



Queer Literature and Pre-Wildean Era of 19th Century

Jyoti

Research Scholar

Centre for Russian Studies (CRS)

School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies (SLL&CS)

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New delhi-110067

ABSTRACT

The study of queer literature and history has gained enormous popularity recently, with more people than ever taking an interest in the narratives that history has attempted to obliterate. Yet, there has been little done to shed light on 19th-century queer stories despite this curiosity. Finding gay tales in the 19th century is challenging due to the absence of a community, contemporary descriptors of sexuality, and the generally forbidden nature of sex, but by no means impossible. As we can see, how literature actually offers a special lens through which historians and archivists can learn how homoerotic desire was seen in the 19th century.

Keywords: Queer Literature, LGBTQ+, Pre-Wildean Era, 19th Century.

INTRODUCTION

Modern ideas about sexual identity and the labels we use today did not quite exist in the 19th century. It was not until the 1930s that the term “gay” came to be used to characterize homoerotic desire (and the associated socio-political identity). Despite this, there were a number of terms for homoerotic desire in the 19th century, although they were anything but universal and frequently described sexual attraction rather than identity. Because of this, the term “queer” has been used to denote the prevalence of homoerotic desire throughout the 19th century.

‘Queer’ has a vast and convoluted history of its own. The term was first used as an adjective to describe anything odd in the 16th century. Later, it evolved into a derogatory term for people in same-gender relationships in the late 19th and early 20th centuries before being reclaimed by politically radical LGBTQ+ people in the 1980s as an identity meant to describe anyone who was not heterosexual or cisgender. This meaning of “queer” is derived from the last definition, designed to favourably depict non-normative (non-heterosexual) desire outside the bounds of identity. This definition is the one that is most frequently used in academics.

Narratives with queer themes, symbolism, or characters are called queer literature. This is a vast literary genre since no single work of gay fiction captures the same lived experience. It is vital to remember that not all authors of queer literature are LGBTQ+ individuals, and not all LGBTQ+ individuals produce queer literature. Many of

these books and poetry fit into various genres; therefore, queer literature is not one specific genre. This can contain, to mention a few, romance, regional literature, feminist fiction, or horror.

PRE-WILDEAN PERIOD OF 19TH CENTURY

In the early to mid-19th century, American men put more and more effort into establishing and preserving “homosocial venues,” like public institutions, where they could congregate and honour male spirituality. American literature that focused on romantic connections between men first appeared as a result of this emphasis on developing masculine spirituality in gender-segregated environments, which had unexpected homoerotic side effects. Below all the work highlights how “homosocial places,” whether in the city, the country, or the military, permitted homoerotic desire to grow, are presented.

The Dr. Ellis Hughes’s Diary (1813-1866) - Most entries in Hughes’ approximately fifty-year-long diary are dated between 1830 and 1840 when he was assigned to the U.S. Army as an assistant surgeon in Florida. Most of the entries in Hughes’ over fifty-year-long diary were from 1830 to 1840, when he served as an assistant surgeon for the U.S. Army in Florida. Hughes’ work not only gives a thorough account of life during the Second Seminole War (1835–1842) but also offers a unique window into how homoerotic desire was viewed by those who experienced it (**Ellis, 1813**).

The diaries show a blatant internal conflict between homoerotic desire and Christian ideals, as is to be expected. It is exceedingly improbable that Americans in the early 19th century had any understanding of queerness beyond bible verses that forbade sodomy (any sexual act that was non-consensual or non-reproductive) and anti-sodomy laws because there was no queer literature or community at that time. Although sodomy accusations against non-heterosexual sexual practices were uncommon, these rules distinguished immorality, homoerotic desire, and sin (**Hughes, 2022**).

Early Queer depiction and “Leaves of Grass” (1855–1922) - Walt Whitman’s lone poetry collection ‘Leaves of Grass’ continues to be a significant part of the American and queer literary canons, making him arguably one of the most well-known American poets of all time, much alone in the 19th century. Only 12 poems were included in the book when it was first published in 1855, but throughout the course of subsequent editions and reprints, the number of poems increased to around 400 (**Reisch, 1981**).

As one of the earliest positive representations of male homoerotic desire, the “Calamus” sequence, initially included in the original collection in 1860, cemented Whitman’s place in queer literary history. The poems are rarely read as anything other than homoerotic, even though Whitman never acknowledged the queerness of either himself or the “Calamus” sequence, despite being requested to do so repeatedly by numerous queer Victorian poets. Also, a lot of the poetry in this collection address facets of queer sexuality that were not given labels until the early 1900s. Moreover, in pieces like the “Calamus” poems in his “Leaves of Grass” collection, Whitman addresses romantic and sexual connections between men (**Reisch, 1981**).

