Rural Homophobia or Universality of Love?

Brokeback Mountain in Literature and Film

“Brokeback Mountain” and *Romeo and Juliet*: are these two stories comparable in regards to the barriers that the texts' lovers face to the desire to express their love? Some critics believe that they are, indeed, similar, and that the notion of love and loss is a universal one, an experience that all can relate to (Love 56). Others, however, reject this simplified comparison, arguing that the context and representations of this constrained, forbidden love are unmatched in "Brokeback Mountain" (Mendelson qtd. in Love 56). Although this may seem like a trivial debate, the consequence of categorizing the Western as a universal love story diminishes Annie Proulx’s intended theme of “destructive rural homophobia” and, thus, contributes to reversing any potential radical work that Ang Lee's film adaptation could have accomplished (Cooper and Pease 251).

This paper explores the strategies that Proulx’s short story and Lee’s film utilize to represent the social and cultural barriers that prevent the protagonists Jack and Ennis from expressing their love and sexuality, thereby seeking to determine how each medium attempts to transform its audience's perspective and values. Firstly, brief contextual research will be acknowledged to further understand the conditions in which the characters live. Within this discussion, Neil Campbell’s notion of “spaces” will be explored to answer the following question: What does the geographical and physical space of "Brokeback Mountain" enable for the protagonists (206)? Campbell’s distinction between metaphorical “open” and “closed” spaces
allows for further dissection of the techniques through which the mediums portray concepts of freedom and closed social mores. Although the film adaptation of *Brokeback Mountain* has its own voice, separate from Proulx’s, some critics assert that Lee’s film minimizes the protagonists’ queer experience by attempting to make the story palatable for a mainstream audience (Mendelsohn qtd. in Bolton 37; Cooper and Pease 251). This is particularly evident in the omission of significant scenes in the short story and its chronological plot progression, which resembles Proulx’s *New Yorker* version rather than the version published in *Close Range* (Campbell 217). Ultimately, the latter version of Proulx’s work is more effective in depicting the protagonists’ homosexual experiences through its realistic, descriptive, evocative language, illuminating that the story of "Brokeback Mountain" is not meant to be universally felt by all.

The roles of film critics will also be highlighted as crucial in determining the interpretation of and emotion that is felt by an audience, as well as the potential for shaping the views and beliefs of sexual minorities (Cooper and Pease 252). While I align with critics who contend that Lee’s film diminishes the protagonists’ queer experiences, I argue that such proportional significance stems from Ang Lee’s desire to create a love story. Lee’s interpretation of Proulx’s work becomes problematic when it is perceived to be a voice for sexual minorities, a notion that is contradictory to the film’s message of universality of love and loss. As a result of attempting to gain empathy from its audience, the film misses the opportunity to adequately represent the experiences of rural homosexuals, reversing any potential for the political activism that Proulx’s work strives for.

When examining the strategies that “Brokeback Mountain” and its cinematic adaption use to demonstrate Jack’s and Ennis’ struggles, it is beneficial to recognize the context in which the characters live: the open spaces of rural Wyoming. As Butler notes, non-heterosexual
individuals in rural locations often face intensified cultural and social barriers compared to their urban counterparts (132). These barriers are frequently associated with socially constructed heteronormative pressures, where homosexuality is viewed as a contradiction to rural values and morals (131). Such a lifestyle is viewed as incompatible with traditional family roles and the ideals of rural marriage, gender roles, and religious morality (131). Butler references a 2001 study conducted by Bouldon, which explores the dominant heterosexualism in Wyoming and its “don’t ask, don’t tell” mentality in regards to homosexual exploration – a detrimental outlook for the self-expression and freedom of homosexuals (132). Overall, her research indicates that many LGBTQ members stay closeted to avoid ostracism and the potentially violent consequences of living an ostensibly "controversial" lifestyle (136). With this context in mind, it is easier to understand Jack’s and Ennis’ repression of their love and sexuality. In the story, Ennis recalls his father taking him to witness the corpse of a gay man in his community: “I was what, nine years old and they found Earl dead in an irrigation ditch. They’d [taken] a tire iron to him, spurred him up, drug him around by his dick until it pulled off, just bloody pulp” (270). Their fears, particularly Ennis’, of social punishment and potential violence are very valid, as this is the reality for those who go against controlling, heteronormative values. Because of their conservative, oppressive community, they cannot allow themselves to live freely in love.

