



Todd Haynes's *Safe* and the Covid-19 Pandemic Mirror on the Wall

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ABSTRACT

Todd Haynes's 1995 film *Safe* depicts the demise of protagonist Carol White as she suffers headaches, bloody noses, insomnia, asthma, and seizures from environmental illness, which leads to her social and marital demise and her taking refuge at Wrenwood, a sanitarium retreat in the Albuquerque foothills. This article reads Carol as a tragic archetype, and aligns the indices of COVID-19 pandemic life (face masks and social isolation for safety) with Carol's similar response to her illness. While the film has previously been critiqued and interpreted from perspectives including feminism, consumerism, environmentalism, suburbia, race, heteronormativity, melodrama, plague, Whiteness, and AIDS politics, this article performs a close reading based on Northrop Frye's archetypal definition of Aristotelian tragedy, and then analyzes the differences in late-pandemic middle class American perspectives from that of Carol White as she navigates her situation. Late-pandemic middle class perspectives provide an optimistic and alternate fate to the tragic pathos depicted in Carol's story.

KEYWORDS

Safe (1995), Todd Haynes, Northrop Frye, tragedy, COVID-19, pandemic, great resignation, environmental illness



Fig. 1. Carol White (Julianne Moore) attempts self-love at the mirror inside her isolation dome. *Safe* Blu-ray DVD. Criterion Collection, 2014.

— 2 —

Todd Haynes's 1995 masterpiece *Safe* reminds me of the contemporary relationship, in 2022, with the waning of pandemic quarantines and mask mandates. Previous critics have read the film as consumerist and feminist satire¹, as commentary on cultural whiteness, as critique of suburbia², and as commentary on the 1980s AIDS pandemic³. *Safe*, in 2022, can be read as a cautionary tale, an unfinished tragedy. There are noticeable indices of contemporary pandemic life in protagonist Carol White's story, such as face masks and self-isolation for safety. These similarities bring her ruin closer to pandemic experiences. The plot concerns her hobbled struggle for healthfulness, and her unsuccessful quest for self-discovery. However, while the film ends as a truncated tragedy, in the late-pandemic era some in the middle class are having success with self-discovery.

Carol's story has not come to a hard stop at the end of *Safe*, but there is little doubt that she has failed to obtain healthfulness and self-love. When looking closely at Carol's tragedy there is an opportunity to distance her doomed fate from the emerging post-pandemic outlook, which is empowered and reflective—decidedly not tragic. That's not to say the 6.4 million deaths

¹ See Bouchard in particular, but most critiques cited in the article recognize Haynes's for thematic feminism and Queercore aspects in his work.

² See Burke, also Tougaw.

³ See Bersani; Tougaw; also Stuber.

and millions of infirm patients have not been tragic, but there's an alternate narrative for some. For certain columns of the middle class, relationships with home, with nature, with family, and with work have transformed in varying degrees. The "great resignation"⁴, shifting attitudes about remote work, and a 20% uptick in both pet adoptions⁵ and outdoor recreation⁶ collectively reflect an altered relationship with the former sense of self, of home, and with the sense of where and how one fits in the world.

I read *Safe* as tragedy, and compare late-pandemic perspectives to Carol's experiences and fate. *Safe* has been read as horror⁷, as melodrama⁸, as an AIDS parable, and as a critique of capitalist environmental destruction⁹—all of which are true readings in different contexts—but I'm reading it as a cautionary tale about failing to desire a meaningful life, and failing to achieve true self-love. Despite the shared signifiers of pandemic life and Carol's odyssey into environmental illness, late-pandemic trends of thoughtful life decisions among the middle class reflect an optimistic alternative to the tragic fate of Carol White in *Safe*.

Reading *Safe* as Tragedy

In 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic in the US, critics in *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker* revisited *Safe* via COVID-19 themes for the similarities between 2020 pandemic life and the film's depiction of environmental illness, Carol's physical reaction to fumes, chemicals, and industrial elements in her posh suburban world. Like us, she wears a face mask, and shelters at home. The film's long takes and long shots suggest that Carol's illness, from headaches to nosebleeds to coughing fits, panic attacks, and seizures are also, in part, a reaction to her vacuous daily routines in a world that engulfs her. Austin K. Collins writes, "her life does seem to be almost entirely composed of errands: organizing and overseeing house repairs, attending to the dry cleaning, keeping tabs on the help, all while keeping fit and maintaining some vague shell of a social life. First-world problems, yes, and that is the point." Carol's bland life, even her non-life-threatening maladies make for soft tragedy, but it is the absence of an inner person that really drives this tragedy. David Roth writes, "Even before she contracts the mysterious illness that will send her reeling and shrinking away from this life, Carol floats through her days—and, in a white silken robe on sleepless nights, through her icy, Kubrickian home—like a ghost." "Ghost," however, doesn't capture the full spectrum of Carol's empty soul. It's as if her *hamartia*, or

⁴ See Richter; also Tappe.

⁵ See Bogage.

⁶ See Wagner.

⁷ Wes Craven notoriously called *Safe* "the scariest film of the year so far" as noted by Haynes in Blu-ray commentary.

⁸ See Jacobowitz and Lippe; see also Zarzosa.

⁹ See Hosey.

tragic fatal flaw, is implicit in her emotional makeup, or, as Brian Marks wrote in 2020, “Carol is a woman who doesn’t know how to desire.” Haynes himself, in an interview with Scott Tobias, refers to Carol’s lack of interiority, and how Julianne Moore portrayed the character, nonetheless, with believable humanity: “[This] role was so transparent. And I was impressed with how she could make somebody who is that much of a cipher into somebody who you believe is a real person, but not over imbuing it with too much editorializing or second guessing, or kind of winking to the audience.” The subtle earnestness in Moore’s portrayal, and in Haynes’s leveraging Carol in every scene as part of the *mise en scène*, are key to reading *Safe* as tragedy, rather than satire or irony, where the heroine would register differently.

