

Ambiguity of  
homosexuality in  
"free love" by ali  
smith and "mr. and  
mrs. elliot" ...



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In Ali Smith's "Free Love" while traveling abroad in Amsterdam, a teenage girl is able to explore something she has never been capable of before, her sexual orientation. Whereas, in Ernest Hemingway's "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot", to society Cornelia and Hubert seem to be happily married, however behind closed doors Cornelia is able to express her true sexual identity. Both Smith and Hemingway exemplify this theme through the social un-acceptance of homosexuality in the 20th century, the inability to display one's sexual preference, and being non-conformant to gender roles.

Within the past 25 years, the gay rights movement has made tremendous efforts in promoting "human rights and fight discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons"(Levy. Web). Throughout a majority of the 20th-century, people feared for their lives, due to the repercussions associated with coming out. In "Free Love", the narrator goes from being in Amsterdam where she can be open in her relationship with Jackie, "we were kissing in the middle of Amsterdam and nobody even noticing"(Smith, 7). To going back home and not even being able to hold hands with someone of the same-sex. "But then, what people think is sordid is relative after all; the person who saw us holding hands between our seats at the theatre one night thought it sordid enough to tell our mothers about us in anonymous letters"(Smith, 9). During this era, society was unaccepting to those who did not meet the social norms. This is clear in the passage of the short story as the narrator and Jackie are simply holding hands and are immediately scrutinized. The person who sees them holding hands is not even capable of telling the girls' mothers in person but rather has to remain unidentified. In "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot", Cornelia experiences similar difficulties with her sexual

identity. She must remain in a marriage with Hubert, whom she does not love in order to continue her sexual relationship with her girl friend. Throughout the text, Cornelia's alleged lover is written as 'girl friend', implying she is her friend that is a girl, rather than her intimate lover. Hemingway does not use the term girlfriend as if he did, his story would have remained unpublished. Although the texts take place in different decades, both the narrator and Cornelia are unable to express their sexual orientation without the fear of facing deadly backlash. As a result of society's inability to comprehend homosexuality at the time, those who were not even gay were afraid to be associated with the term, as it was such a controversial topic throughout the 20th-century.

During the 1900's in the United States, numerous laws were put into place, which made it a criminal offence to advocate for homosexuality (Chauncey, Web). Throughout Smith's text, the narrator never openly divulges her sexual preference. She hints at it numerous times through her sexual encounters with Suzi and Jackie, but the terms "gay" or "lesbian" are never used, her sexual identity is merely implied. She even says, "I'd have these thoughts for years and they were getting harder and harder to keep silent about. I didn't really have a choice"(Smith, 5). The narrator is incapable of expressing her sexuality as during the 1990's "roughly two-thirds of Americans condemn[ed] homosexuality or homosexual behaviour as morally wrong or a sin"(Herek, Web). Throughout this decade they were the targets of discrimination, sexual assault and verbal abuse (Herek, Web). Similar to "Free Love", Ernest Hemingway also chooses not to use any homosexual terms in his text as in the 1920's when the story was initially published it

was illegal to be gay in the United States as well as Europe (National Archives, Web). Based on the time period the story takes place in, it can be interpreted that Cornelia is using her marriage with Hubert as a cover up in order to continue to explore her sexual relationship with the girl friend. " Mrs. Elliot and the girl friend now slept together in the big mediaeval bed... Elliot drank white wine and Mrs. Elliot and the girl friend made conversation and they were all quite happy"(Hemingway, 125). To society, Cornelia and Hubert are a happily married couple, however behind closed doors, Cornelia and her girl friend are able to be together. Mrs. Elliot and the narrator both exemplify the struggles those endured who did not meet " the standard social norms"; they are both required to shy away from their sexuality in order to uphold their places in society.

Typically in a heterosexual relationship, there is an ideology that males tend to be superior towards their female counterparts. However, in a gay or lesbian relationship they tend to have a stronger partnership, due to the fact that they do not conform to what society considers as " traditional" gender roles (Lehmiller, Web). This breaking of gender roles is exemplified in " Free Love" through the narrator and Jackie as both women display equality in their relationship. " Otherwise it was downstairs at either of our houses after everybody else had gone to bed, on the floor or on the couch, one of us with one hand over the other's mouth, both of us holding and catching our breath" (Smith, 8). In this excerpt, the word " us" is used more than once which symbolizes the equality displayed through the gender roles in their relationship. Similarly, Cornelia as well does not correspond to the gender specific stereotypes. Unlike the narrator, Cornelia experiences what it is like

being involved in a heterosexual relationship. In her relationship with Hubert, he is seen as inferior. She even refers to him as "you dear sweet boy" (Hemingway, 124). The gender roles are inversed due to Cornelia's sexuality, as she does not associate herself with heterosexual gender stereotypes. Although the narrator and Mrs. Elliot are both of the female sex, the gender they both express in their partnerships neither masculine nor feminine, but rather a combination of each.

Both Ali Smith's and Ernest Hemingway's short fiction "Free Love" and "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot" respectively, allow the reader to understand the effects not complying with "society's social norms". Each short story discloses how our culture responded to someone who was not heterosexual in the 20th-century, why so many people remained inside the closet and the lack of specific gender dominance in a gay or lesbian relationship. In Smith's and Hemingway's stories, this was not uncommon as "Hemingway really dealt with issues of sexual identity both in his published and unpublished writing" (Lehmann-Haupt, Web) and Smith displays "a capacity for using the personal and individual to suggest universal truths and a skill for hinting at a wider world beyond the story" (British Council, Web). Not only do both these texts divulge issues related to sexuality, we also obtain direct insight of both author's personal experiences. Thus allowing for the texts to display a personal perspective on the effects of this topic.

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