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# Destabilizing Gender Binaries and Ideologies:

## The Progression of Gender and Queer Studies Through Twentieth Century Literature

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Abstract

Today, when you pick up a new novel, it hardly comes as a surprise when you are introduced to characters who defy gender binaries and ideologies that have been in place for hundreds of years. This has not always been the case. During the 1900s, there seemed to be a shift in the creation of literature, the intent of literature, and the way that literature was analyzed in terms of gender and sexuality; ample research has been done in the field of gender and queer studies, allowing new perspectives to form and new information to be shared. And while the differing genders and sexuality preferences have been voiced in various ways, literature has been an exceptional outlet to share this knowledge, especially during the twentieth century. The addition of queer studies that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s has provided a new perspective not only on feminist aspects presented in literature but also on how gender identification and sexual preferences are portrayed in literature, giving a voice to those who have been silenced for far too long. During the twentieth century, authors such as Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Jeanette Winterson pushed the boundaries of gender ideologies, effectively using the strength of their own voices to upset the oppressive nature of gender binaries. The unsettling of these binaries in twentieth century literature has created a long-standing platform for others to speak their own truth.

*"That is the way with stories; we make them what we will.*

*It's a way of explaining the universe*

*While leaving the universe unexplained…*

*Everyone who tells a story tells its differently,*

*Just to remind us that everybody sees it differently."*

***-Jeanette Winterson***

*Transgender*. *Homosexual*. *Gender fluidity. Lesbian*. These terms often provoke a certain unease among individuals in a society that holds preconceived notions of what the terms "gender" and "sexuality" mean, often grouping the terms together as if they mean the same thing. Those same inherent beliefs have disallowed a more open-minded understanding of the progression of gender and queer studies over the last twenty years. Those beliefs have also caused a forceful unacceptance of individuals who identify as more than male or female, such as transgender, pangender, cisgender, etc. Over the years, there has been ample research done in the field of gender and queer studies, allowing new perspectives to form and new information to be shared. And while the differing genders and sexuality preferences have been voiced in various ways, literature has been an exceptional outlet to share this knowledge, especially during the twentieth century. Prior to the twentieth century the depiction of homosexual or lesbian characters was not unheard of, yet they often lacked the conviction needed to ensure the readers grasped the author's message. However, during the 1900s, there seemed to be a shift in the creation of literature, the intent of literature, and the way that literature was analyzed in terms of gender and sexuality. The study of gender has been an important part of literary analysis for many years. Yet, the attention of this theory has been heavily focused on feminist aspects, such

as gender roles and power dynamics within a household (specifically between husband and wife), leaving behind the various aspects of gender that have emerged since. And while queer theory was born out of feminism, "sexuality gradually emerged as a separate analytic category, and, in the late 1980s, as the focus of an [entirely] separate field" (Love 304). The addition of queer studies that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s has provided a new perspective not only on feminist aspects presented in literature but also on how gender identification and sexual preferences are portrayed in literature, giving a voice to those who have been silenced for far too long. Utilizing gender and queer theory, this paper will highlight the ways in which authors, such as Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Jeanette Winterson, have created pieces of literature that destabilize the gender binaries that result from socially constructed definitions surrounding gender and sexuality.

Before the emergence of queer theory, individuals relied heavily on Gay and Lesbian theories or Feminism to analyze literature in terms of gender and sexuality. However, even among the great feminist theories, there was little to no fight for those who fell out of the limited boundaries that were set in feminism. Gay and Lesbian theories had a similar effect, as the limits to the information provided often did not include individuals who identified as something "Other," such as bisexuals, transsexuals, transvestites, etc.  Queer theory may have been born out of Feminism, but it was not immediately accepted – and even still not always acknowledged – by those individuals who fought so tirelessly for women's rights. In their anthology of Literary Theory, Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan suggest that "gender identity is no less a construction of patriarchal culture than the idea that men are somehow superior to women; both were born at the same time and with the same stroke of the pen" (896), yet for many years they did not receive the same attention. Rivkin and Ryan also share the thoughts of constructionists in that "what must change… is not the way androcentric culture traps and stifles a woman's identity that should be

liberated into separation, but rather the way all gender, both male and female, is fabricated" (896). The idea that gender is a fabrication, somewhat of a performance, reflects the thoughts of many gender and queer theorists, such as Judith Butler and Gayle Rubin. Other theorists, such as Michael Foucault shared similar beliefs as he often wrote of how gender and sexuality are indeterminate and cannot be subjected to a permanent construction. Many gender and queer theorists promoted the idea of gender and sexuality being a social construction. Individuals such as Judith Lorber, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Adrienne Rich all presented respected ideas that focused on gender as a social construct, the myths that surround the ideas of gender, the lack of knowledge in more current definitions associated with gender and sexuality, and what it meant to live in a world that suffered from "compulsory heterosexuality." And while each of these theorists offer relevant and important information regarding the topics of gender and sexuality, it was not until the devastating AIDS epidemic that individuals strived to create a platform that fought against the discrimination they faced. Since then, much attention has been given to gender studies and queer theory – attention that has been long overdue – and to do so, many critics look to literature to reinforce the importance of a well-rounded knowledge in gender and sexuality studies.