Northrop Frye provides a definition of tragedy as a genre, as he described it in *Anatomy of Criticism*, a mid-twentieth century structuralist reading of canonical texts. Frye begins by leveraging Aristotle’s definition of tragic *mimesis*, representation, primarily through plot elements such as *peripetia*—a sudden reversal of circumstances—usually accompanied by recognition, and *pathos*, which is an act involving destruction or pain. He locates the source of tragic effect in plot, or *mythos*, which revolves around an extremely visible hero, a character superior in degree to others, but not to her environment. When the tragic heroine falls, she falls from a high place, the top of the wheel of fortune, and in falling becomes isolated from the society over which she once reigned in some capacity. When *peripetia*, or a turn of events occurs, it is accompanied by a self-recognition of some fatal error that the tragic hero has made to bring this turnabout. The error involves a flaw or violation of moral law, but it’s an act made of the hero’s free will. As the hero falls, she inspires in the audience a catharsis affected as pity or fear. From Hamlet to Willie Loman to even Jesus Christ, the tragic hero, as a varied cultural agent, inspires audience emotional response and reactions through tradition-tempered pathways.

Starting with the heroine herself, Carol White is indeed extremely visible—Julianne Moore is in virtually every scene, and when she is briefly not on camera we are in her point of view. While focusing on the cinematography of the film—long takes, long shots, relatively few close ups—Roddey Reid argues that:

Haynes, far from attempting to put viewers at a “safe” remove from the temptations of facile audience identification, draws on our own willingness to be fascinated by [Carol White] and *to identify with* even the most contrived, artificial, or flat characters and environments while at the same time denying us the privilege of ever understanding them. (32-33, emphasis mine)

And this identification is key to a tragic narrative, even if there’s a gap in our understanding of her motives. Her wealth and ensconced life situate Carol in a high place. In the scenes featuring a drive up to her suburban home, we pass new construction of Spanish-style McMansions, and

then, on her street, several posh homes. Hers is the largest and the only one we see with an automated gated driveway—she has the fanciest house. Austin Collins has commented that her social position, however, makes her even more vulnerable: “Her entire lifestyle fails her. A veritable jungle of greenery surrounds the Whites’ home; every room in their house feels both alienatingly spacious and as safe and secure as bubble wrap. . . . [You] get a real feel for the ways this upper-class life of Carol’s feels cordoned off. A violation of the norms of her life has that much more impact.” Carol is superior to others in her socioeconomic station, she will be falling from the top of the wheel of fortune. Additionally, her individuation from her community as a lightning rod is reinforced by her physical attributes as a trophy wife. Although she is often among her cohort of well-kept fellow homemakers, Carol stands out from them as particularly striking in her plastic appearance, as well as in other nuanced ways. Although her friends look and live similarly to her, they are thoughtful about their lives in ways Carol cannot achieve. At the gym after aerobics class, she listens as two of her friends, Anita and Barbara, converse:

Anita: I just eventually found the whole twelve-step thing was like another form of addiction that I was—

Barbara: That’s exactly what this book is saying . . .

Anita: Yeah?

Barbara: Yeah. It’s about how to own your own life, you know, ‘cause it’s like, what he says is that we don’t own our own lives. We’re told what to do, what to think, but emotionally we’re not really in charge.

Anita: But I think that with exercise and diet and healthy foods you can really—

Barbara: —I just think he’s very good on certain things . . .

Anita: Yeah . . .

Barbara: (To Carol) Have you read him, Carol?

Carol: No . . .

Barbara: He’s very good on certain things, emotional maintenance, stress management. (She stops for a moment, looking at Carol.) You know, Carol, you do not sweat.

Anita: Oh, I hate you.

Carol: (slightly embarrassed) I know, it’s true. (Haynes, *Safe*, 107)

Beyond Haynes’s clever metacommentary via the self-help message Barbara shares, we see here how Carol is not a full participant in a thoughtful or reflective life the way her friends are. And they bring her into the conversation only by enviously noticing how she is different, physically more “feminine” per the sexist codes that stigmatize sweaty women. In a later scene among her peers, at a baby shower when Carol is further along in her illness, they talk about her health while she is in the bathroom. That is the only shot in the entire film where Carol is not present,

but her health and looks are the topic of her peers' gossipy conversation. As the baby shower continues after Carol's return from the bathroom, they gather to watch the mom-to-be open the big present. Carol sits apart from the group, back a couple yards with a friend's young daughter, Elise, on her lap. Carol has a severe asthma attack that causes panic at the party. Her best friend Linda and another of the women run to her side and attempt to comfort her, but there's a strange lack of connection there, which reflects her isolation. In the Criterion Blu-ray commentary, Haynes says of this scene, speaking to Julianne Moore, "I wanted them to be, like, touching you, but not really touching you." Moore replies, "Yeah, they couldn't. Just barely making any contact." Haynes finishes by observing, "You're just so alone." Isolation from her society is Carol's *peripetia*, her reversal of fortune.

