for a physical connection with Steve:

I was watching Philip. When Steve finished he smiled a little, and put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Some day when Mr. Kirby's using his horse you'll have to come for a ride with me in the car. Some Saturday, when I've calls to make in the country. I'll let you know."

I glanced up at Paul, then turned to Harlequin again, and started running my fingers through his mane. I didn't look at Steve or Philip now, but I could feel them standing there, unaware of us, complete for the moment in themselves. I don't know what came over me—maybe just the wind, the plaintive way it whined. I seemed to feel myself vaguely threatened. (42)

Indeed, his relationship with Steve so rejuvenates Philip that Mrs. Bentley remarks that the "eagerness and vitality radiating from him" remind her "how young he still is, how handsome and tall and broad-shouldered" (50-51). Philip is so eager to please Steve, so desirous of his devotion, so possessed of him that Philip begins, according to Mrs. Bentley, "spoiling him thoroughly" (74).

In order to spoil Steve, however, the hopelessly impoverished Philip needs money, and so Philip disregards his previous humiliations and writes to former congregations for money owed, an act that comes as a slap in the face to Mrs. Bentley as she cannot help feeling slighted "that he never did it for me" (111). As time passes, Mrs. Bentley becomes more and more jealous over Steve's primacy in Philip's life, and she comes to consider Philip's passion for Steve as "dark, strange, morbid" (135). Thus, when someone sends word to the Catholic Church that Steve is living in a Protestant home (could that someone have been Mrs.

Bentley?), she is relieved yet eventually disappointed as she discovers she is “not finding the place in [Philip’s] life I hoped I would once Steve was gone” (122).

Therefore, the real tragedy of *As For Me and My House*, the aspect of the novel that creates such intense loneliness and suffering, is Mrs. Bentley’s dependency on Philip and her belief that it is somehow her fault that Philip does not desire her. As Sedgwick explains, the “worst violence of heterosexuality comes with the male *compulsion to desire* women and its attendant deceptions of self and other” (198). Again, Mrs. Bentley believes Philip *should, must* desire women—he *should* desire her—and when he does not, she takes the blame herself:

I’ve comforted myself too, trying to be a good wife, seeing religiously that his socks were always darned, his books in order, his dinner hot. But it was all wrong. Comfort and routine were the last things he needed. Instead he ought to have been out mingling with his own kind. He ought to have whetted himself against them, then gone off to fight it out alone. He ought to have had the opportunity to live, to be reckless, spendthrift, bawdy, anything but what he is, what I’ve made him. (103)

In this passage, Mrs. Bentley seems unsure of exactly what Philip is, what “his own kind” are—indeed, she seems willfully blind to the possibilities—but the one thing of which she is sure and for which she feels personally responsible is that Philip is an unhappy, unsatisfied, shadow of a heterosexual, married man. Therefore, she tries desperately to be the best wife she can be, with the hope that her efforts will inspire Philip to realize how valuable she is.

One of the first things Mrs. Bentley does to prove her value as companion and wife is to sacrifice her own career as artist. Mrs. Bentley is an accomplished pianist (not to mention brilliantly gifted journal writer) who has forfeited her career, as every dutiful wife was expected to do throughout most of the twentieth century, in favor of her husband’s. Since they both met and became engaged at a concert, Barbara Godard recognizes art as the “keystone” to the Bentley marriage, and the “failure of their marriage” as “mirrored in that of their artistic careers” (60).

While I concur that art is the keystone to their marriage, I believe it is Mrs. Bentley that has put the keystone in place, and I

wonder if the keystone is an illusion. It is from her perspective, after all, that we come to know Philip as artist. She believes Philip is an extremely gifted artist who only needs to escape his small town life to be happy. But can we trust her evaluation? As T. J. Matheson points out, even Mrs. Bentley suggests that Philip's work is not first-rate when she hints "the limitations of his hand and eye" have kept him in Horizon. Furthermore, Matheson continues, since Philip originally became an artist to emulate his father, perhaps his artistic aspirations are not the result of "irrepressible talent" but are "the result of a psychological compulsion to imitate an idealized figure" (177). Could it be that Mrs. Bentley wants and needs to believe that Philip's frustrated artistic dreams are what make him so desperately unhappy? Is this Mrs. Bentley's false-front? Could it be that there is something else besides the obvious making Philip unsatisfied? Since she does not or will not consider other possibilities, Mrs. Bentley becomes bent on preserving her illusion of someday experiencing a happy marriage by saving her husband's artistic talent, first by buying him oils and urging him to paint, and then by saving money to move them out of small town Horizon, Saskatchewan.

Becoming the guardian of Philip's artistry is another attempt by Mrs. Bentley to guarantee her importance in Philip's life. At times, she is resigned to the probability that Philip may never actually love her with the same intensity that she loves him—"it's a man's way," she rationalizes, "to keep on just as determined to be free" (64)—but, ever resilient, she nonetheless believes that if she makes herself useful, he will, at the very least, grow to appreciate her more. This is, after all, the way the Bentley marriage was conceived. "Philip married me because I made myself important to him," she reports, "consoled him when he was despondent, stroked his vanity the right way" (64). Even then Philip "slighted and repulsed" her, but after three years of persistence—and much patience—Philip eventually marries her. With this precedent in her mind, Mrs. Bentley's current attempts to make herself valuable to Philip are completely understandable.