In 1928, the world was introduced to "the first English language trans novel" (Winterson), when Virginia Woolf published *Orlando*, the story of an individual who lived for centuries, exploring the world, and finding him/herself in the process. The story begins with Orlando performing acts that he had seen his father and grandfather do – specifically chopping off the heads of Moors. Although he mimics the ways in which he has seen his male role models act, Orlando, even as a young child, possessed a love for the written word that was not suitable to his position in life. As Orlando grows up, he experiences many things; he becomes steward and treasurer to Queen Elizabeth, he works under King James I, he begins a relationship with a

Russian princess, and he becomes an ambassador then a duke to Constantinople under King Charles II. One night, many people saw Orlando pulling a woman up to his balcony, and the next morning, Orlando was found in his room succumbed to a trance-like state. When he awoke, after seven days, Orlando had become a woman. The transition from male to female did not have any extreme effects on Orlando, as she felt quite the same as before. She quickly embraced her new identity, experiencing many new things, but as a woman, leaving the reader to question the social construction of gender binaries. What constitutes "male" and "female," and why does society believe it is necessary to be one or the other? Orlando certainly did not succumb to the idea that man is one being and woman another, as they effectively lived their life as both. After being propelled into the future, specifically October of 1928, Orlando began to think of the different selves that make up each person. She, at one point, cries out that "I'm sick to death of this particular self. I want another," because "everybody can multiply from his own experience the different terms which his different selves have made with him" (Woolf 308-309). This particular quote from Woolf's novel has significant bearing on the ways in which critics have connected her piece to the fluidity of gender and sexuality. However, what is most remarkable is the lack of attention given to the transgenderism present in *Orlando.* It is important to touch on the fact that, as literary criticism goes, *Orlando* is typically analyzed from a feminist/lesbian perspective, as this novel is considered a biography of Woolf's. However, by focusing only on the ways in which this novel can be considered a foundational text for feminism, an important piece of this novel is quietly shoved under the rug.

In the article "Breaking Through the Limits of Flesh: Gender Fluidity and (Un)natural Sexuality in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando,*" Swikriti Sanyal suggests that Woolf created a character, Orlando, "whose body could not be contained within the confines of gender, who repeatedly transgresses the norms of heterosexuality," (Sanyal) and who gave a voice to those who

identified differently from the gender they were assigned at birth. The idea of transgenderism is one that has been considered taboo for many years, and even today, it is not often that individuals are able to express this part of their identity without vicious backlash from society. It was not until the last decade or so that Woolf's novel was even considered as pivotal piece for trans studies and politics, and even still, the research and criticism that focuses on this aspect of Woolf's work are limited and hard to find. Avoiding the obvious connections to trans studies further silences a topic that is pertinent to gender and queer studies, a topic that has been thoroughly avoided for centuries. Before Woolf's novel was published in 1928, the only notable piece of literature that reflects even the slightest notion of transgenderism was Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* Still, the connection between Ovid's piece and transgenderism would not be made for thousands of years after its publication. It is not entirely surprising that more discussion has not been had in regard to the significance of Woolf's novel to the progression of trans studies, as it was not until the early twenty-first century that the emergence of transgender literature started to make an impact. What is surprising, though, is how, since the progression of trans studies, there has been a limited amount of criticism that focuses on the ways in which Woolf ensured that this progression of trans studies occurred. Readers are left to wonder why that is. The topic of transgenderism is highly taboo and often avoided because it so clearly breaks the chains of conformity. To avoid the clear connections between Woolf's novel and trans studies is more of a habitual process than an active choice. Trans studies covers subjects that society deems inappropriate or perverse, therefore it is often they are ignored, made invisible, or shown in ways that will promote the perversion that society has labeled them with. Over the years, transgender individuals have been depicted in a harsh light, especially through media coverage, such as in movies or television shows. It could be argued that this topic is primarily avoided due to this highly negative depiction in media – or its lack of attention in media -, which

adds to the socially constructed idea that transgenderism is a disease, or something to shy away from. In her article "The Evolution of Transgenderism in Film and Literature," Michelle Smith suggests we cannot

> … 'reshape our understanding of sex and gender' until we begin to "look back at how we have represented – or, most commonly, omitted – transgender people in popular culture. The historical lack of understanding of transgender people is evident in a cultural tendency to depict them as objects of comedy, or, more often, as freakish or monstrous. (2017)

It is quite a common occurrence to depict in a negative light that which is not understood or accepted; what is not understood is often believed that it must be feared instead, and because trans studies did not receive much attention until the late 1990s and early 2000s, that fear simmered for quite a long time.

Before the emergence of trans studies, those who identified different from the gender they were assigned at birth were assumed to have a gender identity disorder. There were many studies done in regard to Gender Identity Disorder, and these studies promoted the idea that "we need to know what makes someone transgender so that they can be 'fixed'" (Turban). Yet all of these studies ultimately "promoted ideas that could hurt transgender children and their families," as they produced "an offensive theory with the potential to diminish the self-esteem of vulnerable transgender youth" (Turban). These theories promoted the idea that someone was to be blamed for the occurrence of transgenderism – the individual must have a disorder, their mothers must be mentally ill, or their parents "did not place strong limits on stereotypically gender atypical behaviors" (Turban). Therapists often implemented a gender identity conversion therapy that they believed would cure the so-called problem of transgenderism. Even today, there are individuals who insist that transgenderism is a problem that can and should be "fixed."

