

Aula 7

QUEER THEORY

META

To introduce students to queer theory, by placing some emphasis on its questioning of heteronormativity, which has made it possible for the recognition of new sexual identities once marginalized by the patriarchal norms of sexual behavior.

OBJETIVO

To provide some of the meanings the term “queer” might assume;
To present some of the scholars whose works have formed the basis upon which queer theory has been sustained.

To make evident the importance of difference in queer theory
To illustrate how queer theory has affected literary criticism in general.

PRERREQUISITO

Notions about the formation and development of gender studies;
Notions of the main concepts employed in gender studies.
Familiarity with the relationship between literary theory and gender studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Having already been introduced to gender studies as well as Judith Butler, whose work was of notable importance for the development of the aforementioned field, this seems to be a timely occasion to make you acquainted with **queer theory**, to which matter we have alluded before in passing. In this lesson, we intend to provide you with some basic information on queer theory, departing from its somewhat hazy denomination to the influence it has come to bear on literature in general. It is needless to say that this piece has not been designed to be exhaustive on the matter it discusses, but concise yet informative.

Ver glossário no final da Aula

Before anything, we must understand what the term “queer” in **queer theory** stands for. This might seem a simple task at first, as many may think that a quick look at a dictionary entry will suffice to solve the problem. If you try to do it now by using a non-specialized edition, you will probably find the following definition: “*queer (adjective): strange; odd*”. Despite having something to do with one of the meanings it assumed after the consolidation of lesbian and gay studies in universities in the 1990s – when it started to be employed more often –, such a dictionary definition scarcely helps us shed some light on the connotations under which the term has recently been used.

If you leave your dictionary aside and look for articles on this subject matter, you will certainly realize that, in its overwhelming majority, there is a reluctance to bring forth a fixed, didactic, consistent definition for the term. And when such a thing is attempted, it is frequently accompanied by an observation pointing at its reductive character. Therefore, you must bear in mind that the considerations which will be made as follows are for didactic purposes only.

The term queer was once used as a synonym for homosexual. It was often associated with homophobic abuse. Since the early 1990s, however, the term has been strategically taken up to signify a wide-ranging and unmethodical resistance to normative models of sex, gender, and sexuality. Later, it came to constitute an umbrella term for a plethora of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications (gay, lesbian, trans, etc.). In addition, it has also been used to refer to a theoretical model that came out of the traditional lesbian and gay studies. For some, the term is synonymous with “lesbian and gay”, probably for its closeness to such studies. For others, these terms are not interchangeable.

Yet again, one can also find it being used to refer to a coalition of nonnormative sexual identities, which might include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. In other contexts, **queer** is employed to denote a critical stance as to the identity-based categories of modern sexuality and its marginalizing tendency towards “deviant” sexual behavior. Be it as it may, there is one single trace – we might say with some certainty – that is present in every possible definition for the term in point, *namely*, its *resistance* to normative sexual behavior.

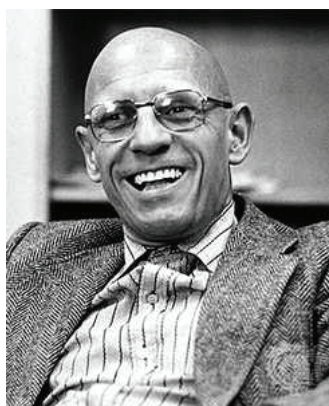
The phrase **queer theory**, in turn, had been allegedly coined by Teresa de Lauretis, an Italian author and critical theorist. According to her, it is linked to at least three interrelated critical projects: a refusal of heterosexuality as the benchmark for all sexual

formations; an attentiveness to gender capable of questioning the assumption that lesbian and gay studies is a single, homogeneous object; and a focus on the multiple ways in which race crucially shapes sexual subjectivities.

Just like the term “queer”, the phrase “queer theory” also harbors some intricacies, as many scholars say it is *not* a theory properly speaking nor does it have clear and fixed assumptions or canonical texts – notwithstanding *Gender Trouble* (1990) being considered a seminal work for its development. For some, such indefiniteness or lack of well-delineated boundaries owes itself to its being a relatively new area. However, one can take its *resistance* to definition as well as its *opposition* to heteronormativity as its main characteristics.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As one might expect of so diversified an area, **queer theory** is indebted to a number of theorists from different fields, the most prominent of whom, perhaps, is the French philosopher Michel Foucault. His writings on sexuality will be consistently used by queer theorists. The assertions he makes on this topic point at a denaturalization of the dominant understandings of sexual identity, which is of great avail to a theory [queer] that calls into question heteronormativity. According to the aforementioned author, sexuality is not a human attribute – or “fact of nature” if you will –, but a discursive production, and as such, a *human construct*. His *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976) – or History of Sexuality – advances the argument that the power exercised by various institutions apparently “to suppress” sexuality was actually responsible for producing it as a “hidden truth” that must be rooted out.



