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## *Brokeback Mountain* and the Radical Threat of Queerness

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Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) follows a love affair between two men as it consumes their lives for over four decades. Despite the taboo nature of their love and how disruptive it is to their otherwise ordinary lives as family men, ranchers, and cowboys, they keep returning year after year to Brokeback Mountain, the same place they first met. This essay will analyze their first



reunion after their initial summer on Brokeback. The sequence shows Alma (Michelle Williams) catching her husband Ennis (Heath Ledger) passionately kissing Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal). I will also show how another sequence—Joe Aguirre (Randy Quaid) watching Jack and Ennis through binoculars—compares to Alma's discovery of her husband's attraction to Jack. Both sequences depict queerness as a "radical threat" to normative social values and ideals of family (Edelman, 14). In the first reunion sequence, for instance, the queer kiss Alma witnesses threatens her relationship with her husband, challenging not only her understanding of who her husband is but also who she is as a wife and mother. "For queerness," as Lee Edelman writes, "can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one" (17).

According to Edelman, queerness is the negative space of heterosexuality; it is the thing that heterosexuality is not. For Edelman, this means that queerness is not only understood as morally debased or lacking in social value, but also "the very space that 'politics' makes unthinkable" (3). Queerness is essential to heterosexual social discourse (as its inherent "other") and definable only in the negative—as the essentially anti-social or in-human. For this reason, queerness figures a "resistance to the viability of the social" (3). One who occupies the negative space of queerness, Edelman argues, can only identify as an absence, an "other," a "resistance" to normative social values. Such a life can only signify as a radical disruption of the heteronormative. Embracing this position "outside" the social, this negative space, is to perform what Edelman calls "queer negativity,"

which would actively contest heteronormativity (6). But Jack and Ennis cannot embrace active, queer negativity. Instead, they attempt to suppress and deny their queer identities.

After their first sexual interaction, Ennis says to Jack, “you know I ain’t queer,” and Jack responds, “me neither.” These two lines are telling, as is the fact that these men feel the need to make this assertion after acknowledging their relationship (what “we got going on here”). Ennis is so threatened by his own queerness that he feels the need to distance himself from it. He uses the words, “I ain’t queer” as a way to not only deny what he just did (having sex with a man) and avoid acknowledging what they “got going on here” (a sexual relationship), but also to deny the very part of him that desires Jack. He uses the words, “you know” as if he’s seeking reassurance that his performance of “not queer” is in fact reality and not performance at all. Jack responds by saying, “me neither” which shows his participation in a performance they both consider “normal” that rejects their queer identities. Both men feel threatened by their queerness, which leads them to attempt to reject it multiple times in the film even as they keep coming back to each other regardless of how much it disrupts their lives and identities.

In their first reunion after the summer working on Brokeback, Ennis shows a new side of himself that is, up to this point, foreign to both the audience and (we assume) his wife Alma. Ennis is anxiously awaiting Jack’s arrival. He sits by the windowsill, smoking, drinking, and bouncing his leg. The fidgeting, excessive drinking, and smoking all suggest that he is anxious for this meeting, which points to its importance. A jump cut to a wide shot shows him passed out on the couch surrounded by empty beer bottles. The sound of Jack’s truck driving up is enough to wake Ennis,



who then heads immediately to look out the window and gives us one of the most genuine, albeit restrained, smiles we have seen from Ennis thus far. It is the smile of a man who cannot help himself. We see him so excited to see Jack that he’s no longer the quiet, guarded Ennis we’ve come to know. Eagerly awaiting Jack’s arrival, he is vibrant, passionate, and enthusiastic. His love for Jack brings this out of him, showing us a repressed queer identity that contrasts with and disturbs his identity as a stoic cowboy, father, and husband.

Ennis’s feelings toward Jack become even more clear as he runs out the door and, while standing outside at the top of the stairs, yells, “Jack fucking Twist,” slamming both hands onto the half wall and beaming with joy. The motion and exclamation convey Ennis’s feelings for Jack. The “Jack fucking Twist” and hand slap are relatively loud, emotional, and unrestrained gestures coming from a man who we have known, up to this point, to be incredibly quiet and purposefully controlled. The only times we see emotion take control of Ennis are when he is experiencing anger or, less commonly, sadness, which is why his uncharacteristically expressive joy over seeing Jack is even more important to notice. It tells us what the kiss that follows tells us, what the giddy run outside told us, and what the smile told us. All of these actions reveal the passionate love between these two men without either character explicitly verbalizing it.

