

Lawn and Order: A Conceptual Analysis of the American Lawn

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When one thinks of the lawn they probably imagine the emerald green turfs contained from fence to fence all neighboring identical ones all lined up in a cul de sac. The White House lawn is a perfect example of a “perfect” lawn (Kelly, 2019). The building that houses the President of the United States is surrounded by a beautifully manicured lawn; An exemplar for all Americans as to what they should strive for in their own lawns. The American telos, to craft a carpet of lush green lawn seems to be the goal treasured by all Americans. This may seem rash to say that man has become obsessed with the idea of a lawn, but grass has become one of the most irrigated crops. There are 100,000 acres and 1 million gallons of water dedicated to lawns per week every summer according to the Alliance for Water Efficiency (2017). This shows that much effort and resources have gone into crafting the lawn in a certain way. The way a lawn should look has been a long-accepted truth that has been enforced for years. Societal pressure and laws have forced most lawns into a set perimeter. In 1987, a man was charged with three misdemeanors and fined \$30,000 simply for filling his yard with wildflowers (Williams, 1997). Even after he was charged, the neighborhood forced him out and held a block party celebrating his exile. This is just one example of the countless out there of the restrictive nature of suburbs. Homeowners Associations around the United States impose rules limiting what citizens can do with their own lawns. Just as lawns were once used by the wealthy to exalt their status, they are still today used as a way to control. There is a problem with the current definition of the lawn that doesn’t consider its economic, political, and social perspective.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Lawns originated in Europe and unlike today they served a purpose outside of aesthetics. Planet Natural Research Center wrote in an article how lawns originated from Middle English. The first lawns were called laundes which referred to an opening in an area of land surrounded

by trees and were first described as the plains around castles in order to see approaching armies (Planet Natural Research Center, 2018). Lawns have origins in Africa and Europe for similar reasons. Gene Caballero, co-founder of GreenPal, shares about the use of the lawn in Africa in 1100. The Lawns “allowed villagers and hunters to see danger approaching from far away, whether it be lions or an attacking tribe” (Caballero, 2021). Both these articles show how shorter grasses provided an advantage to people back then. This use of the lawn also elevated the lawn as something more than just grass and dirt. The trend of shorter grasses stayed as people began to use clearings in land for gardens or for livestock to graze on. It was not until the 12th century that lawns would be used for recreational purposes. Caballero and Planet Natural Research Center also discuss the turn in which lawns became used for field games such as golf and lawn bowling. Scotland was a prime playground for lawn bowling, because of its open grasslands (Caballero, 2021). Lawn bowling, Golf, and cricket all became popular sports by commoners and were played intensively. So intensively that lawns and bowling greens, which was the name for stretches of land used in lawn bowling, came to America with the colonists. Planet Natural Research Center discusses how Scottish immigrants fleeing Europe brought their love of lush grass with them (2018). Lawn Bowling was so popular that there are 12 cities in the U.S. that commemorate this ancient way to use the lawn. Once again, lawns became symbolic of more than the grass and further began to mean something. Along the same time, commoners used lawns for recreation, nobles and kings employed them for aesthetic purposes. “In the 16th Century Renaissance, lawns were deliberately cultivated by the wealthy in both France and England” (Planet Natural Research Center, 2018). Wealthy landowners had both the land and the money for gardeners to landscape their lawns into beautiful gardens. Around this time, manors and estates became popular, and owning land for purely aesthetic purposes instead of survival

became a major symbol of excess wealth and power. Therefore, this time in history marks the first time lawns served a purpose completely separate from survival, only there to flaunt wealth. In this way, lawns began to take on a more abstract meaning, much like the lawns of today.

The lawns of today first took shape in Levittown which was the first suburb. These were built by Abraham Levitt and his sons and from 1948 to 1952, they built 6,000 houses and each came with a lawn for the homeowners (Marino, 2014). In an effort to minimize homelessness, the U.S. government made housing more affordable and supplied citizens with this style of housing. These efforts extremely popularized lawns as now most citizens had one and alongside it, rules for that lawn. Rules such as a mandated height and what homeowners could display in their lawns were some of the first. (Planet Natural Research Center, 2018). Propaganda promoting the style of a green, short lawn also began to spread around this time. Newsletters supporting the idea of “thick green carpet of turfgrasses, watered, fertilized, and kept regularly mown,” began to be created (Cristina et al., 2005). The government produced documents such as the brochure created by L.C. Corbett instructed others on how to create their lawn. L.C. describes the characteristics of the lawn, fertilizers, soils, watering, shrubs and trees, and many more ideas for homeowners (Corbett, 1906). This pamphlet was made in 1906 and was mass-produced. This idea of the lawn would become more achievable with the introduction of mechanical lawnmowers that were affordable by most middle-class families which made the “perfect” lawn more achievable. At this point, lawns had come from a place where only wealthy landowners could afford to make them pristine to the point where now it is expected to have it.

