
Brokeback Mountain: The Contextualization Of The Story

The short story *Brokeback Mountain* by Annie Proulx challenges the stereotypes homosexual men were being confronted with during the time period from the 1960s to the 1980s and thereby heavily criticizes homophobia, socially constructed gender roles and the compulsory heterosexuality during this time.

Contextualization

Brokeback Mountain covers a time period of almost twenty years and is mostly set in Texas and Wyoming, where the fictive *Brokeback Mountain* is located. Considering that Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar first met in 1963, shortly before turning twenty years old, they were shaped by the culture and environment of 1950s America (Ibson 190), where at this point an “intense antigay sentiment [...] emerged in an especially concentrated and virulent form” (Tyson 330). In his book “Proving manhood” Timothy Beneke states that [g]rowing up in the deep South in the 1950s, the most powerful [...] [he] encountered was directed [...] against gays” (Beneke 144). At this point in time, gay people were even admitted to mental health institutions to be treated with aversion therapy, electric shock treatment, and lobotomies. (Tyson 319). “[I]t wasn’t until 1974 that such practices officially ended when the category of homosexuality was removed from the American Psychiatric Association’s list of psychological disorders” (Tyson 319).

Judith Butler’s gender theory

Queer, gender and feminist theorist Judith Butler differentiates between sex and gender. She defines “sex [...] as [a] biological facticity, and gender [...] as the cultural interpretation or significance of this facticity (Butler 88, 522), which is socially constructed. Furthermore, Butler emphasizes that the construction of gender is not stable and is “instituted [...] through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler) through time. She says people are performing gender by imitating and repeating acts which are perceived as being masculine or feminine.

Challenging stereotypes against gays

Ennis and Jack

The first indicator that shows that *Brokeback Mountain* challenges typical stereotypes against gay men is the fact that the two main characters’ personality traits and outer appearances are exactly what was perceived as masculine during the second half of the 20th century. Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist are exactly the opposite of what is coded as ‘feminine’, both are characterized as “high-school drop-out country boys with no prospects, brought up to hard work and privation, both rough-mannered, rough-spoken, inured to the stoic life” (Proulx 2).

Ennis is “a man eager to construct and embody a very familiar manhood: the physically adept, hardworking, verbally silent, responsible, ethical western hero” (Keller and Jones 24). He is described as a strong man who “possess[es] a muscular and supple body, made for the horse and for fighting” (Proulx 6) and as having exceptionally good reflexes. Shortly after reaching the

age of fourteen, he had been forced to start doing hard physical work on ranches as a direct result of him not being able to continue high school anymore, because the truck he needed to get there broke down. He had no money to get the car repaired because not long ago his parents had died in a car accident, which led to him and his sibling having to grow up and act responsibly fast (Proulx 3). Ennis's famous last words in the story "[i]f you can't fix it, you've got to stand it" (Proulx 58) are "a motto of American masculinity" (Ibson 200) and show how men are expected to endure bear all burdens they have to carry.

Jack dresses like a cowboy, which is the American male icon. Most of the time he wears a bull-riding belt buckle, copper jeans and old, worn-out packer boots, which are "holed beyond repair" (Proulx 6). His probably greatest passion is rodeo, a very dangerous, physical and most importantly manly kind of sport. He has been injured while doing it multiple times and for example, had to endure crushed vertebrates and stress fractures. He also says while bull-riding one is always levering it off one's thigh and "[e]ven if you tape it good you break it a little goddam bit at a time" (Proulx 25). Nevertheless, he does not stop bull-riding and talks about his injuries as if they were nothing, which shows how resilient and courageous he is and how much he can handle, all attributes perceived as masculine at this time.

Both men, particularly Ennis, are not exactly opposed to using violence. They even try to solve some of their disputes with physical confrontation, which results in Jack's jaw being "bruised blue from the hard punch Ennis had thrown him" (Proulx 17) during one of their fights. The assumption that men are more likely to use violence is a prejudice many people have; why Jack and Ennis act according to this prejudice will become clear at a later point.

