

# Existential Psychology East-West

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*Brokeback Mountain:*  
A Gay and Universal Love Story<sup>1</sup>

Ilene Serlin

A young, gay client left my office, and I reflected on her urgent questions. She was intent on explaining to me the difference between enjoying being submissive in sex and enjoying the dominance or cruelty of her partner. One of her main issues, she said, is that she cannot have an orgasm or feel passion with this partner, who is stable and loves her greatly, but only with someone who is emotionally cruel or unavailable. My client was turning 30 years old and wanted to settle down. She had been with the same partner for three years and was desperate at her inability to feel passion. Although I appreciate the importance of these subtle distinctions of sexual identity, equality, and love, I am also aware of the many gaps in my own understanding and of the stereotypes that I, as a heterosexual psychotherapist, hold.

Looking at *Brokeback Mountain* as a lesson in sexual identity and relationship issues is only one of the ways it would be useful for psychologists to discuss this film with clients and one another. We should be as informed as possible about the nuances of all kinds of love and be aware of our own biases and perspectives. But are the concerns in this film only about gay love? I believe that the issues raised by this film are compelling and universal themes of passion, authenticity, loneliness, and partnership. These are the very human questions that show up in all great dramas: Can any romantic love that is fueled by challenges, secrecy, and idyllic settings live in the real world? Does domestic routine always kill passion? Is romantic love inevitably tragic?

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### Setting

*Brokeback Mountain* is an exquisite story about two cowboys who fall in love. It is based on a short story written by Wyoming resident E. Annie Proulx, who won the Pulitzer prize for *The Shipping News*. First published in *The New Yorker* in 1997, it also appeared in the book *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*. The screenplay was adapted by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, and the film was brilliantly directed by Ang Lee, director of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Sense and Sensibility*. The score was created by Gustavo Santaolla (*Motorcycle Diaries*) and contains excerpts from Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson, and Rufus Wainwright. Poetic visual images of the Western landscape iconography were created by Rodrigo Prieto. The film was produced by James Shamus, is rated R, and runs for 134 min.

The story is about two young men in 1963 who are hired to work for a rancher in Signal, Wyoming. The inarticulate and solitary Ennis Del Mar, played by Heath Ledger, and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) both come from families of emotional cruelty, and one stormy night they find refuge in their tent and each others' arms. Although Ennis immediately says, "You know I ain't queer," and Jack says, "Me neither," their passion continues to smolder. After the summer, Ennis returns home to marry his childhood sweetheart (Michelle Williams, Ledger's real-life partner), and Jack goes to Texas and marries a rich boss's daughter (Anne Hathaway). Over the next 20 years, they continue to meet periodically for "fishing trips" on their idyllic *mountain*, while their respective marriages deteriorate. Scenes of silent male camaraderie taking place in wide open spaces are juxtaposed against images of the banality of domestic family life.

#### *Brokeback Mountain: Why Is It Relevant?*

I went to see the film on the evening after I met with my client, and the 10:00 p.m. showing was sold out in San Francisco. Although *Brokeback Mountain* has sold out houses in liberal New York and Los Angeles, it is not just a gay or liberal film. It won seven Golden Globe nominations and was screened at the Venice International Film Festival, and more advance tickets for *Brokeback Mountain* were sold in a metroplex in Plano, Texas, than for the blockbuster film *King Kong*. Other movies with gay characters this year, such as *Capote and Rent*, had urban or campy settings, but *Brokeback Mountain* takes place in America's heartland. It is impossible to dismiss the film as a plot designed by latte-sipping liberals or Chelsea faux

cowboys. Set in the same year as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s march on Washington and the publication of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*, the film shows the heartening progress we have made on civil rights since 1963. Even though the film was released around the time that the president "cynically flogged a legally superfluous (and unpassable) constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage for the sole purpose of whipping up the basest hostilities of his electoral base" (Rich, 2005, p. 13), polls are nevertheless showing that a large majority of Americans support equal rights for gay couples if the relationship is not called marriage.

### Brokeback Mountain: Psychological Issues

The film's postmodern layering of perspectives and issues about identity, alienation, and the need for connection (Gergen, 1991) is revealed by a look at the fascinating array of review titles. Some examples include "Masculinity and Its Discontents in Marlboro County" (Dargis, 2005), "Two Gay Cowboys Hit a Home Run" (Rich, 2005), "Cowboys, Just Like in the Movies" (Trebay, 2005), and "Love Story with One Difference" (2005). Robert Roten (2005), from the *Laramie Movie Scope*, called it a "modern story about 'star-crossed lovers,'" a modern "Romeo and Jack." Rob Nelson called it "Midnight Cowboys, Lonesome Doves," and Roger Ebert said it was "as observant as work by Bergman" (*Brokeback Mountain*, n.d.).

Reviewers and writers have quite different ideas about what the film is about. Proulx, the author of the short story on which the film is based, has said that it is "about two confused young men 'beguiled by the cowboy myth'" (Dargis, 2005, p. 13). The irony is that the protagonists are not actually cowboys but technically shepherds. Dargis noted that *Brokeback Mountain* is a film about identity ("On Brokeback, the two men are neither straight nor gay, much less queer; they are lovers, which probably accounts for the category confusion that has greeted the film"; p. 13), and Rich (2005) made the same point tongue in cheek, calling it "a heavily promoted American movie depicting two men having sex" (p. 13). Epidemiologists attempting to categorize sexually transmitted diseases have the same problem with mixed identities, having no categories for men who have sex with other men but do not identify as gay. Being gay in American poses special questions and challenges about identity formation (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Isay, 1996).

