

(This essay analyzes Marsha Norman's *Getting Out*.)

### The Influence of Sociology in *Getting Out*

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Sociologists use the term “deviance” to refer to the violation of rules and norms in any given society. This deceptively simple definition leads to a specific sociological perspective on deviance, which sociologist Howard Becker identifies this way: “It is not the act itself, but the reactions to the act, that make something deviant” (Henslin 135). In other words, society’s reaction to a deviant act determines a person’s level of deviance. Unfortunately, the label of “deviant” often results in ostracism from society, thus decreasing an individual’s possibility for reform. *Getting Out* by Marsha Norman illustrates the infinite complications that affect an individual’s struggle to reform. Although numerous sociological theories apply to Arlene’s struggle, the labeling theory best explains the difficulties associated with her reformation.

This labeling theory claims that the labels people are given affect their own and others’ perceptions of them. These perceptions channel a person’s behavior either into deviance or into conformity. The labeling theory provides insight into Arlene’s possibility for reform. Arlene, the main character in *Getting Out*, strives to redeem herself after being released from prison. In her search for a better life, Arlene counters a multitude of obstacles that hinder her reformation. The majority of Arlene’s obstacles occur as a result of negative labels she has been given. For example, Arlene’s mother provides no emotional or financial support because she believes Arlene is incapable of change. Arlene’s mother demonstrates her lack of support by repeatedly referring to her daughter as Arlie, Arlene’s former self. Arlene’s protest that “They don’t call me Arlie no more. It’s Arlene now” never affects her mother’s behavior (Norman 1755). By not granting Arlene’s request, her mother promotes the return of Arlie. When Arlene attempts to discuss different types of employment, her mother laughs at the suggestions. Arlene recognizes that certain jobs are not available to her because she has a prison record, but her mother’s critical attitude ultimately reinforces the “ex-convict” label.

The “ex-convict” label also influences Arlene’s family life. Arlene tries to make amends with her family by asking to come visit for Sunday lunch. Arlene’s mother immediately rejects the request, but provides the excuse that “Sunday is my day to clean house now” (1758). However, the actual reason Arlene’s mother does not want her to visit stems from the fact that she is no longer welcome at home. Arlene’s mother states, “Don’t want nobody like that in my house. I still got two kids at home. Don’t want no bad example” (1758). Arlene’s mother clearly feels that Arlene does not have a positive influence on the family; therefore, she should not be allowed to spend time at home.

In addition to the “ex-convict” label, Arlene receives the label of “whore” from her mother. When Arlene’s mother discovers Bennie’s hat, she automatically assumes that Arlene has returned to her old lifestyle of prostitution. Arlene explains that Bennie is a guard that volunteered to drive her to Kentucky, but her mother does not believe that any man would “drive a girl 500 miles for nuthin” (1761). Arlene’s plea that she “ain’t like that no more” fails to convince her mother. Her mother says, “Oh you ain’t. I’m your mother. I know what you’ll do” (1761). These harsh words arouse feelings of hostility and hurt in Arlene. The fact that her own

mother does not believe she can change greatly contributes to the difficulty of Arlene's reform.

Another character who doubts Arlene's reformation is Bennie. Initially, Norman portrays Bennie as a caring, considerate man who truly wants to help Arlene. However, in Arlene's flashbacks, the reader observes the negative labels that Bennie uses to describe the former inmate. For example, when Arlie is in prison, Bennie states that she is a "screechin wildcat" (1778). Bennie's "wildcat" label arouses Arlie's temper, thus resulting in increased "animal-like" behavior. The prison system cannot expect rehabilitation as long as system workers, like Bennie, refer to the inmates as animals. The fact that Bennie dwells on Arlene's past is an additional factor that prohibits her reform. Similar to Arlene's mother, Bennie continuously focuses on the person Arlene used to be rather than the person she is striving to become. Bennie reminds Arlene that "there ain't nobody can beat you for throwing plates" (1747). He appears to be extremely proud of Arlie's violent behavior, and he finds it necessary to frequently remind her of these "accomplishments." Perhaps Bennie refuses to accept Arlene's change because he feels in control of Arlie's actions. Bennie's attempt to rape Arlene is a prime example of his need for power. The attempt also shows that Bennie does not think Arlene is on the same level as other women. He sees her as "wildcat" that can only be subdued by force. Bennie's behavior also suggests that he applies the "whore" label to Arlene. Although Arlene does not act like Arlie, Bennie feels that she is sexually available to him because she was once a prostitute. Ironically, only when Arlene labels Bennie as a rapist does he stop the attempt. The "rapist" label forces Bennie to realize that he is no different from the inmates he previously guarded. Arlene convinces Bennie that she "ain't Arlie" anymore, and he responds, "No, I guess you ain't" (1768). Bennie's acknowledgment of Arlene's change is a crucial turning point because it results in the elimination of the "whore" label.

In contrast to the negative labels imposed by Bennie and Arlene's mother, the chaplain and Ruby provide Arlene with positive emotional support. The chaplain initiates Arlene's reform by convincing her that, despite others' opinions, she is a good person. His advice allows Arlene to visualize a better life for herself. Ruby, Arlene's next-door neighbor, encourages her to concentrate on rebuilding her life. Ruby understands Arlene's situation because labels that apply to Arlene, such as "ex-convict" and "whore," have also applied to her. When Arlene considers resorting to her old lifestyle, Ruby warns her of the adverse consequences. If Arlene regresses back into the role of Arlie, prostitution will become her sole source of income. Ruby tells Arlene that she can wash dishes to pay the rent, or "spread your legs for any shit that's got the ten dollars" (1783). Ruby's harsh statement reveals the importance of self-respect in comparison to material objects. Ruby also plays a crucial role in Arlene's acceptance of Arlie, her former self. She reminds Arlene that it is acceptable to love Arlie because "You can still love people that's gone" (1785). The primary message Ruby tries to convey to Arlene is that she has to accept her old self in order to become a new person. Ruby's comforting wisdom motivates Arlene to ignore the negative labels and forgive herself for the past.

Although the "deviant" label applies to Arlie's actions, Arlene shows that her new lifestyle overrides the negative impact of the label. Despite her mother's and Bennie's opinion, Arlene's behavior is not consistent with their labels. Arlene's decision to confide in Ruby provides sufficient evidence of her strong desire to reform. Because Arlene accepts her past, she has made the first step in improving her life. Despite society's continuous discrimination, Arlene's newly found inner strengths allow the reader to feel optimistic that she can adapt to a crime-free life.

## Works Cited

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