At the same time, Brokeback Mountain distances Jack und Ennis from characteristics typically associated with women in the 20th century and thereby condemns how society tends to deprive homosexual men of their masculinity and to attribute them traits considered as 'feminine'. According to Butler "masculinity is taken on by the male homosexual who, presumably, seeks to hide [...] [this] ostensible femininity" (Butler). Ennis and Jack defy so-called gay "signs", which, as stated by Lois Tyson, "consist[] of characteristics that heterosexist culture stereotypically associates with gay men [...], such as might be evident, for example, in the appearance and behavior of "feminine" male characters" (Tyson 340).

Especially Ennis is not very talkative, which stands in contrast to females who are said to talk all the time. In addition to that Jack and Ennis both joke about their cooking skills being horrible. By stating this they are also denied other feminine traits, as cooking was solely women's duty during the time period covered in the short story. Butler argues that this "disavowed male homosexuality culminates in a heightened or consolidated masculinity, one which maintains the feminine as the unthinkable and unnameable" (Butler 94).

It is important to note that it is definitely questionable if the best strategy to criticize stereotypes against homosexual men is to have two gay characters fulfill typical stereotypes about heterosexual men and to distance them from stereotypes against women. But as controversial as it seems, it is working, and this fact gives one to think about just how strongly stereotypes influence our opinions and perceptions. The overuse of stereotypes in Brokeback Mountain condemns not only stereotypes against homosexuals, but stereotypes in general.

The western genre

Another point which shows that the short story challenges the stereotypes against homosexual men is the setting of Brokeback Mountain, as it makes many allusions to the wild west, which is known to be one of the genres celebrating masculinity the most, and connects it to homosexuality. The western genre presents “the figure of the reticent cowboy; his unique attire; the solitary lifestyle; rodeo culture; farming and working with animals; the homestead and its restriction on men’s freedom; the power of the wilderness and nature” (Needham 40) and enforces the cowboy as a masculine idol. Every single one of the ‘cowboy-characteristics’ listed by Gary Needham is fulfilled by at least one of the two main characters: Jack dresses in typical cowboy-attire and is a rodeo enthusiast. Both are not overly talkative, they do hard work on ranches and work with sheep and are out in the wilderness by themselves, only accompanied by their horses. Most importantly they enjoy the freedom that comes with being completely isolated on Brokeback Mountain, the lack of other people freeing them of restrictions. The mountain is the only place they can be their true selves and be together, far away from society’s expectations. To me, the western setting of the story seems provocative, as it “forces a reevaluation of commonplace notions of cowboys” (Bui 152) and “queers traditional concepts of American masculinity and the [...] genre most closely tied to its representation” (Benshoff, Griffin 406).

“Stigmatizing gay men and lesbians, and the resulting propagation of certain negative stereotypes about them as failed men and failed women, function as a way of reminding everyone, regardless of their sexual yearnings, of the culture’s gender ideals” (Ibson 199). Timothy Beneke makes a good point when he argues that the equation of masculinity and heterosexuality is one of the core problems and that the uncoupling of those two would be an important step against homophobia (Beneke 145), because “if heterosexual desire did not prove masculinity, homosexual desire and activity would not disprove it (Beneke 145). Brokeback Mountain tries to take this step by demonstrating that masculinity and homosexuality are not mutually excluding each other. It “queers the myth of the American West and its most iconic figure, the overtly macho cowboy or rancher” (Benshoff and Griffin 407) and presents two homosexual men who possess all the attributes perceived as stereotypically masculine and lack attributes perceived as stereotypically feminine.

Compulsory heterosexuality

What Brokeback Mountain also does is that it condemns compulsory heterosexuality by demonstrating that heterosexual marriages are not always perfect, unlike it often had been presented in America during this time. After coming back home from working on Brokeback Mountain, Ennis and Jack both independently decide to ignore the fact that they have feelings for each other and to marry a woman to start a family and to live up to society’s expectations of what men are supposed to do. Ennis’s and Alma’s marriage is marked by many disagreements and discussions. Alma wants to move to another place, but Ennis does not, she is angry about Ennis not supporting their children enough and annoyed about his “fishing trips [...] with Jack Twist and never a vacation with her and the girls, his disinclination to step out and have any fun, his yearning for low-paid, long-houred ranch work, [...] [and] his failure to look for a decent permanent job” (Proulx 32f). When Ennis tells Jack about how much he loves his two little daughters when he first visits, Alma says nothing, but her facial expression makes clear that she even goes so far as to questions her husband’s love for his own children (Proulx 22). In the end, their marriage ends with Alma divorcing Ennis and marrying the grocer she works for, taking the two children with her (Proulx 33). The story does not tell much about Jack’s