However, since the emergence of trans studies, these theories are more likely to be debunked, providing an avenue for individuals to be heard. It is for the reasons mentioned above that critics often overlook the importance of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* in the progression of trans studies, as Woolf's trans character promotes the elimination of gender binaries that have existed throughout time.

It was clear that "Woolf was preoccupied by the social and economic differences between the sexes – differences, she believed, that were gender biases masquerading as facts of life." In her novel *Orlando,* Woolf "paved the way for this more serious and disturbing exploration" of this performance (Winterson). It was Judith Butler who first asserted that gender was a performance – that individuals "do" whatever gender they are assigned at birth, and to "do" gender, they must perform acts associated with the specific gender they were assigned. In Woolf's novel, she effectively disavows these binaries that have been set in place for centuries, for "Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity," and "Orlando herself showed no surprise at it" at all (Woolf 138-139). Orlando was not influenced by the society that they lived in; instead, they embraced their transformation, leaving no question as to whether or not he should act one way and she another. Gender roles and binaries have been around for centuries, yet with just over three-hundred pages, Woolf effectively disavowed this social construct with the stroke of her pen. In her essay "Feminist Criticism and Queer Theory," Heather Love wrote that "according to [Judith] Butler, subjects are called on to perform strict gender roles and punished when they step out of them; in a strange trick of logic, those same 'command performances' are then taken as evidence that 'normal' gender is natural, biologically determined and inevitable" (308). What this means is that individuals "do" whatever gender they are expected to, effectively reinforcing

the expectations and binaries that Woolf dismantled with her novel. Orlando did not succumb to society's expectations – the expectation that one is either male OR female – and they further dismantled the social stigmatization that revolved around sexuality. When Woolf published *Orlando,* it was during a time when there were strict gender roles; it was also during a time where intimacy between two people of the same sex prompted social upheaval. So, while Woolf created the first English trans novel, she also paved the way for more individuals to speak their own truth, such as what James Baldwin did when he published *Giovanni's Room.*

*Giovanni's Room,* which was published in 1956, is a heart-breaking story of an American man named David, who tirelessly fought against his own self, refusing to accept what he knew was inside of him. As the story begins, readers are introduced to David as he looks out of a window, contemplating the atrocity that was his life. As he reminisces, he becomes acutely aware of how "one particular lie among the many lies [he has] told, told, lived, and believed" (6) altered the course of his life. David, a complicated character, lived his life as he believed he was supposed to. In other words, he lived a life that was defined by society. His father wanted him to be a man, and with that, David knew that his internal longings were going to be the end of him. His first intimate encounter with another male, Joey, was when he was a teenager, and when he later moved to France and met Hella, he believed his relationship with her would erase the shame and guilt he felt each time he thought of Joey. Yet, when he proposed to her, Hella was unsure if she was ready to settle down. She left to contemplate her feelings, leaving David alone to contemplate his own life and to come face-to-face with the person he desperately tried not to be. While Hella was away, something awoke in David with such a force that he was unable to subdue it. He met Giovanni while he was at a bar with a friend, and the attraction between the two men was instantaneous; it also caused an upheaval on David's psyche as he associated his attraction to men to something vile and condemnable. While Hella was away, David continued to

have an intimate relationship with Giovanni, yet he knew it could not last, especially after receiving a letter from Hella saying she accepts his proposal and is coming back to France. Yet, he did not seem upset by this. He viewed Hella's return as something that could save him from himself. He was disgusted with his actions, with who he really was, and Hella was the perfect distraction from the sin that was inside of him. Upon Hella's return, David did not speak to Giovanni for days, and when he did, he casually ignored the relationship they had built while Hella was away, effectively subduing that part of his own personal identity as he had done since childhood. Giovanni became erratic and depressed, and after being used, sexually and psychologically, by the owner of the bar he worked at, he strangled him with a piece of clothing. Giovanni is eventually captured and sentenced to death, and David deals with this revelation by spending three days drinking and having sex with a sailor. Soon, Hella finds out what he has done and leaves for America. However, it was not the abandonment by Hella that destroys David. Instead, it was the utter shame he felt, the disgust he endured each time he looked in the mirror. He believed himself to be vile, and the more he tried to fight against himself, the greater the separation of self he endured. This separation of self is an important aspect of Baldwin's novel, as he effectively highlights the utter despair issued at the hands of discriminatory gender oppression.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick once said that "there is an ethical urgency about queer theory that is directed at the damage that sexual prohibitions and discriminations do to people" (qtd by Smith). Readers can clearly see the effects of those sexual prohibitions and discriminations when they consider Baldwin's novel. The main character, David, struggles to find acceptance, not outwardly, but inwardly. He is in a consistent battle against his own self, refusing to accept his own desires as something pertinent to his own being. Baldwin's novel was published in the 1950s, a time where homosexuality was viewed as a disease. "It [gender] is a compulsory

performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions" (Butler 957-958). Homosexuals were often sought out, targeted, and publicly ridiculed as a means to set an example – this example, of course, was that one who does not adhere to what is socially acceptable will be treated as a pariah. In his essay, "The Homosexual as Pariah…" Taylor Cade West posed an important question when he asked: "Barred from participation in humanity, forbidden as it were, to exist, where is the homosexual to turn?... Is there a ground upon which he may cultivate existence?" (2014). This struggle for existence is exactly what Baldwin's main character searches for through the entirety of the novel. His desires, because they subverted the gender and sexuality norms of the time, caused a deafening and dark tunnel to emerge in his psyche. He becomes two separate people that are consistently in a struggle of dominance. He is aware of his desires, of who he truly is, yet he cannot come to terms with it because of society's hold on him. He "look[s] at [his] sex, [his] troubling sex, and wonder how it can be redeemed, how [he] can save it from the knife" (Baldwin 168). The terror that David feels as a homosexual is further enhanced by the society with which he lives. Yet, as James Baldwin once said:

