

Reardon, Tiffani

Presentation Paper

The Line of Beauty by: Alan Hollinghurst

9 April 2014

Where is the line?

In our time, people break moral rules all the time. We often hear phrases like “there is a fine line between sexy and slutty,” and “don’t cross that line.” The word “line” itself holds great significance and several different meanings. In *The Line of Beauty* by Alan Hollinghurst, there are several “lines,” each crossing a metaphorical line, begging the question: was there ever a line drawn to be crossed at all? As evidenced in the language describing each line, there was none. In the world of *The Line of Beauty*, there were no moral lines drawn, therefore making it no big deal when they would have been crossed.

Throughout the book, the protagonist, Nick, and his lover for some of it, Wani, are constantly doing lines of cocaine. Most people would picture someone doing drugs, especially snorting cocaine, as rather disgusting, specifically what comes to my mind is someone who is always sniffing, hasn’t showered, and looks like a modern-day junkie. But Nick and Wani aren’t like that, in fact, the narrator even goes as far as to describe the preparation of cocaine in a beautiful way that almost makes you look past the thing being described: “But a line wasn’t feasibly resisted. He loved the etiquette of the thing, the chopping with a credit card, the passing of the tightly rolled note, the procedure courteous and dry...” (216). Here the narrator, from Nick’s point of view, describes the preparation of a line of cocaine as almost beautiful; specifically the word “etiquette” makes it sound high-class and fancy, and the word “courteous” makes it sound kind and helpful.

Being that the book is about gay men in the 80's, it is expected that there would be in-depth descriptions of men, by men. What one wonders though is, where did people then differentiate between the beauty of the homosexual man described by a man and the beauty of the heterosexual man described by a woman? The book itself doesn't differentiate. Because the narrator is third-person limited, we see only what Nick sees and believes, and because he is gay, his point of view is simply that men are beautiful: "He saw the long muscles of his back shifting in its sleep grip, and then, as Leo hunkered on his heels and his loose jeans stood away from his waist, the street lamp shining in on the brown divide of his buttocks and the taut low line of his briefs" (35-36). Here the narrator makes the description of Leo's body sound poetic, luring, and beautiful. It almost makes the reader forget that homosexuality was hardly accepted at that time, even while legal.

Catherine, a particularly interesting character, is a habitual cutter at least in the beginning of the book. And while Nick worries when he notices her scars, he nowhere near reacts the way one would expect: "...when Nick first met her he found himself glancing tensely at her arms. On one forearm there were neat parallel lines, a couple of inches long, and on the other a pattern of right-angled scars that you couldn't help trying to read as letters..." (6-7). Here, instead of thinking about the pain she might have been in, or what drives her to do that to herself, he thinks about the letters the lines spell out. It makes cutting seem almost normal and as if it is just something to be accepted.

These lines, that would normally have been crossed had they been in another time or book, were completely acceptable in the context of this book. Cocaine is beautiful, gay beauty is fine, and cutting is something to question, but not really worry about. There was no line crossed because the line was never drawn for these characters.