The slow-burn plot of *Safe* revolves around Carol's coming to an understanding of environmental illness while she falls into increasingly severe reactions to the toxins in her environment. Her quest shifts from maintaining the status quo in her materialistic but unsatisfying life, to seeking a solution for her mysterious illness, until she takes up residence at Wrenwood, a remote New Age retreat for environmental illness patients. As she proceeds she becomes more marginalized and separated from her society, from her family, and symbolically even from her fellow retreat residents. And a tragic plot must involve the tragic heroine being isolated, removed from society. Frye describes the tragic hero as "exceptional and isolated at the same time, giving us that curious blend of the inevitable and the incongruous that is peculiar to tragedy" (38). Carol is exceptional in her lack of desire, in her blankness, and this makes her perfectly adapted to her subservient role to the domineering men in her story. Her husband Greg (Xander Berkeley) loses his temper when her headaches get in the way of their sex life, or as he puts it, "No one has a fucking headache every night of the fucking week!" Her paternalistic and condescending family doctor (Steven Gilborn) loses his patience when she persists in her symptoms despite his failure to diagnose anything he understands through his tests and examinations. He recommends a psychiatrist, male, who stares her down like a cold-blooded interrogator. Even her stepson Rory (Chauncey Leopardi) treats her most often with a sort of casual irritation, but never with warmth or deference. She is exceptional in her emptiness, and incongruous in how profoundly well she fits into her assigned role as suburban wife and homemaker.

Carol fits in with the men in her story by virtue of her blankness, by their ability to inscribe on her the meaning and understanding that fits their world view. Frye writes that this sort of tragic hero experiences pathos primarily through exclusion:

The root idea of pathos is the exclusion of an individual on our own level from a social group to which he is trying to belong. Hence the central tradition of sophisticated pathos

is the study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world, between imaginative reality and the sort of reality which is established by social consensus. (39)

The imagined reality is that Carol, having achieved the American consumerist dream, should be satisfied, but her emptiness, and her sickness, belie a different inner world. Because she does not know how to desire, and has not learned how to love herself (which is her *hamartia*, her fatal flaw), she cannot avoid the tragic fall, the terminal pathos that awaits her just beyond the final frames of the movie.

After dead ends with conventional medicine, Carol takes matters into her own hands by following up on a flyer she sees on her gym bulletin board that reads: “Do you smell fumes? Are you allergic to the 20th century? Do you have trouble breathing? Do you suffer from skin irritations? Are you always tired?” She attends a seminar about environmental illness and learns there about the concept of managing her “load,” the level of exposure to the toxins in her environment and diet. Joining the masked and damaged fellow sufferers of environmental illness, (see Fig. 2), Carol is encouraged by having found others who suffer from headaches, blackouts, nausea, and even seizures from toxins in the environment. At another meeting she learns about the need to create an aluminum foil-lined ventilated space in her home, without carpet, with minimal textiles, and with no chemicals. In the vernacular of this subculture, by eliminating exposure to toxins Carol will “clear”, will reduce her load to zero, from which she can build back up her tolerance to chemicals and reenter her former society. But during a harrowing seizure at the dry cleaners, where exterminators are spraying for bugs, Carol is taken by ambulance to the hospital, where, again, conventional medicine denies her any useful diagnosis or treatment. She eventually ends up at Wrenwood, which is advertised in an infomercial she sees on the hospital room TV: “Safe bodies need safe environments in which to live. Nestled in the foothills of Albuquerque, the Wrenwood center describes itself as a nonprofit communal settlement dedicated to the healing individual.” While validating her environmental illness as a real condition and providing a toxin free space for Carol’s recovery, Wrenwood also provides a community of fellow residents in search of recovery.



Fig. 2. Mask wearers at environmental illness seminar. *Safe* Blu-ray DVD. Criterion Collection. 2014.

Carol's Wrenwood residency takes up the second half of the film. Here, she follows the cult-like dictums of modesty in dress, silent daytime meals where the men and women eat separately, communal sermons from the founder and leader Peter Dunning (Peter Friedman), group therapy sessions, and abstinence from sex, drink and drugs. Carol swallows the philosophical self-help pablum of the retreat's resident guru, Peter, with earnest conviction, or as much as she can muster from her hollowed soul. He preaches a New Age message that his followers' psychosomatic immune system weaknesses are related to their own world view, and that if they cultivate a positive outlook the world will be less toxic to their systems. Even here, in an environment removed from the post-industrial suburbs of the San Fernando Valley, Carol's condition worsens, and she ends up further isolated at Wrenwood. She moves into a windowless porcelain lined igloo and breathes from an oxygen tank that she drags with her wherever she goes on the compound. As she undertakes to fully participate in Wrenwood's self-love program, she continues in a spiral of unhealthy weight loss, and develops a lesion on her forehead, an index of her persistent physical demise. The last scene of *Safe* shows a depleted Carol, entombed in her solitary and spartan igloo, feebly speaking into the mirror as she has been advised to do by the director of Wrenwood, Claire (Kate McGregor-Stewart). Carol says to her reflection, a close up into the camera, "I love you. I really love you. I love you" (Fig. 1). Then, the shot lingers on her lost expression in the mirror, her forehead sullied by the lesion, her eyes puffy and red, and, after 20 long silent seconds, the film cuts to black and is over. All indications to this point are that her plot is a tragedy, her pathos evident in her worsening physical decay, her self-love affirmations

unconvincing. But unlike a completed tragedy, Carol's story doesn't reach its implied conclusion.

At film's end, Carol is still in a sort of unfinished physical and spiritual death spiral. Leo Bersani characterizes it like this:

Carol enacts a shedding of identities that is also a shedding of the film's subjects: the strongly legitimized identity of a middle-class female homemaker, her identity as a victim of industrial waste, her symbolic identity as an immune-damaged carrier of a fatal infection [AIDS], and finally, her particular (and particularly thin) psychic identity as a person. Paradoxically, it is Carol's stammering words of self-love at the end of the film that signal the shedding of a person who might be loved. There is no one there. (35)

So, while Aristotle and Frye map the tradition in tragedy as featuring pathos, most often death of the protagonist, for Carol the closing pathos is the death of her subjectivity.¹⁰

