

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.

Siken only further deepens this metaphor by introducing the aspect of religion within queer individuals. Part of being queer is acknowledging that religion will always be weaponized against you, whether or not you even believe in a God. Siken uses this, deconstructing the idea of an all-powerful, wrathful God and rewriting him to fit his own ideals for this poem. “Let’s say God in his High Heaven is hungry...Let’s say the Devil is played by two men. We’ll call them Jeff...you can tell that they have forgotten about God, and they are very hungry” (Siken). Already, the demonization of queer men is religion is being made apparent. Jeff, who had already been used to symbolize queerness in it’s many forms, it’s now the Devil itself, the most evil thing most of the Western world can think of. “The one on the left has gone bad in the middle, and the other one on the left is about to” (Siken). Siken is shown how these two Jeffs are already shown as the Devil in stanza five, already demonized, without even having gone ‘fully bad’. They’re symbolizing how queer men are consistently pushed into the role of being anti-God, demonic, sinners, etc. etc., without so much as being given a chance to prove themselves otherwise. It becomes very existential in a way, reflecting Nietzsche’s idea of truth simply being what you make of it, simply a mass combination of “metaphors, metonymies, and anthromorphisms” (Nietzsche). Are the two Jeffs the Devil because they were put in that position and simply conformed to it, or are they the Devil inherently? Siken intentionally does that make this distinction entirely clear, presumably wanting to play off of how the church typically chooses to view queer men in the eyes of God. This religious mockery only returns in stanza twenty-three, where Siken writes, “Let’s say that God is the space between two men and the Devil is the space between two men...Jeff and Jeff and Jeff and Jeff...all of these Jeffs are trying to tell you something. Come closer” (Siken). The metaphor of them all being Jeff blurs the line between God and Devil, creating a muddy mess for the speaker to trek through as they try to determine

what Jeff is telling them. Are queer men demonic or righteous? Will they be allowed into eternal life or damned to Hell? This ties back in with not being able to choose, as the choice is completely out of the readers hands. There's no way of knowing who Jeff is anymore.

Of course, with the argument of religion, one also has to cover the other forms of inherent wrongness forced upon queer men. In "Epistemology of the Closet", Sedgwick brings up the age-old argument of homosexuality being compared to things such as incest, pedophilia, and bestiality. With this argument, a picture is painted of queer men being dirty, predatory, or simply incorrect on the most base level imaginable. Siken plays off of this, using graphic imagery to make the reader uncomfortable, creating that sort of tension that is created by the repeated attempts to villainize queer individuals. "You are playing cards with three Jeffs. One is your father, one is your brother, and the other is your current boyfriend" (Siken). Already, the lines are being muddled between father/boyfriend/lover, taking on a distinctly Freudian feel of implying similarities between the metaphorical father, brother, and lover. This is delving deep into the comparison between homosexuality and incest, because now the three Jeffs are all mixed up. "...you can't talk right now, one of the Jeffs has put his tongue in your mouth. Please let it be the right one" (Siken). Siken took that muddled line and simply destroyed it, creating the idea that there was no longer any way of knowing the difference between homosexuality and incest. Instead, it could be either, and there's no way to discover which is which. This line also manages to deconstruct the idealized connection between incest and homosexuality by painting the speaker as a victim; they do not know the difference between father, brother, and lover, and therefore can not tell which one is kissing them. They have no way of knowing whether or not it needs to be stopped, which can be used to show the inner conflict that comes with being queer. There is a constant attempt to discover if what you are doing is actually a sin, or actually dirty, but

there is never truly an answer that you can rely on. Are you kissing your lover, or is it your fathers 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 it’s own form of beauty, which leads to violence being recognized as it’s 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 succumbed to it entirely, as now only wants his lover by his side, even if it is just in a grave. This could be referencing mutual suicide, the two men in love knowing that they wouldn't be accepted, knowing that they wouldn't be able to escape all the wrongness and violence that is constantly forced upon them. The idea of death ties in in that it's a last resort, perhaps the only method of escape from what everyone expects from a queer man. There's no denying the constant imagery of death; if it's not blood, then it's sickness. Stanza thirteen reads, "You have cancer. Let's say you have cancer. Let's say you've swallowed a bad thing and now it's got its hands inside you. This is the essence of love..." (Siken). The reference to sickness is a popular one within queer writing. The AIDs epidemic in the 1980s, which killed thousands of people, and went vastly ignored by the government due to rampant homophobia. Siken is drawing the comparison to cancer instead, making this sickness have the idea that anyone can get it and it's unpreventable. You get sick, you suffer, you die, and there's no way around it. The idea of unpreventinbility in death creates a gruesome idea being homophobia and how it kills, especially when compared to the idea of love itself. The implication of love being a killer only further ties in the ideology of queerness being pushed together with force consistently.

