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My essay is titled, "Norman Rockwell's Illustrations in Ideology." The essay is in Compliance with the College Honor System. I am submitting this essay in the Religion category, although it is an interdisciplinary essay in the fields of both religion and art history. The images I have mentioned are all listed and named at the end of the essay before the Work Cited page.

Norman Rockwell's Illustrations in Ideology

When most Americans recall Norman Rockwell, a myriad of images come to the minds of people of every age, gender and walk of life. Some remember the illustrations depicting boyhood and sports and school that provoke perhaps a warmth of nostalgia in those who remember. Others will remember the more serious portrayals, the ones that represent the ebb and flow of history, the images that have captured rare moments of peace within injustice, the images that gave a whisper to predicaments of racism or gender inequality. With hundreds of Norman Rockwell's illustrations in print, it is not surprising that even as years pass, Americans still strongly identify with the collective story that Rockwell told through his illustrations. At the same time, it has led many researchers to push the questions, "What notions of gender can be gathered about American society by studying Rockwell's prints?"¹ and "How did the ways that Rockwell portrayed the Family affect greater societal assumptions of normativity?"² Amid responses, researchers have come to many different conclusions on what Norman Rockwell's artwork symbolizes. For some, Norman Rockwell's artistry signifies the epitome of the stereotypical, Christian family in the 20th Century.³ But for others, Norman Rockwell is seen as an illustrator who pushed the bounds of homoeroticism and anti-family themes in his artwork.⁴ Within the myriad of images that Norman Rockwell illustrated, both views can be highly supported. I am arguing that despite Norman Rockwell's well-known reputation of illustrating pictures that depict heteronormative, Christian images of the American family, some of Rockwell's work such as *Thinking of the Girl Back Home* and *Easter Morning* depict just the opposite. It would be pointless to assign to Norman Rockwell a singular stance of masculinity, family, and Christianity as multiple researchers have. By illustrating diverse forms of hegemonic masculinity, Rockwell innocuously pushed the boundaries of the family and its relation to Christianity, portraying the family not as a static, nuclear structure, but instead as it really was: an entity subject to change.

¹ Eric J. Segal, "Norman Rockwell and the Fashioning of American Masculinity," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 78 No. 4 (New York City, NY: College Art Association, 1996), 641.

² Storch, Sharon L. "Normal or Norman? Rockwell's Influence on Mass Society." *The Proceedings of the Laurel Highlands Communications Conference* (2015).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Solomon, Deborah. *American Mirror: the Life and Art of Norman Rockwell*. Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

The figures portrayed in the artwork of Norman Rockwell have been commonly viewed as the epitomes of the stereotypical, heteronormative characters that come as a side effect in the push of the nuclear family in America, oftentimes by the policing of masculinity illustrated in some of Rockwell's artwork.⁵ In Rockwell's first illustration for the Saturday Evening Post *Boy Pushing a Stroller*, the policing of masculinity into a specific, hegemonic form is present. A black and white image with tints of bright red, *Boy Pushing a Stroller* features three figures: two rambunctious boys in the background with baseball caps while another boy pushing a baby in a stroller is the main figure of the foreground. Although the background figures wear simple baseball shirts, the main figure has on an elaborate suit and hat, complete with a baby's bottle in the front pocket. The boy pushing the stroller is obviously embarrassed, his face scrunched up as he attempts to avoid the snickering and taunting of the boys behind him. Although the image does not depict grown men as fathers, the masculinity of the young boys praised in *Boy Pushing a Stroller* has greater meanings for the stance on the family. With the disenchantment of male involvement in childhood upbringing, it appears that the hegemonic masculinity that is centered "around physical prowess in preference to a fussy, family-oriented image of boyhood," confirming the preferred dissociation between masculinity and family. The taunting is not directed specifically at pushing the baby stroller, but instead his characteristics and positioning written on the body. Rockwell's choice to adorn the young boy in clothing previously seen as more "feminine," even by male standards provokes a teasing of his entire character of masculinity. The greater undertones present in *Boy Pushing a Stroller* seem to poke fun at the man who is not masculine enough: not like the boys were are behind him, using their bodies for sport and grit, their clothes unadorned because their masculinity even at a young age is enough. In fact, like this illustration and many others, "Rockwell's illustrations point to a masculinity dependent upon correct judgement in matters of dress,"⁶ revealing sort of "sartorial masculinity"⁷ omnipresent in *Boy Pushing a Stroller*. The boy pushing the stroller is the complete opposite: like a woman, his body acts as a pinboard for fashionable adornments. He is not involved in gritty activities, but instead stays clean and tender, even so much as taking care of a child.

