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Is real life better than fantasy? Do we really see how people who don't quite fit in a "normal" gender category can erupt new ways of acting in society, be it good or bad? Both feminist and queer theory have radically contributed to the way humans interact with their romantic interests. Due to the way that we used to see relationships, friendships, love and even a woman's role in society as a singular line ONLY, everyone suddenly had to come to grips with the crazy notion of two men being together, two women kissing (and not as a sign of friendship), and women suddenly asserting themselves alongside men's roles in society. Those impressions were not always welcomed with open arms, but through the ideas of changing how narrow-minded we can be as judgmental, accident-prone human beings, we can allow ourselves to accept these changes more freely.

Contrary to popular belief, I did not know that Freddie Mercury was gay before watching the 2018 critically-acclaimed movie *Bohemian Rhapsody*. In all honesty, I knew very little of his personal life or that he had suffered, later dying, from AIDS. Most of his life, being very public due to rising stardom as a lead singer for the hit rock-and-roll band, Queen, was probably just as tempestuous and staggeringly confusing as his personal emotions. Being of Parsi-Indian ethnicity, Farrokh Bulsara, later known as Freddie Mercury, was as manly as a young teenage boy could get. Growing up as a wrestler training on a semi-professional level, being the oldest

child in his family, and living under his father's stern sense of practical amusement and "how a man should be raised" theology, Freddie was just expected to "become a man". And what does that mean? When you "become a man", crossing the threshold into the older generational society held together by conformists who have a hard time allowing "abnormalities" influence their lifestyle, what are you expected to grow into?

Parker accentuates the idea of a multiform within human desire, especially related to queer's lifestyle. The binary opposite of queer is not exactly straightforward, like how "gay" or "lesbian" is the binary opposite of "straight". But if queer does not have an exact opposite, the connotations behind ONE word have to be somewhat infinite, don't they? In Freddie's case, joining the newly formed band, Queen, and growing through his sexual exploitations with his bandmates and future fiancée, Mary, he was very fluid with how he carried himself.

Take Mary Austin, Freddie's closest female interest in his life, as an example. Dating Freddie and asking to be married must have been one of her dreams, only to have it suddenly fall apart when she started noticing his feminine side - his change in tone, his flamboyant dressing, his wearing makeup during performances - and paying closer attention to some of his male fans could have been a significant turnaround for their relationship and consequently Freddie's acceptance of his sexual orientation. Having a relationship so complicated seemed to fulfill, yet somewhat hinder, the acceptance of himself which Freddie seemed to be able to emulate only with Mary. It makes me wonder how those who identify as queer see women in their lives.

Freddie's appeal towards Mary was largely due to her outward expressions of her inward emotions. She was very opinionated, carried herself with an air of confidence, and was not afraid of giving Freddie the truth, even when she had to be the one to tell him he was gay when he

thought he might be bi-sexual. Freddie's bandmates were also a huge part of his adult life.

Giving him acceptance by shoving the spotlight so many wanted to shine on Freddie's personal life away from him and more towards the music that was constantly flowing from their instruments was harder to do, yet somewhat expected. Being queer within the limelight of stardom can unfortunately be very dangerous and even suicidal, especially during the time when the sexually transmitted disease AIDS blowing up in the medical field.

The idea of conforming within the typical, socially accepted standards, that is, being straight, has always been pushed upon those who want to explore, who try to "tip the balance" in a gender-abnormal relationship. Emily Dickinson, one of the most feminist (and relatively queer) poets during the nineteenth century, helped change ways of thinking, dressing, and living, as well as the reasons behind those changes. "Dickinson was not the "typical" woman of the time, and rarely did she ever conform to any boundaries, much less ones put in place by society" (Rasch & Rasch 2017). Her view on women in her world as well as on the association of death with femininity could be perceived as "something of a lack of losing an aspect of womanhood" (Rasch & Rasch 2017). Dickinson can be seen as both a figure of queer acceptance, having a very strong connection towards Susan Gilbert, an important woman in her adult years, and of feminist qualities, her pain and struggles consistently focused on resisting men's ideas of "what a woman should be" and Death being a sort of a twisted structure for her writings.

When we think of death, we think of our bodies no longer living. Death occurs in every part of the world, at any given time, no matter the circumstance. We experience loved ones dying, old friends who are no longer with us, strangers we've never given any thought to before except for the staggering 5-10 seconds it takes to say "I'm sorry for your loss", but perhaps never

does it occur to us that death could equate to a “rebirth of feminism”. I could argue that we have found a way to address the problems we cannot settle regarding the attitude towards women and their taking charge by giving life to the idea of a “social death”, choosing to focus on our own sense of who we are compared to what others expect from us.

In her many letters she writes to her longtime love interest, Susan Gilbert, a woman whom Dickinson found an electrifying and profoundly intense connection with, Emily Dickinson expresses and demonstrates what Parker mentions in terms of *homosociality*, where it “refers to intense relations between people of the same sex that might not be sexual but that through their intensity can suggest an erotic charge” (Parker 205). But, the glaringly obvious difference between what Parker refers to as “intense friendships typical of many ostensibly heterosexual nineteenth-century American women, often expressed in passionate letters and diaries that seem, to later ears, erotic but that bear no evidence of sexual relations” (205) and the creative yet adoring passion Dickinson would include in her many letters to Susan, writing lines such as:

“To own a Susan of my own
Is of itself a Bliss —
Whatever Realm I forfeit, Lord,
Continue me in this!”

