

The Stunning Similarities between Katha Pollitt and Charles Colson.: A Case Study of “What’s Wrong with Gay Marriage”, and “Gay ‘Marriage’: Societal Suicide”. EN101A

Same sex relationships are the most challenging societal trend that divides Americans today. All through history (from biblical beginnings until today) mankind has been unenthusiastic to recognize what the Longman Advanced American Dictionary (2007, p.1398) describes as sexual gratification by individuals of the same gender. George Chauncey, in “The Legacy of Antigay Discrimination” (Kennedy, Kennedy, and Aaron 260-264), vividly describes the path politicians have taken to blot out such tendencies from civilization. In spite of gay marriage denunciation, major newspapers like “The Washington Post” (Friday April 3, 2009) and television stations like CNN and ABC have reported that the state of Vermont’s legislature has successfully legalized same – sex unions, while Iowa’s Supreme court has coined the ruling that opposed gay marriage as being unlawful. Such successful strides in the fight for gay marriage legalization actually started in Massachusetts and California where the battle ignited a passionate debate and inspired literary works such as the essays of Katha Pollitt: “What’s Wrong with Gay Marriage”, and Charles Colson’s “Gay ‘Marriage’: Societal Suicide”. It is astonishing that both writers express their divergent views by using similar writing strategies - such as persuasion, writing style, tone, and credibility of supporting details.

Charles Colson and Katha Pollitt are both intellectuals and university graduates. Colson graduated from both Brown and George Washington Universities; while Pollitt earned a Bachelor’s degree at Radcliffe College. Their education is instrumental in helping them persuade readers in a very scientific manner. They both start off by stating the problem, then they provide statistical information that pushes them to adopt a particular stance, eventually they exhibit supporting details or evidence that props up their claim and leads to a finding.

For instance, Katha Pollitt, in *The Bedford Reader* (2009, p.548-550) uses scientific methodology to persuade her readers by doing the following: She States the central problem at the very beginning of her essay: “Will someone please explain to me how permitting gays and lesbians to marry threaten the institution of marriage?” She then keeps on by listing a catalog of social conservatives like David Bankenhorn and Jean Berhke Elshtain who oppose the legalization of gay marriage .To convince her readers in a more gripping manner, Pollitt also uses statistical details to prove that “...marriage is (not) all about procreation” and that “...marriage is (not) a way women domesticate men. She uses the following to enhance her argument:”

...having children isn’t a marital requirement. As many have pointed out, the law permits marriage to the infertile, the elderly, the impotent and those with no wish to procreate; it allows married couples to use birth control, to get sterilized, to be celibate. There’s something creepily authoritarian and insulting about reducing marriage to procreation. (Kennedy, p.549)

Such details help to establish Pollitt’s claim in the reader’s mind: that marriages are “strengthened by love, commitment and stability” and not by procreation. By the time Pollitt concludes her argument and proposes her solution – that gay marriage would be legalized if the “State” is separated from the “Church” ,an unprejudiced reader would agree entirely with her stance.

Similarly, Charles Colson also uses scientific methodology to convince readers of 'Gay Marriage': Societal Suicide' to be sympathetic to his views. Like Pollitt, he states the problem he wishes to resolve at the beginning of his essay: "Is America witnessing the end of marriage? The Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts has ordered that the state issue marriage licenses to same sex couples." Then he furnishes lots of information with the intention of intensifying the problem (this is reminiscent of what Pollitt does). He refers to the actions of the Supreme Court as "municipal lawlessness" (p., 554) and falls in line with President Bush's idea of "a Federal Marriage Amendment" that would launch vibrant debate on marriage all over the country. (Kennedy, p.554)

A great deal of details and statistics are cumulatively presented to prove that the legalization of same sex marriage will be problematic to the nation as a whole. For example, Colson believes that marriage is the foundation of society and letting it to be infested by homosexuals is like murdering it. He also believes that:

Dozens of studies now confirm the evidence I've seen with my own eyes. Boys who grow up without fathers are at least twice as likely as other boys to end up in prison. Sixty percent of rapist and 72 percent of adolescent murderers never knew or lived with their fathers. Even in the toughest inner city neighborhoods, just 10 percent of kids from intact families get into trouble, but 90 percent of those from broken families do....(Kennedy, p.555)

Hence, the reader automatically finds himself agreeing with Colson when he concludes his essay by recommending that the fundamental structure of marriage should not be tampered with if societal disintegration is to be avoided. The college student who reads Colson's essay would concur with the essayist because his family may have had a child or brother who found himself in prison because of the absence of parental guidance. Having been in prison himself, Colson adopts the role of an insider who paints a picture from its natural background.