In his discussion of high mimetic tragedy Frye writes that it is "expressed in the traditional conception of catharsis. The words pity and fear may be taken as referring to two general directions in which emotion moves, whether towards an object or away from it" (37). And in the case of Carol White, audiences respond with fear more than pity. We want to put distance between ourselves and her—we are not her. But *Safe* refuses to provide catharsis. Frye continues, "pity and fear become, respectively, favorable and adverse moral judgement [. . .] In low mimetic tragedy, pity and fear are neither purged nor absorbed into pleasures, but are communicated externally, as sensations" (38). In *Safe*, each of Carol's episodes of environmental illness are communicated as sensations, be they asthma attacks, lapses of consciousness, bloody noses, a seizure—these inspire unpurged fear. If pity were the cathartic response to the singular scene in which Carol cries, on her first night in her cabin at Wrenwood, this is undermined by Ed Tomney's haunting score accompanying her solitary walk to her cabin. Once inside, an extreme long shot shows her standing in her screened in cabin from far enough away that even the roofline and scrub brush surrounds are in the frame. The music stops and Carol lurches into a standing, sobbing, cry, for a full thirty seconds, before she is interrupted by the Wrenwood director, Claire, from just outside the screen door. Carol stops her crying immediately and Claire enters the cabin, talking her through the moment by telling how she overcame her own environmental illness by repeating to herself hourly in the mirror, "I love you. I really love you." Carol's crying provides no catharsis and inspires no pity, but rather the scene leaves us with suspicion of the ethos of Wrenwood and Claire's domineering succor. Laura Christian has written that the film elicits "viewer sympathy without pity, criticism without facile

¹⁰ Mary Ann Doane writes about the lack of cathartic affect, "Pathos is not so much used as a tactic within the films of Todd Haynes ... as it is signified, without cynicism" (Doane 5).

condemnation” (112). Even if the catharsis we expect from tragedy is withheld, and if the mimesis of pathos stops short of portraying Carol’s ultimate demise, the tragedy remains nearly fully formed.

Haynes, in an interview with Nick Davis, speaks to that implied tragic ending, which he calls “false Sirkian” in reference to Douglas Sirk’s antecedent use of unconvincing happy endings in his films:

[That] false Sirkian ending. It just goes for a more sincerely compromised and sad ending, and an obvious sense of loss. But *Safe* does have one. It follows through with narrative expectations of Carol seeming to get better, but by the time the film ends, you have accrued so much information about Carol’s sad acquiescence to the laws of identity, and even the new rules of identity that she accepts at Wrenwood. For her to say “I love you” in the mirror should feel like something has resolved, but all the film language in *Safe* should be telling you that nothing is resolved.

That supports the tragic interpretation. “[The] tragic hero has normally had an extraordinary, often a nearly divine, destiny almost within his grasp, and the glory of that original vision never quite fades out of tragedy. ... The other reductive theory of tragedy is that the act which sets the tragic process going must be primarily a violation of moral law, whether human or divine” (Frye 210). The divine destiny might be Carol’s belief in an impossible formula for suburban bliss, her mistaken insistence that she’s “fine.” Based as it is on a sexist platform of banal subservience and empty consumerist triviality, Carol’s life has hollowed her soul and left her without the ability to desire anything different. This, of course, belies societal violation of several moral laws around worshipping the false god of material wealth, as well as the grotesque gender inequality portrayed in the film.

The depiction of Carol’s marriage to Greg illuminates the domestic arc of her tragic fall. Carol’s relationship with her husband begins in the first frame after the credits when they exit their parked Mercedes. Carol sneezes, Greg says “bless you,” and Carol says, “It’s freezing in here.” The film takes a beat looking at the empty parked car in the garage, then hard cuts to Greg and Carol in mid-missionary coitus, the overhead shot is a medium close up so that we can see Carol’s unsuffering but dispassionate expression throughout Greg’s silent convulsive climax. We learn here, less than three minutes into the film, that Carol’s marriage is not providing her sexual pleasure or romantic intensity. In the next scene Greg is leaving for work while Carol prunes roses in her front garden. He says affectionately, “look at that green thumb”—the roses are a bit droopy—and Carol says, “I wish.” He gives her a perfunctory kiss goodbye and reminds her to check on the sod delivery, which she says she’ll do. A delivery van pulls up and Carol says it may be the new couch. The mundane dialogue undercuts the imagery of the extravagantly

planted front gardens and ornate architecture of their house. In another scene Carol wakes up on the couch, alone, with a documentary on “deep ecology” playing on the television in the otherwise dark room. She goes upstairs and takes a pill in her bathroom, then sits on the edge of the expansive bed, turning to look at Greg’s sleeping body, curled up with his back to her. She goes outside then to her poolside garden. A haunting passive loneliness permeates these scenes.

A few scenes later, Carol and Greg sit at a restaurant dinner with his clients from work, where one of the clients tells a misogynistic joke about a woman getting a vibrator stuck in her vagina and going to the ER to have it removed. Carol is portrayed here as separated from her society: first, her hair, makeup, dress, and relative youth are mannequin-perfect compared to the other two wives at the dinner; second, Carol is spaced out, distant, while the other two, older wives at the table titter and bray at every pause in the piggish jokester’s crude story. When one of the clients’ wives notices Carol’s lack of a response to the joke’s punchline, she says, “Somebody doesn’t seem to like your joke, Ted.” And at this Greg utters a concerned, “Carol?” Carol looks both absent and panicked even though her hair, makeup, posture and dress are in perfect Stepfordian order. As she and Greg leave the restaurant, she apologizes and Greg is disappointed but understanding, saying, “Just, you’re overexerted I guess.” They walk from the restaurant slowly, arm in arm as one would with a sickly person, not with romantic heat. This scene with his clients is the beginning of Greg’s supportive but hangdog disappointment with Carol’s condition.