⁵Storch, "Normal or Norman? Rockwell's Influence on Mass Society."

⁶ Eric J. Segal, "Norman Rockwell and the Fashioning of American Masculinity," 642.

⁷ Ibid, 643.

Sartorial masculinity is a theme pushed further in Norman Rockwell's *T'aint You, Life* as a man's masculinity is policed by a young boy outside at recess. The image features two figures who stand facing each other: one is a boy who is dressed in a school uniform with a red jacket, orange, striped tie, and a brown hat, and the other is a taller man with a dark grayish suit and a floppy hat. The young boy laughs as he partially covers up with his arms a drawing that mimics the older man. The drawing is a stick figure drawn hastily in green and red marker with the words "Miss Perseval" as a caption. The older man looks shocked and defeated, his hunched stature provoking an embarrassment over his clothes that appear to be the object of taunting. Rockwell's obvious views on perhaps the proper way men should be expected to dress represented greater anxieties that became present in new ways during the beginning of the twentieth century. During this time, homosexuality was not perceived as a set of acts or even the involvement with someone of the same gender. Instead, homosexuality "was defined in terms of of feminine attributes," more specifically "effeminate mannerisms and dress,"⁸ consequently sparking an anxiety in one's masculinity depicted on the body. Segal in *Norman Rockwell and the Fashioning of American Masculinity* compares the adult figure depicted in *T'aint You, Life* to the popular depiction of the fop, which was seen as a man who became an "invert," caring too much about his fashion and the way he looked. For Rockwell, the illustrations that depicted the teasing of the fop and young men who showed similar interests undoubtedly had a social effect on society, whether Rockwell knew it or not. They provided regulations for the appropriate and inappropriate dress for masculine bodies during a time in history when the anxiety of homosexuality was becoming greater.

Rockwell's illustration *On My Honor* may be the epitome of the appropriate sartorial masculinity, confirmed further in the framework of patriotism. Norman Rockwell was notorious for praising the Boy Scout organization, seeing them as the epitomes of young masculinity, perhaps even greater than that of the taunting boys in *Boy Pushing A Stroller*. The Boy Scouts of America organization appeared to be the epitome of American masculinity, perhaps even representing masculine ties to war on a smaller scale. Here, boys could be separated from girls in a homosocial environment, bonding over doing activities with their hands and being close to nature. In Rockwell's

⁸ Segal, "Norman Rockwell and the Fashioning of American Masculinity," 643.

Illustration *On My Honor*, three scouts of varying ages stand together, their right hands raised in the scouts' hand symbol. All three boys stand up in a straight, erect position, their cheeks rosy as they stare straight at the viewer. It is evident that the figures are depicted as adolescents who replicate the preferred young masculinity. Further implicated in their masculinity is their dedication to their country. Behind them, the Liberty Bell is pictured with bolded, capitalized font running across it, depicting the Scout's Oath: "To do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; To help other people at all times; To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight." Norman Rockwell's dedication to the Boy Scouts of America organization is strongly reflected in the background of *On My Honor*. But with Rockwell's dedication comes larger themes he shared about manhood, accountability, and war. Unlike *Boy Pushing a Stroller* that focused masculinity around sartorial attributes and family, *On My Honor* takes hegemonic masculinity one step further, focusing it on larger institutions that praise and honor masculinity. For the Boy Scouts of America, there are obvious ties to Christianity, especially shown in the pledge where young men promise to do their duties to God. This sounds eerily similar to ideals of war adopted by some Christians. "Bypassing any moral concerns or political considerations," young men were drafted into the war, "placing blame squarely on the politicians who refused to fight."⁹ Furthermore, patriotism and the organization Boy Scouts of America are implicitly exclusionary of women and ultra-feminine exhibitions of masculinity. *On My Honor* embodies all the acceptable forms of young masculinity: a masculinity that is predictable, safe, and secure.

