



# Queer Literature: Questions on Sexuality

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## Abstract

The mankind has come a long way since the stone age; it has progressed in almost all the fields. Now, the jobs are not confined to genders and the society is not entirely patriarchal anymore. It has been a long journey for women to take stand in society, but they have proved their mettle. Not just women, transgender community has also found their voice in the vast crowd of society. The world has been changing and now there are not just two genders anymore, and the concepts of sexuality has left all the questions far behind. The ideas of non-heterosexual relationships and same-sex attraction can be traced back to almost late 1500s when Geoffrey Chaucer wrote Canterbury Tales, and it became more popular when Christopher Marlowe wrote his famous play, Edward II. The play is believed to have homosexual themes, the first of its kind. Since then, there has been innumerable books, articles, novels, etc. written on this subject.

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## Introduction

The literature of the twentieth century is marked with various elements such as; imagism, surrealism, realism, pessimism, etc. But the most important characteristic is the queer literature. Although queer literature is not considered a standard genre, it is still an important one. "Queer literature, refers to narratives that feature gay themes, symbolism, or characters. This is a broad category of literature, as no one piece of queer fiction reflects the same lived experience." (Queer Literature, n. pag) Queer literature has been growing in popularity over the past few years, and for good reason. There is a diverse range of LGBTQ+ voices out there, and they all deserve to be heard. Queer literature is often characterised by its experimental nature, and this allows for a rich and diverse range of writing. Queer literature often centres around themes such as identity, sexuality, and relationship. One of the most popular types of queer literature is the contemporary romance. These novels typically follow two characters who are of the same gender, but the romance typically centres around something other than their sexual relationship.

Another popular type of queer literature is the coming-of-age story. These novels typically deal with young adults as they discover their identity and sexuality. They often explore themes such as discrimination and coming out.

Queer literature is a vital part of the LGBTQ+ community, and it should be read by everyone. It provides a unique perspective on the world, and it is important to read stories that reflect our own. It encompasses literary texts, aka writings, which engage with queer subject matter. It often deals with marginalized and often invisible groups of people who share un-normative identities and experiences and challenges heteronormative and traditional concepts of love and sexuality. It often speaks to the LGBTQ+ community on a personal level, offering an insider's perspective on experiences that are often difficult to talk about. "Queer Theory was, and remains, first and foremost a scholarly enterprise, although its adherents often explore the relationship between theory and practice by acknowledging the power relations inherent in the production of knowledge." (Queer Theory)

Queer literature is often powerful, confronting, and refreshingly honest. It majorly centres around gay, lesbian or transgender characters, for example Bernardine Evaristo's Booker Prize winning book, *Girl, Woman, Other* is based on the lives of twelve lesbian or trans women of colour who are trying to make their name in the world and are trying to find their identity. She writes, "I mean, how on earth can you be a Professor of Modern Life when your terms of relevance are all male, and actually all-white". (Evaristo, 47) Many writers have been writing on queer for a long period of time. It started with Geoffrey Chaucer who is believed to have written the first queer or homosexual character, i.e.; the Pardoner. The Pardoner in *Canterbury Tales* is depicted as someone with effeminate characteristics or a eunuch.

For many of Chaucer's readers, the narrator's pronouncement is intimately linked with certain deservedly influential commentaries on the Pardoner's sexual status, and any reconsideration of the subject must acknowledge its debt to those studies and carefully discriminate its conclusions from theirs. In his groundbreaking review of medieval texts on medicine and physiognomy, Walter Clyde Curry opened discussion of the Pardoner's physical nature.<sup>3</sup> Although the point is seldom noticed, Curry interprets the narrator's pronouncement as offering a choice between impotence and effeminacy (p. 58). He treats the mention of these two sexual phenomena as serving to define a third possibility, underlying and unnamed, and then shows that the Pardoner's physical characteristics -- long, fine hair; high voice; glaring eyes; and beardlessness -- fit the descriptions of eunuchs offered by medieval doctors and physiognomists. All but one of Curry's sources, moreover, associate eunuchry with immorality, and some also insist that the congenital eunuch is more evil than the castrated eunuch. (Monica E. McAlpine - 'the Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters.')