Among the many reasons *Safe* has gained wide recognition as a masterpiece is that Haynes refused to let his characters become clichés. Dennis Lim, writing about the film for *Criterion* in 2014 observed, “The film’s signal attribute is its deadpan ambiguity.” Greg is far from a model husband, but neither is he monstrous or unfeeling about Carol’s plight. As they walk from the restaurant he says, “Maybe the doctor can give you something for it.” The doctor is dismissive, gives Carol some ointment for a rash, tells her to stop the fruit diet she’s doing with a friend, and to lay off dairy. To stop eating dairy is severe advice because Carol is a self-proclaimed “milkacholic” who doesn’t even drink coffee, but takes milk as her singular indulgent comfort food¹¹. Even her most mundane comforts, then, are violated by paternalistic authority. But Greg, though he is a benefactor of paternalistic norms, remains loyal and understanding to Carol as she navigates her illness, despite his frustration.

Carol herself is oblivious to her second-class status in her marriage, and in her society. Her life is grotesquely unexamined, so much so that she fails to recognize the demise that her increasingly frequent episodes of asthma, panic attacks, headaches, and rashes portend. Northrop

¹¹ In “Health and safety in the home: Todd Haynes’s clinical white world,” Glynn Davis reads *Safe* as a critique of whiteness, whereby Carol’s milk addiction is aligned with her Wrenwood wardrobe (white), her last name, and her white igloo as the thematic chassis of the film.

Frye speaks to this lack of recognition as important to tragedy:

Tragedy seems to move up to an *Augenblick* or crucial moment from which point the road to what might have been and the road to what will be can be simultaneously seen. Seen by the audience, that is: it cannot be seen by the hero if he is in a state of hubris, for in that case the crucial moment is for him a moment of dizziness, when the wheel of fortune begins its inevitable cyclical movement downward. (213)

While we can see Carol develop a “dizziness” that seems unrelenting through the end of the film, her hubris is less apparent. It is not arrogance that prevents Carol from recognizing that an alternate life is possible for her. It is her lack of desire for any life particularly different from the one she is in. And perhaps this lack of desire is a way into a reading of Carol’s fatal flaw as hubris. If she is surrounded by characters who are trying, however morally lost they may be, to hold their socioeconomic station and she herself is merely going through the motions: is that hubris? Perhaps that is a forced reading. Instead, I would read Carol White as *pharmakos*, a scapegoat of sorts. Frye writes:

Irony isolates from the tragic situation the sense of arbitrariness, of the victim’s having been unlucky, selected at random or by lot, and no more deserving of what happens to him than anyone else would be. If there is a reason for choosing him for catastrophe, it is an inadequate reason, and raises more objections than it answers. Thus the figure of a typical or random victim begins to crystallize in domestic tragedy as it deepens in ironic tone. We may call this typical victim the *pharmakos* or scapegoat. . . . The *pharmakos* is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes, like the mountaineer whose shout brings down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence. (41)

While Carol is empty of desire, and markedly unaccomplished in self-love, she can also be read as a representation of a perfectly suited bourgeois wife who defers to her husband and who takes for granted her position in society, a guilty society. But her bourgeois suitability and deference to Greg stumble when her environmental illness interrupts their sex life. At bedtime, Greg stops recounting a story from his workday to comment on Carol’s newly permed hair, saying he likes it, and Carol says in a flat voice, “I’m glad honey,” and gets into bed but makes no eye contact. Greg, off camera says “sexy,” then paces around to the end of the bed, his body language reflecting that he’s figuring out that they won’t be having sex that evening. “How’re you feeling? Huh?” he asks. Carol looks up from her magazine and touches her temple, wincing. “I still have this, uhm, this head thing.” And Greg says, “Oh boy.” He turns and removes his watch. “Holy cow, what is going on here?” “Nothing.” “Nobody has a fucking headache every night of the

fucking week!” Greg says as he throws his watch into his pillow. He sits down on his edge of the bed, defeated, with his back to her (see Figure 4). From the initial coitus scene at the start of the film through this muted argument in bed, *Safe* depicts the absence of a truly romantic relationship in Carol and Greg’s marriage. Haynes’s staging of this story, with the long shots in particular, imply that the context is all important. These libidinous mismatches are a byproduct of the guilty society, an inescapable part of existence when the woman must live subserviently to her husband, when consumerist desire and a bedroom decorated in mirrors and showroom pastels have displaced physical chemistry.

Consumerist desire is just part of the guilty society in *Safe*. Her condition, environmental illness/multiple chemical sensitivity, is caused by various types of pollution, byproducts of runaway capitalism, the poisonous evidence of societal guilt. Roger Ebert located these themes in the film’s soundtrack:

You don’t always notice it, but during a lot of the scenes in *Safe* there’s a low-level hum on the soundtrack. This is not an audio flaw but a subtle effect: It suggests that malevolent machinery of some sort is always at work somewhere nearby. Air conditioning, perhaps, or electrical motors, or idling engines, sending gases and waste products into the air. The effect is to make the movie’s environment quietly menacing.

And the film also features a steady rattle of noise pollution from electronic media. Whenever Carol is at home or in the car there is always AM talk radio, television infomercials, or pop music on the radio¹². If Carol is empty inside, there are always voices and noises of the guilty society trying to fill that void, and the sounds are often toxic.

Carol’s marriage is further portrayed as a toxin in her life in the scene that picks up the morning after her bedtime quarrel with Greg. It begins by showing him finishing his morning bathroom routine by spraying on aerosol underarm deodorant and hairspray while he listens to a daunting traffic report about the clogged L.A. freeways (and scenes of freeway traffic are featured as haunting transitions elsewhere in the film, implying the guilty society). In her bedroom, aural and chemical toxins abound. After his toilet, Greg stands at the foot of the bed and Carol says, “I’m sorry honey,” and he says, “me too.” She stands and they embrace, then Carol begins to heave in what appears to be convulsive crying. Greg utters, “It’s okay,” but after a few seconds the heaves become more violent, and she pushes him away brusquely and vomits on the carpet. On the one hand we understand she may be responding to the film of routine chemicals Greg has applied to his body, but on the other hand her nauseous reaction to his embrace symbolizes her marriage’s foundational demise (see Fig. 3).

