

Queer theory essay sample



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Queer theory emerged from gay/lesbian studies' defining the social construction of normative and deviant categories of sexual behaviour. While gay/lesbian studies focused largely on questions of homosexuality, queer theory expanded its area of research, looking at anything that falls into 'normative and deviant categories'¹, particularly sexual activities and identities. Gayle Rubin's essay 'Thinking Sex' demonstrates how the 'contemporary west arranges its beliefs about 'good sexuality and bad sexuality'² she presented two diagrams showing examples of these, examples of which I will refer to when looking at my chosen two texts.

Sarah Water's novel *Tipping the Velvet* encourages us to think outside the norm, the protagonist Nancy Astley (later adopting the stage name of Nan King) begins the book within the category of normal; she has a boyfriend, lives at home and works within the family business. Nancy's initial infatuation with Kitty demonstrates her journey of sexual discovery, her desire for kitty is lesbian which according to Rubin occupies the area between good and bad which is the 'major area of contest'³ due to constantly changing attitudes to sexual behaviour. Kitty and Nan's subsequent relationship seems typical of any relationship and in the 21st century is not queer to most people.

Queer theory insists that 'all sexual behaviors, all concepts linking sexual behaviours to sexual identities, and all categories of normative and deviant sexualities, are social constructs sets of signifiers that create certain types of social meaning.'⁴ Kitty's affair with Walter not only seals her unhappy, unfulfilled future, highlighted when she says 'I didn't like to do it!' and 'at times I couldn't bear it'⁵ but also catapults Nancy, with her newfound sexual

identity out into the world alone, she cannot return home because of her pride. She is unable to turn to any friends because all were originally friends of Kitty's and unaware of the affair.

In western culture, once you have committed yourself to a partner whether same sex or different to then alternate is wrong and abnormal, you are either heterosexual or homosexual. According to Bristow the lesbian and gay movement at times excluded bisexuals due to there ' treacherous intimacy with the heterosexual enemy'6, another reason why the use of the word ' queer' was advantageous allowing the term ' queer' to ' encompass a diversity of sexual behaviours'7. This idea of Kitty being able to change to suit her social situation and career is unsettling and queer.

This is demonstrated again when Nan becomes a rent boy using her stage clothes to dress as a boy. She, like Kitty has inverted her sexuality, but she appears as a boy, so the men she pleases believe she is a homosexual. It would have been more acceptable, more normal, had Nan become a female prostitute. This idea is an impossible concept for two reasons, firstly because Nan has accepted she is a lesbian and does not desire men sexually and secondly this move into prostitution was not deliberate or planned when Nan says ' I had pleased him in some queer way, for Kitty's sake'8 she is talking about her first experience as a rent boy. Her client's resemblance to Walter is what motivates her to do it; it is almost as if Nan considers it a kind of performance. Nan says men desiring her in boys clothes made her feel ' in some queer way, revenged'9. She appreciates the freedom she has from the unwanted male interest she suffered as a girl.

Both Nan and Kitty's sexuality deviates from the normal, in the heterosexual and lesbian sense of the word and can be categorised as queer. Nan does not fit into any socially constructed gender role, she is a woman who desires other women but who, when dressed as a boy, is desired by men. Her character exists totally outside the norms in everyway.

Queer theory follows feminist theory and gay/lesbian studies in rejecting the idea that 'sexuality is an essentialist category'¹⁰, something determined by biology or judged by standards of morality. At this point in the novel, Nan is in control of her life, independent and self-sufficient. Her decision not to meet with Florence and to go back with the widow, Dianne to her opulent house is one that leads her further into deviance bringing domination and subversion into the equation.

Nan becomes Dianne's possession, an object of her desire ultimately she remains a sexual object and nothing more than what she had been to men, a prostitute, provided with a good home, good food and more importantly an insight into the lesbian community that existed. Dianne chose her clothes, told her how to behave, how to act and called for her when she desired her sexually. This dominance is queer, Dianne's gender and sexuality is hard to define. She is a woman who obviously desires women but not for a 'normal' loving relationship, but a solely sexual one independent from love. She uses a dildo when she is having sex with Nan indicating she is not entirely lesbian but really just desires control so the next best thing is a girl dressed as a boy this she can control and mould to resemble what she truly desires.

Dianna's use of the word 'instrument'¹¹ to refer to the dildo is described by Nan as 'an unnecessary euphemism, with its particular odour of the surgery or house of correction,'¹² and that this idea 'appealed to her'(Dianne).¹³ This image of sadomasochism and dominatrix is a hard one to comprehend; the idea that Nan would be happy to be dominated just as Dianne wants to dominate is appropriate within the story and is exemplified when Dianne says 'only see what I am mistress of! And 'See what I own'¹⁴. As Rubin suggests, a category labeled 'normal' automatically has an opposite, a category labeled 'deviant' and the specific acts or identities that fill those categories link social practices and methods of control. Nan's relationship with Dianne does not necessarily define either woman's gender or sexuality it does however highlight Dianne's desire for power and control.

Nan's relationship with Dianne ends abruptly, though significantly just after Nan had seen Kitty for the first time since she left her with Walter, and although she begs Dianne to forgive her infidelity she regains power over her life. The final leg of Nan's queer journey of discovery leads her to Florence, she lives with Florence, her brother, and the baby, she gives herself partly to Florence and they form a relationship, but neither woman fully participates due to painful experiences and losses in previous relationships. Nan only really realises what she desires when she is confronted with Kitty, Nan is content with her sexuality as a lesbian she is happy to be amongst people who accept it is normal for her to dress as a boy. She accepts an equal gender role with Florence.