For any viewer, it would be evident that Norman Rockwell has a very defined view of young men's purpose in America, a view that is characterized by a strong sense of masculinity, patriotism, and the refusal to identify with feminine attributes. Interestingly enough, another one of Rockwell's illustrations *Thinking of the Girl Back Home* appears at first glance to carry the masculine undertones seen in previous artwork, but also carries hints of homoeroticism. The setup of *Thinking of the Girl Back Home* is instantly seen as an example of acceptable homosociality: two men spending time together as sailors on a ship. They sit with a porthole behind them; they are dressed in sailors' garbs

⁹ Lienesch, Michael. "Anxious Patriarchs: Authority and the Meaning of Masculinity in Christian Conservative Social Thought," 51.

complete with white hats and greyish-blue uniforms that hang loosely on their bodies. The stature of the sailor on the left is a little higher, one of his legs crossed and his right and left arms clinging tightly to his personhood. His right hand gently fondles a pipe resting between his lips as pillowy clouds of smoke dissipate into the air. The features of his face are relaxed, yet he stares down at the other sailor who is looking off into the distance. The other sailor sits slightly below him, hunched over with bright features that pull into a smile. His right hand lies on the leg of the other sailor. In his left hand, he holds a notepad and letter with a picture of a girl facing toward the viewer. As the title insinuates, the two men are supposedly depicted as thinking of their significant (female) others, one of them being shown in the illustration. It is evident that the hegemonic masculinity at hand is one similar to the *On My Honor* illustration. In fact, their uniforms look strikingly similar to those of the Boy Scouts in *On My Honor*, seeming to indicate again a certain kind of masculinity formed around responsibility of patriotism. There are greater tensions, though, apparent in *Thinking of the Girl Back Home*. Although it appears that the sailor on the right is looking off to the distance while thinking about his significant other from back home, his posture that holds his hand just over the knee of the sailor on the right appears to cause tension. It is interesting to note that on one hand, the right sailor has his legs spread open in a casual stance, his notepad holding the picture of the woman hanging directly in front of his genitals. On the other hand, the sailor on the left holds himself tightly, his legs becoming a nearly indiscernible mess as he crosses one over the other. The hand of the sailor on the right is perched on top of the crossed leg, seeming to be both given and withheld as the tension of the left sailor's body cuts off any direct contact with his genitals. Even the left sailor's mouth is closed tightly into a slight frown with only the phallic-like structure of the pipe sticking out while the other sailor grins an open-mouthed smile. The homoerotic tensions run high, but they do so only under the illusion of other forms of hegemonic masculinity that seem to dampen the slight, suggestive nuances.

The illustrations of Norman Rockwell show a variety of different contexts of young men's lives to where their identities and masculinities are pulled, examined, and sometimes even explored. Similar to the characterization of the young boy, the man has a varieties of different representations that put him into different roles and with different supposed responsibilities to his religion and to his family. One of the most famous of images, *Freedom from Want*, places the man at the head of the

household and the rest of the family as subordinates, also inherently confirming the gender roles of both the wife and the husband. The illustration features a family all seated around the dinner table, undoubtedly emitting a sense of warmth and comfort to the viewer as the characters laugh and smile at one another. The illustration centers around two main figures: the mother and the father. The father stands tall at the top of the illustration, peering over his wife onto the table. Consequently, his wife stands in front of him but slightly below, her arms carrying a large platter of a roasted turkey as she serves the table. Although many people assume that this nuclear family has been the most widespread and ideal way, it is evident that there are a variety of different cultures who have organized themselves within sects of nuclear families.¹⁰ Yet, Norman Rockwell's illustration *Freedom From Want* depicts what many Americans would argue is the epitome of the nuclear, white family. With the table seeming to almost extend out to the family, it appear to be an invitation that all are welcome. Of course, as in America, that is not always the case. The illustration depicts white, middle-class people who have the time and money to spend on a holiday like Thanksgiving. The welcoming, grinning faces are inviting to the viewer, yet, at the same time, the subjects hold a certain type of exclusivity. For people who do not fit the prototype of white, middle-class nuclear family, although they are invited to the table, they never truly fit into the dinner conversation.