An article written by Campbell explores this contrast between “open” and “closed” spaces in the story, and how these areas are metaphorical of freedom and repression (206). Whilst Jack and Ennis benefit from the open space of the mountain, they find it isolating to be gay in their communities. This is well-represented in Campbell’s distinction between the metaphorical “open range” in Proulx’s story, which alludes to the desire of freedom and self-expression associated with the imagination of cowboys and the rural wilderness, and the “closed”
social mores of rural communities that are unwelcoming of sexual minorities and non-traditional, non-conforming gendered lifestyles (206). The film visually demonstrates this concept with cinematography by constructing the small spaces of the infamous, symbolic closet and uncomfortable, compacted rooms. As in Proulx’s story, the latter is illustrated in scenes such as Aguirre’s stuffy office, Ennis’ messy trailer, and Jack’s father’s ranch. Similarly, the story vividly describes these “dark interiors and cramped spaces,” illustrating Aguirre’s office as “choky” and Jack’s bedroom as “tiny and hot” (Campbell 216; Proulx 256, 282). Contrasted with this claustrophobia, in both mediums, is the supposedly “open range” of Brokeback Mountains’s wilderness, yet Campbell highlights the irony of this space, especially when considering the surveillance of their relationship by Aguirre (214).

With this in mind, what does this “two-faced” mountain (Proulx qtd. in Campbell 214) enable for the characters? Although Love contends that it represents a “worthless kingdom” and “something that can serve a foundation for nothing” (60), I would argue that it represents the hope of freedom and self-expression in a world where it is impossible for them to truly escape the constraints of heteronormative society While this notion is well-represented in both versions of the story, Proulx's text is more effective at illustrating the realities of Jack's and Ennis’ repression, using its descriptive language to emphasize the hardships of their homosexuality. The film, on the other hand, focuses more on the relationships the characters have with their families, in an attempt to make the content of the story more palatable for a mainstream audience. In doing so, as opposed to Proulx's emphasis on alterity, the film leads with familiarity, which ultimately minimizes the protagonists’ queer experience, reversing any radical work that the film aims to achieve (Bolton 43).
This contradiction is examined further by Bolton’s notion of alterity ethics concerning what a "queer" film ought to do (36). When attempting to understand the differences in emphasis in the film compared to the short story, Bolton argues that it is necessary to understand the “implied” audience that each medium aims to transform their audience into (36). This subjective notion refers to the consumer’s ability to adopt certain perspectives, views, values, and knowledge whilst engaging with an “aesthetic text” (36). He contends that the “implied” audience for Proulx’s New Yorker version of "Brokeback Mountain" differs from that of Close Range (43). In essence, the 1997 version of the story published in the New Yorker was directed at a liberal, educated, culturally intrigued audience who were more likely to be receptive to a "queer" story than other audiences (41). This version emphasizes hypermasculinity and the rural setting rather than "queerness," whereas the focus in Close Range is reversed, placing emphasis on homosexual desire (43). This shift in focus illustrates how Proulx “lead[s] with alterity”: The context of the story is reliant upon the “implied” audience, with Proulx choosing to make the most foreign aspect of the story to that audience the most prominent (43). Understanding this concept, one can apply it to the film, except that there is one crucial difference that sets it apart from the written texts: The film leads with familiarity rather than alterity, which serves to gain empathy from its audience, building a connection between them and the characters (44). Whilst Proulx creates a barrier between the characters and her audience to underscore disparity and “the destruction of rural homophobia” (qtd. in Cooper and Pease 256), the film encourages its viewers to connect with the protagonists (Bolton 44); this bond in turn universalizes their hardships instead of exposing them. The most notable way that Lee demonstrates this connection is by postponing the characters’ first sex scene until half an hour into the film, delaying the confirmation of queerness and allowing a conservative, less queer-friendly audience to invest in
the men before they are potentially turned off by their gayness (Bolton 44). This is yet another example of how Lee’s film departs from Proulx’s story, with its original intended theme of rural homosexuality, instead promoting the theme of the universality of love and loss. By leading with familiarity, the film works to diminish the protagonists’ relationship, failing to adequately represent rural homosexuality. Aside from this, there are other ways in which the film shifts away from Proulx’s original intention of the story, particularly in regards to proportional significance and mise-en-scene – both contributing to minimizing the reality of Jack’s and Ennis’ sexuality.