Michel Foucault
Source: https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Foucault

By showing that the “truth of sex” was in fact invented by Western society and that such an invention of sexuality is a product of power and knowledge, Foucault rejects the assumption that this discursive construct can be authoritatively defined. Thus, instead of venturing a definition, he seemed to be more interesting in looking into how this “truth” had been produced, which effects came out of it and what historical role it played. It is mainly for denaturalizing sexuality by describing it as a cultural category and suggesting that it is a product of power rather than a preexisting object that Foucault’s work has been incorporated or appropriated by queer theory practitioners.

Another scholar whose work has been seized upon by queer theorists is the American anthropologist Gayle S. Rubin (1949 –). Grounded to a significant extent on Foucault’s constructivist understanding of sexuality, Rubin also rejects all sorts of biological explanations and moves forward to say that sexual identities and behaviors are hierarchically organized in society through systems of stratification. To put it simply, she argues that there are certain forms of sexual expression that are valued over others.

Every social group – regardless of their position in the political spectrum – classify certain sexual behaviors as good or natural and others as bad or unnatural. It is such a valuation system that she is interested in investigating. “*Thinking Sex*” (1984) is the title of the essay in which these issues are dealt with. Therein, she also discusses ideological formations that underpin sexual views, the most important of which is what she calls “sex negativity”. This is the notion that sex outside of marriage or for pleasure only is evil.



Gayle Rubin speaking at the GLBT History Museum in San Francisco, June 7, 2012.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gayle_Rubin

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is also among the writers whose works are significant for queer theory. Her groundbreaking book is entitled *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Therein, she calls into question the distinction between homo- and heterosexuality. At the center of it, lies many contradictions. Additionally, like Michel Foucault, she does not understand sex as a *natural*

given, but a social construct. What is more, she believes it is critical that one should analyze which **knowledge effects** such contradictions might produce instead of attempting to find which of the contradictory modelings in circulation describes homosexuality more accurately.

Sedgwick is also known for popularizing terms like “homosocial”. It refers to same-sex relationships that are not of a romantic or sexual nature. Common examples are friendship, mentorship. People that prefer to engage socially with individuals of the same sex can be said to express homosocial leanings. Conversely, heterosociality refers to the preference towards non-sexual relations with the opposite sex. One can even talk of *biosocial* interaction, which involving social relation with both sexes.

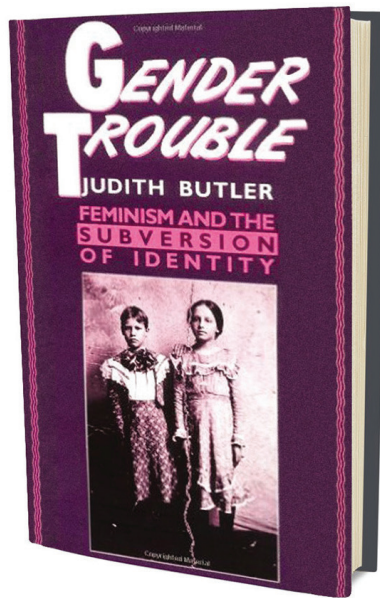
In spite of her books, she is probably best known for an article entitled *Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl*, published in 1991, which caused a lot of stir within conservative academic circles. This article can be taken as an application of **queer theory** on interpreting literary works.



Fonte: <https://samstagisteingutertag.wordpress.com>

Finally yet importantly, there is still another name associated with **queer theory**: Judith Butler. Her notion of gender performativity – upon which we have touched previously – is very often mobilized by queer theorists. As seen before, she believes “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1990, p. 33). In fact, the text inside which one may find such an assertion – *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* – is said to be foundational to queer theory. There are, of course, more scholars whose

writings have been relevant for the development of queer theory. The ones we listed above, however, are usually referred to as the most prominent.