Nowadays, the lawn still has these set rules and boundaries that control what homeowners can do. Laws prevent homeowners from truly taking control of their lawn and others are trapped due to set social standards. Stephen Williams writes about just how much

society controls a lawn. In his article “I fought the lawn and the lawn won” he describes a man who filled his lawn with wildflowers and was charged with three misdemeanors and fined \$30,000. This was not his only punishment. Neighbors stripped his lawn of the flowers and a “vigilante” used his BB gun to scare away any birds that tried to use the man’s bird feeder (Williams, 1997). Paul Robbins writes of a similar situation that occurred in Ohio. An ambitious woman who stopped mowing her lawn and replaced it with saplings was harassed and had her lawn destroyed (Wainwright, 2010). These examples show how society has impacted the individual’s right to do what they wish with their own land. These examples also explain Andrew Brooks and Robert A Francis’s view of lawns as “very public-private spaces.” They argue that although the lawn is private property and in theory, anyone should be able to do whatever they want with it within the law, it also displays the person who lives there. The lawn is the boundary to the home and shows off to the neighborhood who they are as a homeowner.

Alternative lawns are a term used to describe lawns that stray from the traditional short, green, picket fence view (Brooks and Francis, 2019). This can be as simple as a lawn full of wildflowers to a lawn that lacks any natural aspects at all. An artificial lawn is a term used to describe a lawn that is made up of synthetic polymer (plastic) grasses. Andrew Brooks and Robert A Francis wrote an article discussing those who take part in this new trend. Andrew Brooks is a Senior Lecturer in Development and Environment in the Department of Geography. Dr. Robert Francis has a Bachelor's in Science and a Ph.D. in geography from the University of Birmingham. These make them qualified to discuss this new trend of artificial lawn people. The researchers claim that this new trend is increasingly becoming popular and employ a netnographic analysis in order to gather a consensus about the opinion and to uncover more about artificial lawns. The researchers determined from their analysis of forums on a website

called www.mumsnet.com that the new trend has gotten some traction. Some support this new trend and entertain the idea of making the grass as fake as the ornaments, others disapprove. This fact is also true for many other deviations from traditional lawns. Social issues regarding the lawn and what it should be are rampant in today's discourse on lawns. Francis and Brooks write in their article about how lawns have become an elitist symbol and the Planet Natural Resource Center would argue that it always has been. Although a lawn seems to be the domain of the homeowner, individuality and creativity are stifled by society, politics, and economics. In my research, I was able to discover that lawns have become symbolic of something more than just grass and dirt. They have a deep history and continue today to spread their influence. However, one thing lacking in the discourse is a definition of the lawn in consideration of these economic, social, and political lenses. Understanding the lawn in this context would provide an explanation of why this practice continues to flourish.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

Common methods for humanities projects include less quantitative data methods and are more individualized. Humanities is about studying the nature of humans and my project is examining how humans have given meaning to the lawn. Methods like conceptual analysis and phenomenology are used often in projects dealing with philosophy. Conceptual Analysis, which I used, is commonly used by philosophers and is used in order to derive a better understanding of concepts. The University of Southern California describes it as a method dating back to the ancient philosopher, Plato. Conceptual Analysis is used to “understand the meaning of an idea or concept” (USC, 2000). In this paper, lawns are viewed as an abstract concept rather than a fundamental, tangible object. Lawn, in this case, not only represents the grass and dirt but also how humans interact with it. The University of Southern California also identifies another use of

conceptual analysis that helps further understand that. Conceptual Analysis can also be used to “determine how that idea or concept relates to other philosophical problems” (USC, 2000). I arrived at this method because of its dual functionality. Not only did I analyze the lawn as a concept, but be able to break it down and understand it within the context of our economy, society, and politics. This data would provide a step closer to understanding why Americans continue to follow this philosophy.

In order to apply a conceptual analysis to the American Lawn, I created a platonic dialogue resembling one of Platos. Platonic Dialogue is a form of dialogue created by Plato that was created in order to analyze concepts and understand them better in the fourth century. Platonic dialogues are described as "a discussion process during which a facilitator promotes independent, reflective, and critical thinking" (Koba and Tweed, 2009). In Meno, a dialogue by Plato, Socrates discusses the concept of virtue with the titular character, Meno. In the dialogue, Meno asks Socrates what is virtue which leads them to a path of discovering what it truly is in the hope that the reader will also think and reflect just as Meno does. Plato’s works are praised for their ability to do such. Spurring readers to philosophical activity is the primary purpose of the dialogues. Constance Meinwald has a Ph.D. in Princeton's Classical Philosophy program and she writes in an article in Britannica that “Spurring readers to philosophical activity is the primary purpose of the dialogues” (Meinwald, 2000). This shows how respected Platonic Dialogues are in the field of philosophy and how they will be helpful in discussing the lawn as a concept. The lawn is a well-known concept and I plan to further develop it within the reader, so that they may get a better understanding of it.