It’s hardly uncommon for a movie adaptation of a novel to enhance certain elements of the original story and diminish, or omit, others. An adaptation is, after all, the filmmakers’ interpretation of a given story, and the movie they create is their creative vision. However, a filmmaker’s choice of what elements of the story to focus on can fundamentally alter the message and meaning that the original writer intended. This is clearly shown in Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain*. As mentioned above, Lee creates a sense of ambiguity around the characters’ sexuality in the first half an hour of the film, which opposes Proulx’s direct approach in *Close Range*, which features a two-paragraph prologue. In this opening, Ennis’ sexuality is clear to the reader, as he wakes up “with a sense of pleasure because Jack Twist was in his dream” (Proulx 255). In addition to this delay in the film, there is more proportional significance placed on the characters’ relationship with their families, such as Ennis’ daughters, who are merely named in the short story, as opposed to each other. Such proportional significance aids in creating depth in the protagonists' characters and portraying the effects of their repression. One of the ways the film explores Ennis’ struggle is through his visible frustration with his inability to express himself, which results in him resorting to violence by attacking both a stranger in a truck and his
ex-wife Alma (Campbell 213). Campbell argues that these eruptions illuminate the repercussions of such a controlling social order, quoting Jane Tompkins’ view that “violence displaces language and emotion, revealing what is absent” (213). I fully agree with this notion, and while I recognize that the film must use the power of mise-en-scene and cinematography to demonstrate Jack’s and Ennis’ repression, it is important to acknowledge its omission of the short story’s brief graveyard scene, which Campbell claims as the “only space in which [Jack] and [Ennis] could express their love” (217). Instead, the film emphasizes the “shrine” that Ennis has created in his tiny trailer, which features a postcard of Brokeback Mountain and the characters’ entwined blood-stained shirts (Campbell 217). This shrine for Jack is a powerful means of expressing Ennis’ unspoken love for Jack through mise-en-scene, however; not all strategic uses of mise-en-scene in the film are productive in exploring the protagonists’ queer experience.

A critical and potentially overlooked aspect of mise-en-scene in Lee’s film is Jack and Ennis’ visual depiction. Rather than making Jack “a small man [who] carrie[s] some weight in the haunch” and who has a buckteeth smile, or Ennis scruffy and cave-chested (Proulx 257), the characters resemble hypermasculine cowboy stereotypes such as John Wayne (Cooper and Pease 258). It is evident that the characters are presented within the boundaries of heteronormativity, which “privileges the heteropatriarchal norm” (Cooper and Pease 258). Cooper and Pease raise a valid question as to why the actors are not presented as more mainstream media representations of queerness such as those on Queer Eye (258). Perhaps the answer to this question relates to the film’s strategy of familiarity, as mentioned above, which is meant to encourage a connection between the audience and the characters. Regardless of whether the film successfully utilizes mise-en-scene to portray the characters, any political work it aims to achieve is lessened by its
plot progression and non-confrontational approach to demonstrating queer experiences, further emphasizing its theme of the universality of love and loss.