Or perhaps mentioning physical touch, as shown in the following prose:

“Susie, will you indeed come home next Saturday, and be my own again, and kiss me as you used to? . . . I hope for you so much, and feel so eager for you, feel that I *cannot* wait, feel that now I must have you...” force me to see just how different the two types of connection women have with each other can be.

Maybe the idea behind Dickinson's and Gilbert's interesting and unique love was a somewhat rebellious act of fortitude during an era in which a queer woman was not even a thought? Parker questions the paradigm shift in having such a normal way to express female friendship through physical demonstrations and "passionate language of such friendships" (205) to have changed its connotations to an erotic fixation, almost untouchable, adding a sense of "we don't normally do that as women with our friends, but it is okay NOW because it's not during OUR time". And not only that, but noticing how Emily Dickinson would "frequently and deliberately reassign gender pronouns for herself and her beloveds, recasting her love in the acceptable male-female battery of desire" (Popova 2019) makes me wonder why she felt the need to sometimes "modify" her passion, her undulating desire for her Susan to aptly fit in with the "norm" of a male-female relationship.

Taking it upon herself by having to express her love using the opposite pronoun of who she was as a woman begs the question why she would feel like she needed to focus on "being accepted" when the very subject of her love letters was another woman. Does the pronoun "He" really emulate what a man is like in a relationship? Does having a man in a relationship, regardless of your physical sexual orientation depict how you'll act towards your significant other because you're more "manly" or more "possessive" or because you are "dominant"? Or does the pronoun "He" just seem to fit more because it's more socially acceptable to read any sort of writing, fiction or nonfiction, and relate to it more because of the sole purpose of reading a love story with the idea of a "man and woman" together? Why can't we read anything, watch anything, or talk about anything, that has a sense of queer touch to it, or focuses on femininity without feeling squeamish or thinking "well, at least this isn't MY life"?

Parker, on page 151 of *How To Interpret Literature*, deems feminism as a new way to study and illuminate what it really means to “be a woman”. From a theoretical standpoint, it can be hard to talk about feminism without assimilating to our somewhat bigoted idea of what we think defines feminism. We only touch the base structure of the *very word*, when in reality, all three waves of feminism contribute to more than just “women being equal in the workforce”. Feminism is an identity comeback, a way to structure women within a “man’s world” but tiptoeing the fine line between being equal and being possessive. “Contemporary, third-wave feminism enlarges the dialogue between feminism and the study of gender, seeing women less as a separate group and more as integral to the world across local and global gender formations, geographies, and cultures” (Parker 151). This gives a new meaning to the word *feminism*. Not just in the literal sense, where feminism is seen more as an open door to women who were once intimidated to voice their own opinions, but also as a walkway to accepting feminists who may identify as queer also.

This self-identity exploration can express desire to become more “themselves”, regardless of what gender they may identify with. Maybe Dickinson was aiming towards being an example of “hope [that] feminism can also help men feel at liberty to choose how to enact their gender” (Parker 160). I grew to sympathise with the way Susan Gilbert’s feelings towards Emily Dickinson fell apart. Maria Popova hauntingly describes the feeling of unrequited love: “[fewer] things are more wounding than the confounding moment of discovering an asymmetry of affections where mutuality had been presumed”.

Dickinson’s emotions lean more towards being wholly intense, her feelings pouring out in her poems, in her letters towards someone she thought she could connect with on a deeper

level, more than any man. It is clear in her writing and throughout her adoringly resonating expressions towards Gilbert. Coming to terms with this particular devastation, knowing that her “unguarded abandon” for her love was not met with the same quality as she had hoped, questioning the very “moment whether the love that stands as the central truth of her daily being is real” (Popova 2019).

Perhaps this could be seen in Freddie Mercury’s lifetime, he questioning his own moment when the love he might be feeling towards others of his own gender was really there, or was merely part of his fantasy. During one of Queen’s many promotional press conferences for their new album, it seemed that the reporters found Freddie’s sexual life and “confusing orientation” more exciting than the music Queen made. Why is it that people can be so concerned with someone else’s complicated backstory? Part of being a star means people can see your whole life choices without any privacy, but Freddie did his best to turn rumors away and keep his queer life more private than reporters would have liked. Telling his bandmates the moment he knew he had contracted AIDS, he mentions how he didn’t want to be the medical world’s “poster boy” or “cautionary tale” to contracting a disease most everyone knew was from being gay and having sexual relations with someone who had the disease.