After Ennis runs down the stairs and the two men embrace, Ennis looks around to make sure no one is watching them (a moment that also suggests how threatening queerness is), then pushes Jack up against the nearest wall for a passionate kiss. This is another uncharacteristic move for



Ennis because we do not know him to be the more active person in the relationship. Here, however, Ennis's initiation of the kiss points to his uncontrollable passion for Jack.

Contrasting the version of Ennis when he sees Jack with the Ennis we know him to be around Alma makes Alma's discovery of the two of them kissing even more upsetting for her. Not only does she see Ennis passionate and vibrant, but she must face the realization that this side of him was first discovered by another man and not by her. Edelman's argument about how queerness threatens both queer and heteronormative identities is most applicable when Alma opens the front door and catches the two men making out by the stairs. She is first shown in a medium shot and then, after showing the kiss in an eyeline match, we see Alma once more, this time in a close-up. Alma's expression reads as a combination of fear, disgust, shock, and perhaps anger. The use of the close up and the acting performance by Michelle Williams allow the audience to experience her confusion and mixed emotions. Alma closes the door, then walks slowly and unsteadily towards the kitchen, her breathing shaky and shallow.



While Ennis and Jack's queerness certainly disturbs their own identities, it also has the power to disturb the identities of those close to them. The first, less extreme example of this happens when Joe Aguirre watches Ennis and Jack through the binoculars. Joe Aguirre's face shows disgust, and he continues to treat both men with revulsion after seeing them together. He cuts their summer short, then refuses to rehire Jack, telling him "you guys wasn't getting paid to leave the dogs babysit the sheep while you stem the rose." Jack and Ennis pose a threat to Aguirre. He is clearly marked as homophobic, and we are encouraged to suspect that seeing Jack and Ennis together





challenges values that he does not want challenged, which results in the loss of a job for Jack. Alma, however, has much more invested. Her identity as a mother, a wife, and the sole partner of a heterosexual man is at stake. As Alma walks away from the door after seeing her husband kiss Jack, it becomes clear that her worldview has been shattered. She is forced to redefine her relationship with Ennis

as well as how she views herself within that relationship. Ennis' queerness, therefore, is a radical threat—an identity that, despite Ennis' attempts to repress it, nevertheless threatens their marriage and makes Alma question her overall identity. This is an apt example of what Edelman means when he says that queerness can only ever disturb an identity.

As Jack and Ennis come inside after their kiss, the two main perspectives in this sequence—Ennis's and Alma's—are intercut in a series of alternating shots. We see Ennis visibly delighted while talking to Jack about their children. When Jack tells Ennis he's "got a boy," we see Ennis from the back as he eagerly springs his head forward in interest and replies, "yeah?" A few seconds later we see Ennis turn around to face Alma (and the camera) as he grins unabashedly. Though subtle, this is another example of how thrilled Ennis is to see Jack. His glee bleeds into words and gestures that would otherwise be suppressed or guarded, further underscoring the idea that this is a significant and unparalleled moment for Ennis.

Yet the apparent joy Ennis feels makes him oblivious to the arguably equally as apparent shock and discomfort Alma is experiencing. The high he feels contrasts with Alma's utter low. He is, however, incapable of recognizing her experience in this moment, which only further emphasizes his all-consuming love for Jack and just how much that love differs from his love for Alma. The recklessness of



falling in love with a man and kissing him where they could easily be seen also suggests how this love makes Ennis do things he wouldn't otherwise do, pointing us to the sheer power and intensity of the feelings of the men for one another and the fact that Ennis does not feel the same way toward Alma.

When Jack and Ennis first walk into the house, Alma is shown in a medium shot. The next time we see her, the shot is a little closer and, right after we see Ennis turn to Alma and grin after hearing the news that Jack has a little boy, we see Alma in an even closer shot, clearly upset. By framing Alma in increasingly closer and closer shots, we can focus more on her facial expression, which is wrought with clear anguish. These shots are meant to focus the audience's attention on her emotional experience. This experience is only heightened by seeing Ennis—the very man causing her this pain—not only unaware of her suffering but actively and enthusiastically engaging with Jack in front of her as if she were oblivious to their true relationship.

Part of the brilliance of *Brokeback Mountain* lies in its recognition of how, as Edelman reminds us, queerness threatens identities. But the film also tells us that such threats can apply to both queer and heteronormative identities, potentially amplifying the tragic consequences that may occur when queerness is repressed or denied. ☹

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