

Queer Theory Definition & Literary Example

I. from Dr. Mary Klages, UC Boulder

<http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/queertheory.html>

The word "queer" in queer theory has some of these connotations, particularly its alignment with ideas about homosexuality. Queer theory is a brand-new branch of study or theoretical speculation; it has only been named as an area since about 1991. It grew out of gay/lesbian studies, a discipline which itself is very new, existing in any kind of organized form only since about the mid-1980s. Gay/lesbian studies, in turn, grew out of feminist studies and feminist theory. Let me tell you a little about this history. (It's interesting in its own right, because it is literally happening under our noses, in our classrooms, at this moment; it's also interesting as a way of seeing how theoretical movements or schools grow out of other schools, as we've already seen with the bricolage that emerges from Saussure to Derrida to Lacan to Cixous and Irigaray).

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Gay/lesbian studies, as a political form of academics, also challenges the notion of normative sexualities. As Rubin's article suggests, once you set up a category labeled "normal," you automatically set up its opposite, a category labeled "deviant," and the specific acts or identities which fill those categories then get linked to other forms of social practices and methods of social control. When you do something your culture labels deviant, you are liable to be punished for it: by being arrested, by being shamed, made to feel dirty, by losing your job, your license, your loved ones, your self-respect, your health insurance. Gay/lesbian studies, like feminist studies, works to understand how these categories of normal and deviant are constructed, how they operate, how they are enforced, in order to intervene into changing or ending them.

Which brings me--finally--to queer theory. Queer theory emerges from gay/lesbian studies' attention to the social construction of categories of normative and deviant sexual behavior. But while gay/lesbian studies, as the name implies, focused largely on questions of homosexuality, queer theory expands its realm of investigation. Queer theory looks at, and studies, and has a political critique of, anything that falls into normative and deviant categories, particularly sexual activities and identities. The word "queer", as it appears in the dictionary, has a primary meaning of "odd," "peculiar," "out of the ordinary." Queer theory concerns itself with any and all forms of sexuality that are "queer" in this sense--and then, by extension, with the normative behaviors and identities which define what is "queer" (by being their binary opposites). Thus queer theory expands the scope of its analysis to all kinds of behaviors, including those which are gender-bending as well as those which involve "queer" non-normative forms of sexuality. Queer theory insists that all sexual behaviors, all concepts linking sexual behaviors to sexual identities, and all categories of normative and deviant sexualities, are social constructs, sets of signifiers which create certain types of social meaning. Queer theory follows feminist theory and gay/lesbian studies in rejecting the idea that sexuality is an essentialist category, something determined by biology or judged by eternal standards of morality and truth. For queer theorists, sexuality is a complex array of social codes and forces, forms of individual activity and institutional power, which interact to shape the ideas of what is normative and what is deviant at any particular moment, and which then operate under the rubric of what is "natural," "essential," "biological," or "god-given."

II. Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

See entries for: Queer Studies, Queer Theory, Lesbian and Gay Studies, Gender Studies
Keep in mind that these entries are put up by anyone and then debated by everyone. Look at those discussions as well as the definitions.

III. See also **David Richter's Introduction** to "Gender Studies and Queer Theory" in *The Critical Tradition*, NY: Bedford/St.Martin's. 2nd ed. 1998. 1431-1444. (*I have copies of this in my office.*)

II. From SWIRL

<http://www.sou.edu/English/IDTC/Terms/terms.htm>

Queerness, in the work of theorists like Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, is as much a semiotic as it is a social phenomenon. To say that someone is "queer" indicates an indeterminacy or indecipherability about their sexuality and gender, a sense that they cannot be categorized without a careful contextual examination and, perhaps, a whole new rubric. For gender to be, in Judith Butler's words, "intelligible," ancillary traits and behaviors must divide and align themselves beneath a master division between male and female anatomy.

From people's anatomy, we can supposedly infer other things about them: the gender of the people they desire, the sartorial and sexual practices they engage in, the general elements of culture that they are attracted to or repulsed by, and the gender of their "primary identification." While in practice each of these categories is rather elastic, it is usually when they do not line up in expected ways (say, when a man wears a dress and desires men) that one crosses from normative spaces into "queer" ones. In Butler's view, queer activities like drag and unexpected identifications and sexual practices reveal the arbitrariness of conventional gender distinctions by parodying them to the point where they become ridiculous or ineffective.

(Hedges, from his article, "Howells's 'Wretched Fetishes': Character, Realism, and Other Modern Instances." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. 38.1 Spring1996.)

III. An Example

The Lady's Dressing Room

Jonathan Swift (1732)

Five Hours, (and who can do it less in?)
By haughty Celia spent in Dressing;
The Goddess from her Chamber issues,
Array'd in Lace, Brocades and Tissues.

5 Strephon,¹ who found the Room was void,
And Betty² otherwise employ'd;
Stole in, and took a strict Survey,
Of all the Litter as it lay;
Whereof, to make the Matter clear,
10 An Inventory follows here.