> The terrors homosexuals go through in this society would not be so great if the society itself did not go through so many terrors which it doesn't want to admit. The discovery of one's sexual preference doesn't have to be a trauma. It's a trauma because it's such a traumatized society. (1984)

It was this same traumatized society that led David to believe he would be condemned by his desires. Baldwin uses terms such as "filthy," "dirty," and "vile" to symbolize the way that society views homosexuality. And, in turn, he uses those same words to display the internal struggle that homosexuals endure because of society's stigmatization. Giovanni's room, where

David lives for a few months while Hella is away, is only described as a "hideous room" (115) or a "filthy room" (142), and this room is symbolic of the compartmentalization that happens in David's own mind. In his mind, the hideous and filthy room is the one in which his homosexuality resides. David attempts to separate various parts of himself so as not to upset the boundaries and expectations that have been inflicted upon him. Baldwin, an openly gay man, used his talents to shed light on the psychological effects of gender and sexuality discrimination. He once said in an interview that "If I hadn't written that book I would probably have had to stop writing altogether" (Baldwin), implying that the urgency of this novel is not merely in the story itself, but in the way that it highlights the psychological and emotional struggle of individuals who succumb to society's expectations instead of embracing their own identity.

The depth of Baldwin's novel is not limited to the gender and sexuality issues present in it, but also in the fact that Baldwin, an openly gay, black man, choose to write a novel from a *white* man's perspective. It was one thing to be gay in the 1950s, but it meant something entirely different when the issue of race was added to the mix, so much so that Baldwin opted to tell a part of his own personal story from the perspective of a white man. He addressed this in a statement when he said, "I certainly could not possibly have – not at that point in my life – handled the other great weight, the 'Negro problem.' The sexual-moral light was a hard thing to deal with. I could not handle both propositions in the same book. There was no room for it" (qtd by Toibin). That begs the question of how *Giovanni's Room* would have been viewed if David, his main character, had been an openly gay, black man? Would that have made a difference in the way readers reacted to his novel? In a 1984 interview with Richard Goldstein, Baldwin discusses the significance of writing *Giovanni's Room* and how "a black gay person who is a sexual conundrum to society is already, long before the question of sexuality comes into it, menaced and marked because he's black or she's black. The sexual question comes after the

question of color; it's simply one more aspect of the danger in which all black people live" (Baldwin). To eliminate one aspect of that danger, Baldwin choose to embody a different race to ensure his readers understood the significant peril in which gay individuals lived their lives. This speaks volumes to the issue of race as it pertained to sexuality during this time, as the 1950s proved to be a tumultuous time for black Americans. The need to eliminate the racial discrimination that would have been undeniably present if the main character were a black man is a significant aspect of Baldwin's novel that is thoroughly avoided.

The issue of race was entirely eliminated from Baldwin's novel, as the main character is a white American living in a white-dominated French society. To incorporate people of color into this novel would have, at that point in time, taken away from, what Baldwin believed to be, the larger issue at hand – gender and sexuality. If Baldwin had created David as a black, American man struggling with his sexuality, it could be strongly argued that *Giovanni's Room* would not have even been published, as during the time of the publication America was in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement. This movement, documented as starting in 1954 and ending in 1968, consisted of over a decade-long battle for people of color - the battle to be heard, to be treated equally, to be seen as human beings. Considering the blatant discrimination that people of color endured during this time, Baldwin made the conscious choice to remove the race issue from his novel, only leaving the issue of sexuality and society's preconceived notions surrounding it. However, by doing this, Baldwin also effectively silenced the intersectional oppression that the majority, if not all, black individuals suffered. Being black was like being sentenced to a life of solitude, but to be black and be a homosexual was to take that solitude and multiply it tenfold. The double oppression that gay, black men suffered was stifling, as they had to fight to feel normal even amongst those who were supposed to understand. George M. Johnson, a well-known writer based in the Washington D.C. area, touched upon this by saying:

> We have long been burdened with the work of removing homophobia from Black communal spaces while also taking up the fight against racism in *all* spaces. We have seen a white gay man named Ed Buck escape accountability for the deaths of two Black gay men found in his home – a jarring reality that shows us just how much power white queers wield over queers of color. (2019)

This power that has been wielded over people of color, especially gay individuals, is present in Baldwin's decision to write his story from a white man's perspective. While his intentions were to shed light on important and controversial topics, Baldwin still effectively reinforced the suppression of the black man's voice. In his 1989 interview with Richard Goldstein, Baldwin once said "as long as I protest my case on evidence or assumptions held by others, I'm simply reinforcing those assumptions. As long as I complain about being oppressed, the oppressor is in consolation of knowing that I know my place, so to speak." However, it can be argued that, by ignoring the race issue that was so prevalent during the time, Baldwin still reinforced those assumptions he was trying so hard to ignore. The limitations placed upon people of color were oppressive at best and fatal at worst, and it is clear in the way that Baldwin felt he could not address the many forms of oppression that he faced as a gay, black man. Writing from a white man's perspective, he felt, was the only way in which he could be heard. What is eye-opening is that Baldwin was right. There is no question that if he had attempted to publish his novel from a black man's perspective, he would have been refused, ridiculed, and likely restricted from trying to publish again. Today it may be different for a gay, black man; however, in the midst of the civil rights era, Baldwin knew that he must carefully separate pieces of himself in order to tell a story that had to be heard. *Giovanni's Room* is a fictional story, yet one must consider the personal ties that Baldwin had to its main character and the ways in which he felt oppressed by his own narrative choices.

