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The Construct of Gendered Identities Is Built Through Relationships

INTRODUCTION

The films, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and *Kissing Jessica Stein*, both strongly represent themes of challenging heteronormativity and stereotypes of gender. Both movies depict identities being constructed and challenged through the establishment, maintenance, and collapse of relationships. Represented primarily by interpersonal and critical theories, the various communication styles used, and the compliance or challenge of stereotypes depicted, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and *Kissing Jessica Stein* rhetorically shape concepts of gender through the construction of relationships.

KISSING JESSICA STEIN

Kissing Jessica Stein presents a challenge to the concept of heteronormativity. Jessica had always been interested in men, but after multiple dates with men that didn't meet her expectations, she hears her coworkers read a newspaper advertisement about a woman seeking the same, which sparks her interest. Eventually, both Helen and Jessica found what they were looking for in each other. This challenges heteronormativity because the concept itself implies relationships only work, or are most fitting, between a man and a woman. Their relationship defies this because neither was happy with any of the men that they had dated, but they were

both emotionally and sexually satisfied with each other. This could be due to Helen featuring more masculinized characteristics, or it could be just because of their human connection.

From the time they first meet, the viewer is subject to see the differences in their gender. Although they both were born as female, and identify as their gender assigned at birth, Helen is much more masculinized, especially compared to Jessica who is classically feminine. One of the first instances of this is when Jessica had second thoughts during their first encounter and tried to run off, but Helen was assertive and came up with a way to get her to stay (Herman-Wurmfeld). Jessica had finally found someone who was able to meet her needs from the standpoint of emotional intimacy and intelligent conversation (Herman-Wurmfeld). Helen was in search of the sexual connection and after questioning if Jessica could provide, the couple had reached a point where she was at least satisfied. Ultimately, however, Helen and Jessica were unable to continue their intimate relationship because the two key elements to make it more than a best-friendship, sexuality and romance, were no longer present according to Helen (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 195).

In a way, *Kissing Jessica Stein* rejects the biological theory. Both Helen and Jessica were born as female, yet they had very distinct communication styles and characteristics. For example, Helen had a lot more linear thinking style, as depicted by her multiple encounters with men, she knew where to go when she wanted to be sexually satisfied (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 38). Jessica thought much more holistically. She would rather look at the big picture and how things connect, as when she and Helen were pushing to become intimate (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 38).

The interpersonal theories of gender serve a critical role in *Kissing Jessica Stein*. These theories best explain Jessica and Helen's communication styles and the differences between

them. Jessica, a highly feminized female character, had a strong maternal presence in her life with both her mother and grandmother, which guided her to identify more strongly with feminized characteristics. This may lead one to the conclusion that Jessica's first relationship was with her mother, and it was that relationship that influenced the building of her identity, supporting the psychodynamic theory. Helen, on the other hand, did not seem to have that same bond with her mother or even another female presence, suggesting that her mother and she did not quite have the same closeness during her upbringing. Judith Butler describes gender as a performance, explaining how Helen can be biologically female, identify as female, and still perform masculine characteristics when she wishes to do it. Helen spent most of her time with men, so it is likely her performance was guided and reinforced by them, which represents the social learning(interpersonal) and symbolic interactionism(cultural) theories (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 42, 46). Similarly, Jessica's strong female presence in her life from early childhood means that she likely learned how to perform a traditionally feminine style of gender from her mother and grandmother.

Another important theory in play for Jessica and Helen is queer theory, a critical theory of gender. This is shown primarily through Jessica's reluctance to engage with Helen based on it being abnormal. She felt that it was wrong for her to be interested in a woman, although there was no basis for her to reach that premise other than what the heteronormative society that she lives in has taught her (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 51, 53) (Herman-Wurmfeld).

Through Helen initiating most of the romance, as when she tried to put her arm around Jessica and initiated intimacy and when she waited for Jessica and when she bought her flowers, she is nonverbally communicating her interest (Herman-Wurmfeld). Not only did these actions

communicate interest, but they were also typically masculine roles. With Helen being more traditionally masculine with her actions, she also displayed feminine characteristics in her attire and makeup, particularly the way her lipstick was a blend of three colors (Herman-Wurmfeld). It is in that way she created her identity, by communicating her differences between her actions and thinking, and her attire and how she presented herself. Jessica on the other hand, communicated her traditionally feminine identity through her active listening and always responding to people who were talking and acknowledging what they said with nods or vocal cues, her feminized dress code, and being much more open to sharing her personal space (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 125, 130, 134).

Jessica especially felt as if she had to be sensitive and caring (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 157). She constantly worried if people were going to react to her fear of disappointing them, and when things weren't going to work out with a man, she did her best to still be kind (Herman-Wurmfeld). Both Helen and Jessica represent the theme of femininity: "There is No Single Meaning of Feminine Anymore" (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 161). For Helen, this is shown by her challenging the boundaries of the term "feminine" when she showed her more assertive and dominant sides, even more so when she made it clear that she was self-focused, as represented by her leaving Jessica when her needs weren't being met (Herman-Wurmfeld).