A close look at both essays exposes surprising likeness in tone. One can effortlessly feel the passion that reveals their irritation and pushes them to scrutinize the opposing camps. In 'Gay "Marriage": Societal Suicide', Charles Colson expresses disbelief that the Massachusetts legislature voted to legalize same-sex civil unions. One can feel his anger from the choice of words such as "gleeful" and "mocking" that indicate a shameful turn of events, in the perception of marriage.(Kennedy p.,554) Colson's distaste for same-sex marriage is also evident in his use of the word "marriage" which he unemotionally encases in quotation marks each time he refers to gay civil unions. He seems to show that the idea of same-sex marriage is so unacceptable that there is no vocabulary item to represent the phenomenon. The keen reader would see the contrast in usage: When Colson uses "marriage" in reference to heterosexual couples, he leaves out the quotation marks; whereas his reference of it to homosexual couples is encased in quotation marks.

Katha Pollitt correspondingly reveals her impatience and anger with social conservatives, by using metaphors. She describes heterosexual marriage as being "an orange blossom" that seems to be so beautiful that it lacks flaws. Sarcasm and irony is abundantly used to laugh at or ridicule arguments against same- sex marriage. An illustration of this point can be found in the second paragraph of her essay wherein Pollitt says one thing but means another: Here she kicks against

the argument that heterosexual marriages tame men by insinuating that they would commit less crime –like kill, take drugs, commit suicide or hurt others in accidents. Actually what she means is that any individual can commit crimes, whether they are married or unmarried. Like Colson, Pollitt uses quotation marks to imply a different meaning other than the literal implication of the word. In the fifth paragraph of her essay, Pollitt declares that heterosexuals consider their marriages to be “sacred”. Actually she implies here that such marriages are anything but sacred. If the reader were to read a few more lines after this word , they would find lots of details that support her inference:”That is why so many people can live with civil unions but draw the line at marriage”.(Kennedy, p. 550)

Another common strategy used by Pollitt and Colson is the factual presentation of ideas. Both essayists are aware that the debate on same sex marriage is ongoing; hence they try to outwit opponents by presenting their arguments in the most credible manner. Pollitt selects convincing examples that expose the conjugal need of same –sex lovers; her arguments revolve around the notion that everybody is born equal and should not be discriminated against. She believes that since lesbians can have children in some states they should as well be allowed to marry. Readers are most likely to be carried away by Pollitt’s subjective presentation of facts. She reveals her sympathy for gay and lesbian couples by advocating free and unregimented relationships. On marriage she says, “Speaking just for myself, I don’t like marriage. I prefer...free love”. Such personal revelation exposes her frankness and gives credence to every other proposal she may advance.

Charles Colson, like Pollitt, also provides supporting details in a credible manner. In ‘Gay “Marriage”: Societal Suicide’ he appeals to the reader’s sense of sight to get his message across. By giving an eye witness account when he describes the ravages of prison life, he seems to be saying that readers had better believe him. The reader’s attention is captivated when he advances the following information: “I’ve witnessed the disastrous consequences of family breakdown – in the lives of thousands of delinquents. Dozens of studies now confirm the evidence I’ve seen with my own eyes...” (The Bedford Reader, 2009) The subsequent details (that are described) are assumed to be true because the writer reveals that he had observed the phenomenon himself. This frankness is an aspect that Pollitt also uses extensively in her essay.

A careful study of both essays discloses similar writing style: Colson presents his views in a conversational and chatty manner, as if it were an active speech exchange between two interlocutors. He does this by asking questions and providing answers for the problem. This method is very effective because it simulates an ongoing round table or screen debate which should lead to an identifiable conclusion. At the beginning of the essay, Colson alarmingly predicts the end of marriage if same –sex unions were to be legalized. He seems to scream the following: “Is America witnessing the end of marriage?” and it is implied that he wishes the reader would help him stop the decline by agreeing with him and joining him to discourage the justice department in legalizing marriage. As recently as yesterday April 11, 2009, CNN confirmed Colson’s views by announcing that thirty states have voted to protect marriage as the union between a man and a woman. (The News room)

Pollitt also uses conversational technique by asking questions and providing valid and convincing answers. She identifies each point of contention and reveals her position by

questioning the validity of the opposing side's stance. For instance, Pollitt triggers arguments through sensitive questioning: "How about Marriage is the way women domesticate men". She also asks: "What about the argument from history?" This sows doubt in the reader's mind and forces them to re-examine their thoughts to match hers. Incidentally, there is no use of questions in the last two paragraphs. This is not surprising because, she has already provided all the answers in the previous paragraphs. The last two sections are used to state the finding that she imprints in the reader's mind – marriage should be orchestrated by love and commitment and not the church. This strategy succeeds in making the reader an active participant in discussions intended to legalize same –sex marriage and convince him to agree with the essayist. A keen reader would visualize an actual discussion that would sway him to become involved. Ironically, the states of Iowa and Vermont recently proved Pollitt's argument to be more convincing by legalizing gay marriage; while Washington, District of Columbia announced they would recognize gay marriages contracted elsewhere. (ABC NEWS)

To sum up, readers will note that although Katha Pollitt and Charles Colson have divergent views on same –sex marriage, they never the less use similar or identical strategies to propagate their positions and alert readers on the necessity of participating in the ongoing and dynamic discussion.

Cited Sources

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