In the article "Breaking Through the Limits of Flesh…" Swikriti Sanyal wrote that "It is rather difficult to come across any significant mainstream literary work with homosexual content before the augment of the twentieth century, and even then, the writers took care to camouflage and mask the uninhibited exhibition of this outlawed desire" (2014). So, while both Virginia Woolf and James Baldwin created works that clearly depicted these issues of gender and sexuality, it is not often that these topics are so openly explored. Both Woolf and Baldwin address a multitude of issues surrounding gender and sexuality ideals of their time, but they also touch upon something that, until more recently, has not been given much attention – gender fluidity. To understand gender fluidity, it is important to understand the differences between gender expression and gender identity, as one is how one chooses to express themselves outwardly and the other is how one feels inwardly. Gender expression is what an individual shows to others in the way that they dress, their mannerisms, their choice of pronouns, or the way they do their hair. In contrast, one's gender identity is not seen by other individuals. To be gender fluid means that one does not fully identify as a man or as a woman, yet they can present with qualities of both. Gender fluidity promotes the elimination of gender binaries by removing the "must-have" qualities associated with being male or female. This is precisely what Ursula K. Le Guin aimed to do when she published her novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness.*

In contrast to both Woolf's and Baldwin's novels, Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction piece, *The Left Hand of Darkness,* tells the story of an Ekumen, – or one who comes from an Earth-like planet - Genly Ai, who travels to the planet Gethen (also known as Winter) to find that they have removed the binary opposition of gender altogether, "suggest[ing] that the binary categories of male and female are tenuous" (Lapointe). To his surprise, Genly witnesses the unfamiliar ways in which gender is presented in another culture, as on the planet of Gethen, individuals do not identify as one specific gender. Rather, they have the ability to interchange

genders depending on the time of the month. Much like ovulation for women, the inhabitants of Gethen enter a state of *kemmer* once a month that allows them to reproduce with other individuals. When in kemmer, one individual's biological nature shifts from that of a male to a female in order to effectively carry offspring. Le Guin produced a piece of literature that showcases what it could be like if gender binarism was not a prevalent issue in society; however, she did so in a way that flips the coin on the discrimination and unacceptance that many individuals endure when it comes to their own gender identification. In her creation of the Gethenian world, Le Guin also presented a society with which we are awfully familiar even today – one in which anything that is not considered "normal" is automatically seen as a perversion of sorts. As Grace Lapointe mentioned in her article, "Light is the Left Hand of Darkness: Deconstructing Gender Binarisms," "science fiction genre's extensive use of metaphor makes it uniquely suited to exploring social issues." What is more, is that women are not typically known for their success in science fiction, especially at the time of the publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness.* And in her novel, Le Guin effectively addresses many social issues in how she presents her readers with a main character that endures the discrimination and lack of acceptance that is prevalent in societies that hold preconceived and socially constructed notions of what it means to be "male" or "female." In a chapter taken from Literary Theory for Beginners, Mary Klages explains the unjustifiable way in which Western culture determines gender:

> In Western culture, we recognize only two sexes: male and female. But there are at least six markers of biological sex: external genitalia; internal reproductive organs; sex chromosomes; sex hormones; and skeletal structure. There may also be sex differences in brain structure and/or brain chemistry. The point is, Western culture reduces the relevant markers to a binary opposition – you ARE male or female. (114)

Klages goes on to discuss the ways in which society will attempt to "fix" an individual who does not conform to that standard of male or female, highlighting the role that binary opposition has played in society for many years. In one of her essays, "Seeing is Believing: Biology as Ideology," Judith Lorber also echoes this assertion when she writes that:

> 'Once the gender category is given, the attributes of the person are also gendered…, neither sex nor gender are pure categories…' Rather, 'combinations of incongruous genes, genitalia, and hormonal input are ignored in sex categorization, just as combinations of incongruous physiology, identity, sexuality, appearance, and behavior are ignored in the social construction of gender statuses.' (1993)

In order to remove those binaries, Ursula K. Le Guin uses her literary talents to promote the idea of gender fluidity, a term used to define what happens when individuals change their gender expression or gender identity – or both - over time.