And first a dirty Smock appear'd,
Beneath the Arm-pits well besmear'd.
Strephon, the Rogue, display'd it wide,
And turn'd it round on every Side.
15 On such a Point few Words are best,
And Strephon bids us guess the rest;
But swears how damnably the Men lie,
In calling Celia sweet and cleanly.
Now listen while he next produces,
20 The various Combs for various Uses,
Fill'd up with Dirt so closely fixt,
No Brush could force a way betwixt.
A Paste of Composition rare,
Sweat, Dandriff, Powder, Lead³ and Hair;
25 A Forehead Cloth with Oyl upon't
To smooth the Wrinkles on her Front;⁴
Here Allum Flower⁵ to stop the Steams,
Exhal'd from sour unsavoury Streams,
There Night-gloves made of Tripsy's⁶ Hide,
30 Bequeath'd by Tripsy when she dy'd,
With Puppy Water, Beauty's Help

Distill'd from Tripsy's darling Whelp;⁷
Here Gallypots⁸ and Vials plac'd,
Some fill'd with washes, some with Paste,
35 Some with Pomatum,⁹ Paints and Slops,
And Ointments good for scabby Chops.
Hard¹⁰ by a filthy Bason stands,
Fowl'd with the Scouring of her Hands;
The Bason takes whatever comes
40 The Scrapings of her Teeth and Gums,
A nasty Compound of all Hues,
For here she spits, and here she spues.
But oh! it turn'd poor Strephon's Bowels,
When he beheld and smelt the Towels,
45 Begumm'd, bematter'd, and beslim'd
With Dirt, and Sweat, and Ear-Wax grim'd.
No Object Strephon's Eye escapes,
Here Pettycoats in frowzy¹¹ Heaps;
Nor be the Handkerchiefs forgot
50 All varnish'd o'er with Snuff and Snot.
The Stockings, why shou'd I expose,
Stain'd with the Marks of stinking Toes;
Or greasy Coifs and Pinner's¹² reeking,
Which Celia slept at least a Week in?
55 A Pair of Tweezers next he found
To pluck her Brows in Arches round,
Or Hairs that sink the Forehead low,
Or on her Chin like Bristles grow.

The Virtues we must not let pass,
60 Of Celia's magnifying Glass.¹³
When frighted Strephon cast his Eye on't
It shew'd the Visage of a Gyant.
A Glass that can to Sight disclose,
The smallest Worm in Celia's Nose,
65 And faithfully direct her Nail
To squeeze it out from Head to Tail;

For catch it nicely by the Head,
It must come out alive or dead.

70 Why Strephon will you tell the rest?
And must you needs describe the Chest?
That careless Wench! no Creature warn her
To move it out from yonder Corner;
But leave it standing full in Sight
For you to exercise your Spight.
75 In vain, the Workman shew'd his Wit
With Rings and Hinges counterfeit
To make it seem in this Disguise,
A Cabinet to vulgar Eyes;
For Strephon ventur'd to look in,
80 Resolv'd to go thro' thick and thin;
He lifts the Lid, there needs no more,
He smelt it all the Time before.
As from within Pandora's Box,
When Epimetheus op'd the Locks,
85 A sudden universal Crew
Of humane Evils upwards flew;
He still was comforted to find
That Hope at last remain'd behind;
So Strephon lifting up the Lid,
90 To view what in the Chest was hid.
The Vapours flew from out the Vent,
But Strephon cautious never meant
The Bottom of the Pan to grope,
And fowl his Hands in Search of Hope.
95 O never may such vile Machine¹⁴
Be once in Celia's Chamber seen!
O may she better learn to keep
"Those Secrets of the hoary deep!"¹⁵

As Mutton Cutlets, Prime of Meat,
100 Which tho' with Art you salt and beat,
As Laws of Cookery require,
And toast them at the clearest Fire;
If from adown the hopful Chops
The Fat upon a Cinder drops,
105 To stinking Smoak it turns the Flame
Pois'ning the Flesh from whence it came;
And up exhales a greasy Stench,
For which you curse the careless Wench;
So Things, which must not be exprest,
110 When plumpt into the reeking Chest;
Send up an excremental Smell
To taint the Parts from whence they fell.
The Pettycoats and Gown perfume,
Which waft a Stink round every Room.

115 Thus finishing his grand Survey,
Disgusted Strephon stole away
Repeating in his amorous Fits,
Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!

But Vengeance, Goddess never sleeping
120 Soon punish'd Strephon for his Peeping;
His foul Imagination links
Each Dame he sees with all her Stinks:
And, if unsav'ry Odours fly,
Conceives a Lady standing by:
125 All Women his Description fits,
And both Idea's jump like Wits:
By vicious Fancy coupled fast,
And still appearing in Contrast.
I pity wretched Strephon blind
130 To all the Charms of Female Kind;
Should I the Queen of Love refuse,
Because she rose from stinking Ooze?
To him that looks behind the Scene,
Satira's but some pocky Quean.¹⁶
135 When Celia in her Glory shows,
If Strephon would but stop his Nose;
(Who now so impiously blasphemes
Her Ointments, Daubs, and Paints and Creams,
Her Washes, Slops, and every Clout,
140 With which he makes so foul a Rout;)
He soon would learn to think like me,
And bless his ravisht Sight to see
Such Order from Confusion sprung,
Such gaudy Tulips rais'd from Dung.

Notes

1. The names Strephon and Celia come from classical pastoral poetry or romance.
2. Betty is the generic name for a maidservant.
3. Lead was used as a cosmetic to whiten the face.
4. Front, "forehead."
5. Allum flower, or powdered alum, is used as an antiperspirant.
6. Tripsy, a typical name of a lapdog.
7. Whelp, "puppy."
8. Gallypots, "jars."
9. Pomatum, "ointment for the hair."
10. Hard, "near."
11. Frowzy, "messy."
12. Coifs and Pinners, "night caps."
13. Glass, "mirror."
14. Machine, "Any complicated piece of workmanship" (Johnson).
15. "Those Secrets of the hoary deep": See Paradise Lost, 2.890-91: "Before their eyes in sudden view appear/The secrets of the hoary Deep."
16. Satira, the heroine of The Rival Queens by Nathaniel Lee; quean, "A worthless woman, generally a strumpet" (Johnson). Pocky suggests either smallpox or a venereal disease.