“Joseph and His Friend: A Story of Pennsylvania” (1870) - American novelist Bayard Taylor, a prolific author in various genres, published his novel *Joseph and His Friend: A Tale of Pennsylvania* in 1870. The novel was regarded as one of the first queer American books, if not the first. The story chronicles the lives of Joseph and Philip and their long-time romantic relationship, two young farmers from rural Pennsylvania. The novel demonstrates a unique bond between two men and examines the meaning and nature of such a passionate but non-sexual connection. There is disagreement among critics about whether Taylor’s novel is an idealisation of male spirituality or a political defence of gay unions (**Taylor, 1870**).

The main focus of the work is still the men’s connection, despite Joseph’s marriage to a young woman, which led many critics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to accuse it of adopting a position in favour of same-gender unions. Joseph was universally seen as a failure, whether it was because of overt homoeroticism or the fact that readers disliked the majority of the characters. Interestingly, Shakespeare’s passage from Sonnet 114, which scholars frequently use as a starting point for their analyses of Shakespeare’s potential homoerotic desire, appears on the book’s title page (**Taylor, 1870**).

THE ISSUE OF FEMALE DESIRE : LESBIANS

Most of the 19th century was still characterized by the widespread notion that women could not naturally experience sexual desire, despite female sexuality in literature produced by and for males. Due to this, women who wrote explicitly about female sexual desire, homoerotic or otherwise, in the middle of the 19th century essentially had two choices: go unpublished or coat their writing in excessive amounts of religious metaphors and moral lessons that the (male) literary world would accept as appropriate. The three authors who discussed homoerotic female desire in the middle of the 19th century are listed below; one of them is a woman. The variations in how their work was contextualized, embraced, and interpreted could be noted.

A poem by Christina Rossetti called “Goblin Market” (1862) - At the age of 31, Christina Rossetti, the talented sister of well-known painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, printed *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862, her debut collection of poetry. Many consider her one of the most prolific female poets of all time. Her lyrical poetry, many of which have been turned into British Christmas carols, frequently dealt with feminist and religious topics (**Hay, 2018**).

Her most well-known work, *Goblin Market*, is a lengthy narrative poem that chronicles the misfortunes of two sisters named Laura and Lizzie as they purchase forbidden fruit from a group of goblin traders. Many have compared the goblin fruit to the apple Eve consumed in the Garden of Eden since it causes those who consume it to feel intense pleasure, get addicted to its effects, and eventually die from withdrawal (**Hay, 2018**).

The poem, which is a Victorian children’s story that can be found in many different collections, has much sexual imagery, which has prompted many experts to see the sisters’ relationship as homoerotic and the entire poem as an allegory for sexual suppression (**Hay, 2018**).

Ancient Greece as a Queer paradise, “Poems and Ballads” (1866) - Poems and Ballads, the debut poetry collection by the young British author Algernon Charles Swinburne, was published in 1866. Swinburne’s collection quickly became well-known for its aesthetic and notorious for its taboo sexual themes, including sado-masochism and homoeroticism, and it helped start his career. Swinburne’s gender significantly impacted his work’s appeal in the literary community since he continued the long literary history of sexualizing queer women by portraying female homoerotic yearning for males as a man in his writing (Swinburne, 1904).

His poems depart from Sappho’s works as interpreted by Classical scholars in the 19th century by including explicit homoeroticism. Swinburne’s poems are an excellent example of the mythologizing of Ancient Greece as a queer utopia, even though he was not the first to describe it that way.

Queer Monstrosity and “Carmilla” (1872) - Carmilla, a novella by Joseph Le Fanu, is regarded as one of the more significant early works of vampire literature. The plot revolves around Carmilla, a young woman brought into their care after suffering injuries in a carriage accident, and Laura, a teenager who lives in Austria with her father. Soon after meeting Carmilla, Laura recalls her from a childhood dream in which a girl watched her sleep. The two ladies quickly become good friends. After a series of bizarre occurrences, it is discovered that Carmilla is actually Miracalla, a countess and vampire from the 17th century who has been consuming the blood of attractive young women (Veeder, 1980).