¹² See Christian for a deeper discussion of polyvocal soundtrack.



Fig. 3. Carol vomits during a hug from her husband. *Safe* Blu-ray DVD. Criterion Collection. 2014.

— 14 —

The scenes that follow portray the widening separation between Carol and Greg, and between Carol and her society. Sitting up in her bed one day, Carol is penning an inquiry letter to one of these groups when Greg comes in frustrated because he'd been calling to her and she had not responded. When he asks her what she is doing, Carol has a total lapse of comprehension and panicked confusion. Blubbering, she says, "Oh God what is this? Where am I? Right now?" And Greg, standing now in stupefied shock with his arms hanging limply at his sides, says gently, "We're in our house. Greg and Carol's house." This scene reflects the "dizziness" Frye refers to when the tragic hero fails to understand the wheel of fortune turning downwards. It may also be Greg's point of recognition that Carol's situation is more serious than he surmised, but it does not change his approach much. Greg is consistently an unquestioning agent of the patriarchy, as many feminist critiques have argued, and he infantilizes Carol in small habitual ways even as he supports her quest for a cure. However, Carol's descent into her illness and search for a cure intensifies her separation from Greg and her society. She sets up a safe space in her home where the carpet is covered with foil-lined panels, and she has an oxygen tank. Her illness becomes her singular focus, and when she meets her friend Linda for lunch that is all she can talk about. Her appearance changes as she becomes a full-time patient, no longer able to wear makeup, and at home she listens to a self-help environmental illness cassette on her Walkman™ while she takes a battery of vitamin supplements. Carol lives under the same roof as Greg but no longer shares a bed or bedroom.

Once Carol settles in at Wrenwood her separation from her family ossifies, as does her

separation from nature and society at large. She takes a solo walk on a nature path while she narrates a voice over of a simple letter she is writing to Greg and Rory, reporting that she'll be staying the "full amount" because she's doing a bit better, and the desert landscape is beautiful there. When Greg and Rory make a visit to Wrenwood they attend one of Peter's sermons where he speaks about how he no longer reads the newspapers or watches the news on TV because that negative energy can affect his immune system, and his flock should also not partake of the news, "Because if I really believe that life is really that devastating, that destructive, I'm afraid that my immune system will believe it too. And I can't afford to take that risk. Neither can you." He then leads the assembled group in his closing prayer, "We are one with the power that created us. We are safe, and all is well in our world." The congregants repeat the prayer in churchlike conformity. Greg and Rory sit quietly during this session, but their sidelong looks reflect cynical doubt at the message. This scene creates a sense of dread that the New Age dogma of Wrenwood is misguided, even if, as a viewer, I don't want to identify with Greg or Rory's perspective. Afterwards, the family walks back to her cabin. Greg carries her oxygen tank, the nostril tube strapped to her face, and he asks her if she thinks Wrenwood is working. She says she does, although we can see she is looking even thinner and unhealthier. The next day Carol approaches her new more isolated igloo quarters, walking arm in arm with Greg, then she stumbles in a near faint and takes several definitive steps away from him. He stops and asks if she's alright. Pausing a minute to get her balance, she says, "I think it might be your cologne." Hands on his hips and agitated, Greg says he's not wearing any. Maybe it's on his shirt, she says, and he sniffs his collar, shrugs, and kicks a small rock away in disgust. At this point, Greg himself is clearly among the toxins Carol's system can't withstand. He says, "Well, I guess we better get moving if we're gonna catch a plane. You gonna be okay?" And Carol says, "I'll be fine. It's just for a short time. I'm fine." Carol's denial is never more apparent than here, where she fails to recognize, as any tragic hero eventually does, her inevitable demise. Greg asks permission to hug her, and does so while her arms hang limply at her sides, one holding up her oxygen tank. In tragedy, after the fall, the hero normally has a moment of *augenblick*, recognition of what could have been but is now lost forever. But Carol's insistence that she's fine belies her inability to recognize that her former life, however undesirable, is nevermore. Her story ends before she ever recognizes that she's really not going to be fine, but the audience sees that she's doomed.

That is the last we see of Greg and Rory, and the next act of the film depicts Carol bonding, to a degree, with her Wrenwood cohort. She gets cajoled into making an awkward birthday speech during a particularly joyous evening meal that she had cooked with a fellow resident with whom she has a platonic flirtation going, Chris (James LeGros). Her speech reveals that she is learning the vernacular of Wrenwood, of Peter's preaching, but the unspoken and

obvious message is that interiority eludes her. It is after this evening that Carol speaks to the mirror, attempting to learn self-love, but a cipher cannot know love. Her marriage with Greg, despite their mutual loyalty, is fatally flawed, irretrievably mired in disempowerment and her washed out desire. In the Blu-ray commentary, Haynes says of Carol in the early scenes of the film that “She’s not connected to anybody,” that “she’s squished out of the frame,” that “she’s on the margins.” And on the same commentary, Julianne Moore says of the voice she used for Carol that she “wasn’t making any contact with my vocal cords.” Carol has been created as an empty presence in the suburban environment, a feminist nightmare of total capitulation to the demands of a rigged patriarchal society. In an interview with Oren Moverman, Moore speaks to how Carol has been formed by her society: “It’s about a person who is completely and utterly defined by her environment. Carol has been taught who she is supposed to be by what surrounds her. So when each item in her life starts to make her sick, she no longer knows who she is” (217). Building on this theme, critic Gaye Naismith reads *Safe*’s depiction of upper middle class White suburban society as guilty, and Carol’s lost perspective as inextricable from it.