Coupled with the seemingly instrumental notions of his view of the normative family, Rockwell also parallels this with an idea of acceptable Christianity. In Rockwell's image *Spring*, his views of masculinity's role in Christianity appears to be simple: the father plays a large role in upbringing his son in the Church and serves as a religious role model for his family. In *Spring*, a father and son are pictured in a church, the father turning the page of the young boy's hymnal for him as he sings. They are both dressed in gray suits with ties, even having small flowers attached to the lapel of their suit coats. The church surrounding them is a vibrant white color that zooms the focus in on the father and son. A large beam of light shines through the window onto them. Similar to the *Boy Pushing a Stroller*, the sartorial nature of the suits reflect that of a clean, well-kempt man that previously was connected with femininity surrounding housekeeping and childbearing. In this

¹⁰ Coontz, Stephanie. *Marriage, a History: from Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*. Penguin, (2006) 16.

instance, though, Rockwell is placing a man and his young in the realm previously associated with femininity. At the same time, there is a disconnect from the home, as the figures are portrayed in a church while isolated. No women or other church members are depicted, instead the men take over the space and inhabit it in a newly masculinized way. They do not appear to be guests in a male-dominated space, but instead they appear to have claimed the space. It is notable that, similar to *On My Honor* and the taunting boys in *Boy Pushing a Stroller*, people generally “go more easily and more often to secular culture, and especially to sports” when characterizing manhood, seeming to eschew all “religion of women's values, of forgiveness, mercy, and tenderness.”¹¹ But in *Spring*, a new version of fatherhood becomes connected to Christianity: a fatherhood that embraces the upbringing of sons in the Christian faith.

Despite the view that glorifies masculine involvement in Christianity especially in a paternalistic context, *Easter Morning* has a much different connotation: it seems to poke fun at Christianity and going to church, emphasizing perhaps a femininity of Christianity that should in fact be disavowed by men. In *Easter Morning*, a group of family members in their Sunday best outfits of dresses and suits head out the door to church. In the center of the illustration, a man sits in a relaxed, strewn position as he holds a newspaper close in his hands while simultaneously smoking a cigar. Through the window behind him, a nice looking suburban house sits. It is evident that the family is of middle class, and, although there are many figures shown in the illustration, the man is in the center. Here, he is in his pajamas: a bright red robe with blue and white striped pants and brown slippers. Strewn on the floor around him is an array of newspapers. To any viewer, this illustration could be taken as a funny and lighthearted depiction of Sunday morning. At the same time, *Easter Morning* differs drastically in some of its key messages pertaining to fatherhood and its place in Christianity from those depicted in *Spring*. Christianity is no longer depicted as a righteous realm held by men to endow to their sons, nor is it a defining, acceptable characteristic of manhood. In fact, as some Christians have previously wrote, “they have allowed themselves to become victims of a mass culture

¹¹Lienesch, Michael. “Anxious Patriarchs: Authority and the Meaning of Masculinity in Christian Conservative Social Thought.” *The Journal of American Culture*, vol. 13, no. 4, (1990), 51.

that encourages them to be weak and vulnerable,”¹² losing their grit and manliness shown in illustrations such as *On my Honor. Easter Sunday* reflects a sort of disconnect, an embarrassment of religion and a complete eschewal from the realm of femininity and its effect of Christianity.