THE DIALOGUE

Plato's "Meno" inspired the dialogue that I created. Rather than evaluating virtue, my dialogue evaluates the lawn through a social, economic, and political lens. The dialogue is called "Plantonic Dialogue" which is a pun on the word platonic. Throughout the dialogue, there are multiple puns used that harken back to Plato's dialogues which used humor in order to keep the audience invested in the story. In Sarah Jansen's article called "Plato on Laughing at People," she claims that Plato's "dialogues are a mimesis of contemporary people, touching on plebian topics in colloquial language, often for the sake of political critique" (Jansen, 2019). Plato implored humor into his dialogue to make them understandable to the people at the time and discuss such topics and that is why I have mixed in many puns alongside my dialogue. The dialogue is called "Plantonic Dialogue" and the name of the podcast within is called "A Lawn Dialogue." Both are puns harkening to the nature aspect of lawns. Even the characters of the dialogue's names are puns relating to something to do with lawns, Mark Gardener and Shane Reed. Later on humor takes on a more important purpose as when Mark finally understands what a lawn is in the dialogue he uses a pun. The dialogue then ends with a joke.

The characters in my dialogue are Mark Gardener who represents Meno or the reader. He is the inquisitive asker of questions and through the dialogue, the reader can see him come to some conclusions and do the same. In the beginning, Mark is shown to be ignorant just like Meno. His constant questioning is meant to represent the reader's inquiries about lawns. The only other character is Shane Reed who plays the role of Socrates. He prompts thinking and prosecutes Mark in order to help him and the reader understand the concept. One thing that differs between the dialogues is their setting. Plato takes place in the time period when he lived and elements of the dialogue are seen in it. Socrates uses a nearby slave boy to help Meno understand something which is one example of it. My dialogue takes place in the same time

period I write it. The dialogue is designed to be a podcast script in which Mark and Shane host a podcast and on it discuss the question: What is a lawn? Throughout it, they reveal more about how the lawn does have economic, social, and political connotations.

SOCIAL

The dialogue discusses many social aspects of the lawn. The first line of the dialogue is “He did WHAT with his yard,” which is not only an effective way to start the dialogue by discussing the general focus but also reveals a very important aspect of the lawn. It represents the commentary neighbors have on others' lawns which is also seen when Shane talks more about his own lawn. In the beginning, Mark and Shane begin by discussing lawn trends that are popularized in society. The audience also learns that Shane has one of these examples of an alternative lawn. He chooses not to mow his lawn and chooses to grow wildflowers in it. His stray from the traditional point of view is an example of a bigger issue. How others can judge your lawn. Shane says, “I’ve checked my local laws and I’ve found what I’m doing is allowed where I live, but this doesn’t stop the passersby from giving their opinion on it.” In this line, he shows how passersby and his neighbors despise what he does with his lawn. This also represents another point Shane goes on to make when he mentions the history of the lawn. On both occasions, he discusses their elitist quality and how they were dominated by a certain demographic. In the 1950s, it was white males who dominated society and therefore, the lawns. This mirrors the 1600s when royalty dominated society they controlled the lawns. This still continues today, with those who are higher in society controlling the lawns.

POLITICAL

The government is arguably one of the most powerful entities in modern society and therefore, as previously mentioned, has the most influence on lawns. Even looking back to the

1600s, the royalty was the government and they created laws that forced lawns into a certain way and that still stands to this day. Shane mentions many unnecessary laws, such as laws that govern “what you can grow in your own yard, what height you have to keep your grass, and even a sort of squatter’s rights for lawns.” In this, we see just how political lawns are. There are Laws judging innocent things homeowners can put on their lawn which is meant to be their own private property. This contradicts this belief in private property. In the dialogue, Shane even says that the lawn is a “pretty public-private place” in which politics has some hand in. With laws that punish homeowners come fines and this leads to the next lens lawns are in.

ECONOMY

The economic lens can be seen as long with the Political and Social. In the 1600s the royalty created lawns and oppressed society, due to their wealth. Even in the 1950s, wealth played a key role in allowing these lawns to come into existence. Levitt sold these homes for cheap to incoming soldiers. This was also as Mark says “consumerism became a term used to describe spending...” An influx of money made keeping lawns easier to handle and match this current view of the lawn. Money continues to be a very important factor in keeping it that way. Fines make sure that others do not cross this line which requires money. In a similar way to society, lawns have become elitist in the economy as well and were always.

CONCLUSION

In this work, lawns are evaluated as an abstract concept with a view of the lawn as an entity in an economic, political, and social. The platonic dialogue I created aims to show the lawn in this view. Although it is limited by my own interpretation and understanding of it, it still achieves its goal of presenting the dialogue as something social, economic, and political perspectives. The dialogue is meant to be understandable by most audiences so that they can also

gain an understanding of a new view of the lawn. This work should inspire reflection in the audience so that they can come to their own conclusion while also showing that the lawn does have these connotations. Understanding more about an entity that is unarguably taken over America allows society to understand more about itself and gives a more accurate definition to an entity that plagues so much of it today.

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