Another big part of Siken's writing is the lack of identity, shown in depth with the consistent metaphor of Jeff. Jeff is everyone, and everyone is Jeff. No one gets to have their own identity or stay true to themselves, not even the speaker. The speaker is also Jeff. This ties into the original point with not being able to choose the direction your life goes in. While riding the line between safety and sanity, one loses their sense of self. All queer people have a sort of core experience they have all lived through, creating the idea of Jeff, who is both God and the Devil, both your father and your lover. No one can avoid becoming Jeff. Stanza nineteen expresses this belief. "Here is a list with all of your names, Jeff. They're not the same name, Jeff. They're not the same at all" (Siken). Every character has been named Jeff and has been indistinguishable from each other, but there is this underlying panic that surely there's a difference, surely they're not all the same. This helps to deconstruct the idea of a 'queer identity', as it shows both the core experience and the need to still be an individual, however difficult achieving that individuality may end up being.

Because of all this violence and wrongness, there's an underlying force of hopelessness and desperation that underlines Siken's work. He writes a speaker that just wants to love and be loved so badly that he's willing to let love kill him in the process. The repeated imagery and cycle of sickness and violence highlight that even if that is all the speaker will ever know, he'll still accept it with open arms, simply because he believes it to be love. In stanza eight, the speaker is a child, yet still expresses this need for love. "There is an empty space next to you in the backseat of the station wagon. Make it the shape of everything you need it to be. Now say hello" (Siken). Even at a young age, the speaker knows the inherent feeling of wrongness, and therefore is already trying to fill the metaphorical void in the only way they know how. It's not long, however, until hope is slowly being lost. "Take the light inside you like a blessing, like a

knee to the chest, holding onto it and not letting go. Now let it go” (Siken) The light, representing hope, is something that the speaker originally wanted to hold on to in stanza fourteen. Hope for love, hope for a lack of suffering, but then he lets it go. The world has worn him down and pain is now all he knows. How can he continue to hope when the world feels against him? This sense of desperation only grows later in stanza eighteen, where Siken writes, “You just wanted to prove to him that there was one safe place, just one safe place where you could love him. You have not found that place yet. You have not made that place yet. You are here. You are here. You’re still right here” (Siken). The speaker just wants to be left to love in peace, but the world has made itself so unsafe for himself and then lover that there’s nothing left. The repetition at the end shows a sense of madness, of losing a sort of sanity as one tries to cope with the hand they were dealt in life, knowing that there was nowhere else they could go. It’s deeply unsettling, and adds a fierce emotional effect that deconstructs the idea that queer men are predators by painting a picture of one who is just desperately hurting and in love.

However, at the end, there is once again a spark of love and hope. In the very last stanza, stanza twenty-four, the reader is suddenly thrown into a much more realistic situation than those that had been presented previously. There is no Jeff in this situation. “You’re in a car with a beautiful boy, and he won’t tell you that he loves you, but he loves you. And you feel like you’ve done something terrible...and you’re tired” (Siken). The speaker knows that this is love, genuine love, but he’s too tired of pain and failure and guilt to hold onto it. He doesn’t seem to know if he’s still capable of that love. But the stanza continues. “...you’re trying to choke down the feeling, and you’re trembling, but then he reaches over and he touches you, like a prayer for which no words exist, and you feel your heart taking root in your body, like you’ve discovered something you don’t even have a name for” (Siken). This is where the entire idea of wrongness



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, leaving just the innocence of love itself behind without any of the blood that Siken was so convinced would come with it earlier in the poem. This stanza rewrites the entire narrative by suggesting that maybe the world wasn't correct, and that maybe love was just love, not anything corrupt or painful. It's just love left behind, in the end.

“You Are Jeff” is a poem that uses heavy-handed metaphorical devices and graphic imagery to paint a picture of queerness that is neither pleasant nor painless. Siken writes of bloody abuse and sickness to demonstrate the danger of being queer, he writes of the dangers of both staying silent and being true to themselves, he writes of being a pawn to both the Devil and God alike, and he writes of being so disgustingly morally corrupt by your own forms of love that there's nothing left except one huge, overarching being of Jeff. He writes of the lack of identity that comes with queerness when the world strips it away from you.

However, Siken also uses this poem to tear away his own long-spoken ideology. He makes sure that in the end, the speaker and reader still find a sense of love, harmony, and hope in the world; he successfully deconstructs the idea of queerness being associated with everything negative, such as corruption and bruises. He sheds some light upon what seemed to be an entirely hopeless situation, creating a new narrative that love will never be inherently wrong, and that

things will get better. This usage of queer theory is an almost-violent act of self-acceptance and love for oneself and other, leading it to be a truly remarkable application.

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