marriage, but it is not a perfect one either. The biggest issue is how to deal with their son. Jack tells Ennis he is “dyslexic or something [...] [but] Lureen wouldn’t admit to it and pretended the kid was o.k., [she] refused to get any bitchin kind a help about it” (Proulx 40f). Because Lureen is the one who owns the money, Jack cannot do anything about it. He also not only betrays his wife with Ennis and male prostitutes in Mexico, but he also has an affair with another woman. Although Jack cares about his family, he would be willing to leave them behind to be with Ennis at any time. What Ennis’s and Alma’s, as well as Jack’s and Lureen’s relationship, proves as clearly as the day is that a heterosexual marriage is not automatically a happy and fulfilling marriage. It is also not guaranteed that a heterosexual marriage will last. For none of them their marriage is the ideal of love and especially for the two men, it is more like a prison.

Moreover, *Brokeback Mountain* castigates socially constructed gender norms by demonstrating how passing on bad habits as norms can end and by showing how the desire to live up to norms prevents people from living the life they really want for themselves.

Jack and Ennis’s need to prove their masculinity are strongly shaped by their upbringing and by crucial experiences with their fathers during their early childhoods. “The American rite of passage into male adolescence commonly demands a toughening up and a leaving behind of the less guarded emotions sometimes allowed to boys” (Ibson 202), and this is exactly the sentiment Jack’s and Ennis’s fathers shared. In both cases, it can even be described as a childhood trauma with a lasting impact on their later lives. When the two men meet again for the first time after four years Ennis reveals that he was “slugged [...] silly [by his older brother K.E.] every day” (Proulx 28). That was until his father, who was annoyed with him crying about it, gave him a lesson and told him to make K.E. “feel some pain, get out fast and keep doin it until he takes the message” (Proulx 29) because there is “[n]othin like hurtin somebody to make him hear good” (Proulx 29). This highlights how Ennis was corrupted by his father and his older brother, as his sole male role-models, into believing that violence is a good way or even the best way for men to solve their problems.

Jack also had an experience with his father which had lingering effects. When he was a small boy of 3 or 4 years of age, he often had trouble to reach the toilet in time and one time his father couldn’t control his anger about that. He punched his son, whipped him with a belt, and urinated on him. Just like Ennis’s father, Jack’s father is prone to violence and his son gets used to it. After the incident, his father forced Jack to clean everything up and while doing so Jack noticed that his father was not circumcised like himself (Proulx 53). This is also a circumstance that increased Jack’s need to be a ‘real’ man. His clothes and his tough behavior described earlier “[s]uggest[] a craving to prove something about his masculinity” (Dale Parker 197).

Additionally, Ennis’s and Jack’s need to prove their masculinity by fulfilling clichés leads to them trying to hide their emotions. Especially Ennis is reluctant to open up and express what he feels. He is “not big on endearments” (Proulx 21) and only shows his affection with the words “Little darlin” (Proulx 21), a nickname reserved only for his horses, his daughters, and Jack. When Ennis and Jack are saying their goodbyes after their time on *Brokeback* mountain ends, “they shook hands, hit each other on the shoulder[...] [and] then there was forty feet of distance between them and nothing to do but drive away in opposite directions” (Proulx 17). The men do not even dare to hug each other, even less kiss, because they fear the consequences of being watched by someone. After they parted Ennis “felt like someone was pulling his guts out hand over hand a yard at a time” (Proulx 17), but he would never have shown that because he was

taught that 'real' men are supposed to be strong all the time. When Jack finally reveals his emotions and his wish to live with Ennis, the other man cannot commit himself to Jack, which results in Jack starting to fulfill his plans with another man. (Beneke 43).

