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# Society and Its Influence on Identity: The Consequences of Heterosexism and Heteronormativity in Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep* Jayla Johnson

The emotions Lee Fiora and Sin-Jun Kim experience in Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep* (2005) represent the living embodiment of everyone: uncertainty, awkwardness, and a desire to love and be loved. Sittenfeld adds a questioning sexuality to the turmoil of feelings Lee and Sin-Jun encounter, both of whom grapple with their sexuality in an environment that tries to restrict it. By tying Lee's and Sin-Jun's sexual uncertainty to their identity, Sittenfeld presents just how easily their identity can be altered in order to find acceptance in society and their surrounding peers. Through the heterosexist environment of Ault, where homosexuality is often rarely acknowledged or supported, Sin-Jun is compelled to keep her lesbian identity a secret while Lee suppresses her sexuality – both attempting to adhere to society's conventional attitude regarding sexuality.

Lee, explicitly aware that she lives within a heterosexist society where heterosexuality is valued over homosexuality, is quick to denounce the idea that she might be gay or bisexual. Lee's fear of being a lesbian stems directly from living within a subconsciously homophobic school. Lee feels "terror [pass] through [her]" (Sittenfeld 34) at the possibility of someone discovering the "gay" pamphlet hidden in her room, imagining how disastrous it would be to her future if "everyone at Ault thought [she] was a lesbian" (34). If homosexuality was an accepted norm just like heterosexuality, Lee would not feel as if being a lesbian, or having others mistake

her for a lesbian, is the end of the world. Her fear of being seen as gay by her peers is so severe that skipping class and facing the consequence of “having [her] name reported to the dean” (34) to destroy any evidence of her reading a pamphlet about a sexual orientation that does not pertain to heterosexuality “seemed a small price to pay” (34). And it is not just society suppressing her from exploring her sexuality – Lee finds herself “trying not to be excited” (32) at the thought of kissing Gates. She feels her “stomach tighten” (31) while reading the pamphlet and has to force her eyes away and firmly tell herself, “No, [I’m] not gay” (33). Lee, in a desperate attempt to fit in Ault, conforms her sexuality to reflect those around her, rather than take the time to sort through her conflicting feelings and determine her sexual orientation for herself.

Ault’s attempt to bring more awareness to the LGBTQ community by hosting yearly drag shows and pamphlets that tackle sexuality, instead further supports homosexuality being viewed as “abnormal” and heterosexuality as “normal.” In the infirmary, among the pamphlets that address “*Am I gay?*” (31), are several pamphlets surrounding it, ranging in topics from suicide to date rape. Here are pamphlets meant to inform students of serious, terrible issues and, within the mix, is one about questioning your sexuality, suggesting that being gay is as terrible as contemplating suicide or experiencing rape. The fact that the “gay” pamphlets are only found in the infirmary where the “sick or faking sick” (30) stay, subtly implies that questioning your sexuality and being gay are signs of mental sickness, or abnormality. Even when Ault hosts an annual “drag dance” (17), it is not to raise more attention on, for instance, transgender issues, but rather to poke fun at the very thought of seeing “girls dress as boys, and boys dress as girls” (17). By giving Ault students the chance to “try on” a different identity, the school promotes the idea that it is okay to dress in drag for one night and laugh about it with friends, but only to return to

normativity the next day. To throw a “drag extravaganza” (18) without acknowledging the problems and stereotypes the LGBTQ community faces on a daily basis, is to silence their voices. Ault, while not only ignoring the issues and experiences of the LGBTQ community, symbolizes a society that views homosexuality as abnormal.

The negative outlook on homosexuality in Ault and society leads Sin-Jun to conceal her sexuality from her friends and family, believing she could never, truly, be accepted. When Lee asks if there is something going on between her and Clara, Sin-Jun denies it, claiming “nothing is going on” (234) out of fear of Lee condemning their relationship. Considering Ault’s acceptance of heterosexual couples, had Sin-Jun been in a relationship with a man rather than woman, she would not have felt embarrassed and ashamed nor would she have avoided telling Lee. Instead, the stigma of being a lesbian creates such a strong fear in Sin-Jun that she cannot even confide in her friend. Similar to how Lee, early in her freshman year, worried about the school believing she might be gay, Sin-Jun, too, fears the school discovering her secret. Sin-Jun, constantly having to mask her sexuality, is driven to believe the only way to escape society’s oppression is to permanently leave it. Sin-Jun’s attempted suicide, by “[taking] pills on purpose” (208), serves as a much needed reminder that society’s and Ault’s disapproving attitude toward sexual orientations that deviate from what is considered “normal” has drastic consequences. Growing up in a school environment where “there are no gay people” (32) and within a heterosexist culture, Sin-Jun’s sexual orientation alienates her from her peers, repressing not only her sexual identity but personal identity, as well.

Being an adolescent in the twentieth century is difficult enough with trying to navigate friendships, homework, and the pressure to be popular and well-liked. Lee and Sin-Jun, however,

have an added obstacle – both girls struggle with their sexuality. Induced by the environment around them, Lee represses the idea that she might be a lesbian, and Sin-Jun hides her true sexuality from her peers in order to “fit in” and appear as any other Ault student. In an ideal world, Lee and Sin-Jun would have the freedom to explore their sexuality without society’s and Ault’s influence on their actions. Instead, these two girls find themselves acceding to societal pressure, consequently missing out on the opportunity to discover their true identity and sexuality, and to engage in relationships undeterred by what others think of them.

### **Works Cited**

Sittenfeld, Curtis. *Prep*. New York: Random House, Inc., 2005. Print.