Jessica's previous relationship with Josh represented the alternate paths model of male intimacy communication. Between Josh's extremely masculine communication and Jessica's opposite position, they had issues with closeness. However, in accordance with this model, he expressed closeness in other ways (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 187-188), as when he was constantly picking up on the changes in Jessica, asking her if she has met another guy, or when

he called her out in front of the guy at Joan's dinner party (Herman-Wurmfeld). According to Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz, "Lesbian couples tend to share responsibility for their relationships" (198). Therefore, in terms of relationship maintenance, Helen and Jessica were destined for a solid relationship if they truly shared the burden. However, Jessica wasn't able to pick up on Helen's dissatisfaction with where their relationship was, despite her constantly trying to act on or bring up the topic of needing more of the intimate aspects of a relationship (Herman-Wurmfeld). Jessica and Helen couldn't make it work because of their differences in terms of autonomy and connection, the more masculine identifying Helen craved more emotional freedom and sexual connection whilst Jessica craved a strong emotional connection and reliance on Helen (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 197) (Herman-Wurmfeld).

At the beginning of the film, *Kissing Jessica Stein* featured multiple stereotypical gender roles. When Jessica was dating, the film cycled through multiple men who featured male stereotypes such as being hypersexualized, trying to take control of the orders or the date itself, and even objectifying Jessica. Shortly after, however, Helen was depicted as a challenge to roles as she was seen as feminized through her vulnerability to men, she allowed them to use her for sex in exchange for the sexual connection she sought, but also represented a masculinized figure through her hypersexual activities and interaction with her feminized male friends. Together, they represented the lesbian stereotype that one partner is more masculine and the other is more feminine. However, it was challenged by Helen's choice to still actively seek out men in the beginning, as well as Jessica still staying with Helen through her vulnerabilities with being sick and her attachment to Jessica (Herman-Wurmfeld).

Jessica had finally found someone capable of satisfying her emotionally and intellectually, and only through Helen was she able to find herself and become more confident (Herman-Wurmfeld). Following her relationship with Jessica, Helen was able to figure out the difference between what she wants and what she deserves, and she seems to have found that with her new partner (Herman-Wurmfeld). Jessica was ultimately able to realize that Helen was right when their split was caused by them being more of best friends than lovers, and in a way, they found themselves through each other and it gave them both peace in their lives (Herman-Wurmfeld).

HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH

Like Judith Butler's concept of gender as a performance, Tina from the article "A Boy's Life" said, "...gender's in your brain" (Rosin). These concepts of gender are especially apparent in Hedwig's youth growing up as Hansel. Hedwig struggled with identity their entire life because they did not choose to transition, it was forced upon them (Mitchell). This is what primarily led to Hedwig's internal struggle portrayed throughout the film.

The most pervasive gendered communication theories are the interpersonal theories, primarily the psychodynamic and cognitive development theories. In terms of the psychodynamic theory, Hedwig's mother was a very prominent figure in his childhood and dictated the way they performed gender, evident when she put them in the oven to play to control their feminine urges (Mitchell). As a child, Hedwig represented the cognitive development theory when they chose to resist their mother's urges to make them act in masculine ways, as when she disapproved of Hedwig dancing on the bed (Mitchell).

Queer theory also plays an important role because it "...argues that identities are not fixed, but somewhat fluid" (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 51). Similarly, "...trans and genderqueer labels are limitless in the creation of individuals, expressions, and behaviors that they represent (Rodriguez 168). It is with these concepts that Hedwig finds their identity. They had discovered that they could maintain the female-dressed exterior while identifying or performing in any manner they chose. For example, when Hedwig interacted with their love interests, they performed a more vulnerable, feminized identity. However, when Hedwig and Tommy had their power struggle, there was a much more dominant, assertive, and masculinized identity presented.

Hedwig's outfits represented an extremely feminine identity. Their often-promiscuous costumes were meant to convey the feminine side, and create a desire among men in the audience, this further presented Taylor and Rupp's idea of arousing straight men as a central part of the show to the drag queens (15). However, Hedwig's most vulnerable, stereotypical feminine identities were portrayed when they were in their most intimate, in love moments with Tommy (Mitchell). These outfits didn't make the audience even think of Hedwig as anything other than a woman, the words "transsexual" or "drag queen" likely didn't even come to mind. With Yitzhak, they want to wear the wigs and behave in a manner more expressive and less hostile, but Hedwig shuts down that idea, for they didn't want to lose their power over Yitzhak like they did Tommy (Mitchell). Yitzhak's hard exterior and generally expressionless face portrayed a more masculine identity and reinforced Kimmel's idea that men can't show emotion or vulnerability (53). However, when Yitzhak was away from the stage and other people, there was a much softer, feminine side to them. In a way, it's almost like the love they had for Hedwig exposed their true emotional side that they felt the need to hide from the world. The way Hedwig carried

themselves, with their head up high, signaled a more confident and dominant persona. In terms of gender identity, this message created conflict with the stereotypical vulnerable, shy feminine identity. It worked well for Hedwig who tried to convey a position of power among peers.

