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## Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*

by Richard Payton

(Honors English 154, Speech 120)

The Assignment: Read Holly Devor's "Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes." Write a paper discussing how the issue of gender was treated in a film of your choice.

According to Holly Devor's essay "Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes," the concept of "gender" as a means of identification has no real basis in "sex characteristics" (284) – or "biological makeup" – but is, rather, a socially-created construct, superimposed on individuals based on "feminine" or "masculine" attributes. Roles and expectations for an individual in society, then, are largely determined by which "gender" he or she has been attributed. If society is to be believed, according to Devor, an individual must be either male or female. Devor draws a distinction between "masculinity" and "male," and between "femininity" and "female," putting them into a relationship of signifier/signified. Attributes of masculinity are generally associated with maleness in society, and femininity with femaleness (285). However, as Devor is careful to point out, these attributes are not biologically innate to the specific genders, but, rather, are shared by persons across the board, and only arbitrarily grouped into "clusters of social definition" (284) for hierarchical categorization. These views are adopted by John Cameron Mitchell in his film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, which explores and elaborates upon Devor's theoretical concepts in a more concrete and immediate human sphere.

The protagonist of the film – Hedwig Robinson – lacks the physical characteristics by which we are accustomed to assign gender. However, as Devor points out, these bodily aspects are "largely covered by clothing in daily life" anyway, and so gender is often recognized "more on the basis of [masculine or feminine] characteristics" (284). Mitchell, therefore, by removing the overt and physical signifiers for gender categorization, throws us immediately into a context in which we must address gender in terms of Devor's theories – that is, as based on behavior.

The filmmakers clearly did not set out to make this an easy task for an audience accustomed, even in this day and age, to certain set notions of gender and sexuality. At this point in time, we as a society have become fairly used to – if not necessarily accepting, or even tolerant, of – particular ideas of sexuality as a spectrum ranging from "straight" to "gay" with *maybe* one or two points in between. However, even in this context we have little problem with gender identification: we think of the stereotypical gay male as being an "effeminate male," or the stereotypical lesbian female as being a "masculine female." Devor, however, argues that, by attributing these categorical gendered aspects onto non-gendered individuals (that is to say, anybody, as gender is not innate biologically), we are in fact essentially determining their gender, most likely on a subconscious level, and thus setting up certain societal expectations on which to base judgment of their actions. Thus, while we may think of a man as "effeminate" or a woman as "masculine," what we are really doing is thinking of them as "female" and "male," respectively.

Hedwig illustrates this idea very nicely. For example, for most of the film, she is referred

to as “she.” However, as we find out fairly quickly, she lacks the specific biological parts which we generally associate with a “she.” But, again, lacking also are those parts which would classify her as a “he.” And so our system is thrown out of whack: we can no longer say, “ah, X is just an effeminate male” or “just a masculine female,” because we’re left only with the attributes – that is, with the *signifiers* of gender, but without any accustomed signified. The film shows us, though, how facile we are at superimposing the constructs with which we’ve been raised – it forces us to, really. All throughout, Hedwig is constantly reminding us that she’s something we’ve never really encountered before (or, at least, not very often), as far as sex characteristics are concerned; yet, because of her gendered attributes, which are largely feminine – a “feminine” manner of dress and appearance (e.g. hairstyle), a higher vocal range, etc. – we continue to think of her as a female. Mitchell, of course, catches us in the blatant act, and turns the tables completely: during the final scene (“Midnight Radio”), Hedwig, for the most part female in our minds up to this point, is “transformed” into an entity which all of the sudden forces us to change our take on the matter (“Is she a male now? Wait, was ‘she’ ever *female*? ... ohhh ...”). Not only this, but, as if to drive the point even further home, Hedwig’s husband Yitzhak, actually played by a woman, a character we’ve been thinking of in terms of “effeminate male,” transforms completely into a *very* effeminate female. This scene, while confusing at first, proves to be very rewarding when analyzed in terms of gender and identity theory. If considered carefully, it becomes clear that Mitchell is giving us a hint, pushing us subtly in the direction he wants, and, finally, while we may not have solved the riddle of gender and identity, while we may not have the answers, we have at least been *shown* the riddle – and, as Heidegger says, “the task is to see the riddle” (79).

Perhaps the most important function of Hedwig, though, is to help us understand the concept of the gender-construct, see it for what it is, and then transcend it. While *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is a film about many things, at its core it is a film about existential transcendence through love, and if we fail to see and understand this then we have missed something beautiful and wonderful that the work wants to give for free to all comers.

Hedwig, after all, is in reality preoccupied with one thing and one thing only – and it’s not gender, her past, or her music, prominent as these things are throughout the film. We couldn’t blame her, of course, if it were any of these – after all, who has more right to be preoccupied with gender than Hedwig? But what really obsesses Hedwig, and has for her entire life, is *love*, and the search for love.

The film’s concept of love is predicated on the theory put forward by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*, and introduced into the action of the film by the musical number “The Origin of Love,” accompanied by a wonderful animated sequence. In this theory, humanity began as connected pairs, which were subsequently split in two by the gods in order to reduce the power of humans, and it was out of this breaking that love sprang – essentially a longing for the lost other half.

For Hedwig, this is the driving force of existence. In aligning herself metaphorically with the Berlin Wall, she introduces this idea from the get-go, and carries it throughout, as we watch her attempts to reunite and complete her identity both in her past and her present. It becomes clear, through the action and through Hedwig’s songs, that she considers a complete reunification of self to be an existentially hopeless quest – after all, humanity was split by the gods; we are born scarred. For Hedwig, the purpose of love is to help ease the pain of isolation, not to mend it, and any sort of whole identity we can construct for ourselves will have to be by ourselves, not through another individual. This is conveyed powerfully by the very last shot,

which shows a naked Hedwig-entity staggering alone down a bleak night-lit alley as the camera cranes up to an ever-increasing high-angle shot. This emphasizes the human isolation conveyed by the film, but we also keep in mind the animation sequence we have just seen, in which two faces merge into one, which in turn merges into a tattoo of the same on Hedwig's upper leg, suggesting that there is, ultimately, both hope in the self and help from others. For all its trappings, for all its discussion of issues and constructs, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, in the end, is a film about awareness, about seeing the riddle – of society, of the self, of love, of everything – and, finally, transcending.

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