Cover of the first edition
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_Trouble

The Role of Difference in Queer Theory and its Practical Implications

We should not move forward without saying a word or two about the role of difference in queer theory. It is consensual that sexuality is central in this context. However, one may identify the main pursuit of queer theory in its the study of nonnormativity, which means to say it is highly interested in any order of difference involved in the production of sexual normalization and deviance. This has caused queer theory to turn its attention to other axes of social difference – such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, nationality –, for it has come to the conclusion that they are intimately intertwined. Therefore, setting them apart would yield an incomplete analysis.

One of the practical implications that resulted of this shift of attention towards other orders of difference is the questioning of the exclusive character of many queer movements, which for some time did not take into account social markers such as race and class. Consequently, within the **LGBTQ community** – the acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer – there is a fracture that keeps apart those who just identify with **LGBTQ** and those who identify both with it and with an oppressed race.

Cathy Cohen (1962 –), an American black feminist and social activist, in *“Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens”*, undertakes a critique of modern day queer politics, saying it has been unable to represent those individuals who face other forms of oppression. One of her questions is as follows

how do queer activists understand and relate politically to those whose same-sex sexual identities position them within the category of queer, but who hold other identities based on class, race and/or gender categories which provide them with membership in and the resources of dominant institutions and groups? (COHEN, 1997: 442).

As you can see, it is not only about sexuality. Based on this lack of recognition of other orders of difference, many have argued that queer politics has not encompassed all queer community, but only a privileged fraction of it, primarily represented by upper class, white individuals. To some extent, this state of things bears some resemblance with early feminist movements, which in similar fashion failed to account for the needs of those women who belonged to different social classes, colors or cultures. Many black women, for example, did not feel represented. Therefore, a person of color – despite identifying with queer – might feel unwelcomed or excluded by a movement that does not account for racial difference and its implication for the shaping of their sexual identity.

Cohen also draws a comparison between queer and lesbian gay movements, pointing at a possible reason why the former has been struggling to account for other layers of difference. She argues that, unlike lesbian and gay activism, which from its very beginning had links to the left, black activism and feminism, today's queer movement seems to operate within a historical and ideological vacuum. Many queer activists overemphasize queer issues to the detriment of racism, sexual oppression and economic exploitation, which do not seem to qualify as an object of study, notwithstanding the fact of many queer individuals belonging to racially as well as economically oppressed groups and being female. All these issues have given rise to a number of attacks whose aim is to open up queer theory to new orders of difference, by means of which process the marginalized queer individuals – on the grounds of their race or social status – might be given a voice in such movements.

QUEER THEORY AND LITERATURE

At this point, you might be asking yourself the following question “does queer theory have anything to do with literature?”. The answer would be “yes, indeed”. In fact, it has been responsible for the emergence of alternative interpretations for literary works that have long been understood through a heteronormative perspective. In other words, it has given rise to a wave of “re-readings” of literary works that are now interpreted according to queer theoretical assumptions. There is even whole theses on how homosexuality had been coped with in specific moments in history and how it surfaced in their respective literary production. *Between Men: English*

Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (1985) by Sedgwick is a good example. It brings forth the argument that there was a continuum between homosexuality and *homosociality* – male bonding – in the 19th century, which would present itself in English literature through love triangles – two men and a woman. She asserts that, in the erotic triangle, the erotic rivalry – which is the bond that links the two rivals – is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the love object.

You can also find texts which deal more specifically with single literary canonical works. Take, for example, the already-mentioned Sedgwick's article *Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl*, which caused a lot of stir after its publication. In it, she juxtaposed three treatments of female suffering, namely Marianne Dashwood's emotional frenzy when Willoughby abandons her in *Sense and Sensibility*, a 19th century French medical account of the "cure" inflicted on a girl who liked to masturbate, and the critic Tony Tanner's "vengeful" treatment of Emma Woodhouse as a woman who had to be taught her place. In doing so, she proposed a new "reading" of the abovementioned novel that was not allowed before, given the restraints imposed by heteronormative discourses.

Alternative readings of literary works are now less unusual. And sometimes this new understanding of a given text ends up touching its author's life [or sexual behavior]. An example can be found in early-nineteenth-century American literature, as many of Emily Dickinson's biographers have seen her bond to her sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Gilbert, as more than romantic friendship. Some argue that when Dickinson referred to her friend as a "lover," she meant it literally. Susan Howe, for instance, author of *My Emily Dickinson (1985)*, says that *Master Letters*, a work that was often used to suggest Dickson's devotion to a man, were no more than literary constructions and should not be used as proof for her love towards him.