Genly Ai arrived on Gethen as an individual from a planet that promoted only two genders – male and female, and these genders were assigned to specific individuals as a permanent part of their biology. Therefore, when he arrived on Gethen, Genly was the outcast. His permanent male biology was a curious endeavor for the Gethenians to understand, and they often did not trust his intentions because they did not understand his biology. The differences between Genly and the inhabitants of Gethen often caused unrest and trepidation, but "because [Genly] is only considered abnormal in relation to the Gethenians, this suggests that the marginalization of queer individuals is arbitrary and determined by the heterosexual majority" (Lapointe). The individuals who lived their whole lives on Gethen did not seem interested in understanding the biological nature of Genly's gender identity; "they had never gone on to ask, for example, how the continuous sexuality of [his] race influenced its social institutions, how [they] handled [their] 'permanent kemmer'" (Le Guin 134). From this, it is clear that Le Guin's

intentions were to create a story that illuminated the problems in having a society that was not interested in that which differed from their norm, a society in which individuals were shunned based on how they did or did not conform to the expectations set forth. "Their [Gethenians] treatment of Ai mirrors Butler's description of heterosexual society's marginalization of 'queer' individuals, who do not fit within the binary categories of masculinity and femininity," further solidifying the assertion that "sexual norms are arbitrary and determined by the majority" (Lapointe). Also, "Corresponding as they do to the underlying opposition man/woman, these binary oppositions are heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system: each opposition can be analyzed as a hierarchy where the 'feminine' side is always seen as the negative powerless instance," (Moi 102) as readers see reinforced in Genly's descriptions of Gethenians that possess 'feminine' characteristics, such as Estraven. Initially when Genly describes Estraven, who plays a pivotal role in the novel, he labels his performance as "womanly, all charm and tact," and it was that "soft supple femininity" that promoted an unease in Genly. Each time Genly described a member of Gethen, it was only those who possessed feminine qualities that he often felt negatively towards. When Genly was questioned by Estraven about the gender ideologies of his own society, Genly replied:

> … the difference is very important. I suppose the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one's life, is whether one's born male or female. In most societies it determines one's expectations, activities, outlook, ethics, manners – almost everything… It's extremely hard to separate the innate differences from the learned ones. (Le Guin 234).

It can be argued that Le Guin faltered in her attempts to separate these differences by reinforcing the socially constructed idea that femininity is to be seen as inferior to masculinity. She even reinforces this idea by creating a novel that attempts to eliminate gender binaries, but at the same

time, consistently uses the pronoun "he" when referring to individuals throughout the story. While Le Guin's novel certainly provokes a deeper look into the issues of gender identity, gender fluidity, and gender expression, she also subtly reaffirms those same binaries she is trying to dismantle. The characters from Gethen are not strictly male or female; however, unless they are in kemmer, they are all referred to as males. This leaves her readers wondering what exactly Le Guin's intentions were. However, despite the few inconsistencies in her work, Le Guin was effective in creating a world where her characters subverted certain ideologies regarding gender and sexuality.

*The Left Hand of Darkness* provides a foundation for new theories and perspectives to shine through. Le Guin's focus on gender fluidity, the oppression of those who go against the norms of society, and the acceptance of what is different provide an excellent framework for queer theorists. In the Gethenian society, everyone was the same – except Genly, of course. One of the previous envoys that went to Gethen many years before Genly documented that

> … a man wants his virility regarded, a woman wants her femininity appreciated, however indirect and subtle the indications of regard and appreciation. On Winter they will not exist. One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience. (Le Guin 95)

The satirical way in which Le Guin tackles important issues of gender and identity lessens the blow to those who otherwise may not be so susceptible to understanding. When presenting such controversial topics to the world, doing so in a way that promotes humor often ensures that people are paying attention. Le Guin does an excellent job at subtly and humorously imploring, through her fiction, that we should all take a better look at the world we are living in. In her novel, Le Guin highlighted the ways in which the Gethen inhabitants often shunned Genly strictly due to his differences, never making the choice to understand those differences, as they

were fearful of what they would learn. During a town meeting, Genly made the choice to stand in front of these individuals, hoping they would further understand his intentions – only to live and understand this new world and their culture. However, he was met with great opposition during his speech. One Gethenian stood abruptly, shouting:

> Don't you see, Commensals, what all this is? It's not just a stupid joke. It is, in intention, a public mockery of our credulity, our gullibility, our stupidity – engineered, with incredible impudence, by this person who stands here before us today. You know he comes from Karhide. You know he is a Karhidish agent. You can see he is a sexual deviant of a type that in Karhide, due to the influence of the Dark Cult, is left uncured, and sometimes is even artificially created for the Foretellers' orgies. (Le Guin 156)

This Gethen inhabitant, much like what is seen in today's society, completely rejected Genly because he appeared as a "sexual deviant" to those who came from a world where gender binary did not exist. Genly's permanent male biology was a foreign concept to those individuals residing on Gethen, so they attributed it to something that was influenced by the "Dark Cult." By using the terms "sexual deviant" and "Dark Cult," Le Guin effectively alludes to the ways in which religion has influenced society's perceptions of gender and sexuality throughout the years. This perception of gender and sexuality has been the barricade that individuals have been fighting to break through. The idea that man is man and woman is woman, and that they should never lie with someone of the same sex, has been around for centuries. The influence that society has on the social construction of gender is important, but it is also important to understand and acknowledge that society is largely influenced by religious institutions – institutions that are dominated by white, heterosexual men. In her novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit,* Jeanette Winterson highlights the ways in which homosexuality and lesbianism have been demonized by the church for thousands of years.

