

## An Introduction to Queer Theory

*And its application to 'The Prussian Officer'*

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'Queer', a word previously associated with the strange and peculiar, has journeyed etymologically through use as a homophobic slur, to its reclamation as a boundless and fluid identity, used throughout the LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and more) community. Queer theory continues this unpredictable voyage through literature.

Put simply, queer theory is the abandonment of heteronormativity – the assumption of heterosexuality until proven otherwise – in the interpretation of texts. Queer theory is different to gay or lesbian studies as, like its name, it incorporates fluidity and abandoning rules. As 'queer' challenges the idea of heterosexuality and homosexuality as binary opposites, queer *theory* challenges what we might consider queer in a text.

The rejection of traditional life trajectories such as marriage can be interpreted as queer, as well as dissidence or rebellion from society.

It might seem that challenging society (perhaps by not getting married or being monogamous) doesn't make someone queer. However, this

rebellion may represent defiance against social rules and norms, which are also what define (and limit) gender and sexuality.

When reading with queer theory, characters are often the main subject. Certain characters in a text may be given focus and read as having a transgressive sexuality, such as gay or bisexual. For example, a female character who rejects her male suitors may traditionally be read as heterosexual and overly particular, but through queer theory read as homosexual. Similarly, characters in heterosexual relationships aren't necessarily heterosexual – they may be read as bisexual, closeted or unhappy.

Queer theory encourages the reader to view texts or characters as queer – but how can we go about this? One way of applying queer theory is to take up the perspective of a queer person. Instead of the standard approach of a character being straight until proven queer, they might see characters as queer until proven straight. Another method of reading literature in a queer way is finding irony in the presentation of traditional gender roles. A novel about a family who fit the rigid, nuclear family stereotype – a mother, father and their biological children – could be interpreted not as promoting this way of life but as parodying it. Also very important to queer theory is the analysis of subtext, which can be explained as underlying content or themes within a text. The text as a whole may have a deeper queer

meaning. Most often focussed on are the themes of gender and sexuality. Perhaps the story is a gay allegory, while seeming to be about a heterosexual couple or something else entirely.

As these are only some basics of queer theory, an illustration of its application to a literary text will help us get a more thorough understanding of the theory. The reading strategy can be applied to many contemporary and classic texts. An author whose work is perfect for a first-time application of queer theory is D.H. Lawrence, known both for being explicit in his writing and for his homoerotic themes. I will conduct a queer reading of his short story, 'The Prussian Officer'. Though one of Lawrence's war stories, the central conflict in 'The Prussian Officer' is one of character. The titular character is the focus of both the story and this analysis. However, it is the officer's own focus on his 'orderly', or military errand boy, that allows Lawrence to make a psychological examination of repressed emotion and its consequences, and lends the story to a queer reading. Queer theory often focusses on a number of characters and 'The Prussian Officer', with its very few characters, allows the focus to fall on the officer and his orderly, Schöner.

The interpretation of the Prussian officer as a gay character is suggested through Lawrence's portrayal of his relationship with women.

The portrayal of gender and sexuality, whether queer or not, is key in queer theory and Lawrence's use of heterosexual relationships is useful for this reading.

The captain totally lacks interest in women, having 'never married ... no woman had ever moved him to it.' Furthermore, when the officer attempts to tackle his sexual frustration by sleeping with women, he finds it 'a mockery of pleasure' and returned 'in an agony of irritation, torment, and misery.' A queer theorist might argue that his lack of attraction to females indicates an attraction to males.

The Prussian officer's captivation with Schöner, who's presence is 'a warm flame upon the older man's tense, rigid body', is paramount to a queer reading of the story. Lawrence describes vividly the effects of even Schöner's mannerisms on the captain as '[sending] a flash of hate and anger through the elder man's blood'. From a heteronormative viewpoint, the Prussian officer is read as feeling only hatred towards his orderly. However, queer theory abandons the limits of this view and considers that the connection the officer is feeling is one of sexual tension. Their relationship is deeper than that of just an officer and his orderly, and 'The influence of the young soldier's being had penetrated through the officer's stiffened discipline'. Lawrence's language, such as here, is often highly charged with a

sexual undertone, mirroring the act of anal intercourse. The idea of the 'undiscovered feeling [that] remained between the two men' is the most overtly queer subtext, along with the captain and Schöner's characteristics, in the story.

Queer subtext can also be found in scenes of violence, such as where the officer beats and abuses Schöner. As he causes pain in the orderly, 'A withering smile came into the captain's frenzied eyes'. The question of the nature of his frenzy is certainly questionable. Rather than anger, queer theory suggests that the officer is experiencing sexual pleasure. The attacks are described almost as sexually from Schöner's perspective as his 'body mindlessly became rigid and stiff' as his body's impulses and desires overrule his mind. The orderly's reaction seems to mirror arousal, this idea later reinforced as 'his heart went hot and faint, and he panted, remembering the brutal kicks.' Perhaps most explicit of all, however, is Schöner's murder of the officer. From a heteronormative angle, the attack is a vengeful and sexless act. However, there is an underlying tone of sexuality as, when the orderly kills him, 'heavy convulsions shook the body of the officer', mirroring sexual climax. In 'The Prussian Officer', violence is used as an outlet, but also as a mirror, of homosexual repression and frustration.

The text also contains examples of the rejection of society's rules and norms, particularly relating to gender. As

outlined earlier, occurrences of dissidence and the rejection of societal norms are a way of portraying queerness, especially when it is gender roles that are rejected. The character of Schöner embodies a rejection of the rigidity of society's definition of masculinity and reinforces the queer relationship between him and the Prussian officer. In fact, Schöner enacts a female role in his job as an orderly, with the officer acting as a demanding husband: Schöner 'followed [the officer] like a shadow' and is told to 'Clear the table', acting like a silent, obedient wife. This imitation of an unequal heterosexual relationship parodies a conventional, non-queer lifestyle and uncovers issues within these relationships. Even the orderly's name exhibits femininity, an aptronym meaning 'more beautiful' in German. This word is used to describe both men and women, which suggests that Schöner represents gender fluidity. This is a queer concept itself, breaking the rules of gender, and adds another layer to the queerness of the relationship between the two men.

'The Prussian Officer' is often interpreted as a story about jealousy and the repression of emotion, but queer theory encourages a reading of the repression of homosexuality and the tragedy this causes. As well as this, D.H. Lawrence is read as portraying gender in a queer way, though Lawrence's own contradiction of this in other sources reminds us that theories may contain bias. Queer theory itself encourages double vision (seeing from both a heterosexual and

queer perspective), rather than a new, queer single vision. The consideration of all perspectives is indispensable in the interpretation of literature and, though theories such as queer theory are useful, they can also be used as a guide to discover our own ideas.

Whilst classic literature is often the focus of university literary criticism, queer theory can also be applied to contemporary novels, as well as many other forms of literature or media. Like in literature, analysis and theory can assist our interpretation of even every day media, such as film and television. In fact, our assessment of modern texts, with the assistance of literary theories such as this, may be even more successful, due to our better understanding of modern context. Queer theory is all about taking a new perspective so, whether it is a queer outlook or not, this introduction encourages the reading of even a favourite novel in a new light.