Together, Hedwig and Yitzhak especially challenged traditional themes of masculinity and femininity. For instance, themes of masculinity include don't be feminine, be aggressive, be self-reliant, and be sexual (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 152-155). However, Yitzhak, the more masculine-identifying character, challenged all of these themes. Yitzhak relied heavily on Hedwig whether it's for emotional support or power, and Yitzhak seemed to much prefer emotional intimacy over physical, rejecting the theme to be sexual (Mitchell). They also failed to conform to the theme of being aggressive. Yitzhak was much more subordinate in allowing Hedwig to assume almost complete control (Mitchell). Similarly, Yitzhak had a secret vulnerable side to them that was only really shown around Hedwig or when they were alone (Mitchell). This vulnerability reinforced a more feminine identity and rejected the masculine theme of not being feminine. Hedwig, on the other hand, presented themselves as a more feminine identity, while simultaneously adhering to both masculine and feminine themes. In regard to masculine themes, Hedwig was dominant, aggressive, and assertive (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 153-154), very rarely will they back away and this is represented by the great feud with Tommy about who was in power (Mitchell). When Tommy came crying to Hedwig (Mitchell), Hedwig felt obligated to be sensitive and caring, even though it was not really who they were (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 157). From growing up with their mom's almost dictator-like parenting style to Luther's abandonment, to Tommy's (Mitchell), Hedwig was taught to normalize negative treatment by others towards

themselves (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 158). Therefore, Hedwig's identity demonstrated a mix of both masculine and feminine themes of gender.

Hedwig and the Angry Inch represented both the male deficit and the alternate paths models of personal relations. Between Hedwig and Tommy, there's clearly a sense of the male deficit model because the pair clearly had a special bond between them, but neither was really able to express their feelings and it drove them apart once Tommy reached fame (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 187) (Mitchell). However, the second theme to the alternate paths model, where men express closeness in a different way (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 188), could be assumed by Tommy ultimately reuniting with Hedwig in one way or another (Mitchell). Luther expressed his emotions through his gifts, such as bringing Hedwig to the United States (Mitchell). It can be believed that this is how Luther expressed his emotions to Hedwig, even though he ultimately abandoned them (Mitchell). There was clearly a connection between Yitzhak and Hedwig but both failed to express these feelings, the audience primarily sees Yitzhak's true feelings and emotions when they were alone, suggesting that they were unable to convey these to Hedwig (Mitchell), representing the male deficit model (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 187).

From the time Tommy entered Hedwig's life, the audience got a sense that there was going to be something between them. This connection they had led to a struggle of power, Hedwig was in a position of power being older and more experienced in music (Mitchell). However, the shift in the power dynamic occurred when Tommy became famous (Mitchell). Yitzhak represented the more feminine desire for a connection while Hedwig wanted independence and autonomy (Mitchell) (Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz 198). However, neither

Hedwig or Yitzhak put effort into relationship maintenance, and that is what leads to the distance between them.

Luther himself represented the male stereotype of the culture of entitlement. Luther had the feeling that he's entitled whatever he wanted because he had "...a shockingly strong sense of male superiority and a diminished capacity for empathy" (Kimmel 59). This was primarily represented by Luther knowing exactly what to say to get Hedwig's attention, demonstrated by Luther saying he thought Hedwig was a girl (Mitchell). Additionally, he told Hedwig what he thought Hedwig wanted to hear in order to get what he wanted without the emotional connection (Mitchell). Another stereotype presented was the stigma around having relations with a trans person, this was represented in the movie when Tommy was caught with Hedwig and insisted they didn't know each other (Mitchell). Also, there seemed to be a stereotype that people just assumed someone who has transitioned would primarily be interested in the opposite sex. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* reinforced this stereotype with Hedwig's sexual interest being focused on men like Yitzhak, Tommy, and Luther, even though the relationship with Luther occurred primarily before Hedwig was forced to transition (Mitchell).

Inexplicitly, Hedwig was angry because their body was altered without them actively choosing, the decision was made for them (Mitchell). Hedwig may have performed more femininely in their youth, but that didn't mean they were ready or even welcomed the change (Mitchell). Similarly, "...the difference between being a drag queen and being transgendered... 'A drag queen is someone... who has never ever thought about cutting her dick off' (Taylor and Rupp 14). Applied to Hedwig, they may have wanted to perform femininely, maybe even dress up, but that didn't mean they wanted to transition. Ultimately, this led Hedwig to a lifetime of

confusion about their identity, but they were able to reach a point of acceptance with their body and take themselves for who they are (Mitchell).

CONCLUSION

In the films, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and *Kissing Jessica Stein*, the characters challenged or conformed to stereotypes, used their individual communication styles, as well as put into perspective the psychodynamic and queer theories, and it was in this way that they were able to rhetorically construct their gendered identities. The truth about gender is that it is fluid, it's always in motion, and it's extremely individual, and individuals may not know to describe their identity, and that's okay too. It is human nature to try and place a label on people and their identities, but people need to resist the temptation because gender and identities are both abstract and individual and it would be both unfair and untrue to force people to label themselves and their identities.

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