

Queer Theory Explained

Identity-Based Gay & Lesbian Criticism (late 70s -late 80s)

- This criticism assumes that *representations are a function of sexual identities*. It assumes that these identities preexist and define representations.
- The critic reads texts for evidence of latent, potential, or hidden (closeted) identities, and brings them into fruition in ways the author didn't realize or was afraid to name. In effect, the critic completes a coming out narrative that the text begins.
- The coming out narrative thus becomes a kind of master paradigm for criticism. Its view of sex and identity is teleological. A potentially homosexual character's development depends on how completely they realize a gay or lesbian identity. Sexuality is viewed as a capacity for pleasure that is consolidated into an identity when a character realizes their "object choice" and enters into genital relations with a person of the same sex, or at least recognizes that they desire to do so.
- Another way to put this is to say that the critic's task is to define *who characters are*.

Queer Theory (late 80s - present)

- Queer Theory assumes that *sexual identities are a function of representations*. It assumes that representations preexist and define, as well as complicate and disrupt, sexual identities. Another way to put this is to say that people discover their identities by working with (and against) the identities the culture represents as possibilities.
- Queer theorists read texts with a great degree of specificity, attending to what characters take pleasure in, how this is tied to historically specific circumstances, and the representational dynamics and dilemmas in which characters find themselves enmeshed.
- Queer theorists dispute a teleological view of sexuality and identity, and avoid evaluating identities against the yardstick of contemporary ones. Characters may prove interesting precisely because they parody or disrupt received identities, or reveal the contingencies of any identity. This includes "heterosexuality," which they refuse to view as an ahistorical and transcultural constant.
- Queer Theory takes seriously Freud's contention that pleasure bears no necessary or inevitable relation to a genital sexuality anchored by one's "object choice." Characters' pleasure may be most energized by things independent of gender--fetishes, eating, brains, exercise, autoeroticism, submission, engaging and resisting temptation, etc. Dynamics traditionally labeled as "perversions" are explored without pathologizing them.
- This model tends toward coalition politics. It is skeptical of viewing some identities as authentic and others (say, leathermen, bisexuals, or butch lesbians) as lacking, inauthentic, deviant, or compromised.
- In other words, queer theorists attend carefully to *what characters want and do*.