Reactions to their relationship

Another factor of the short story's way to criticize compulsory heterosexuality and at the same time homophobia is the depiction of the disapproval, rejection, and hatred directed at homosexuals during the 1960s to the 1980s, which lead to many feeling forced to hide their sexuality. Because Jack and Ennis do their best to keep their affair a secret, not many people find out about it, but except for Jack's mother all those who do, react negatively to it, even family members. Jack recounts his encounter with Joe Aguirre, the foreman who hired them for the job on Brokeback Mountain, in the year after they worked together. Jack wanted to work for him again, but Aguirre declined the offer and told him they were not "gettin paid to leave the dogs to baby-sit the sheep while [...] [they] stemmed the rose" (Proulx 28). This vulgar implication in combination with the pair of binoculars Aguirre had with him when he said it was enough evidence for Jack to realize that he and Ennis had been watched on the mountain (Proulx 28).

The second person who discovers their intimate relationship is Alma. When Jack visits Ennis and they are reunited for the first time after four years they cannot hold back or stop themselves from hugging and kissing each other on the stairs in front of the front door. Alma opens the door in exactly this moment and abruptly closes it again (Proulx 21). She does not say a word to her husband about what she has witnessed in almost twenty years, only after their divorce she reveals that she knows and also what she thinks about it by calling Jack 'Jack Nasty', which leads to an outburst on Ennis's side. It is not explicitly stated if Lureen knows about it, too, but the cold tone in which she speaks to Ennis on the phone when he calls after Jack's death suggests she does and that she does not approve. Jack's father is another person who disapproves of their relationship. When Ennis visits Jack's parents after their son's death Jack's father looks at him "with an angry, knowing expression" (Proulx 51). He even denies Ennis offer to fulfill Jack's wish to have his ashes scattered on Brokeback Mountain.

Brokeback Mountain also stages the most drastic form of homophobia. Ennis tells Jack about two elderly men, Rich and Earl, who were living together on a ranch in his hometown when he was younger and who were always joked about. One day one of them was found dead and Ennis' father only laughed about it and forced his two sons to look at the tormented corpse. Earl had been tortured, castrated and killed with a tire iron, supposedly by homophobes and Ennis even goes as far as suspecting that his father had been involved in the violent murder (Proulx 30). Having seen how some people think about gays and how it can end for a homosexual man haunts Ennis for his whole life is the main reason for his' deep-rooted fear of his and Jack's relationship being discovered. It is also the reason why he refuses to Jack's proposal of them having a ranch and settle down together. Ennis says he does not want to be dead and there is no doubt that they will be dead if they show their affection for each other in the wrong place (Proulx 27ff). Just how deeply engraved this fear gets clear when Ennis finds out about Jack's death. Lureen tells him there had been an accident when Jack tried to repair his flat tire, her husband had been hurt from an explosion and choked on his own blood. Despite the explanation Ennis instantly pictures Jack being killed with the tire iron, just like Earl. When Ennis visits Jack's parents afterwards he sees his assumption confirmed when Jack's father

reveals that Jack had wanted to divorce Lureen and had brought another man to the ranch and started to build a place with him. What really happened to Jack, if it was an accident or murder, never gets resolved. According to Butler gender performance also is “a strategy of survival within compulsory systems” (Butler) and this is exactly the strategy the two main characters follow. When Jack abandons this strategy of survival by starting to build a home with another man, he dies. So, whether he was murdered or not, his death highlights the drastic consequences of not behaving like society wants you to behave.

Conclusion

During the whole short story, Jack and Ennis constantly struggle with this need to live up to society’s expectations of how “a real man” needs to behave. The tragic end of the story can be perceived as the most important point as it clearly demonstrates the hopelessness of the situation Jack and Ennis had been in, which was caused by the social expectations they were faced with and felt forced to fulfill, sacrificing their own happiness in the process. As claimed by Timothy Beneke “[w]hat makes the need to prove manhood compulsive is that it can never be satisfied; one is momentarily a man and then the doubts reassert themselves – you’re only as masculine as your last demonstration of masculinity” (Beneke).

Anne Proulx herself calls *Brokeback Mountain* a “story of destructive, rural homophobia” (Q t W 32). What *Brokeback Mountain* addresses are not just issues of the past that are long overcome. Yes, the situation has improved, but there is still a long way to go to get rid of heteronormativity. This is what makes the short story still relevant to today’s society.