
Brokeback Mountain: The Broken Hearts Of Men

Brokeback Mountain (2005) is an extraordinary double-protagonist film in Hollywood that has broken hearts, touched hearts and given hope to so many people through this “unique and universal love story” – to quote director Ang Lee. The two main characters involved in a homosexual relationship are shown as tough-men cowboys conforming to hegemonic masculinity. As they get more and more attached to each other, they continuously build their masculine identities by going through their inner selves again and discovering the dormant side of their masculinity.

This essay aims to examine how the masculine identities of the two protagonists disrupted and created a shift in rethinking the traditional representation of men in Hollywood films, while also exploring the themes portrayed in Brokeback Mountain through its relevant context, subtext and the analysis of the film techniques and film criticism, particularly on the masochism and narcissistic themes presented by the main characters.

Susan Faludi, a feminist who wrote *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man* (1999), presents that the “crisis of masculinity” was a disastrous moment in history. She argues that it is the mass media that created and inflated this crisis. She also contends that the “prevailing American image of masculinity” is the man who is in the control of his environment, which the image was supported by the great visual influence of the “Marlboro Men, Dirty Harrys and Rambo” (Faludi, 10). These references are made to the strong, masculine portrayals of cigarette advertising and Western film protagonists. These popular cultures construct what Faludi refers to as “ornamental culture” where the qualities of manhood of full of confidence and purpose are displayed by using the bodies of men, majorly only taking the physical aspects into consideration without considering the innate characteristic qualities (Peberdy, 6). The image of masculine men is especially seen in American Western films, such as John Wayne’s *The Searchers* (1956) or Clint Eastwood’s *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (1966). In those movies, characters like Ethan Edwards or Joe Millard are white, intelligent, handsome and powerful men that have achieved some sort of social status, which is also known as the hegemonic male.

There were Hollywood films that represented gender and sexuality that had challenged people’s perspectives on homophobia, such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Basic Instinct* (1992). In this time, “the sexually non-normative have informed Hollywood filmmaking. It is not that queers are being explicitly represented; it’s that representation has turned queer. The openness of queer sexuality has transformed the shape of movie masculinity itself” (Greven, 6) In *Beowulf* (2007), directed by Robert Zemeckis, was a medieval film about a strong man who is actually groomed well and nearly hairless, almost like his chest was feminised. Although Beowulf’s face is covered by his beard, suggesting the medieval period, but his body is portrayed in our own modern time. And it does not hold him back from his tough and strong hero persona at all, he is still the strong “manly man”. Based on a local reception study by Harry M. Benshoff, *Brokeback Mountain* was referred to as the “gay cowboy movie”, and that it “generated a large amount of fear, anger, delight, disappointment, and/or moral outrage among diverse groups of filmgoers”. Naturally, the film is most closely tied to its representation of the Western movies and their typical concept of the American masculine men. This drama-romance

film is set in the American West of Wyoming in 1963, and it dramatises the themes of social and homophobia but it also regularly obscures the lines between homosocial and homosexual, being straight or gay, because neither Ennis or Jack would declare a gay identity. Both of them still go on to marry women and have children, but as this film explores homosexual desire, that makes it a queer cowboy movie. This film has helped to bring openness to people's reception and approach to the gay and lesbian communities, where even mainstream newspapers in Texas had attempted to become more inclusive of them. According to Benschhoff's reception study, Dallas Morning News ran announcements for queer couples' commitments along with the traditional heterosexual couples' weddings. However, through Benschhoff's surveys, there were many negative ideas against the film as people, straight or not, were afraid that they would be stimulated by sex scenes or would be repulsed by it. There was also a stigma if a male had gone to see the film, especially accompanied by another male, as it could be seen that that person is probably gay. The most intriguing responses from the survey were about how people had never thought about gay men who could be "manly" and how a film could feminise the ideology or the American West, where the iconic and traditional concept of masculinity could be challenged. The film's reception provoked discussions of homosexuality and homophobia, creating a shift in how people had thought of the usual representation of men in America.

Throughout *Brokeback Mountain*, we follow the tumultuous relationship of Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist spending 20 years in the heart of a very close-minded environment of the American West. In the end, this environment only leaves the feelings of sorrows and it ultimately leaves the two men with unfulfilled lives. It is the repression that masculinity caused that had led to the suppressed lives of Ennis and Jack where they were not able to love each other completely because of the society that has told them it is absolutely unforgiving. The setting in the film of the uninhabited Wyoming landscape is a space for the freedom and wilderness that men desire and a place where Ennis's and Jack's sexuality is freed from judgement. The use of wide angles and saturated colours shows off the vast nature and the vivid blue skies are in contrast to its muted colours in their interior shots, which could be a reflection to the repressed love and intimacy between the characters. It is nature that gives the men power to control their surroundings and provide them a space to achieve their hegemonic form of masculinity. When they ride their horses, they are shown to have power and are dominant over their animals, and the use of long and high-angled shots supports this visually. The river in the mountains also provides visual cues to the development of their relationship. The shots of melting ice from the reason shows the seasonal changes and the long time parting of both of them, while the shots of the rough water flowing shows the tension between themselves as they come to a conflict about the values of life, family and love. It is the setting of nature, *Brokeback Mountain*, that reflects the secrecy of their homosexual romance and their relative roles in their relationship, and embodies the wilderness of the West. Such isolation empowers their romantic development while their relationship mainly blooms in the wild and rural locations.