This novel explores all aspects of a relationship that exists outside the expected norms it places the protagonist in a variety of situations, it turns

upside the idea that sexual deviance is sought after by the deviant. This is not the case Nan's life is a series of opportunities which lead her to make decisions in order to survive. Nan takes the opportunities and led by the desire she explores her own sexuality, never succumbing to society expectations. Looking at it from a categorised binary oppositional perspective such as Rubin's suggests that it would be a difficult book for some readers. Although the extent to which this novel queers our understanding of sexuality, gender and desire is dependant on the reader's position.

The Loves of Lady Purple by Angela Carter deals with sexuality, gender and desire on a variety of different levels. It deals with the invention of masks; with the way, men try to re-invent women in order to control them. The Asiatic professor, although 'very old'¹⁵ he 'revealed his passions through a medium other than himself'¹⁶ he was the controlling force behind Lady Purple, 'she was nothing but a curious structure until the professor touched her strings, ¹⁷ for it was he who filled her with necromantic vigour.'¹⁸ According to John Sears 'the importance of Lady Purple lies in her giving an appearance of autonomy, while being totally dependant on the 'articulating fingers' of the puppeteer'. ¹⁹ Everything she is, her gender, her sexuality and her desire is a constructed male fantasy.

Lady purple represents an interpretation of a woman by a solitary man who 'transcended the notion she was dependant on his hands'²⁰. Her aggressive appearance with her 'pseudo-military' 'weaponry'²¹ of 'ferocious teeth'²² and her act constitute an utterly masculine representation of a female, as John Sears states; 'Lady purple represents a particular violent and

destructive sexuality, which the text is at pains to emphasise, is entirely constructed by and ultimately reflective of male desire'. Her sexuality is a creation and her gender is defined against the norm.

In the first passages of *The Notorious Amours of Lady Purple*, the use of binary oppositions becomes apparent with her adoptive parents being described as the 'prosperous merchant'²³ and his 'barren wife'²⁴.

Immediately there are positive and negative representations of the sexes, a representation of a society norm. According to Jeffrey's 'the queer approach which celebrates the 'performance of gender' and its diversity necessarily maintains the two genders in circulation'²⁵. Lady Purple is female but does not represent other; the masculine creation of her character results in the inversion of her gender role.

Women are displayed as objects 'the mannequins of desire,'²⁶ further reiterating the point that the story represents male fantasy, the appearance of Lady Purple is totally created for male stimulation her story in performance uses her artificial sexuality to create an artificial, almost pornographic performance. Lady Purple became 'mistress of the whip',²⁷ it is at this point the story becomes disturbingly queer forcing the reader to comprehend the world of the sadomasochist, which according to Rubin appears within the category of bad. Also in this category are 'those who do it for money'²⁸. The fact that Lady Purple is a sadomasochist who has sex for money does not make her entirely bad according to Rubin because she is still partaking in consensual sex with a person of the opposite sex, which is 'very good'.

It is queer how as a woman, she remains in control of her life only so long as she has something to offer men, the book does not concern itself with the detailing the troubles a woman like this may have encountered. It keeps to the ideal of a dominant woman determined to fulfill her desires and demonstrate how she uses men to do this. This idea is expressed when she is described as ‘ the dominant perpetrator of desire’²⁹ reversing the conventional norm of gender roles and female sexuality, putting men in the position of ‘ other’, only required to serve as Lady Purples ‘ canvas’³⁰ on which she can play out her own deviant fantasies.

Her deviance sinks to an uncomfortable level when she begins to murder her lovers, ‘ for pleasure’ or ‘ to be rid of them’. One particular murderous encounter leads her to possess a flute made from the thighbone of her victim, an integral part of the play comes when she is seen dancing to its tune, played out by one of her clients. According to Rubin moral values are attached to sexuality in western culture and ‘ differing perceptions of gender can and do affect moral responses to sexuality’³¹ although this is a malleable area within queer theory with opinions of what is good or bad, normal or deviant constantly changing.

What is interesting is how this male constructed fantastical puppet play renders the protagonist useless once she is no longer desirable to men. Lady Purple comes to life and ‘ unaided’³² begins ‘ her next performance’³³ only to find she bound by the limited knowledge she possesses, ‘ all that seeped into the wood was the notion that she might perform the forms of life.’³⁴ Ultimately, ‘ out of logical necessity’³⁵ heads toward the only brothel in the town. This masculine creation of a woman full of life and power, her gender

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role inverted, her sexuality almost completely masculine and her desires deviating constantly from the norm is finally alive but yet is now restricted by the limited knowledge her creator has provided her with.

Both texts have the potential to queer a readers understanding of sexuality, gender and desire. All three are subject to reader's position and which society group they belong to, for example people of different sexualities and genders will have a different experience, all depending on what the reader considers normal. Judith Butler argued with regard to queer theory that all sexualities need to be denaturalised and that as a society we should be more reflective in how we handle the terms used when referring to sexuality, gender and desire in order exist in a liberated environment.

Queer theory is more a social theory that will help change attitudes toward normal or deviant behaviour; both books help to achieve this by encouraging the reader to evaluate what they consider ' queer'. Exposing the reader to unconventional situations demonstrates another way of life, it may queer their understanding, whether negative or positive, but it may alter a previously negative attitude, which is what queer theory is about.