The film investigates the extent to which we depend on distinctions between inside and outside and between self and other, both as a society and as individuals, in creating a sense of order and control and in maintaining coherent belief systems. While Haynes shows us how such distinctions are sustained, he is perhaps even more interested in situations and circumstances where these rule-of-thumb distinctions become muddled or can no longer be applied. [*Safe*] presents a number of “sites of confusion” where exteriority and interiority can no longer be clearly circumscribed. (Naismith 364)

This interior-exterior confusion is perhaps most profoundly portrayed via the well-documented feminist critique depicted through Carol’s remarkable passivity. To read Carol White’s story as tragedy, then, we must see her lost marriage and absence of a useful role in society as a catastrophic loss set in a guilty society. Carol hasn’t the capability to desire anything but the situation she has, so her dying or dead marriage reads as tragedy, or at least as ironic tragedy. She is hollow in her marriage, hollow among others, and hollow when she is alone making futile efforts at self-love.

Safe as a Late-Pandemic Looking Glass



Fig. 4. Bedroom mirrors reflecting a hollow marriage. *Safe* Blu-ray DVD. Criterion Collection. 2014.

— 17 —

Like many critics and film festival curators this decade, my interest in *Safe* derives from the parallels I see in pandemic life and the signifiers of Carol's quest for achieving a healthy distance from the environment that makes her sick. In the years since the pandemic began, there have been phases, particularly in the earlier months in 2020, when agoraphobic quarantine, suddenly quiet streets, and closed shops and restaurants found vast numbers of Americans sheltering at home, afraid of contact with others, fearful of contracting a mysterious and potentially deadly disease. The way families retreated into their "bubbles" reminds me, in some ways, of the way Carol seeks to manage her "load" and to establish a toxin free "safe space" where she can "clear." In the early pandemic bubbles people managed exposure, deciding which outsiders were good and necessary risks, figuring out who was cautious enough in their quarantine, masking, and hand washing practices to enter their bubbles. The 2020 critical reconsiderations of *Safe*, as inspired by the culture of fear, also came from a political time when Donald Trump was president. David Roth wrote in the *New Yorker* of Trump's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and its parallels with Ronald Reagan's negligent approach to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, when *Safe* is set. The political climate during and since the Trump years has marked the pandemic era with an intensified culture of division, where all politics have been identity politics, and everything from vaccination to complying with masking rules has been mired in polarized tension. From within that fraught vacuum prognosticators predicted a

collective letting go of restraint and tension when the pandemic ended.

As the first wave of coronavirus began to recede, the press was emphasizing how ready Americans were for a post-pandemic release. For example, in January 2021 Nicholas Christakis of the Yale Human Nature Lab, discussed a hedonistic new “roaring 20s” on CNN:

We’re gonna enter a post-pandemic period, which, if history is a guide, all of us who have been cooped-up, have been saving our money, ... people become more religious, more abstemious, more risk averse—all of these trends will unwind. And people will relentlessly seek out social opportunities in night clubs, and bars, and political rallies, and sporting events, and musical concerts and so on. There might [be] sexual licentiousness. People with a lot of pent up desire for social, that includes, of course, sexual interactions. More liberal spending, for example. [The] economy will boom and so on. So all of these sort of experiences that are now being constrained by the germ will reverse.

Of course, Christakis did not forecast the Delta or Omicron variants, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or the global economic impacts of that situation, nor did he anticipate the deeper reflection that many people are doing in response to the pandemic going on for more than two years. Looking back, the discussions of a hedonistic “roaring 20s¹³” fizzled and the conversation has moved towards deeper, more constructive and introspective post-pandemic changes, not hedonism but rather a reconsideration of foundational aspects of life like work, home, nature, and community¹⁴.

While Carol’s affliction makes her an isolated exception, while the world continues around her as she falls into intensified symptoms of environmental illness, Americans have experienced the COVID-19 virus as a community—isolated from society together, collectively. Having been through a few iterations of premature optimism that the pandemic was nearly over, the last two years and counting of pandemic life allowed many to re-evaluate their pre-pandemic lives, reflecting on what they’ve valued and appreciated during that time. In February 2020, Pew Research Center reported that a small majority of all Americans were typically trying to do two things at once, and 60% of adults said they sometimes felt too busy to enjoy life, even more so for parents with kids under 18 years-old¹⁵. The pandemic years have slowed things down. In February 2022, Pew reported that 64% of those working from home during the pandemic said that it made it easier to achieve a work-life balance and 78% said they’d like to continue working from home all or most of the time¹⁶. Although 60% of Americans have jobs that cannot be done from home, the change among those who have been able to do so reflects an awakening. The

¹³ See also Coyle, and Arnold-Forster.

¹⁴ See Stanton.

¹⁵ See Van Kessel.

¹⁶ See Parker.

“great resignation” reveals a broad rethinking of U.S. citizens’ relationship with their jobs, and the staying power of remote work is showing a changed relationship with home as a hybrid space where professional life can occur alongside domestic life. Carol, on the other hand, lost her community and left her home because of her peculiar illness, and found only cultish community among fellow environmentally ill sufferers at Wrenwood.

The state of marriages provides another point of entry in considering *Safe* as a pandemic looking glass. If Carol and Greg’s marriage is a casualty of her tragic illness, then, how does that compare with the pandemic’s effect on contemporary marriages? By contrast, a 2020 study conducted by the American Family Survey, reported that the share of married people ages 18-55 saying their marriage is in trouble declined from 40% in 2019 to 29% in 2020. Further, for most, the post-pandemic marriage is stronger than it was previously with a majority reporting both a deepened commitment to the marriage, and an even larger majority reporting that the coronavirus pandemic made them appreciate their partner more¹⁷. In general, more marriages in America have gotten stronger through the pandemic, not weaker. In another study, this one from sociology journal, *Socius*, the rate of both marriage and divorce within the five states sampled, were down during the pandemic¹⁸. This can possibly be taken as cause for comparative optimism, as another way of putting distance between Carol White’s marital demise and late-pandemic survival.