Ennis and Jack are neither the more or less masculine character. In the early beginning while Ennis stands right outside Aguirre's office, he covers most parts of his face with his hat. Jack parks his vehicle away from the office and seems interested in Ennis, looking at him and posing with a narcissistic pride allowing others to see him like an object for visual appraisal. Ennis also later takes him in visually; his desire to stare at him while unnoticed hints at the theme of masochistic gaze. It is the same as Jack's desire to look at Ennis fixedly without being noticed is masochistic, and so it is this vulnerability within the gaze that suggests the insecurity in his masculinity that eventually exhibits his queer desire. David Greven argues that the film insists on demonstrating the gendered fluidity of both characters (221). Ennis is able to portray himself

with cruelty, but also great affection. Jack can show off traditional masculine strength when he stands up against his father-in-law but also when Ennis threatens to kill him for going to Mexico. In the film, one of the most homoerotic scenes was a close-up of Jack's face in the foreground, not looking at Ennis as he is bathing in the background, is Jack's masochistic passivity. This is a staging of a masochistic gaze that held a lot of sexual tension. Both Ennis and Jack have a mixture of masculine and feminine elements and they represent the gender and sexual associations and attributes. When Ennis and Jack meet and have their passionate kiss after four long years, Alma witnesses this. Ennis's inability to realise his own wife's difficult position confirms Ennis's narcissistic solipsism. When Ennis quickly packs up his getaway with Jack, he stops by the bathroom to get his toothbrush and opens the medicine cabinet. The mirror's reflection of him is parallel to his actual body of his. and in that short shot of him, it makes him appear narcissistic. His unrealised narcissism are signs of the American male identity in the negative light, even with his attractiveness, he has the power of narcissism to attract desire.

It is evident that Ennis's biggest fear is of a gay man being beaten. He has multiple imagined scenarios of seeing Jack murdered by a group of homophobic men with a tire-iron, and then there's a close-up of Jack's bloody and beaten face. It was suggested in the ending that Jack was having an affair with a male Texan and was actually killed because of homophobic men, however, this information was not confirmed in the film. This imagined scenario is linked to his past when his father brought him to see a dead bloody body of a man who was attacked for being gay, even with the corpse's private part pulled off, and Ennis even suggested that perhaps for all he would know, his own father could have done it himself. In this memory, his father's hand wraps around his neck like a tight noose. It is a representation of the queer male position to the disciplining. This is also Ennis's masochistic idea of being beaten by his father, or father-figure. It is the reason why he could not ever agree to Jack's idea of having a life together at a ranch, or commit to their relationship on another level. His fear of a violent death puts him in a feminine position of waiting for an expected violent event, relating to one of the themes of the film, patriarchy. Of course, Ennis does not receive any sort of gratification from the thought of Jack being beaten, in fact, it is Ennis's recognition and realisation of his need to love Jack which breaks the narcissistic chain as he recognises his and others mortality.

There are some father-figures in the film, namely Aguirre, Jack's own father and Ennis's father in his memory. They represent manhood in a frightening and selfish way, where Aguirre represents the economic and emotional power by a patriarchal father. In the ending, when Ennis visits Jack's family home after learning of his death, he meets his parents who were opposites of each other. While his father tries to go against everything Ennis says, his mother was the encouraging person, inviting him to see Jack's old room, putting an encouraging hand on his shoulder and even inviting him to come again another time, in a way, almost going against the father's words who was being so rude. Jack's mother injects a tender and empathetic element into the film, however for Alma and Lureen, they're treated ambivalently in the film. The relationship between Alma and her grown daughters are not so clear, but one of her daughters seem to want to live with Ennis rather than her strict mother. Lureen, Jack's wife, is depicted as an anti-mother who prefers to focus on her career. Even when Jack and Lureen first met, she was portrayed as the sexual aggressor as she first says "What're you waiting for, cowboy, a mating call?" and proceeds to have sex with Jack in the car on top of him. It is those qualities and her natural talent to be in the business industry and her indifference to her own son puts her in the "absent father" position and setting her up for the trappings of conventional masculinity (Greven, 235). She is portrayed as a bigger man, more "manly man" than Jack Twist.

Ennis has the typical American man values and murderous rage. During the Fourth of July celebration, he brought his wife and young child to a park to watch the fireworks in the sky and he was annoyed with some loudmouthed men who did not heed his warnings. Eventually, Ennis gets up and attacks one of the men and intimidated them. The shot of Ennis standing high and tall over the obnoxious men while fireworks shoot out in the sky, puts him visually in full power. He stands between having the American manhood qualities and being a queer. When Ennis kills the elk, it might have been the first indication of Jack's heartfelt infatuation with him. When Aguirre watches them wrestle, they do so joyfully and playfully. When Ennis punches Jack's face bloodily, it links himself to the imagined homosocial group of men in his mind that would be Jack's killers. When Alma confronted him about his relationship with Jack, he twisted her arm and threatened he would punch her and make her husband "eat the fucking floor". Having this kind of rage is part of Ennis's charm. The idea of manhood and masculinity is not just possessing the male body and his heart but also his murderous drive. Brokeback Mountain has a combination of the American "manly man" and the violence of homoeroticism. It is an amazing film because of how it is able to assess American manhood and the fetish and sexualisation behind it.

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