I enjoyed how Parker talks about the compulsory heterosexuality and can see it more clearly in his hit, *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Many of Freddie’s bandmates, mainly Roger Taylor and Brian May, were seen as your typical rockstars, complete with different ladies every night and placing their attention on women for their sheer sexual pleasures, were such a different kind of “queer” than Freddie ever could be. Knowing they were becoming famous, having released so many hit songs that soared to the top of the music industry charts, both Roger and Brian can be

seen “naturalizing” the idea of multiform sexuality Parker so clearly describes. On page 188 of *How To Interpret Literature*, Parker states that “some men who identify as heterosexual find some ‘masculine’ women attractive, perhaps an athletic woman or a “take-charge” woman.

I find it somewhat amusing that William Shakespeare can be used as examples in both queer AND feminist theories. His particular sonnet, *Sonnet #20: A Woman's Face With Nature's Own Hand Painted*, focuses on how the effect of genitalia can vastly change the outlook of one's life. In the case of Freddie Mercury, he was confused during most of his life regarding his sexual orientation. He loved Mary with a deep love, even proposing to her in their early years, wanting a romantic, heterosexual relationship, perhaps trying to “push under the rug” his hidden desires. This sinful gesture ended up hindering his career for a while during his journey of “self-discovery,” ultimately leading to his contraction the AIDS disease because of his desire to be with men.

As for Emily Dickinson, her one-sided love affair with Susan Gilbert suggests to me that her genitalia could be interpreted as “emotionally harrowing” and “too dramatic with feelings” because as women, isn't that how we are seen when we get our periods? Suddenly, we cannot claim for ourselves our emotions, our frustrations, our lashing outs. They are completely overpowered by our vaginas telling us what to do or how to feel. Our responsibility towards our own actions are no longer “ours” but in a way Nature's fault because we are essentially from Her.

Shakespeare's *Sonnet #20* is rooted in beauty and losing a sense of love or even self-awareness to Nature's own selfish views. The particular text I'm referring to is as follows:

“And for a woman wert thou first created,
Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,

And by addition me of thee defeated

By adding one thing to my purpose nothing”

In my rough analysis of this sonnet, the simple, seemingly innocent addition of male genitalia to a creation Nature had molded as a human, going from woman to the complete opposite because of ONE added component seemed to, according to Shakespeare, completely render him useless as his true self. The eyes he mentions in his sonnet, the “eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling” (Shakespeare) remind me of Emily Rasch’s depiction of Emily Dickinson and her “obsession” with Death. In her article, Rasch correlates Dickinson’s eyes to the windows of her life, depicting different lifestyles and struggles that she faces, and the only way we can relate to her pain, and to her insight, is through her writings. “Dickinson offers a unique perspective on this idea because she was a recluse and saw things, quite literally, from the inside out. Her offering of perspective allows readers to see inside of her head and get the perspective that she was trying to portray in her poetry” (Rasch & Rasch 2017).

I feel that Shakespeare could understand that men tend to take advantage of women, treating them as they see the women in their “true roles”. *Sonnet #20* can be seen as radically changing something about an object or a person you once loved with so much passion, and thinking that by changing it a little, you can enhance your vision of its perfectness even more. By doing so, you have disregarded the fact that you have now almost ruined its pure implication, the meaning behind the object you desire, because your thought of making it “whole” ended up degrading it to society’s standards.

Many people who associate themselves with the queer and feminist standpoints could relate very well to others trying to snuff their ideologies and force them to become acceptable

human beings with “correct visions” of their future. Why do we feel like we need to “help” those who don’t fit in with our normal ideas of gender influence to better ourselves? Why do we say we “accept those who love differently than us” yet subtly demand their impotence to be replaced with what we perceive as natural? Could we, like Shakespeare, ultimately become detached ourselves from who we truly are because our skewed sense of natural love changes our depictions towards queers and feminists, forcing us to add on our own genitalia to our judgment (that is, our “disdain” and “homophobic tendencies”) ?

Knowing what I know now about Freddie, about his confusing lifestyle within the rock-and-roll world, the queer idea behind him was more than just a word. It emulated his lifestyle, controlled how he became the Freddie Mercury everyone recognizes. His eloquent ideas towards music could have been more relatable due to his “feminine” qualities. Having to work through knowing what he was and understanding that it did not “define” him only let him embrace himself more, allowing the world see what the idea of a “queer rockstar” could really be. Could I go so far as to say that Freddie Mercury helped address feminism through his acceptance of his queer lifestyle?

Regarding Emily Dickinson, her feminist, almost feverishly rebellious attitude towards the “old-fashioned” structure of women in a heterosexual relationship, the views *of* that relationship and how a woman should act and respond within her role as a woman in the nineteenth century help construct the path towards the feminist era. The poems she writes, from “I Heard a Fly Buzz, When I Died” to “The Secret” to “Because I Could Not Stop For Death” exude a sense of dignity mingled with her remarkable capability to expand on queer ideas in her work. Her undying love for Susan, which remained constant throughout her final years, proves a

“shimmering testament to the fact that love, longing, and the restlessness of the human heart are the catalyst for every creative revolution” (Popova 2019). Being a queer feminist in her time, and in ours, created a bond that every man and woman can access and enhance. Reading Dickinson’s poems, listening to Queen’s music, acting out Shakespeare’s plays, all give a sense of self-worth and a concrete individuality. We can see more clearly how much of a struggle it is to be your own within the world’s convoluted sense of “binary opposites.”

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