Carmilla has been said to as the quintessential lesbian vampire, feeding on Laura out of need and out of a sexual desire that her prey does not instantly return. She also contributes to the vampire tradition. Carmilla is the first of a very small number of queer vampire stories and the only vampire story at the time of its release in which the monster was a woman. Le Fanu is not the first author to show sexual desire and vampirism hand in hand. Unexpectedly, several scholars have pointed out that the novella does not condemn homoeroticism or feminine desire; instead, it almost seems to celebrate it, which has led many to hail Carmilla as a groundbreaking work of queer and feminist horror fiction (Veeder, 1980).

Although a revolutionary work, Carmilla nonetheless benefits from the fact that a man wrote it. It is also impossible to ignore the fact that a woman in the 1870s would never have been able to publish such a queer vampire romance with two sexually liberated women. Similar to Swinburne’s Poems and Ballads, it is essential to consider the novella’s audience and the likelihood that what is now referred to as “sexual emancipation” was just queer women being sexualized for a male audience’s amusement at the time (Veeder, 1980).

1880-1900: AN OPEN SECRET OF SAPPHO REVIVAL

Despite the nearly sole focus on male artists who openly created LGBT literature in the 19th century, many women did the same but received much less attention. The three women listed below are equally unapologetically queer in their work as males like Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman. However, they are significantly less well-known because of the sexism that pervaded the 19th-century literary world and whose consequences are still felt today.

It is important to note that even though the women on the list below wrote nearly 20 years after Christina Rossetti, they encountered the same obstacles she did in getting their literature recognized by the (male) literary community. Yet, A. Mary F. Robinson and “Michael Field” adopted radically different strategies to guarantee the publication of their work laced with homoerotic female desire rather than saturating it with moral precepts.

The song collection “An Italian Garden” (1886) - An Italian Garden: A Book of Songs by A. Mary F. Robinson, published in 1886 and written before her first marriage, is a superb illustration of the small subset of 19th century lesbian poetry written by and about women. Numerous researchers have examined Robinson’s letters to her romantic partner and fellow poet Violet Page (also known as Vernon Lee), with whom she was involved from 1880 to 1888, to create a complete picture of life for lesbians in the 19th century (**Robinson, 1897**).

Although other women were composing queer poetry at the time, Robinson was one of only a handful to sign her work with her real name, probably because she wanted to “find an audience tomorrow” rather than immediate fame. Despite this emphasis on posthumous fame, Robinson did amass a modest fan base among her fellow poets, including her lifelong friend, Uranian poet and early queer historian John Addington Symonds.

“Michael Field”, Union of Queer Women and Male Pseudonyms - In the late 19th century, many women published their poetry under male aliases, but few were as intriguing as “Michael Field.” As the name may imply, Field was not just one male poet but the creation of Edith Emma Cooper and Katherine Harris Bradley, two poets who were also blood relatives and lifelong lovers, Edith Emma Cooper and Katherine Harris Bradley (**Prins, 1999**).

Katherine Bradley’s sister Lissie Cooper had a daughter named Edith Cooper, making Katherine not only Edith’s aunt but also fifteen years Katherine’s senior. The two women’s diaries and correspondence reveal the beginnings of their connection, which began when they were just 14 and 30 years old, respectively, in 1876. At the time, Katherine and Edith were each other’s nieces and aunts.

As Edith, then 16, began her studies at the University of Bristol, their relationship continued to grow. Soon after, the two ladies moved in together and started a creative collaboration known as “Michael Field.” Despite the fact that Field’s identity had been revealed earlier in “his” career, the two continued to write as Michael Field and cohabitated until Emma’s passing in December 1913. Together, the two produced almost forty poetry collections, plays, and translations, most of which dealt with issues related to female sexuality, femininity, and Victorian gender roles (**Prins, 1999**).

QUEER EROTIC LITERATURE ABOUT VICTORIAN LONDON

Queer pornographic literature from the late Victorian era can provide specific insight into the interactions between gender, sexuality, and sex in London’s developing queer subculture while being thought to be of little literary worth. These three works can all be found in the LGBTQ Literature Collection at Special Collections.

“The Sins of the Cities of the Plain” (1881) - This novel, whose title alludes to the biblical tale of the sinful cities ‘Sodom and Gomorrah,’ was written by the anonymous author “Jack Saul.” It is widely regarded as the first pornographic work in English to address homosexual issues exclusively. The narrative is structured around the experiences of Jack Saul, the “author” and narrator, while he worked as a rent boy (a working-class male prostitute) in London. Throughout the evening, Jack discusses his scandalous past and his numerous sexual encounters with men, women, and transgender people **(Saul, 2006)**.

