

The Inherent Violence of Queer Love

(As Told With Deconstructuralism Within Queer Theory)

The poem “You Are Jeff” by Richard Siken is a non-linear, multi-paragraph, highly metaphorical piece that depicts a deeply unsettling ideal of love in the eyes of the narrator. There is a character, Jeff – the problem being that the name Jeff could belong to anyone, representing multitudes of characters throughout the duration of the poem, anyone from brothers to fathers to lovers. Jeff represents ideals of freedom and love, but also of bloodshed, death, religious trauma, and a deeply unsettling wrongness that can never be fully explained. These contrasting ideologies and characters all with the same name can all be tied together in showing what society creates out of queerness using a deep understanding of poststructuralism and deconstruction within queer theory. Richard Siken uses these forms of deconstruction in queer theory in order to paint a vivid picture of the unsettling mindlessness and corruption that comes with being a queer man in all of his poems, especially “You Are Jeff”. This essay will follow the non-linear narrative and graphic imagery previously mentioned in Siken’s work and show how it all ties into queer theory.

Starting in the beginning of the poem and being scattered throughout is the theme of picking sides. When growing up queer, one often feels like they have to choose between the safe

route of keeping yourself quiet and accepted, or the dangerous route of being out and proud of yourself, but risking being rejected or even harmed for your sexuality. This is where the first two metaphorical Jeff's come in in the first stanza. "Do not choose sides yet. It is still to your advantage to remain impartial...The one in front will want to take you apart, and slowly. His deft and stubby fingers searching every shank and lock for weaknesses. You could love this boy with all your heart. The other brother only wants to stitch you back together...Do not choose sides yet" (Siken). These Jeff's are brothers, and represent opposing ideas. The first Jeff is danger and freedom, showing that being with him – being yourself – will hurt, but you'll love every moment. The second Jeff wants to "stitch you back together"; he wants to keep you good and whole, keep you quiet. But the speaker doesn't want to choose yet. This is common with queer youth, is slowly riding the line between being open with yourself and being safe. It's hard to make a choice, because it's impossible to tell where each choice will lead. This can be connected to the thesis/antithesis part of queer theory; heterosexuality over homosexuality leads to queer youth not knowing if it's safe to pick a side, to be loud or quiet. This theme of picking sides only gets stronger throughout "You Are Jeff", as in stanza twelve, Siken writes, "Who do you love, Jeff? Who do you love?" (Siken) The line is a direct attack of sorts, showing the lack of choice that one really gets to make. There will always be questions and accusations to fight, and eventually you'll be left with no choice but to speak up and pick a side. This is highlighted in stanza eighteen. "It's time to choose sides now. The stitches or the devouring mouth" (Siken). Finally, Siken uses metaphors from the first stanza to show how neither choice is truly the right one. Either you're 'healed', shown as 'normal' and not-queer to the world, or you show pride in yourself and get metaphorically eaten alive for it. There is no winning.



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there is never truly an answer that you can rely on. Are you kissing your lover, or is it your father's tongue in your mouth? Is this a sin, or is it love? According to Siken, there is no answer.

With this inescapable sense of inherent wrongness, there is also a sense of bloodshed and guilt that one can never truly be rid of. Siken repeatedly uses the idea of love being an act of violence or a threat to display the sort of fear and guilt that the world forces upon you for being queer. Stana four reads, "When he throws the wrench in the air it will catch the light as it spins towards you... You had expected something else, anything else, but the wrench never reaches you. It hangs in the air like that... It's beautiful" (Siken). Already, Siken is deconstructing the ideal of beauty in love and replacing it with violence. A wrench in the air is a threat, this is indisputable. It could hit something, severely wounding or killing them. The person throwing the wrench is causing pain, somehow. However, Siken is painting it as beautiful, as the sort of thing one simply watches be done. He's showing how violence starts to be recognized as its own form of beauty, which leads to violence being recognized as its own form of love. When one is told that their form of love is wrong and dirty, then they start to believe that anything wrong and dirty can be part of that love. The bloodshed only worsens. In stanza fifteen, Siken writes, "In your ruined shirt, on the last day, while the bruise won't heal, and the stain stays put, the right light streaming in from everywhere at once. Your broken ribs, the back of your head, your hand to mouth or hand to now, right now, like you mean it, like it's splitting you in two. Now look at the lights..." (Siken). The speaker is wounded, he's been beaten half to death, and all he's focusing on is the lights. He's slowly being killed by what he believes love to be but he refuses to acknowledge or fix it. If homosexuality is supposedly so unnatural, then is violence not supposed to be part of it? Is that not love? Siken uses this idea of physical abuse as love to show how society has so closely tied together violence and queerness, making the two almost one. Nearer

to the end, Siken even equates queer love to death itself. "...don't leave this room until I come back from the dead for you. I will come back from the dead for you...This could be a graveyard" (Siken). Stanza twenty-one shows the speaker as a dead man, desperate to get back to his beloved. What killed him isn't clear, but it's safe to assume that it was the lover, or any other Jeff, in the first place. Jeff is always shown to be the perpetrator and victim in one. Soemthing that is also unclear, however, is what the speaker's intentions are. They speak of coming from the dead, but they also say that their lover's room could be a graveyard, as though the speaker would drag him into death as well. It's as though the speaker has given up on preventing this violence and suNMQM





and violence is torn to shreds. There is no blood in this stanza, no mention of the omniscient Jeff that only read to destruction and ruin the entire poem. All that Siken writes about is a beautiful boy holding the speaker's hand in a car. There is no disgusting sexuality that the world forces upon them, there is no hatred and bigotry, there are no illusions to a wrathful God or an all-consuming sickness. There is merely a form of hope and love that leads to an idea that perhaps the world's viewpoint of queerness can still be completely deconstructed and erased,



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