What is perhaps more crucial to understand than Rockwell’s actual illustrations is the incredulous significance surrounding their place in the *Saturday Night Post* and how this journal acted as a vehicle for the suggestions--either normative or otherwise--that were present in Rockwell’s illustrations. From 1728 forward, The Saturday Post published weekly issues that discussed current events that “...shaped the country’s character,”¹³ ultimately becoming an iconic source of American consumption. In fact, Rockwell’s work was so popular that “The Saturday Evening Post Circulation was increased by 250,000 copies every week that Rockwell designed the cover.”¹⁴ It is undoubtedly evident that the various covers of The Saturday Night Post reached a vast audience, but how did the intermingling of ideology and mass media really affect normativity? For the creators of the documentary *MissRepresentation*, it is evident that mass media plays a major role in the way society is shaped by revealing images that are supposedly shaped by society. Even unknowingly so, the figures and themes represented in advertisements and the greater realm of mass media inherently--but perhaps unknowingly--shape the ways in which Americans create and replicate ideology. Thus, in Norman Rockwell’s case, even if his illustrations had falsely represented the reality of American life, they would have been perceived as authentic representations. Defining that ideology has been a concept that researchers have struggled with answering.¹⁵ Although it is tempting to try to label Norman Rockwell’s stance on gender and the Family with a polar view, “if normativity reveals itself as an illusion, then antinormativity also proves to be impossible.”¹⁶ Therefore, the question must turn to how Norman Rockwell’s illustrations reflect not a singular polar view of the Family and Christianity, but instead a multitude of positions. Ultimately, though, “they contribute to ongoing

¹²Lienesch, “Anxious Patriarchs: Authority and the Meaning of Masculinity in Christian Conservative Social Thought,” 51.

¹³Storch, “Normal or Norman? Rockwell's Influence on Mass Society.”

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵ Solomon, *American Mirror: the Life and Art of Norman Rockwell*.

¹⁶ King, Claire Sisco. “American Queerer: Norman Rockwell and the Art of Queer Feminist Critique.” *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 39, no. 2, (Feb. 2016), 170.

conversations about the variability of lived experience and its interpretations, but they do not, and cannot, tell the whole story.”¹⁷

Norman Rockwell’s work has been seen as the epitome of hetero-normative, Christian America, but still offers a degree of queerness undermined by more conventional aspects of his work. Not only could young people and adults alike identify with Rockwell’s beloved images of conventional homes and situations, but there also proved to be a diverse representation of masculinities and ideas of the Family. This constitutes Norman Rockwell’s belief in the Family’s ability to adapt and change.

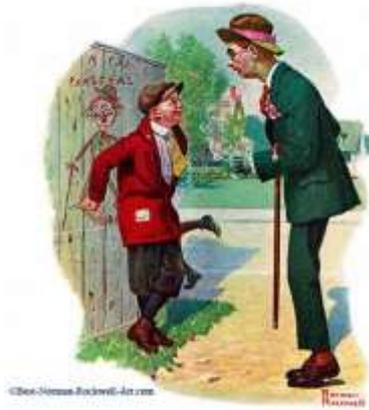


Boy Pushing a Stroller

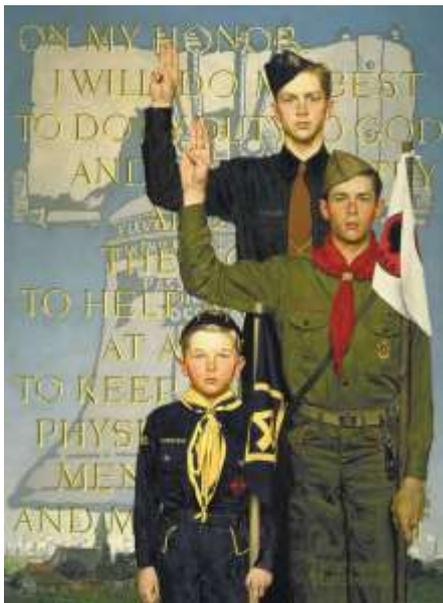
¹⁷ Ibid, 170.

Life

WEEK OF HONOR
MAY 14, 1918



1918-1919



T'aint You, Life

On My Honor



Thinking of the Girl Back Home



Freedom From Want



Spring

Easter Sunday

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