The film’s plot progression follows that of Proulx’s New Yorker version, a chronological series of events that lacks the content of the two-paragraph prologue of Close Range, which sets the story after the death of Jack. Despite being only two paragraphs, this introduction parallels the end of the story, when Ennis is stuck in an “open space between what he knew and what he tried to believe” (Proulx 285) about the constraints of moral surveillance and “the power of belief in love and belonging” (Campbell 207). These powerful words, in conjunction with the introduction of Close Range, illustrate the depression and loss of hope that Ennis has while he grieves over the demise of his love, descriptions that emphasize the realities of homosexuals in rural communities. By omitting these details from the film, Lee minimizes Ennis’ mourning and struggles with depression, as well as the fact that he knows that he has no-one in his community to share his pain with and so he has “to stand it” (Proulx 285). Furthermore, the Close Range version portrays the grimness of rural homosexual reality through the graphic use of descriptive language. This is exemplified above in regards to Ennis’ traumatic experience of his father taking him to witness the corpse of a gay man in his community, as a way of warning of the consequences of leading a non-heterosexual lifestyle. Another powerful description in the story relates to Ennis’ memory of Jack’s earlier story of his father beating him and urinating on him, representing both Ennis’s and Jacks’ internalized versions of repressive patriarchal social order and the world of rural Wyoming (Hart 218). As mentioned above, both of these graphic descriptions in the short story are perhaps too bold for a Hollywood film, whose generally conservative, heterosexual audience would likely be offended by a story of the frank, brutal realities of rural homosexuality. However, Cooper and Pease argue that film critics significantly
impact how individuals will interpret or feel about a film, furthering this discussion of the adaptation’s theme of the universality of love and loss, and its departure from the original story’s meaning (251).

Cooper and Pease assert that when a film falls outside of the “normative limits” of cinema, critics are unsure of what category they ought to place it in so they position it “within some familiar discursive space” (251). In regards to Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain*, many critics overlook the queer subjectivity of the story, dismissing its intended theme of “destructive rural homophobia” and instead regarding it as a universal love story (251). Cooper and Pease contend that this minimizes the protagonists’ struggles with repression and the constraints of self-expression, in addition to those of sexual minorities that desire a voice (251). Moreover, they claim that such “frames” of media contribute to “perpetration of prejudice” against groups of individuals, including racial and sexual minorities, which is significant considering that they help to shape viewers’ understanding of global issues and problems (253). Cooper and Pease share some interesting notions that influence my thinking about the film adaptation. I acknowledge that film reviewers play a significant role in influencing how an audience interprets or feels about a film; however, I would like to take this notion a step further and address the role of marketing in relation to this issue. As Bolton highlights, advertisements for Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* presented images of the protagonists embracing their wives rather than each other (38), which I would argue diminishes the queer content of the film before reviewers have even engaged with it. While many critics describe the film as a “human love story” in which “the two lovers just happen to be men,” ultimately it was Ang Lee who stated at the Golden Globes that he “just wanted to make a love story” (Bolton 37, 38).
With these events in mind, I maintain that Jack’s and Ennis’ story is not one to be felt by all. They face specific struggles and barriers that heterosexuals cannot experience in the same context, and, thus, it is offensive to diminish their hardships in the story by interpreting the narrative in terms of a theme of universal love and loss. As Bolton affirms, a heteronormative audience lacks the experience of “the fear of the closet, the self-loathing of internalized homophobia, and the impossible heartbreak of never knowing whether a lover’s death was an accident or murder” (51-52). I will, however, admit that this interpretation is not the fault of the average cinematic consumer but rather of Ang Lee’s adaptation, which is a far cry from the grim, brutal realities that Annie Proulx describes in Close Range. Rather than leading with alterity, Lee’s film approaches the story in a way that establishes familiarity with its audience. While I credit his story for touching the hearts of many, I simply believe that by minimizing the protagonists’ struggle with the constraints of rural society, it reverses any potential for political activism that Proulx’s story could have evoked. This is not a story of Romeo and Juliet, but, rather, a story of homosexual struggle within a controlling, heteronormative society.