Unlike many other works of erotica from the same period, little is known about the author of the book (perhaps because of its homosexual nature) or how many of the tales Jack narrates are based on real events. The novel and the events it describes have enough in common with one another for this to be considered a precursor of the non-fiction novel by many. For instance, there are many similarities between the narrator Jack Saul’s life and experiences and those of real-world rent boy John Saul.

“Teleny, or the Reverse of the Medal” (1893) and Aesthetic Erotica - In the pornographic novel “Teleny, or the Reverse of the Medal,” set in late 19th century Paris, Des Grieux has a telepathic sexual connection with the Hungarian pianist Teleny. Instead of concentrating on sex, the book investigates the underground homosexual subculture of late 19th century Paris and deals with surprisingly serious and realistic subjects like sexual repression **(Caleb, 2010)**.

Contrary to *The Sins of the Cities of the Plains*, we know a lot about the origins of *Teleny*, which is currently credited to Oscar Wilde and several of his associates. Many similarities may be found between *Teleny*’s artistic vision and the Aesthetic movement Wilde and his associates contributed. Moreover, pornographic publisher Charles Hirsch claimed that on multiple occasions, persons he knew to be Wilde’s acquaintances would come and drop off an unfinished manuscript of the book and leave it with him under a false name, just for the document to be picked up by a different man. This has prompted many scholars to believe that the work was written in a “round robin” fashion by several LGBT Victorian authors, including Oscar Wilde. Interestingly, Hirsch alleges that he once sold Wilde a copy of *Sins of the Cities of the Plains*, raising the intriguing possibility that the author may have been influenced by reading the book to create his own work of queer erotica **(Caleb, 2010)**.

Gender dissidence and “Letters From Laura and Eveline” (1903) in Victorian London - Similar to *Sins of the Cities of the Plains*, *Letters From Laura and Eveline*’s plot was significantly influenced by actual occurrences, in this case, the arrest of gender nonconforming performers Fanny “Fredrick” Park and Stella “Earnest” Boulton for “conspiracy to commit sodomy” in 1870. Even though Boulton and Park were ultimately found not guilty of sodomy because there was no evidence to support their accusation, the high-profile trial brought the two into the public limelight. It served as the basis for several works of art and literature. *Letters From Laura and Eveline* follow Laura, Eveline, and their spouses on their honeymoons and the numerous sexual circumstances they encounter **(O’Hearn, 2015)**.

The book's intended "scandalous" element is introduced when it is discovered that Laura and Eveline are queer women born male, a fact that their spouses are unaware. Since both women's husbands have no problem with their gender identities and neither woman reports having a shortage of sexual partners, the portrayal of the women's gender nonconformity is far more ironic than scandalous. This implies that genderqueer people had a more significant and more visible role in Victorian London's queer culture than is now believed. The lack of transgender or genderqueer history from this era is probably caused by the fact that the study of queer history is still heavily affected by the cis-heteronormative idea of the gender binary (O'Hearn, 2015).

THE FORMATION OF SEXOLOGY AND LANGUAGE OF IDENTITY

As previously mentioned, there was little to no terminology to define homoerotic desire for most of the 19th century. Nevertheless, all of this started to alter in the late 1880s with the development of sexology, or the study of human sexuality. Richard von Krafft-Ebbing brought several terminologies for human sexuality into the English language with the publication of *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), including "homosexual" and "bisexual," which would eventually develop into the sexual identities we use today.

"Love's Coming of Age" (1896) by Edward Carpenter - Edward Carpenter, a man of many talents, was a philosopher, poet, and early supporter of LGBT rights. He also served as one of the influencers for E.M. Forster's well-known book *Maurice*. *Love's Coming of Age*, one of Carpenter's best-known books, was released soon after the Oscar Wilde trials in 1895. Many believe that Carpenter was motivated to write the essay collection by the injustices he saw during the trials (Carpenter, 1911).

The "Intermediate Sex," in which Carpenter observes that those who engage in homosexual relationships and have intense romantic affections for people of the same gender seem to be more progressed than the rest of society, is by far the most critical essay in the book in terms of queer history. The title of the essay was inspired by the term "*Uranians*," which was first used by German activist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in the 1860s to describe males who had the homoerotic desire as having a female mind and thus belonging to an "intermediate" sex (Carpenter, 1911).

Evidence shows that many upper-class queer men used the term "uranian" to describe themselves in the late Victorian era, even though uranian and its variants have since gone out of fashion as sexual identities. As well as using the phrase as both a descriptor and an identity in the 1880s and 1890s, Uranian poets like Oscar Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, and John Addington Symonds raise the possibility that the modern idea of sexual identity may have some roots in the queer literary community (Carpenter, 1911).