This opening up of new possibilities of understanding an author or reading a given text has even reached one the greats of English – and some will say world – literature. There is a recurring debate over the sexuality of William Shakespeare. It is peacefully accepted that he had a wife – by the name of Anne Hathaway – and three children Susanna, Hamnet and Judith, whose existence has been proved through documents of the period. There is much speculation, however, on his sexual life. Based on the analysis of his sonnets – the most suggestive of which is *Sonnet 18* –, some scholars have argued he was bisexual. The addressee of most of them was a man, often referred to as the "Fair Youth". In addition, therein one should find **puns** suggestive of homosexuality.

Ver glossário no final da Aula

The broadening of the horizon in literary criticism to encompass these long-ignored facets of many literary works owes itself – to a significant extent – to the development of queer theory, for it has been able to de-naturalize sexuality, by conceiving it as a mesh of possibilities, not as two

rigid opposite halves – man and woman – which are deemed to complete each other. To put it differently, new ways of experiencing sexuality as well as new sexual identities came to be recognized as such.

CONCLUSÃO

We hope this lesson, although brief, has been successful in making acquainted with queer theory as well as its relevance for the renovation of literary criticism. Of course, there are many more things which could be said about this relatively recent field. Nonetheless, our aim was to put you in touch with the basics, hoping to spark your interest in deepening your knowledge of it later. There is just one more remark we should make before bringing this text to an end: after all that has said about queer theory, you should bear in mind that it can roughly refer to two things, one of which are “queer readings” of canonical texts – to which we have alluded previously – and the theorization of “queerness” itself on whose hazy definition we made some comments at our introduction.



RESUMO

This lesson is composed of four sub-sections. In the first one, you will be briefly introduced to some of the meanings the word “queer” may assume, especially when employed in the expression “queer theory”. Next, we will mention in passing some of the scholars whose works have helped set up the theoretical terrain upon which queer theory has thrived. To such a group belong the French philosopher Michel Foucault, the American anthropologist Gayle S. Rubin, author of *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler with whom you might already be familiarized at this point. It is important to note, however, that this is not an exhaustive list. Then, some considerations on the role of difference in queer theory and its practical implications will be made, after which we will point at some of the changes produced by queer theory in literary criticism in general.



ATIVIDADES

Write a summary of the main points discussed in this class. Try not to exceed two pages.

ACTIVITY COMMENT

Esta atividade tem por finalidade principal fazer com que você construa uma síntese dos principais conteúdos desta aula.



PRÓXIMA AULA

ANTI-HOMOSSEXUALIDADE: A gênese da homofobia

GLOSSARY

Queer Theory is a field of critical theory that emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of queer studies and women's studies. Queer theory includes both queer readings of texts and the theorisation of 'queerness' itself. Heavily influenced by the work of Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, queer theory builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies' close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities.

(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_theory)

Pun: it is a form of word play that exploits multiple meanings of a term, or of similar-sounding words, for an intended humorous or rhetorical effect. These ambiguities can arise from the intentional use of homophonic, homographic, metonymic, or figurative language.

(source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pun>)

20 MUST-READ QUEER THEORY TEXTS

- Rosemary Hennessy – Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism
- Judith Butler – Gender Trouble
- Nancy Fraser – “Heterosexism, Misrecognition and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler”
- Kevin Floyd, The Reification of Desire
- Jasbir Puar – Terrorist Assemblages
- Andrea Smith – “Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism”

- Cathy Cohen – “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”
 - Jose Esteban Muñoz – Disidentification
 - Roderick Ferguson – Aberrations In Black: Toward A Queer Of Color Critique
 - Lee Edelman – No Future
 - J.K. Gibson-Graham – Queer(y)ing Capitalism in and out of the Classroom
 - Eve Segwick – Epistemology of the Closet
 - Jack Halberstram – Female Masculinity
 - Michael Warner – The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life
 - Jasbir Puar – “Prognosis Time”
 - Jose Esteban Muñoz – Cruising Utopia
 - Lisa Duggan – Twilight of Equality
 - Robert McRuer – Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability
 - Eli Clare – Exile and Pride
 - Michel Foucault – The History of Sexuality
- (Source: <http://www.critical-theory.com/20-must-read-queer-theory-books/2/>)

REFERÊNCIAS

- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York (/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york): Routledge, 1990.
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- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1, An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. London: Penguin, 1990.
- Rubin, Gayle S. “Thinking Sex.” In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin, 3–44. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/queer-theory>