It is widely believed that there are many homosexual elements in Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* play. The first type of homosexual element comes from the character of Gaveston, who is very close to the king and is shown to be very homosexual. This deters many nobles from helping the king, because it is seen as a move towards

monarchy taking a homosexual aspect. Another homosexual element comes from the character of the Duke of Gloucester, who is married to the king's sister and is shown to be having an affair with the king's page, Pembroke. This again deters many nobles from helping the king, because they see it as a move towards Monarchical instability. Another homosexual element comes from the character of the Earl of Warwick, who has a relationship with the king's brother and is shown to be very fond of him. This again deters many nobles from helping the king, because they see it as a move towards monarchical instability. These are just a few examples of the homosexual elements in the play, and there are many more.

Shakespeare has numerous plays and sonnets. Out of 154 sonnets, he dedicated first seventeen sonnets to 'fair youth' and 'a young aristocratic man', and it is believed that the 'young man' could be William Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke. William Herbert was a close friend and patron of Shakespeare. Moreover, the play, Twelfth Night was written in 1601 and first performed in 1602. The character of Cesario is complexly written and is still questioned to this day in respects of sexuality and homosexual character. It is aptly discussed in the passage below,

Questions of sexuality in Shakespeare, and indeed questions about Shakespeare's own sexuality, began scarcely before the ink was dry. While married to Anne Hathaway, who remained in Stratford-upon-Avon throughout Shakespeare's career in London, he addressed 126 of his sonnets to a young man. And yet as early as 1640, editors were keen to expunge any whiff of homosexuality from the sonnets, with John Benson publishing an edition of the poems with many of the pronouns 'he' and 'his' revised to 'she' and 'her'. This dismissal of queerness in canonical works of literature, particularly from this period, is not only disappointing and intellectually dishonest; it is also simply inaccurate: labels such as homosexual or heterosexual 'did not exist as conceptual categories' at the time Shakespeare was writing. ("British Library.")

In the 20th century, queer literature emerged and grew in popularity, due in part to the ground-breaking work of writers such as Michel Foucault, Charles Bukowski, and Walt Whitman. Queer literature challenges heteronormativity, presenting narratives and characters that defy simplistic dichotomies of male/female, gay/straight, and rural/urban.

Walt Whitman was one of the most versatile writers of nineteenth century. Even though, there has been no concrete proof on Whitman's sexual orientation but one can quite easily understand from his many works that he might have been gay. In research from Colella Dan, "Whitman's sexual preference was towards men despite his denial in written accounts. Through close-reading and research, many gay critics see countless homosexual references in Whitman's work ... Whitman fell in love with his patients as he worked as a nurse in Washington." (*How Gay Was Walt Whitman?*) In another work, Whitman has written about a man who is experiencing attraction towards the people of same sex as his, and he is not denying the feelings either. "Firstly, he explains in "Sometimes with One I Love" the reasons behind his celebration of the male body and homoerotic passion: "I loved a certain person ardently and my love was not return'd, / Yet out of that I have written these songs" (3-4). It is not only that he loved a man, shadowing his lover's gender by the expression "a certain person", but also that

he was not loved back, which incites the queer theorist to believe that the causes of this rejection lie in the heteronormative society the poet lives in.” (*Commentary on Walt Whitman’s “Calamus.”*)

There have been numerous writers in nineteenth and twentieth century but none like Oscar Wilde. He is considered to be one of the most prolific writers of the nineteenth century but he wrote way ahead of his time. Many of his works have a glimpse of homosexual elements and the character of *Dorian Gray*, in Wilde’s book of same name, can easily be called the ground-breaking character in the history of queer literature. One can comprehend the extent of homosexual elements in *Dorian Gray* in the lines below,

Wilde had suddenly inundated late-Victorian society with a highly visible body of homoerotic literature, and there was bound to be a reaction. *Dorian Gray*, while cautious, was implicitly homosexual, and the hugely successful plays contained coded references that were obvious to the initiated. His poetry and public comments were often more explicit. He orchestrated startling and risky demonstrations, such as posing his gay friends and acolytes at play openings ostentatiously dressed and sporting artificial green carnations. (“How Gay Was *Dorian Gray*?”)