While Mrs. Bentley strives to nurture and save Philip's artistic talent (and, thus, she believes, her marriage), Philip's answer is to retreat into solitude. Unlike his idealized, imaginary relation-

ship with his father, his relationship with his wife frustrates his talent: Mrs. Bentley is no muse for Philip. It seems, in fact, that Philip is unable to create anything while his wife is in the room. As Mrs. Bentley states, "For while I'm there he's actually helpless to draw a single line. He can't even sit out here in the living-room with me and read or write" (43). Instead, Philip retreats into his inner-sanctuary—or as Godard explains, his "Ivory Tower" (59)—and creates his drawings behind close[te]d doors. That Philip cannot create in front of his wife suggests that, indeed, there are mysterious, secret, profound, and, most important, concealed aspects to his life, aspects he is uncomfortable sharing with anyone, particularly—perhaps because he consciously or unconsciously blames her for his unhappiness—his wife.

While in his closed room, Philip creates prolifically, and his creations reflect his state of mind. Philip becomes obsessed, for example, with sketching Main Street scenes, which often detail "a single row of smug, false-fronted stores, a loiterer or two, in the distance the prairie." As Mrs. Bentley reads the sketches, they all exhibit something that "hurts," and they are characterized "with a look of self-awareness and futility" (4). Of course, the false-front is one of the most important images of the novel, and it appears everyone—from the hypocritical townspeople to Mrs. Bentley—is hiding or denying something. It is Philip and his false-fronts, however, that are most central to the story, for if he could move beyond them, he and his wife could finally face important truths. Of course, the most obvious is the front he hides behind as a minister without faith, a role that requires him to preach words that have no meaning for him. Another is that he perhaps realizes but denies the fact that he does not really have the talent to become an artist, something he has wanted to become since childhood. Another false-front is his role as husband, a part he is certainly incapable of fulfilling. What these false-fronts function as, then, what they symbolically represent is the small-town prairie version of *the closet*. Unable to admit, unable to reveal, unable to accept, Philip is unmistakably living a closeted existence, and, like a person in the closet, he must fiercely protect these false-fronts, no matter how much he may despise them, if he wants to continue in his secure, safe,

normal present life, a life he seems too afraid to—perhaps ever—abandon.

Yet there are signs that Philip desperately wants to escape these false-fronts. Just as Doc Hunter advises Benny Fox in *Sawbones Memorial*, an escape from the fishbowl that epitomizes small town life might open up enormous possibilities for Philip, and Philip is strongly drawn to another life "out there." Early in the novel, for example, Philip's desire for escape is made clear when he hears a train whistle sounding in the distance, a sound, Mrs. Bentley reports, that always makes Philip wince. At night, for example, "when the whistle's loneliest," Philip will toss and "lie still and tense"; during the day, "his eyes take on a quick, half eager look, just for a second or two, and then sink flat and cold again" (29). Obviously, the train whistles are constant reminders of the existence of an elsewhere. They represent the "potential, unknown" worlds filled with possibility, and each time he hears a train, according to Mrs. Bentley, he is reminded of the "outside world that he hasn't reached" (33).

Yet it is doubtful if Philip will ever strike out on his own to discover the possibilities of the outside world that he has not reached. In fact, as the novel ends, he is becoming more entrenched with ties that bind him to his family: Philip and Mrs. Bentley adopt the baby born as a result of Judith and Philip's affair. Perhaps now that Philip has a male in his life in the form of a son, he will feel more complete; as Mrs. Bentley hopefully reports, since the arrival of his son, Philip's eyes reflect a "stillness, a freshness, a vacancy of beginning" (165). More likely than not, however, as Philip's relationship with his son falls from idealistic to realistic (as his relationship with Steve was beginning to do prior to Steve's departure), Philip will once again find himself withdrawing from his family, withdrawing from life, and closing the door behind him. For perhaps a father-son relationship is not the male-male relationship for which he is yearning. But it is not until Philip figures out what he wants, what exactly is behind *all* of his false-fronts that he will find fulfillment. Most important, it is not until he tears down the false-front masking his desires—whether they are homosexual desires or desires that may include the possibility of other men—that Philip will be able

to stop viewing his wife's love for him as a threatening, demanding force that continually reminds him of his seeming inability to desire women. By getting rid of this particular false-front, Philip will be able to give both himself and his wife well-deserved peace.

NOTES

- ¹ The approach I employ is based on the camp-recognition model suggested by Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*, an approach based on the politics of identification:

What if whoever made this was gay too? . . . What if the right audience for this were exactly *me*? What if, for instance, the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of attention and attraction that I am able to bring to this spectacle are actually uncannily responsive to the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of the person, or of some of the people, who created it? And what if, furthermore, others whom I don't know or recognize can see it from the same "perverse" angle. (156)

- ² Keath Fraser's reading of the homosexual content in *As For Me and My House* is much different from mine. He believes that by not fully "admitting Philip's homosexuality in the novel," Ross's characterization of Philip contains an "artistic flaw" that ultimately contributes to a "stilted outcome" (54). However, Ross's unwillingness to overtly admit Philip's homosexuality creates tension and ambiguity—both primary forces in Ross's art.

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