Contemporary members of the laptop class may not be saying “I love you” into the affirmation looking glass, but they might be reflecting like Carol at an earlier moment, when she asked, “Oh God, what is this? Where am I? Right now?” And although Carol’s question came to her in a moment of flustered and confused panic, evidence is showing that Americans are approaching the late pandemic as a time not for panic, but to thoughtfully reevaluate life choices—and options—around work, home, and desires for happiness. A *New York Times* focus group about the pandemic experience¹⁹, reported of millennials that, “Several said they quickly realized what they valued most in life when they found themselves working from home,” and they found that in general the younger professional constituency in the workforce feel empowered by the great resignation, that it empowered them to require a positive work environment, fair pay, and a stimulating environment for professional growth. In her *Washington Post* column, “‘Zero Regrets.’ Six months after quitting, these workers are thriving,²⁰” Karla Miller spoke with workers who left their jobs six months ago as part of the great resignation and found that most are happier in new positions or not working. Their situations have improved with better working hours, the ability to work at home, and more healthful lifestyles with exercise and

¹⁷ See Seifman.

¹⁸ See Manning and Payne.

¹⁹ See Rivera and Healy.

²⁰ See Miller.

family time as big factors. In a study published in December 2020, a large majority of adults were spending more time walking and gardening, and a smaller majority were spending more time watching wildlife and being alone outdoors.²¹ By comparison, in the singular scene where Carol is experiencing nature, walking alone on a trail at Wrenwood, her peaceful experience gets abruptly interrupted when she inadvertently walks too close to the road and a large truck careens past. This startles her and she runs away as best she can, but the incident triggers a setback for having been momentarily exposed to the exhaust. It's after this that Carol arranges to move into the porcelain-lined igloo. Her relationship with nature, like her relationship with suburban life, is a dead end.

I want to close this essay by considering a tertiary spectral character in *Safe* who haunts the margins of the Wrenwood retreat. Seen though the film's default extreme long shot, Lester walks in the distance across the open spaces of the compound in only two scenes. He is dressed in white pants and sweater, covered head to toe, his face beneath a balaclava hat and mask, his hands in black gloves. Lester's odd tiptoe gait makes him especially strange and mysterious, raising his knees very high with each step as if navigating muck in a sideways sort of locomotion, although he is moving across hardpan desert terrain. Carol first sees him while penning a letter home on the deck of her cabin. When she pauses to watch him pass in the distance, Peter approaches from behind and asks, "Is that Lester you're watching?" and when she asks after him, Peter says, "Lester is just. . . very, very afraid. Afraid to eat, afraid to breathe." The only other time we see Lester is after a subtly disturbing outdoor group therapy session at which Peter has gone around the group asking each individual to share how they are responsible for their ailment, how their attitude and perspective are what made them sick, and the scene closes with Lester shambling past in the distance.

If Lester represents the crippling distortions that fear can have on an individual, it seems Carol, before her fall, embodies a sort of delusional fantasy of being protected from risk. Agustín Zarzosa looks at Carol's sense of security, of safety, as a fantasy, a delusion:

[T]his fantasy does not result from a traumatic event in her life but lies at the foundation of what little life Carol has. As a result of this fantasy, her life becomes devoted to the creation of safe spaces, to the maintenance of privilege and contentment, to the exchange of pleasantries, and to the rule of triviality. The source of her illness cannot be localized because the fantasy of safety has become sutured into life, becoming almost synonymous with it. (60)

Zarzosa's read on safety as fantasy provides a provocative way of seeing the late-pandemic moment as one of possible reckoning. Those who have the option to do so are reevaluating their

²¹ See Morse.

life habits, even their relationship with coronavirus safeguards. As each citizen lets down their guard and navigates increasing their “load,” letting down masks in this space or that, and re-entering a changed society, they are being realistic. The sense of safety from coronavirus infection, at this point, is no longer sustainable as a fantasy nor as an easily achievable way of life. Americans are learning to live with pandemic risks in their midst instead of relying on a false sense of security. Rather than embracing a short-sighted fantasy of a new “roaring ‘20s,” they are rethinking the sense of home, and how that space is also a place for work. Rethinking the sense of community, of travel, and even of marriage and relationships. In short, the pandemic has trampled the fantasy of safety and provoked reconsideration of the idea of safety and of how lives can be shaped. Haynes too was thinking about incorrectly shaped lives when he conceived *Safe*, as he told Rob White in interview: “What interested me in *Safe* was how somebody could reach an ultimate place and [be] brought to a sense of consciousness, when they found themselves completely at odds with—constitutionally just in opposition to—that environment and who they thought they were supposed to be” (145-6).

In reading *Safe* as a cautionary tragedy for this late-pandemic time, I see Carol and Lester as two possibilities. Following Carol’s path, citizens fail to conceive for themselves a satisfying life connected to desires based on individual needs and goals. Continuing in the work-a-day go-go perspective that had engulfed so many in pre-pandemic times leads to Carol-like emptiness. Now, in late-pandemic times, as mask mandates lift and American society begins to discover what post-pandemic lives will look like, few want to be like Lester and remain fixated on the threat of infection to a point of social paralysis. There is a path forward, ideally one that retains some of the silver lining of quarantine life, some of the advantages of remote work, some of the connections with nature, and some of strengthening of committed partnerships, while rediscovering the pleasures of social life when risk of infection is not the focal point. Perhaps the point is not to indulge in a hedonistic roaring ‘20s where Americans party to forget themselves, but rather to savor the awakened, thoughtful, deeper satisfaction of being connected to their station in life and to appreciate the re-emerging communities they’ve been missing.

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