In 21<sup>st</sup> century as well, there are many writers who write about queer. Abhijit Naskar is a famous neuroscientist and best-selling author of many books. His book, *Amor Apocalypse: Canım Sana İhtiyacım*, highlights the differences and similarities in heterosexual and homosexual beings. In his book, *Amor Apocalypse: Canım Sana İhtiyacım*, he writes,

“Straight and queer are products of a bipolar world,  
In the sanctuary of love there's no straight, no queer.  
In love's domain queer is straight, straight is queer,  
A heart full of love and light is radiantly nonpolar.” (*Amor Apocalypse: Canım Sana İhtiyacım*)

In *Giovanni’s Room*, gay author James Baldwin writes, “‘Love him,’ said Jacques, with vehemence, ‘love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters? And how long, at the best, can it last, since you are both men and still have everywhere to go?’” The novel is set in a grave tone, written as a kind of confession of a homosexual person.

*Giovanni's Room* is a profound exploration of the complexities of human sexuality, particularly in its exploration of homosexual elements. The novel follows protagonist David, who, after a series of tumultuous events, finds himself in Paris, struggling with his own identity. As he comes to terms with his sexuality, he begins to confront the difficulties and discrimination associated with being gay. One of the most powerful aspects of Baldwin's novel is his unflinching portrayal of the discrimination and prejudice that exists against homosexuals. Though David and Giovanni's relationship is a source of comfort and understanding, it is also a source of fear and anxiety.

The novel opens with David in a bar, where he meets the eponymous Giovanni. As their relationship develops, it becomes increasingly clear that David is struggling to come to terms with his homosexuality. His feelings for Giovanni become increasingly intense, and he begins to grapple with the implications of his sexuality. Through their relationship, Baldwin explores the difficulties of being a homosexual in a world of heteronormativity and

homophobia. As David and Giovanni's relationship develops, it is clear that they are not just lovers, but also a source of much-needed support and understanding for one another.

"The Catcher in the Rye" is one of the most celebrated novels of the 20th century and a cornerstone of the canon of queer literature. The story revolves around Holden Caulfield, a prep school student who is rebellious and iconoclastic. Holden is openly gay, and his experiences in the male-dominated world of boarding school define his opposition to society's norms and values. Salinger's portrayal of Holden's homosexuality is frank, uncompromising, and unapologetic, and has been cited as a significant factor in the historical acceptance of gay rights. "The Catcher in the Rye" is also notable for its depiction of 1950s America, which is largely sympathetic to Holden's anti-social attitude and iconoclastic views.

The New Queer Reader by Edited by Dale Peck and Jay Stevens became famous for its honest description of queer and the relevance. This anthology collects seminal essays on queer culture, past and present, from some of the foremost gay and lesbian intellectuals, including bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Tim Lynch, and Sarah Schulman. The range of topics is wide, from gay history to AIDS activism to current debates about queerness, identity, and community. The New Queer Reader is essential reading for anyone interested in understanding queer history and culture, and in thinking critically about ways to create a more inclusive world for all.

Edmund White is an internationally acclaimed novelist, essayist and critic. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, *The Beautiful Byzantines*, and *White Noise*. White's work has been interpreted as dealing with gay and lesbian life, identity, and experience. His most famous book, *The Physicists*, is a graphic novel about physicists working on the atomic bomb during World War II.

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