HOMOSEXUALITY AND HELLENISM

The Uranians, the most notorious upper-class homosexual personalities of the Victorian era, made Oxford University their unofficial headquarters starting in the 1870s. Oscar Wilde, Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas, John Addington Symonds, and John Francis Bloxam, as well as to a lesser extent Edward Carpenter and Lionel Johnson, centred the majority of their poetry and prose on the idea of pederasty and the belief that Ancient Greece was a homosexual utopia. A large portion of their writing, which appeared in Oxford University publications like *The Chameleon* (1894), homoeroticism, idolized the beauty of youth and Classical Greece through aesthetic prose.

It is important to note that only a few Uranians engaged in pederasty in the Classic meaning, a practice common in Ancient Greece where academic men adopted young boys as protégées and sexual partners. Except for Symonds and Bloxam, most poets were middle-aged men who favoured younger, college-aged males. They justified their desire as adhering to “pederastic tradition” despite their romantic partners being willing adults. Their obsession with Classical Greece and “pederasty” was probably brought on by the Victorian era’s attraction to Classical studies at Oxford and the fact that nothing was known about homosexual history outside of Classical Greek mythology and history. *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* by Linda Dowling, published in 1994, examines the relationship between Classical studies and queer writing in the 19th century (**Dowling, 1994**).

OSCAR WILDE AND HIS TRIALS

Despite being best known for his plays, Oscar Wilde produced a significant number of poetry throughout his tenure in the literary world, particularly from 1878 to 1885. Through numerous articles and poems he wrote on the subjects in the years that followed his graduation from Oxford in 1878, Wilde established himself as a significant figure in the Aesthetic and Decadent movements. Wilde’s early years as an aesthete helped shape the perception of him that would endure until he died in 1900. The author, born in Ireland, became a living myth thanks to his flamboyance, wealth, and carpe-diem attitude towards all aspects of life (**Harris & Douglas, 1927**).

At the height of his fame, Oscar Wilde attended his social club, The Albemarle, in February 1895 to find that Douglas’ father, the Marquess of Queensberry, had left him a calling card that read, “For Oscar Wilde, posing sodomite.” The remainder of Wilde’s life and his literary legacy, which would be marred for decades to come, would be defined by this incident. Oscar Wilde was the only one whose private life, a well-kept secret among other writers at the time, was made significantly public among the numerous 19th century LGBT authors (**Harris & Douglas, 1927**).

Unsurprisingly, the court cases and two-year prison term that Wilde was forced to complete because of nothing more than his sexuality caused a great deal of fear among the expanding community of openly queer authors towards the end of the 19th century.

The Consequences: Unrest and Anxiety in Literary London

After Oscar Wilde's trials and imprisonment, the LGBT literary community in London was shocked. The ramifications of this growing anxiety can be observed in many works of literature written at the turn of the century. Authors rapidly learned that their fictional works could be used as evidence against them in court. Most English bookstores removed Oscar Wilde's books from their shelves, jeopardizing his career and those of Douglas and their close associates.

Salomé, first published in French in 1893, immediately rose to the top of Wilde's most contentious plays due to its portrayal of biblical figures like John the Baptist. The play's last performance before Oscar Wilde's death occurred in Paris for one night only in February 1896, when he was still a prisoner at Reading Goal. Therefore he was never able to attend. The drama would not even be seen by the general public in Great Britain until 1931 due to a censorship rule that forbade the portrayal of biblical characters on stage. *Salomé* received no critical acclaim before Wilde's passing in November 1900, indicating that presenting the play while the exiled author was still alive was non-negotiable.

The limited edition of *Salomé*, which can be found in the Special Collections Rare Books Collection, includes controversial original pictures by Aubrey Beardsley, a long-time friend of Wilde and Douglas, many of which were banned in the book's early English translation.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the worries that LGBT writers had at the end of the 19th century, Oscar Wilde's passing would not spell the end of queer literature. Queer literature has evolved in the 120 years following Wilde's passing from the relatively secretive and ill-defined sub-genre depicted above to a visible and thriving genre with roots in everything from children's to adult literature.

The approximately 150-year-old Queer Literary Collection is proof enough of this evolution since it was completely unheard of even a few decades ago, much less in the 19th century, that gay literature would become a formally acknowledged and academically regarded genre. In recent years, it appears that queer literature has seen a rebirth. As more queer-themed books are published, the genre will develop, and it seems LBGTQ+ people will get more accepted.

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