In 1985, Jeanette Winterson published an award-winning novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.* This novel, much like Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, is said to be a semi-autobiographical account of the author's life. In the story, readers are introduced to the aptly named main character, Jeanette. Jeanette, having been adopted by an overtly Christian woman, lived a life that was dictated to her by the church. Her adoptive mother lived by religious rhetoric, only seeing the world in a black and white fashion. Thus, her only intention in adopting Jeanette was to train her to be a servant of God, resulting in a sheltered and confusing childhood. At the beginning of her childhood, Jeanette was homeschooled by her devout adoptive mother, mostly ignored by her indifferent adoptive father, and ignorant of life outside of the house she lived. Fortunately for Jeanette, she was forced to go to public school once she turned seven years old, providing her with opportunities to see life outside of the church. However, her going to public school also prompted a spiral of events in Jeanette's life that would change her forever. She began as an outcast, as the other students did not understand her loyalty to God. When the other students, and even her teachers, began to question why Jeanette forced her religion upon everyone else at school, it became clear to Jeanette that she was missing something. Why didn't all the other students and teachers feel so strongly for their God? She began to consider the differences between her life and that of the outside world. One day at church, her pastor began preaching about perfection; it was then that Jeanette inwardly and vehemently disagreed with the teachings of the church. Amidst her uncertainty she felt towards the church, Jeanette also became acutely aware of her attraction to other females. Through this novel, Winterson has given her readers an inside look to the life of a lesbian woman who had to give up everything she believed to be true to be who she truly was. Throughout the novel, readers are submerged in Jeanette's fight to be who she is, and to love who she loves, despite what others may feel about it. There are many underlying feminist and queer themes throughout Winterson's novel, as it portrays many

lesbian relationships between Jeanette and others, yet the more prominent theme focuses heavily on how sexuality has been shaped by religion.

In their anthology *Literary Theory,* Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan suggest that intimacy between same sex couples has been around for hundreds of years, as it was a common occurrence in fifth-century Greek society, yet it quickly came to "be 'discovered' to be signs of an identifiable 'perversion.'" They continue to add that "Christianity… probably has a great deal to do with how non-reproductive sexual practices became stigmatized over time" (898). Much like many of life's 'rules,' the construction of gender and sexuality norms were largely influenced by the church. For it was the bible that first said that God created 'male' and 'female,' condemning those with feminine qualities, empowering those with masculine qualities, and successfully creating the separation between the two. It was also in the bible that we, as a society, were taught that intimacy between two people of the same sex is an abomination. For centuries, it has been implied that intimacy belongs only between a man and a woman, as intimacy between two individuals of the same sex does not adhere to the religious belief that it is only man and woman who can promote the progression of the human race. In the eyes of religious fundamentalist, unnatural sexual behavior was/is seen as a sinful disgrace to the word of God. Those who fell prey to their unnatural desires would ultimately suffer for their sins. Mary Klages once wrote that "…gender scripts are enforced by systems of reward and punishment," (118) which is something that is clearly reinforced through the perception of queer individuals by religious institutions. In the bible, a piece of literature that is about twenty-seven hundred years old, it was asserted that one should "not practice homosexuality… it is a detestable sin" (Leviticus 18:22), and that whoever does engaged in homosexual behavior should "be put to death, for they are guilty of a capital offense" (Leviticus 20:13). It is this thought that promotes the idea that one cannot live their own realities without being condemned by the

society in which they live in. In her novel, *Oranges,* Winterson aimed to shed light on how the church demonized 'unnatural' sexual desires and the effect this has on the lives of queer individuals. By incorporating her own experiences into this fictional story, Winterson has effectively argued that "the issue of the 'demonization' of homosexuals appears to rest on a simple and ancient animosity cultivated to perfections over centuries" (West). Winterson, an openly gay woman, suffered the discrimination of the church. Yet, her novel implores her readers to embrace that which makes them different, that which makes them who they are.

It has been clear that women, just because they are women, have suffered tremendously from the gender ideologies put in place centuries ago. However, those women who also identify as lesbians are forced to endure a double oppression, as lesbians – as well as homosexuals, transgenders, bisexuals, etc. – have been viewed as "a symptom of general moral and societal degeneration" (West) by the very institution that promotes the idea that "all of you should be of one mind. Sympathize with each other. Love each other as brothers and sisters" (Peter 3:8). Winterson's main character, Jeanette, loved her God and believed that God was not the one who discriminated against her, but instead, it was God's servants who rejected her own reality. When she realized her feelings towards Melanie, a girl she met in town, she did not question those impulses. She viewed love as love, no matter who it was between. When the church learned of the relationship between the two girls, they were separated and forced to repent. Jeanette, not understanding why she was being punished for loving Melanie, refused to accept their religious ideologies. The pastor, working with Jeanette's mother,

> … stood a safe distance away like I was infected… The pastor explained to me as quietly as he could that I was the victim of a great evil. That I was afflicted and oppressed, that I had deceived the flock. 'The demon', he announced very slowly, 'had returned sevenfold.'" (Winterson 133)

Jeanette was then forced into a dark room with no food or water, and, for over thirty-six hours, she contemplated the demon that supposedly possessed her. She thought: “If I had a demon my weak point was Melanie, but she was beautiful and good and had loved me. Can love really belong to the demon?” (Winterson 108). It is clear that Jeanette is beginning to wonder how the church, the followers of a God who promotes love, could view her relationship with another woman to be so vile, so condemnable. This inherent need to demonize individuals for participating in same sex relationships has been a prevalent issue in society for many years. In the process of demonizing these individuals, “the violence wrought upon the individual who is forbidden to articulate the self is the disintegration of his existence” (West). Gender and sexuality, as it has been argued, are undeniably socially constructed by the influence of religious institutions throughout time; however, these constructs do more than just stigmatize same sex relationships. Ultimately, these constructs often inflict an uncertainty upon the individual who lives differently than what is expected. Hannah Arendt once said that “the greatest injury which society can and does inflict upon him is to make him doubt the reality and validity of his own existence, to reduce him in his own eyes to a status of nonentity” (qtd by West). Being reduce to a status of nonentity is something that many queer individuals endure in their lives. However, in her novel, Winterson implores her readers to reject that uncertainty and embrace the validity of their own existence.