*Brokeback Mountain* is also a film about the challenging societal factors that impinge on gay relationships. The film has been called a

"landmark in the troubled history of America's relationship to homosexuality" (Rich, 2005, p. 13); Proulx's story "*Brokeback Mountain*" was written six years before Stonewall became a new frontier for gay rights, and gay student Matthew Shepard was murdered near Laramie, Wyoming, on October 6, 1998, the year after the story was published. Shepherd was pistol whipped by two men he met at a bar, tied to a split rail fence with his own shoelaces, and left to die in the cold. Consensual sex between two men was still a crime in some American states until 2002, when the Supreme Court reversed the sodomy laws; therefore, critic Trebay (2005) called the film a documentary that shows the violence so often part of gay men's experience. Other reviewers have pointed out that the problem in the film is not caused by the wife and family of the men but by their bullying bosses and shaming fathers—the patriarchy itself.

Noteworthy for clinicians are also the terrible alienation, depression, and loneliness that come with being gay in America (Herek, 1989). The name of one of the two protagonists, Ennis, brilliantly played by Ledger, means *island*, and we see him as unable to fully connect with either Jack, his wife, or his children. Jack, the other protagonist, played seductively by Gyllenhaal, is also lonely in his cold family, his wealthy and insensitive wife and in-laws. Both men live a secretive double life, and neither is able to commit authentically to either life. One rancher from Wyoming who was interviewed in a review (Trebay, 2005, p. 1) spoke of his great loneliness and said that he had considered suicide.

Another theme of *Brokeback Mountain* is purely a visual element—the power of nonverbal communication. From the grunting and wrestling between the two men and their use of silence, pauses, and body language, we feel their bond (Birdwhistell, 1970). They use understatement to make their points, as when Jack summarizes the whole story of the relationship as, "That ol' Brokeback got us good." The camera work echoes the poetic use of imagery, lingering on distant mountaintops and clear streams. The imagery even gets campy, as when the smoldering looks and shots of men's butts in tight jeans have the audience snickering. In psychotherapy, the nonverbal level is often minimized by our verbal, goal-directed, male therapeutic model. Because nonverbal and visual imagery are so directly connected to dreams and the unconscious, it would be helpful for therapists to be aware of this aspect of the therapeutic process.

Another layer of the film is archetypal. The image of the Western frontier is mythic in the American imagination, and the film shows the power of the imagination over reality. For example, the era of the cowboy actually existed for a relatively short time in American history—from the end

of the large-scale cattle drives after the Civil War to the advent of the use of rail to move cattle. By the time movies were created, this era was over. The myth of wide open spaces lives on in the collective unconscious and symbolizes freedom to be oneself, away from the stifling conformity of domesticity and technology. Part of this myth shows the conflict between nature and culture in the human psyche. Other Western films that show this conflict and also have sexual overtones include John Wayne and Monty Cliff in *Red River*, Gary Cooper and Lloyd Bridges in *High Noon*, and Rock Hudson and James Dean in *Giant*. Outsiders have always been drawn to this freedom, as shown in the John Wayne genre. Even artists who perpetuated the myth, such as Aaron Copland, who wrote *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*, were outsiders; Copland was a Jewish boy from Brooklyn who was a Communist sympathizer and more comfortable in Paris than the West (J. Weisgall, personal communication, December 26, 2005). Agnes de Mille, the choreographer of *Oklahoma*, was the ugly duckling and outsider of the famous Hollywood de Mille family, and *Oklahoma* was one of the first American musicals that captured the hearts and minds of the American public. In the political arena, Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger (Serlin, 2003) posed before pictures of Teddy Roosevelt, evoking the myth of the rugged individualistic cowboy. However, the myth of freedom is an ideal and not real; for example, cowboy Rock Hudson spent his life living in the closet. The myth of the wild West shows the tension between the real and the ideal.

As Carl Jung (1958), Rollo May (1975, 1991), and others have shown, the influence of mythic images is as significant as the reality of human thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Mythic images can be used in psychotherapy as a template to see one's own personal mythology (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988) and also images of male partnership (Beebe, 1993). In the case of my psychotherapy client, for example, her mythology was partly about her need for freedom, commitment and flight, and doomed love. Myths capture the paradoxical complexity of human nature, whereas much modern psychology emphasizes a one-dimensional approach to diagnosis or treatment. For example, the trend toward manualized methods that help clients replace negative thoughts with positive ones, or those that emphasize happiness while leaving out tragedy, miss the drama of human life. Instead of fixing symptoms, a mythic approach to psychology aims to help people deal with the real complexity between individuation and adjustment to reality, freedom and fate, and multiple selves and identities. From a mythic perspective, as

Shakespeare wrote in *As You Like It*, "all the world's a stage," and we play many roles.

Finally, a mythic perspective allows us to see that, like great art, life comes in genres. Is *Brokeback Mountain* a tragedy? Both heroes leave the community and go off to the island or paradise to find themselves a theme often found in Shakespeare. Yet can they individuate, or are societal factors such as homophobia and intolerance too strong? Greek tragedies portray the tension between freedom and fate. Is *Brokeback Mountain* in the genre of forbidden love?

Because everything else in the cowboys' life changed, but their love lasted all their life, I see this film as showing the enduring power of love. The director set out to sympathetically portray the challenges of two men in love and the human need to live an authentic life. To this end, he succeeds magnificently. The acting by Ledger may win him an Academy Award nomination, and the score and cinematography support the action seamlessly. In short, *Brokeback Mountain* introduces many complex psychological issues that would be valuable for psychologists to see and understand.

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