Throughout the novel, Jeanette did not succumb to the influence of her church. Instead, she was persistent in her fight to live her own truth, to embrace her own identity. The excessive mentioning of oranges throughout the novel is symbolic of Jeanette’s refusal to conform to the church’s standards. Her mother consistently presents Jeanette with oranges, seemingly at times when readers are witnessing Jeanette’s uncertainty in the church. Also, some time after being betrayed and left by Melanie, Melanie tries to offer Jeanette an orange, symbolizing the way in

which she wants her to conform as she did. The oranges represent heterosexuality, and at one point in the novel, Jeanette wonders "What about grapes or bananas?" (115), suggesting that oranges are not, in fact, the only fruit. And although Winterson's novel is strictly about a lesbian woman fighting to live her own reality, *Oranges* is a pivotal piece of literature for queer studies. The influence of such an empowered main character, no matter their sexual or gender identification, has a lasting effect on the ways in which readers view important issues revolving around gender and queer studies. Jeanette, as author and main character, did not offer false hope or childish notions about being 'Other;' she offered her readers, and her fellow queer folk, the courage to embrace their own identity, to validate themselves in a world that offers little compassion for them. This lack of compassion is largely due to the ways in which gender and sexuality have been perceived throughout time. And with time, "sexual definitions [have] become rigid, creating an overwhelming societal feeling of anxiety, panic and intensifying homophobic attitudes" (Smith), resulting in a lasting battle for queer individuals to be accepted for who they are.

Despite the lasting effects of religious influence on the social construction of gender and sexuality, there has been an exceptional amount of attention given to gender and queer studies over the last twenty years. The progression of this field is apparent when considering two of the characters mentioned above – David from *Giovanni's Room* and Jeanette from *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit.* These two characters, while living similar struggles, are quite different in the ways they react to those struggles. Baldwin's novel, being published in the 1950s, depicts the psychological impact of being a homosexual male. Thirty years later, Winterson published her novel, which also highlighted the psychological impact of gender and sexual discrimination, but of a lesbian woman. While these two novels have many similarities, it is important to touch on the differences within. For example, each of the main characters struggle to be who they are;

however, they each possess differing self-concepts throughout their stories. David, on one hand, views himself as filthy, sinful, and as someone who cannot be saved. On the other hand, Jeanette rejects the idea that loving another woman makes her condemnable. The thirty-year gap in publication should be considered when analyzing these differing self-concepts, as it plays a significant role in how queer individuals began to view themselves, especially after the Stonewall Riots in 1969. After the Stonewall Riots, members of the gay community began to openly express themselves, embracing their differences, and forcing the world to consider the possibility of a more fluid concept of gender and sexuality. Winterson's novel depicts this newfound inner acceptance that queer individuals had long been denied.

In the Afterword of *The Left Hand of Darkness,* Charlie Jane Anders addresses the important part fiction plays in people's lives by implying that

> … it casts a reflection on all the fixed ideas in our own world. Maybe our rigid gender binary is just as made-up as their neutral-except-once-a-month gender is. Maybe our government-issued pronouns and official stereotypes don't have to define us always. Especially for my fellow trans and nonbinary people, a story that undermines the assumptions behind coercive labels feels magical. (309)

Le Guin was not the only author to offer such a magical release for those individuals who are attempting to undermine stereotypical assumptions. With her novel, *Orlando,* Virginia Woolf also provides her readers with a story that "unsettles and disavows the very possibilities of fixed meanings and binaries" (Sanyal), encouraging her readers to question the entire social construction of gender identity. With her novel, Woolf embraced the indeterminate ways in which sexuality and gender present themselves, offering a new insight into trans politics in the process. And much like Le Guin and Woolf, both James Baldwin and Jeanette Winterson shared with their readers openly personal depictions of what life was like for them. To identify as

homosexual or lesbian is to automatically be subjected to a life of oppression and solitude. However, by sharing their stories, readers, as well as critics, are better able to understand that love is love, no matter who it is between. Baldwin, while inadvertently reinforcing racial oppression, illuminated the psychological struggle that many queer individuals are subjected to, offering a new understanding of gender and sexual oppression. Likewise, Winterson effectively dismantled centuries of religious ideologies and gender stigmatizations by creating a main character that embraced her own reality, empowering readers with every sentence. While these authors and their respected novels are pivotal pieces of literature to consider when exploring Gender and Queer theories, they each offer something different to this particular field of study. However, what is important is that the issues present in each novel be given the same amount of attention. *Transgenderism. Homosexuality. Gender fluidity. Lesbianism.* All of these terms promote specific issues in regard to gender and queer studies, yet they all imply the same thing – oranges are, in fact, not the only fruit.

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